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## **A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON RAMKELI FAIR AND THE RITUAL OF *MATRIPINDADAN* AT GOUR MALDA**

### ***Abstract***

*The glorious past of Malda, district of West Bengal is associated with ancient ruined city of Gour. Ramkeli is a small village located here. A fair is annually conducted at Ramkeli, is considered as an important pilgrimage for Vaishnavism, a predominate cult of Bengal promoted by Chaitanya. The fair has been held from more than five hundred years to celebrate the advent of Chaitanya at Ramkeli. The fair is also popular for another reason, generally in Hinduism the right to offer pinda is held by sons for paternal lineages but during this fair matripindadan ritual is performed by women for maternal lineages in Gayeswari or Goureswari temple located at Ramkeli. An explorative study is conducted at Ramkeli by using participatory observation method to understand the association or dilemma between these two cults of Chaitanya and Shakta.*

**Keywords:** *Chaitanya, Vaishnavism, Matripindadan, Bhakti Movement, Shakti cult, Ramkeli.*

### **Introduction**

Ramkeli is both a place of religious devotion and entertainment, situated at Malda. The significance of Ramkeli fair is almost five hundred years old. The fair is organized to celebrate the coming of Chaitanya at Malda. It holds significance for Hindu community because it is a seat of worship for two sects: the *Vaishnava* and the *Shakta* sects. The fair at Ramkeli starts on the last day of *Jayistha* (second month of Bengali calendar). In *Chaitanya-Bhagvata* Virndavana Das (written in 1535 AD) claims that once Chaitanya visited the village Ramkeli at Gour and stayed for three days on his way to Mathura and Vrindavan and the day was *Jayistha-Sankranti* (last day of *Jayistha*, which falls in the middle of June). The day is celebrated as an auspicious day for *Vaishnava* community (a religious community, worshiper of Krishna) and the fair signifies the advent of Chaitanya at Gour Malda (15 June of 1515 AD).<sup>1</sup> In India it is a common practice for sons to perform funeral rituals of parents and

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offer *pitripinda* but at Ramkeli on that day of *Jayistha-Sankranti* a large number of female devotees visit from different parts of India to give *matripinda* and this *pindadana* is only held during the fair at Gayeswari or Goureswari temple near Firoz-Minar which is considered as an unique feature of this fair. This paper shall base its narrative on review of literature on Ramkeli, Vaishnavism in Bengal, Chaitanya, *Shakti* worship and on an ethnographic account of the two significant festivals held on the same dates. Both the events give women two-fold identities: a chooser where she can exercise her agency and at the same time the other event subsumes her identity in the wider patriarchal domain of authority and domination.

The distance between both temples at Ramkeli (Madonmohan and Goureswari) is about two kilometres but both groups of devotees do not accept the persistency of the other. The *Vaishnava* devotees of Ramkeli recognize the existence of *Shakti* cult and Gayeswari at Gour but deny its historical root. For them different Hindu kings developed their kingdom here so the stone carved idol of the temple remain as a relic and the temple has no significance for the conduction of this fair. They do not accept the philosophy of *Shakti* worship because they view Krishna as the supreme soul and Radha for them is only woman deity whose entity persists in her love for Krishna. Thus every devotee of Krishna (including male devotees) is an embodiment of Radha. Most of them did not have any idea about the location of the temple. The devotees of *Vaishnava* community who are directly involved with the worship of Madanmohan and Chaitanya mostly belong to upper-caste position. According to them the ritual practices of *Shakti* cult like meat, alcohol and blood considered as impure for *Vaishnava* and those practices are associated with lower born people. To them, Chaitanya as the saviour of humankind had tried to liberate people from those practices. So for them, *Shakta* community is situated in lower position than *Vaishnava* as their lifestyle is associated with lower caste groups who are non-vegetarian. So, the basis of the dialectic is both *Vaishnava* and the *Shakta* exist at the same place but deny their existence becomes significant context in which the opposite position of women in both cults are discussed in the paper.

### **Theoretical Understanding**

The feminist understanding of gendered polarisation provides a critical approach to study the traditionally assigned male-female role division in various social institutions and explain it as a socio-cultural construction. This construction helps to maintain the sustainability of patriarchal social order that enhance gender inequality and women subordination. From the feminist view gender assigned roles are not determined by the biological classification of human body rather those are scripted by society, culture, values, norms, customs and institutions (Oakley 1996: 35-39). The empirical research on Ramkeli fair was conducted by using the ethnographic account as espoused by

Malinowski for understanding the traditional values, beliefs, customs and cultural practices of this fair. The theoretical paradigm of Malinowski was based on interpretative analysis of empirical data. As a functionalist he emphasised on the study of culture. He denoted culture as a whole where patterns, values, beliefs, ideas and practices of people are studied. He analysed culture from a functionalist perspective. Through his study he tried to grasp people's own vision about his own world, thus interpret the culture as a whole. His theory was based on 'function' and explained how function of one institution can influence the other and claimed every customs, values are not isolated from each other rather connected with the rest of the culture. He also emphasised on the understanding of those who practice culture and how it becomes meaningful to them by mitigating their own needs. Lastly he interpreted how those cultural practices promote social cohesion (Kaberry 2002: 71-91).

In this empirical work on Ramkeli fair the authors want to critically analyse this functionalist tradition by explaining the conventional customs and values of this fair as a cultural system and try to understand the how this age old practice use the traditional gender defined role as a mechanism for maintaining the patriarchal social order for fostering social cohesion and uniformity of collective value system.

E. Leach as a structuralist had tried to bridge the gap between functionalism and structuralism. He advocated every society maintain a balance with constant stability of flux and potential changes of culture, thus there not always exist an absolute form of conformity in cultural practices rather that can be sustained with conflicting interests, which is identified as a source of dynamism. Thus the mechanism of cultural change is based on the reaction of the people of a particular community on the basis of their differential economic and political interests. Thus he focused on the binary opposition of society and claimed every society have different form of culture with various representation of binary oppositions. For him the understanding of a cultural system should be based on the interpretation of the structure of mind of the people and analysis of their understanding about the binary (Kuper 1983: 142-166).

In this paper the binary opposition between the *Vaishnava* and *Shakta* community is interpreted on the basis of the traditional values and beliefs system of both cults, and also the authors try to re-define the caste and gender based hierarchy within the religious practices of Vaishnavism. Through this empirical study the authors criticise the rigid binary structure of male and female role that serves to restrict women agency and emancipation by using a feminist lens. Feminist epistemological position argues the structure of gender based on the binary of two different sexual identity is functionally used to provide privilege position to men and suppress women position through the practice of culture.

Although the religious ideology of Chaitanya emerged on the ideology of equality but with the considerable changes and negotiations in the practice of Vaishnavism at Ramkeli the devotees of Chaitanya interpret the presence of caste and gender based hierarchy within Vaishnavism as functional for the preservation of the tradition of the cult on the other the members of both two religious communities assign functional meaning to the dilemma between this binary opposition of Vaishnavism and Shaktism. The study also explains the assimilation process of Vaishnavism and Shaktism which serve to maintain the whole cultural order and the rear the stereotypical order of gender hierarchy and socially constructed belief of gender based appropriate behavioural practice within these both two religious cults.

### **Evolution of Ramkeli Fair and the Role of Chaitanya**

During Pala dynasty Gour was the capital of Bengal and considered as the capital even after the Muslim rulers owned Gour in 1198 AD. After shifting the capital in 1350 AD to Pandua in 1353 AD Gour again became the capital of Bengal. Roup and Sanatan are believed to build Madanmohan temple at Ramkeli in 1509 AD. The idols of Madanmohan (other name of Krishna), Radha, Balarama and Revathi and a statue of Gopal, Gauranga, Nityananda and Advaitacharya and two oil portraits of Roup and Sanatan are situated in the temple. A huge stage is constructed in front of the temple for *naam-samkirtana*. There are eight cistern ponds (*asthasakhi-kunda* of Krishna) at Ramkeli as a model of Vrindaban named—*Roup-Sagar, Shyam-Kunda, Radha-Kunda, Lalita-Kunda, Bisakha-Kunda, Surabhi-Kunda, Ranja-Kunda* and *Indulekha-Kunda*, designing the place as *Gupta-Vrindaban*. It is supposed that here Chaitanya met his two devotees under the *Kelikadamba* (*Mitragyna-Parvifolia*) and *Tamal* (*Diospyros-Montana*: sacred grove) tree in front of Madanmohan temple and after staying there for three days Chaitanya returned to Puri, Odisha (*Nilachal*) on 17 June, 1515 AD. From then, the place was flooded with devotion for Chaitanya and the mass gathering of devotees at that auspicious time transformed into a widely known Ramkeli fair. Every year a large number of *Vaishnava* as well as other devotees come from different districts of West Bengal and India to visit this fair (Chakraborty 1992: 10-19).

Chaitanya influenced large number of people through his devotional spirit, popularly known as *Bhaktiyoga* (cult of devotion). Vaishnavism has been discussed in Hindu *Puranic* mythology but it was transforms into a complete new dimension during fifteenth century by Chaitanya (1486 AD to 1533 AD) and his followers in Eastern part of India especially in Bengal and Odisha. His philosophy of Krishna *bhakti* and *prem* (devotion and love) took universalised form. Bengal Vaishnavism is based on the philosophy of *bhakti* rather than quest for knowledge, devotion towards Krishna is considered as only path of salvation (*bhakti* leads to *mukti*, freedom from the mundane) (Ghosh 2020: 204).

Chaitanya was ascribed godhood by devotees and looked upon as lord Krishna incarnate which became the unique feature of Bengal Vaishnavism. Chaitanya possessed the qualities of charismatic leadership that attracted his devotees. According to Max Weber a charismatic leader is one who is quite ordinary but possesses such qualities that attract people towards the leader and the qualities set him apart from the ordinary people. The common and the ordinary people accept the leader as if endowed with supernatural, superhuman or exceptional qualities those are not accessible by them. For him, charisma can become a revolutionary force in the social world which may lead to dramatic changes in the traditional system (Ritzer 2011: 128-129). Thus, Chaitanya cult was constructed due to the charm of his personality and the appearance of his evident devotion.

The *Bhaktiyoga* of Chaitanya was unique as sometimes expressed by his dancing and singing with joy, sometimes he lost his sense and immersed in Krishna *bhakti* (Goswami 1925: 169). For Krishnadas Kaviraj whenever Krishna wanted to feel the love of Radha he appeared in Navadvip in the form of Chaitanya who had the duality of both two divine souls Radha-Krishna. Radha was described as warm, soft and her eternal love for Krishna is compared with his devotion (*Radha-bhava*, the love of Radha for Krishna) (Goswami 1925: 4-9). So Bengal Vaishnavism is infested with purity of love and Chaitanya received the central space in the heart of the *Vaishnava* in Bengal (Goswami 1925: 17-21).

The unique feature of Chaitanya Vaishnavism is *harinaam-samkirtana* (taking the name of Krishna collectively) which becomes the main attraction of Ramkeli fair. Initially *kirtana* was conducted privately in the house of a devotee named Shrivasa but Chaitanya instructed to organise it in a larger form (Ghosh 2020: 53). People from different segments of society like untouchables; lower caste groups including women was flooded with devotion evoked by *kirtana* (Ghosh 2020: 55). He advised his devotees to lead a simple life and live as a beggar, should be strict vegetarian and be humble with others and these practices of poverty can connect Vaishnavism with the people of lower strata. He defined *kirtana* as characterised by fervour of devotion where emotion has played a dominant role so people forget caste distinctions as they participate (Chakrabarty 1985: 74-78). In the era of Chaitanya this form of collective devotion had developed a movement against all conservativeness of caste rigidity, popularly known as Bhakti Movement of Bengal where Chaitanya took a significant role (Ghosh 2020: 52-55). By performing *naam-samkirtana* he developed a communication among the devotees and generated a mass consciousness of pure devotion. As an intellectual he developed new ideas, new thoughts in opposition of the existing evils of society and revolt against social prejudices regarding caste hierarchy (Ghosh 2020: 208-209).

Chaitanya was associated with Radha like emotion (*Radha-bhava-dyuti*) which is the product of the ancient Indian theory of *rasa* (an emotional form of

devotion) of *Bhakti* cult which leads to salvation (*moksha*). According to Hindu religious ideology devotion (*bhakti-rasa*) is divided into five sub-categories such as— *shanta-rasa* (quiet meditation), *dashya-rasa* (devotee performs as a servant of the deity), *sakhya-rasa* (based on friendship), *vatsalya-rasa* (parent like emotion) and *madhu-rasa* (emotion of passionate love) (Goswami 1925: 57). The devotion of Chaitanya was based on *madhu-rasa* form here he is regarded as embodiment of the union of both Radha-Krishna. He claimed all the devotees of this material world can be viewed as Radha (woman love) and the supreme lord Krishna is one and only man of the Spiritual world (Ghosh 2020: 203).

The practice of mass marriage of *Vaishnava* became the most unique feature of this fair. For the exploitation of lower caste people by the upper caste especially those lower caste women who were widow, husband deserted and abandoned were in more vulnerable situations. Sometimes for the pressure of society they gradually engaged in various kind of anti-social activities either willingly or unwillingly (Das 2017: 1). For losing the dignity of ideal womanhood (chaste wife) they gradually were isolated from the mass.

By following the *Bhakti* cult of Chaitanya his disciple Nityananda Abadhut started to organize the ceremony of mass marriage at Ramkeli to rescue those exploited people which also helped them to start a new journey with a new mate. The marriage was conducted by exchange of *kanthi* (necklace made by strings of beads of *Tulshi* stem) and *tilak* known as an identity of *Vaishnavite* conversion. For this marriage both groom-bride were needed to enlist their name to the authority of the temple. The marriage was conducted in front of Madanmohan temple on the auspicious day of *Jayistha-Sankranti*. Before marriage the *Vaishnava* and *Vaishnavi* took a bath in a pond (*kunda*) near the temple and wear fresh cloth for maintaining purity (Das 2017: 1). Then *Vaishnavi* had to stand in a row by covering themselves and only their little finger of left hand remain uncovered. The *Vaishnava* has to choose their mate by selecting the fingers, exposed in public. The marriage started with the promise of life-long devotion to Krishna by exchange of one-rupee (*pachsika-posia*) and *Vaishnavi* was committed to help her male partner to devote properly throughout his life (Chakraborty 1992: 28-31). But today at Ramkeli this *kanthi-badal* ritual has become a myth. The purpose of the practice was to help the distress people to return to the mainstream society with dignity and also provide the socially accepted right of togetherness and equality. A Bengali song was popular among the *Vaishnava* of Bengal—

*'Ramkeli mela giya bostomi anibi, pachsika poisa diya konthi bodlenibi, khonjoni bajaye tare tulibe kaghore, hare Krishna naam kori smariaprabhure'* (Chakraborty 1992: 30). {Translated as- In Ramkeli fair *Vaishnava* can marry *Vaishnavi* by exchange of *kanthi* and one-rupee. Celebrate the entry of the Bride in the house of the groom by playing *khonjoni* (a musical instrument of *kirtana*) and together take the name of Krishna}.

In Indian society a social stigma is inflicted on unmarried men and women, because the importance of marriage is undeniable for maintaining status-quo. The cost of mass marriage was very low that became helpful for those brides and grooms who could not bear the heavy cost of social marriage which can also remove the stigma of spinsterhood (Chakraborty 1992: 28-31). Thus the purpose of the marriage was to liberate those people who could not marry and also it introduced the new life of togetherness towards the path of devotion. Although the philosophy behind this practice involves equality of both mates but the *Vaishnava* devotees of the fair have an antagonistic idea about this marriage. As they believe at the time of that mass marriage the grooms had to select their mate only by watching the finger of the bride, they were not attracted by her beauty thus the men by accepting a woman as his wife emancipate her from social stigma so as a husband he became her saviour. Hence the primary duty of the woman is to serve her husband for whole life. Here the patriarchal construction of woman identity becomes an important factor as by following the concept of ideal womanhood in this form of marriage the wife had to follow the instructions of her husband as her existence is based on her status of wifehood.

### **Our journey at Ramkeli**

The journey started from Rathbari, Malda which was 15-16 Kilometres from Ramkeli. The two unique characteristics of this fair is mass marriage of *Vaishnava* and *matripinda* offered by women. The journey had started long back when we saw people flooded trains, jammed buses to visit Ramkeli fair. It aroused in us a strong urge to know what it was and what it stood for which attracted so many people from all over India and from foreign countries.

Devotees from different parts of West Bengal (Siliguri, Birbhum, Bolpur, Purulia and others) and also from India (Varanasi, Guwahati, Uttarakhand and others) came to the fair. They sat in a row in separate tents and asked all visitors for alms and help in form of uncooked food and money. But the visitors had no information regarding the origin of Madanmohan temple, Roup, Sanatan and Gayeswari or Goureswari temple, although they acknowledged the spiritual power of Chaitanya and philosophy of *Bhakti* cult.

The religious observance by *Vaishnava* community (*harinaam-samkirtana*) is the main attraction of this fair. Several tents are made by different group of *bairagi* (both men and women), known as *bairagi-akhra* in the premises of Ramkeli. Chaitanya did not create *kirtana* but transformed it as a weapon of resistance against the domination of Brahmanism. Before his appearance *Vaishnava* community established a group headed by Adwaitacharya at Navadwip, Nadia but that was caste based where the right to worship Krishna and to perform *kirtana* was only enjoyed by upper caste (*Brahmin, Kulin-Kayestha, Baidya*) Hindus. Pre-Chaitanya era was expressively dominated by Brahmin community and women predominantly governed by the male

members of society. Chaitanya as a religious reformist had tried to change the character of the ritual practice of *Vaishnava* community and transform it into a mass movement (Ghosh 2020: 52-53).

Bengal Vaishnavism was transfused by the local disciples of Chaitanya like— Vrindavan Das, Jayananda, Lochana Das, Murari Gupta and others, those who were married devotees and some of the devotees took ascetic vow (known as *goswami*) like- Sanatan, Roup, Jiva, Raghunath Bhatta, Gopal Bhatta and Raghunath Das and others, all of them belong to different caste position in society (include both upper and lower caste) (Ghosh 2020: 199). He declared that even if a person is *Sudra* (lower caste) can be considered as true *Vaishnava* if s/he recites the name of Krishna (Ghosh 2020: 206-215). He argued as— ‘*Chandal jodi Krishna naam kore tobe se chandal noy, Brahmin Jodi oshot pothe chole tobe se Brahmin noy*’ (Translated as- if an untouchable will take the name of Krishna s/he cannot be considered as untouchable and if an upper caste Brahmin will become dishonest s/he cannot be denoted as Brahmin) (Bramha 2015: 69). Thus by rejecting all caste based distinctions he promoted a sense of equality as a state of devotion which is known as spiritual democracy (Ghosh 2020: 52-55).

Every year a huge number of *Vaishnava* and *Vaishnavi* participate in the worship of Madanmohan on those auspicious days of Ramkeli fair. An unstructured interview was conducted with them about the importance and origin of the fair. The caste status of those *Vaishnava* were blended (both upper and lower) in most of the *Vaishnava-akhra* (group of *Vaishnava*, who perform *kirtana*) but it was seen that the main hosts of different *Kirtana* groups were upper caste male Brahmins and those were directly involved in the occasion. Other participants were mixture of various caste position. Here the role of female devotees were limited especially as passive helper who helped the male performer by playing different music instruments or participate in chorus music during *kirtana*. Thus the male upper caste *Vaishnava* became the main organizer of the rituals associated with Madanmohan temple. Some of them were the member of various *kirtana-akhra* and the other were involved as priest of the temple.

In philosophical level the devotees believed caste system is based on hierarchy and is defined by birth according to *karma* (action of previous life) so every caste group have different caste status and only the philosophy of Vaishnavism can reduce this differentiation by liberating the lower caste people from the sins of their previous life. But in real sense at Ramkeli caste distinctions play a vital role where the caste position of Chaitanya including Roup and Sanatan was glorified by the upper caste *Vaishnava* who defined them as Brahmin *santan* (son of Brahmin), that denotes their privileged position within the *Vaishnava* community. For them becoming *Vaishnava* leads to redemption from lower caste position but simultaneously they claimed that the higher caste position is more privileged for becoming more virtuous from

the deeds of previous life.

The idea of those *Vaishnavite* about marriage is based on patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy use marriage as a weapon to control women, it provides right to husbands to keep women under their control and women also internalized the moral code of conducts for being an ideal wife, which is known as *pativrata*dharma. *Pativrata* denotes some specific code of conducts of Hindu wife leads to chastity and wifely fidelity as pure form of selfhood. Her responsibilities should be restricted to her husband and which becomes the means of salvation of her life (Chakravarti 2006: 74). Similarly in mass marriage a *Vaishnavi* had to consider her husband as her lord (*pati-parameswar*), obey his order, should become the passive helper of his way to devotion and after death of her husband she could devote herself towards the supreme god Krishna. One participant (*Vaishnava*) stated as '*Naarir ehonmer potiseba projomne Krishna prapti ghotai*' (Translated as- wife should serve her husband, it leads to salvation in her next life after death).

For understanding the dilemma at Ramkeli between the philosophies of *Bhakti* cult, based on equality and the actual idea of *Vaishnava* about gender specific equality and role of women (especially married, *Vaishnavi*) it is important to know about the objectives of this philosophical school of Chaitanya and about his married life mentioned in different *Vaishnava* texts.

The Bhakti Movement of Chaitanya was governed by two major purposes— resistance against the religious conversion conducted by Hussain Shah (Muslim ruler, reigned 1493-1519 AD) in Bengal and provide rights to lower caste Hindus who were exploited and marginalized by dominant Brahminic ideology.

Among various male devotees some of female devotees had played an important role for spreading Chaitanya philosophy but in most of the cases they were associated with some of his male devotees. The most deserving names are— Ganga Devi, daughter of Nityananda and wife of Madhavacharya who spread Vaishnavism in parts of Bengal; Sita Devi, wife of Adwaitacharya and after his death she provide leadership to his disciple at Shantipur in Nadia; Janhnavi Devi, daughter of Suryadas Sarkhel and second wife of Nityananda; Hemlata Thakurani, daughter of Srinivasa; and Madhavi Devi, sister of the Sikhi Mahiti (Ghosh 2020: 198-199).

In *Vaishnava* community there exist a long standing controversy of *Sevikiya* (care and affection) versus *Parakiya* (extra-marital relationship) love for Krishna (Ghosh 2020: 203-204). *Vaishnava* philosophy has variety of ideologies, from all of those Narahari Sarkar and his follower Lochana Das spread the ideology of devotion for Chaitanya in the spirit of love of *gopi* (married female friends of Krishna) for Krishna. This group of followers denoted intense physical desires among the women of Nadia for Chaitanya. They claimed all married women of Nadia including ugly and beautiful considered handsome

Chaitanya as their *Nagar* or paramour and felt the desire to touch him and their eyes were thirsty to gaze at him. Thus for those women the glory and grace of Chaitanya was defined as ultimate sweetness of life. This philosophy was popular as *Srikhanda* School of devotion and the ideology was extended among the rural belt of Burdwan region during eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Thus *Srikhanda* School of thought denoted *Parakiya* (extra marital love) love for Chaitanya who was considered as the embodiment of Krishna (Chakrabarty 1985: 190-192). However different mythology of *Vaishnava* claimed that Chaitanya usually avoided direct interaction with women as an ascetic (Sen 2019: 141-142).

Among the two wives of Chaitanya, Vishnupriya as his second wife is given more importance in *Vaishnava* literature, as she viewed the transition of his life to monkhood. She is regarded as Satyabhama (second consort of Krishna) in her past life and denoted as a young bride, whose whole life remained devoted to her lost husband (Bandyopadhyay 2015: 248).

From colonial period educated middle-class Bengali assumed a need for this cult to purify the tradition from sexual immorality (*Parakiya* cult) as a negative stereotype was generated against the *Vaishnavi* (female ascetics) (Banerjee 1987: 1197-1206). For Melville Kennedy most women took Vaishnavism in order to hide their lower caste status. He stated in the *bairagi* (ascetic) life the widow *Vaishnavi* can remarry without recognition of society (Kennedy 1925: 172). Chaitanya–Vishnupriya image portrayed the connection of Vishnupriya to Lakshmi with the notions of abundance, wealth, beauty, and prosperity. That was developed for the increasing importance of domesticity, conjugality in the colonial period (Chakrabarty 1993: 1-34). When in a society the concept of ideal womanhood is most desirable, then the idea of conjugal worship became more popular than the couple those are associated with one another on the basis of passionate love (the divine couple Radha-Krishna loved each other but Radha was married to Ayan Ghosh).

Haridas Goswami who promoted the Chaitanya–Vishnupriya tradition, was born in a Brahmin family. Here Vishnupriya is personified as *dasya-bhava* (devotion through service) towards her husband. This represented a radical alteration of theological perspectives of Bengal Vaishnavism. As Tony Stewart stated this image portray the relation on the basis of socially acceptable moralities (Stewart 2010: 160). Thus Haridas Goswami tried to synthesize the both opposite cults of Vaishnavism.

The expression of ideal womanhood represented in *Sevikiya* philosophy of Vaishnavism. On the other *Parakiya* cult expressed a passionate devotion, love and aesthetic pleasure between Radha and other *gopi* (female friends) for Krishna which was beyond the marital relationship and the philosophy was in opposition of chastity and fidelity of ideal womanhood. Thus both of these two philosophies tried to define the role of women from the idea of patriarchy

(male dominated construction of women identity). According to Hindu mythology (guided by patriarchal ideology) the innate nature of women is called as *strisavabhava* denoted women as sexual being as in opposition with the moral code of conduct of women known as *stridharma* defined as fidelity to husband. *Strisavabhava* represented women sexuality as their essential nature which is defined as maternal heritage. Here *Parakiya* cult is the representation of this innate nature of women (married women of Nadia feel sexual attraction to Chaitanya). On the other *Sevikiya* cult of Vaishnavism introduced the dharma (religious ideology) prescribed code of conduct for women which is based on the devotional spirit of women to her husband signified as *stridharma* conceived by paternal heritage which led to ideal womanhood (chastity of Vishnupriya) (Chakravarti 2006: 72-74).

It was observed at Ramkeli the perspective about mass marriage and role of women, the *Vaishnava* devotees was guided by this philosophy of Chaitanya-Vishnupriya cult, where wife should play the role of passive helper of her husband in his way to devotion. In this form of marriage patriarchal ideology took the dominant form, the life of a wife should be devoted to her husband and denoted husband as the lord to whom the wife must offer unquestioning devotion. Although the cult of Vaishnavism is based on the equality of all human being in the path of devotion but here also the ideology of patriarchy, as a weapon of domination is cultivated and nurtured by this religious sect till today at Ramkeli.

### **Agency of women at Gayeswari or Goureswari Temple**

Ancient Gour was the capital of Bengal, where *Shakti* cult was predominant. The great mother goddess of Gour was denoted as Goureswari, was worshiped by various Hindu king in different time periods. The temple was situated at the left side of Gour near the river bank of Bhagirathi later destroyed in the river. Including in Pala dynasty the presence of the temple could be found at Gour. At the time of Sena Dynasty the king Lakhan Sen established four Chandi temples at four different gateways of his kingdom to protect Gour named— eastern corner- Jahurachandi temple, western part- Dwarbasinichandi temple, northern side- Patalchandi temple and southern corner- Goureswari temple. Later the original temple of Goureswari sank into the river Ganga, and was rebuilt by Lakhan Sen at his newly constructed town named as Lakhanabati (present name Phulbari Village near Adina, Malda). The village was also known as Deogram where various Hindu temples were constructed (Ghosh 2020: 389-392). Again the temple was destroyed by Muslim ruler Bakhtiyar Khilji (reigned 1197-1206 AD) and the actual idol was replaced in different place of Gour by Brahmin priest to confuse the ruler.

Alexander Cunningham and Francis Buchanan Hamilton described Dwarbasinichandi as the mother goddess of Gour. Francis Buchanan Hamilton stated (1809-1810 AD) although the Dwarbasini temple was destroyed but still

at that place near about 5000 people gathered in the month of *Jayistha* to celebrate the worship of Goureswari, the owner of Gour, later he found the deity was worshiped near Firozpur. Alexander Cunningham (1879-1880 AD) also accepted the village Kamalabari (at the northern side of Gour where the Dwarbasinichandi temple was established) possessed the temple of Goureswari (Ghosh 2020: 389-392). Later the idol was established on the border of Gour. As the Muslim rulers ruined the temple several times, the idol was worshiped in different places of Gour (Basak 2011: 87-88). Hindu King Ganesh again established the temple in Bamanpara and started to worship Goureswari but his son Jalaluddin destroyed the temple (the son of Hindu king Ganesh converted to Islam). Later at the time of Hussain Shah the idol was found and the temple was again established by Alauddin near the north-west part of Baishgaji-Prachir (ancient name Banglacot) in front of Firoz-Minar. Till today in that temple a stone carved four handed goddess idol is worshiped as Goureswari (Ghosh 2020: 389-392).

### **Our journey at Goureswari Temple**

Besides the festival of *Vaishnava* the Ramkeli fair is also popular for *Shakti* worship. In the western side of Firoz-Minar beside the thin stream of river Bhagirathi Goureswari temple is situated. The temple is considered both as *Shakti-peeth* (one *peeth* among the 51 *Shakti-peeth*) and also as Mother Goddess of Gour. When Gour was the capital of Bengal the temple was constructed for the ritual of maternal funeral, especially conducted by daughters so the deity is also known as Gayeswari. Till today the ritual is performed by women at Gour in the first day of Ramkeli fair (Basak 2011: 87-88). After having a bath in the river they worship goddess Tulshi, light a lamp in Firoz-Minar with the help of *bihari-pandits* (Hindi speaking Bihari male priest) and give their tribute to their mother in the Gayeswari temple, the ritual is popularly known as *matripindadan*. They float the *pinda* (a small ball made of rice flour, ghee, sesame seeds, milk, honey and like other traditional elements; which are sold near Firoz-Minar) in the pond near the temple and light a lamp for peace of the holy souls of their ancestors on the roof of the temple. In this temple there exist a model boat (signifies *baitarani*), after completing all the rituals the devotees have to cross the boat as a significance of the path towards heaven (*bhabanadipar*). On the first day of the fair women devotees from different places like— Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Utter Pradesh including Nepal visit the temple to offer *matripinda*, so the place is also known as *Matri-Gaya*<sup>3</sup>.

### **Krishna-Kali Association**

Historically the cults of *Vaishnava* and *Shakta* are radically different and antagonistic but at the philosophical level there developed a proximate association between these two ideologies. According to *Shakti* cult Kali is the fierce form of Durga (wife of Shiva) and *Vaishnava* denotes Krishna as the god

of love. The similarities between Kali and Krishna are based on their origin and embodiment. Both deities have dark complexion either blue or black which represents the darkness that consumes all the sinister of both material and spiritual world and embedded truth and peace. Both of their names signify the black one, the male version is denoted as Shyam (other name of Krishna) and female version is Shyama (other name of Kali) (Datta 2016). Mahabharata defined Durga as the sister of Krishna known as Yogmaya (other name of Kali) regarded as Subhadra at Puri in Odisha who was born from the womb of Yashodha.<sup>4</sup> At the philosophical level *Kala* is a Sanskrit word means time. Time controls the universe which is unrestrained and immortal reality. The name Kali is the feminine word for time and masculine is *Kala*. Kali denotes the never ending cycle of time. Shiva as a male counterpart of time, Mahakaal is Consort of Kali. Hinduism also signify the three male gods— Bramha-Vishnu (other name of Krishna)-Mahes (other name of Shiva) together as the origin of creation, procreation and destruction. On the other the *Bhagvad-Gita* symbolize Krishna as *Kala* who defines time. Thus the three philosophies are associated with each other. According to Bengali folk tradition once Krishna takes the form of Kali for Radha. Every night he used to play flute in forest with Radha even after her marriage which was unrevealed to Ayan, her husband. Once her sister-in-laws Jatila and Kutila informed him so he went to the forest to catch his wife red-handed but Krishna knew everything. So he asked Radha to collect red flowers and fruits as if she was worshiping and he took the form of Kali. Hence when Ayan visited Radha he saw her as worshiping goddess Kali. He was pleased to see this. Thus in folk tradition there develops a co-existence of faith between Krishna and Kali (Vora 2018). But in Vaishnavism there exist a huge debate between these two cults for the differences in ritual practices of *Vaishnava* and *Shakta*, the details of this dilemma is discussed in the next section.

### **The Dialectic between the Philosophy of Chaitanya and *Shakti* Cult**

At practical level the conflict between the philosophies of *Vaishnava* and *Shakta* is very evident. According to the *Vaishnava* especially Chaitanya who transformed *kirtana* as a path of devotion believed Krishna as a supreme power creates this material world. So every elements of this world are considered as a part of Krishna. Thus Chaitanya could found the *duyti* (existence) of Krishna everywhere and felt love for every living element equally. On the other *Shakti* worship is based on animal sacrifice. This defines the opposition between the both cults. Chaitanya was soft-hearted but an incident related to this dilemma represented a different version of him. Kaviraj (1925) stated once a Kali devotee put red flower and blood of goat (ingredients for sacrifice essential in Kali worship) in front of the house where *Vaishnava* devotees gathered together for *kirtana* (house of Shrivasa). Soon the person who was the perpetrator suffered from leprosy and came to Chaitanya for apology. But he refused to help him and sent him to Shrivasa for apology. Thus although

Chaitanya had a non-violent character, he could appear in an aggressive form to protect his ideology (Goswami 1925: 319-321). Thus in reality the life style and ritual practices of both cults are totally different.

Puri is one of the most important pilgrimages for *Vaishnava* where Chaitanya spent the last part of his life. Here goddess Vimala (regarded as a *Shakti-peeth*) is worshiped at the Jagannath temple. Although the goddess is oriented with *Shakti* cult but in everyday worship after offering food to Jagannath temple (vegetarian) the offerings is given to Vimala temple thus it become *mahaprasadi* (oblation to the deity). The goddess is identified as a form of Durga, consort of Shiva and also the mother goddess of Puri. According to the *Shakti* cult every *Shakti-peeth* (51 temples are made in honour of various body parts of Sati, first wife of Shiva) is associated with a temple of Bhairava (another form of Shiva) as a guardian for the protection of the temple. But only in Puri, Jagannath as a form of Krishna considered as the Bhairava of Vimala Devi. Here the philosophy of oneness of Hindu trinity (Bhramha-Vishnu-Shiva) is established. But according to the *Shakti* cult Jagannath is identified as Shiva-Bhairava rather than as a form of Krishna (Mahapatra 2005: 9-14). Only in the occasion of *Durga-puja* (Bengali festival celebrated during autumn) non-vegetarian food is offered to Vimala temple and also animal sacrifice is practiced on the third day of this occasion (*Astami*, eight day of *Navratri*). After completing all rituals by following the philosophy of *Shakti* cult the Vimala temple is purified, from then again the offering of Jagannath is started to deliver to Vimala (Tripathy 2009: 66-69). Thus the offering of remnants of Jagannath to the deity signifies her subordinated position to Jagannath, but the devotees of the temple including *Vaishnava* cannot ignore the existence of the deity.

But at Ramkeli the dichotomy between *Vaishnava* and *Shakta* was very crystalline. The visitors of the fair were divided into groups. One group (especially *Vaishnava*) came to perform *kirtana* or worship of Madanmohan and Chaitanya near the temple. The other appeared in the fair to offer *matripinda* in Gayeswari or Goureswari temple, conducted specially by women and most of them were from lower caste group came from different rural belts of Malda as well as some other places of West Bengal. They believe if one performs the ritual she has to perform this at least three times in the next three years. Thus the ritual provides an opportunity for women to liberate their ancestors which ideally are conducted by male progeny in Hinduism.

### Conclusion

A significant opposition to caste system was manifested from various tradition of Bhakti Movement during early and late medieval period in India (Four major regions of India witnessed the impact of *Bhakti* tradition: Tamil region- 700 AD to 1200 AD; Maharashtra-1200 AD to 1700 AD; North India-1400 AD to 1700 AD and Eastern India- 1500 AD to 1800 AD). The ideologies of

different cults varied according to the philosophy of each but in every cult devotees came from different caste groups including upper and lower positions. All of the cults provided democratic access to the devotees from different segments of society and religion became an important space to liberate lower caste men and women. By following the *Bhakti* tradition marginalized lower caste men and women felt the urge to liberate themselves from the domination of Brahmanism and also from the role of domesticity that was allotted to women in caste based social order (Chakravarti 2006: 95-96). But by conducting a field study through the use of participatory observation method at Ramkeli, it was observed that although the *Bhakti* tradition of Chaitanya has criticized caste hierarchy the devotees at Ramkeli were unable to ignore this caste based domination within the domain of religious purity. They accept the privileged position of the upper caste Brahmin in *Vaishnava* community and try to restore the superiority of upper caste as a group of *Vaishnava* even within the *Bhakti* cult of Chaitanya. Moreover *bhakti* (devotion) towards Krishna that culminated in the submission to the Lord also personified subordination and submission of women who were unable to escape the patriarchal ideology. The cult did not offer any catharsis either to them to ignore this dominant ideology.

The development of Bhakti Movement of Chaitanya became a strong anti-Brahmanical tradition which provides an image of alternative religious community. But when it is practiced by devotees it idealizes authoritative the social relations, domination and hierarchy within the social structure as developed by the dominant ideology of caste and gender politics. They develop as a religious sect where the members follow their own beliefs and rituals and produce an endogamous community thus ultimately become a caste like sect where the practice of patriarchy and the sentiment of *pativrata* is very prominent and considered essential for the socio-cultural construction of women's identity (Chakravarti 2006: 103).

Though the history of Gayeswari or Goureswari temple was more ancient than Ramkeli fair, the fair is more popular for the *Bhakti* cult of Chaitanya and Madanmohan temple than the ritual *matripinda* of Gayeswari or Goureswari temple. Here too, the agency of women to exercise freedom and attain liberty from patriarchal practices is denied. The devotees of Chaitanya accepted the socially expected role of an ideal woman which represents woman as emotional, adorable, and loving like Radha, beloved of Krishna or like Vishnupriya. The *Shakti* cult defines women as dangerous and destructive, so Vaishnavism could not accept the philosophy of *Shakta*. On the other the women devotees who came to visit Gayeswari or Goureswari to perform the ritual of *matripinda* also did not accept the glory of Chaitanya at Ramkeli and also distanced themselves from participating in *Vaishnava* rituals. Their conviction is based on the philosophy of *Shakti* cult and the great mother of all humankind, they had a deep faith on the ritual of *matripindadan* which can only glorify their status as a daughter to their natal descent. The paper based on exploratory

study conducted through the participation of the authors in Ramkeli fair during the auspicious time opened an opportunity to understand how the caste hierarchy redefines itself within a rupture in the Hindu idea of pure and polluting castes and at the same time exposes us to the idea of reconciliation of space and agency within the same Hindu pantheon. At Ramkeli the process of women emancipation is nurtured by women of lower-caste position, through the active involvement in the ritual of *matripindadan*, the group of individuals those who are marginalised in both categories of gender and caste can practice their agency which is the most unique characteristics of Ramkeli fair. At the Ramkeli fair there exist an indefatigable struggle between women's subordination as a functional practice in the name of preserving tradition of *Vashinava* community and the exercise of women's agency and emancipation practiced by the women of lower-caste position in the temple of mother goddess Gayeswari or Goureswari. This struggle is juxtaposed but not integrated, is in continual denial of the existence of each other, but at the same time their unified expression of their own beliefs form a cultural practice unique to Ramkeli. The functional existence of the binary yet a denial of the singular significant presence of each other thus reinforce the cultural unity of the society as a whole. The cults and their practices are only piecemeal in contrast to the holistic nature of social existence.

### Declaration

We do hereby declare that this paper has not been published earlier or not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

### Notes

1. According to Chaitanya-Bhagvata Hussain Shah was the king (Sultan) of Gour (the capital of Bengal from eight to twelfth century) and his two royal servants—Roup and Sanatan (belonging to upper caste Brahmin) became disciples of Chaitanya.
2. Srikhanda is a village near the sub-division of Katwa, Burdwan. The region was popular for Bhakti Movement of Chaitanya
3. Gaya is a city, has historical significance which is identified as a holy pilgrimage of Hinduism. Traditionally the place is important for the performance of pindadaan ritual. Once Rama with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana offered pinda for his dead father in Gaya. Here the ritual is performed by son for their ancestors (male forefathers) or dead parents to pay homage after their death, which leads to salvation of the soul and by performing this ritual son can get the blessings of their ancestors. It was believed that Sita (wife of Rama) also offered her matripinda in Gayeswari or Goureswari temple at Ramkeli. So the temple is known as Matri-Gaya.
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogmaya\\_Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogmaya_Temple) (Last accessed on 21 March 2023).

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