

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: A Relook at the Saint and Reformer

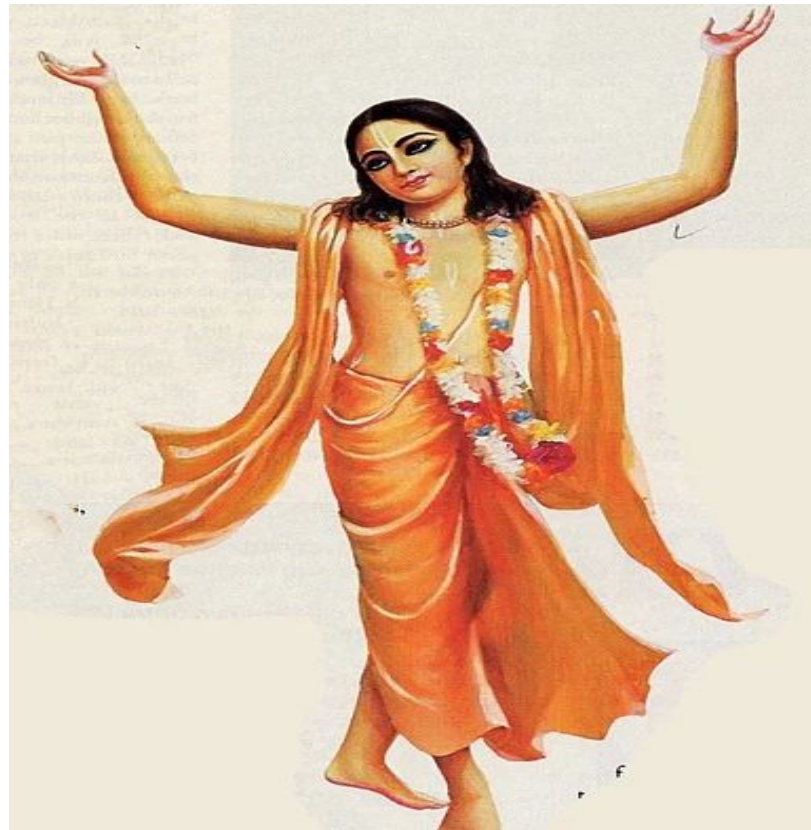
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SRI CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU

BORN: 1486 A.D

PLACE: NABADWIP, NADIA, WEST BENGAL

Chaitanya, the 15th-century saint, is known for his role in spreading Vaishnavism in Bengal. Often hailed as a socioreligious reformer, we look at modern research that has shown that while there is no denying Chaitanya's extraordinary contribution to Vaishnavism, there are reasons to reassess his role as a reformer and the social implications of the movement that he led.



In his time, Chaitanya was held as no less than a divinity, as God descended on earth to redeem humanity (In pic: Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is shown performing 'kirtan', devotional chanting and dancing, in the streets of Nabadwip, Bengal;

Chaitanya as the divine?

In his time, Chaitanya was held as no less than a divinity, as God descended on earth to redeem humanity. He was acclaimed as an exemplary saint, a compassionate soul, an ecstatic, God-intoxicated figure who brought back social justice, piety and devoutness to a society hitherto afflicted by debauchery, social inequities and crass worldliness. This was the subject matter of several medieval hagiographies on Chaitanya that have now attained wide circulation, even among people who do not formally claim to be Vaishnavas. For many, these are classic and enduring contributions to Bengali literature. But while a hagiographic celebration of Chaitanya's extraordinary life and work was only natural for his times, new arguments have also emerged ever since, foisting ideas or issues that are distinctly modern upon an individual who was quite clearly premodern.

Chaitanya as a socio-religious 'reformer'?

One of the epithets consistently bestowed upon Chaitanya by modern Bengali authorship is that of a social as well as a religious 'reformer'. In 1925, the American evangelist and scholar Melville T. Kennedy said that Chaitanya freely recruited people regardless of caste and based on their spiritual aspirations. However, modern historical research (such as by scholar B.B. Majumdar) shows that a majority of Chaitanya's better-known followers were men from the three upper bracket castes of Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha. And even though he ostensibly recruited women followers too, the number of active women participants was insignificant.

Chaitanya through the lens of 19th century academics

In the 19th century, when Chaitanya rapidly emerged as an iconic figure for Hindu Bengalis anxious to draw useful lessons from their cultural past, some of his work was given contemporary political meaning. Thus, a well-known episode from Chaitanya's life in which he and his followers defied the arbitrary orders of the local Kazi by prohibiting a Vaishnava procession was read as the first recorded instance of peaceful civil disobedience. Coming in the 1930s and 1940s, when indeed Gandhian ideas and movements had taken roots, this is not at all surprising. However, with respect to efforts at constructing Chaitanya into a political icon, we may also detect contrary trends. A small but significant section within the Bengali intelligentsia associated Chaitanya and his religion with emasculating sentimentalism, quite unsuitable for a people struggling to find a political voice. A good instance of this occurs in the novel *Anandamath* (1882) by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, where Chaitanya is accused of emasculating the Bengali people through his appeal to religious sentimentalism.



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The two important aspects of the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu are:

- 1. He believed in on Supreme Being, whom he called Krishna or Hari and exhorted others to have faith in Krishna.**
- 2. He preached universal brotherhood and denounced all distinctions based on Caste and Creed. He was opposed to the domination of the priestly class.**