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Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance: Brāhmaṇical and Bhadralok Alliance in Bengal

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Abstract: This article sets out to problematise the notion that late nineteenth and early twentieth century Vaiṣṇava anti-sahajīyā polemics can be taken as a definitive index of colonial wrought rupture within Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism. It proceeds by (1) drawing attention to oblique, yet unmistakably polemical, forms of response to sahajīyā currents in pre-colonial Gaudīya literature that are indicative of a movement towards a brāhmaṇically-aligned Vaiṣṇava normativity; and (2) highlighting how this movement towards normativity was further fostered in colonial times by Gaudīya gosvāmī types, who were often extensively involved in bhadralok Vaiṣṇava domains.

Keywords: Gaudīya; Vaiṣṇava; Bengal; brāhmaṇa; bhadralok; sahajīyā

1. Introduction

The Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava tradition featured prominently in the socio-religious landscape of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century in spite of the fact that it had become a palpable source of discomfort for the region’s emerging western-educated indigenous middle class. The tradition thus frequently came in for scathing criticism from this small but socially powerful group—commonly referred to as the ‘bhadralok’ (‘gentlefolk’)—on account of its perceived promotion of sexual and other forms of moral impropriety.

It might therefore seem surprising that, in the latter decades of the century, a notable section of the bhadralok began to turn to Vaiṣṇavism as a source of religious and cultural inspiration. Bhadralok involvement with the tradition appears, however, to have been determined from the outset by the colonially-shaped moral framework that distinguished the group—a framework often regarded as characterised, above all, by a rigid Victorian puritanism (Banerjee 1987). Bhadralok Vaiṣṇava enthusiasts thus took great pains to set a ‘pure’ (suddha) or ‘genuine’ (prakṛta) Vaiṣṇava tradition apart from all that did not meet the demands of their distinctive moral sensibilities.

This dissociative undertaking took shape most notably in a broad polemical campaign against Vaiṣṇava currents bearing the mark of tantric and other such transgressive influences. These currents—which, I broadly denote ‘sahajīyā’ (a term largely employed adjectivally rather than nominally in the context of the present discussion)—were frequently denounced by bhadralok Vaiṣṇavas as

1 Versions of this paper were presented in 2015 at the Bengali Vaishnavism in the Modern Period Workshop (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies) and the Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions (University of Edinburgh). I am very grateful to Tony K. Stewart, Brian Hatcher, Rembert Lutjeharms, James Madaio, Jessica Frazier, Ishan Chakrabarti, and Matt Shutzer for their helpful feedback at various stages in the paper’s development.

2 I employ this as shorthand for the numerous (at times disparate, often discrete) communities that developed around the sixteenth century ecstatic Bengali Kṛṣṇa devotee, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533). For a survey of recent critical literature on the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, see (Wong 2015).

3 I thank Tony K. Stewart for alerting me to the importance of this distinction. I am also grateful to him for kindly sharing his insightful unpublished paper on the study of the Sahajīyās: ‘Sex and Secrecy in the Politics of Sahajīya Scholarship [or Caveats

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deviant on account of their alleged illicit sexual practices, such as ritual copulation with the wife of another (parakhyā-sādhana), and other morally problematic behaviour. The burgeoning arena of Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava print served as the principal site for this campaign, with diatribes against sahajiyā depravity being an especially prominent feature of the many bhadrakol-directed Vaiṣṇava periodicals that began to circulate in Bengal in the later decades of the nineteenth century.4 As the esteemed Vaiṣṇava scholar and regional historian Achyutacharan Chaudhuri Tattvanidhi wrote in one such article, entitled ‘Sub-religion’ (upadharmaṇa) and published in Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinod’s pioneering Vaiṣṇava journal, Sajana-toṣanī (4.7):

Just as on large trees there are ‘parasites’ (paragāchā), religions (dharmma), too, have parasites. Absorbing the sap of the tree from which they emerge, parasites nourish themselves and make the host tree visibly ugly. Many such parasites or ‘sub-religions’ (upadharmaṇa), such as the Sahajiyās, Bāulas, and so forth, feed on the support of Vaiṣṇavism. . . . It would not be necessary to say anything about them if Vaiṣṇava society was not harmed by this. But this is not actually the case. [These groups] continue to present themselves as Vaiṣṇava. As a result, external observers of Vaiṣṇavism witness their conduct and conclude that Vaiṣṇavism is a religion of abominable practices (kadācāra) and unrestrained behaviour (yathēcchācāra). (Tattvanidhi 1892, p. 133)5

It is, perhaps, tempting to construe this pervasive drive against sahajiyā currents as instantiating a broader cultural dissociative programme through which the bhadrakol sought to oppose itself to, and elevate itself above, the chotolok (‘small folk’) and their uncivil (abhadra) ways. This programme has been highlighted as constitutive of the bhadrakol’s very identity, which was otherwise fraught with internal tensions and disparities (e.g., Broomfield 1968, pp. 153–54, 322; Mukherjee 1993, p. 73). Operative here was a strategy of deflection through which bhadrakol agents redirected well-documented colonial moral criticism towards those they deemed more properly deserving of it, thereby implicitly acknowledging its force. We might think of this as a form of what Jeanne Openshaw neatly styles ‘displaced acquiescence’ (Openshaw 2002, p. 21). To frame nineteenth century Vaiṣṇava anti-sahajiyā polemics along these lines is, as I see it, to hold to the notion of a distinct ‘rupture’ within Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism wrought by the importation of a new colonially-shaped bhadrakol morality. The concrete implications of this were the marginalisation and expulsion of a host of currents and communities that had hitherto been an integral part of the tradition.

We must, however, be wary of oversimplification. I would argue that there are clear indications that an emerging Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy, with discernible brāhmaṇical predilections, had begun to dissociate itself from sahajiyā currents prior to the advent of British power in the region, and certainly well before the formative processes of bhadrakol moral and social identity were underway in the mid-nineteenth century. Bhadrakol morality was no mere colonial derivative; rather, as Brian Hatcher maintains, it was the outcome of a complex process of cultural convergence through which alien discourse and practice becomes affiliated to indigenous traditions’. As Hatcher advises, we would do well to keep an eye on the persistent force of ‘indigenous sources and modalities’, particularly those of brāhmaṇical discourse, when dealing with expressions of it (Hatcher 1996, p. 7). It should come as

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4 For more on how this campaign played out in some of these periodicals, see (Fuller 2005, pp. 132–44; Bhatia 2017, pp. 140–45; Stewart forthcoming).

5 A comprehensive list of these periodicals, see (Stewart and Basu 1983).

6 bade bade ṛkhyā yemana ‘paragāchā’ haya, dharmmera seirāpā paragāchā āchē; paragāchā ye ṛkhyā jāme, sei āchē kēsa rasa ākaraṇa karatā na vṛdhi ṛṣṭiḥ prāpta hāya evam drīṣṭiḥā mātā vṛksatike kusit kariyā tule. vaiṣṇava dharmmera ākaraṇa ēkāthā cekāthā ‘upadharmaṇa’ āchē, yathā sahajiyā, bāula prabhr. . . . ihāda sambandhā kona kathāḥ baliśāka ācāra jāti na—yādi ihāte vaiṣṇava saṃjñāya kona anuṣṭha nā lūita. vāstutāḥ tathā nahe; ihāte āpanadīghke vaiṣṇava baliśā paricāya drīṣṭe thāke. tathāte eih āraṇa ye, yāḥāra vaiṣṇava dharmmera baliśā bāhiya hāte drīṣṭe kariyā thākēna, tathāte ihāda sāhara ācāraṇa drīṣṭe vaiṣṇava dharmmera eva kāthā kadačāraṇe—yathēcchācāraṇe dharmmera baliśā śiddhānā karewa . . .
little surprise, then, that bhadrālok Vaiṣṇava concerns about sahajiyā currents do in fact find a notable degree of resonance in pre-colonial Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava literature.

2. Brāhmaṇical Predilections

Contrary to idealised characterisations of Caitanya as a radically iconoclastic social emancipator—a vision of the ecstatic Kṛṣṇa devotee frequently championed by left-leaning Bengali social and cultural historians (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2004, pp. 80–81; Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 6–7; 1999, p. 223; Sanyal 1981, p. 58)—his discernibly brāhmaṇical aversion to transgressive and impure behaviour is an unmistakable theme in many of his early biographies. Just what constituted such behaviour for Caitanya is clearly indicated by, for example, the numerous biographical narratives surrounding his ‘deliverance’ (uddhāra) of the two debauched brothers Jağāi and Mādhāi, who serve as paradigms of sin (pāpa) and fallenness (patīta) in the literature on account of their unrestricted indulgence in (among other polluting activities) meat eating, alcohol consumption, and unrestricted sex (O’Connell 1971, p. 156). Caitanya’s uncompromising stance on sexual impropriety is particularly stressed in narratives treating his later life as a renunciant (Majumdar 1939, pp. 570–75). The moral proclivities articulated in these works are, of course, ‘only a reassertion of what had been the Vaiṣṇava preference for centuries in Bengal and elsewhere in India’ (O’Connell 1971, p. 176), and exhibit a discernible affinity with those of brāhmaṇical orthopraxy, however much they also report Caitanya’s criticism of Śmārtta ritual and social rigidities. Such notions of purity entailed that Caitanya and his followers were often portrayed as relating to groups and practitioners advocating transgressive ritual behaviour ‘with reservations if not hostility’ (Valpey 2014, p. 14). In his Caitanya-bhāgavata (2.19.86–4), for instance, Vṛndāvanadāsa reports that Caitanya once became so disturbed by the offer of wine (ānanda) from an eccentric and co-habiting sannyāsī of the left path (vāma-pathi) that he immediately jumped into the Ganges while repeatedly calling out the name ‘Viṣṇu’ in an urgent attempt to purify himself.

It is true that these images of Caitanya come to us through the various lenses of his early hagiographers, and we should be aware that, as Heidi Pauwels observes, all hagiographers ‘have their own agenda, creating according to their own preoccupations’ (Pauwels 2010, p. 518). Unfortunately, since Caitanya left only a handful of verses in writing (notably in Sanskrit), any claim of unmediated access to some kind of ‘original ideal’ against which later developments in the tradition can be definitively measured (Chakrabarti 1999, p. 223) seems a little far-fetched. Yet, irrespective of the socially subversive intent of Caitanya’s inceptive devotional movement (or lack thereof), pronounced brāhmaṇical influence in the post-Caitanya tradition in Bengal is undeniable.

This influence is evidenced not least by the ascendance of gosvāmī lineages (vamsa) tracing hereditary descent from one of Caitanya’s companions, which provided a loosely-knit Gaudīya community with its principal form of leadership. Most prominent among these were brāhmaṇa gosvāmī lineages tracing descent from Caitanya’s two intimate companions, Nityānanda and Advaita, described in the Caitanya-caritāmṛta (1.9.19) as the two main ‘trunks’ (skandha) of Caitanya’s ‘wishing tree of devotion’ (bhakti-kalpa-taru). While differences in the degree of ritual and social orthopraxy exhibited by these communities may be discernible, they were on the whole marked by a pronounced ‘conservative character’ (O’Connell 1971, p. 310).7

It is true that not all the major Gaudīya communities that arose in post-Caitanya Bengal were brāhmaṇa-led. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, for instance, there emerged discipular communities (parivara) affiliated with the pivotal Gaudīya missionaries, Narottama and Śyāmānanda, 6

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6 For analyses of Kṛṣṇadāsa’s strategic use of this arborescent metaphor and its historical implications, see (Stewart 2010, pp. 234–42; 2011, pp. 303–7).

7 Gosvāmīs of the Advaita-vamsa—with its principle ‘seat’ (śrīpat) in Shantipur—traditionally refuse to accept initiates belonging to castes below the navāsākha, or ‘ritually clean śūdra’. By contrast, gosvāmīs of the Nityānanda-vamsa—whose principle seat is in Khardaha—do extend their ministry to castes below the navāsākha. They nevertheless appear to have developed means of guarding against ritual pollution, such as the post of adhikārī, which serves an intermediary leadership function between the gosvāmīs and their disciples belonging to lower castes and tribes (O’Connell 1971, pp. 311–12).
who hailed from the kāyastha and sādgopa castes respectively. These important Gaudīya leaders even famously breached an established prohibition on the acceptance of brāhmaṇa disciples by non-brāhmaṇa gurus, or ‘initiation against the grain’ (pratiloma-dīkṣā), commonly attributed to Gopāla Bhāṭṭa’s Hari-bhakti-vilāsa. Yet, while the intention behind such a move was no doubt socially reformative and its radicalism glorified in much of the hagiographical literature of the period, it by no means entailed the wholesale subversion of brāhmaṇical values, remaining ‘consistent with the principles of purity’, however much these may have been grounded on ‘new criteria, devotion rather than birth’ (Stewart 2010, p. 283).

3. Oblique Response

In view of these developments in the tradition, it is only natural that we should find signs of pre-colonial Gaudīya disapproval of Vaiṣṇava currents with a bent for the transgressive. Admittedly, pre-colonial Gaudīya criticism of such currents may not have been quite as explicit as later Vaiṣṇava polemicians might have us believe. Joseph O’Connell has drawn attention to what he perceives as a marked difference between seventeenth and eighteenth century ‘canonical’ Vaiṣṇava attempts to address the problem of sahajiyā-type ‘deviance’ on the one hand, and those produced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the other. Whereas the latter are generally characterised by their overt ‘denunciation of sexual promiscuity’, the former are conspicuously devoid of such a morally polemical tone, being more concerned with ensuring a ‘clearer restatement’ of their own theological position in relation to passion-pursuing devotional practice (rāgātmika-sādhanā-bhakti) (O’Connell 1971, p. 273n.), which would appear to lend itself readily to sahajiyā appropriation. According to O’Connell, writers of this earlier period chose to direct their polemical proclivities more towards those considered ‘slandurers’ (nindaka), ‘who harassed and ridiculed Hari and his Vaiṣṇavas’, than towards those merely deemed to have misappropriated Vaiṣṇava ideas and symbolism (O’Connell 1971, p. 275).

We should note that O’Connell takes the ‘wave of canonical writing’ produced around the turn of the eighteenth century by the likes of Viśvanātha Cakravarti, Rādhāmohana Thākura, and Narahari Cakravarti as providing a definitive yet somewhat indirect response to the ‘mass of hybrid cults’ that had begun to make themselves felt on the Gaudīya scene. He reads, for example, the concerted attempts of Viśvanātha and Rādhāmohana to vindicate the doctrine of Krṣṇa’s illicit love (parakṛtya-vāda) as being (rather paradoxically) constitutive of a general strategy to counter sahajiyā co-optation of the same ‘in the face of those who would recoil from the dangers of sahajiyā into cautious substitution of svakṛtya for parakṛtya’ (O’Connell 1971, p. 274).

O’Connell certainly makes a valuable point in highlighting the indirect mode in which much of the response to the sahajiyā phenomenon may have been articulated by pre-colonial Gaudīya writers, particularly when it is compared with that of their colonial Vaiṣṇava counterparts. His suggestion, for instance, that the controversy surrounding the status of Krṣṇa’s love with the gopīs, which consumed the Gaudīya community during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can be read against a background of concern about physical parakṛtya ritual practices of the kind advocated by sahajiyā currents proliferating at this time, adds an important social dimension to what might otherwise simply appear as an abstruse theological debate. It further entails that the Gaudīya response to the sahajiyā phenomenon may have been far more pervasive than might initially appear to be the case, especially if nineteenth century polemical modes serve as one’s principal template.

A potential clue regarding the cause of this obliqueness is provided, somewhat ironically, by a notably anomalous instance of a rather more direct form of assault against sahajiyā-type practices—namely, Manoharādāsa’s early to mid-seventeenth century Dvīma-maṇi-candrodaya, the ‘bluntness’ of which, Tony K. Stewart conjectures, likely led to its ‘suppression or failure to circulate’ (Stewart 2010, p. 340). In his analysis of the text, Stewart flags a curious trait: while Manoharādāsa appears to set forth a ‘near diatribe of frustration and criticism’ against physical interpretations of esoteric Gaudīya worship or sādhyā-sādhana (Stewart 2010, p. 342), he himself nevertheless has occasional recourse to an ‘alchemical’ idiom characteristic of siddha and sahajiyā discourse.
(Stewart 2010, p. 345). Stewart proposes that this apparent peculiarity of the Dīnā-manī-candrodāya may well be more reflective of its context than the more popular, idealised narratives of the tradition let on, with the boundaries between what we now think of as ‘normative’ and ‘deviant’ Vaiṣṇava modes likely being far less ‘clear cut’ at this time (Stewart 2010, pp. 346–47). The indirect nature of the pre-colonial Gauḍīya response to proliferating sahajiyā currents might accordingly be understood as the natural corollary of such nebulous sectarian boundaries; it is obviously difficult to respond directly to things that do not yet have clearly formed identities.

Any attempt to locate pre-colonial forms of Gauḍīya response to the sahajiyā phenomenon would therefore do well to take note of these important observations regarding its general obliqueness. I would, however, question the assumption that such obliqueness invariably precluded more polemical modes of response. In what follows, I want to draw attention to passages from popular pre-colonial Gauḍīya hagiographies that I believe can be understood as oblique, yet unmistakably polemical, forms of response to sahajiyā currents. Doing so will necessitate a method of reading that not only (1) attempts to discern some of the implicit markers of pre-colonial Vaiṣṇava discourse about sahajiyās; but also (2) displays a sensitivity to the signifying potential of these passages—what, following Paul Ricoeur, we might call their ‘semantic autonomy’—in full awareness that the meaning of a text is never contained simply within its author’s ‘finite intentional horizon’ (Ricoeur 2008, p. 80). My selection of material from the genre of hagiography for this investigation is not without significance. Gauḍīya authors in pre-colonial Bengal displayed a distinct preference for expositing theology through the hagiographical (and predominantly vernacular) medium. With the tradition’s Sanskrit analytic-philosophical corpus being ‘the preserve of a select few’, the ‘biographical image’ appears to have served as the apparatus of choice for the transmission of the Gauḍīya devotional ideal to a mass audience (Stewart 2010, pp. 6–7). That passages from prominent examples of this genre of Gauḍīya literature betray such polemical tendencies is thus, I would argue, indicative of the pervasiveness of concerns about the sahajiyā phenomenon within the pre-colonial tradition. In sum, I see these pre-colonial concerns as expressive of a movement towards a brahmanically-aligned Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava normativity.

In the final section of this article, I examine how this movement towards normativity was further fostered in colonial times by Gauḍīya gosvāmis, who often voiced a similar moral aversion to sahajiyā currents. By drawing attention to the extensive involvement of these gosvāmi types within bhadralok Vaiṣṇava domains, I make a case for understanding the colonial Vaiṣṇava campaign against the sahajiyā phenomenon as a development of pre-colonial Gauḍīya tendencies. In doing so, I hope to problematise the notion that this campaign can be taken as a definitive index of rupture within the Gauḍīya tradition.

4. Rūpa Kavirāja as a Sahajiyā Proxy

The name ‘Rūpa Kavirāja’ holds a particularly unenviable position within the Gauḍīya tradition’s history, being inextricably associated with deviance and offence. From the little biographical information available, it appears that he began his Vaiṣṇava sojourn in Bengal sometime in the early to middle part of the seventeenth century. While there are conflicting reports regarding his spiritual heredity, it seems that at some point Kavirāja came under the tutelage of Mukundadāsa at Radhakund in Braj, and ultimately ascended to a position of some authority within the Gauḍīya community of the region, probably on account his evident theological acumen.

Kavirāja was the author of at least two substantial Sanskrit theologico-practical treatises, Sāra-saṅgṛaha and Rāgānuga-vivrati. Both evince detailed knowledge of Gosvāmi literature, especially the writings of Rūpa Gosvāmi. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, however, Kavirāja’s views on doctrine and practice had come under severe scrutiny within Vaiṣṇava communities in Braj and Jaipur. This culminated in 1727 in the official declaration of his works as heretical by a theological council set up at the behest of Jai Singh II. While Kavirāja’s advocacy of the supremacy of parakātya love was challenged by Jai Singh’s council, it was his radical interpretation of passion-pursuant devotiona...
practice (ṛāgānuga-sādhanabhakti) that appears to have been the council’s principal bone of contention (Delmonico 1999, p. 96).

It is around this time that Kavirāja began to serve as something of a symbol of deviancy within Gauḍīya Vaishnava literature. The most well-known Gauḍīya account of his fall from grace is presented by Narahari Cakravartī’s early eighteenth century Narottama-vilāsa. Intended primarily as a devotional biography about the famed Narottama and his pivotal missionary work, the Narottama-vilāsa contains an appendix entitled ‘Introduction to the Author’ (grantha-kartāra paribhāṣā), which recounts a rather unhappy incident involving Kavirāja and Kṛṣṇapriyā Thākūrānī, the granddaughter of one of Narottama’s disciples, Gangā-nārāyaṇa Cakravartī. The incident is alleged to have occurred in the vicinity of Radhakund some days after the passing of Kavirāja’s sīkṣā-guru, Mukunda.

According to the text, Kṛṣṇapriyā—who had cared for Mukunda toward the end of his life with ‘the affection of a mother’ (mātāra samāna sneha), and ‘upon whose tongue the name of Hari was constantly present’ (nirantarā harināma yāhāra jīvēyā) (Cakravartī 1921, pp. 204–5)—arrived at a reading of the Bhāgavata attended by all the Vaiṣṇavas of Radhakund. Except for Kavirāja, all those present paid their respects to the revered Vaiṣṇavi (Cakravartī 1921, p. 205). Unperturbed by Kavirāja’s slight, Kṛṣṇapriyā readily joined the assembly. Kavirāja, however, proceeded to challenge her, questioning how she could properly engage in two activities (karma) simultaneously: listening to the Bhāgavata (bhāgavata-śravana) and chanting God’s name (nāma-grahaṇa). Kṛṣṇapriyā retorted, ‘This [chanting] is a habit of the tongue. My listening is not obstructed by it’ (Cakravartī 1921, p. 206).

Hearing this, Kavirāja is said to have become enraged, thereby meeting with ‘utter ruin’ (sarva-nāśa). As the text claims, First he disregarded guru, then similarly the Vaiṣṇavas, who are the embodiment of Kṛṣṇacaitanya. He became destitute on the rarest path of bhakti; not a trace of his absorption in prema remained. Thinking himself great in all respects, he committed offences elsewhere too. He became eager to create a different view, and set on diverting others from the path. (Cakravartī 1921, p. 206)

Kavirāja’s deviant activity was soon exposed in Braj, and he fled to Bengal, returning deceptively (kapata-rūpete) to the place of his guru. There, too, his deviancy came to light, and he was branded a ‘guru renouncer’ (guru-tāyığı). Ultimately, he is reported to have retreated to the village of Khuriya in Orissa, where he died from leprosy (kuśha-ṛoga)—only to become a ghost (bhūta) (Cakravartī 1921, p. 206)!

Questions of historical veracity aside, the polemical intent of this rather dramatic narrative is undeniable. The explicit connection drawn by the text between Kavirāja’s contempt for the esteemed Kṛṣṇapriyā and his subsequent divergence from the tradition is underscored at the end of the narrative as its principal moral. As Narahari writes, ‘If you say, “Being qualified, why [did Rūpa Kavirāja engage] in this conduct (ācāra)?” I respond, “What will one not do due to offence (aparādhā) to the Vaiṣṇava?”’ (Cakravartī 1921, p. 206).

Thus, although O’Connell may certainly be correct to observe that, in the context of pre-colonial Gauḍīya literature, it was principally the ‘slanderer’ (nindaka)—or, as in the case of the Narottama-vilāsa, the ‘offender’ (aparādhi)—‘who drew upon himself the Vaiṣṇava’s

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8 Briefly, Kavirāja recommended what David Haberman dubs the ‘literal imitative action’ by the physical body of a practitioner (sādhanaka-rūpa) intent on attaining the highest plane of devotion (Haberman 1988, p. 98); that is, the physical imitation of their chosen ‘paradigmatic’ passionate devotee (nītikīrtik-bhakta), invariably a milkmaid (goṭī). Despite facing explicit opposition from as weighty a theological authority as Viśvanātha Cakravartī in the late seventeenth century, Kavirāja’s views on the practice appear to have gained currency among sections of the Gauḍīya community in North India. As Monika Horstmann describes, by the early decades of the eighteenth century ‘there roamed renouncers through both Braj and Jaipur who in the name of god-madness sported a religiously or otherwise female persona’ (Horstmann 2005, p. 278).

9 tāka kahē abhiṣkṛta jīvētā / śravacena bādha ihe nā hāya amāra //
pratāheṣā hāya buddhī śrīgurudheśe / tāche kṛṣṇacaitanya vigahā vaisnave ācārā //
paramā durātha bhaktipate hāla hīna / nā rahāla se premārāte kīchā cīna //
saraṇa durlabhā bhaktipate hāla kīna / nā rahila saṃsāra prabhaṇe bāda mārī āpīna / anirāgra apanārā upāprīnā kāre //
kare prthik māta hāla māhā dētti / anye bahirnukhe pathe kariyā prajñī //

10 yādi kahē yogānātī hāyā kena e ācārē / tāhe kāhi vaisnava-prārādhi kī nā kāre //

11 yē tā ke ahū sthāanā nānā sādhanā-sādhana-bhakti, aham evām prabhāvadāya /
pratāheṣā hāya buddhī śrīgurudheśe / tāche kṛṣṇacaitanya vigahā vaisnave ācārā //
wrath’, it seems he sets up too rigid a distinction between this group and those deemed to be guilty of misrepresenting Vaishnavism (O’Connell 1971, pp. 274–75). As illustrated by the Narottama-vilāsa’s treatment of Kavirāja, the two groups were often seen as coterminous; in other words, deviants simply were offenders.

In drawing on the case of Kavirāja, it is not my intention to suggest, as Jan Brzezinski has, that Kavirāja posed what we can properly call a ‘sahajiyā challenge to Gauḍīya orthodoxy’ (Brzezinski 1996, p. 73). As should be evident from even a cursory reading of Kavirāja’s construal of rāgānuga-sādhanā-bhakti, his general religious orientation does not neatly correlate with that of those I am broadly designating sahajiyā, at least as far the available textual evidence goes. For one thing, whereas in sahajiyā practices male practitioners generally retain a distinct sense of their masculinity in the understanding that Kṛṣṇa predominates within the male body and Rādhā within the female body, Kavirāja proposed that male practitioners of rāgānuga-bhakti actively cultivate bodily femininity (Haberman 1992, p. 317). Moreover, Kavirāja does not appear to have advocated the ritual use of conventionally impure substances, such as the so-called ‘four moons’ (cari candra) (most commonly, semen, menstruation, urine and faeces), that are integral to sahajiyā practice (Jha 1995). What we appear to be presented with in Kavirāja’s work is a reading of rāgānuga-sādhanā-bhakti embedded within a general framework that is still very much devotional rather than tantric.

A case might be made, however, for tracing certain incipient sahajiyā-type tendencies in Kavirāja’s writings. This is in fact a line of thought indicated by Neal Delmonico, who argues that, irrespective of the precise nature of his own practice, Kavirāja may have proffered ‘a theoretical basis and justification for the hetero-practical [i.e., sahajiyā] sub-sects’, highlighting Kavirāja’s notion that rāgānuga-sādhanā-bhakti is to be performed ‘with both physical and mental bodies’ (Delmonico 1999, p. 99). In support of this thesis, Delmonico points to the fact that both Kavirāja and his teacher, Mukunda, often feature prominently in sahajiyā lineages (parampara) (Delmonico 1999, p. 100). According to Glen Hayes, Mukunda was ‘perhaps the most influential [sahajiyā] guru in the medieval period’ and is still highly revered in Bātula and Kartabhajā communities today (Hayes 1985, p. 105n.). Regarding Kavirāja himself, Shaktinath Jha observes that many sahajiyā-type groups in Bengal engaged in some form of four moons practice explicitly trace the dissemination of this practice to him. Jha specifically mentions a tradition associated with one Kālācāda Vidyālāmāraka,12 which apparently has forty-nine branches and sub-branches across Bengal that all identify Kavirāja as one of their principal gurus (Jha 1995, p. 88).

While such appropriation does not necessarily imply substantive theological heredity, it certainly highlights a dimension of the Kavirāja affair germane to the present discussion. Regardless of whether characterisations of Kavirāja as an exponent of incipient sahajiyā ideas are warranted, the fact that he came to acquire symbolic significance for sahajiyā currents is quite evident. I would argue that it is against this background of significance that pre-colonial narratives pertaining to Kavirāja’s rejection by the tradition, such as that presented by the Narottama-vilāsa, can be profitably read. This is to propose, then, something of an inversion of Edward Dimock’s evaluation of the Narottama-vilāsa’s Kavirāja rejection narrative; while Dimock also discerns sahajiyā significance in it, he curiously identifies Kavirāja, in view of his deprecatory attitude toward women, as representative of the orthodox tradition and the Narottama-vilāsa as itself articulating a sahajiyā-type position (Dimock 1989, pp. 100–1).

My reading of the Narottama-vilāsa is, admittedly, more exploratory than definitive. It is difficult to say whether Narahari consciously employs Kavirāja in the text as a proxy for sahajiyā currents. Whatever the case regarding Narahari’s authorial intention, however, it is, I submit, hard to imagine pre-colonial readers of the Narottama-vilāsa living in a period that witnessed the proliferation of sahajiyā

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12 Ramakanta Chakrabarty identifies Vidyālāmāraka as the founder of the Kiśorbhajanās, who emerged sometime in the later part of the eighteenth century and became especially popular in Vikrampur and eastern Faridpur in present-day Bangladesh (Chakrabarty 1985, pp. 324–25).
currents (many of whom symbolically aligned themselves with Kaviraja) not deriving such an import from the text.13

5. Deviance in Rarh and Banga

That deviance from emerging orthodox Vaishnava tenets and practices was often intimately associated with perceived offense, and thus deemed contemptible, is evinced by another well-known pre-colonial Gaudhya text of the biographical genre: the mid-seventeenth century Prema-vilasa of Nityanandadasa. Proffered largely as an account of the activities of the celebrated missionary trio of Srivijaya, Narottama, and Syamananda in early seventeenth century Bengal, the twenty-fourth chapter of the text presents a vivid account of Vaishnava-related deviance perpetrated in the regions of Rarh and Banga14 during the time of Caitanya.

We hear, for instance, of Vasudeva, an ‘exceedingly depraved’ (bada duracara) brhmana from Rarh, who was guilty of certain ‘abominable practices’ (baga anacara) in that region. While Vasudeva considered himself to be ‘Gopala, the son of Nanda’ (nandera nandana gopala), he was known by others simply as ‘the jackal’ (siyala). We also learn of a ‘sinful’ (papta) kshastha named Visnudasa, who ‘broadcast his own majesty (aistaryaa) in Banga’,15 claiming to be ‘Raghusrtha’, who had ‘come to earth from Vaikuntha for the deliverance of the world’.16 Coming to be known in the region as ‘Kapindri’, Visnudasa corrupted people ‘through his various deceptions (nata chale) and depraved practices (duracara). Both individuals are said to have been ‘disowned’ (tyajya) by Caitanya and ‘rejected’ (agrafiya) by his devotees (Nityanandadasa 1913, p. 246).

While the depravities and abominations indulged in by these two individuals is left unspecified, indication of the sorts of activities alluded to by the text is provided by the account of a third renegade, a brhmana known as Madhava. Briefly, the text explains that Madhava was originally the priest of an unnamed raja, from whose deity (vigraha) he stole ornaments and fled to a village of cowherds (goula), where he assumed the role of a priest (Nityanandadasa 1913, p. 246). Being ‘lustful’ (kimuka) and an ‘extreme sinner’ (paptsytha), he donned a ‘crown’ (cud)17 and proclaimed, ‘I am a wearer of the

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13 It is worth noting the existence of an intriguing text by the name Caitanya-karika, attributed to Caitanyadasa, the eldest son of Caitanya’s companion, Svaminanda Sen. Composed in Bengali paatra and supplemented with substantial Sanskrit quotation, the Caitanya-karika recounts a dialogue between Mukunda and a disciple named Mathuradasa Goswami on a variety of Gaudhya-related topics. Of particular relevance to the present discussion is the text’s sixth and final chapter, which narrates a pilgrimage Mathuradasa makes to the holy town of Nabadwip. During his travels, Mathuradasa crosses paths with Kaviraja and his coterie of followers. Kaviraja introduces himself to Mathuradasa as a student of Mukunda. Mathuradasa, however, soon becomes perturbed by alarming deviations he detects in Kaviraja’s teachings. Mathuradasa relates this distressing exchange to Mukunda. Mukunda proceeds to reveal to Mathuradasa that Kaviraja was a wayward student whom he had rejected because of insubordination. Mukunda, moreover, identifies Kaviraja as the founder of the heretical ‘Pasta dayi’ (i.e., Spastadayika/Spastadakya) order (Caitanyadasa 1904, p. 88) and, on the basis of Puranic authority, declares him an incarnation of the demon (daitya) guru Sukrakarya, who had previously vowed to appear in the Kali-yuga to wreak havoc (vidambana) on the religion of Caitanya (Caitanyadasa 1904, p. 92).

14 Rarh and Banga comprise the south-western and south-eastern sub-regions of medieval Bengal respectively.

15 spa na aistaryaa baage karage prakataa // jo gat uddhaturthe upasthita avante //

16 bole ami raghusrtha vaikuntha haite / jogaat uddhaturthe upasthita avante //

17 I take cud here to imply the peacock-feathered crown that is a staple feature of the iconography of Krsna. It could alternatively be read as a synonym for sikha or tik, the tuft of hair left unshaven on the crown of the head that marks Hindu orthopraxy (Bandyopadhyay 1966).
crown (cūḍādharī), Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa himself. If you worship me, you will go to my abode, Vaikuṇṭha. On the pretext of enacting Kṛṣṇa-līlā, Mādhava is alleged to have had sexual relations (saṅgama) with low-caste (antya) women of the area (Nityānandadāsa 1913, p. 247). On one occasion, he is reported to have arrived in Puri accompanied by his female entourage with the intention of participating in Caitanya’s group chanting (saṅkīrtana). Caitanya, however, is said to have immediately put a stop to this intrusion:

The Lord said, ‘That crown-wearer (cūḍādharī) has come. He enacts līlā with females, defiling dharma. O devotees, that crown-wearer has defiled (bhraṣṭa) from dharma. The land in which he lives will be defiled (raṣṭa). Don’t look at the face of that fallen offender (aparādhi). Quickly banish him from Purushottama [i.e., Puri].’ (Nityānandadāsa 1913, p. 247)

We are thus presented once again with an explicit polemic against Vaiṣṇava-related deviance. As in the case of the Narottama-vilāsa’s Kaviṛāja rejection narrative, misappropriation of Vaiṣṇava symbolism, far from being tolerated, is looked upon by the Prema-vilāsa with patent disapproval, its perpetrators deemed ‘extreme sinners’ (pāpiśṭha) and ‘offenders’ (aparādhi).

Brāhmanical concerns are undoubtedly at play here. This is signalled by the text’s emphasis on the defiling nature of the behaviour of the individuals concerned. In branding this behaviour ‘abominable’ (anātāra) and ‘depraved’ (dūrātāra), the text implicitly counterposes it to orthoprax notions of good (sat) or pure conduct (śuddhatātāra), thus evoking the quintessentially brāhmanical discourse of the Dharma-śāstras. The brāhmanical orientation of the text’s assault is further underscored by its derogatory reference to the low-caste status of the women with whom Mādhava is said to have cavorted—those from the lowest castes (antya), such as candālas (Nityānandadāsa 1913, p. 247). These observations are borne out by the evident brāhmanical concerns articulated throughout the twenty-fourth chapter of the text, which even waxes lyrical about the history of the kulina system in Bengal.

What does this reveal about Gaudīya attitudes toward sahajiyā currents? Based on the sketchy and clearly partisan account of the three individuals proffered by the Prema-vilāsa alone, it is admittedly difficult to ascertain definitively whether their practices constituted what we could properly designate as ‘sahajiyā’, or even broadly ‘tantric’. Irrespective of the precise religious orientation of the three deviants in question, however, there do appear to be legitimate grounds for reading the text’s criticisms as expressive of a polemic against sahajiyā currents, even if only by implication.

For one thing, although claims to divinity of the kind the Prema-vilāsa denounces were not a universal feature of the sahajiyā milieu, it was by no means uncommon for adherents of many sahajiyā groups to exalt their founders to the status of descents (avatāra) of Kṛṣṇa or Caitanya (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 8). Moreover, the text’s unequivocal disapproval of such claims—what it styles ‘self-deification’ (tāvābhāmāntīti) (Nityānandadāsa 1913, p. 247)—can, I suggest, be read as a variant expression of Gaudīya distaste for ‘self-worship’ (ahamgrāhāpāsana), a practice explicitly proscribed in the writings of Viśvanātha Cakrabarti, for example. O’Connell argues that the pronounced attention the practice of ahamgrāhāpāsana receives in the writings of Viśvanātha serves as another index of the oblique response of mainstream Gaudīyas to the perceived ‘self-apotheosis’ of proliferating sahajiyā currents (O’Connell 1971, p. 271). That is to say, the sahajiyā practice of ṛupa—the essential ‘attribution of divinity’ to humanity, through which women and men realise their true nature (svārūpaka) in their present physical form (ṛūpa) (Dasgupta 1969, p. 133)—was simply equated with ahamgrāhāpāsana, or self-worship, when interpreted through the conceptual resources available to mainstream Gaudīyas. The Prema-vilāsa’s treatment of tāvābhāmāntīti, or self-deification, thus serves as another example

18 bole āmi cūḍādharī krṣṇa-nārāyaṇa / anātāra bhajīle āhe vaikuṇṭha bharana //
19 ṭhāthe kehe iho kon iha cūḍādharī / nārāyaṇa līlā khetā dharmaṁnandā kari // ohe bhaktagana cūḍādharī dharmābhraṣṭa / ye deśe kārhe rasa deśe āhe rasa // iho aparādhi paṭita muha nā dekhibā / puruṣottama haite śīghra tādāhā dētā //
20 For more on the centrality of the concept of ṛupa in the Dharma-śāstric tradition, see (Davis 2004; 2010, pp. 144–65).
21 See, for example, Viśvanātha’s Bhakti-sūra-pradāśini-ṭīkā on Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.306.
of how sahajiyā ideas and practices may have been rendered by a Gaudīya devotional schema. The text's overtly polemical stance against this practice offers, however, a notable counterpoint to O'Connell's insistence that Gaudīya warnings about ahāmyagṛhapāsāna generally 'fall short of denouncing presumably well-meaning persons who may have slipped into such an un-Vaiṣṇava posture' (O'Connell 1971, pp. 274–75).

Whether Nityānandaḍāsa was aware of the anti-sahajiyā implications of his polemic is a moot point. I would contend, however, that, as in the case of the Narottama-vilāsa, conservatively orthoprax Vaiṣṇavas in pre-colonial Bengal who were witness to the burgeoning of sahajiyā currents and their perceived practices of self-deification could not but have derived such implications from it.22 We might note in this regard that many areas within the regions of Rarh and Banga have historically been sites of substantial sahajiyā-type activity. The district of Birbhum in Rarh, for example, with its predominantly tantric religious landscape (Chakrabarty 1985, p. 136; Dimock 1989, p. 65), has long been associated with sahajiyā figures (Chakrabarti 1989, p. 194). Likewise, Murshidabad, much of which falls within the Rarh region, has hosted manifolds Vaiṣṇava sahajiyā-type minor sects (upasampradāya) engaged in forms of body-oriented ritual practice (deha-sādhdana). Interestingly, the deifying projection of guru ‘as the living God’ appears to have been a pervasive trend among such groups (Jha 1988, p. 110). We see a history of similar kinds of activity in areas of Banga like Vikrampur and Faridpur (both in present day Bangladesh), where, in the eighteenth century, a slew of Vaiṣṇava-oriented brāhmaṇa gurus are reported to have propagated transgressive modes of tantric worship among low-caste and untouchable followings (Chakrabarty 1985, pp. 324–25).

The notion that the views articulated by this section of the Prema-vilāsa can be taken as broadly representative of mid-seventeenth century orthodox Gaudīya attitudes toward sahajiyā currents, however, run into a significant difficulty. This is not so much to do with any ostensibly sectarian agenda on the part of the text’s author, Nityānandaḍāsa, a disciple of Nityānanda’s second wife, Jñānava Devī. The Prema-vilāsa was in fact one of many hagiographies pertaining to the second generation of Caitanya’s followers to move beyond the provincial history of an individual lineage and attempt a broader treatment of the various Gauḍīya communities of the period (Stewart 2010, p. 337). Rather, the difficulty lies in the fact that the provenance of the text’s twenty-fourth chapter (where the polemical narrative in question is located) has come under serious scrutiny.23 It is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present article to weigh in on this issue (an undertaking contingent on the findings of further historical-critical work on the chapter), but the argument I am developing here

22 It is in fact along precisely these lines that the text’s polemic was read by orthodox representatives of the Gauḍīya tradition in the early twentieth century. In the preface to his 1913 edition of the Prema-vilāsa, Yashodalal Talukdar includes an official decree (cṛyācāra-pata) signed by thirty members of the Gauḍīya gosvāmi and raiṛgī communities of Vrndavana. The decree invokes the passage in question as a precedent for the excommunication of three sahajiyā-type groups—namely, the Cudādharīs, Kapindris, and śṛṅgālas—for their imitation of the rāsa-illī, etc. (rāsādi-illī-parivāra) (Nityānandaḍāsa 1913, pp. v–xii). Their curious presence in the Braj region aside, these groups appear to correspond directly with the three deviant individuals targeted by the Prema-vilāsa’s polemic. I have come across references to two of these groups in sources beyond those cited in Talukdar’s edition of the Prema-vilāsa. Most notably, an oft-quoted Bengali verse ascribed to Ṭotārāmadāsa Bābajī, a south Indian brāhmaṇa Vaiṣṇava panḍita who migrated to Nabadwip sometime in the mid- to late eighteenth century, includes the Cudādharīs in its list of thirteen deviant orders (ūtala bāsula kartābhajāṇī nāda daraveśa śī / sahajiyā sakhībāvakti / smārtī jāta-godi / / aṭitādī nāda-sādhdana-gaṇa / / totā kehe—ē tera saṅga nādi kari / /), for more on Ṭotārāmadāsa and this verse, see (Chakrabarti 1989, pp. 192–94; 1986, pp. 6–7; 1999, pp. 229–30). Additionally, Nabadwip Chandra Goswami includes both the Cudādharīs and the ‘Kapindrā community (parivāra)’ in an extended list of extant Vaiṣṇava subsects (upadharma) in his Vaiṣṇavā-vraṭa-dīna-nirṇaya (1900–1901) (cited in Chakrabarti 1989, pp. 19–20; 1999, pp. 231–32).

23 Talukdar reveals that he based his edition of the Prema-vilāsa on eight manuscripts (Nityānandaḍāsa 1913, p. iii). Of these, one contained the ‘complete’ (sūptārtha) twenty-four and a half chapters (vilāsa) of the work, while another contained twenty-four chapters (Nityānandaḍāsa 1913, p. iv). Talukdar considers these two manuscripts to be 100 and 150 years old respectively. If Talukdar’s dating is accurate, the twenty-fourth chapter of the text can be assigned at least to the mid-eighteenth century. Others, however, express reservations about the chapter’s authenticity; see, for instance, (Chakrabarty 1985, p. 323; Majumdar 1939, pp. 506–10; Manning 2005, pp. 129–30; 2011, p. 46; O’Connell 1971, p. 166). Rebecca Manning goes so far as to suggest that the chapter is an early twentieth century interpolation, on account of what appear to be references in it to the Advaita-prakāśa and Brihad-illī-sūtra (Manning and Stewart 1977, p. 116; Manning 2011, p. 46).
does not hinge on it. For the polemical narrative the chapter presents finds palpable tonal and material resonance with passages in other more assuredly pre-colonial biographical sources.

The chapter itself supplies verses in support of its claims from Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa’s sixteenth century Caitanya-bhāgvata (1.14.82–8), which relate the deviant behaviour of individuals who broadly correspond with those targeted by its own polemic (Nityānandadāsa 1913, p. 247). In these verses, Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa reports on the ‘many sinners’ (kata pāpiṣṭha) who moved among Caitanya’s followers in the land of Banga. Inciting others to accept their divinity (āpanāre laoṣṭiyē), these miscreants are said to have ‘defiled the people’ (loka nasiṣṭ kare) for the sake of ‘filling their bellies’ (udāra-bharanya). One of these ‘extreme sinners’ (pāpiṣṭha) called himself ‘Ragunātha’. Another ‘made [the people] sing of him as ‘Nārāyana’’ (āpanāre gāoṣṭya baliyē ‘nārāyana’). Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa expresses disbelief in the audacity of such self-deification by those manifestly subject to the constraints of mundanity. ‘Out of what shame’, he asks, ‘does that scoundrel, whose three states (tina avasthā) we see daily, sing hymns of himself?’ Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa also tells us of a third reprobate, a ‘demon brāhmaṇa’ (brāhma-daiyē) from the region of Rārh, who claimed to be ‘Gopāla’, but was known by others as ‘the jackal’ (śīpāla). Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa decries this ‘extreme sinner’ as being unworthy of the status of a genuine brāhmaṇa: ‘A demon within, he merely donned the dress of a brāhmaṇa’ (antare rākṣasa, vipra-kāca mātra kāçe) (Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa 1928, p. 284).

Another passage redolent of the Prema-vilāsa’s polemic is found in Narahari’s popular early eighteenth century Bhakti-ratnakara, the fourteenth chapter of which levels charges of self-deification against deviant individuals hailing, once again, from Rārh and Banga. Narahari highlights the pernicious influence in these regions of ‘those averse to bhakti’, who claim to be ‘brāhmaṇas’ (brāhma-daiyē) and thus ‘transgressed dharma’ (dharma karaye laṅghana). Forsaking chanting (kirtana) to Kṛṣṇa, these ‘great sinners’ (mahāpāpiṣṭha) are said to have ‘caused [others] to sing hymns to them’ (āpanāke gāoṣṭya) (Cakravartī 1912, p. 1045). One such deviant deceived the people by masquerading as ‘Ragunātha’. Indulging in ‘depraved practices’ (dūrācara), he came to be known throughout Banga as ‘Kavindra’ (Cakravartī 1912, p. 1045). Similarly, in Rārh there roamed a ‘fallen brāhmaṇa’ (viśrādhana) known as ‘Mallika’, whose ‘wicked’ (duṣṭa) nature was unparalleled. ‘That great sinner’, Narahari reports, ‘declared himself ‘Gopāla’. Displaying his demonic magic (rākṣasa-māyā), he deceived the people’ (Cakravartī 1912, p. 1045).

Both the Caitanya-bhāgvata and the Bhakti-ratnakara thus set forth similar, brāhmaṇically-informed diatribes against deviant Vaiṣṇavas in the regions of Rārh and Banga. As can be seen, many of these miscreants go by names that are either identical with (Ragunātha, Gopāla/Śiyāla) or very similar to (Kapindri/Kavindra) those targeted in the Prema-vilāsa. Like the Prema-vilāsa, both texts home their polemics in on the transgressive practice of self-deification and its associated immoral activity. The Bhakti-ratnakara’s polemic in fact exhibits a parallel structure with that of the Prema-vilāsa, substantiating its claims by citation of the very same Caitanya-bhāgvata verses as those invoked in the context of the latter. It thereby presents itself as a likely candidate for the immediate source of the Prema-vilāsa’s polemic—assuming, of course, that the twenty-fourth chapter of the Prema-vilāsa is indeed a later production.24

24 debhitechi dine tina avastha yaśatra / kon laje āpanāre gāoṣṭya se chaatra? // In his Gaṇḍā-bhaṭṣya on the Caitanya-bhāgvatā, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvatī proffers the following as possible meanings of the phrase ‘three states’ (tina avasthā): (1) gross (sthūla), subtle (suṣṭha), and causal (kāraṇa); (2) waking (jīvita), dreaming (svapna), and deep sleep (suṣūpti); and (3) past (bhūta), present (varttaman), and future (bhuvaniyē). The basic idea, he suggests, is that these states are markers of the conditioned living being’s affliction by material nature (prakṛti) and time (kāla) (Vṛṇḍāvanaḍāsa 1928, p. 287).

25 While it is not a hagiographical source, one could also point to the resonances the Prema-vilāsa’s polemic finds in the forceful criticism of Vaiṣṇava deviance in the Kṛṣṇa-bhajanāntara of Narahari Sarakara, Caitanya’s intimate Śrīkhanda-based companion. Of course, as Rembert Lutjeharms notes, this concise Sanskrit theological treatise does not so much find issue with self-deification as it does with the deceitful devotional posturing of those ‘who dress like perfect yogīs’, yet ‘become sensual enjoyers of sensual enjoyers’ (Lutjeharms 2017, p. 166). Regardless of the original target of this criticism, I concur with Lutjeharms that its pertinence to proliferating sahajīya currents would not have been lost on subsequent generations of the text’s readers (Lutjeharms 2017, p. 167).

26 In a footnote to the Prema-vilāsa’s polemic, Talukdar supplies verses from a Sanskrit text ascribed to Viśvānātha entitled Gaure-gaua-candrāki. These provide an account of three deviant self-deifying individuals from the Rārh and Banga regions
6. Vaiṣṇava Normativity

It is no coincidence that our search for indications of pre-colonial Gauḍīya anti-sahajīya polemics should lead us once again to the early eighteenth century hagiographical writings of Narahari. The missionary work of Śrīnivāsa et al. precipitated a process of doctrinal and ritual standardisation within the Gauḍīya tradition that led to the emergence of what Stewart dubs a ‘corporate identity’, the tangible origins of which can be located in the famed late sixteenth century festival (mahotsava) of Kheturi (Stewart 2010, p. 336). Kheturi may have afforded the various Vaiṣṇava communities of Bengal a concrete platform for cohesion under the overarching authority of the Vrindavan Gosvāmīs, but, as Stewart argues, the tradition’s ‘consolidation’ would not be realised at a ‘metadiscursive’ level until the appearance of Narahari’s Bhakti-ratnākara and its supplement, the Narottama-vilāsa. In many ways, these works replicated the metanarrative style and function of Krṣṇadāsa’s monumental Caitanya-caritāmṛta in relation to seventeenth century Gauḍīya hagiographical literature, serving to ‘redefine the relationships among the texts and … curb and contain the direction of thought and practice’ (Stewart 2010, p. 334). It thus seems only natural that Narahari’s works should make efforts to suppress or expunge expressions of Vaiṣṇavism that did not cohere with the ‘normative’ form they sought to promote, founded on the theological and ritual authority of the Vrindavan Gosvāmīs as mediated by the Caitanya-caritāmṛta. It is not without significance, then, that the Bhakti-ratnākara frames its depiction of deviance in Rarh and Banga as a vivid counterpoint to the missionary work undertaken by Śrīnivāsa, portrayed as one who ‘destroys the pride of those who are opposed to devotion, preaching the books of the Gosvāmīs’ (Cakravartī 1912, p. 1045).

This normative, brāhmanically-aligned form of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism would persist well into the period of British colonial rule, sustained particularly by Vaiṣṇava gosvāmī communities throughout Bengal (the orthoprax proclivities of which were highlighted above). Contrary to colonial accounts of the Gauḍīya tradition that emphasise the diminishing efficacy of gosvāmī leadership in the post-Bhakti-ratnākara period (e.g., Kennedy 1925, pp. 76–77), there is evidence of the continued flourishing of a number of gosvāmī śrīpāṭás. While, as the conflicting nature of colonial period reportage indicates, some śrīpāṭas had indeed ‘fallen upon hard times’ by the middle of the nineteenth century, others appear to have displayed continued growth and prosperity (Bhatia 2017, pp. 73–74). Referencing the cases of Srikhand and Baghnāpara, Bhatia concludes: ‘It seems obvious that some of these śrīpāṭas flourished, gained disciples, ran schools, and became rich centres of Vaishnava doctrine and practice, by the mid- to late nineteenth century’ (Bhatia 2017, p. 74).

7. Brāhmanical and Bhadralk Vaiṣṇava Alliance

There are also clear indications of the persistence of broad gosvāmī influence over the tradition well into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period in Gauḍīya history often portrayed as dominated by an emerging bhadralk Vaiṣṇava leadership.28 Most significantly, perhaps, we know that many bhadralk Vaiṣṇavas established discipular relationships with representatives of gosvāmī communities. Achyutacharan Chaudhuri Tattvanidhi (1866–1953) and Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinod (1838–1914)—both of whom we briefly encountered toward the beginning of this article—are cases in point. Both of these figures featured centrally in the wave of Vaiṣṇava-related activity that swept across

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28 A narrative of bhadralk dominance over the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition during the colonial period has featured ubiquitously in recent critical work in this area. For more on this scholarship, see (Wong 2015, pp. 319–23).
the bhadralok religious and cultural landscapes during the later decades of the nineteenth century.29 Any attempt to understand their pivotal roles in this context must, however, contend with the fact both received their initiations (dikṣā) into Vaishnavism from, and cultivated enduring relationships with, respected hereditary members of gosvāmī communities. Tattvanidhi’s dikṣā guru, Radhikanath Goswami (dates unknown), was a leading light of the gosvāmī community of Shantipur, which traces lineal descent from Advaita. Likewise, Bhaktivinoda’s dikṣā guru, Bipin Bihari Goswami (1850–1919), was a notable ambassador for the gosvāmī community of Baghnagar, which claims descent from Caitanya’s associate, Vāṁśīvādanānanda.

Admittedly, it would be distorting to give the impression that these ‘traditional’ Vaiṣṇava figures and their communities were wholly impervious to the pervasive impact of British colonialism. The intimate relationships developed by certain representatives of these communities with those members of the late nineteenth century bhadralok who began to turn to Vaishnavism itself stands as testament to gosvāmī implication in colonially-wrought social and cultural change; but the concrete impact of colonialism on these communities goes even further back. From the late eighteenth century, patronage of gosvāmī śrīpātra often fell to that new class of Bengali ‘comprador-rajās’ who had made their fortunes as agents and intermediaries to the East India administration (Bhatia 2017, pp. 62–64). I would thus propose a softening of the rigid boundaries sometimes drawn between colonially-implicated bhadralok Vaiṣṇava types, on the one hand, and, gosvāmis, babājis, and other ‘standard bearers of traditional Vaishnavism’, on the other (Fuller 2005, p. 31). Nevertheless, it would be similarly misleading to deny the persisting, brāhmanically-aligned orthopraxy that often characterised these colonial gosvāmī figures—an orthopraxy that would naturally shape their basic attitudes toward the sahañjñā phenomenon.

Take, for example, the case of Radhikanath. Brāhmanical concerns pervaded his Vaiṣṇava thinking.30 They are clearly on display in, for instance, his Yatī-darpaṇa (Goswami 1910). This is perhaps only to be expected in a work that attempts to establish the legitimacy of the saṁyāsa order—the pinnacle of the ‘fundamentally Brāhmanical institution’ of the āstrama system (Olivelle 1993, p. 19)—within Gaudīya Vaishnavism. Announcing his brāhmanical credentials at the outset of the text, Radhikanath identifies himself as a tenth-generation member of the Advaita-vaiṣṇava type and proceeds proudly to extol his Vaiṣṇava community as ‘continually honoured by dutiful brāhmaṇas for its virtue of observing the scriptural rites expected of brāhmaṇas’ (Goswami 1910, p. 1).31 Such predilections naturally entailed a palpable distaste on Radhikanath’s part for acts transgressing orthoprax standards of social and ritual purity. He provides ample indication of this in his Bhakti-śikṣā, wherein he outlines the behavioural norms to which he expects all Gaudīya initiates to strictly conform. Drawing on Gopāla Bhaṭṭa’s decidedly brāhmanical Hari-bhakti-vilāsa—a work that principally sets out to ‘define the orthopraxy of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas’ (Broo 2009, p. 68)—Radhikanath details the activities he regards

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29 Tattvanidhi was a prolific author dedicated to the preservation of the legacy of Vaishnavism in Bengal. Between 1891 and 1930 he published twenty-nine books (and wrote eighteen others that remain unpublished) on the tradition’s theology, aesthetic theory, and history. His essays were a staple feature of many Vaiṣṇava journals of the period. In 1896, he was awarded the title ‘Tattvanidhi’ (‘Ocean of Knowledge’) by his guru Radhakinath Goswami for his service to the Gaudīya cause; for more on Tattvanidhi’s life and literary contributions, see (Manring and Stewart 1977; Manring 2005). Bhaktivinoda’s manifold devotional and theological writings, editorial and publication projects, and organisational endeavours also played a crucially contributive role in the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava flourishing in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. His work has borne fruit in the form of numerous pupilary lineages in India and, more recently, across the globe, which trace their spiritual heredity through him. These have assumed their most dominant institutional forms in the numerous offshoots of the Gaudīya Math—including that of ISKCON—all of which locate their nexus to Bhaktivinoda in his seventh child and follower Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874–1936); for a survey of recent critical scholarship on Bhaktivinoda, see (Manring and Stewart 1977; Manring 2005). Bhaktivinoda’s saṁśāra-rūpa samādita haiya śaitecheha.

30 Rebecca Manring suggests that Radhikanath’s brāhmanical Vaiṣṇava agenda provided the decisive impetus for the late nineteenth century production of the Advaita-promoting hagiography Advaita-prakāśa (Manring 2005, p. 248). She makes a compelling case for reading the Advaita-prakāśa as an essential part of a broader attempt to rejuvenate a dwindling Advaita-related community and cast it as the Vaiṣṇava ‘standard-bearer of propriety and legitimacy as well as . . . social purity’ in the face of a wider Gaudīya tradition that had acquired notoriety for ‘scandalous behaviour’ (Manring 2005, p. 236).
as most detrimental to the cultivation of a life of Vaiṣṇava devotion, including the partaking of grains (annā) prepared by those of sinful livelihood, among whom he singles out prostitutes (veṣṭya); the eating of fish (mātṛṣya) and meat (nīṁṣa), which he denounces as ‘thoroughly contemptible’ (nītānta garhita); and association with women (yoṣīlt-saṅga), by which he means illicit encounters with the wives of others (para-strī) and prostitutes (veṣṭya) (cited in Bhaktiratna 1928, pp. 208–11). Radhikanath characterises these activities as both ritually and morally polluting, and thereby as obstructive (anārthta-kāraka) to the purity he sees as a prerequisite for the effective pursuit of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti. Regarding sexual transgression, he adopts an unequivocally hard line:

Those who keep the company of other’s wives (para-strī-saṅgī-gana) perform evil acts in secrecy; therefore, they lack honesty. Purity, too, vanishes as a result of association with women (strī-saṅga). All virtues, such as compassion, controlled speech, intelligence, modesty, wealth, fame, forbearance, equanimity, steadfastness in God, self-command, and restraint of the external senses, are thoroughly and completely destroyed [by such association]. Womanisers (yoṣīlt-saṅgī-gana) are thus agitated. [They are] deluded, believers that the body is the self, self-destructive, deplorable, and controlled by women like toy-deer. Never associate with them.’ (cited in Bhaktiratna 1928, p. 211)

The framework of moral evaluation Radhikanath employs here is plainly brāhmaṇical. Many of the virtues (qunā) enumerated in the passage, for example, are closely associated with the model brāhmaṇa of Dharma-sā stri discourse. His adherence to such a framework makes it near impossible to conceive that he would have remained silent on the subject of saha jīya currents, the practices of which often flouted orthoprax notions of purity in the name of Vaiṣṇavism.

That Radhikanath was an ardent opponent of such currents is borne out by his serving an extended term as co-editor of the popular Bengali language Vaiṣṇava periodical Viṣṇupriyā-patrika in the final decade of the nineteenth century. A literary project of the renowned anti-colonial bhadralok journalist and Vaiṣṇava organiser Sishir Kumar Ghosh (1840–1911), the Viṣṇupriyā-patrika made the task of redressing what it deemed the Gaudīya tradition’s many ‘untidy realms’ one of its chief objectives (Bhatia 2017, p. 140). As one might expect, saha jīya currents featured regularly within the pages of the journal, with contributors frequently levelling attacks against groups such as the Baula, Daraveṣṭa, and Kartābhajā. The Viṣṇupriyā-patrika thus became a significant voice in the broad anti-saha jīya campaign of the period (Bhatia 2017, pp. 140–45). As the journal’s co-editor, one can safely assume this campaign had Radhikanath’s full backing.

Bipin Bihari, too, serves as an exemplar of gosvāmī brāhmaṇicalism within the Gaudīya tradition during this period. His brāhmaṇical bent is unmissable, for instance, in his Hari-bhakti-taraṅgī (Goswami 1902), a comprehensive Sanskrit treatise on the duties (kṛtiya) and conduct (vyavahāra) of Gaudīya practitioners. In terms of both content and structure, the text draws heavily on the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa. Predictably, then, one of its distinguishing features is its emphasis on good or proper—that is, brāhmaṇically-aligned—Vaiṣṇava conduct (sadhācāra). Directly citing the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa (3.3–4), Bipin Bihari signals the centrality of sadācāra to his vision of the ideal Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava life in the work’s opening verses (1.5–6):

32 parastrīsaṅgī-gana asat kārya gopeṇa kare, sutarataṁ tādādara satya thāke nā. āuacā striśaṅga nimittā dūre yātha. dayā, mauna, buddhi, lajja, sampatti, yāsa, kṣāna, dama, bhugotān śiśita, dama, bāgheṇdriya vīgara ityādi guṇasakala ekaṁ bāyā samyakra tepa kṣāna hajja yātha. atara eva yoṣīlt-saṅgī-gana adhāna. mitādha, dehaṁnavaṇī, ṭitamghātt, sōcā evaṁ kriṇānteraṇa ryata yoṣītaner aṇataḥ. ahādirgā saṅga kārīte nāi.

33 As Madhusudan Goswami reports, while editors of some Vaiṣṇava journals of the period were willing to publish articles with which they did not agree, it was standard practice for such disagreement to be explicitly indicated (Goswami 1922, p. 235). At no point do the editors of the Viṣṇupriyā-patrika do this. It is true that Radhikanath did at one point express a desire to rescind his support for the Viṣṇupriyā-patrika and step down as co-editor, but this does not appear to have been related to the journal’s stance on the saha jīya issue; rather, it was due to its vocal participation in the debate over the legitimacy of the ‘Gaura-nimtī’ that raged throughout the Gaudīya world during these years (Majumdar 1939, pp. 459–60).

34 The Hari-bhakti-vilāsa is itself citing the Markandeya-purāṇa.
Since nothing could be accomplished by anyone without good conduct (sadācāra), it is certainly required at all times. For one who is devoid of [good] conduct, there is no happiness in either this world or the next. Sacrifice, charity, and austerity does not benefit a person in this world who lives by transgressing good conduct. (Goswami 1902, p. 3)\(^{35}\)

Once again, the position set forth in this text appears to leave little room for compromise with views and practices in contravention of the unmistakably brāhmaṇical standards that underpin it—not least those associated with sahajiyā currents. This is corroborated by comments Bipin Bihari makes further along in the Hari-bhakti-taraṅginī in a section treating passion-pursuant devotional practice (rāgānuga-sādhana-bhakti) (3.570–1):

Indeed, the imitation (anukarana) of passion (rāga) by one whose mind is engrossed in the objects of the senses and who is devoted to his penis and belly is mere deception of the people. Almost all of those who currently pursue passion (anurāgīn) in this holy land [i.e., Bhārata-varṣa] are cheaters, who steal others’ wives, etc. (para-stry-adhy-apahāraka). Those who keep their company will surely go to hell. (Goswami 1902, p. 359)\(^{36}\)

This passage is most properly a reference to the perceived travesty of devotion perpetrated by those who engage in rāgānuga-sādhana-bhakti without appropriate qualification and motive. Its pertinence to an appraisal of a sahajiyā practice like parakīyā-sādhana should nevertheless be plain to see.\(^{37}\)

There are good contextual grounds for reading sahajiyā currents as one of the passage’s implied targets. We learn from a short, unattributed biographical note included in the prefatory section of the Hari-bhakti-taraṅginī\(^{38}\) that, during his youth, Bipin Bihari spent time briefly with a sahajiyā-type ‘minor sect’ (upasampradāya) by the name of the Navarasika (Goswami 1902, p. iv), a group identified by some as a Kartabhajā community (Sil 2003, pp. 48–49; Urban 2001, p. 246n.). His encounter with the group is said to have led to his realisation of its ‘degenerateness’ (apakarsatā) and the concomitant solidification of his faith in the ‘pure’ (viśuddha) Vaiṣṇava religion of Caitanya preserved by his ancestral community in Baghnapara, to the sanctuary of which he swiftly returned (Goswami 1902, p. iv). The demarcation of well-defined boundaries between a normative, brāhmaṇical-aligned form of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, on the one hand, and what he considered to be deviant, sahajiyā perversions of it, on the other, was thus a framing concern of Bipin Bihari’s Viśṇuṇava thinking.

This concern is even more explicitly present in Bipin Bihari’s Daśa-mūla-rasa (Goswami 1904), a systematic theological Bengali verse treatise on ten essential Gauḍīya Viśṇuṇava themes. The final section of the Daśa-mūla-rasa narrates a history of the Baghnapara śrīpāta based largely on pre-colonial hagiographical sources. At several points in the narrative Bipin Bihari broaches the issue of what he deems the questionable nature of some of the available material pertaining to the Baghnapara community. He points, for instance, to two works purporting to present accounts of the śrīpāta’s revered founder, Rāmacandra Gosvāmī (otherwise known as Rāmāī Ṭhākura)\(^{39}\), Akiñcanadāsa’s Viśvarta-viḷāsa, regarded by some as ‘the principle treatise of the Sahajiyā Viśṇuṇavas’ (Sanyal 1989, p. 131),\(^{40}\) and a

\(^{35}\) na kīcchita kasyacit sidhīgati sadātman vinā yataḥ / tasmād avajeyam sarvatra sadācāro hy apekṣṇiṣṭe / na hy ikātravībhīṣasya sukhamo nastra ca yajñadhanatapānāḥ śrīpāta ca / yajñadhanatapānāḥ śrīpāta ca / / na hy ikātravībhīṣasya sukhamo nastra ca yajñadhanatapānāḥ śrīpāta ca / /

\(^{36}\) visajyācitacatasya śīno dārāparasya ca / rāgānukarmavya agga kevalam lokavānakanam // sampratya māṁ punahābhāmau ye santīś cānurāginīḥ / priyāṃ te cānurāgīḥ samuccāt karvātāḥ śīno dārāparasya ca / /

\(^{37}\) Interestingly, unqualified participation in the practice of rāgānuga-bhakti is at times explicitly identified as a type of sahajiyā deviation in the writings of Bipin Bihari’s disciple Bhaktivinod (e.g., Bhaktivinod 1906, pp. 46, 454–55). It would, moreover, become one of the principle targets of the trenchant anti-sahajiyā polemics of Bhaktivinod’s son and follower Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (e.g., Saraswati 1916a, 1916b)—who, incidentally, seems to have had a hand in editing the Hari-bhakti-taraṅginī (Goswami 1902, p. ii).

\(^{38}\) The author of this note was possibly Bipin Bihari’s middle son, Lalita Ranjan Goswami, who provided the Bengali commenarial prose rendering (marmārtha prakāśā baṅgārcandita) of the text’s Sanskrit verses.

\(^{39}\) Rāmacandra was the grandson of Vaiṣṇavadānānanda and adopted son of Nityānanda’s second wife, Jahnava Devī. For more on Rāmacandra and the history of his Viśṇuṇava śrīpāta in Baghnapara, see (Goswami 2008).

\(^{40}\) For more on the Sahajiyā orientation of the Viśvarta-viḷāsa, see (Hayes 1995; Stewart 2010, pp. 348–62). For more on Akiñcanadāsa’s relation to the Baghnapara community, see (Goswami 2008, pp. 497–520).
text he refers to simply as ‘Rāmāṇī-chalā’.

41 Accusing both works of having perverted (vikṛta kariyā) Rāmacandra’s life and teachings, Bipin Bihari denounces them as ‘books authored by Bāulas’ (bāulerā kṛta grantha) and ‘unworthy of acceptance by true Vaiṣṇavas’ (sad-vaiṣṇava grāhītayogī haite nārāya) (Goswami 1904, p. 1135). He also detects suspicious elements in sources on which his own narrative is otherwise heavily reliant. He discerns, for instance, ‘repugnant philosophy’ (vīruddha dārsana) in places in the available manuscripts of Premādana Miśra’s early eighteenth century Vamsī-śikṣā. 42 Seeking to distance the celebrated Baghnapara author from such unsavoury views, Bipin Bihari dismisses it as the interpolated narration of a Sahajiyā (saḥaja vādiḥa . . . praksipta varṇana) (Goswami 1904, p. 993). He deals in much the same way with those features of Rājavallabha Gosvāmī’s early seventeenth century Muralī-vilāsa that do not sit well with his own orthoprax sensibilities. He denounces, for example, the current text’s ‘detestable’ (jaṅghanya) version of Rāmacandra’s famous reception of the 1200 shaven-headed (nedā) disciples of Vitacandra as the interpolation of a ‘Bāula poet’ (bāula kavi) (Goswami 1904, pp. 1049–50). Bipin Bihari indicates further along in the text that he finds the notion that a Vaiṣṇava of Rājavallabha’s pedigree could have countenanced the view that Rāmacandra fed his guests the impure food of fish particularly troubling: ‘The learned declare that the talk of hilsa fish we see in the [Muralī-] vilāsa was interpolated by a Bāula. A Bāula has mischievously inserted views that are repugnant to Vaiṣṇavas in various places of the Muralī-vilāsa’ (Goswami 1904, p. 1136).

Bipin Bihari had the opportunity to give expression to this dissociative impulse at an institutional level in the early twentieth century. In 1909, a society by the name of Sri Krishna Chaitanya Tattva Pracharini Sabha was founded in Calcutta by Dr Priyanath Nandy, a vocal participant in urban Bengal’s bhadralok Vaiṣṇava milieu. The society’s stated purpose was the purging of unwanted elements from the contemporary Gaudīya world—as Nandy put it, ‘reforming the diverse forms of licentiousness (Ṣyaḥbhibhichār) and corruption (glani) and different types of deviant sects (upadharma) that have crept into the “pure” (bisuddha) [Vaishnava] religion’ (cited in Dey 2015, p. 224). The society sought to realise this objective by harnessing consensus among respectable quarters of the tradition against sahajiyā currents and other forms of Vaiṣṇava deviance, often by means of official decrees (vyavasthā-patra) (Dey 2015, pp. 225–26). Along with several other representatives of gosvāmī communities in Bengal, Bipin Bihari appears to have lent his full support to this cause (Dey 2015, pp. 225, 227), to the point of serving as the society’s president (sabhāpati) during its inceptive years (Goswami 2008, p. 527).

Aspirations for a brāhmaṇically-aligned Vaiṣṇava normativity in the pre-colonial Gaudīya tradition were thus further fostered in colonial times by gosvāmī types like Radhikanath and Bipin Bihari. Their bid to demarcate the boundaries of this normativity frequently entailed express moral condemnation of sahajiyā-type deviance. It is thus no coincidence that when members of the colonial Bengali bhadralok such as Tattvanidhi and Bhaktivinod turned to Vaiṣṇavism in the late nineteenth century, they often found allies in these gosvāmī figures. Far from being relationships of mere convenience, as some have suggested—an attempt, perhaps, on the part of bhadralok Vaiṣṇavas to ‘fit rhetorically into the authority structures of the larger tradition’ (Fuller 2005, p. 327; italics in original)—I would argue that brāhmaṇical-bhadralok Vaiṣṇava alliances were founded on a
commonality of purpose and shared values. After all, bhadralok Vaiṣṇavas were invested in a very similar programme of dissociation from the transgressive. In other words, there was something of an elective moral affinity between these two broad Vaiṣṇava groups in colonial Bengal. Without positing an affinity of this kind, it simply does not seem possible to adequately account for the pervasive and committed participation of gosvāmī figures within bhadralok Vaiṣṇava domains, as gurus to figures like Tattvanidhi and Bhaktivinoda; as editors for journals such as the Viṣṇupriyā-patrikā; or in leadership positions in organisations such as the Sri Krishna Chaitanya Tattva Pracharini Sabha.

8. Conclusions

In sum, then, the Vaiṣṇava campaign against sahajiyā currents that took shape in colonial Bengal in significant ways built upon antecedent polemical proclivities within the Gaudīya tradition. To be sure, anti-sahajiyā polemics of this later period often assume a more explicit form than the oblique mode in which they are expressed in precolonial Gaudīya writings. Not only do they commonly deploy more direct modes of reference to sahajiyā groups (not least their use of designators like ‘sahajiyā’, ‘sahaja vādī’, ‘bāula’, etc.), but also place a new accent, as O’Connell rightly notes, on the perceived ‘sexual promiscuity’ associated with the sahajiyā phenomenon (O’Connell 1971, p. 273n.). A variety of factors may be at play here: decades of foreign and indigenous attacks on Vaiṣṇavaism in what is often portrayed as a colonial climate of moral obsession with ‘obscenity’ (aśīlāta) (Banerjee 1987, 1989; Ghosh 2006); increased exposure to sahajiyā currents as a result of their continued proliferation on the ground (Banerjee 1989, pp. 68–69; Bhatia 2017, p. 89; Chakrabarty 1985, p. 326); unprecedented access to sahajiyā literature through the burgeoning medium of print, particularly that associated with the ‘Battala’ presses of north Calcutta (Chakrabarty 1985, pp. 392–93; Dimock 1989, p. xxii; Sarkar 1999, p. 57); and the emergence of new forms of research on sahajiyā-type groups by both western scholars (e.g., Wilson 1846; Wise 1893) and their Orientalist-inspired indigenous counterparts (e.g., Datta 1987; Bhattacharya 1896)—to list but a few. Whatever the case, it is clear that long before these late nineteenth and early twentieth century bhadralok Vaiṣṇavas attempted to ‘define, delimit and discipline’ the tradition (Bhatia 2017, p. 145), representatives of Vaiṣṇava communities across Bengal had already openly and vocally taken issue with sahajiyā or tantric-style tendencies as inimical to the truth they understood Caitanya and his immediate entourage to have exemplified. To attribute this intervention to a newly instigated morality born of the colonial experience is thus to fail to recognise the ethical impulses of early modern, pre-colonial Vaiṣṇavas. In short, bhadralok Vaiṣṇavas only continued what was already a vibrant discourse of censure and reprimand within the Gaudīya tradition, though they did manage to focus attention using the new technologies of print and formal corporate entities that emerged in the colonial era.

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