



A Socio-Psychological Study into the Mindset Shift during the Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, West Bengal, and Odisha

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Abstract

The Vaishnavite (Bhakti) movement of the 15th–17th centuries marked one of the most profound socio-cultural and psychological transformations in eastern India. This paper undertakes a socio-psychological analysis of the mindset shift generated by the movement in Assam, Bengal, and Odisha. It argues that the movement fostered egalitarianism, restructured individual and collective identities, and established devotional love (bhakti) as a dominant cognitive and affective paradigm. Drawing on theories of social psychology, the paper critically assesses how practices such as congregational singing, dramatic performance, and temple-centered inclusivity reoriented cognition, emotion, and behavior. Comparative regional analysis highlights both convergence and divergence: while Assam institutionalized the reformist ethos through satras, Bengal cultivated ecstatic devotion under Chaitanya, and Odisha integrated bhakti within the universalist Jagannath cult. The study concludes that the Vaishnavite movement was not merely a religious awakening but a transformative socio-psychological revolution whose legacies continue to inform cultural identity in eastern India.

Keywords: Vaishnavite Movement, Assam, Bengal, Odisha, Socio-psychological Study, Bhakti, Mindset Shift, Sankardeva, Chaitanya, Jagannath.

1. Introduction

Religious reform movements are historically pivotal in reshaping societies, not only through theological innovations but also by reconstituting patterns of social interaction, collective belonging, and individual psychology. The Vaishnavite movement in eastern India stands as a paradigmatic case of such transformation. Rooted in the broader Bhakti ethos, the movement dismantled the rigid structures of caste and ritual orthodoxy by introducing egalitarian devotional practices, accessible liturgy, and emotionally charged worship.

This study briefly examines the Vaishnavite movement through the lens of social psychology, focusing on how cognitive frameworks, affective states, and social behaviors were

restructured in Assam, Bengal, and Odisha. A socio-psychological approach reveals not merely theological debates but the lived experiences of ordinary practitioners, their new sense of selfhood, and the psychological emancipation fostered by devotional egalitarianism.

2. Objectives of the Study

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1. To examine the socio-psychological conditions that facilitated the rise of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, Bengal, and Odisha.
2. To analyze how the movement reoriented individual cognition, emotion, and behavior.
3. To explore regional variations in mindset transformation and their cultural significance.
4. To critically assess the successes and limitations of the movement in dismantling social hierarchies.
5. To identify the continuing socio-psychological relevance of the movement in contemporary eastern India.

3. Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative, interpretative research methods, combining historical-textual analysis with socio-psychological theory.

- Primary Sources: Vernacular devotional texts (e.g., Sankardeva's *Bargit* and *Kirtan-ghosha*, Chaitanya's hagiographies, Panchasakha literature in Odisha), and institutional records of satras and temples.
- Secondary Sources: Scholarly works by historians, sociologists, and Indologists (e.g., Barpujari, Dimock, Eschmann).
- Framework: Social psychology concepts such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel), Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger), Collective Effervescence (Durkheim), and Emotion Studies are applied to historical data.
- Approach: Comparative regional analysis is used to highlight convergences and divergences between Assam, Bengal, and Odisha.

The methodology is interpretative rather than statistical, prioritizing critical analysis of cultural texts, practices, and socio-psychological patterns.

4. Literature Review

The Vaishnavite movement has been studied from historical, theological, and literary perspectives, but few works integrate socio-psychological frameworks.

- Assam: Barpujari (1990) views Sankardeva as a cultural reformer, while Chandan Sharma (2005) interprets Neo-Vaishnavism as a catalyst for social change.

- Bengal: Dimock (1966) and Haberman (1988) highlight the emotional ecstasies of Chaitanya's movement, focusing on its affective religiosity.
- Odisha: Eschmann, Kulke, and Tripathi (1978) argue that the Jagannath cult served as a symbol of regional integration, absorbing tribal and Brahmanical elements.
- Comparative Bhakti Studies: Das (2005) emphasizes the democratizing tendencies of vernacular bhakti literature across India.

Gaps remain in assessing the psychological dimensions—how devotees internalized new values, how collective identity was forged, and how emotional catharsis shaped community life. This paper seeks to address that lacuna.

5. Historical Context

By the late medieval period, eastern India witnessed political instability, socio-economic change, and the tightening grip of ritual orthodoxy. Caste stratification generated psychological alienation, while Brahmanical ritualism created barriers to spiritual access. In this milieu emerged charismatic leaders:

- Assam: Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) initiated Neo-Vaishnavism (*Ekasarana Dharma*), emphasizing monotheism, satras, and cultural productions such as *Ankiya Naat*.
- Bengal: Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) popularized ecstatic devotion (*prem-bhakti*) centered on Krishna, inspiring mass participation in *sankirtan*.
- Odisha: Reformers like Achyutananda Das and the Panchasakha poets reinterpreted Jagannath worship in bhakti terms, emphasizing universality and inclusivity.

These reformers operated within different socio-political contexts yet converged on the psychological necessity of liberation from fear, guilt, and exclusion.

6. Theoretical Framework

The following socio-psychological theories provide analytical tools for interpreting mindset shifts:

1. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner): Redefinition of group belonging around devotion rather than caste.
2. Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger): Resolution of psychological conflict between hierarchical orthodoxy and egalitarian faith.
3. Collective Effervescence (Durkheim): Communal singing, dancing, and ritual as generators of solidarity.
4. Emotion Studies: Legitimation of emotional expressiveness in religious practice.

7. Findings and Discussion

Assam: Institutionalized Neo-Vaishnavism

- Finding: Sankardeva's satras provided alternative identities, cultural participation, and moral discipline.
- Psychological Impact: Reduced anxiety by allowing wider participation in religion; theatre and music became tools of catharsis.
- Limitation: Despite inclusivity, caste persistence reveals incomplete transformation.

Bengal: Ecstatic Devotion and Emotional Catharsis

- Finding: Chaitanya emphasized divine love as the ultimate spiritual goal.
- Psychological Impact: Emotional expressiveness legitimized; sankirtan created states of ecstatic unity, temporarily dissolving boundaries.
- Limitation: Caste hierarchies remained outside devotional practice, revealing dual consciousness.

Odisha: Jagannath and Symbolic Universality

- Finding: Jagannath embodied inclusivity by uniting tribal, lower-caste, and elite worshippers.
- Psychological Impact: Symbolic security for diverse groups, strengthening Odia cultural identity.
- Limitation: Temple rituals continued to privilege Brahmins, producing ideological-practical contradictions.

8. Critical Comparative Analysis

- Assam: Institutional emphasis → structured community life.
- Bengal: Emotional emphasis → affective transformation.
- Odisha: Symbolic emphasis → cultural integration.
- Common Thread: Democratization of spirituality, but incomplete social equality.

This reflects a paradox of mindset shift: the movement reoriented inner consciousness and collective participation, but structural hierarchies persisted.

9. Contemporary Relevance

The Vaishnavite movement continues to shape regional identities. Assamese satras remain cultural-educational centers, Bengali kirtan traditions sustain affective religiosity, and Jagannath festivals embody Odia unity. In modern contexts of social fragmentation, the

movement's legacy highlights the enduring capacity of devotional traditions to foster solidarity, psychological relief, and identity cohesion.

10. Socio-Psychological Transformations under the Vaishnavite Movement

The Vaishnavite movement precipitated a profound socio-psychological transformation across Assam, Bengal, and Odisha. By contesting rigid ritualism, caste hierarchies, and priestly mediation, it redefined religious practice as an egalitarian and emotionally accessible pathway to spiritual fulfillment. This transition marked a significant departure from hierarchical, fatalistic, and ritual-centered religious systems, ushering in a collective orientation rooted in devotion (bhakti), inclusivity, and affective spirituality.

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11. From Ritualism to Emotional Devotion (Bhakti)

In the pre-Vaishnavite milieu, salvation was predominantly conceived as attainable through complex ritual performances, sacrifices, and strict adherence to caste-based prescriptions, mediated largely by the priestly class. Such a framework reinforced distance between the devotee and the divine. The Vaishnavite movement disrupted this paradigm by advancing bhakti, or emotional devotion, as the most legitimate and universally accessible spiritual path. This shift emphasized a deeply personal and ecstatic relationship with deities such as Krishna and Jagannath. Congregational practices, particularly *kirtan* (devotional singing), provided a collective outlet for religious emotion, thereby transforming worship into an intimate and participatory spiritual experience.

12. From Social Hierarchy to Egalitarianism

Preceding the movement, the entrenched caste system rigidly determined social identity, religious rights, and cultural status, thereby perpetuating discrimination and exclusion, particularly for lower castes and tribal groups. The Vaishnavite message of spiritual equality fundamentally subverted these norms by asserting that divine love transcends all social boundaries.

- In Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism dismantled caste rigidity, integrating diverse communities, including indigenous and marginalized groups, into a shared devotional fold.
- In Bengal, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Gaudiya Vaishnavism offered a spiritual refuge to socially marginalized populations, thereby undermining Brahminical dominance.
- In Odisha, Chaitanya's egalitarian mission created avenues for historically excluded communities to participate in devotional life.

Thus, the Vaishnavite framework advanced a radical reconfiguration of social relations by fostering inclusivity and dismantling hierarchical exclusivity.

13. From Fatalism to Agency and Hope

Prior to the movement, religious life often reinforced fatalism and resignation to oppressive social structures, leaving individuals with little agency in shaping their spiritual destiny. The introduction of bhakti reoriented this outlook by empowering individuals with direct access to divine grace, independent of ritual intermediaries. This sense of agency imbued religious life with optimism and hope, particularly among marginalized groups, who found in bhakti an

avenue for self-worth and upward spiritual mobility. The emphasis on humility, honesty, and service further anchored a moral-ethical framework that transcended caste-defined roles and responsibilities, thereby providing a renewed sense of purpose.

14. From Social Fragmentation to Collective Identity

The pre-Vaishnavite socio-religious order was marked by fragmentation along caste and tribal lines, fostering division and social friction. The institutional innovations of the movement countered this fragmentation by creating inclusive spaces of community interaction. In Assam, *Satras* and *Namghars* functioned as cultural-religious centers that nurtured communal solidarity. Similarly, in Bengal and Odisha, congregational gatherings around *kirtan* reinforced collective participation and emotional unity. These institutions not only facilitated devotion but also cultivated a shared cultural identity that transcended narrow sectarianism, reinforcing cohesion across diverse social groups.

15. From Fear to Love for the Divine

Earlier religious practices were often characterized by a fear-based orientation, wherein worship was mediated by concerns over cosmic retribution and ritual transactionality. The Vaishnavite emphasis on *prema* (divine love) radically redefined the devotee–divine relationship. Instead of distant reverence rooted in fear, the movement promoted an intimate, affectionate bond with God—most vividly represented in the devotional traditions centered on Krishna and Radha. This emotional framework transformed spirituality into an experience of joy, intimacy, and liberation, freeing individuals from anxieties associated with ritual insufficiency and divine punishment.

16. Conclusion

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam, Bengal, and Odisha constituted a profound socio-psychological revolution. By fostering emotional catharsis, cognitive reorientation, and new collective identities, it reshaped the mental landscapes of communities across eastern India. Yet, its partial success in dismantling caste structures reveals the tension between ideology and social reality. A socio-psychological approach underscores that the movement's greatest innovation lay in democratizing devotion while leaving unresolved contradictions that continue to resonate.

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Conflict of Interest/Competing Interests

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Data Availability

The raw data supporting the findings of this research paper will be made available by the authors upon a reasonable request.

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