

Kunjabihari Das Babaji

Kunja Bihari Das Babaji was a Tewari Brahmana from Meshya, a small village near Jhalda in the district of Purulia in northwestern Bengal. He was born Kunja Kishor Tewari on the Jhulan Purnima of 1896, the only son of Nilakamal Tewari and Muktamala Devi. He became interested in religious subject matters as a boy, learning the Bengali versions of Mahabharata and Ramayana from his uncle, Nilamadhab Tewari. It would appear that the Caitanyaite religion was not well known in the area at the time and his first religious attraction was to the Rama-carita Manasa of Tulasi Das. It was only in the mid-1920's that he first encountered the Bhagavata-purana with Radhavinoda Goswami's translation and commentary. As is often the case in such circumstances, Kunja Kishor's parents worried about their only son's religious interests and had him married at a young age in order to assure his commitment to the family.



Even though he had only limited formal education, Kunja Kishor opened a primary school in his village where he taught for twenty years. His primary interests continued to be religious, but at the same time, he engaged his students in the nationalist (Svadeshi) movement by growing cotton and spinning it for the purpose of making homespun cloth. He was particularly influenced by Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta, the publisher of Mukti magazine, which was the main organ of the Congress party in the district. Nibaran Chandra was also a Vaisnava who saw independence as a means for improving the status of the Caitanyaite religion. Kunja Kishor was much influenced by his teaching, in particular, his attitude toward the proliferation of religious leaders in Bengal claiming to be incarnations of God. He was also introduced by him to some of the more subtle aspects of the Caitanya-caritamrta teachings.

In 1922, Nilakamal Tewari died. Kunja Kishor followed the obligatory mourning rituals ending with the sraddha ceremony, but shortly thereafter he fell ill and for about eight months was repeatedly attacked by strong fevers. After this long illness, Kunja Kishor underwent a period, which lasted for about a month and a half during the rainy season of 1923, of what he himself described as unmada, "insanity". He experienced this time as one of great joy and liberty, claiming to have had visions of Radha and Krishna and hearing divine sounds, etc. In his later life looked back on this period as a precursor of his experiences as a adept in Radha Kund.

In spite of all these distractions, Kunja Kishor's school continued to be a success with many of its graduates going on to win scholarships for further study. Thus, though he tended to use the school as a platform for religious and political activity, there was little objection from the school inspectors. One of his stranger classroom practices was to keep a human skull, found in a field, on display in order to remind his students of the impermanence of life. Gradually, the school grew and a new building with the aspect of an ashram was erected in the middle of a field and was given the name Sevasrama. A three-day Vaisnava festival, which continues to be held there annually, was inaugurated by Kunja Kishor's uncle Subal Chandra Tewari.

In the early 1930's, the influence of Sahajiya and Baul teachings began to be felt in the district and some close friends of the Tewari family also became members of these sects. Kunja Kishor felt very fortunate to meet a Vrindavan Vaisnava who was travelling in the area at the time. From him he learned about many aspects of Vaisnava teaching as preserved in Vrindavan, including the disciplic succession and the importance of the siddha-pranali in Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. Kunja Kishor had been initiated by Gopal Chandra Thakur Goswami of Jhalda when only ten or eleven years old.

He now took steps to recover the knowledge of siddha-pranali which was the key to further advancement on the spiritual path. With renewed enthusiasm and armed with this deeper understanding of the orthodox tradition, he managed to convert several of his Sahajiya and Baul neighbours to the path of pure Vaisnavism. This caused a stir and the Bauls started in a campaign of criticism against Vaisnava orthodoxy. A great assembly was called together at the Sevasram in November, 1934, to establish the supremacy of the orthodox movement. Many guest speakers from all over the Vaisnava world were invited, led by the scholar Vrajendranath Chakravarti of Jhalda. The result of the meeting was that the influence in the district of the various Tantric subsects of Gaudiya Vaisnavism was seriously impaired.

Unfortunately, only a few weeks after this success, Kunja Kishor's wife died in childbirth. He continued his life as a teacher for several more years as he fulfilled his responsibilities towards his two daughters, Vinodini Devi and Janaki Bala, seeing to their education and marriage. During this time he continued to organize large assemblies in the name of the Gaudiya-Vaisnava-Dharma-Samraksini Sabha ("Council for the protection of the Gaudiya-Vaisnava religion"). Those who had been initiated were encouraged to find out their siddha-pranali, while those who were initiated in heterodox movements were

encouraged to seek reinitiation. He collected money so that mrdanga and kirtana classes could be given at Sevasram and formed a kirtana group with the students who participated.

Word of Kunja Kishor's close adherence to the Vrindavan orthodoxy reached the ears of Krishna Caitanya Das Babaji of Radha Kund, also originally from Jhalda, who wrote to him saying that he felt that Kunja Kishor must have been a friend of his through many lives. The kindness of a great monk like Krishna Caitanya Dasji had a deep effect on Kunja Kishor and his interest in material life diminished further. In 1937, during the Kumbha period (mid-winter), he went to Radha Kund for a month's holiday and accepted Krishna Caitanya Dasji as his siksa-guru, taking the Panca-tattva and other mantras from him, as well as instructions about worship. Krishna Caitanya Dasji died a year later.

In 1939, Kunja Kishor went back to Braj with his mother, this time for good. He was immediately initiated into the renounced order of life by the renowned scholar Advaita Das Babaji of Govardhan, receiving the name Kunja Bihari Das Babaji. A few months later his mother also took the renounced order from Advaita Dasji, receiving the name Madhavi Dasi. She continued to live in a room near the Gopa Kuwa at Shyam Kund before dying in 1944.

Kunja Bihari Dasji found a cottage at Brajananda Ghera, and with the help of donations received from his countrymen, he was able to greatly improve the building. In it, he established a publishing house which he named the Krishna Caitanya Sastra Mandir after his siksa-guru. He published not only numerous books such as Bhavakupe Jiver Gati, Paratattva Sammukhya, Bhakti-kalpa-lata, Bhakti-rasa-prasanga and Manjari-svarupa-nirupana, but many paintings and charts as well. The well-known scholar of Vaisnava history and Bengali literature, Biman Bihari Majumdar, used Bhakti-rasa-prasanga as a required text for his M.A. course at the University of Patna.

In his introduction to the Manjari-svarupa-nirupana, Kunja Bihari Dasji writes that his first acquaintance with the mood of the manjari was through his renunciation guru, Sri Advaita Dasa Babaji of Govardhana, whom he called the foremost scholar of the Vaisnava world, especially in the matter of sacred aesthetics or rapture. From that time on he became especially interested in the subject and began collecting references to the mood of the manjari whenever he came across them, paying special attention to the different ingredients necessary to produce the experience of sacred rapture in that mood. Later on, he had the opportunity to live for a long time with another great scholar and resident of Radha Kund, Dinasarana Dasa Babaji, and was able to study thoroughly all the literature on the subject. During that time, most of the materials found in this book were compiled. Later, other residents of the Kund gave their encouragement and through financial help received from a number of sources, these materials were published as "An inquiry into the nature of Radha's handmaids".

Kunja Bihari Dasji made a great number of disciples, several of whom later became abbots of Radha Kund. His most celebrated disciple, Ananta Das Babaji, is a great scholar in his own right, who has published numerous works from the Krishna Caitanya Sastra Mandir. Kunja Bihari Das's influence continues to be felt in his homeland which its inhabitants identify with Jharikhand, the wild jungle country through which Caitanya passed on his way from Puri to Vrindavana in 1513, avoiding the more frequented route along the Ganges. The proportion of babajis living in Radha Kund who come from the westernmost part of Bengal is well over 50%. Vaisnavism in Puruliya district continues to bear the strong stamp of the practices found in Radha Kund.

Kunja Bihari Dasji disappeared from this world in the year 1976 in the age of 80 years.

The biographical information presented here is based on the pamphlet Paramaradhya Sri-Sri-Gurudev Om Visnupad 108 Srimat Kunja-bihari Das Babaji Maharajer Caritavali o Sucaka, written by Ananta Das Babaji (Vrindavan: Sri-Kesava Das, 1979).

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