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Selected Aspects of the Textual Studies on the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Tradition in Medieval Bengal*

SUMMARY: This paper is conceived as an examination of the textual sources of the Tantric Vaiṣṇava tradition in its regional context and of the way in which vernacular Bengali and Sanskrit functioned as two factors determining the development and shape of the particular medieval esoteric tradition. The complicated history of the Bengali culture amalgam, which determines the special character of this region, takes on a crucial meaning here as pan-Indian Brahmanical and Sanskrit culture is juxtaposed on many levels with regional culture. The interactions between the regional and the pan-Indian as well as between the vernacular and Sanskrit seem to be a very complex problem with dynamic nets of interactions, functioning synchronically on multiple levels. The examination of this matter is preceded by a general overview of the previous scholarship on the subject.

KEYWORDS: Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā, Tantra, yoga, Bengal.

Bengali literature, both old (Middle Bangla) and modern, is one of the most substantial and richest in South-East Asia. Nowadays Bengali (Bangla) is a world language, in fifth or sixth position among the world's languages (considering the number of speakers,

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ca. 250 million in Asia alone¹). The extensive medieval Bengali literature also provides very interesting material for the research of Indological, Religious and Culture Studies. The very rich Bengali culture is also fertile soil in the field of anthropology. In the second millennium AD in North-East India vernacular Bengali gained the prominence of a language used for composing important works of several religious traditions, as well as a language whose power lay in its popularity and availability to wide masses. In this way it served as a means for distributing religious doctrines and practices and general missionary work. In contemporary India (West Bengal State) and Bangladesh Bengali has a unique position and this language is a primeval element of cultural identification for the Bengali people.

This paper is conceived as an examination of the textual sources of the Tantric Vaiṣṇava tradition in its regional context and of the way in which vernacular Bengali and Sanskrit functioned as two factors determining the development and shape of the particular medieval esoteric tradition. The crucial meaning here lies in the complicated history of the Bengali culture amalgam, which determines the special character of this region. Pan-Indian Brahmanical and Sanskrit culture is juxtaposed here on many levels with regional culture.

In medieval times vernacular Bengali became widely used as a language of religious expression. In the 14th century extensive literature in Bengali and regional versions of eposes appeared (Sen 2015). Moreover, the Bengali language was also the means of expression of new and old forms of regional religions, with Vaiṣṇava poems, *Maṅgalas* and *Śūnyapurāṇa* illustrating this process. In the case of Tantric Vaiṣṇavas, Bengali was used as the medium for transmitting the methods of Tantric practices and doctrines existing there at least from Buddhist Pāla's age to the new historical and social reality of medieval times. Sanskrit as a factor defining the culture of Eastern India never became as influential as in other Indian regions and it is reflected also in the case of the Tantric Vaiṣṇava tradition.

¹ The number of Bengali speakers is disputable in comparison to Arabic and Portuguese, see *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 19th ed., 2016.

History and culture of Greater Bengal

As I try to demonstrate, the worlds of both Sanskrit and vernaculars simultaneously shaped the specific Bengali medieval Tantric religious traditions. While Sanskrit played an important role in introducing the pan-Indian ideas and culture framing, vernaculars provided the specific substrate of the regional tradition. Thus we see how the clear division of two worlds, Sanskrit and vernacular, is dubious and simplified. My assumption is that rather these worlds permeated each other and medieval religious groups in Bengal used various strategies under different circumstances. The concept of the Little and Great traditions (Redfield, Singer 1954: 53–73, Singer 1972)² as an idea of mutually interconnected levels of culture influencing each other might be initially applied here.³ Nevertheless, if we only understand this sometimes criticized theory in the correct manner, as the net of complex interactions between low and higher strata of culture and not as clearly separate levels of culture, we can further our knowledge. We have to consider the complex history of Greater Bengal, through processes of Sanskritization and parochialisation. Therefore, before we focus on the main problem we have to consider the following factors:

Bengal, laying on the lower Ganges Delta, became influenced by the Vedic Aryan culture relatively late and was considered for a long time as a non-Aryan area. Clear indications of this attitude are found for example in the normative works (*smṛti*) such as *Manusamhitā*, where we find claims that inhabitants of Bengal are outside the pale of Brahmanical culture, and generally the inhabitants of the Eastern region dwelling outside the habitat of black antelope are called *mlecchas* (*Manu*, I.21–24). A similar attitude can be found in Baudhayana's *Dharmasūtra*, where the ritual of *prāyaścitta* (purificatory rite) is recommended for those who visited the lands of the Vaṅgas, Kāliṅgas

² For concept of Sanskritic Hinduism see Srinivas 1952.

³ For complex relations between Sanskrit and vernaculars and general picture of Sanskrit *cosmopolis* see Pollock 2006.

and today's Bengal, which was once inhabited by these north-eastern tribes (Chattopadhyaya 2002: 1185–6). Clearly, Bengal was not a suitable place for Aryas to live. *Mahābhārata* gives us the impression that during this period some Aryans dwelled in this area and there were even some places of pilgrimages located to the east. As Chattopadhyaya claims, after analyzing a wide variety of sources, Bengal had been partially Aryanized for a long time (Chattopadhyaya 2002). Moreover, Bengal was early penetrated by heterodox religions such as Buddhism and Jainism in ages before CE. Nevertheless, it is obvious that since at least the Gupta period Bengal had been a part of India understood as culturally unified under Brahmanical influence. These influences were weakened by Buddhism, regional Tantric traditions, and finally by the presence of Islam (Muslim dynasties since the 13th century).

Bengali-speaking areas are surrounded from the east and the north by Non-Indo-European languages from Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan groups, which indicates the position of Bengal as the frontier of the Indo-European language and Aryan culture to the east (Eaton 1993). The non-Indo-Aryan language substrate is still perceived in Bengali (grammatical and lexical components, see Ruth and Thompson 2010).

Its direct proximity with the ancient Greater Magadha (Bronkhorst 2013) and the strong presence of Buddhism since ancient times determine the unique character of this area. The golden era for Buddhism in Bengal was the second half of the first millennium, when Buddhism enjoyed the royal patronage of Pālas and other Buddhist dynasties (Candra). Mahāyāna Buddhism was based in North-East India on a complex of intellectual centers (*vihāras*, monasteries with educational function) as well as a net of heterodox yogins and mystics called *siddhas* (or *mahāsiddhas*, see Davidson 2004, White 1996). Besides the well-known Nalanda in Bihar, in Bengal we find such great monasteries (*mahāvihāras*) as Somapura in Paharpur (the largest monastery in North India, presently in Bangladesh), which played a crucial role in Buddhist religious life between the 8th and 12th centuries. The tradition of *siddhas* was expressed in the literature of Tantras (*Hevajratantra*; Snellgrove 2010, Davidson 2004), Dohās and Caryās (see below) and

their lives were documented in hagiographies (Abhayadatta) and other sources. The times of the Bengali Pāla dynasty (8th–12th c.) were the last great time for Indian Buddhism (Majumdar 2013, Barua 2013). This region, relatively easily reachable from Nepal and Tibet, was frequented by Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims and monks arriving for education and monastic guidance. In this way the eastern provinces of Bengal and Bihar (along with Kashmir on the West) were centers of diffusion of Vajrayāna to the regions of the Himalayas.

Buddhism in Bengal gradually lost its dynamism to the rise of Hinduism. As it is evidenced by various sources which illustrate the gradual decline of Buddhism (e.g. reports of Chinese pilgrims visiting Bengal between the 5th and 7th centuries), the number of Buddhist monasteries dropped and the number of Hindu temples increased. As well, in the 12th century the new Hindu Sena dynasty withdrew their support of Buddhism. In the 13th century the intellectual centers of Indian Buddhism were destroyed facing the invasion of the Turkish Muslims who established the new Islamic states in Eastern India. This was not yet the final blow for Buddhism but, undoubtedly, it was the end of Indian Buddhism as a creative, intellectual and highly dynamic element of Indian religious life. The destruction of the main monastic and intellectual centers by Muslim invaders diminished Buddhism to a role of a slowly dying rural religion. Some Tantric Buddhists fled to Nepal or gradually became absorbed by various Vaiṣṇava Tantric, Yogic, and Muslim (Sufi) groups. Finally, Buddhism in Bengal was replaced by Hinduism and Islam. Nevertheless, the conclusion that Buddhism disappeared completely from India in the 13th century is not accurate. There are data indicating that in north-east India Buddhism was active until at least the 16th century. I omit here other sources but focusing only on interactions with Vaiṣṇavas we find evidence that Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas confronted the *śūnyavādins* or “followers of the emptiness doctrine” in the 16th and 17th centuries. During his long pilgrimages on the Indian subcontinent the mystic and *avatāra* Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1534) encountered Buddhists in the southern region. As the story is narrated by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja

(in his famous hagiographic work *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*) they were antagonistic towards Caitanya and even planned an attack on him (CC, II. 9.40–50). The assault failed because Caitanya was miraculously saved and the leader of the Buddhists was injured. The effect, as Kṛṣṇadāsa tells us, was that all the Buddhists were finally converted to the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* religion. Another famous example of such interactions is the history of Vīrabhadra and the conversion of the “shaven heads” to the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* religion. *Ānandabhairava*, the 17th-century Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā work of Premadāsa (Das 1972) describes the story (which must have happened in the second half of the 16th century) where one of the leaders of the Vaiṣṇava community, Vīrabhadra Gosvāmin (son of Nityānanda, a close associate of Caitanya), converted to the Vaiṣṇava religion a large community of the “shaven heads”: 1,200 monks (*neḍā*) and 1,300 nuns (*neḍī*).⁴

The social structure present in Bengal does not reflect the classical structure of the four great social classes or *varṇas* (Chattopadhyaya 2002). Late Aryanisation and specific regional culture, and the strong position of the heterodox religions such as Buddhism, did not allow for fully shaping the system of the four *varṇas* in Bengal. Nevertheless, the hierarchical system of *jāti* analogical to other Indian regions is present in Bengal (Inden 1976).

From the perspective of other Indian regions, Bengal was perceived not only as a place of non-Vedic *nāstikas* (Buddhists) but also as a region associated with Tantrikas and magicians. In folk tales the region of Greater Bengal was considered as inhabited by female magicians. Medieval sources such as *Gorakṣavijaya* (16–17th c., but the material is older⁵) describe a picture of Bengal as populated by female sorceresses who were able to seduce ascetic Yogis, as it was in the case of the guru of Gorakṣa, Matsyendranāth.

⁴ *Ānandabhairava*, 220 (my own numeration): ... *bāra śa neḍāke tera śata neḍī dilena kene*.

⁵ This work is rather late, nevertheless, it repeats old Brahminical prejudices expressed in dharmic literature.

Moreover, in comparison to the other North Indian provinces, the ascetic traditions practicing yoga in Bengal are heavily laden with Tantric elements. Those Tantric elements include concepts of the subtle body consisting of *cakras* (or its equivalents, lotuses, ‘ponds’—*sarovaras*), the use of the sexual act in ritual and yogic practice, and the use of tabooed bodily fluids.⁶

Assam, still considered sometimes as a part of Greater Bengal, is believed to be a major seat of Tantric religions (Urban 2010). The main Śakta Piṭha in Eastern India is located there (Kāmākhyā).

Taking into consideration all the above data we can conclude that Eastern regions including Bengal were always a very special case in the history of Brahmanical culture (Bengali frontier: see Eaton 1993). It is difficult to compare the position of Sanskrit in this not fully Aryanised area with that in the other provinces of India; nevertheless, Sanskrit played a crucial role in both the Buddhist and Brahmanical cultures of this region. However, it seems that Sanskrit never achieved a status comparable to that enjoyed in other parts of India (in the sense of influence over the whole culture).

Bengali Tantric Sahajiyā tradition

First, let us turn to the substrate on which the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā tradition developed, and to the question of the use of a particular language in a religious context. The Mahāyānic Tantric Buddhism during the age of the Pālas generally used Sanskrit (numerous Sanskrit Tantras). Nevertheless, we also find examples of texts which were composed in Eastern India and are a sign of different forms of expression. The primeval example of the use of the Hybrid Sanskrit is *Hevajra-tantra*, one of the earliest and most important Tantras of Vajrayāna

⁶ As James Mallinson informed me (personal communication) of some of his impressions on his research amongst North Indian ascetic traditions where Haṭha-Yoga is practiced: Bengal is an exceptional place where we meet very strong elements of Tantric practice (fusion of Haṭha and Tantra).

(Snellgrove 2010) composed most probably in North-Eastern India. *Hevajratāntra* also includes an excerpt in Apabhraṃśa: Vajra song of the Yogins and Yoginīs (II.5.v 67). Then, we have texts being the classical expressions of the religious experience of famous *mahā-siddhas*: *Dohākośa* of Saraha and other *siddhas* and *Caryāpada* or *Caryāgīti*. The Dohās were composed in eastern dialect of Apabhraṃśa (called Avahaṭṭha, Jackson 2004: 11) or, according to other authors in Śauraseni Apabhraṃśa, in the period spanning the 8th to 12th centuries (Bhayani 1997, Jackson 2004). *Caryāgīti*, discovered by Haraprasad Śastrī in Nepal in 1907, comprises 47 songs probably composed around the 10th and 11th centuries (Bagchi 1956, Kværne 1977). Its language was identified as proto-Bengali and in this way it represents the earliest record of the Bengali language. Both collections of texts expressed deep reservations towards the Brahmanic ideas of caste and purity and various modes of ritual and meditative practices both Hindu and Buddhist. The attitude of the songs is similar to the ideas expressed in much older Buddhist sources, both Pali and Sanskrit ones: in the Pali canon the collection of *Thera* and *Therī Gathā* (*Songs of Monks and Nuns*) and in Sanskrit in classical work of Aśvaghōṣa. These prejudices towards conventional religious rituals and social hierarchy in a spirit of protest (underlined by Dasgupta in his classical work: Dasgupta 1989) are visible in the literature of the Buddhist *siddhas*, Tantric Vaiṣṇavas and contemporary Bauls (*bartmān-panthī*: Openshaw 2004).

As mentioned above, the religious Tantric landscape of Bengal is dominated by Śakta groups worshipping the Goddess (Devī) in her various manifestations. Tantric Vaiṣṇavism is represented mainly by the Bengali Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā tradition (Bose 1930, Das 1972, Dimock 1989, Hayes 1995, 2001, 2003, Śliwczynska 1992). This Tantric group,⁷

⁷ Tantric is used here as indication of the group which in doctrine and practice is primarily Tantric, understood as a conglomerate of qualities enumerated for example by Padoux (body as a matrix of practice, use of primeval human impulses, desire (*kāma*) as means for liberation or immortality, specific forms of yoga, the ritualized, controlled by yogic methods, sexual intercourse,

or rather groups, have been very influential in this region since medieval times. One of the distinguishing factors differing this group from orthodox Bengali Vaiṣṇavas is the use of ritual and yoga of a Tantric character. These techniques blended with Vaiṣṇava theology were focused on the mystical world of Kṛṣṇa and his eternal paramour Rādhā, the divine body and the process of transformations which on a human, more than theological, level constitute the basis of this Tantric practice. In this way, Vaiṣṇava theology enriched by regional Bengali methods of Tantric *sādhana* comprises the syncretic form called Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā. We can enumerate its following components:

concentration on the body as a matrix of practice, a microcosm (*dehatattva*)

the specific idea of the subtle body, more similar to the Vajrayāna scheme (*vajra-deha*) described in *Hevajratantra* than to any Hindu Śaiva-Śakta model of the subtle body

Tantric Yoga: sexual yogic (*yugala*) practice with stress on *bindu-dhāraṇa* (semen retention) and blending bodily essences and leading them into the central channel (*nadī*)

use of bodily fluids

the idea of *sahaja*—primeval reality identified here with the state of mystical love of Vaiṣṇava

prema—the idea of the mystical, divine love of Vaiṣṇavas

rasa—‘mystical rapture’, mystico-esthetical experience understood as the experience of *prema*, on the human level identified with bodily procreative fluids;

specific use of the terminology of binary Tantric principles based on Vaiṣṇava theology and poetry: *rati-rasa*, *madana-mādana*, Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa;

maithunya, (*yugala* in Bengal), see Padoux 1987: 272–274). White proposed the term radical “hardcore” Tantric groups (White 2002: 23–4, 32). Confusion may come from the fact that almost all Vaiṣṇava traditions accepted some kind of Tantric practice to its ritualism (mainly Pāñcarātra), although their dominating doctrine is Brahmanical Vedānta. Therefore, it would not be justified to deem the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition as Tantric. However, the Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇava tradition represents a more radical and mainly Tantric understanding, and this is at least expressed in ritual practice.

varṭamāna—the idea of sensual experience of reality through ritual and yoga, opposite to *anumāna*, intellectual comprehending of the reality dominating in Vedānta

samarasa—experience of oneness

vastu—primeval substance.

All these elements fused together determine the regional character of praxis of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās.⁸ As was demonstrated by Chakravarty, between the 16th and 19th centuries in Bengal there were numerous groups, more or less closely affiliated to the main stream of the Vaiṣṇava religion in Bengal, who were using the ritual complex which we can call Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā (Chakravarty 1985, Manring 2005: 116, Davidson 2002: 45–83).

As previous scholars have noticed, research on Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā is difficult in many respects: the literature is hermetic and devoid of commentary,⁹ and numerous texts have not been edited.¹⁰ Finally,

⁸ It is not out of place to say that many *sants* and other *bhakti* and tantric groups of medieval North India use similar terminology e.g. *rasa*, *sahaja*, *samarasa*, and as was demonstrated, there exists a link between Caryā songs and the poetry of Kabir (Linda Hess 1983 cited in: Kværne 2010). Nevertheless, the unique fusion of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and Tantric elements and the peculiar fusion of these terms is a specific Bengali feature.

⁹ As Hayes remarked, Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās are the only Tantric group whose literature has no commentary (Hayes 1995).

¹⁰ Unfortunately, neither the editions of the source texts nor secondary literature in the Western and Indian languages are numerous, and many aspects of the esoteric discipline of this tradition are still obscure and not academically explored. In comparison to scholarly research on other Tantric traditions such as Śaiva, Śakta Buddhist Vajrayāna, the literature is rather limited. Moreover, in the case of the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, a significant part of the manuscripts is still awaiting edition and publication; therefore, interpretations of many aspects of this tradition are rather shaky. As Bengali scholar, Dasgupta notes: the library of the University of Calcutta has in its collection 150 “sahajiyā” manuscripts (this is the exact term found in Bengali catalogues). Other libraries in Kolkata (Calcutta) such as the Asiatic

the interpretation of the technically difficult language is a real obstacle in research, especially in the case of groups which no longer exist. Nevertheless, the elements of the medieval Sahajiyā tradition which survived in similar forms of Vaiṣṇava, yogic and other rites, mainly in rural Bengal Vaiṣṇava Tantric literature, are almost entirely composed in Bengali. It does not mean that the important authors of the Sahajiyā branch did not know the Sanskrit sources of the Caitanya tradition and Tantras, or did not use them in the process of composing their works. Quite to the contrary—they had to know them and were part of this tradition. As they claim themselves and is confirmed by other sources (guru lineages—*praṇālīs*), they were initiated by leaders of the Caitanya tradition.¹¹ Sahajiyā texts contain many references to Vaiṣṇava scriptures and Tantras. The point is that the structure of the Tantric rituals, concepts of subtle yogic body and the vocabulary used in these Bengali Tantric Vaiṣṇava texts are more in agreement with the tradition of Tantric Buddhism, “Songs of the Performance” (*Caryāgītī*), and the vernacular poetry of Caṇḍīdāsa than with the Sanskritic tradition of Tantra so prominently represented in several Śakta Tantras. Nevertheless, the Sahajiyā disciples of Kṛṣṇadāsa seem to be quite conservative in their approach to Brahmanical sources in comparison to the nameless author of the Sahajiyā song, who radically advises the complete rejection of the Vedas and following the path of *sahaja* (Hayes 1995).

Vaiṣṇava tradition in Bengal

The Vaiṣṇava tradition, although having been present in Bengal for ages, in the 16th century experienced a revival initiated by the saint, mystic and reformer Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya. It was the beginning of

Society of Bengal and Bangiya Sahitya Parishad have gathered more such manuscripts. Many other works are also kept in libraries of the Viśvabhāratī University in Bolpur-Śantiniketan and others of West Bengal and Bangladesh. This gives us hundreds of texts, amongst which only a few of the most popular and important have been properly edited and published.

¹¹ Many texts contain such lists, e.g. VV.

the new regional Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* tradition based on universal sources such as *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and also some South Indian *bhakti* patterns. The ecstatic religiosity started by Caitanya was inscribed into the growing popularity of the Kṛṣṇa cult in North India, but also had its regional specificity enriched by South Indian inspirations (Hardy 1974). The urgent need to formulate and describe the doctrine of the young group was fulfilled by a team of six scholars and ascetics called the Six Gosvāmins of Vṛndavan, who on the order of Caitanya composed dozens of Sanskrit works formulating the tenets of doctrine, ritual, poetry, and so on. This corpus of texts is recognized as canonical literature for the followers of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition.¹²

The issue of the use of the language in the Tantric Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā literature

When analyzing this extensive corpus of literature, one of the most interesting points to arise is the question of the use of the particular language. The Tantric branch which simultaneously emerged as the troubling Tantric child of the Vaiṣṇava tradition used mainly Bengali. In the Vaiṣṇava Caitanya tradition Sanskrit was used for all types of literature but especially for the ‘higher’ subjects: for expressing theology and ritualistic topics (Delmonico 2004).¹³ Though the *bhakti* movement was egalitarian in the soteriological sense, the core of the intellectual elite were Brahmanas and the dominance of Sanskrit and the need for participating in wider circulation of knowledge on a pan-Indian scale by means of Sanskrit is understandable here. Bengali was used without limits as the language suitable

¹² This form of Vaiṣṇava, both past and present, does not consist only ethnic of Bengalis, so the use of the term Bengali Vaiṣṇava is only partially adequate.

¹³ See also Pollock who deals with the problem: “A discussion of the reasons for choosing Prakrit occurs in the twelfth-century Śaiva tantric Mahārthamañjarī: Sanskrit is obligatory only in discussing Vedic materials; in reflections on God and self, any language, however solemnic, can be more than serviceable” (Pollock 2006: 108).

for poetry (numerous *padāvalīs*), hagiographies and ritualistic guidebooks. Bengali appears in highly Sanskritised form as for example in the *Caitanayacaritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja (Dimock, Stewart 1999, see Introduction: 41–47). Religious legitimization was exclusively based on Sanskritic texts written by Brahmans who mainly composed texts concerning philosophy (Vedānta) and ritual. Nevertheless, Bengali was obviously also used for disseminating the new religious ideas, such as the above-mentioned CC, considered as the turning point of diffusion of the doctrine of the Gosvāmins in the Bengali speaking areas. It was a controversial move (from the point of view of highly Brahminized and conservative followers of Gosvāmins) but Sanskrit did not likely guarantee either the success of the missionary or the proper understanding of the Caitanya doctrine by the Bengali masses. In the Sahajiyā schools of Bengali, Vaiṣṇava dominated Bengali as the language of means of expression. Bengali was probably also the proper choice for expressing old Tantric ideas of the Sahajiyā tradition into which some Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas seemed to gravitate synthesizing it with orthodox Vaiṣṇava praxis. So Bengali served as a tool for preserving the old regional Tantric tradition and the new emerging dynamic Vaiṣṇava tradition as well.¹⁴

The series of problems associated with the use of Sanskrit and vernaculars for the purpose of adequate expression of the religious doctrine and practice is a key issue in understanding the complex religious landscape of medieval north-east India. The nature of this problem is not only linguistic, but to a high degree touches upon the doctrine and praxis of the medieval Bengali religious groups presented here. It is worth noting that the Śakta Tantras were mainly composed in Sanskrit (Gupta and Goudrian 1981, Banerjea 1992). The Tantric Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā tradition, which emerged simultaneously with the Caitanya revival in Bengal, using mainly Bengali, seems to be rather a continuation of the old Buddhists and Vaiṣṇava Tantric tradition (Dasgupta 1995) and it is difficult to identify regional Bengali Tantric

¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are some assumptions that some Tantric Sahajiyā texts were also composed in Sanskrit (I will return to this problem later).

ritual complex (known as Sahajiyā and not equivalent in all aspects to Vajrayāna but close to the practices of *siddhas*).¹⁵ As was suggested by Sanderson, Buddhist Tantric tradition appeared in complex relations with the Śaiva tradition (Sanderson 1988). From such a perspective the Bengali Sahajiyā tradition, diffused in Vaiṣṇava circles and later in Sufi groups or other syncretic groups, seems to be a separate mode of worship in comparison to the medieval Sanskritised Śakta Tantra tradition.

In this way the regional Bengali Tantric Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā tradition provides us with interesting data for considering the problem of the relation between local and pan-Indian Tantric traditions. The crucial problem is transmitting of the esoteric knowledge, the question of its availability through a particular language and circle of responders. Another point is doctrinal: how did the Brahmanical, Vedāntic Vaiṣṇava tradition interact with its heterodox offshoots, which were a very vital and dynamic part of the developing Vaiṣṇava religion in Bengal. Do they repeat Tantric Buddhist patterns or try to make a syncretic form of the Vaiṣṇava religion? The answer cannot be definite because the range of obscure texts does not allow for easy classification or reveal their source of inspiration. The Tantric Buddhist substrate (elements of which might also be borrowed from some earlier regional tradition) is undoubtedly important; nevertheless, the special feature of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā texts is the use of peculiar vocabulary which is the part of the old Bengali Tantric tradition (*rasa, rasik, vastu, vartāmana, rati, madana*, etc.) The poetic tradition of this region in Sanskrit (Jayadeva) and vernacular (Vidyāpati, Caṇḍīdāsa) was also a substrate of these special features of Tantric Vaiṣṇavism. Another, even more prevalent, theology is that of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava, including its elaborated concepts of mystical-esthetic experience, or

¹⁵ The study of the songs of *siddhas* in the *Caryāgīti* collection shows that it is difficult to classify them as simply Buddhist songs. Siegel demonstrated it clearly in the case of the *siddha* Kāṇha, whose behaviors and attributes give the impression of rather non-sectarian Tantric Yogi, of neither a clearly Buddhist nor Śaiva affiliation (Siegel 1981).

bhakti-rasa, presented eloquently by theologian Rūpa Gosvāmin and his followers in the 16th and 17th centuries. This concept is correlated with the mythological motifs and dualistic doctrine of the *bhakti*. On the practical plane the *sādhana* (religious discipline) is expressed by use of the Vaiṣṇava, Tantric, and Yogic methods (Haberman 1988).

The issue of Mukundadeva

Let us look into the center of the Vaiṣṇava Tantric tradition represented by the Mukundadāsa line and the issue of the relationship between Sanskrit and vernacular sources. The dominant opinion amongst Western scholars is that the most important Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā corpus of the texts of Mukundadāsa and his disciples was composed entirely in Bengali (Hayes 2002). Mostly Bengali authors such as Das (Das 1972) and Thandar (Thandar 2012: 11), basing their opinions on Vaiṣṇava sources, claim that the Mukunda works were first composed in Sanskrit and then translated by his disciples into Bengali. However, all works of Mukunda are available today only in the Bengali language and none of the *Catalogus Catalogorum* of Sanskrit texts contain any of these texts in Sanskrit. Some of the works of Mukunda actually contain Sanskrit *ślokas*, but only in the form of citations from other works. For example, the ARV contains in total five *ślokas* in Sanskrit, which are citations from the following texts: one of *Padmapurāṇa*, *Muktacaritra* of Rūpa Gosvāmin and *Gopīpremāṃṛta* and two from another Sahajiyā work of Mukunda, namely BhRV, supposedly also composed in Sanskrit. However, ARV is also available only in Bengali today and is one of the most popular texts and the numerous manuscripts of this work are evidence of this.¹⁶ Otherwise, in this case we would

¹⁶ There are at least twelve manuscripts of this work in various collections in India and Bangladesh. The available manuscripts widely differ from each other. One step towards a critical edition of this text is the work of Thandar (Thandar 2012), who gathered almost all the available texts of ARV. Strangely, he did not take under consideration the manuscripts of ARV

have to make the assumption that BhRV was actually first composed in Sanskrit, then translated into Bengali and at the moment of composing the ARV Mukunda cited his own work in Sanskrit. In this case the translating of only two Sanskrit *śloka*s to include them in a Bengali work seems to be a strange act, and it warns us to be careful about the form of composition of ARV. Whether in this case Sanskrit original texts and other texts of Mukunda were lost (or were not carefully transmitted in manuscripts in the case of the availability of Bengali translations) remains a question of speculation.

Another point which has to be considered in detail is the author of the primeval Sahajiyā works, namely Mukundadāsa or Mukundadeva Gosvāmin. We have to take into consideration various factors which make this complex problem even more complicated and obscure (Das 1978: 100–110). The dates and information concerning the distinguished author and *guru* of the spoken tradition, Mukundadeva or Mukundadāsa, are scarce and contradictory. He lived around 1600–1650 or a little earlier and was probably one of the five main disciples of the Kṛṣṇadāsa who established separate branches of Vaiṣṇava Bengali tradition. At least that is the story told by Ākiñcanadāsa in VV,¹⁷ but the reliability of some of the information included in this work is disputable. In BhRV Mukundadeva is described as the youngest and the most favorite disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa. Though he came from a rich and influential family (“was the son of the ruler”¹⁸), at an early age he devoted himself to the ascetic life, “giving up everything, giving up the wealth” and became a disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa, being the special subject of his attention.¹⁹ However, scholars suspect that there were

gathered in Manuscript Library of University of Calcutta (Mss: 595, 4887, 6451, 6778).

¹⁷ Vilāsa I: 28: *mukunda kaniṣṭha śikhā sabār sneher bhājana, kavirāja caṃder teṃha hana prāṇa sama.*

¹⁸ BhRV: 28, citation in: Das 1972: 102: *mukundadeva rājaputra chilā.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem: sakala chāḍiyā aiśvarya chāḍiyā teṃha vairāgya hailā, tabe kṛṣṇdāsa tāre bahu kṛpa kailā.*

at least two significant persons in the history of the Vaiṣṇavism named Mukunda: Mukunda Gosvāmin and Mukundadāsa. The former was a well-off landlord or prince from Multān in Punjab. After taking the ascetic life he settled in Vṛndavan in the Mathura area and as a disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa wrote a commentary to *Bhaktirasāmṛitasindhu* of Rūpa Gosvāmin. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that he was also the author of the Sahajiyā works. The latter would be Mukundadāsa Gosvāmin, a disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa whose name we find in VV and other Sahajiyā works. In this case it is not very probable that he came from Punjab. Stewart recognizes that there were two Mukundas: Mukundadāsa and Mukunda Gosvāmin (Stewart 2010: lxxxiv–v). According to Dimock a certain Mukundarāma, resident of Śrīkhanda, might be identified as the author of many Sahajiyā works and probably a disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa.²⁰ On the other hand, Sen is skeptical of Mukunda being a disciple of Kṛṣṇadāsa. He claims the author of *Amṛtarasāvalī* was Mathuradāsa, a disciple of Mukundadeva, and puts him at the beginning of the 18th century (Sen 2015: 419).

As the Vaiṣṇava tradition (Das 1972, citing BhRV: 103) informs us, Mukunda is the author of the Sanskrit work²¹ *Mukundamuktāvalī*, the collection of six important texts comprising: ARV, *Rāgaratnāvalī*, AR, *Premaratnāvalī*, BhRV and *Lavaṅgacaritrāvalī*. Only three have survived to our times: ARV, AR and BhRV, all in Bengali. They are

²⁰ Dimock 1989: 93–4. As Sen indicates “many works and songs of Śrīkhanda expressed Sahajiyā practice” (Sen 2015: 95). Ākiñcanadāsa was also supposedly a member of the Śrīkhanda school.

²¹ Das indicates that Premadāsa translated this work into Bengali (Das 1978: 102–9). Referring to the book *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Prasāṅga* by Gopinatha Kaviraja, Das (also Thandar 2012) considers another disciple of Mukundadeva, Mukundarāmadāsa, as translator of AR. All these works were first composed in Sanskrit and then translated by disciples of Mukunda: Premadāsa and Mukundarāma. Dimock recognizes Mathuradāsa as the author of AR, (p. xxiii). However, Das (Das 1974) in his edition of AR recognizes Mukundadeva as the author of that work. A possible solution to the problem may be the issue of symbolic authorship.

dated around the middle of the 17th century or a little earlier.²² Fragments of these texts have the character of the ritual manuals (*paddhati*), and describe the mystical cosmophysiology in agreement with the concept of the micro-macrosmos (*dehatattva*) and rasa doctrine (*rasatattva*). The main focus is esoteric practice (*sādhana*) of Sahajiyās (*sahaja dharma*). Moreover, considering that Mukundadeva was most probably a Punjabi and was part of the circle of the Bengali Vaiṣṇavas in Vṛndavan, it makes it less probable that he composed his works in Bengali. Unfortunately, we do not know of his ability to compose works in Bengali. If not, in this case Sanskrit would be a quite natural choice. AS of Yugaladāsa in the traditional ending (*bhaṇita*) informs us that the text was finished in the year 1075 of the Bengali calendar (1668 AD), which confirms that Yugala was a disciple of Mukunda and lived and worked in the second half of the 17th century.²³ Unfortunately, in the case of Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavas we rarely have such details concerning the authors and their works.

ABh inscribed to Premadāsa comes from the manuscript of the University of Calcutta. It is signed and dated 1239 of the Bengali era (1832/3 AD). Brzezinski expresses his opinion that it is the date of copying, but the text was composed in the time of Mukundadeva (17th century). Sen and Dimock ascribe this text to 1720, which is also a rather late date, and in the context of the mentioned facts about Mukunda and his disciples it creates difficulties in fixing the historical frames of tradition.²⁴ Another manuscript of this library

²² Sen puts the AR quite late, at the end of the 18th century and ascribes the authorship to Mukunda's disciple, Mathuradāsa. Dimock also claims that in spite of traditional authorship of Mukunda, this work was probably composed by his disciple (Dimock 1989: 144).

²³ AS, 283: *śrī guru caraṇa padma hṛde kari āśa, ei ta kahiyāchila yugalera dāsa; iti śrī āgamasāra sampūrṇa, iti sana 1075 sāla, tārikha 25 śrāvaṇa, roja ravibāra.*

²⁴ Dimock 1989: 52. Sen identifies Premadāsa with the author of the important Vaiṣṇava work *Caitanyacandrodaya* and that explains its rather late date (Sen 2015: 664).

(examined by myself) titled *Sahajiyāgama* has similar character and is in the form of a dialog between Śiva and Devī (Mss 6224, *Hara-Pārvatīr kathopakathana*, author unknown). Formally and topically it is similar to ABh; nevertheless, it needs further examination.

Finally, NPV of Gauridāsa (manuscript 5252 from the collection of Baṅgiya Sahitya Parishad in Kolkata) is an interesting and extensive compilation and rework of the early texts of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās. NPV, in accordance with its title (*The collection of [texts] uncovering mysterious meanings*), interprets many esoteric aspects of the Tantric Vaiṣṇava school, expressed in a more manageable and clearer manner than in the works of Mukundadeva or Premadāsa. This aspect of NPV gives the scholar the advantage of sinking into esoteric texts, but it is certainly not justified to deem the NPV a commentary *sensu stricto*; it has a looser and rather undisciplined character. NPV also confirms the primary role of Mukunda and his works and enumerates the main texts of this school in the following manner: 1. AS 2. ABh 3. ARV 4. AR. This work as a part of an exegetical effort of the Tantric wing of Vaiṣṇava introduces more universal terminology to the esoteric vocabulary of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, for example by trying to reconcile the very peculiar concept of the subtle body of the Mukundadeva school with the more popular *cakra* scheme present in Śaiva-Śakta Tantras.

As one can see, similarly to other problems in Bengali literature (e.g. Caṅḍidāsa *samaya*), the confusion about Mukundadeva (on a smaller scale of course) and contradictory sources mean that there is no easy solution to the problem, and in this way the authorship and chronology of the main texts of the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā school will not be definitely fixed. Undoubtedly, in the texts of the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā school we can trace a great endeavor to connect the Tantric branch tradition with its main, orthodox stream and establish it as an authentic line of *gurus* (*paramparā, pranālī*). The connection in *sampradāya* was intended to fill the line with close companions of Caitanya (Svarūpa Damodara, Rāya Rāmānanda and others, Dimock 1989²⁵). The Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavas especially connect

²⁵ See also polemic: O'Connel, *Were Caitanya's Vaiṣṇavas Really Sahajiyās?* (cited in: Dimock 1989: xvii and following pages).

their line with Kṛṣṇadāsa with the intention of legitimizing their *guru* lineage and religious authority. As mentioned by Haberman, to this line also belonged the famous, influential and controversial 17th-century Vaiṣṇava theologian Rūpa Kavirāja, whose doctrine was condemned on council in Jaipur (1727 AD) as comprising the elements of Sahajiyā (Haberman 1999: 98–104).

Sanskrit works—manuscript preliminary notes

One interesting example of the preliminary research which perhaps may shed some light on these obscure topics is the material represented by the fragment of the manuscript (only one folio, manuscript incomplete) found in the Manuscript Library of the University of Calcutta and titled *Aropanirṇāya* (Mss no 2823, incomplete). A very short but significant fragment of the work describes the land of Kṛṣṇa or Vṛṇdavana placing this mythical land in a Tantric manner in the human body.²⁶ This work resembles others such as *Vṛṇdavana mādātmya* with the exception that all mythical centers of the Vrajamaṇḍala are in *Aropanirṇāya* internalized in the human body. Even if this issue needs further research it indicates that we have to be very careful about categorical claims about any exclusive use of the Bengali language by Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās.

Conclusions

What picture do we receive after reviewing this rather complex historical data and hermeneutical effort of generations of theologians and adepts of these traditions? As I have tried to demonstrate, the interactions between the regional and the pan-Indian as well as between the vernacular and Sanskrit, seems to be a very complex problem with dynamic nets of interaction, functioning synchronically on multiple levels. The above-described corpus of Tantric texts was mainly composed in Bengali; nevertheless, in some aspects they are

²⁶ Manuscripts start: *śrī śrī rādhā kṛṣṇāya namaḥ || athaḥ aropa nirṇāya likhateḥ || cauḍaṣi kroṣa vṛṇdavānaḥ dehete sthitiḥ...*

heavily based on Sanskrit Vaiṣṇava works. Authors of these works were knowledgeable in yogic and Ayurvedic terminology as some texts indicate: *Āmatattva* (Dimock 1989, Hayes 2011), *Bhajānaṭīkā* (unpublished Mss 3083 in the collection of the Calcutta University) and *Nāyikāsādhanaṭīkā* (Basu 1930, Dimock 1989).

It seems that at least in the 17th and 18th centuries, the authors of several Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā texts were greatly knowledgeable in both Vaiṣṇava and old Tantric texts and were trying to reconcile these two worlds. As Stewart indicates, VV is a demonstration of the erudition of its author Ākiñcanadāsa, who, commenting on the CC and using various sources (Vaiṣṇava and Tantric), reveals the hidden meaning of the texts. Similarly, Gauridāsa in his NPV reveals the hidden meaning of Mukunda's works. VV is also an example of the huge effort to blend Tantric Sahajiyā practice into the new mode of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. Similarly to CC, which was the expression of Gosvāmins' Sanskritic "high" theology in the vernacular, the primeval Bengali Tantric works of Mukundadeva, Ākiñcana and their disciples furthered the subject of exegetical work aiming at making them authoritative for the religious community. Local Bengali traditions seem to retain and transmit very old patterns of practice and adapt them to the new context of the changing religious landscape. The proper choice for such appropriation was the vernacular, which as we saw illustrates very old traditions of expressing mystical experience. We have to consider Vajra songs, *Dohākośas*, *Caryāgīti* and Bengali *padāvalīs* and their continuation in medieval times in the mystical poetry of *sants*, Tantrics and *bhaktas*. As was presented, one important feature of this literature is the use of the vernacular, although it also reflects pan-Indian structures of *bhakti* and Tantric ritualism (either Buddhist or Hindu) and is heavily influenced by Tantric Sanskrit literature.

The vernacular was also probably a better tool for expressing religious experience of adepts of various social strata, not only those educated in Sanskrit. Additionally, the use of the vernacular in the Tantric texts is explicable when we recognize them as providing support

to ritual. A spoken language seems to be more adequate as a mode of communication in those rituals which demand more yogic bodily control than the precision demanded by external ritual. A crucial function seems to be played also by the metaphorical language of particular traditions, which is the reflection of the basic human experiences and interactions of humans, the subjects of a particular culture, with the environment (Hayes 1995). Using universal symbols like trees, rivers, animals and correlating them with the model of the body as microcosm was an esoteric tool, but one universally recognized in Indian Tantric and yogic circles (Kværne 2010, Snellgrove 2010). Another perspective might be provided by a wider analysis of Asiatic forms of literature where archaic modes of describing the reality through anthropomorphism and equivalence of micro-macrocosms are prevalent (Braginsky 2004).

The presented issue also challenges the concept of existence of any universal Indian model of the subtle body. As was demonstrated by Sanderson (Sanderson 1988: 687) and White (White 2003: 221–2), such a model has probably never existed in India, and every school has had its own idea of the yogic body. The matrices for somatic concepts were binary (male-female, *Puruṣa-Prakṛti*), triadic (sun-fire-wind, *soma-agni-vāyu*, *tri-guṇa*, *tri-doṣa*) as well as pentadic structures (five *bāṇas*, ‘arrows’, five senses, etc.) and the division of micro-macrocosmos repeated in ritual and Sankhyic, Tantric and Yogic doctrines (White 1996, Czyżykowski 2013). The concept of the four internal ponds (*sarovaras*) present in Sahajiyā texts (liquid reality, alchemical terminology) seems to be more similar to the old Buddhist model of the four *cakras* in *vajradeha* (HVT, I.1.24) and yogic Sufi ideas described in the 17th-century Bengali *Yoga-qalandar* (four centers, *moqām*, ‘stations’; Haq 1975, Cantu 2015) than to other Tantric Śaiva-Śakta systems (six, seven, or more *cakras*). Therefore, the Bengali regional Tantric tradition represents an archaic and conservative scheme of the subtle/mystical body which was dynamically appropriated to new historical and cultural contexts, but its core remains very archaic. In the concept of ritual of the late Staal (Staal 1996) the structure of the ritual

is dominant, while the semantic features of ritual are secondary. Syntax dominates over semantics, and *praxis* dominates over *doxis*. In the case of Bengali Tantric traditions, the very archaic ritual complex of *sahaja* and its correlating vocabulary is very persistent through the ages. Although the historical and religious context is changing and the symbolism and meanings attached to particular elements of rituals are also changing, the general structure, the symbolism and power of this ritual complex, and its influence on the human mind, remains relatively stable.

Abbreviations

ABh—*Anandabhairava* of Premadāsa

ARV—*Amṛtaratnāvalī* of Mukundadeva

ARS—*Amṛtarasāvalī* of Mukundadeva

AS—*Āgamasāra* of Yugaladāsa

BhRV—*Bhṛṅgaratnāvalī* of Mukundadeva

CC—*Caitanyacaritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja

HVT—*Hevajrantra*

NPV—*Nigūdhārthaprakāśāvalī* of Gauridāsa

VV—*Vivartavilāsa* of Ākiñcanadāsa

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