

## More Reflections on Initiation: Critique of Tripurari's little tan book

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This month I thought that I would take a look at some of the issues raised in the little tan book by Tripurari Maharaj (TM) called *Sri Guru-parampara* (Mill Valley, CA: Harmonist Publishers, 1998; no ISBN). Some of you may recall that it was one of the stimuli that started this series of essays of mine. One senses that TM tried in this book to take an open-minded and accommodating approach to the topic and for that he is to be congratulated. Why I myself am even cited in the text! That is generosity indeed. I will try in what follows to maintain that atmosphere of generosity. Unfortunately, the understanding presented in the book is profoundly flawed. To try and examine all of the failings of the book would require another book of equal or greater length and that is way beyond my intentions. Therefore, I want to focus on only three major issues: the question of the *siddha-praṇālī*, the question of the *śikṣā-paramparā*, and the myth of the fall of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition in the 19th century.

Let's begin with the question of the *siddha-praṇālī*. TM unfortunately misunderstands what the *siddha-praṇālī* is and I am afraid that I might be at least partially to blame for that. In the first place, the *siddha-praṇālī* is not a separate rite or initiation (*dīkṣā* that is received at some time after one's mantra *dīkṣā*). It is information often but not necessarily supplied by one's guru at the time of the mantra *dīkṣā*. At the time of authentic initiation, that is, initiation into an authentic guru lineage tracing itself back to Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu or his immediate companions or followers, one becomes a member of a *siddha-praṇālī*. In some of my previous writings I may have given the impression that it is a separate rite, apart from the primary rite of initiation. For that I apologize. The single most important rite in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is mantra *dīkṣā*. At that time one is accepted into a lineage of gurus going back to Śrī Caitanya or his immediate followers. This is called the *guru-paramparā* or guru lineage and is considered very important because it is the channel through which Mahāprabhu's mercy comes down to one. The mantras one receives then are empowered by every member of that line and knowing who they are is very important for one's daily meditation and visualization practices. That is why

in the Gauḍīya tradition one is given their names in a list like the one on this web-site. One should offer a humble bow to every member of that chain each day and before doing any *bhakti* practice. It is by their blessings that one may succeed in the practice. Not doing so would be like sitting out on the end of the branch of a tree while sawing it off at the trunk. It is the chain that one has to catch hold of if one wishes to be pulled out of the ocean of repeated birth and death and each link is important. The members of those lineages each have two names: the names they were known by in the world and the names they have in their eternal identities in the eternal world. The list of their worldly names is called the *guru-paramparā* and the list of their names in divine sport is called the *siddha-praṇālī*. Along with their names in eternal sport or their *siddha* names one is given other information about them such as their bower of residence, the nature of their intimate service, the color of their skin and cloths in divine sport and so forth. This whole body of information is useful for *bhakti* practitioners who want to practice visualization of the daily sport in the passion-motivated *bhakti* (*rāgānugā bhakti*).

In the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition outside of ISKCON one receives sixteen mantra and gāyatrī. These are the guru-mantra and gāyatrī, caitanya-mantra and gāyatrī, nityananda-mantra and gāyatrī, advaita-mantra and gāyatrī, gopala-mantra and kama-gāyatrī, radha-mantra and gāyatrī, gadadhara-mantra and gāyatrī, and srivasa-mantra and gāyatrī. There may be some variations in these mantra in the different lines of the tradition, but these are the mantra I received from my guru, Bābā Śrī Tinkudi Gosvāmī and the ones others said they, too, received from their respective gurus. Each mantra and gāyatrī of course is preceded by the one syllable seed (*bīja*) appropriate to that mantra and gāyatrī. For instance, the seed for the guru-mantra and guru-gāyatrī is *aiṃ*. It is said that without these mantra and gāyatrī one is not qualified to do any higher service like pūjā, āratī, or visualization (*smaraṇa*). Note that there is no *sūrya-gāyatrī* (aka brahma-gāyatrī: *om bhur bhuwah svar tat savitur ...*) As far as I know this mantra has nothing in particular to do with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism or with the worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. It is the mantra given to brahmin boys during the *upanayana* initiation which marks their entry into the study of the Veda. Its introduction into the mantra *dikṣā* appears to be one of the many fabrications of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī and we will return to some of those later. Chanting the Holy Names, of course, does not depend on any form of initiation. There is no required initiation rite for the Holy Name in this tradition.

According to some views, one is transformed during the mantra initiation from a *pravartaka* (beginner or novice) to a *sādhaka* (genuine practitioner). As a practitioner one has a number of choices open to one for *bhakti* practice, most of which do not require the esoteric information provided by the *siddha-praṇālī*. If one has a strong desire to do *rāgānugā sādhana-bhakti*, however, and that desire called greed (*lobha*) is the chief qualification for undertaking such a practice, one needs the *siddha-praṇālī*. As stated before, the *siddha-praṇālī*

is the siddha or *mañjarī* names and descriptions of the line of gurus that one has received initiation into. Each member is believed to be a participant in the eternal sport of Govinda. When one receives the *siddha-praṇālī* one also learns, from one's guru, one's own *siddha* name, color, service, and so forth as well as those of one's gurus. One can then use that information to visualize oneself as a *mañjarī* participant and assistant to one's *guru-mañjarī* and his *guru-māñjarīs* as they serve Śrī Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. This visualization is at the core of the practice called “remembering the sports of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa during the eight periods of the day (*aṣṭa-kālīya-līlā-smaraṇa*)”. If one does not have the desire to do this form of mental service, and many do not, one does not need the *siddha-praṇālī*. As one reaches the higher stages of the development of bhakti, the features of one's siddha personality become naturally revealed to one in cases where the guru has not given them.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the *siddha-praṇālī* is not a separate initiation and for many it is not strictly speaking necessary. What one cannot do without according to the mainstream tradition, though, is the mantra *dīkṣā* and the guru-paramparā. Thus, when TM says: “All opposition to Bhaktisiddhanta contends that he did not receive the siddha-pranali initiation to the esoteric worship of Radha and Kṛṣṇa from either Bhaktivinoda or Gaura Kisora (p. 3)”, he is simply wrong. The contention is that Bhaktisiddhanta did not get **mantra dīkṣā** and guru-paramparā. Without mantra *dīkṣā* and guru-paramparā there is no question of having a *siddha-praṇālī*.

When I left ISKCON it was not because I wanted some *siddha-praṇālī-dīkṣā*, it was because I was convinced (and I am even more convinced today) that Bhaktisiddhanta did not receive mantra *dīkṣā* and guru-paramparā from anybody. To return to an earlier analogy, I became convinced that the chain or rope that I was holding onto in hopes of being pulled out of the ocean of “becoming” was tied to absolutely nothing at all. TM seems to tacitly recognize this when he says “Bhaktisiddhanta did not teach his followers to worship the *dīkṣā* guru of Gaura Kisora Das Babaji .. (p. 3)”. The reason Bhaktisiddhanta did not was that he did not know who the *dīkṣā* guru of Gaura Kisora Das Babaji was. Neither does TM or anyone in the Gaudiya Math and ISKCON. My contention is (based on an eye-witness account of his own admission before Pandita Ramakṛṣṇa Das Baba) that Bhaktisiddhanta didn't know who his parama-guru was because he never received *dīkṣā* and guru-paramparā from Gaura Kisora Das Babaji. On the other hand, Gaura Kisora Das Babaji was notoriously difficult to get initiation from (he once accused an initiation hopeful in quite crude Bengali of wanting to jam a pole up his ass, *putki jām karā*) and even when one of his disciples asked about *guru-paramparā* he was, according to Haridas Das's account, tremendously evasive telling him instead to chant the Holy Name. He emphasized the Holy Name over everything else and did not recommend the practice of visualization of divine sport (*līlā-smaraṇa*). This is a view held by

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<sup>1</sup>See the discussion of one-form bhakti and multiform bhakti in Manindranath Guha's *Nectar of the Holy Name*.

many others in the mainstream tradition. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Gaura Kisora Das Babaji, who was not a brahmin and who cared nothing for the caste system, would have given Bhaktisiddhanta the *sūrya-gāyatrī* in any sort of initiation.<sup>2</sup> Haridas Das's account of Gaura Kisora Das Baba is quite interesting. What is most interesting about it, though, is that there is no mention of Bhaktisiddhanta at all. Bhaktivinoda is mentioned, but mostly in the context of Gaura Kisora's pleasure at having evaded his pursuit by hiding out in a whore house. I don't think that there was any great enmity between Haridas Das and either Bhaktivinoda or Bhaktisiddhanta, apart from the usual dissatisfaction Navadvipa Vaisnavas felt toward them for claiming that Mayapura, the birth place of Mahāprabhu, was on the other side of the river. It is strange that an important person like Bhaktisiddhanta would not be mentioned, though. Perhaps the *dīkṣā*-seeker whom Gaura Kisora Das Babaji accused of wanting to jam him with a pole and whom he later struck with an umbrella was Bhaktisiddhanta. In Haridas Das's account, however, though that person is never named, he was said to be from a place called Noakhali. I have no idea where that place is, but it is not likely to be a reference to Bhaktisiddhanta. Nevertheless, Gaura Kisora Das Baba finally gave that person the Holy Name and told him that if he chants for one year without fail he will meet the Lord and if not he should come back to Gaura Kisora Das Babaji. If this is typical of the way Gaura Kisora Das Babaji treated those asking for initiation then it is unlikely that Bhaktisiddhanta fared any better. Bābājī was simply loth to give initiation.

What I received from Bābā Śrī Tinkudi Gosvāmī (who lived out in the lonely reaches of Vraja, places like Ratan-kunda and Prema-sarovara, not Radhakunda as TM claims) was mantra *dīkṣā* and *guru-paramparā* and, because I asked for it, thinking I would like to practice *līlā-smaraṇa* at some point, he also gave me my *siddha-praṇālī*. I have not as of yet begun the practice of *līlā-smaraṇa*, but it is comforting to know that I could if I wanted to. And I may yet want to. Now, however, I am certain that the rope I cling to when I sit to remember my mantra is attached firmly to the ocean-liner of Śrī Caitanya and that I am being dragged, for the most part unwillingly I will admit, toward the distant shore of Goloka.

It is interesting to note that TM mentions Ananta Vasudeva and Sundarananda Vidyavinoda in his book without clearly saying who they were. Ananta Vasudeva was also known as Puri Maharaja and was not only learned, but was the man chosen by Bhaktisiddhanta to replace him after his death. Sundarananda Vidyavinoda was one of the leading writers and thinkers of the Gaudiya Math, author of numerous books on Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism, and the editor of the Math's monthly journal for years. A few years after Bhaktisiddhanta's passing, for some reason the year 1941 sticks in my memory, Puri Maharaja and

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<sup>2</sup>See Gaura Kisora Das Babaji's jivani (life story) in *Śrī Śrī Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava Jīvana*, dvitīya khaṇḍa, by Haridas Das. 3rd printing, Gaurabda 489 [1975], pp. 39-52.

Sundarananda Vidyavinoda left the Gaudiya Math, but not alone. A number of followers left with them and settled in various places around Vraja to do *bhaja-jana*, i.e. *hari-nama japa and kīrtana* and *līlā-smaraṇa*. I heard the following from one of those followers, then an old *bābājī* in Govardhan. When Puri Maharaja discovered the lack of initiation in the Gaudiya Math lineage, he called all of the leading renunciants (*sannyāsī* in the Math organization together and informed them of his discovery. He advised them: "You all may as well all go home and get married. Continuing this charade is useless." (It has never been clear to me what charade Puri Maharaj had in mind, the charade of being Vaisnava or the *sannyāsa* charade. Judging from his later actions he probably meant both.) He then took his own advice taking off his saffron robe and heading to Vrindaban where he was forced to hide from the murderous anger of his former guru-brothers who wanted to kill him for ruining their lucrative scam (this part sounds quite familiar to me). When he arrived in Vrindaban he was given shelter by none other than Puruṣottama Goswami, one of the respected Radharaman Goswamis.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter he publicly renounced and denounced the Gaudiya Math and apologized for all of the offenses he committed as a prominent member and then leader of it. He later married and settled in Vrindaban producing over the years one of the finest collections of editions (more than fifty volumes) of Gauṇīya scripture ever to be produced. This hardly sounds like someone who had lost his *śakti-saṁcāra* (empowerment by Kṛṣṇa) by leaving the Gaudiya Math. Rather, it sounds like he became empowered by leaving.

The departure of Puri Maharaja strikes me as an incredibly courageous and honest thing to do. Here Puri Maharaja was in the highest seat of power in the Gaudiya Math, appointed by the founding *ācārya* himself and himself therefore the presiding *ācārya* of the institution at the time. He could very well have covered up the flaw in initiation and carried on. Instead, at great personal risk to himself and at great loss, he informed his guru-brothers and set out to put himself and them back on the correct path. Many of his guru-brothers, however, split off into their own warring factions, struggling for control of the money and property-rich institution or to establish their own institutions, and tried to cover up the truth, labelling Puri Maharaja as fallen and claiming that he ran off with a woman. They fought each other for years for pieces of the Gaudiya Math pie. After that time the Gaudiya Math and its offshoots were firmly founded on greed and deceit. The books the Math and its family produced afterwards were with few exceptions poorly edited and filled with errors. None of them match up to anything like the quality of the work produced by either Puri Dasa (no longer a *sannyāsī*) or Sundarananda Vidyavinoda after they left the Math.

Well, here I am at the end of an installment having said much and yet with so much more to say. Experienced writers know (not that I am one of those) that they can never quite tell where they will end up when they sit down to

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<sup>3</sup>Śrī Puruṣottama's son, Shrivatsa Goswami, told me this personally.

write. I have only scratched the surface of one of the three issues that I wished to discuss in this essay and I am afraid I have also let generosity slip out the door. Haven't I just called the leaders of Gaudiya Math after Puri Maharaja greedy and deceitful? Let me try and usher some generosity back in by pointing out that though the leaders of the Math may have been crooked and deceitful, the rank and file members probably had no idea of what was really going on. A. C. Bhaktivedanta, who was still Abhay Caran De, a householder chemist in Allahabad, probably only heard that Puri Maharaja had fallen down with a woman, shrugged, and turned back to selling shaving cream and toothpaste. Some of the followers no doubt remained sincere to what they thought was true.

We need to dig more deeply into the *siddha-praṇālī* question. Where did the practice come from? Who originated it? Why is it important to the Gauḍīya tradition? Who should practice it and when? These are all important issues as are the related questions of the *śikṣā-paramparā* and the supposed fall of the Gaudiya tradition in the 19th century. I will turn to these things in the next installment. Look for that in a few days rather than a month, since I am bursting with ideas.