

## Understanding the Religious Worlds of the Subalterns: An Analysis of Syncretic Culture in Bengal

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Debates on multiculturalism in the Western democracies have often fuelled discussions of minority history. After the Second World War, writing of history has increasingly become entangled with the so-called 'politics' and production of 'identity'. Therefore, necessity often arises in all democracies to include in the history of the nation, histories of the indigenous and the ethnic groups who had been previously left out from it. In the 1970s, such studies came to be known as 'history from below'. Among other things, such studies have also focussed on the belief patterns of the indigenous groups, who have been recently referred to as 'subalterns'.<sup>1</sup>

Religion may be treated as a platform through which one can understand the mentality of the subalterns. The present study is an attempt to understand this particularly in the field of religion. The so-called 'lower orders' of Bengal mainly connect themselves with popular religion, while contesting with the hierarchical structure and ideology of castes, which has been vigorously contested in the realm of popular religion, and is often defined through a process of exclusion as the 'other' religion. In this paper, we would illustrate this by closely examining the concepts, rituals and the epistemological shifts over time in a number of minor religious sects that developed in Bengal since the late eighteenth century as a part of the continuing tradition of *bhakti*.<sup>2</sup>

This paper considers the works of some of the renowned scholars who have revealed deep understanding on the subject. One of the foremost among them is Partha Chatterjee, who in the inaugural number of the '*Subaltern Studies*' series in 1982, demonstrated how religion deeply influenced communal identification in agrarian contexts, both as a weapon of dominance wielded by a Hindu majority and a tool of resistance for mobilizing Muslim peasants. We may also consider the writings of Sumit Sarkar such as his treatment of the '*Kalki Avatar*' scandal

in early twentieth century Bengal and its reception in the Bengal public sphere. Sarkar takes religion to be crucial for understanding Subaltern militancy as in his essay discussing Gandhian civil protest in Bengal. Also important are Shahid Amin's study of how Gandhi became a divine, miraculous figure in Gorakhpur in the 1920s and to Ishita Banerjee Dube's study on *Mahima Dharma* and its relation with the cult of Jagannatha.

For several centuries, Bengal has been the site for diverse races, creeds, religions and cultures. Unlike northern India, Bengal witnessed less hegemonisation by Brahmanical influences. In the first place, there was the relatively flexible indigenous society, where caste practices were not rigid. In the *Candimangalkavya*, ritually defiled *Candals* are described as rightful dwellers of the city and not treated as outcastes. Niharranjan Ray has argued that the caste system was not as rigorous in Bengal as it was in the Aryavarta. This was because of the late process of Aryanization and the prolonged existence of a more liberal indigenous tribal culture, which constantly interacted with the orthodox *varna* culture and diluted it. As the settled agricultural economy expanded in pre-colonial Bengal, linkages between caste and class became more visible with those providing physical labour lose their status to those who refrained from it but nevertheless controlled land such as Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas. These three *jatis* were the traditional *ujchajatis* (higher castes) of Bengal.<sup>3</sup>

The dominant caste ideology could also be noticed in its obvious influence on tribal communities which lived at the periphery of the settled *varna* society. A constant interaction between the two cultures transformed both. While the *varna* system in Bengal became less rigid, the tribes also went through a process of *Hinduization* which the pioneer Bengali anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose has described as 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'.<sup>4</sup>

The dominance of Brahmanical religion was further contested by Buddhism and the advent of Islam. With the emergence of certain Buddhist dynasties like the Palas,

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between the eighth and twelfth centuries in Bengal, the Kambojas in northern and eastern Bengal, in the tenth century and Chandras in eastern and southern Bengal, between the tenth and eleventh centuries, Brahmanism was greatly challenged. With the spread of Buddhism in Bengal, the degeneration of the Buddhist monks began to be noticed. Buddhism now came to be associated with Tantricism. This trend, however, had already been started from the time of Lord Buddha. The *Caryapadas* composed during this period, embodied the religious tenets of *Sahajiya* Buddhism, a later day offshoot to Tantric Buddhism. A good number of Tantric scholars of Buddhism and the authors of the *Dohas* and *Caryapadas* flourished during this period.

Due to Tantric influence and the work of the Siddhacharyas, sexuality became a part of religious culture. In his novel *Bener Meye*, Haraprasad Sastri depicted how eleventh century society of Bengal revolved round this *Siddhyacharyas*. In fact, though Buddhism was losing its ground, the Pala rulers tried to maintain a balance between Brahmanism and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> During the twelfth century, Bengal came under the rule of Senas who were followers of Vaishnavism. Consequently, there was a new emphasis on the Vaishnava cult of Radha and Krishna. The immense popularity of the Radha Krishna songs gradually began to influence Buddhist *Sahajiya* thought. This resulted in the birth of a new sect called the Vaishnava Sahajiya<sup>6</sup> which remained an obscure religious cult of Bengal, little known to the upper caste society of the modern age. The Vaishnava-Sahajiya cult was the outcome of the amalgamation of two religious cultures: Buddhist Sahaj-Jnana and Gaudiya Vaishnavism.<sup>7</sup> The *upaya* and *prajna* of Buddhist *Sahajiyas* were transformed into Krishna and Radha, the ultimate state of *mahasukha* or supreme love. Therefore, an important part of this group's *sahaj sadhana* was the religious process of gradually transforming human love into divine or spiritual love.<sup>8</sup>

The next phase of Bengal's social history was highly significant. It was a transition period, while Brahmanical Hinduism increasingly became assertive and dominant in parts of Bengal. Buddhist and native ideas and practices, especially those focusing on cults celebrating the forest goddess, still continued to shape the religious culture of ordinary people. In the midst of this transitional period, Bengal came under the Muslim rule. Initially, Muslim rulers did not set about transforming the society; their principal goal was to consolidate their own political power in a territory which was almost entirely non-Muslim.<sup>9</sup> The new rulers not only posed a serious challenge to the rigours of caste system but also propagated Islam.

As a consequence, people who belonged to the lower stratas of the society, especially the Sahajiyas, embraced Islam. They were considered to be the first *fakirs* of

Bengal. This led to the emergence of Sufis in Bengal.<sup>10</sup> The earliest known Muslim inscriptions in Bengal dealt with the group of immigrant Sufis,<sup>11</sup> who had settled in Bengal and participated in community building activity, including forest clearing and cultivation.<sup>12</sup> However, Richard M. Eaton argues that men who entered the delta not as holy warriors but also as pious mystics or freebooting settlers. From the beginning of Indo-Turkish encounter with Bengal, one section of Muslims sought to integrate into their religious lives elements of esoteric practices of local *yogis*. Contemporary Muslims perceived northern Bengal generally, and specially Kamrup, lying between Brahmaputra River and hills of Bhutan, as a place inhabited by expert practitioners of yoga and of magic. This was noted by Ibn Batuta on his visit to Sylhet. The Sufis too were attracted to the yogic traditions of Kamrup. Within the very first decade of Turkish conquest, there began to circulate in deltaic Bengal, Persian and Arabic translations of a Sanskrit manual on tantric yoga entitled '*Amritkunda*'.

Brahmanical dominance in Bengal was further challenged the Bhakti movement launched by Sri Chaitanya during the sixteenth century. The movement offered an alternative to ritualistic Brahmanical religion, and provided a new egalitarian theological platform. It is to be noted that Bengal was already the home of several esoteric sects comprising the Kapalikas, Abhadhutas and Nath Yogis even before the success of the Bhakti movement.<sup>13</sup>

### **Towards a Syncretic Development: Subalternity and its Syncretic Culture**

The failure of Gaudiya Vaishnava order to incorporate the lower strata of the society subsequently led to popular adaptations of Vaishnavism in the form of syncretic sects.<sup>14</sup> The early radicalism of Gaudiya Vaishnav *sampradaya* was increasingly overshadowed by conservative social forces. It proved more attractive to the upwardly mobile peasant and trading castes, like the Sadgops or Tilis.<sup>15</sup> Gradually, Brahman gurus, threatened by the ever growing number of low caste converts, began to surround themselves with privileges and re-introduced caste differentiation.<sup>16</sup>

While the mainstream Gaudiya Vaishnava order was thus appropriated, the more radical Sahajiya tradition continued to interrogate the ideology of *varnashram dharma* and the rituals of the Vedic Brahmanical religion.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Sudra gurus, most of whom had no link, with the orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava order, attracted lower caste men and women. Thus, the casteless Vaishnavs, the unclean Sudras as well as some tribes joined the Sahajiya cult.

The rise of religious syncretism in Bengal goes back to the *Caryapadas* (eighth-twelfth centuries). Sakti Nath Jha has argued that in the *Caryapadas*, a special language (*sandhya bhasa*) was used to express a particular type of spiritual practice (*sadhana*) centred round the body. In Bengali folk religion and literature, *sandhya bhasa* denotes intentional language or a language bearing multiple meanings. Similar *sadhana* flourished through esoteric *Vajrayana* of Nepal and was expressed in *Carca* songs. Subsequently, traces of this *sadhana* and literary tradition were found in the handwritten manuscripts of the practitioners of *sahaj sadhana*. This poetic language and associated *sadhana* figure in the songs of Lalan and other *sadhaks* of Bengal.

Akshay Kumar Dutta in his book *Bharatbarsiya Upasak Sampraday* connected the esoteric concept of four moons (*Cari candra bheda*) with body oriented sexo-yogic practices. This *sadhana* was conducted in strict secrecy for fear of social reprisals and cloaked by various symbolisms. In Bengal, tracts were written against Bauls, Auls, and similar groups based on their alleged use of such esoteric practices.<sup>18</sup> However, Upendranath Bhattacharya has practically challenged the validity of the older view and has tried to establish the distinctive features of Baul religion.<sup>19</sup>

There were some striking similarities between the creeds of the early Sahajiyas and Bauls, which definitely points to a genealogical connection between them.<sup>20</sup> Without abandoning their native identity, both Hindus and Muslims could join such groups through initiation (*diksa, siksa, bheg or khilafat*) and *sadhu sanga* (seeking company of holy men). Thus, people of various socio-economic and cultural levels of society formed loose organisations centred round the guru.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the Sahajiyas conceived of the Ultimate Reality as *sahaja*, also found in the songs of the Bauls. But the earlier Sahajiya cult, underwent a notable transformation in the hands of the Bauls. The Bauls belonging to the Hindu community were generally Vaishnavite in their faith, and those belonging to Muslim community were generally Sufistic and in both the schools, the emphasis was on the mystic conception of divine love.<sup>22</sup>

Close to the Baul tradition, but somewhere at the borders between two organized religions of Hinduism and Islam, stood the *fakirs*, the most important figure among them in the religious history of Bengal, being Lalan Shah (1774-1890). In the Kustia region, during the early nineteenth century, he had effectively contested the hegemony of orthodox Islam and Hinduism and attracted through his popular songs, the attention of many Hindus and Muslims, irrespective of their social origins. Another *fakir* in east Bengal, known as Sahlal Pir, was more successful in his organized effort to interrogate

the established social hierarchies. He was born sometimes around 1700, in rural east Bengal and did not attach much importance to birth. Among his disciples, some of them remained householders and others became mendicants. Those who were converted and joined the ranks of casteless Vaishnavas came mainly but not exclusively from the lower orders of Hindu society, the unclean Sudra, *antayja* and untouchable castes as well as some tribes. Ramakanta Chakravarti has provided a list of 16 such castes whose main religion was Vaishnavism. They were Bhaiti, Bhuimali Dhoba, Dom, Jalia, Kaivarta, Pod and Namasudras.<sup>23</sup>

### The Pirs and other Popular Cults

Traditional animist, Buddhist and Hindu beliefs and the newly introduced Islamic beliefs (close to Sufism) quite often blended to give birth to a host of popular saints and pirs of a rather hybrid nature. Some were transformed from local godlings, while others were new, semi-historical figures.<sup>24</sup> It seems that the emergence of the semi-historical Aulchand at the end of the seventeenth century was in continuity of the popular tradition of invention of saints with common Hindu and Muslim characteristics that marked Bengali society following Muslim conquest in the thirteenth century. Aulchand's religious creed-originally called 'Satya Dharma' (the religion of truth) emphasized certain common features that characterized contemporary cults and sects. Eventually, it lost its original name and came to be known instead as 'Kartabhaja' (meaning those who worship their master, the 'karta' or the Master—here suggesting the guru).<sup>25</sup>

Around 1756, Aulchand came to Ghoshpara and initiated a Sadgop with landholder Ramsaan Pal and 21 other disciples, who constituted the 22 original followers of the sect or the '*bayish fakir*', as they were known. Eventually, Ramsharan emerged as the 'Pope' of the sect and according to the legends, it was believed that he had acquired miracle working powers of curing diseases and giving life to the dead. But it was under his wife Saraswati Devi, also known as Satima and her son Dulalchand (1775-1832/33) that the sect grew in size and influence. It was Dulalchand who composed songs that encoded the theology of the Kartabhaja movement. The collection of these songs published in 1881 as *Bhaber Geet*, speak in the day to day commercial metaphors of the market-place, trade and transactions. In this work, Gaudiya Vaishnavism is referred to as the 'Big Company', controlled by rich kings and emperors and their greedy managers who exploited the poor porters. It was because of their greed that the Old Company became bankrupt and on its ruins grew up New Company. The metaphors in no uncertain terms draw parallels between religious oppression of the

orthodox school of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and political subjection and economic exploitation penetrated by the East India Company, which were integral to the lived experiences of the Bengali villagers.<sup>26</sup>

The Kartabhajas represented a transformation of the Vaishnava–Sahajiya tradition under the new conditions of British colonialism. The sect emerged at a critical historical moment and geographical location—the area in and around Calcutta at the turn of the nineteenth century, the seat of colonial trade and finance. In Calcutta, the sect attracted the poor labouring classes which had recently migrated to the city from the villages. Like the wandering and minstrels of the Baul tradition, with whom they shared many close ties, the Kartabhajas conveyed their mystical teachings through the medium of music and songs. As Hugh B. Urban argues, it was in the context of nineteenth century Bengal amid the changing politics of early colonial rule and the rise of new indigenous reform movements that the Kartabhajas represented a fairly radical and controversial social order. They opened the possibility of an alternative social field beyond the usual burdens of caste, labour and trade. “What they offer...” as Partha Chatterjee comments, “...(was) a congregational space defined outside the boundaries of the dominant religious life, outside caste, society and injunctions of the Shariah.”<sup>27</sup>

The establishment of the British colonialism exposed the Indian ‘little tradition’ to another religion—Christianity. In keeping with the tradition of acculturation in their religious beliefs and habits, some of the old Bengali syncretic sects often adopted and adapted the new practices introduced by the Christian missionaries. Thus, the Kartabhaja sect followed a set of 10 rules and fixed every Friday for a confession session by its members, reminiscent of the Biblical Ten Commandments and the Catholic practice of confession respectively. These syncretic religious sects occupy a special position in the history of Bengali popular religion creating a sub-caste of their own.<sup>28</sup>

However the eclectic Kartabhaja theology could not satisfy the more radical Sahajiyas. Some of the dissidents from this group, therefore formed a number of deviant orders, one of which was Sahedhani sect that developed in Nadia district in the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Like other minor sects, it too offered an eclectic epistemology constructed through the selective appropriation of aspects of Sufism, Sahajiya Vaishnavism and Christianity. In contrast to this, the Balahadi sect positioned itself more directly not just against Vedic Puranic orthodox Hinduism and its *varnashram dharma*, but also against the concepts of *parakiya* love. The sect derived its name from its initiator, Balaram Hadi, who was born around 1780 into the untouchable Hadi or scavenger caste from

Meherpur in Nadia.<sup>30</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty gives a list of 12 of his disciples all of whom were from low caste Muchis, Namasudras, Jugis, Hadis, Mahishyas and Muslims. The cult had three women followers described as ‘earning their livelihood by begging. Unlike the Sahajiya Vaishnava sects, the Balaramis did not have a guru disciple structure in their order.

However, Partha Chatterjee in his article “Caste & Subaltern Consciousness” has taken his gaze away from the educated leaders of the depressed classes, focusing instead on the consciousness of the people at the grassroot level. However, he also acknowledges the triviality or marginality of such insubordination which ultimately failed to affect or alter the system.<sup>31</sup>

The elasticity of Hinduism permitted its votaries to adore *pir* cults like *Satya Pir* (Hinduized as Satya Narayan) and Manik Pir, the god of cows<sup>32</sup> The emergence of *Satya Pir* during the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century was equally significant in the development of religious harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. Literature on this cult emerged with regularity in late sixteenth century following the first known works of Phakir Rama, Ghanaram Chakravarty and Rameswara.<sup>33</sup> These literary texts written in praise of Satya Pir portrayed a folk society innocent of hardened communal boundaries. In 1664, the poet Sankarcharya identified Satya Pir as the son of one of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah’s daughter and hence a Muslim.<sup>34</sup>

Sumanta Banerjee, however, argues that Sultan Alauddin and his successors encouraged the growth of an eclectic culture based on traditional indigenous religious beliefs and rituals as well as the lately arrived Islamic ideas and legends. Moreover, this was the period when translations of Sanskrit Epics into Bengali and the recording of floating popular legends and folklore in the form of manuscripts by Bengali poets were patronized by the court of the Sultans of Bengal. It was in this social background that one should try to locate the birth of Satyanarayan and Satyapir cults.<sup>35</sup> Richard M. Eaton gives a different observation. According to him, the emergence of the cult coincided chronologically with the growth of agrarian communities focussed on the tiny thatched mosques and shrines that proliferated throughout eastern Bengal.<sup>36</sup> The innovation of Satya Pir can also be seen as a manifestation of a consistent popular craving for a divine protector and benefactor. In the oral narratives, Satyapir, thus, helped the poor (Brahmans) to become rich and protected the enterprizers (the merchants) from adversities.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of *Satya Pir* during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century was equally significant in the development of religious harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. Literary texts written

in praise of Satya Pir portrayed a folk society innocent of hardened communal boundaries.

The cult of Manik Pir had also been very popular both among the Hindus and Muslims. His devotees belonged to all classes of the rural society, but the subalterns were by far the most numerous. In terms of their religious affiliation, they were mostly Hindus, only few were Muslims. The majority of the Hindus belonged to the 'untouchable' *jatis*. Manik Pir was also considered as the protector of cows. Dinesh Chandra Sen is of the opinion that the reason behind the extraordinary respect paid to Manik *pir* by the rural agricultural Hindus, who were worshippers of cows, may be based upon the healing power that he possessed in regard to the diseases of their sacred animals. P.K. Maity observed that a large number of devotees (98 per cent of whom were Hindus) gathered for *puja* of the *pir*, at the dargah of Manik Pir in Tamluk (locally known as *Manik Pirer than*). Generating from multiple streams, disparate voices and overlapping textures, the domain of Manik Pir seek to impose a particular religious habitus on popular Hinduism and challenge Christian evangelism.<sup>38</sup>

#### Deities Appear as Saviours

In contrast to the religious ideology of Kartabhaja, Balahadis and Matua, there existed in many parts of Bengal, where low caste people were becoming priests of Manasa, Candi, Siva and Dharmathakur. But at the same time the upper castes were also very much enthusiastic in the religious life of the 'marginalized' people. They had a belief that in times of distress these deities would appear as saviour. Sometimes the goddess, in order to establish her worship, among the people, instructed her followers to establish her as a recognized deity, and then, she would protect them from their distress and helplessness<sup>39</sup> which had been reflected in the narratives of the *Mangal kavayas*. Banbibbi or Dakshin Ray in the Sunderban delta, were still worshipped by the local people for protection from tigers which invade their villages. All over Bengal, Sitala, a goddess not to be found in any of doctrinal Hindu religious scriptures, continued to be worshipped by devotees, seeking protection from small pox.

Popular logic had created new deities in response to problems and crisis under British colonial rule. When cholera broke out for the first time in Bengal in 1817, the rural community invented and added Ola Bibi, the goddess of cholera to their divinities.<sup>40</sup> Cholera, as it had been said, was the 'classic epidemic' disease of the nineteenth century. David Arnold argues that the disease bore distinctive imprint of popular Hinduism. Cholera by contrast had not been extensively ritualized by the early nineteenth century. There was no equivalent technique of inoculation for which to invoke a goddess's blessings. Perhaps most significantly, cholera though certainly

present, appeared not to have been as widespread and as destructive as it became after 1817. Only in deltaic Bengal, the homeland of cholera, the worship of a specific deity of Ola Bibi called by the Muslims and Olai Candi by the Hindus became popular.

Before 1817, this goddess enjoyed far less popular devotion than Sitala, but she was thereafter extensively propitiated when cholera was most prevalent. The common response was to represent cholera as a new manifestation of the powers of an existing deity like Mariamman, Kali or Candi or as an entirely new deity known only by some descriptive titles as *jari mari* (sudden sickness) or *Kali mari* (black death). Belief in disease goddess gave rise to two related responses, one was the dressing up of a woman, often a young girl, to represent the goddess and the use of mediums to voice the goddess's anger and demands. Both acted as vital channels of communication between the deity and villages.<sup>41</sup>

Ola Bibi is not to be considered the Islamic version of a Hindu goddess. The goddess is the embodiment of indigenous concepts of health and protection. The simultaneous presence of Hindu and Islamic cultural elements in the narratives of the cholera goddess (Ola Bibi is an *avatar* of Vishnu and her pilgrimage is to Mecca) are unproblematic to Bengalis. There is no inter-community antagonism in the myths and ritual practice of the cholera goddess. However, the reasons for her sudden popularity at the time of the consolidation of colonial power in Bengal, is quite unclear. Bengali Muslims living around the Ganges delta were threatened by the disease just as the Hindus and the British were. The study of Ola Bibi, worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims, proves helpful for understanding the dynamics of negotiating health in subaltern contexts.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding the worship of the deities like Manasa, Sitala, Candi, Dharmathakur, Siva and others there developed a local tradition of festivals through various customs and rituals and later become part of popular culture in the villages of Bengal. In this respect, a mention may be made of some of the popular beliefs such as worship of godlings of disease and local saints etc which did not conform to any particular religions of the Hindus and Muslims alike.<sup>43</sup>

The Hindu *Raymangal* literature depicts the conflict between Dakshin Ray, a local Hindu chief and Ghazi assisted by Kalu, over the control of the active deltaic region of southern Bengal. It is significant that both Dakshin Ray and Ghazi were in their respective traditions, credited with command over tigers and crocodiles.<sup>44</sup> The result was a stalemate, which was resolved through the mediation of a personage who was half Krishna and half Prophet Muhammad.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the cults of Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray were intimately tied to each other and to the environment where they evolved. *Dakshin Ray* was the protagonist of Hindu ways of life while *Bon Bibi* epitomizes the natural wilderness of the region and the expansion of Islamic faith among the non-farming folks of this region. According to Sukumar Sen, *Bon Bibi* was the Islamized concept of *Mangal Candi* or *Bon Durga* although the cult had a prior existence since the early medieval times.<sup>46</sup> Another deity of significance in forested area of Sunderbans is the Banbibi–Narayani deity complex. It ensured security for a large number of people belonging to the unclean caste Hindus as well as Muslims. The Muslims preferred the term Banbibi for this mother deity and the Hindus sought refuge in Narayani who is but another manifestation of some Mother-deity.<sup>47</sup>

Even some versions of the Manasa legends dealt with the conflict with the new Muslim rulers, referred to jointly in the Bengali text as Hassan – Hossein. The conflict was of epic dimension and ended in the comprehensive destruction of the Muslim forces and the surrender of their king, Hasan. Peace was thus restored, the dead were revived and they all became Manasa's votaries. This episode is historically significant as it deals with an early literary account of the role of Muslims in expanding agriculture in Bengal.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, this paper tries to present a new version of Bengal's social history, by arguing that the *jati* order in Bengal was far from being a rigidly reified structure but one which had room for spatial and social mobility. The key features of the study have been the subaltern denizens of rural Bengal, who in their emotional world remained torn between Tantric Hinduism, Tantric Buddhism, various local brands of Saktism and local folk traditions. The point of argument lies in the fact that though being distant from the world of the social elites caught within the boundaries of institutionalized Hinduism defined in terms of strict Brahmanical in junctions, did over time find an opportunity to be assimilated and incorporated within the hierarchical social system of Bengal.

Brahmanical culture was forced to come to terms with the little tradition through the recognition and adoption of local Bengali language. However, the cultural monopoly of the Sanskritists had already been undermined in pre-Islamic Bengal by the Mahayana Buddhist *siddha* writers, critical of Brahmanical ritualism, formalism, pedantry and pride of birth. The Buddhist *siddhacharyas* set in motion a process which was carried farther, on the one hand, by the patronage to Bengali literature by the sultans and, on

the other, by the authors of *mangalkavyas*, glorifying their respective deities.

The minor religious sects were seriously interrogating the hegemony of the Brahmanical dharma, particularly its hierarchical ethos. However, despite sustained protest, the hegemony of the Brahmanical religion or legitimacy of the *varnashramadharma* could not be effectively subverted. It can be stated that an important aspect of the social and cultural history of Bengal is that this phenomenon of continual contestation toned down the nature of domination of Brahmanism and reduced the intensity of the oppressive features of the caste system. The subordinate groups at the bottom accepted it as it also provided a space for their existence. In this context it is necessary to recall M.N. Srinivas's analysis of the ritual idioms of Coorg and the dynamics between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic Hinduism.

Furthermore, this paper has tried to present a counter argument to the dominant intellectual version on Islamization of rural Bengal conditioned through the growth of Sufi saints, institutionalization of the dargahs of pioneering *faqirs* and militant Muslim saints identified with the ghazi tradition. This may be seen in the context the Hindu Bengali society which gave birth to its cultural mediators entrusted with the task of bringing their great and little traditions closer.<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

1. Dipesh Chakraborty, "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 9, (Feb 28- March 6 1998) pp. 473-479.
2. For details see, Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony, Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004.
3. Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste Culture and Hegemony*, *op. cit.* pp. 17-22.
4. Nirmal Kumar Bose, 'The Hindu method of Tribal Absorption', *Science and Culture*, Vol. 8, 1941, pp. 188-98.
5. Sri Satindra Mohan Chattopadhyay, *Banglar Samajik Ithihaser Bhumika* (in Bengali), *op. cit.* pp. 29-31.
6. Rajeshwari Datta, "Religious Aspect of Baul Songs of Bengal", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3, May 1978, pp. 445-455.
7. Paritosh Das, *Sahajiya Cult of Bengal and the Pancha Sakha cult of Orissa*, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1988, pp. 1-2.
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9. Rafiuddin Ahmed (ed.) *Understanding the Bengali Muslims Interpretative Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 11-12.
10. Rajeshwari Datta, "Religious Aspect of Baul Songs of Bengal", *op. cit.* pp. 445-455.

11. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam & the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
12. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Understanding the Bengali Muslims, Interpretative Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 12.
13. Ramakanta Chakraborty, *Vaishnavism in Bengal 1486-1900*, Calcutta, Sanskrit, Pustak Bhandar, 1985, pp. 28-30, 76-78, 275- 276, 285-286.
14. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, op. cit. p. 165
15. See for details Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Papyrus, Calcutta 1981, and Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, "Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal" Occasional Paper, No 76, *Centre for Studies in Social Sciences*, Calcutta 1985.
16. Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, op. cit. pp. 321-22, 333.
17. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, op. cit. pp. 51-53, 166.
18. Saktinath Jha, "Cari Candra Bhed ; Use of the Four Moons," in Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.) *Mind , Body & Society: Life & Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 65-102
19. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, op. cit. pp. 160-161
20. The songs and *Dohas* of the earlier Sahajiyas, are characterized by a spirit of heterodoxy which is likewise a feature of the songs of the bauls. See Ramakanta Chakraborty, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, op. cit. p. 351
21. Rajat Kanta Ray, *Mind , Body & Society : Life & Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, op. cit. pp. 65-102
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