AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO THE SECOND IMPRESSION

I

Only a fortunate few can look back on their first academic effort with comfortable self-assurance. The present writer is not one of them. Re-reading something one wrote fifteen years ago,—when one’s equipment was even poorer than it is now,—can be a highly embarrassing experience. Having gone through it, I felt less than enthusiastic about having this volume reprinted. I repressed these probably sensible hesitations mainly for one reason.

The material brought together in this volume has been collected and arranged on the basis of a single criterion, viz., commonsense or the lack of it. A fresh look at the same data in terms of the methods and approaches of social anthropology can provide new insights into the nature of mediaeval Bengali society and its processes of change. Hence the decision to reprint this volume and this somewhat lengthy prefatory exercise in method, which explores certain implications of the data not brought out in the text.

Let me begin with a negative statement. The sub-title to this volume is misleading. As it now stands, the book is not a “study in social history”, introductory or otherwise, though it contains a fair amount of material which is the stuff of social history. The mistaken description is linked to an incorrect definition,—the one quoted from Trevelyan in the introduction to the volume,—which inflates the scope of the subject to include all history, with politics not quite left out. If the scope of social history is as wide as the activity of man in society,—and that without any clarity of focus,—then there is hardly any point in using the qualifying adjective.

Social historians,—some consciously, others less so,—have
moved away from such omnibus definitions, but as yet there is no clearly articulated consensus as to the limits and legitimate contents of the subject. For the purposes of the present note, I shall accept the following definition: “investigation of historical communities by the methods of social anthropology or sociology,”

particularly the former, because it has greater relevance to the study of such pre-industrial and relatively small scale communities as are the subject matter of this volume. Like most definitions of wide-ranging subjects, this one is of course somewhat arbitrary. Its major advantage consists in the fact that social anthropology, unlike ‘orthodox’ social history, has a clearly defined focus and method for the study of societies. If it has not discovered ‘laws’, the mass of ethnographic data collected by social anthropologists in pursuit of theoretically defined research aims has revealed striking regularities in human institutions and in the institutionalised response of groups and individuals to similar situations. We have here an empirically tested framework of reference which is a better guide than purely subjective intuition in deciding what to look for and how to inter-relate one’s findings in the study of man’s social past. Further, one is made aware of dimensions,—of implications of actions and institutions,—which are by no means obvious from the data.

In terms of our definition, social history is a study of different kinds of institutionalised relationships, i.e., relatively enduring features of human associations, in the past ages and their experience of change over time. The ideas, values and expectations associated with the institutions are also within its legitimate scope. Our problem of definition does not, however, end here. If social history is a study of relationships, what is the relevant unit of reference? Whose relationships and what relationships are one to study? The answers to these

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1 See John Beattie, *Other Cultures—Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964; Paperback edition, 1966). 14. The words quoted are not meant by the author to be a definition of social history. I have used them as such for reasons explained below.

2 J. Beattie, *op. cit.*, Ch. I
questions remain somewhat imprecise. In an isolated small-scale community, the unit to be investigated is physically distinct. Only the systems of social relationships binding the members of the community together in a variety of mutual bonds are not physical entities, but constructs which the observer has to build up. The unit of reference in a more complex and spread-out community,—like the mediaeval Bengali society,—cannot be physically identified with the same ease. We may at best identify this society with the people living in the geographical territory of Bengal and speaking for generations the Bengali language; but such a definition has obvious loopholes.

The question as to what relationships do we explore is somewhat easier to answer. The nature of human associations differs according to the nature of particular activities so that we have so many "social fields" within each of which the individual members of a society are bound together in a particular web of relationships. The pattern of relationships in one "field", say, the economic, modulates the pattern in others, so that at one level what is to be studied is the relationship between the relationships. "All the relations of all kinds... are thought of as a network in which people are the knots or points, and relationships, of whatever kind, are the threads or lines". Our subject-matter, then, is the arrangements subsisting in the various areas of social life,—at a point of time as also over time,—the mutual connections between these arrangements as also the ends which particular institutions and arrangements serve in a given context. These ends may be the same as the ostensible objective in view or something very different and unsuspected. There is no way yet of ensuring, however, that our account covers the entire social system, for

1. For a discussion of this question, see A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Structure and Function in Primitive Society—Essays and Addresses (Cohen and West, London, 6th Impress ion, 1965) Ch. X.

2. Robert Redfield, Peasant Society and Culture—An Anthropological Approach to Civilisation (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956), Ch. II.

what ‘aspects’ of society together constitute the totality remains an unsolved problem. The best one can hope to do is to cover various aspects of social life in their interrelations,—without hoping to exhaust the range of possibilities.

The above elementary discourse in social anthropology has a limited purpose, viz., to indicate the lines along which an investigation into and rearrangement of the data presented in the text are suggested below in this note. The broad approach outlined above can provide insights which are by no means mere jargonised banalities; and this, despite the severe limitations of source material. One fact, however, should be borne in mind. Interrelations, which have often to be guessed from raw data, cannot be ‘proved’ in the same way as the occurrence of a particular event can be. The difficulty is all the greater where the relevant material is scanty. We have at best circumstantial evidence suggesting a possibility, strong where the data are plentiful, weak elsewhere.

II

For reconstructing the picture of the Bengali society in the early days of the Mughal rule, the data available are unsatisfactory at two levels. The information regarding most aspects of social life,—the family and kinship systems, social stratification, political organisation, beliefs and rituals etc.,—is extremely inadequate, though not uniformly so. It is as if only a few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle have accidentally survived. Carefully pieced together, they suggest at best a faint broken silhouette, with one limb here, another there, coming out in clear detail.

The second difficulty is in a way even more serious. The data have a limited focus, covering in any depth only small segments of the total population. The central figure in the indigenous literary and religious texts,—our chief source of information,—is the Brahminal Hindu, a person belonging to some upper stratum of the caste society, his world view and life style determined by Puranic mythology, commonplaces of the Indian philosophic tradition and the regulations embodied in the Smriti literature,—the eighteen tattvas of Raghunandana in particular. If he shares with men of lower ritual status belief in magic and the occult powers which are not parts of the
Brahminical "Great Tradition", such beliefs and the associated rituals had already achieved apotheosis in the works of Raghunandana himself. Within the main focus of our source material are also included the various sects partly in revolt against the world view and rigid regulations of the 'traditional' way of life. We see them in our period in the process of reabsorption into the orthodox caste order and the life-style of the upper caste Hindu, though the beginnings of a fresh departure from the anti-orgiastic tendencies of Brahminical orthodoxy is already there.

The picture grows increasingly hazy as one moves from the centre of the focus towards the periphery where the mass of agriculturists, artisans, village servants, tribal people, slaves etc. appear briefly as sketchy, shadowy figures, despite some supplementary information provided by the Persian chronicles and the non-indigenous sources. There is some clarity as to the economic function of these groups—"peripheral" from the point of view of our sources. Perhaps the available descriptions of their life-habits and standard of living are also authentic enough in matters of detail. But when punctilious observance of Brahminical rituals and concern for caste values are attributed to semi-nomadic hunters, the credibility of our information has to be questioned. Even our knowledge of political organization does not go below the levels of the village headmen,—a statement which no longer applies to other parts of medieval India.\(^1\) Hence our knowledge of medieval Bengali society is confined, by and large, to the genteel

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\(^1\) A substantial body of literature concerning the agrarian system of medieval India has been published in recent years. Even where their central theme is the economic relationship, they provide a fairly clear picture of the political and administrative organization at the village level. The village level organization in mediaeval Bengal is, however, by and large excluded from the scope of these works. See Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Asia Publishing House, 1963); B.R. Grover, "Nature of Land Rights in Mughal India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. I, No. 1, "Nature of Dehat-i-Taaluqa (Zamindari villages) and the evolution of the Taaluqdar System during the Mughal Age", *ibid*, Vol. II, Nos. 2 and 3, S. Nurul Hasan, "The Position of the Zamindars in the Mughal Empire," *ibid*, Vol. I, No. 4, N.A. Siddiqi, "The classification of villages under the Mughals." *ibid*, Vol. I, No. 3.
upper strata,—‘upper’ in terms of power, wealth or ritual status. The masses come authentically into the picture only so far as certain limited aspects of their lives are concerned.

The social life of the Muslims in Bengal has been discussed in this volume mainly on the basis of references in the writings of ‘outsiders’, except for the works of the court poets of Arakan. Such writings tell us very little about the structure of the Bengali Muslim society. Dr. Abdul Karim’s pioneer work on the Muslims in Mediaeval Bengal,¹ despite its great value for religious and cultural history, has not added substantially to our knowledge of social structure, evidently because the relevant data are not available.

III

Marriage, family and kinship systems, as also the norms and ideas associated with them, show a remarkable continuity in Bengali society. The somewhat sketchy picture which emerges from our sources would still be valid in many essential details for the rural or even urban social groups.

The extreme emphasis on kula² or the right family in the

¹ Abdul Karim, Social History of the Muslims of Bengal (down to 1538) (Dacca, 1959).
² Bengali literature of the period is replete with references to the importance of marrying one’s daughter into the right Kula. See, for instance, Chandimangala, 14: “akuline dile sutu, sahá mājhe hent māthā . . . baḍa punye pūt kulajān! . . . mili yata vandujan, dasdike deha man, yathā pāo amalim kul!” (Translation. “If I give my daughter to anyone but a Kulin, I shall be humiliated, . . . it is only as a result of great meritorious acts that one may find (as a son-in-law) a person from a good family (Kula), . . . Let all friends look around in every direction for a family free from blemish.”)

As indicated above, this introductory note is not based on any fresh research, but is mainly an attempt to reinterpret the data presented in the text. However, on re-reading some of the source material, I felt that I had missed the implication of some significant data. The references to the sources in these foot-notes are mainly confined to two texts, the Chandimangala and Raghunandana’s Ashtavimsati-tattvani (hereafter referred to as Chandi and Raghu respectively). As should be evident from the notes at the end of the chapters, the information derived from these two texts are repeated copiously in other Bengali literary works. Since the purpose of this note is mainly to illustrate the possibilities of a particular line of investigation, the references in the foot-notes to the other literary works have been kept to a minimum.
selection of the bridegroom must have been linked to the usual practice of endogamy within the subcaste and exogamy in relation to one's gotra, i.e., line of descent from some eponymous ancestor. In so far as marriage was a factor in inter-group cohesion, the most important unit of reference was not the gotra but the kula or the extended family, though the formal rules regarding endogamy and exogamy referred to the gotra and not the kula.\footnote{Raghu, Udvahatattvam, 463.} Besides, the choice of the right kula for matrimonial relationship involved an element of discretion based on complex and somewhat imprecise criteria while the range of choice as to the gotra one could marry into was clearly defined. For all practical purposes, other than matrimony, however, one's membership of a gotra was notional, while every person was a member of an extended family in a very real sense. Since, however, the kula was a part of gotra the system of marriage also entailed a relationship between widely scattered though not very cohesive social groups. In theory, all members of one's own gotra were one's kins and, for men, all members of the gotra one married into were one's affines.

The status ranking of a kula was based primarily on ritual considerations, i.e., its relative perfection in terms of the conduct expected of its caste, and of orthodox Hindus generally, but purely secular criteria like social prestige in the eyes of the local political authority or correct professional behaviour were also important determinants.\footnote{Chandi, 145, 221. See infra 64f, for a more detailed discussion of this question.} ‘Loss of face' in the public eye, whatever the occasion, could be a serious negative factor. The norms concerning status ranking and right conduct were expressed as also reinforced by the emphasis on the ideal marital alliance. The important fact was that the relevant virtues and failings did not refer merely or even mainly to the bridegroom, but to the entire extended family. The social prestige from a desirable alliance similarly accrued to the bride's family, though particularly to the bride's father. The aspect of sanction, i.e. social opprobrium or loss of face in case the bridegroom came from the wrong kula, was probably a
stronger influence on conduct than any positive status dividend from a correct alliance.

One fact, however, needs to be emphasized. The anxiety to secure marital relationship with the right kula appears to have been far greater when one was marrying off one's daughter than in connection with one's son's marriage. In fact, one hardly comes across any reference to kula in the latter context. In extolling the eligibility of a prospective bride, it is her physical beauty which is mainly emphasized.1 This asymmetrical pattern fits in with the difference in attitude towards the sex morals of men and women. The caste regulations and values were evidently flexible enough to accommodate up to a point natural male preferences in matters of marriage, but far less so with regard to women's likes and dislikes.2

So far as one can see, for most social groups, the modal pattern of marital behaviour was monogamous, though there was no moral disapproval of polygyny. To be married to a polygynous husband was, however, recognized as a serious misfortune for a girl, though the possibility of friendly relations between co-wives was not altogether precluded.3 Typically, a polygynous marriage was considered desirable from the viewpoint of the bride's family, if the bridegroom happened to be from a particularly desirable kula, a fact largely responsible for the proliferation of kulin polygyny.4 Polygyny, formal and informal, also appears to have been common among the classes wielding political authority. The only disapproval associated with this practice was functional in origin and referred exclusively to neglect of 'kingly' duties through preoccupation with pleasure.5 Though the relevant data are very scanty, it seems that polygyny was fairly common among the richer

1 Chandi, 142: The merchant Dhanapati is portrayed as wanting to marry Khullana, because of her great beauty, without any initial query as to the desirability of the alliance from the view-point of caste values.
2 Ibid, 144-145: Khullana's mother is described as being very upset at the prospect of her daughter being given in marriage to a bigamous husband. The father, more concerned with considerations of Kula, brushes aside the objection ostensibly on astrological grounds.
3 Ibid, 145, 163; infra, 215.
4 Ibid, 139.
5 Ibid, 61.
Muslims, and it is not even clear that marriage to a polygynous husband was considered a misfortune for a Muslim girl. The Muslim merchants’ separate establishments complete with wives in their several places of business mentioned by Schouten do not appear to have had any counterpart in Hindu society.\(^1\)

However, the Hindu attitude to sex, as revealed in the contemporary literature, indicates no puritanical preferences, though the orgiastic practices of the Tantric kulcharins were no doubt repugnant to many an ordinary householder and held in abhorrence by the Vaishnavas in particular.\(^2\) There was no special secrecy about the facts of sex: the panchalis replete with references to or descriptions of the act of sex were sung in public, presumably before mixed audiences of men, women and children.\(^3\) There is no apotheosis of abstinence or self-denial in the literature of the period. In a society not too rich in material amenities, enjoyment of life mainly meant dietary variation and pleasures of sex. There is a certain preoccupation with both in our literary sources. Marriage was not conceived,—as in the best sastric tradition,—primarily as a samskara, a necessary part of the householder’s dharma, the means towards the end of repaying one’s debt to one’s ancestors. The sastric preoccupation with continence is clearly articulated only in Raghunandana’s smriti. A man cohabiting only on the ritually prescribed days is described there in approving terms as one who is like a brahmacharin, a celibate.\(^4\) Continence, as a norm, however, does not figure anywhere in contemporary Bengali literature. On the contrary our authors evidently delight in the description of physical love in all their accounts of marital life.\(^5\) Women in particular are depicted as full of anxious concern for the fulfilment of this aspect of marriage. Hence the worries of the ageing wife and hence the abhorrence of polygyny. This image of marriage and womanhood was

\(^1\) *Infra*, 231.


\(^4\) *Raghu*, Ahnikatattvam, daropagamanavidhi, 166.

not even at variance with the prevailing system of values which was at most neutral in relation to it.

In terms of practice, this attitude to sex implied a certain tolerance of masculine self-indulgence. The wife evidently lived in the fear of the husband developing extra-marital interests or contracting a second marriage.\(^1\) Neither act was socially condemned unless it involved the violation of any ritual taboo. To stabilise the husband's affections was a major purpose of the elaborate paraphernalia of charms and magical objects,—\(^2\) a psychological defence mechanism for women in a situation of continual insecurity. To the woman, the image of the good life consisted in the monogamous family free from all possible rivals in her sexual life. Deviations from this pattern were psychologically unacceptable to her, though not morally condemnable.

As indicated above, in a male-dominated society, the attitude to sexual morality was not symmetrical for men and women. The institution of child marriage may have served several functions in the Indian social context and was no doubt linked to the system of beliefs regarding the householder's dharma and the duty to one's manes. Its links with the prevailing norms of sexual morality for women were, however, clearly recognised.\(^3\) To leave one's husband's home, however intolerable the conditions, was the ultimate of social disgrace.\(^4\) Widowhood entailed total celibacy and as such was recognised as an intolerable curse. Women had to be particularly careful to maintain a reputation for absolute chastity. Suspicion could be provoked by the flimsiest circumstances. If the chastity of a married woman ever became suspect, the ritual status of her husband's family suffered seriously and fellow caste men would exclude it from the circle of commensality and, presumably, connubium. The onus of removing the suspicion was on the

\(^1\) Chandi, 76-77f.
\(^2\) Infra, 173: Chandi, 151.
\(^3\) Chandi, 143: "nar dekhī abhirām, yadi kanya kare kām, pāy pītā narak-yantranāl" (Translation: "If the (unmarried) daughter feels the stirrings of desire on seeing a handsome man, the father will suffer in hell").
\(^4\) Ibid., 79.
woman and the relevant actions might have actually included going through such ordeals as are described in the contemporary literature.\(^1\) The infiltration of Tantric orgiastic practices into genteel households and the relative flexibility of sexual norms among sects like the sahajiyas may have modified these norms and practices, but one does not know to what extent.\(^2\)

The norms of relationship between husband and wife differed significantly from the patterns of expectations and actual behaviour. Ideally, the husband was an incarnation of Narayana, the most coveted "ornament" for women, above all criticism. The wife who burnt herself on the husband's funeral pyre brought glory to her father's family as well as to the family she had married into.\(^3\) The pattern of expectation reflected in the literary conventions and the magical rituals associated with marriage do not, however, fit in with such values. The charms were meant to 'domesticate' the husband, who, ideally, should remain silent like a dead cow's head when the wife abused him.\(^4\) In short, the husband's subjection to his wife was sought to be as complete as possible. The asymmetrical norms of sexual morality for men and women and male domination of society were apparently sought to be compensated by the resort to magical formulas, an action expressing the women's keenness to contain their menfolk's extra-marital or polygynous proclivities not condemned by society and to ensure domestic harmony on their own terms. \(^*\) Sastric injunctions notwithstanding, wives were pictured as estimating the worth of their husbands in terms of their ability as providers and bed-companions.\(^5\) In domestic life, male domination surely had not reached a point where the husband could take his wife for granted. A man going to take a second wife is depicted as anxious to soothe his first wife's feelings; a husband too poor

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1. Ibid, 221, 224.
2. Infra, 157; Sarvollasatantra, D.C. Bhattacharya's Introduction, 23.
4. Supra, p. 10, f. n. 2.
5. One of the set pieces in the panchalis is the "Nārīgāner pāti-nindā" ("The Wives Malign Their Husbands") wherein the women of the neighbourhood contrast their husbands' various failings with the hero's manifold excellence. One comes across a mild admonition for such 'unvirtuous' conduct only very rarely. See Chandi, 31.
to provide for the family puts up with his wife’s stream of abuses.¹

The institution of “second marriage” celebrated on the occasion of the child-wife attaining puberty continued in our period. Its functional significance,—viz. postponement of sexual relationship until the bride’s childhood was over,—appears to have receded into the background. The literary conventions of the period, depicting consummation immediately after marriage, and, specifically, before the pushpotsava, celebrating a girl’s attainment of puberty, suggest no awareness of the need for such postponement.² In contrast, while girl-children were betrothed in the Muslim society at a very early age, the actual marriage and consummation did not take place until they had attained the age of puberty.³ The probable abandonment of a biologically healthy practice by the upper caste Hindus may perhaps be explained with reference to the norms which required absolute chastity of women without imposing any corresponding restrictions on men.

As already noted, the institution of marriage in mediaeval Bengal had reference to a social context much wider than that of the immediate family and was evidently an instrument of inter-group cohesion. In many societies, this aspect of cohesion is often reflected in the relationship with the in-laws who belong to a different group and as such are strangers with whom there are potentialities of hostility. Cohesion may be achieved by over-compensating this potentiality with excessive deference on part of the son-in-law and similarly institutionalised consideration shown by the father-in-law. Mediaeval Bengali literature is full of references to this institutionalised relationship and to extreme sensitiveness to breach of form in this regard.⁴ The potentiality of hostility is clearly recognised.⁵ The mother-in-law with whom the son-in-law had a typical

¹ Chandī, 147, 37-38.
² Ibid., 213: The child bride, Khullana, is described as having attained her puberty after she had been cohabiting for four months.
³ Infra, 230.
⁴ Chandī, 13: “Svasur yeman tāta” (Translation: “One’s father-in-law is like one’s father”) Also 144.
⁵ Ibid., 13: “Jāmātā svasure dvanda āchhe chirakāl” (Translation: “There is always a conflict between the father-in-law and the son-in-law.”)
avoidance relationship, went through symbolic propitiatory gestures like pouring 
\textit{dadhi} (yoghurt) on the bridegroom’s feet on the wedding day. The potential inter-group hostility which the 
marital relationship was expected to eliminate was further symbolically expressed in mock-fights between the bridegroom’s 
party and the bride’s family which could take a serious turn.\textsuperscript{1} Joking relationship with the in-laws of one’s own generation 
helped modify the negative potentialities. The maintenance of 
certain forms including excessive attention and symbolically 
deferential acts was however always expected from the affines. 
Denial of such treatment to a man betokened his utter 
worthlessness in the eyes of society.\textsuperscript{2}

The typical family unit we encounter in the contemporary 
literature is a relatively small one consisting of husband, wife 
and children, at times, the old parents who are usually 
pictured as living in the grown up son’s home as respected 
guests rather than as the heads of the household.\textsuperscript{3} The son’s 
filial duty of looking after the aged parents was considered 
socially obligatory, but deviations from this norm were 
apparently not unknown.\textsuperscript{4} In the ‘ideal’ family the daughter-in-law was an object of affection to the mother-in-law, but the 
familiar figure of the Bengali housewife pestered by the 
husband’s mother and sister is by no means absent from the 
contemporary literature.

The birth of a son who would inherit status and property was 
a cherished object of family life and a man might go in for a 
second marriage if the first failed to fulfil this wish.\textsuperscript{5} The birth of 
a daughter was, however, not considered a curse as in a later

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Ibid.}, 152.
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, 3: “\textit{lakshmi-chhāḍā purush kutumba-bāḍi yāy, thākuk āsan-jal 
sambhāsh nā pāy !}” (Translation: “When a worthless man goes to his in-
laws’ house, he is not even greeted and, of course, not offered any seat or water.”) Also see Dharmamangala, 56, 68 for joking relationship with 
in-laws of one’s own generation.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Infra}, 216. For an instance of a joint-family and of tension 
among its members, see Ruparama’s autobiographical sketch, Dharmamangala, 18.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Chandi}, 144: “\textit{Karjanār Hari Dān, nāhi poshe bāpmā, prabhāte nā kari 
tār nām !}” (Translation: “Hari Dan of Karjana does not provide for 
his parents. We do not take his name in the morning.”)
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, 53.
period, partly because the institution of bride-money,\textsuperscript{1}—though increasingly considered not altogether laudable,—had not yet been replaced by the system of dowry. The daughter, however, was a source of anxiety, because she had to be married off by a certain age. Once married, she belonged to a different social group and hence the parents’ relations with her were modulated by the institutionalised relationships characteristic of inter-group contacts. There was at least some inhibition about her going uninvited to the parents’ house on a social occasion.\textsuperscript{2} The mother’s attitude to the daughter was marked by a very special attachment, natural in an age when the child bride had to leave the parental home. There was, however, a material source of conflict in the preferential treatment of the son,—especially in matters of inheritance. Such conflict was often aggravated by the custom of giving dowry,—in cash or in land,—to the son-in-law which could rouse expectations and create bitterness.\textsuperscript{3} Such conflicts are portrayed as having been particularly acute in uxorilocal households,—where the husband came to stay in the wife’s parental home,—an institution permitted but looked down upon according to the prevalent social norms.\textsuperscript{4}

A striking feature of the social values of the period consisted in the great importance attached to the kinship group, to which every individual had to show due deference. The correctness of one’s conduct, in terms of ritual requirements and otherwise, was apparently judged first by the kinship group who exercised the right to outcaste a person, though perhaps not without some reference to a higher level of authority like the local raja. Besides one’s blood relations, real or putative, ties of relationship with one’s fellow villagers,

\textsuperscript{1} An opposite view is stated in the text of this volume (\textit{Infra}, 215: “. . . the birth of daughters was deplored . . .”). On re-reading the relevant passages (e.g., \textit{Chandi}, 52), I get the impression that marrying off one’s daughters was considered something to worry about; besides, parents who had only daughters and no sons considered themselves unfortunate. The birth of a daughter was not considered deplorable in itself. For bride-money, see \textit{Chandi}, 144.

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, 14.

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.}, 35-36, \textit{infra}, 216.

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Supra}, f. n. 3.
even those of a different community, were also recognised. Such a relationship,—couched in kinship terms like brother, uncle, grandfather,—could be of equality or deference depending on the age and generation of the individuals concerned.\footnote{Chandi, 13, 213, 224. Chaitanya-charitamrita, Adi-lila, ch. 17, mentions the episode of a conflict between a Qazi and Chaitanya in which the former eventually claimed Chaitanya as his nephew in terms of the “village relationship”, adding that such relationships were superior to blood relationships. (“deha-samvandha haite hai grām-samvandha sāncha”)}

The similarity between mediaeval Bengali Hindu society and its modern counterpart can be misleading beyond a point. With fundamental changes in the political organisation and the economic system, the upper strata of Hindu society have found important new bases for social cohesion, though the old ones have not been abandoned. Attitudes and institutions inherited from the past no longer serve quite the same purpose as in the bygone days and may have even become dysfunctional. The systems of marriage and family and the associated attitudes discussed above have to be understood in the context of a status society in which the individual was primarily subject to institutional arrangements very different from the market forces and an impersonal system of government which now powerfully influence his life. To give one specific instance, the worth of a kula from the point of view of matrimonial connection, was assessed in our period mainly from the view-point of ritual purity, supplemented by secular considerations like its general prestige in the eyes of society. For many decades now, in Bengali upper caste society, such considerations of ritual purity of family history have lost in priority to those of a purely secular character. The worth of the immediate rather than the extended family and the secular achievements of the bridegroom-to-be have become major determinants of choice, though the relevant regulations concerning caste, gotra etc. are seldom violated.

IV

Institutions and values associated with the caste system as we have seen above influenced such fundamental human associations as the family system. Any clear notion of the structure and functions of mediaeval Bengali society must hence
be based on an understanding of the caste system. Unfortunately, for our period we are seriously handicapped by the paucity of source material. There are any number of caste histories, some of them authentic enough. But their one universal weakness is that of indifference to chronology. We know with some definiteness what happened before and after but I am not sure if it is legitimate to guess therefrom as to what was happening during the period under reference. From the casual references to the working of the caste system, however, it is possible to derive some broad general notions as to what it was and how it worked.

Our knowledge of the caste system in India, as it was and as it evolved in history, remains hazy and uncertain, despite a plethora of literature on the subject. We do not yet have any well-documented analysis of what the system meant to the people who lived under it and what ends it served in any particular region or period, until we come to very recent times. The theoretical and empirical studies of the system as it is now have prepared the ground for a broad consensus as to its nature and significant features. For a study of the system in any historical period, this contemporary analysis provides a useful framework of reference.

Caste is now seen essentially as a system of hierarchy, "a transitive and not cyclic order" in which "every caste is inferior to those which precede it and superior to those which follow and all are contained between two extremes."¹ This concept of hierarchy inheres in the indigenous notion of jati and is very different from that of social stratification which comprises arbitrary judgements such as the identification of caste with class. The hierarchy, in its turn, is based on a principle of opposition,—between the pure and the impure, co-existing in a mutual relationship of superiority and inferiority within the same system. Early in this century, the French sociologist, Célestin Bouglé identified what he considered the three distinctive but interrelated features of the cast system,² (1) a

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² Louis Dumont and David F. Pocock, "Commented Summary of the 1st Part of Bouglé's Essais", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, II, 1958 31-44 ; also L. Dumont, *op. cit.*, 64.
gradation of status, (2) detailed regulations to ensure separation between the different grades and (3) division of labour resulting in a pattern of interdependence. The three features are now seen as inseparable in reality, the analytical distinction being introduced by the observer. Besides, all the three "principles" are based on the same fundamental opposition between the pure and the impure. In the status gradation it is expressed as the superiority of the pure over the impure, the separation is meant to maintain the necessary distance between the two and in the division of labour also there is an attempt to separate the pure from the impure occupations. Within the caste are further divisions and sub-divisions embodying the same basic opposition. The sub-divisions of a caste may be purely territorial in origin,¹ but whenever they are juxtaposed, there is a tendency to spell out a hierarchical ordering based on the principle of opposition discussed above.

An important element in our understanding of the caste system is the distinction between varna and jati. Max Weber made a significant contribution to this discussion in identifying the four-fold sastric division of Hindu society as something more than an artificial construct.² The groups he described as sub-caste (jati) are loosely accommodated within one or other of the four castes. The evidence for this fact is to be found inter alia in the frequent practice of commensality between the jatis within the same caste. In the long period, even the possibility of connubium within such 'sub-castes' was not altogether precluded. The barriers between the varnas in other words are much more rigid than those between the jatis within the same varna.

The customary organisation of the production and distribution of goods and services is closely linked up with the caste system.

In their economic dimension, the *jatis* were hereditary closed occupation groups, a fact which probably was related to deliberate or unconscious efforts to eliminate competition and ensure security of employment and income, characteristic of many traditional societies.¹ The possibility of a person moving out of his hereditary occupation and adopting some non-specialised means of livelihood was not rigidly precluded, Mobility in any opposite direction appears to have been limited. The inevitable interdependence which followed from such hereditary specialisation was institutionalized at the village level into a pattern of socio-economic relationship which has been described as *Jajmani*. At the centre of the *Jajmani* organisation stands the dominant caste,²—often a peasant caste,—who enjoyed politico-economic ascendancy in the village, or in a wider area. This ascendancy, according to some,³ derives from their power over the land. All the other castes receive their income, generally on a customary basis, in cash or kind or in the form of land grants.⁴ The artisan castes,—producers of goods rather than services,—enjoy relative freedom from the customary restrictions and are hence more responsive to the market forces. Among the village servants, the status of those who render services of a purely ritual character is determined on the basis of ritual consideration and only secondarily qualified by politico-economic factors. At the other end of the scale, are the land-owning and labouring castes who maintain their status by manipulating secular levers of power. The relationship between the two often has an element of heredity, but are least explicable in terms of caste values.

It is not at all certain if the above abstract picture is true of Hindu society at all times and places, especially of Bengali

Hindu society for the period under reference. There are certain indubitable facts about the caste system as it then subsisted. In the scheme of hierarchy, for instance, there are two fixed points marking the extreme limits of the system: the ritual ascendancy of the Brahmin who was treated as a god on earth and enjoyed an ascriptive status independent of his economic or social functions, and at the other end of the scale, the treatment of the Chandala and certain other untouchable groups as the lowest of the low.\(^1\) In between these two extremes is an interdeterminate world of caste ranking about which our knowledge is exceedingly hazy. One gets an occasional hint of the fact that some ranking was generally accepted. It is not equally clear that this acceptance was universal, especially at the lower levels of caste hierarchy. The phenomenon described as caste mobility which generally takes the form of either an individual family trying to pass off as members of a caste higher than the one they actually belonged to\(^2\) or that of an entire occupational caste claiming a rank in the varna system higher than the one conceded to them is occasionally mentioned in the contemporary literature. The likelihood of caste mobility generated by the phenomenon of mass migration also have a relevance to Bengal as much as to other parts of Mughal India.\(^3\) The frequent depredations of the Maghs and the Portuguese, large scale abduction of women during the wars and rebellions, the regular trade in slaves captured from among the settled population, all had implications for the caste system which are not quite clear from our sources. The individuals and families affected by such calamities surely suffered from the point of view of their ritual purity. The references to Maghadosha and Firinghi-dosha in the caste chronicles of Bengal, however, suggest that the victims of such calamities were permitted to remain within the orbit of the caste order, though

\(^1\) *Infra,* 215; *Chandi,* 106. *Dharmamangala,* 10: *brāhmanc govinde kichhu bhed na karive* (Translation “Make no distinction between Brahmins and (the god) Govinda.”)

\(^2\) *Chandi,* 131.

\(^3\) Leon Sinder, *Caste Instability in Mughal India* (Seoul, Korea, undated); also see my review of the book in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review,* July, 1966, 294.
not without some loss of hierarchical status.\footnote{Infra, 68, 83; Baharistan, 146vo—147vo, 219vo etc.; ibid, translation, I, 273-76; II, 476. Magha-dosha and Feringhi-dosha are the technical names for ritual impurity, not amounting to loss of caste, caused by pollution through ‘contact’ with the Maghs and the Portugese. Also see R.C. Majumdar (ed.), Bangla Desher Itihas, Vol. 2, (Calcutta, B.S. 1373) 307.} As to the indeterminacy of the varna status of the different occupational castes in our period one can only say that the precise limits of the Vaisya or Sudra varnas are not clear from our sources though these terms occur frequently enough in them and hence have a certain relevance for our understanding of the contemporary image of the caste system.

The aspect of hierarchical ranking which concerned and affected the lives of men most directly referred to the precise ranking of a family,—and of an individual primarily as a member of a family,—within a jati. The relevant criteria are spelt out fairly clearly in the contemporary sources. The notion of relative purity or impurity was basic in this context. Purity of family history and of one’s personal conduct in terms of well-defined norms was the decisive factor in determining one’s status ranking. Certain norms had a universal relevance, others referred to individual jatis or varnas. Again, they could be purely ritualistic, or be linked to secular values. Certain norms reveal a combination of the two principles. The distinction between the ritual and the secular was however alien to the mediaeval mind: to it all conduct was either pure (suddha) or impure.

Whatever one’s jati, one’s status rank within it depended above all on the ritual purity of one’s kula—in terms of the strict observance of the laws relating to connubium, commensality and taboos. In so far as these laws were the same for all varnas and jatis—and, to a large extent they were so,—here was a universally applicable criterion for determining ritual status. Avoidance of connubium and commensality with persons outside one’s jati, especially those belonging to the lower rungs of the hierarchy, was a principle binding on at least all Hindus of the upper castes. A family avoiding connubium with all below itself in ritual ranking even within
its own caste, had claims to the highest status. A wide range of taboos was also binding on all upper caste Hindus. Certain items of diet were totally tabooed, others were ritually prescribed on some days of the month.

The rules regarding ritual purity and impurity differed from caste to caste at least at two distinct levels. First, for the same offence against ritually correct conduct,—cowslaughter for example,—Raghunandana, following earlier smritis, prescribes penances which increase in rigour as one goes down the caste ladder. The rigour of the penance is also greater if the owner of the cow is a member of the upper castes, and greatest, if he is a Brahmin. To give another instance, the merit attached to gift-giving varied according to the caste of the donee. In other words, certain demands of ritually correct conduct might be basically the same for all, but differ in degree from caste to caste. One does not know how far these precepts were in fact followed in practice. If they were, it would mean that cleansing oneself of ritual impurity was a more arduous task for the people belonging to the lower castes than, say, for the Brahmins. Since penance often involved substantial expenditure, one could hope to maintain one’s ritual status in cases of departures from the norm only if one were sufficiently wealthy. Secondly, certain demands of ritual purity varied from caste to caste not only in degree but also in kind. To give one extreme example, injury to living beings was legitimate (vaidhahimsa) for Brahmins only in specified circumstances; to a person of the hunter castes such restrictions hardly applied. The lifestyles of the different castes differed in many ways. Such differences had ritual as well as secular dimensions. The Ahnikatattvam in Raghunandana’s Smriti detailing the ritual duties of the twice-born from early morning to night suggests a regime of extreme rigour emphasizing in particular the requirements of ritual cleanliness. Presumably, a Brahmin

1 Chandi, 101, 144, 221.
2 Raghu, Tithi-tattvam, 10-11.
3 Ibid., Prayashchita-tattvam, 185ff.
4 Ibid., 172.
5 Ibid., Tithi-tattvam, durgotsavah, vaidhahimsā-vichāraḥ, 33-4; Chandi, 71.
6 Ibid., Ahnikatattvam, especially 121-27.
could deviate from the recommended code of behaviour only at grave risks to his ritual status. In some ways, the demands of ritual cleanliness were not as clearly defined for the non-Brahmin upper castes as they were for the Brahmans. The *Chandimangala* relates the story of an intra-caste dispute for precedence among *Gandha Vaniks*, in which an individual's claim to high ritual status is challenged on the ground that his father, who sold rings to courtesans and at times had to touch them, would take his meals afterwards without first having a bath. The accusation was answered with the plea that actions in pursuit of business legitimate for one's *jati* involved no ritual impurity.¹ Except in connection with purificatory penances, the demands of ritual purity appear to have diminished in rigour as one moved down the caste ladder. The exhaustive and highly demanding regulations of Raghunandana's *ahnikatattvam* refer chiefly to the daily duties of the Brahmin. At the other end of the scale, the daily ritual duties of the Sudra are summarily discussed in the briefest section of his *opus*² which repeats the ancient law excluding the Sudra from Vedic *mantras*, allows him to use the Puranic *mantras* only and that by proxy through a Brahmin priest and reiterates the view that for him the giving of gifts is the chief meritorious act.

As indicated above, the norms of sexual morality for women could have important implications for the ritual status of any family belonging to the upper castes. The relationship between such norms and the magical-mystical beliefs at the root of the system of rituals is not obvious in our period, though in all probability the emphasis on the chastity of women was associated not merely with male domination of society, but also with a faith in the supra-natural powers which chastity was supposed to confer. The other side of this belief,—viz., that sexual immorality on the part of the womenfolk provokes the occult forces of misfortune,—which persists even now may also have contributed to the general acceptance of this norm.

In short, the past and present conduct of the womenfolk in one's *kula* was a determinant of one's position in the hierarchy for reasons derived partly from the secular norms of mediaeval

¹ *Chandi*, 221.
² *Raghu, Sudrahnikāchāra-tattvam*, 407.
Bengali society, partly from the notions of ritual purity, the secular norms themselves being based to some extent on magical-mystical beliefs. Judged by this criterion, a person could be excluded from the circle of commensality if his wife was believed to be unchaste. A person with many widows in his family also suffered loss of status, presumably because widowhood implied possibilities of unchaste conduct, besides indicating that the family was not favoured by fortune.

The secular norms determining one’s rank within one’s caste,—for such specific purposes as eligibility for marriage alliances or deciding the order of precedence on social occasions,—were, by and large, the same for all castes. Two facts, however, need to be emphasized. With some exceptions discussed below, even the secular criteria referred to one’s rank within the caste: one’s position in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis members of other castes was, generally speaking, fixed regardless of all such considerations on the basis of the prevailing order of precedence among the castes. Secondly, the secular criteria, like the norms of ritual purity, referred not only to the individual but to the kula as well, its past history included.

One’s rank in the intra-caste hierarchy depended on the fourfold criteria—“dhana-mána-kula-śīla” (wealth, prestige, family, conduct). Wealth and prestige based on secular power or achievements were thus by no means irrelevant to one’s status. The view that even the wealthy and the politically powerful could not take liberties with the requirements of ritual purity without loss of status is however strongly emphasized in our sources. So far as the non-ritual aspect of “śīla” or right conduct was concerned, the relevant judgments reflected the contemporary notions of ethics and the good life. It has often been suggested that the caste system with its emphasis on the specific and different duties for the different castes precluded any universally valid system of ethics. I have failed to trace in our sources much evidence in support of this view. True, in relation to certain castes certain actions were specified as objectionable. Generally, however, such taboos were no more than particular applications of a general ethic. Honest

1 Chandi, 222.
2 Ibid., 221.
straight-forward conduct was expected of all.⁴ A trader who cheated suffered loss of status in accordance with this general principle.⁵ All were expected to live up to the life-style appropriate to their caste and occupation. Hence an illiterate Brahmin was looked down upon.⁶ Actions generally condemned on ethical grounds, such as those involving injury to life, were permitted to certain castes in view of their occupation. One can reasonably argue that such exceptions were attempts at practical adjustment and did not imply any negation of a generally valid ethical system. So far as one can see, the requirements of ritual purity varied from caste to caste much more than the demands of morality.⁴

In another important respect, there was a clear departure from the pattern of universality. Right conduct was not merely an ethical question but a matter of life-styles, and here a clear distinction between the upper and the lower castes was recognized. Our sources clearly suggest an ideal of conduct expected of the upper castes in general. In its essence it was the Brahminical ideal, only somewhat more generalized and shorn of the expectations associated specially with the sacerdotal caste. The concept of sila or right conduct for the upper castes consisted in an emphasis on righteousness, humility, generosity, self-restraint, love of scholarship, knowledge of the scriptures, and respect for the gods, Brahmens and the guru. The image of the lower castes on the other hand was associated with uncouthness, with unrestrained anger which would be exceedingly unseemly in anyone belonging to the upper strata of the caste order.⁵

Life-styles, of course, were not determined exclusively by the caste one belonged to, but depended to a substantial extent on

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¹ Raghu, 129. For a discussion of the view that there was no universally valid ethical system, see Weber, op. cit., 144; also I. Karve, Hindu Society—An Interpretation, 9, Ch. III.
² Chandi, 144.
³ Ibid., 104.
⁴ There are instances of certain actions not being permissible to members of certain castes. For instance, a Gandha Vanik renting out houses suffered loss of status (Chandi, 144). The secular or ritual basis for the taboo is not obvious.
⁵ Chandi, 23, 61, 79, 144, 221.
the actual occupation. A Brahmin Zamindar adopted to the best of his ability a kingly style of life, sporting all the trappings of royalty.\(^1\) Conformity to this royal image was evidently essential to the maintenance of his status. A Brahmin official or cultivator would obviously have a very different life-style, though all three lived by the same code of rituals and morality. One’s occupation was an important determinant of one’s status within the caste: the Brahmin scholar was highly respected individual, the illiterate priest was not.\(^2\)

Despite the disdain for the lower castes reflected in our sources, neither the good life nor the heroic ideal was by any means the monopoly of the upper or even the ritually pure castes. The tribal and folk basis of Bengal’s cultural tradition and the numerous obscure cults which developed in Bengal at the periphery of orthodox Brahminism permitted the idolization of a trader, a hunter or a person of some very low caste. A new heroic ideal in terms of the excellence of one’s devotion to Krishna was introduced by the Vaishnavas. It permitted the elevation of a low caste devotee to the status of a saint adorable even by Brahmins.\(^3\)

There were other factors disturbing the inter-caste order of precedence. Secular criteria like wealth, power and occupation were important determinants of inter-caste as much as intra-caste status ranking. The evidence of silence suggests that wealth contributed relatively little to this distortion except indirectly as a means to power. But power was crucial to social ranking in a way which must have upset the orderly arrangements of the caste system. In our sources, the semi-autonomous zamindar is a raja, a king,—the apex of the social pyramid, whatever his caste. Since a worshipful attitude to Brahmins was an accepted ideal of kingly virtue, presumably a Kayastha raja like Pratapaditya being in power implied no threat to the ascendancy of Brahmins in the caste hierarchy. It seems

\(^1\) *Ibid.*, 8.

\(^2\) *Supra*, 24, f.n. 3.

\(^3\) *Infra*, 137-38; *Dharmamangala*, 13: *Vaishnav hay yadi jāliye yavan, yuge yuge hai tār dāsīr nandan.*

(Translation: “If a Vaishnava is even Muslim by origin, I would feign be his slave-woman’s son in every age.”)
extremely unlikely however that a powerful bhuiyan permitted any non-Brahmin to be honoured as his superior in any sense, whatever the generally accepted caste order of precedence. What was true of the raja, was probably also true with appropriate qualifications, of the high officials and, at a lower level, even of the village headman. The latter’s power and claims to precedence are recognisable in our sources, and there is nothing to indicate that they had to belong to any particular group of castes.¹

An important fact concerning the hierarchy of occupations at its lower levels is the extensive prevalence of the institution of slavery in our period.² We do not, however, know how it affected the caste order of precedence. Presumably, capture by and commensality with the ritually impure non-Hindus implied “loss of caste”, if not conversion to Christianity or Islam, though the references to Magha-dosha and Firinghi-dosha suggest that this was not necessarily so. What, however, was the fate of peasants and artisans reduced to slavery by a Hindu Zamindar? One wonders if they did not suffer a loss of status perhaps without any corresponding movement down the caste ladder.

An analysis of the factors determining status hierarchy in mediaeval Bengal reveals a predominantly ascriptive society where one’s material expectations were primarily defined by the accident of birth. Ascription, however, was not exclusively dependent on ritual status or even on caste, for the status which one inherited from one’s family was subject to other determinants as well. Moreover, achievement had its role in widening the limits of an individual’s prospects in life,—in terms not only of wealth and power but also of status which power invariably conferred. And the frequent changes in the level of peace and security introduced an element of instability in the time-honoured order of precedence.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to underplay the

¹ Chandi, 100, 108. For the relative irrelevance of wealth to status, see ibid., 68: nīch kabhū uchcha hāy pāile vahu dhan?
(Translation. “Does a low (caste) person become high (caste), by becoming wealthy?”)
² Infra, 68, 113-14, 196-97.
contemporary preoccupation with the caste system in any account of mediaeval Bengali society. The social world to the mediaeval Bengali Hindu was a world of castes or jatis. To the Vaishnava, dreaming of a millennium in which the world would be flooded by Krishna-prema (love-devotion for Krishna), the relevant point of reference was mankind consisting of all castes, "down to the Chandâla" (achandâl jan). The Tantric kulacharin who rejected all bonds of social convention took his female partner for esoteric practices from among certain specified low castes, thus accepting the basic assumptions of the system in the very act of rejecting them. Mukundarama described the foundation of an imaginary city in terms of the various jâtis who came and settled in their respective quarters. Nearly all characters, fictional or real, are identified with reference to their jâti in the contemporary literature. In both the image and the reality of social relationships, caste consciousness was an omnipresent and all pervasive element.

In the Hindu view of society, even the Muslims were not excluded from the caste order. Mukundarama's account of the various jâtis coming to settle in the city of Gujarat begins with the description of the Muslims. Inclusion into the caste order, in theory as much as in practice, implied the fixation of rank in a hierarchy of precedence. Our sources reveal a certain ambivalence so far as the hierarchical status of Muslims in the Hindu image of society was concerned. Raghunandana unequivocally bracketed Muslims with the lowest of the untouchables. In the Vaishnava literature they were mentioned as objects of aversion and hostility who, however, were not excluded from the possibility of redemption and, hence, of conversion. In the Chandimangala—which probably represents a non-denominational, "common man's" point of view—one comes across a very different attitude. The Muslims there are a jâti, with a distinct way of life, worthy of respect. Only

1 Infra, 137, 151; Chaitanyakaritāmrita, 72, 244, 288; Premavilāsa, 116, 171.
2 Infra, 167-68.
3 Chandi, 102-107.
4 Ibid., 102.
5 Raghu, Prāyaschittatattvam, 193.
6 Infra, 133, 151.
7 Supra, f. n. 4.
the butcher selling beef provokes a pejorative phrase. The community of Muslims is then seen as divided into sub-groups, again described as jātis, most, but not all of which represented distinct occupations. The fact that Mukundarama described the Muslim “castes” first, even before he described the Brahmans (in his account the varnas followed one another in order of precedence),—suggests an emphasis on separation between the two communities, rather than an unequivocal feeling of superiority based on ritual and other criteria. It is significant that in the list of inferior jātis (ītar jāti), tribal peoples like the Khatas and Kols are mentioned, alongside the Hindu untouchable castes. Neither the Muslim community as a whole, nor any Muslim jāti appears in this list. In the image of a social order composed of jātis, the Muslims apparently represented a distinct order of their own parallel to and co-existing with the Hindu hierarchy of castes. In the relatively simple schematisation of the smritis, where the Brahminical caste society is the only framework of reference, they are unhesitatingly placed at the bottom of the ladder on grounds of ritual impurity. In the real world where the upper strata of the Muslim community represented political power and the lower strata largely consisted of artisan groups producing essential goods and services, this schematisation appears to have been valid only so far as it precluded commensality in the very narrow sense of partaking food and water touched by another. Not only did the Hindu power élite,—both ‘feudal’ and bureaucratic,—have intimate social intercourse with the Muslims, in many details of their life-habits they consciously imitated the Muslim aristocracy.¹

The Hindu belief that the Muslim community also was divided into ‘castes’ had an empirical basis: the criteria for the division of the Muslim society into distinct groups were however multiple. Race, for one thing, was an important factor,—Mughals and Pathans in particular preserving their distinct identities. Cutting across the racial barrier was the distinction between Saiyads and the rest. The various Pathan clans (khels) are also mentioned as jātis by Mukundarama. At the lower level of the social hierarchy was the various artisan

¹ *Infra, 220-21.*
and professional groups each with a distinctive ‘caste’ name.\textsuperscript{1} It would however be a mistake to equate Muslim ‘casteism’ with its Hindu counterpart. There is nothing to indicate that intercaste commensality or even connubium was precluded. Despite the preoccupation of the Muslim upper classes with the question of precedence,\textsuperscript{2} we have no hint of an institutionalised order of precedence as between the Muslim castes. Surely, ritual purity was not the basis of caste precedence so far as the Muslims were concerned.

Weber suggested that the Muslim castes were essentially status groups. Conceivably in Bengal in our period the various racial and descent groups (like the Saiyads) maintained a certain degree of separateness, the Muslims of foreign origin looked down upon the local converts and each foreign racial group laid claims to superior status in relation to others. It is very doubtful, however, if any order of precedence among the various groups was generally accepted, except for the superiority of the Saiyads universally conceded among the Muslims. In the nineteenth century and after, a broad status division in the Indian Muslim society between the Ashraf and Ajlaf,\textsuperscript{3} the gentry and the common people, was widely prevalent. It is probable that such a division,—roughly similar to the one between the Hindu high and low castes,—was recognised among Muslims in mediaeval Bengal. The bickerings over status mentioned repeatedly in the Baharistan are, however, based on individual rather than family or group claims. Since these refer mainly to the Mughal officials, the relevance of the information to the Muslim society in general is somewhat uncertain. To a considerable extent, claims to status were based on and expressed through life-styles. Conspicuous consumption on a competitive scale and an elaboration of formal etiquette were among the chief levers manipulated to attain and assert status.

If there was a hierarchical ordering of the Muslim profes-

\textsuperscript{1} Infra, 225f.
\textsuperscript{2} Infra, 84.
sional and artisan jātis, we have no information bearing on this point. Like the Hindu occupational castes, these were hereditary groups. We do not, however, know how far they represented closed occupations, nor, whether, a member of such a jāti, retained,—like his Hindu counterpart,—his caste identity even when he followed some other occupation.

Caste according to one view, as we have seen, is primarily an economic institution,—a hereditary system of division of labour which helped contain the forces of competition in a world of stagnant and undeveloped markets and thus provided some security of employment and income. Besides, it is generally agreed that the system had economic dimensions,—whatever its "essential" character might have been. In fact the customary arrangements for production and distribution in India's pre-market economy are seen as having been dovetailed with caste in its economic aspects.¹

In our sources, all occupations involving specialised skills, both of a ritual and a non-ritual character, are associated with some particular jāti or other. Where a jāti is coterminous with a varna. e.g., the Brahmans, it is associated with a group of occupations rather than a single occupation. In the case of the Brahmans, the specialised occupations ranged from pursuit of scholarship to the work of the marriage-broker. There was however a wide range of unspecialised occupations, important from the point of view of production and the power structure,—which were in no sense closed. The raja or the zamindar, the taluqdar or the Hindu officials in the local courts and in the employ of the jagirdars did not have to belong to any particular caste. The Aini's reference to zamindars of three castes in Bengal is almost certainly a numerical understatement. Even more important, while our sources mention agricultural castes, the occupations of agriculture and landless labour were evidently followed by people drawn from a variety of castes,

¹ See F.G. Bailey, Caste and the Economic Frontier. A village in Highland Orissa (Manchester University Press, 1957); Mckim Marriott (ed). Village India, Studies in the Little Community (Chicago, 1955); G.S. Ghurye, Caste and Class in India (Bombay, 1950)
Brahmins not excluded. Membership of a particular *jati* thus did not necessarily imply the pursuit of a particular occupation. Were the specialised occupations closed to all but the members of the appropriate castes? The factors of instability in the caste system discussed above indicate the likely loopholes through which one might move into one of these occupations without being born into it. Considerations of status as well as profit might have provided the required inducement. We know of the increasing export of sugar and textiles from Bengal in the latter half of the seventeenth century, leading almost certainly to an increase in output at least in some centres of production. It would be a matter for surprise if the production of these commodities continued to be undertaken exclusively by the members of the appropriate castes, especially since much of the relevant skill could be easily acquired.

The caste basis of rural economic organisation,—the *Jajmani* system in one form or another,—has persisted in many parts of India down to modern times. At least some aspects of this system are traceable in our sources. Many of the lower as well as upper castes producing goods and services essential for the rural economy are mentioned as enjoying *inam* lands,—presumably as gifts from the local *zamindar* or *taluqdar*, a practice which has its parallel in one form of the *Jajmani* system. Beyond this meagre information we have very little to go upon. Several possibilities are, however, suggested indirectly by the other evidence bearing on the rural economy. The service castes enjoying *inam* lands were, apparently, not precluded from

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1 Poet Mukundarama's autobiographical sketch in the Chandimangala clearly mentions that his hereditary occupation was agriculture (*Chandi*, 6: "damunyây kari krshi (alt. reading, châsh chashi), nivâs purush chhay sût" Tr. ("I followed the occupation of agriculture at Damunya, where we were settled for six to seven generations.") There is nothing to suggest that reference is to rental income from agriculture. Raghunandana in the *Ahnikatatvam*, p. 128, quoting Brihaspati and Gautama, explains the circumstances under which a Brahmin may follow the occupations of agriculture, trade and money-lending.

2 *Supra* p. 19, f.n. 3.

3 I have, however, failed to trace any direct evidence for such movement into specialized caste occupations.


exchange activities. The *Vaidya*, for instance, is specifically mentioned as enjoying *inam* land and at the same time charging fees for his professional services.\(^1\) Similarly the Brahmin priest received payments in cash and kind, not on any fixed customary basis, in addition to his hereditary land grant.\(^2\) The upper strata of the service castes and religious grantees almost certainly received a share of the produce from their lands and were not in any way directly involved in agricultural production. The Kayasthas are referred to as a rentier group in Chandi-mangala. More important for our understanding of the rural economy, we do not encounter in our sources any dominant peasant caste nor any communal control over land. Such negative evidence is of course not conclusive. The almost invariable association of *zamindars* and *taluqdars* with the land grants to the service and artisan castes however suggests that such ‘donors’, rather than any dominant peasantry, were the chief *Jajmans*. It was they who mediated the distribution of rural income, so far as the non-agricultural castes were concerned,—through the system of land-grants. Such castes supplemented their income with exchange transactions on cash or barter terms, which meant that the economic relationship between the agriculturists and other occupations were at least partly determined by the market.\(^3\)

Subsistence production, based on customary arrangements, does not in fact appear to have been the chief characteristic of Bengal’s economy in our period. The economic world, as reflected in the contemporary literature, is predominantly one of exchange and cash transactions. Agriculture extensively depended on supply of credit from outside sources, often the *zamindar* himself.\(^4\) A situation of economic distress was typically one in which there was no buyer for cattle and grain.\(^5\) Land, the basic means of production, was alienable and actually alienated in return for cash value. Raghunandana in his chapter on inheritance (*dāyatattvam*) discusses what is permissible in

\(^1\) *Chandi*, 105.

\(^2\) *Ibid.*, 104

\(^3\) *Infra*, 201f.

\(^4\) *Infra*, 201.

\(^5\) *Chandi*, 7 : “*dhānya garu keha nāhi kine*” (Translation : “No one was buying paddy and cows”)
connection with the sale and mortgage of immovable property, including land.\(^1\) Many of the daily articles of consumption even at the village level were purchased for cash. The pedlars dealt in a wide range of commodities and the village artisans themselves sold their goods.\(^2\) The production of handicraft manufactures and even the by-employment of spinning in agricultural households were at least partly dependent on advance given by the merchant money-lenders.\(^3\)

The growth of the urban markets, not to mention the overseas markets which underwent remarkable expansion later in the seventeenth century provided further impetus to market oriented production. The substantial accumulation of liquid capital employed in commerce and evidently as capital put out to producers is further evidence of the development of a money economy. Already in our period, there was a marked tendency towards the localization of handicraft industries, especially textiles, in certain areas. Later in the seventeenth century we have evidence to show that in the Malda region the tendency had been carried so far that a particular arang produced only a particular variety of textiles. We do not know if this was a new development or a continuation of an earlier form of production organization.\(^4\) We thus have evidence for the development of market phenomena at practically every level of economic activity. We do not, however, know what proportion of productive effort was oriented to exchange. In all probability, it was small. Besides, there is little evidence for the flow of commodities from the urban to the rural centres. While the towns and cities depended heavily on rural supplies, in the rural sector itself the markets appear to have been confined to small territorial units consisting of at most a few villages with hardly any tendency towards integration into larger units.

\(^1\) **Raghu**, 337-38; also **Vyāvahāra-tattvam**, 189 for the circumstances under which a ‘land-owner’ (bhuvāmi) suffered a lapse of his rights.

\(^2\) **Chandi**, 91-92, 139-94. Significantly, the lists of purchases mention a wide range of consumer goods, but do not include foodgrains.

\(^3\) **Chandi**, 31.

In a pre-dominantly agrarian economy the rights in land become a major determinant of the nature of socio-economic relationship. In Mughal Bengal these rights were partly implicit in the traditional economic organisation and partly derived from the political-administrative system. The zamindars who were not merely revenue collecting authorities as in some other parts of India, but retained the vestiges of independent political power, appear to have been practically ubiquitous in Mughal Bengal. The proportion of the produce they claimed as their share is not known. We only know that whatever the limits of their customary claim they increased their demand by levying additional cesses and a variety of imports. In their capacity as moneymender to the peasants, they could lay claims to a further share of the produce. Moreover, there was always the possibility of extra cess being collected. The one institutionalized sanction against excessive demand appears to have been mass exodus, an instrument applied against the jagirdars and the revenue collectors representing the central authority in the Khalisa as well. The jagir, as is well known, was not a fief but a prebend. Since after the Mughal conquest the lands under the zamindars’ control were also formally conferred upon them as jagirs, these too were in theory prebends. In practice, however, these remained lands under the hereditary control of the zamindars, the extent of the control being determined by customary arrangements the precise nature of which is not quite clear. Besides zamindaris and jagirs our sources also refer to taluqs and if one is to believe the evidence of later tradition, these taluqs too were either prebends or land grants received as gifts in return for particular services without any further conditions being attached to them. Whatever their origin, the taluqdar in our period does not appear to have been bound by any specific service obligation, though he too in all

1 Infra, Ch.I, Sections, VI and VIII.
2 Chandi, 102: A Zamindar is advised to lend cattle and seedgrains to the cultivators and seize the crop when it is ready for harvesting, so that the repayment of the loan is not evaded.
4 The family histories of the Zamindars as recorded in the district gazetteers and district histories contain numerous references to such grants. For contemporary references to taluqs see Chandi, 6, 65.
probability was subject to certain revenue demands from the higher political-administrative authorities. The inam lands and the religious grants represented a further level of rights involving a claim to a share of the produce without any necessary contribution to the process of production, though some of the holders of the inam lands might have become actual cultivators.

It is often stated that in the context of India's pre-colonial economy and, generally, most technologically backward societies, various levels of rights in land,—rather than ownership involving rights of alienation and hence a land-market,—are the most relevant concepts for the study of the agrarian structure. However, as already indicated, our sources refer to gift and alienation of land involving not simply a claim to a share of the produce but apparently the right of cultivation itself. When, for instance, we are told that a piece of land gifted as dowry yielded certain specified crops, the reference may well be to rentier income, but it is more likely that it is to actual rights of cultivation.¹ Again the Portuguese are known to have bought up land along both banks of the river Ganges.² True, there is little to indicate the existence of an extensive land-market, but that does not preclude the institution of ownership. To whom did the land belong? We only know for certain that the zamindar gave away inam lands and also that actual cultivators enjoyed the hereditary right of occupation. There is little reason to doubt that the zamindar exercised the right of alienation, over much of the land under his politico-administrative authority, especially unoccupied land. We do not know whether this right was vested in any other group as well. Raghunandana's references to the sale of immovable property does not, however, suggest that he had in mind only one particular social group.

The economic scene in our period does not convey an impression of stasis. Exchange which had penetrated far into the economy, is generally a dissolver of customary arrange-

¹ Chandi, 36: "jāmātāre bāp mor dilā bhūmidān, tathi phale masur kāpās māsh dhān" (Translation "My father has given his son-in-law a piece of land which produces lentils, cotton and paddy.")
² Infra, 111.
ments and relationships. The political and administrative milieu were not altogether congenial to the maintenance of status quo. Caste in its economic dimensions appears to have been far less of a closed system than is popularly imagined. The over-all situation thus suggests possibilities of vertical and horizontal mobility corroborated by our sources in some detail. The limitations of the process were determined by the limitations of the factors which generated it. Furthermore, there is hardly any evidence for change in the pattern of economic organisation or the forms of economic activity. Groups and individuals no doubt moved from one point to another in the network of economic relationships, but the network itself appears to have remained what it was earlier.

VI

The political system in Bengal during our period was composite in character combining within itself elements of centralization and decentralization. At some levels, political functions had become specialized activities, at others, these were still undifferentiated from the matrix of generalized social relationships.¹

The authority vested in the village organisation must have been the predominant fact of political life for the masses of the population. Unfortunately, the political system of the village communities in mediaeval Bengal is a subject on which we have hardly any information. We merely have references to the powers claimed and perquisites enjoyed by the village headman, known as mandal. Authority in the specific sense of the power to decide the rights and wrongs of a man’s actions and to impose sanctions accordingly, was vested partly in the caste or rather the wider kinship group, not necessarily confined to one village.² We do not know if there was any formal


² Supra 14-15; also Chandi. 222, for an instance of a caste group deciding to judge a person’s conduct and take the case to the ‘King’ for a final decision.
organization within the group for the discharge of this particular function. One only gets the impression that the individuals generally recognized as enjoying high status within the group were jointly invested with this authority, probably subject to the local raja’s powers of arbitration. The Brahmin caste councils having jurisdiction over a wide area with institutionalized arrangements for the “election” of a chief, mentioned in the eighteenth century sources, may have had their counterparts in our period, but we have no evidence on this point. Raghunandana in his chapter on expiatory rites (Prayaschitta-tattvam) merely states that one should consult the learned in deciding the rights and wrongs of an action and the penance appropriate to it.¹ The same chapter incidentally indicates the weakness of the relevant social organization,— caste or village council,—unbacked as it was by physical force, in imposing sanctions. Even for the highest crime in the eyes of the smriti writers, viz., the murder of a Brahmin, penances rather than condign punishments are prescribed. Exclusion from the circles of commensality appears to have been another common form of punishment.

At the level of the kinship group, caste or the community of villagers, the power to command or coerce,—the basis of any political system,—was not linked to any specialized function nor to any centralized authority. It was almost as undifferentiated from the other aspects of social relationship as is the authority of the father over his children from the ties which bind the members of a family together. At the level of the raja, zamindar or taluqdar, on the other hand, we have clear evidence of both specialization and differentiation.² True, the zamindar’s authority was linked to his rights over land, but those very rights were derived from political-military power, acquired, inherited or delegated by a higher political authority. The fact that the zamindar did not have to belong to any particular caste signified the differentiation of their role from the more general network of social relationships nearly every aspect of which was linked to the caste system. The virtual independence of the zamindars in the internal administration

¹ Raghu, 170.
² Supra, p. 34, f.n. 1.
of the territories under them,—their responsibility for the maintenance of law and order, collection of revenue, and often even administration of justice,—indicates a high degree of specialization of political functions. If the zamindars continued to arbitrate in social disputes, this was a function discharged by all Hindu rajas in their capacity as the preservers of dharma.

It is a standard convention in historical writings to identify local lordlings like rajas and zamindars as elements of decentralization representing the centrifugal tendencies in a political system. In the context of small-scale communities, it is, however, possible to consider them as so many focuses of centralized authority. In such contexts, political power in a given territorial unit is concentrated in the hands of the raja or the zamindar instead of being diffused through the social organism as it is in the case of the caste, the kinship group or the village community. In the zamindar we have the bottom level in a hierarchy of centralized authorities. For the masses of the population centralization and specialized political function appears to have been most real at this level. In our period at least, the Mughal power was something by and large outside the local system of political and social relationships.

The contemporary image of the zamindar distorts the realities of status and functions officially ascribed to them in a very significant way. There the zamindar becomes a raja; even a taluqdar is referred to as the ‘lord’ (prabhu). The people living on a zamindar’s land are his ‘subjects’ (praja). Descriptions of his court are couched in terms appropriate for royalty and he appears to have adopted a life-style suitable to his image. To repeat, the image is not one of a mansabdar of the empire, paying peshkash to the emperor under a special arrangement and collecting revenue from the people under his authority. Instead, it is the image of a Hindu king, devoted to the gods and the Brahmans, generous in the gift of lands, just in the distribution of punishments and rewards. In the context of the small-scale community, this was not altogether an unreal picture of the zamindar’s actual role. In mediaeval Bengal, the zamindars constituted a secular aristocracy,—separated from the masses of the population by their military and political power and an appropriate life-style. It was an
aristocracy open to the successful adventurer. Their popular image contributed to the legitimization of their authority. Their mediation may have helped to make the Mughal rule, based on the fact of conquest, all the more acceptable to the upper caste Hindu.

The Mughal rule,—with its own hierarchy of administrative authorities ranging from the emperor to the faujdar and pargana officials,—superimposed a layer of centralized authority over the inchoate, often mutually conflicting, units of local political organization. It replaced the centralized authority of the Afghan Sultans which, being physically more proximate, was more real in the consciousness of the local population. The greater efficiency and thoroughness of the Mughal bureaucratic organisation however gave it a measure of control over the people of Bengal which was almost certainly impossible in the days of the Sultans. The objects of the Mughal centralization were however such as to lead only to the forging of a few links between the imperial government and the local political system, not to any integration. Preoccupied with conquest, maintenance of their control and collection of revenue, the Mughals were only marginally involved in the detailed administration of the countryside. Outside the urban areas, the maintenance of law and order, administration of justice, the provision of necessary financial and administrative support to agricultural production remained, by and large, the responsibility of the zamindars. Many of the zamindars became mansabdars of the empire, but this change in office and status was more formal than real. The payment of peshkash signifying political submission alongside the maintenance of autonomy was a better indication of the actual state of affairs.

Except for the mediation of the local zamindars, the Mughal government was represented by officials who were frequently transferred, men whose social life was carefully insulated from all local contacts. To the local population, these sojourners from the world outside were mere impersonal instruments of conquest and revenue collection. Their excesses were accepted fatalistically as the consequences of one's past sins. The image of their authority was something hazy and remote. Delhi and its Padshah were indeed very far away in the minds of the contemporary Bengali. The Subahdar was a king, apparently a
suzerain over the more familiar vassal ‘kings’,—the local zamindars. In the case of a good Hindu like Man Singh, he was idolized as a virtuous king, devoted to the deities of the Hindu pantheon. For the legitimization of the Mughal authority, however, such special pleading was hardly necessary. The right of conquest was a fully understood and accepted part of the political values of the time. Only in our period the Mughal conquest implied no more than superficial changes for the web of social relationships. This was in accordance with the limited aims of the Mughal centralization.

VII

For most aspects of the social life in mediaeval Bengal, the available data permit the reconstruction of only a very fragmentary picture. Our information is somewhat more adequate with regard to the world of beliefs and rituals. Several distinct levels of beliefs and practices co-existed within this world. At one end they represented the great intellectual traditions of formalized Hindu philosophy, cosmology and the smritis; at the other were their popular folk counterparts embodying the simpler, less sophisticated ‘little tradition’ of Hinduism as a religion of the masses.\(^1\) The continuous interaction between the two traditions imparted a richness and vitality to the religious life of the period which had no counterparts in other spheres of social life.

The cosmological world represented in our sources is essentially that of the Puranas modified by the folk beliefs peculiar to the region.\(^2\) There are brief references to the Vedantic notion of an impersonal deity in the writings of not only the Hindu but

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1 For a discussion of the concepts of “Great Tradition” and “Little Tradition” and the interaction of the two, see Robert Redfield, *op. cit.*, Ch. III. S. B. Das Gupta, in his *Bharater Sakti-Sadhana O Sakta-Sahitya* (in Bengali, Calcutta, B.S. 1367) pp. 170-71, ascribes the power of the folk-cults in mediaeval Bengal to the decline of Brahmanism as a result of the Muslim conquest. The phenomenon seems to be explicable far more satisfactorily in terms of the interaction between the two traditions which was by no means absent in the pre-Muslim period, but merely assumed different forms. The important fact which should be emphasized, however, is the relative weakness of the “Great Tradition” in Bengal’s religious life both before and after the Turkish conquest.

2 *Infra*, Ch. IV, Section VI.
also the Muslim poets. But the belief in a supreme Brahman appears to have been mainly in the background rather than the forefront of religious thought and practices.

The worship of a large number of deities was the central feature of religion as it was commonly practiced. Some of these gods and goddesses were of local origin, some others belonged to the Puranic pantheon while a few like Varahi and Nilamata were vestiges of the region’s Buddhist Tantric past. Their origins are however rarely traceable to one single tradition.

Many of the village deities, animistic in their origin, had been adopted by the Saktta-Tantric cult and were worshipped as manifestations of Sakti,—a conceptualization of the creative principle in its feminine aspect which belonged to the very heart of the Hindu great tradition and had been conveyed to the masses through a series of Puranic myths. The snake goddess, Manasa, evidently a feature of folk-religion, was absorbed into the ‘kinship group’ of the great Hindu gods with the blessings of at least two Puranas.¹ The Dharma cult represented a singular admixture of crypto-Buddhism, Puranic beliefs and a distinct element of animism. Even the shrines identifiably Vaishnava or Saiva may have had local associations with the folk religion which were no longer a part of the conscious tradition in our period.

Some of the local folk deities underwent a different kind of transformation. Mangalachandi, for instance, was identified with the great Puranic goddess, Chandi, the consort of Siva. In this process of identification, however, the lofty image of Siva’s consort itself was transformed into something homely and familiar,—the married daughter of a poor man’s home suffering the myriad vexations of poverty. The great Mahadeva of the Hindu Trinity also becomes a mad beggar addicted to dope. The anxiety to establish personal relationship with the forces controlling one’s life, a characteristic feature of folk religion, evidently influenced the image of even the highest objects of worship. The high gods are no longer merely distant denizens of snow-clad Kailash, but familiar and approachable beings even subject to the same nagging worries which cloud the lives of their worshippers.²

¹ Raghu, 13, 16.
² S.B. Das Gupta, op. cit., 174, 190.
Some of the local deities personified the malevolent phenomena in nature,—diseases for instance. Here was a characteristic expression of pre-scientific thought processes, symbolic and allusive rather than logical in their approach to the phenomenal world. Essentially such personalizations were attempts to comprehend and cope with threatening situations which became somewhat tolerable through this effort to tackle them.¹ The belief in a variety of supernatural beings—Dakinis, Yoginis etc.,—evidently expressed a similar desire to personalize the sinister forces surrounding human life so that one could hope to enter into some relationship with them. The anxiety to establish such personal relationship is pointedly expressed in the literary passages where an author describes himself as a brother to such supernatural beings.²

The continuous preoccupation with charms, magical objects, superstitious beliefs in the occult implication of particular happenings, the possibility of attaining supernatural powers and the long series of rituals which marked practically every stage of the Hindu’s life cycle and even of his daily routine also make sense in this context.³ The avowed objects of this inter-related body of magical formulas, charms, rituals etc. were the prevention of misfortunes like death and disease or the fulfilment of particular wishes. A close look at these objectives reveal certain central preoccupations. Many of the charms and rituals were meant to protect the life of a child, especially during the first few weeks after birth. Infant mortality must have been particularly high inducing this desperate resort to supernatural forces. Another series of charms relate to the anxiety on the part of the wife and the bride’s family to ensure

¹ J. Beattie. op. cit, Ch. 5, 12 and 13; for a detailed case study which has great relevance for the study of prescientific systems of thought and beliefs, see Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (Oxford, 1937).
² Chandi, 6: “dākinī yoginī vandōν Sri dharmer pā, lubdha haiyā ye mor āsare kare ghā, tīni mor bhaginī āmi tār bhāī,” (Translation: “I bow to Dakini and Yogini as also at the feet of the august Dharma. She who (i.e., Dakini or Yogini), feeling tempted, appears in my place of assembly (for the recitation of the Panchali), is my sister and I am her brother.”)
³ Infra, Ch. VI, Section 1; Raghu, tithi-tattvam, Ahnikatattvam and Kṛitya-tattvam; infra, 172-73.
the steady affection of the husband and to secure domestic
harmony. It is significant that the entire magical paraphernalia
of vasikaran~ refer to the feminine eagerness to control their
men folk and to no corresponding anxiety on part of
men, a situation which derived almost certainly from the
emotional insecurity in which women had to live. Many of the
superstitions concerned what was auspicious and what was
inauspicious and included a series of taboos on items of diet on
particular days. Many events and objects outside the scope of
everyday experience were considered inauspicious. The belief
that the unusual portents something ominous is common enough
in pre-scientific societies. At times one encounters surprising
similarities even in matters of detail. For instance, the belief in
the ominous implications of a bird or an animal suddenly enter-
ing the homestead, is shared by the mediaeval Bengali with
several pre-industrial small-scale communities of modern times.1

Many of the taboos and rituals enshrined in the smriti
literature and thus absorbed into the intellectual great tradition
of Hinduism were closely linked to this belief in magic and
superstition. One of the clearest examples of this fact is the
proliferation of rituals connected with the early weeks in the
life of a child. Many of these, significantly, have now become
obsolete. The correct ritual conduct prescribed in Raghu-
inandana’s smriti indicates a preoccupation with the super-
natural as a prime determinant of the course of human life at
another level as well. There is a ritually correct way of doing
almost everything,—even the most mundane acts of the daily
routine. Similarly, there are ritually prescribed duties for
practically every day of the year.2 For a society not altogether
deficient in empiricism so far as many practical problems were
concerned, there is a remarkable dissociation of much that is
ritually prescribed from any empirically experienced necessity.
Why on leaving one’s bed in the morning one must put one’s
right foot first on the ground or squat facing a particular
direction while defecating3 are questions not answerable in
terms of any practical logic. The expected consequences of the

1 J. Beatties, op. cit., Ch. 12; Infra, 173.
2 Raghu, Tithitattvam and Kritya-tattvam.
3 Ibid., 121, 122.
ritually correct conduct, on the other hand, refer very much to the mundane aspects of life and only rarely to extra-terrestrial or transcendental aspirations. The giving of gifts on a particular day secures for the donor such benefits as long life, health and wealth. Chanting the name of a Purahicking on waking up leads to recovery of lost wealth. True, many of the actions are guaranteed to destroy the consequences of one's sins. There, too, the prime object is happiness in the life hereafter,—considered a continuation of one's life on earth,—rather than the attainment of moksha or liberation.

These attempts to attain secular ends through ritual means are in fact an emphatic expression of the belief in the magical power of objects, actions and events. This belief was extended to the notion of time as well and the intellectual tradition of neat schematization was harnessed to spell out in great detail the auspicious and inauspicious days and hours for the performance of every action which had a ritual dimension, even if essentially mundane. The vagueness with regard to the precise divisions of time one generally encounters in pre-scientific societies was totally absent in this particular sphere of Hindu life. The incorporation of this symbolic way of thought into the Hindu great tradition was total. Every prescription in the smriti texts is supported with copious citations from earlier authorities,—a fact which suggests that many assumptions of the great tradition itself were not so very different from the unsophisticated beliefs of the masses.

An important aspect of Hindu religious life is the tendency towards formation of sects. Bengal in the period under discussion witnessed more than one powerful expression of this tendency. At one level these tendencies reflect a conflict between the disciplinarian and genteel values of Brahminism on the one hand and the release of pent up passions in orgiastic practices and religious emotionalism on the other.

The power and influence of the Tantric beliefs and practices in mediaeval Bengal represent a significant victory of these anti-disciplinarian forces. In so far as the Tantras rejected caste practices and values at the level of esoteric practices and mystic

1 Ibid, 14, 15, 121.
2 Max Weber, The Religion of India, Ch. IV.
culture, the indirect challenge implicit in the Tantric system to the very basis of Hindu social organisation was indeed very great. By the eighteenth century, Tantric esoteric practices had penetrated even the genteel upper caste households.\(^1\) To that extent there must have been an erosion of caste values and the ritually prescribed codes of conduct. Tantricism however did not lead to the growth of a distinct sect claiming a monopoly of religious truth and directly challenging the orthodox Brahminical systems. It was essentially a mystic cult which, at the level of mass religion, could co-exist with other cults. Its subversive implications for the caste structure were indirect and on the whole limited in character. On the other hand the influence of Tantricism was so extensive that the more orthodox and genteel tradition of Brahminism had to compromise with it by adopting in a modified form many of its beliefs and ritual practices. Orthodoxy, however, firmly rejected the practitioner of the \textit{kulachara} orgies. In Raghunandana's \textit{smriti a kapalika} is as much an untouchable as a person of the lower caste.\(^2\)

The other important sectarian development in the period was the neo-Vaishnava movement complete with its own particular form of challenge to Brahminical disciplinarianism and a claim to the monopoly of truth and salvation. Within the Chaitanya movement caste separation was significantly modified.\(^3\) Even the barriers to inter-caste commensality were at least temporarily forgotten on the great religious occasions called the \textit{Mahotsavas}. In our period, however, the followers of Chaitanya were being gradually reabsorbed into Hindu orthodoxy. \textit{Inter alia} the \textit{gosvamins} at Vrindavana drew up for them a new code of ritual conduct on the lines of the standard Hindu \textit{smritis}.

At the lower level of Vaishnava society the Sahajiyas represented a more serious challenge to the established caste order and Brahminical values both in terms of their rejection of the caste system and their adoption of mystic beliefs and practices which had a clearly orgiastic dimension. In the characteristic tradition of Hindu sects, the lower order of Vaishnava society eventually constituted a new caste, the

\(^1\) \textit{Supra}, p. 11, f. n. 2.

\(^2\) \textit{Infra}, 129; \textit{Raghu}, 193.

\(^3\) \textit{Supra}, p. 25, f. n. 3.
Boshtams, excluded from commensality with upper caste Vaishnavas and with a well-defined position in the hierarchy of Hindu castes.

Already in our period the growth of the Sahajiya cult revealed an interesting pattern of culture conflict. The tendency towards orgiastic practices were sought to be refined and presented in terms of transcendental mysticism.\(^1\) That the development of Vaishnavism itself resulted in culture conflict is evident from the repeated references to vegetarianism as a laudable practice side by side with statements implying the acceptability of animal sacrifice both morally and ritually. This culture conflict is typically represented in the heart-searching of Mukundarama’s Hunter Hero Kalaketu. He feels uncertain as to whether his profession which he has always followed in good faith is a source of sin or not.\(^2\)

In relation to the comparative changelessness in the other areas of life, the developments in religion in our period were marked by significant mutations. Even the Mughal conquest and the administrative changes associated with it primarily affected only the top level of the political system. The expansion of the external market in India and abroad,—mostly after our period,—induced some changes in economic organisation. Their impact, however, was limited to relatively small sections of the population and did not go very deep.

This asymmetrical pattern of change is not easy to explain. It seems, however, to be fairly typical of historical developments in India in other periods and regions as well. One may venture a somewhat shaky hypothesis in explanation of this phenomenon. Compared to the caste organisation and the code of ritual conduct, the systems of political and economic relationships in India were relatively flexible and open, offering at least some scope to individual aspirations. Besides, the rural masses, the totally underprivileged bottom layer excepted, had only limited experience of political and economic inequality in their daily life. This may have reduced the potentialities of

\(^1\) *Infra*, 134-35, 155f.

\(^2\) *Chandi*, 71; Mukundarama himself while mentioning without any repugnance the custom of animal sacrifice (*ibid.*, 82) also informs us that he had long given up eating fish and meat (*ibid.*, 8).
tension and hence of change, however intense the exploitation from above might have been. The tensions in the politico-economic system were contained within it through institutionalized expression in rebellions and mass migrations. Such sanctions were very much a part of the system, not instruments of change.

The rigorous hierarchy of the caste order and the severe demands of ritually correct conduct appear to have generated very deep tensions. The mechanism of adjustment had to be something radical. Since the caste order and the code of rituals were not backed by physical force, changes affecting these areas of life also did not involve its use. The task of innovation thus became relatively easy. The formation of sects as the institutionalized expression of tensions in the areas of belief, rituals and caste hierarchy is perhaps explicable in these terms. As Weber has pointed out, this too implied only a limited change, for the sects were reabsorbed into the caste order with hardly any exception, and thus brought back into the fold of ritualistic rigour. Sects immured in the folk tradition of a freer life tried hard to keep open a back-door of mystic culture. Their low status in the caste hierarchy probably derived partly from their caste origins and partly from their failure to conform totally.

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The undermentioned volumes published in recent years have some bearing on the subject-matter of the present work:


Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal* (down to A.D. 1538) (Dacca, 1959).

*Dacca: The Mughal Capital* (Dacca, 1964)


M.R. Tarafdar, *Hussain Shahi Bengal* (Dacca, 1959)

A.F.M. Abdul Jalil *Sundarbaner Itihas* (in Bengali) (Khulna, 1967)

Dr. Om Prakash's unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Delhi University), "The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1650-1717" contains *inter alia* information which proves that the first Dutch settlements in Bengal were established only around 1650 and not earlier as is suggested in this book *(infra, 97)*.

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*Delhi.*
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