



Social Structure of the Kapalis of Bengal

An Oral Historical Approach

Prasenjit Sarkar

Abstract. – The article is an attempt to understand the social structure of a little-known Hindu caste population of rural Bengal, traditionally dependent upon the jute-centered economy. The population is widely distributed in different districts of undivided Bengal and is known as Kapali and Vaishya Kapali, which are synonymous. The government of West Bengal declared both of them as Other Backward Classes (OBC). Serious research and documentary evidence on the caste population in general are numerous. In the case of the Kapali, the primary way of doing research is by using the oral historical approach. Special emphasis is given to the immigrant informants from Bangladesh. Findings suggest that the Kapali society vertically divides into major groups on the basis of geography and cultural practices. Each one was further vertically segmented into *samaj* and stratified again. Many vertical sections are reported. Each vertical section is called *samaj* and each one is socially isolated. *Kulinism* was practiced in the *samaj*. The contemporary society is undivided having no social hierarchy in West Bengal. These kinds of divisions, however, are present in Bangladesh even today. Through time, the rigidity of the *samaj* is diluted and a series of changes in social structure is observed. Findings also suggest that ecology and politics played vital roles in the change of social structure of the Kapali *samaj*. [*India, Bengal, Kapali, kulinism, abhijata, moulik, samaj, char land*]

Prasenjit Sarkar, M.Sc., Ph.D., Assistant Professor in anthropology at Bangabasi Morning College (University of Calcutta). Last few years he is engaged in research on the “Kapalis”, a little known caste population in India. He has published articles on anthropology and allied disciplines in journals like *Anthropos*, *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, *The Ripples* and in books. He also has edited two books and another is in process.

Introduction

The Kapali is a little known, Bengali-speaking, indigenous, Hindu caste population (Mukherjee et al. 1996). Traditionally, they were cultivators by occu-

pation and widely distributed in different districts of West Bengal and different neighbouring States (Risley 1892). Census information from 1872–1931 shows, that the population was also distributed in large numbers in the different districts of East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh (Mukherjee et al. 1996). It is also claimed that the population had originally resided in Kashmir from where they went to Bengal (Mitra 1951 [1914]). In the 1931 Census of India, the caste population was considered a depressed class (Porter 1933). The Government of Bengal in 1933 declared the Kapali as a scheduled caste and published this in *The Calcutta Gazette* (1933: 44). But a small urban-based elite section of the Kapalis gave a representation on 11.02.1933 to the Government of Bengal, with a view to remove the name of the Kapali caste from the list of scheduled castes. But the majority of the caste population remained in the dark. The presentation was accepted and published in *The Calcutta Gazette* on 03.01.1935. At present they are included in the list of OBC's (i.e., Other Backward Classes) in West Bengal. In general, it may be stated that Kapalis are mostly rural and agro-based poor people. They also identify themselves as “Vaishya Kapali,” which strengthens their Vaishya Varna affiliation. It is interesting to note that not a single family could be traced who had no agricultural land in the villages studied, though the quantity may be small, thus justifying their traditional occupation. The percentage of literacy among the population is significantly high.

The purpose of the present study is to assess the social structure (sections and interrelations among

them) of a little studied and even less known caste population of Bengal. The present article is an attempt to explore the different divisions and sections or parts and the arrangement of these within the society to understand the order of social relations which are built up one upon another.

Methodology

Initially, data were collected from four different agro-based, Kapali dominated villages, e.g., Polta, Kamardanga, Madia, and Chalki under Swarupnagar, Basirhat, Baduria, and Gopalnagar police station areas, respectively from North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. In the course of doing research on the ethnohistory of the Kapali, which is a little known and studied population of Bengal, it was noticed from an interview with an old informant, in the second month of 2005, that the caste under consideration was stratified until six to seven decades before the present. That interview gave some clue and impetus to search into the hierarchical structure of the society. Based on that clue, in-depth study into the matter started.

Interestingly, only a few older persons, mostly octogenarian immigrant informants, are aware of the former basic structure of the Kapali society. To avoid any kind of controversy as the result of the fragile memory of these informants, special emphasis was put on cross-checking. The present generation has no knowledge about this. No written record is available in this regard. On the basis of the information gleaned from his informants, the researcher was able to trace some of the possible areas where the earlier structures can still be found, in Bangladesh.

Special emphasis, therefore, was put on immigrant informants who once lived in the territory of present Bangladesh but migrated to India, especially after the independence of India in 1947, and in 1971 after Bangladesh gained its independence as well. These are comparatively more knowledgeable and aware of the sections of Kapali society with its varied forms, its hierarchical nature, interrelations, and the functions of the parts. Data were also collected from some tourist informants who, from time to time, might visit a relative in India, all with a view to understand the present society in Bangladesh. Actually, this kind of structure was still predominant in those areas. Elderly people, who were original inhabitants of Bengal, were not so aware or clear about the history of their own society. Probably this kind of hierarchical structure was absent or not as predominant in their area as it was in the area

of those who migrated from the Bangladesh area. In this attempt, due to lack of any kind of documentary evidence, the oral historical method is applied to collect data.

In most of the cases, the interview method was generally applied and followed by an open-ended questionnaire. Some immigrant informants, who came to India after the 1990s and onwards, were also interviewed with a view to cross-check the data and to understand the present situation of the society or *samaj* in present Bangladesh. For the same purpose, the researcher interviewed many immigrant informants from different parts of West Bengal beyond those mentioned above. In the course of field study, several issues of two caste journals, *Samaj Barta* and *Yugochetana* (Mallick 1995: 14) and two booklets on the caste were used (Kargupta 1991, Tagore 1963), from which some of the clues in support of the presence of different sections could be traced. After subsequent cross-checking, the data was analysed.

The Kapali Society and Origin of Hierarchy: A Historical Perspective

Brief Review

The Kapali and Vaishya Kapali are nothing but factions of a single population. Both of them claim common origin. From the ethnohistorical study it can be shown that the population divided into two groups in 1935, in connection with a controversy relating to the inclusion and exclusion of the caste as a scheduled caste. Now both sections are declared as OBCs in West Bengal. Until now one of the sections is fighting for scheduled caste status, while the other section thinks this would be derogatory.

From careful study it could be stated that the Kapali society was segmented into many sections and each one stratified again. The divisions were of two types: a) vertical divisions and b) horizontal divisions (sections); they were nothing but territorial divisions, having their own culture and distinguishable identity, locally known as *samaj*, while horizontal divisions consider the social hierarchy within the caste. Each section or *samaj* was stratified, autonomous in the case of making rules and decision-making. All the sections were endogamous and have their own name for identity and social boundary.

These kinds of divisions and stratification existed in rudimentary form until the 1950s and then gradually disappeared in Bangladesh. The present generation in the area studied and in other parts of West

Bengal as well is not aware of these issues, with the exception of a few older persons.

If we look back to the ancient Kapali society, we may get an idea about the social status and structure of the society. With reference to Dr. Wise's notes, Risley (1892: 422) mentioned that in Eastern Bengal the Kapalis were engaged in cultivating jute (*kostha*). W. W. Hunter (1998 [1875]: 59) described them as a poor caste population. He also mentioned that the Kapalis generally resided in villages from where they can cultivate jute, never in large towns. O'Malley (1913: 232), Thompson (1923: 355), Porter (1931: 307), Mitra (1951: 78), and Bhattacharya (1995 [1896]: 181) have all described the Kapalis, as a caste with the traditional occupation of weaving. Some of the Kapalis identify themselves as Vaishya Kapali also.

Actually, the Kapalis and Vaishya Kapalis apply both terms to themselves. The caste population was vertically divided into small sections or *samaj* and each was isolated from others. In most of the cases, the section or *samaj* consisted of twenty to thirty villages, sometimes more. Each *samaj* was further stratified into several horizontal divisions. Members of each stratum enjoyed some sanctioned privileges and rights according to its place in the hierarchy. The hierarchical structure of each *samaj* was different. Membership in a stratum was ascribed. Each *samaj* had the autonomy to make rules for its members. A web of relations links all the strata with each other. *Kulinism* (s. below) was practised in the Kapali *samaj*.

Historical Background: *kulinism* in Ancient Bengal

In the Sen Dynasty, King Ballal Sen (A.D. 1159–1179) introduced social reforms with the emergence of orthodox Hinduism or *kulinism* in Bengal. The object of practising *kulinism* was to preserve the supremacy of Brahmins and to make divisions within the society and to rule the society by those who were influential. Most of the caste leaders at the time thought *kulinism* was sacred and began to practise *kulinism*. After a long period, the Kapali society, like others, also began to practise *kulinism*. It divided the society into vertical and horizontal divisions. *Kulinism* was a pernicious system in Bengal and today it is nowhere found.

There is a historical explanation for this. In the A.D. 8th or 9th century there was a Vaidya king in Bengal named Adisura, who celebrated a *yajna* (sacrifice) because there was a drought. At the time there were no learned Brahmins in Bengal to perform the *yajna*, so he brought some Brahmins from

Kanya Kubija, who were versed in the Veda and competent to perform the sacrifice required. The five Brahmins were: Bhattanarayana of Sandilya gotra, Sriharsha of Bharadwaja gotra, Vedagarva of Sawarna gotra, Chhandara of Vatsya gotra, and Daksha of Kasyapa gotra.

These five Brahmins brought five Kayastha servants with them, e.g., Makaranda Ghosh, Kali Dasa Mitra, Dasaratha Guha, Dasaratha Basu, and Purushottama Datta. These five Brahmins and their five Kayastha servants were honoured as *kulina* in Bengal. Those who lived in North Bengal (Barendra land) were called the Barendra Brahmins and those who lived in West Bengal were called Rarhi Brahmins. In spite of a common origin, owing to their different geographical localities, they cannot socially mix with each other.

After many years, Shyamal Varma, another Kshatriya king also brought five Brahmins from Conouj, viz., Sanaka, Bhardwaja, Savarna, Sandilya, Vasistha. The descendants of these Brahmins were known as Vaidik Brahmins. They are divided into Paschtya (West Bengal) and Dakshinatya (South Bengal). No marital relations could be made between these two classes, due to the different geographical identity. They are again divided into four tiers (horizontal divisions), i.e., Phule, Vallabhi, Kharda, and Sarvanandi. Any of these can take food prepared by any other; but no marriage can take place between them.

Anthropological Understanding

The term *kulin* means noble born. Many social rules were imposed to keep nobility. Owing to this system, a *kulin* Brahman was often obliged to keep his daughter unmarried forever for want of a bridegroom of the same rank of *kulins* as he himself was. It happened, that one *kulin* Brahman married some 300 girls or else those poor girls would not have been married and would have been ostracized from the society.

The Kshatriya caste was rare in Bengal. The Kshatriyas who live in Bengal cannot socially mix with their northwestern province counterparts because of their geographical isolation. Neither can any original Vaishya be found in Bengal. The Sudras were not of Aryan descent. The Kayasthas were divided into three groups, e.g., the Uttara Rarhis, the Dakshina Rarhis, and the Bangajas, who could take food cooked by one another, but could not marry outside of their own group.

There were very important social rules with regard to the *kulinism* and marriage of Kayasthas who

were present in West Bengal. All the Ghoshes, the Basus, and the Mitras should be called *kulins*, but there were different orders or tiers of *kulins* within them. The first three sons of a good *kulin* should also be good *kulins*; his fourth, fifth, sixth, or another son's social rank was gradually inferior to the former etc. Some other rules are also followed with a view to keep the integrity of the social position.

Thus it becomes clear that *kulinism* started to deal with the Sudras, who were the majority of the population, as they were of non-Aryan origin and were not concerned with these rules. *Kulinism* was only developed in populations which accepted the domination of Brahmins and observed strict caste rules.

After a long year, Vallalaseña introduced the institution of *kulinism* in Bengal. The position of a caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy was also determined according to his good will. It is said that the Kapalis were asked to serve water to the Brahmins but they refused. The king became angry and the Kapalis' social position was degraded. Being influenced by this royal idea, the elites and influential sectors of most of the castes of Bengal began to practise *kulinism*, which stratified the society hierarchically within the caste with a view to keep dominance over the rest of the society. The knowledge regarding the early history of *kulinism* was based on the texts known as "Kulajishastras." In the same way, the Kapalis were also stratified horizontally and practised *kulinism*. The hierarchical position of a caste member was defined and structured. The system had its own ways of social control and of maintaining social boundaries.

Vertical Sections of the Kapali Society

Taking into account various characteristics like food habits, ritual practices, and geographical locations, Kapali society was divided into four major vertical subdivisions. These divisions were also rigid and some felt superior to others. Those subbranches were: 1) Kapalis of "Shukla Paksha" and "Krishna Paksha," 2) "Ghati" and "Bangal" Kapali, 3) "Magua" Kapali, and 4) "Nara" Kapali. In ancient Bengal each of the groups had its social boundary. The Kapalis of Shukla Paksha and Krishna Paksha were rival groups, based on cultural practices. Strict social isolation was practiced. The Ghati and Bangal were the same. The social position of the Magua was the lowest with the Nara Kapalis above them. But each subbranch consisted of many *samaj*.

Kapalis of Shukla Paksha and Krishna Paksha

According to Vedic philosophy, Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya are considered Dwija (twice-born) castes. It is stated that the first birth is the real birth of an individual and the second one is followed by his culture (*sanskar*). Deviation from culture caused social degradation and became the Sudra. The *kulins* of Binodpur Samaj were known as Shukla Paksha and the *moulik* or *akulin* were known as Krishna Paksha. The persons who observed the caste norms properly, as prescribed by the ancient monk Manu, were known as Kapalis of Shukla Paksha, while the deviants were known as Kapalis of Krishna Paksha. These were rival groups. Marriages between the rival groups could not be made even in the recent past. Aged immigrant informants from Dacca, Mymensingh, Pabna, Goalanda, etc. of Bengal, are well aware of this fact.

Magua Kapali

Hundreds of years ago, Arakan Mug pirates once forcibly acquired several islands in the Bay of coastal Bengal. They often looted the settlements on the banks of the rivers and tributaries of lower Bengal. Those *dacoits* were locally known as "Magua Dakat." At that time, *dacoit* victims were considered as untouchable and no social relations were maintained. The Mug *dacoits* tortured the Kapalis from Noakhali, Barishal, Khulna, Faridpore, and the Jessore district of Bengal, who were known as Magua Kapali (Kargupta 1991: 145). The entry of foreigners into the house and torture caused social degradation. The mainstream population considered them lower in status. They were ill-treated by the *kulins* (Mallick 1995: 14).

Ghati Kapali

In West Bengal now, there is a small section of the Kapalis known as Ghati, whose ancient homeland was Dacca, Pabna, and the Rajsahi district of Bangladesh. During the regime of Nawab Mubarakud-daula, due to a famine thousands of people were forced to leave the country in the 1770s. They settled in Kusthia, North 24 Parganas, Jessore, Khulna, Nadia, and different parts of Bengal. Since independence in 1947, these districts are now in West Bengal (India). Migration into a new country and a new ecosystem, with new cultural contacts, and, last of all, poverty caused drastic cultural change among them. Their previous aristocracy and the *purdah* sys-

tem gradually disappeared. Their women folk began to participate in the agricultural work; the upper part of the body was covered by a small piece of cloth. It is also reported that they used a small jar (in Bengali called *ghati*) for carrying water for latrine purposes as well as for drinking water. Such practices were viewed very harshly by the Kapalis of East Bengal, who thus considered them simply as “Ghati,” while the Ghatis disagreed with this opinion and appellation and called the other group “Banga.” Cultural differences, including language, especially pronunciation, food habits, and ritual practices could also be observed between the two and both had strong in-group sentiments. Both of them claimed themselves to be culturally superior to the other, mentioning some bad practices of the other. These are nothing but geographically isolated sections.

Nara Kapali

A small section of the Kapalis resided in north Bengal, mostly in Fashideoa, Rajgunge, and Falakata, and in the Jalpaiguri area. These were locally known as Kawali or Nara Kapali. Probably most of them had migrated from the Kusthia, Rajsahi, etc. area, several hundred years ago. Reasons for this migration could not be ascertained. At that time, those said hilly areas were dominated by aboriginals. It is reported that their culture was different and some of them remained half naked. Culture contact and poverty drastically changed their life. One source also supports this view (see Singh 2007). At the time, this area was under Koch Bihar or Kamtapore and was ruled by the Koch King Naranarayan, from A.D. 1554 to 1587. Local people (beyond Kamtapore state) recognised the Kapali immigrants as tenants of the “Narak,” (means hail) state, a corrupt form of the ancient Kamtapore state. Probably that is why they were called Nara Kapali (Kargupta 1991: 151). Actually the term was used as a way of putting down the caste by others.

All the sections again denote another type of hierarchy (and oppression), which also simultaneously prevailed in Kapali society in ancient times. Geographical and cultural differences were the reason for division. By mentioning some cultural practices as bad, each group abused other groups. Social isolation is reported, but how far that was true could not be verified due to lack of data. Contextually, none of the above subbranches could be traced now, except the Ghati and Bangal.

No documentary evidence could be collected regarding this *samaj*. During the field study special emphasis was put on the old immigrant informants,

mostly from Dacca, Jessore, Khulna, Mymensingh, etc. of present-day Bangladesh, as well as on “sons of the soil” who are residing now in the different districts of West Bengal. Brief information of about twenty-four *samaj* could be collected from different sources. A list of the *samaj* and their tentative jurisdiction is given below. Some informants were too old to recall their childhood memories. Jurisdiction of some *samaj* could not be collected due to lack of information. As far as the data suggests, there is a close similarity between the rules and hierarchical structure of the *samaj*, irrespective of the territory, obviously with minor exceptions.

The first Kapali *samaj* was established in Binodpur, in the district of Dacca of Bangladesh. The place is now in the riverbed of the Padma. Binodpur encompassed vast territory, extending up to the coastal districts of the ancient Bay of Bengal. This vast territory became uncontrollable by a centralised authority. Naturally, Binodpur Samaj was divided into several smaller *samaj* and further divided on the basis of locality. The Kapalis were good cultivators. After four or five generations, in search of new agricultural land they shifted to new land built up by silt deposited in new river beds. This was called char land and was suitable for cultivation. Gradually within a few years new villages were formed and a new *samaj* was constituted accordingly.

Through time, minor modifications were also incorporated in its structure and rules. In most of the cases, each *samaj* consisted of twenty to thirty villages and some times also more. The name of the *samaj* was derived mostly either from the name of a place or from the name of the leader. Each *samaj* was autonomous in making rules, but the influence of Binodpur Samaj remained constant. Naturally, close similarity in terms of structure and constitution existed among all the *samaj*. Each *samaj* was very conservative and each one thought itself superior to others. A *samaj* was divided into *kulin*, or aristocrat, or of noble descent and *mouliks*, or *akulin*, or *abhajan* (common people). A *samaj* was headed up by the *kulins* and spiritual guides (priests). Often, one *samaj* criticised the members of another *samaj*. Within a *samaj* marriage endogamy was practised. *Kulin* leaders controlled all the social functions, like community festivals and ceremonies, dispute resolutions, and many other matters. Any violation of social norms was treated as a severe offence. Monetary and physical punishment was given; one could even be ostracised from the society.

The *samaj* was often so isolated that sometimes they had no idea about the presence of other Kapali *samaj* elsewhere. It is reported that some larger *samaj* were also further divided into several *pargana*

Serial No.	Name of the <i>samaj</i>	Tentative distribution (in 1940s) in undivided Bengal
1.	24 Parganas Samaj	Bongaon and Basirhat subdivision areas of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal
2.	Natna Samaj	Khoksa and Janipore area of Kusthia district of Bangladesh
3.	Mrityunjay Samaj	Kalna, Maheshgunj, Agradeep, Gholapara, Samudra Garh and Katwa of Burdwan district, West Bengal
4.	Noabad Samaj	Nil
5.	Sreemanta Samaj	Galda, Basuntia and adjacent large area of Jessore district of undivided Bangladesh
6.	Sujaypore Samaj	Nil
7.	Basanta Roy Samaj	Budge Budge and Bauria of South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal
8.	Bikrampur Samaj	Nil
9.	Brahma Samaj	Nil
10.	Ramkrishnapur Samaj	Ramkrishnapur and Bauria of Howrah district, West Bengal
11.	Suda Samaj	Beliaghata area of east Kolkata, West Bengal
12.*	Binodpur Samaj	Vast area of Dacca, Mymensingh and Pabna district (earliest <i>samaj</i>), Bangladesh, which was later divided into smaller ones
13.	Mansai Samaj	Mollahat P. S. of Khulna, Kalia P. S. of Jessore district and Gopalgunj P. S. of Faridpore district, Bangladesh
14.	Jamalpur Samaj	Nil
15.	Fatepur Samaj	Nil
16.	Fatheabad Samaj	Nil
17.	Kaksa Samaj	Nil
18.	Sandeep Samaj	Sandeep P. S. island area under Chattogram district, Bangladesh
19.	Chalna Samaj	Dakop P. S. area under Khulna district, Bangladesh
20.	Kolkata Samaj	Bahubazar, Kapali Tola Lane, Kolkata, West Bengal
21.	Nagardi Samaj	Madaripore subdivision of Faroidpore district, Bangladesh
22.	Binod Roy Samaj	Parts of Gopalgunge and Madaripore subdivision of Faridpore district, Bangladesh
23.	Manashi Samaj	Some parts of Gopal Gunge and Madaripore subdivision of Faridpore district, Bangladesh
24.	Mamansahi Samaj	Some parts of Jessore district, Bangladesh

* Earliest *samaj*, latter broken into so many smaller *samaj*.

(Mallick 1995: 13) for better administration. They had their own social boundary. Members from one *samaj* were treated as untouchable to others. Social leaders ruled the society and some welfare work was also reported by them.

Nil indicating jurisdictions could not be traced so far. Contextually, it is to be mentioned that after the Indian independence major delimitation of districts and subdivisions occurred.

Table 1: A List of the Ancient Kapali *samaj* (vertical sections) of Undivided Bengal.

Table 2: Structure of Vertical Divisions of Kapali Caste.

The Kapali Caste Population (Undivided Bengal)
Major Regional Divisions (Magua Kapali, Ghati Kapali, etc.)
Minor Divisions or <i>samaj</i> (Chalna Samaj, Kolkata Samaj, etc.)
<i>Pargana</i> (Mamansahi Samaj was divided in two <i>pargana</i> , e.g., “Naldi,” “Mahatpur,” etc.)

Horizontal Sections of the Kapali Society

There was a *samaj*, named “Manashi,” now in Bangladesh. The octogenarian immigrant informant described that his *samaj*, in the 1940s, was two-storied, i.e., *kulin* and *moulik*. Hierarchically, *kulin* status was superior to *moulik* status. The *samaj* consisted of 22 villages. The possession of some good qualities like education, property, wisdom, pilgrimage, charity or donation, etc. were the criteria for acquisition of *kulin* status. It was an ascribed status. Thus the status was inherited through generations, even if the next generations were not characterised by the above qualifications. Five families, i.e., Mridha, Chowdhuri, Sardar, Mandal, and Mitra from different villages were considered *kulin*.

Any social function was organised with the formal permission of the *kulins*. They were especially honoured at the social function. They were seated in the first row, they gave the permission to start the marriage ritual, food was served first to them, etc. Minor disputes were settled by the village leaders and larger disputes were settled by the *samaj* leaders. These leaders (locally called *mutabbar*) might be from *kulin* or *moulik*, were selected by virtue of intellect, education, capability, and popular support (sometimes by kinsmen also). Sometimes they were borrowed from other villages also.

The *mutabbars* were able to settle all types of disputes, civil and criminal, even in the case of heinous offences like murder; the complaint was not registered in the local police station. *Kulin* or *moulik* was not a matter of consideration in decision-making. Decisions of the leader had to be obeyed; the one who did not do so was subject to being ostracised from the society. Marriage within the group, or endogamy, was required. Eating mutton, chicken, turtle, and onion was strictly prohibited. Violations were brought on punishment.

These kinds of orthodox practices prevailed until the 1950s. Honour was given to the educated per-

sons rather than to the *kulins* in the society. Gradually, the *samaj* became flexible. It is reported that in 1952, from the *samaj* from the village Char Mustafapur, a (university?) graduate person’s marriage was solemnised with someone from another *samaj*, for want of a qualified bride groom in her own group. The *samaj* accepted the marriage, though it was undesired. Even today, *kulin* and *moulik* concepts still prevail in some areas in Bangladesh, but functionally they are no longer so strictly observed.

Table 3: Social Structure of the “Manashi” Samaj.

Five Aristocrat Families (<i>kulin</i>)
Mridha (Charmustafapur and others), Chowdhuri (Charmustafapur and others), Sardar (from different villages), Mandal (Gopalgunj and others), Mitra (from different villages)
Remaining Families of the <i>samaj</i> (<i>moulik</i> or <i>akulin</i>)
(Title: Kar, Ojha, Baidya, Bapari, Dhar, Basu, Shikdar, etc.)

The “Mansai” Samaj consisted of 25 villages. The *samaj* was stratified into two groups, i.e., Sarik or Kulin and Moulik or Akulin. Seven families, e.g., Mitra, Dutta, Bose, Ghosh, Biswas, Das, Shikdar (surname) from different villages were considered *sarik* or *kulin*. The *sarik* position was higher and respected in the society. The *samaj* had its own constitution to rule the society. Eating any kind of meat, wine, onion was strictly prohibited. A social function started only with the prior permission of the social leaders. Marriage endogamy was strictly observed.

From the political perspective, there were two councils, i.e., a central and a village-level council. In every village, there was a village council to look after the village. Cases of the violation of a social norm were reported to the village council. In addition to separate village councils there were also leaders for the *sariks* and *mouliks* in the *samaj*. Leaders were called “*samajpati*.” They were selected by the villagers. Minor disputes were solved by the village council (*gramya salish*), while major disputes were decided by the central level council or *pargana*. It was mandatory to carry out the decisions of the village council.

It is also reported by one of the informants, that previously *samaj* was more stratified, but he could not throw further light on that. They had their own priests who were upper-caste Brahmans and who were especially paid and not accepted by the other

samaj. In decision-making, the Brahman's position was after the *kulins*.

Bringing a bride from the *kulin* family to a *moulik* family was prestigious. More respect was shown to a bride brought from a *kulin* family than the bride brought from the *moulik* family. A bride-price of Rs. 16 was paid to the bride's parents by the groom's family in the first, while Rs. 12 were paid in case of the second. In the *kulin* family, a *moulik* bride could not participate in all social functions. Women's position in the society was good. A mother of ten live children was especially honoured. There was no discrimination between the children of the two types of mothers.

Table 4: Social Structure of the "Mansai" Samaj.

Seven Aristocrat Families (<i>sarik</i> or <i>kulin</i>)
Mitra (Mollarkul and others), Dutta (Manikhar and others), Bose (Faridpore), Ghosh (Potla, Nalamara), Biswas (Mollarkul, Kachudanga, Pachudia, and others), Das (Manikhar, Nalamara), Shikdar (Jogani, Kachudanga)
Remaining Families of the <i>samaj</i> (<i>moulik</i> or <i>akulin</i>)
(Title: Biswas, Kar, Kargupta, Ojha, Bhowmick, etc.)

In the course of the field study, a booklet was found which had no publication year, no references, and no mention of data sources.¹ The title of the booklet is "*Gnan Manjusa o Baishya Kapalir Atmakahin*". It was written in Bengali by Sri Janaki Kargupta, in which he briefly and incompletely described the hierarchical social structure of Binodpur Samaj.

One of the key informants, Sri Biman Kumar Mitra, 78, from Bongaon, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, could personally identify Kargupta. He reported that Kargupta was from a *moulik* family of the Mansai Samaj in Bangladesh. After migrating to India, he took up residence in the Darjeeling district. Kargupta's description also supports the stratified structure of the society and there is a similarity with the present findings. Here the society was stratified into five strata or horizontal divisions.

As reported by the daughter-in-law of the author, the booklet probably was published in 1991. The

author died in 1992. He claimed that the Binodpur Samaj was formed sometimes after the Sen dynasty. No records are available in this regard. The younger generation now is not so interested in past history. Only a few aged informants, who could hardly remember the sayings of their early days, still show an interest.

Naturally, the possibility to again reestablish the structure of the society is remote. More especially the immigrant informants from Bangladesh were the only ones who could throw light on the structure of the society, but this finding supports the view of Kargupta. As a secondary source of data it has enormous importance, at least in the present context, to justify the present finding from the immigrants from Bangladesh. The description of the Binodpur Samaj, as given by Kargupta in his book, is presented in a reconstructed diagrammatic form. Oral as well as historical records corroborated each other. In addition, a possible way of evolution of the social structure of the Kapali *samaj* is depicted.

In the Sen Dynasty in Bengal, King Ballal Sen introduced the institution of *kulinism* in Bengal. There was a belief among the people of Bengal of that time, that *kulinism* was sacred. Being influenced by that idea, they began to develop the institution of *kulinism* each in its own caste. Naturally, most of the castes of Bengal were horizontally divided and stratified the society into *aristocrat* or *abhijata* and *fundamental* or *moulik* sections on the basis of social rank and status. For the same purpose, the Kapalis formed the Binodpur Samaj, occupying the vast territory of Dacca, Mymensingh, and Pabna districts. Because of the large concentration of the caste population, adjoining districts up to Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri in the north were also included in the *samaj* of this time.

The southern part of Bengal at this time was covered by the Bay of Bengal, but gradually alluvial land and islands were developed across the coastal region of southern Bengal and new settlements grew up in that area. Agriculture was the main economy of the population. Jurisdiction of the Binodpur Samaj was also increased simultaneously with the increase and dynamics of the population. Naturally, difficulties developed in this vast territory. It became hard to maintain the regular communication necessary to administer the *samaj*. In the meantime, some people became more influential, accumulated power, and refused to be administered by the *samaj* due to this loose administration. As a result, the Binodpur Samaj was vertically divided into several *samaj*. Thus each one became an independent social unit.

In the dynasty of Ballal Sen, just before forming the Binodpur Samaj, several Kapalis laid claim to

¹ The researcher personally visited the house of this author at Shiliguri (August, 2010), West Bengal, about seven hundred kilometers away from Kolkata. It is reported from his family members that the book was published in 1991 and that the author died in 1992. The author was a poor tailor by profession and loved to travel to different parts of the country. In search of data, he extensively travelled to different parts of ancient Bangladesh, Assam, and Nepal, but they could throw no more light upon the data.

aristocrat (*kulin*) status. For this purpose, a meeting was held by a *samanta* (a landlord and social leader) at Jaynagar (now in the bed of the river Padma) in Dacca, in Bangladesh. Representatives from different areas attended the meeting and several decisions were taken. They created a draft constitution of the caste (and *samaj*), their mode of solidarity, occupation, rituals and practices, etc. During this meeting, the constitution was accepted unanimously by the caste. Thus the Kapali society became stratified and inequality of status started. The hierarchical structure of Binodpur Samaj is described below.

Kargupta (1991) described the “Binodpur” Samaj briefly. On the basis of different good qualities, four families were considered “aristocrat” (in Bengali *abhijata*). These four families were famous and respectable and practically acted like feudatory princes of Dacca and Pabna district of Bengal. They were Sardars (surname) of Bansbari (place of residence), Roys (surname) of Khatakpur, Majumders (surname) of Joyda, and Tarafdars (surname) of Athalia. These four families, each again employed three families (one from each tier), from which the following persons were recruited: a) an intelligent person as advisor, b) a security person or *lathial*, and c) a servant or *sebait*, for service and beautification. None of the servants could be traced.

Table 5: Social Structure of the “Binodpur” Samaj (as prescribed at Joynagar in Dacca).

Four Aristocrat Families (<i>abhijata</i>)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sardars of Bansbari 2. Roys of Khatakpur 3. Majumders of Joyda 4. Tarafdars of Athalia 	
Each Aristocrat Family Employed One Family from Each Tier and Surname	
<i>kulin</i>	
A. Knowledgeable Person as Advisor from a Family	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hazra 2. Talukder 3. Bhowmick 4. Basuli 	
B. Lathial or Security Person from a Family	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Modals of Voyda 2. Khans of Oudichpur 3. Shikders of Kadurgaon 4. Mitras of Itilpur 	
C. Servant or <i>sebait</i> from a Family	
(None of the four family’s identity could be established)	
Fundamental Section of the <i>samaj</i>	
(<i>akulin</i> or <i>moulik</i>)	
(Kargupta 1991)	

The first four families were recognized as aristocrat (*abhijata*) and later twelve families (from a, b, and c) became *kulin* (noble descent), and remaining persons from the caste were known as “fundamental” sections or *akulin* (in Bengali *abhajan* or *moulik*). In the society, Brahmin priests were ranked after the *kulins*.

The following decisions were taken in the meeting held at Binodpur in Bangladesh:²

1. Formation of a draft constitution of the caste.
2. Above-mentioned social structure of the caste *samaj*.
3. Caste would be identified as “Vaishya Kapali” instead of “Kapali.”
4. No person of the caste would be allowed to accept any other caste’s occupation.
5. Performance of blamable work would be viewed as an offence in the society.
6. Justice would be dealt with by the social leaders (*samajpati*).
7. Social cultural functions would be organised subject to the prior approval of the social leaders.
8. Violation of the social norms is liable to be punished by ostracism.
9. Vedic rituals would be performed by the Brahmins.
10. Object and ideology of the caste would parallel the Varna Hindus.

The *abhijatas* and the *kulins* usually carried in their hand a special kind of stick, the handle of which was covered with brass, locally known as *koda lathi*. They wore a moustache and fearlessly moved around the *samaj* areas within their jurisdiction. Prior permission from them was mandatory for the commencement of any social function (Kargupta 1991).

The basic structure or hierarchical system of the *samaj* was more or less the same with minor differences. The four *abhijata* families were known as “higher *kulins*” (in Bengali *uchha kulin*), the remaining twelve *kulin* families from the lower tier were called medium *kulins* (in Bengali *meja kulin*) and the others were known as *akulin* or *moulik*. They inherited this status through generations. This structure prevailed in different *samaj*, where the surnames of the *kulins* and *mouliks* were different (Mallick 1995: 13). Hierarchical structure of the *samaj* was constituted under the influence of the social leaders of a *samaj*. Each *samaj*, according to its

² The meeting was held sometimes after 1179 A.D.; exact date could not be assessed due to the lack of written records.

social status, enjoyed privileges and demanded respect from the society.

Discussion

King Ballal Sen reformed the caste system of Bengal and introduced *kulinism*. The Kapalis initially refused to accept the king's prescribed social position of the Kapali caste and *kulinism*. As a result of this rejection, the social position of the Kapali was degraded in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Initially the society was divided into several broad categories, four of which could be traced, Shukla Paksha, Krishna Paksha, Nara Kapali, Ghati Kapali. They differed according to geography and cultural practices. Later being influenced by King Ballal Sen, *kulinism* was accepted by some influential persons of the Kapalis and the Binodpur Samaj was constituted. Then the entire Kapali society in its vast territory became united as well as divided again. Influential sections got aristocrat status, or *kulin*, and others remained common or *moulik*. Society became horizontally stratified. Aristocrat sections influenced the lower tier people by their wealth, education, and social network and provided intellectual support and protection from outside forces. They enjoyed some privileges. Upper tier people, with a view to keeping their supremacy, imposed rules and simultaneously began to oppress the poor *moulik*. Ultimately, they began to rule the society. Rule breakers were punished. The origin of rival groups within the *samaj*, bad administration, better communication facilities, and new opportunities for subsistence in the newly developed *char* land caused the breakdown of the Binodpur Samaj.

All the *abhijata* and the *kulin* families of Binodpur Samaj resided in different places, far away from each other. Naturally, communication among the leaders and supervision of the society became problematic. In spite of the lack of administration, the Kapali *samaj* was running smoothly. But after a few years, difficulties cropped up among the caste people. Through time, members from lower tiers accumulated more assets and secured higher educational status. They claimed themselves as "aristocrat" or *abhijata*. This caused confrontation among the rivals, which finally ended in the loss of property and in some cases life as well. Then intra-*samaj* and intergroup rivalry caused the disintegration of the first *samaj*, resulting in the formation of many new *samaj*.

Another reason for the disintegration of the Binodpur Samaj was ecological. It had a vast jurisdiction, but communication was very bad. Through

time, the population increased. New settlements were established in the newly developed alluvial land of the river and Bay of Bengal, locally called "char" land. Gradually, the vast territory of Binodpur Samaj became even more extended and became unmanageable and finally broke into pieces. New villages were formed in the new char land. In the same manner, local influential people again formed a new *samaj* and demanded aristocrat status (or *kulin*), while others remained in the lower strata (*moulik*). Thus there was a history of rivalry behind the origin of each *samaj*.

The Kapalis were traditionally cultivators, related to jute. They were also hard workers. They had a background of shifting settlements, generally after every four or five generations. In search of better agricultural land, they shifted to new areas. Through time, the development of new char land in the northern coast of Bay of Bengal and the expansion of Kapali settlement towards southern Bengal happened simultaneously. Ultimately, the society was vertically divided into many isolated local *samaj*, each having its own social boundary and names. Each *samaj* was further horizontally segmented according to each's will and interest. Horizontal structure also varied. They had their own mechanism of social control. All social problems were dealt with by the *kulins*.

This rigid Kapali social system prevailed until the fourth or fifth decade of the last century. It is reported that some of the *samaj* were not horizontally stratified, e.g., Nagardi Samaj. Their food habits were also different from others. The rapid spread of education and major population migrations, especially in 1947 and 1971, caused dilution of the

Table 6: Evolution of the Social Structure of the Kapali *samaj* (before and after Indian independence, 1947).

1870s <i>samaj</i>: Five-Tiered and Rigid (Binodpur Samaj)
Till 1940s and 1950s <i>samaj</i>: Two-Tiered and Rigid (Mansai Samaj / Manashi Samaj, and others)
1950s and onwards <i>samaj</i>: Two-Tiered but Flexible (1947, partition of India, population movement and distortion of <i>samaj</i> ; in 1952 the first inter- <i>samaj</i> marriage was reported and socially accepted in Manashi Samaj)
Even before the 1940s <i>samaj</i>: No Tier and Flexible (Nagardi Samaj)
1960s and onwards: No <i>samaj</i> Hierarchy and Flexible (Major dilution of <i>samaj</i> and formation of "Nutan Dal")

structure and function of the *samaj*. It is also reported that a large section of the Kapalis of Bangladesh did not believe in the old system of *samaj* and established a new *samaj* called *nutan dal* (new group), having no *samaj* hierarchy. Even so, a smaller section in Bangladesh remained orthodox and less flexible. If we consider the structure of the Kapali *samaj* from the 1870s until today, a series of structural changes from a five-tiered *samaj* as in the Binodpur Samaj to a new kind of *samaj* without any *samaj* hierarchy (*nutan dal* or new group found in Bangladesh) could be observed.

The caste population under consideration is really little known and less studied. The caste people maintain a separate identity in the locality. Although the percentage of literacy is high, the people in the area are economically poor. No form of the social structure mentioned above is now present in the area, although it can still be found in rudimentary form in Bangladesh even today.

Conclusion

The Kapali caste population resides now in both India and Bangladesh. The concept of *jati samaj*³ is totally meaningless in India. Further research into the matter, however, is required to understand the present situation of the population and what form of *samaj* still exists today in Bangladesh. The partition that happened after the Indian independence in 1947 divided the country and population. The ecological situation of the two countries is different. Beyond politics and ecology, are there any other reasons for the disintegration of the *samaj*? Many other *samaj* were in the undivided Bengal. So far, the jurisdiction of some *samaj* could not be traced. Intensive fieldwork is required in Bangladesh to explore if any other form of Kapali *samaj* exists there. No serious research has been done except one or two, on this caste population. The Kapali is still a virgin caste as far as its being a field of research in anthropology. It offers an enormous scope for research from a variety of directions. Findings suggest that the hierarchical structure of the Kapali *samaj* is still rudimentarily present in some places of Bangladesh, but with a tendency to form *samaj* without hierarchy.

3 The term *jati* is used to denote an endogamous community with a more or less defined ritual status and invariably have an occupation traditionally linked to it. Members of a *jati* generally share a common culture – the way of life of a people consisting of conventional, extra somatic patterns of behavior which are learned, shared, and transmitted from generation to generation.

I am indebted to Sri Biman Kumar Mitra from Bongaon, Sri Yadu Nath Kar from Krishnanagar, Nikhil Chandra Baidya and Sri Jyotirmoy Das from Calcutta, and so many others without whose cooperation the study could not be completed.

References Cited

- Bhattacharaya, Jogendra Nath**
1995 Hindu Castes and Sects. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. [Orig. 1896]
- The Calcutta Gazette*
1933 *The Calcutta Gazette* (19.01.1933), Part 1.
1935 *The Calcutta Gazette* (03.01.1935), Part 1.
- Hunter, W. W.**
1998 A Statistical Account of Bengal. The District of 24 Parganas. Vol. 1, Part 1. Calcutta: Government of West Bengal. [Orig. 1875]
- Kargupta, Sri Janaki**
1991 *Gnan Manjusa-o-Vaishya Kapalir Atmakahin*. Koch Bihar: Koch Bihar Press.
- Mallick, M. C.**
1995 *Kapali Jati-o-Tar Koulinya Protha* [Mouth Piece of the Kapali Caste]. Calcutta.
- Mitra, S. C.**
1951 Jessore Khulnar Itihasa. Calcutta: Chakraborty and Co. [Orig. 1914]
- Mukherjee, D. Sarkar, P., and D. P. Mukherjee**
1996 The Kapalis of Bengal. A Population Historical Analysis. *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society* 31: 265–272.
- O'Malley, L. S. S.**
1913 Census of India, 1911. Vol. 5: Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa and Sikkim. Part 1: Report. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- Porter, A. E.**
1933 Census of India, 1931. Vol. 5: Bengal and Sikkim; Part 1: Report. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch.
- Risley, Herbert H.**
1892 The Tribes and Castes of Bengal. Ethnographic Glossary. Vol. 2: Bengal. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- Sharma, U.**
2007 Uttar Banger Kapali Sampradaya: Ekti Samikshya. *Loukik* (Calcutta) 1/1: 3–17.
- Singh, K. S.** (general ed.)
2007 West Bengal. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India. (People of India, 43)
- Tagore, Sourindro Mohun**
1963 The Caste System of the Hindus. Varanasi: Indological Book House.
- Thompson, W. H.**
1923 Census of India, 1921. Vol. 5, Part 1: Bengal Report. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.

