

Studies in History

<http://sih.sagepub.com>

Communities, Kings and Chronicles: The Kulagranthas of Bengal

Kumkum Chatterjee

Studies in History 2005; 21; 173

DOI: 10.1177/025764300502100203

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sih.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/2/173>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Studies in History* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sih.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sih.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.in/about/permissions.asp>

Citations <http://sih.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/21/2/173>

Communities, Kings and Chronicles: The *Kulagranthas* of Bengal*

Kumkum Chatterjee
The Pennsylvania State University

This article studies a corpus of genealogical materials from Bengal called kulajis or kulagranthas, which had served important political and cultural functions for several centuries. The main focus here is on trying to understand the historical context in which these materials were produced, their substantive contents and the ideological function performed by them. The essay also seeks to explore the historicity of these genealogies and analyse the roles of the king and the jati-based community or samai from the perspective of the kulagranthas.

Genealogies are probably one of the most widespread and ubiquitous materials used to record the pasts of families, clans and dynasties. ‘As social charters,’ writes Vansina (1985:182), ‘they validate relationships between groups in many societies’. In India, for example, the *vamsavalis* of royal lineages are well known (Thapar 1990), as are genealogical traditions that were specifically associated with particular regions, as for instance the chronicles of Rajput lineages (Shastri 1963). In this article I study a mass of genealogical materials from Bengal, which are known as *kulagranthas*, *kulapanjikas* or *kulajis*. The *kulagranthas* of Bengal had become objects of renewed interest and attention among the Bengali literati of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in part as a manifestation of a great public enthusiasm for history, which had developed during this period in India and in Bengal, particularly among the literate middle classes (for example, Chatterjee 1993; Guha 1988). The other factor that explains a renewal of interest in these materials was the politics of caste and status triggered by the operations of the colonial census during the same time (Bandyopadhyaya 1990). The historicity of the *kulajis* also became the topic of an intense and passionate public

*Most of the work for this article was made possible by a fellowship from the Institute of Arts and Humanities, Penn State University. An earlier version of the article was presented at the Department of History, Calcutta University. My thanks to all those who offered comments and suggestions. I also thank Rajat Ray for reading an earlier version of the article. I owe a big debt of gratitude to Gautam Bhadra who initiated my interest in this subject. This article would not have been possible, too, without his generosity in allowing me access to his personal library and the many hours of discussions with him about this topic.

Studies in History, 21, 2, n.s. (2005)

SAGE PUBLICATIONS New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

Downloaded from <http://ehis.eblib.se/ehost/epress> at READING UNIV LIBRARIES on 2013-05-02 02:10:02.

controversy among the Bengali intelligentsia, especially during the 1920s (Chatterjee, undated).

My discussion here is not concerned with the rekindled interest in the *kulajis* during the modern period, but rather in trying to understand the nature and functions of these materials during the hundreds of years—stretching probably from the ninth to tenth centuries A.D. until about the mid to late nineteenth century—when they were produced and used.¹ In particular, certain specific aspects of these *kulajis* have been emphasized here: first, the cultural and political functions performed by them; second, the insights provided by the *kulajis* into certain institutions of communal and political life; and finally, the issue of whether these chronicles can be regarded as having functioned as some kind of history during the many centuries of their production and dissemination.

The article is divided into several sections: Section one seeks to define and explain the nature of *kulagranthas*, the dates of their production and use and the principal substantive features, which were characteristic of them. Section two discusses the ideological trajectories mapped out in these materials while section three seeks to analyse the roles of king and community in Bengal from the perspective of these materials. The final section grapples with the issue of whether it is valid to regard these materials as history—not in the current sense of the term, but rather in terms closer to what medieval and early modern Bengali society may have understood as *itihasa* or history.

The *Kulagranthas*

Origin and Development

In its most commonly understood and general sense, the term ‘*kula*’ meant family or clan (that is, extended family); the terms *grantha* (book) and *panji/panjika* (chronicle) indicate that these materials were essentially genealogies of *kulas* or lineages that recorded the generational descent of the patrilineal Hindu family and clan over many centuries. Most importantly, in recording such descent, the *kulagranthas* claimed to commemorate the story of the developments that were believed to have shaped the social and normative structure of Hindu, Brahmanical society in Bengal over hundreds of years.

The term *kula*, although generally denoting the clan or lineage, also in the case of Bengal signified a distinct and somewhat unique meaning, that is, *kula* status also denoted an elite position within the *varna/jati* configuration. A person possessing this elite status was described as a *kulin*—literally, one who belonged to a

¹ The genealogies/*kulajis* used for this article include some Sanskrit materials. For example, the manuscript entitled ‘Rajabali’ (Dhaka University Library, accession no. K577A) and Pertsch (1872). Also Bengali *kulajis* which were edited and published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Datta (1282 b.s.) and Guha-Thakurta (1912), among others. I have also used *kulajis* excerpted/reproduced in Nagendranath Basu’s *Banger Jatiya Itihasa*, many vols (1318–1340 b.s.), Bidyasidhi (1355 b.s.) and Gupta (1905, 1912).

high-status *kula*. Such high or elite status essential to become a *kulin* was believed to be derived from spiritual and ritual purity which was manifest in the practices, deportment and inner qualities of those who were deemed to be qualified to be acknowledged as *kulins* (Basu 1318 b.s.; Inden 1976). The status of being a *kulin* and the entire Bengali institution of kulinism needs of course to be understood in the context of the *varna/jati* arrangements and hierarchies that had been a characteristic feature of South Asian society for many centuries. It takes its place among the vast variety and form of regional variations and configurations of the ‘universal’ South Asian fourfold *varna* hierarchy.

The *kulagrantas/genealogies* told the story of how the institution of kulinism came to be created in Bengal and tracked the developments in it over several centuries, focusing in particular on periodic shifts in hierarchies among *kulin* lineages and in the delineation of norms of social interaction among *kulin* families, particularly in terms of their social interaction (specifically relating to intermarriage and inter-dining, but also including certain other forms of social and particularly physical interaction) with each other.²

Among the personalities who loomed large in the narrative of the *kulajis* were a series of monarchs believed to have ruled over various parts of Bengal roughly between the seventh/eighth centuries till the twelfth century. The first of these kingly personalities was King Adisura, commonly believed to have initiated the process of social purification in Bengal by inviting five ritually and spiritually purer Brahmins (that is, purer than the Bengali Brahmins of the time who were believed to have suffered a reduction in their spiritual/ritual prowess on account of exposure to undesirable influences, such as Buddhism, which had exerted a strong sway over Bengal at a certain historical time) from Kanauj in northern India to migrate to Bengal and subsequently to settle there. The descendants of some of these Kanaujiya Brahmins came to be designated higher social status than Brahmin groups who had been settled in the region. This was also true of the descendants of the five Kayasthas, who, according to many of the genealogies, had accompanied the five original Kanaujiya Brahmins to Bengal, that is, they were considered to be ranked higher than Kayastha families who had been resident in Bengal prior to what the bulk of *kulajis* characterized as the defining event of Brahmanical society in Bengal, that is, the importation of ritually purer ‘*sagnika*’ Brahmins from Madhyadesha—the heartland of Aryavarta and the seedbed of a more pristine Brahmanical culture. The two other monarchical figures who dominate the story told by the *kulajis* were Kings Ballala Sena and Lakshmana Sena of the Sena dynasty. Ballala Sena in particular is credited with virtually introducing the system of kulinism—of formally designating some lineages of Brahmins as well as Kayasthas who had descended from the Kanaujiya immigrants as being of higher social status than others on account of their purer, superior virtues and practices. To be designated a *kulin* thus meant a significant elevation in social status and rank vis-à-vis other lineages within the same *jati*. Ballala Sena’s efforts at social

² This observation is based on my reading of the *kulajis* listed in note 1.
Downloaded from <http://sin.sagepub.com> at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on September 30, 2009

ranking also apparently extended, according to some *kulajis*, to the Baidya *jati* whose genealogies, however, do not associate them with the migration from Kanauj. This institution of kulinism was further modified and regulated by Ballala Sena's son and successor Lakshmana Sena (Basu 1318 b.s., 1321 b.s., 1334a b.s., 1334b b.s., 1335 b.s., 1340 b.s.; Gupta 1905, 1912). Over time, the *kulajis* began to articulate an almost formulaic litany of nine specific virtues, which apparently were essential for the attainment of *kulin* status. These virtues included correct practice, modesty, scholarship, the act of installing/establishing deities for the purpose of worship, dedication/commitment, right livelihood, meditation, charity and going on pilgrimage ('*acahro vinayo vidya pratishtha tirtha-darshanam/brittii, tapo, danam navadha kula-lakshanam*' [Basu 1318 b.s.: 134]).

The *kulagrantas* most commonly associate King Ballala Sena with having introduced (or at any rate tightened) the injunction regarding 'correct' marriage practices among *kulin* lineages. This monarch apparently decreed that *kulin* Brahmins should only intermarry with other *kulin* Brahmin lineages. *Kulin* Brahmins could marry the daughters of non-*kulin* Brahmins (known as Shrotriya Brahmins)—but the reverse was not to be permitted. The violation of this decree would result in the loss of *kula* status and thereby a decline in social status and material affluence and even total expulsion from *kula* society (Basu 1318 b.s.). This feature soon became the predominant, defining feature of kulinism in Bengal particularly in the post-Sena period and many *jati* groups—among the Kayasthas, for example—who had initially opposed and resisted the introduction or reification of kulinism by Ballala Sena later introduced it among themselves (Basu 1321 b.s., 1334b b.s.). The most common explanation for this feature, that is, the centrality given to the importance of contracting the right kind of matrimonial alliances, is that the passage of paramount political power in Bengal into the hands of Muslim kings since the twelfth century meant that there was no longer an autonomous Hindu kingship (or at least not one comparable to the Sena monarchy) which could grant material honours and entitlements to those deemed qualified to be honoured as *kulins*. Kulinism or elite status within Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya *jatis* now came to be focused more strongly on regulating social, communal interaction (mainly intermarriage, but also inter-dining, etc.) since these types of purely social interactions now remained one of the few remaining spheres in which Hindu/Brahmanical *jatis* could act autonomously. The regulation of marriage practices specifically came to represent the most typical attribute of high-status *jatis* and lineages in Bengal and these groups in effect constituted *samajas* or communities, which (more on this feature later) were held together by intricate kinship networks resulting from marriage within the group. Many *samajas* were based on geographical contiguity and thus larger units like the Brahmins or Kayasthas came to be divided into smaller local communities such as Rarhi Brahmins (that is, Brahmins settled in the Rarhi region or in lower Bengal), Bangaja Kayasthas (Kayasthas settled in Banga, which for a long time denoted the eastern part of Bengal in particular), etc.

The birth of the chronicles known as *kulagrantas* is closely linked to the formalization of the institution of kulinism or ‘*kula bidhi*’ or ‘*kula maryada*’ by Ballala Sena and Lakshmana Sena. These rulers are also believed to have appointed learned men, well-versed in *kula tattva*, that is, the principles of kulinism and the histories of *kulin* families to hold the office of *kulacharya* and to discharge the important task of creating and maintaining elaborate genealogical accounts of the various *kulin* lineages with the view to building a fund of social and communal memory about the social behaviour (mainly intermarriage) of these lineages. Thus was born the practice of composing *kulajis* or *kulapanjis*. The *kulacharyas*, also known as *ghatakas*, functioned as the chroniclers and archivists of different *kulin* communities and also occupied leadership positions within such communities. In their hands, the compilation of genealogical materials was said to have become so very systematic, that it came to be regarded as a discipline or a *shastra*, that is, *kulashastra* (Basu 1318 B.S., 1321 B.S.).

Since the very maintenance of kulinism involved the evaluation of status and rank, the genealogies produced, maintained and updated by the *kulacharyas* and *ghatakas* played a central role in this continuous process by creating an archive of memory. The task of authorizing and supporting these periodic evaluations was continued by Hindu kings and *zamindars* in Bengal during the post-Sena period. Some among these potentates held high official and bureaucratic positions under the Muslim rulers of Bengal. These chieftains and aristocrats continued to appoint and support *kulacharyas* and to authorize the determinations of *jati/kula*-based hierarchies among Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas through assemblies called *samikaranas* or *ekjais* (Basu 1318 B.S., 1321 B.S., 1340 B.S.). This scenario can be traced in Bengal from the eclipse of the Sena monarchy and into the nineteenth century.

The languages used in the *kulajis* were Sanskrit and Bangla.³ Written *kulaji* texts used both languages, almost with equal frequency; the oral ones were most commonly in Bangla. The use of Bangla in these chronicles points to the actual need felt by those who produced and consumed these materials to ensure the widest possible transmission of the message/s articulated by these genealogies. The use of Sanskrit, I suggest, underlines the equally important need to give these materials an aura of antiquity, sanctity, formality and legitimacy—almost a shastric character in fact (Pollock 1996, 2003). The simultaneous occurrence of Sanskrit and Bangla passages sometimes in the same *kulaji*—both in texts and in oral materials—further reinforces the balancing act enacted by *kulagrantas* in terms of upholding a shastric, ancient image together with deploying a language used colloquially in

³ The use of Sanskrit in *kulajis* is attested to by genealogies such as Pertsch (1872); the use of Bangla is attested to by many *kulajis* republished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Guha-Thakurta (1912), as well as in those purporting to be from much earlier centuries as, for instance the bulk of *kulajis* excerpted in the many volumes of Basu’s, *Banger Jatiya Itihasa* and Gupta (1905, 1912).

order to broaden the sphere of their reception and impact. Almost invariably, the form used in the *kulapanjikas* was verse (*sloka*) rather than prose. The Bangla used in *kulapanjikas*, which were intended for oral use, was most often nothing more than doggerel verse, somewhat crude and unsophisticated.

Conditions of Production and Dating of Kulagranthas

The *kulagranthas* were produced and reproduced for many centuries beginning possibly in the ninth/tenth centuries (maybe even earlier) and continuing into the later nineteenth and even probably the early twentieth centuries. According to scholars such as R.C. Majumdar and Inden, the majority of extant *kulajis* available to modern scholars during the twentieth century were probably not earlier than the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Inden 1976; Majumdar 1979). In fact, the problem of correct, credible dating of these materials became one of the central issues of the controversy that erupted among the Bengali literati in the 1920s. A quick survey of the conditions in which these chronicles were produced and reproduced continuously for more than 700 years or so is necessary in order to properly understand the problem of dating these genealogical materials.

There had been a decline in the relative relevance and importance of *jati/kula*-related subdivisions (for example, considerations of distinction related to *kulin* status) during the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries together with the virtual disappearance of the role of the *kulacharya/ghatak* as the custodian of the genealogical chronicles of the *jati* or the lineage (most of them became professional matchmakers) (Majumdar 2004). This created a situation in which *kulajis* became redundant and neglected and thus, when, during the resurgence of interest in *kulajis* in the very late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, a hunt began for the recovery of these materials, the ones that were retrieved were often seriously damaged, fragmented and ravaged by insects, etc.

More importantly, the problem faced by twentieth-century scholars in terms of determining the chronology and dates of these genealogies derived from the conditions prevailing in the pre-print culture in which these materials had for the most part been generated (Clancy 1979). Over the centuries, scribes made unintentional mistakes when copying and recopying *kulaji* texts and the oral dimension of *kulagranthas* meant that performance-related considerations caused changes to be frequently introduced into the substance and text. But, much more perhaps than such textual instabilities, it was the lack—or the weak existence—of what Foucault (1977) calls the ‘author function’ together with what I call the ‘porousness’ of texts—feature that were evident in all manuscript cultures—which combined to produce serious difficulties in the way of ascertaining the date/chronologies of the *kulapanjis* even apart from the problems stemming from deliberate neglect, water/insect damage, etc. *Kulacharyas* sometimes used older chronicles (specially those that were well-known and respected), but inserted new materials into them without always mentioning that this had been done. This was inevitable perhaps because of the perceived need to manipulate genealogies to suit existing

social/cultural concerns or needs while claiming the authority of well-established works whose credibility and legitimacy were less likely to be questioned. The ‘author function’ in the sense used by Foucault was hard to identify in the case of materials such as the *kulajis* (and for that matter for a vast range of other narratives known as *panchali sahitya*—including the Mangalkabyas, Ramayanas, Mahabharatas, etc.—which were produced in Bengal for several centuries, including the period covered by the *kulajis*) whose generic integrity predominated over attributions and claims of individual authorship. The feature of ‘porousness’, that is, the practice of segments of particular works migrating into other texts without explicit acknowledgement that such a phenomenon was actually occurring, also contributed to the challenges associated with dating the *kulagrantas*. The random interpenetration of the materials of one manuscript text into another took place quite unrestrictedly in a pre-print culture since the much more modern notion (associated with the advent of print culture) of the author’s prerogative and right to exclusive ownership and proprietorship of his/her composition, and the associated notion that no other author/compiler should make free use (that is, without permission and/or acknowledgement) of it was practically unknown (Majumdar 1346 b.s.).

These conditions make it virtually impossible to flesh out the dates and chronological sequence of the *kulajis*. I choose the methodological solution of trying to reconstruct the broad forces of cultural politics during a long span of several centuries in Bengal’s history and then use it as a backdrop against which to map out the ideological trajectories and messages embodied by *kulashastra*. This then makes it feasible to move towards the goal of engaging in a discussion about the important institutions of king and *samaj* in Bengal’s cultural history, and finally to attempt a conclusion about the historicity of these *kulagrantas*.

The Substance of the Kulajis

A great many *kulajis* were of the most basic kind—barebone charts or ‘trees’ recording patrilineal descent within specific lineages (Romila Thapar [1990: 328] describes this as the ‘fixed tradition’). But there were also large numbers of genealogies that charted generational descent but embedded the basic account of biological succession within a broader, comprehensive narrative regarding the status of a specific lineage as well as the social and political forces that shaped and moulded the hierarchies within various *jatis* (Thapar terms this the ‘narrative tradition’ [*ibid.*]).

My discussion is principally focused on the *kulagrantas* of the Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya *jatis* of Bengal. These *jatis* dominated Bengali society for many centuries—both materially as well as in terms of status. The reason for deliberately choosing to concentrate on the genealogies of these elite *jatis* lies in the fact that they (as noticed too by earlier scholars like R.C. Majumdar [1979]) produced many more *kulagrantas* and their chronicles were believed to stretch

back to the earliest stages in the grand account of the evolution of Bengal's Brahmanical society together with its preoccupations with the issues of *jati*, *kula*, etc. The substantive core of the *kulagranthas*, apart from the defining stories regarding the migration from Kanauj or the introduction of *kula bidhi*, was concerned solely with recording the process of constant adjustments and evaluations of *jati/kula*-based status. Three elements combined to make such periodic adjustments possible, that is, the potentate or *raja*, the *kulacharyas/ghataks* and the *jati*-based *samaj* or *goshthi*. The interrelated functioning of these three entities and their significance for understanding the social/cultural institutions that shaped Brahmanical culture and society in Bengal have been discussed in the third section.

Since marriage practices had assumed the most important function in the determination of *jati/kula*-based rankings, the practice of periodic evaluations was intended to police and regulate marriage practices and also social behaviour to some extent. The criteria deployed by the triumvirate of *raja-kulacharya-samaj/goshthi* in this endeavour, shifted and changed with time since the contingent historical context clearly played a role in determining the principles that were selected to evaluate social behaviour and interaction. But the basic concerns, as represented by the *kulajis* seem to have been as follows: preventing contact with people and groups deemed to be impure, that is, a *jati/kula* of lower rank and status, and specific groups deemed to stand beyond the pale of the *varnashrama* configuration; condemning marriage practices and social interaction with specific lineages and/or *jatis* deemed to have violated the norms of social interaction mandated for them; and condemning and regulating generally unacceptable, antisocial behaviour such as committing a murder. In the 'early' period of *kulaji* production (that is, the Sena period and the pre-Sena period), total 'outsiders'—those who could not be ranked within the *varna/jati/kula* hierarchies—included such dreaded, despised and feared groups like the Buddhists; in the post-Sena centuries, '*yavanas*' or '*mlechchas*', identified mostly with Muslims, filled that position.

Women are conspicuous by their absence in the genealogical chronicles of Bengal. The actual records of generational descent within particular families or clans were invariably patrilineal; in cases where details of marriage alliances occurred, the identity of the bride's father or patrilineal clan are specifically mentioned. The bride herself remained forever nameless. Women, therefore, seemed to be absent and invisible in the *kulagranthas*, which purported to commemorate the pasts of Bengal's dominant *jati* clusters and lineage networks. Yet, paradoxically enough, the *kulajis* themselves are testament to the fact that despite the strongly patriarchal ideology articulated by these materials, women played critically important roles in this system of status and rank, which was precariously dependent on the performance of the right kind of social conduct and interaction. High status Brahmins and Kayasthas, for example, were permitted to take brides from families lower in *jati/kula* rank than themselves; but the reverse would spell social disaster for a family and its related clan group (Basu 1318 b.s.). Thus, despite their ostensible invisibility in the *kulapanjis*, women, or rather the status of the families they married

into, had a very real impact on the prestige and rank of their natal families. Moreover, by the fifteenth century or so, one set of influential rulings or reforms that were authorized by Debibar Ghatak for *kulin* Rarhiya families quite openly tied the determination of *kula* status and rank to the physical and behavioural purity of women who were to be partners in marriage to men of Rarhiya *kulin* lineages. According to these rulings, a woman who had been raped (*balatkar*), had ventured outside the home, presumably unattended (*kanya bahirgaman*), could cause her husband's entire clan to suffer a diminution of status. More remarkably, the same fate would befall the bridegroom's family if the bride was an orphan or she possessed physical deformities and handicaps or if she was older in age than her husband. A family that had an unmarried daughter (that is, unmarried after the age at which *jatis* of high status were supposed to ensure that their daughters had been given away in marriage) was also fated to slide downwards on the rank/status scale, as was a family unfortunate enough not to have any offspring. The behaviour of men was also certainly a determining factor in the ever-shifting equations of behaviour and rank—the reforms of Debibar Ghatak in the fifteenth century explicitly stated that consorting with prostitutes would be counted as a reason for a lowering of *kula* status. Similar warnings aimed at regulating the behaviour of men of high-status *jatis/kulas* had also been sounded—at least in theory—in earlier reforms (ibid.).

The significance of the principles that regulated hierarchy and status within *jati/kula* groups can be better understood, I suggest, by a discussion of the wider ideological concerns that were articulated in the *kulagrantas* and which may have led to the emergence of the whole phenomenon of *kulashastra* itself.

Ideology and the *Kulagrantas*

The message articulated by the *kulajis* makes sense only in the context of the ideological battles associated with the politics of culture that were being waged with urgency and ferocity in Bengal during the early medieval and medieval periods. Since the *kulajis* were produced and used for several centuries, it does indeed seem somewhat meaningless to refer to the ‘message’ embodied in these chronicles, which spanned so many hundreds of years. As a close reading of the *kulagrantas* suggests, these genealogies did indeed fine-tune their ideological agendas to better fit the immediate context of the times when they were composed or recast. But, as I hope to demonstrate in this section, there were a few core, long-term cultural concerns, which remained quite consistently at the forefront of the ideological agenda manifest in the *kulajis* over several centuries. The central concern of these chronicles and indeed the principal reason for the emergence of *kulashastra* was the upholding of a Brahmanical social/cultural order and, second, the defence of this order vis-à-vis forces that threatened to undermine it (Chakrabarti 2001). Two other sets of texts that attest to this were the Bengal Puranas, or Upa-Puranas as they are known, and the Smriti texts of Bengal, which were mostly authored during the medieval period (Hazra 1958, 1963). The Upa-Puranas of

Bengal and the Smriti literature in fact serve as critically important complements to the *kulapanjis* and help us to better understand the latter. The concerns of Brahmanism, as manifest in the *kulagranthas* were inextricably associated though with tangled rivalries and contests of Brahmanism with the forces of Buddhism and *tantra* that had enjoyed considerable popularity and currency in Bengal for many centuries.

Brahmanism in its most basic sense denoted the acceptance of a social order based on *varnashrama* principles and its associated implications, that is, the high social status of Brahmins and the acknowledgement that *varnashramadharma* provided an ethically informed social order. Challenges to Brahmanism were indeed well known in Indian history and the formal articulation of Brahmanical ideology might indeed not have been well understood by large sections of ordinary people. But, as Kunal Chakrabarti (2001) points out, ‘the deference paid to it over the ages shows its extraordinary dominance as ideology’. As is well known, Bengal was perceived as lying outside the pale of Vedic/Aryan culture and its essential complement, Brahmanism, for very many centuries. The spread of Brahmanical culture in Bengal can be traced back to the Gupta period and is believed to have gained further momentum during the reigns of the Pala, Chandra and Kamboja dynasties over different parts of Bengal. It is extremely significant that the first set of Brahmanical texts produced in Bengal, the Bengal Puranas, were composed during this period. The process of Brahmanical ascendancy already in operation in Bengal from before the Pala period was further reinforced under the reigns of the Sena-Varmana kings who proclaimed themselves to be active upholders of Brahmanical culture and ideology (Chakrabarti 2001; Majumdar 1971). The *kulagranthas* mirror the concerns of Brahmanical society in Bengal, particularly a social order based on correct principles, the principles of *varnashramadharma*. It must be remembered, however, that Brahmanism did not represent a unified, homogeneous social and religious tradition. Clustered within Brahmanism were a variety of sects—Shaivas, Shaktas, Bhagavatas, Ganapatyas, etc. What bound them together was a common respect for the infallibility of the Vedas and acknowledgement of them as ‘notional authority’, acceptance of a social order based on *varna/jati* principles (Hazra 1958, 1963).

Buddhism was a well-established tradition in Bengal well before the Gupta period. The Pala–Chandra–Kamboja dynasties, which ruled over different parts of Bengal, are regarded as having contributed to the strengthening of Buddhism through their open advocacy and support for it. However, during the early medieval period significant transformations occurred in Bengal’s Buddhism, particularly as a consequence of its interactions with the region’s *tantric* traditions. Mahayana Buddhism was the dominant form of Buddhism in Bengal during the early years of Pala rule. However, towards the later years of Pala monarchy, Mahayana Buddhism itself had undergone significant transformations deriving mostly from the impact and influence upon it of *tantric* beliefs and practices (Ling 1976; Mitra 1954).

Tantra can be defined as primarily a set of worship techniques that gave central importance to the human body as the seat of spiritual power and suggested practical

goals for the realization of the supreme spiritual goal. In its origins, *tantra* represented beliefs and practices that were definitely non-Vedic, if not anti-Vedic. The most fundamental distinction of *tantra* from the Vedic/Brahmanical tradition lay in its open declaration of the right of women and Shudras to religious/spiritual initiation, the non-acceptance of the infallibility of the Vedas and the social supremacy of Brahmins (Bharati 1965; Dasgupta 1982; Dasgupta 1974, 1976). The centrality of goddess worship, or the importance given to the feminine principle in spiritual practices, was also an important characteristic feature of *tantra*. Bengal was an integral part of what Shashibhushan Dasgupta called the *tantric* zone (cited in Chakrabarti 2001). Tantrism, therefore, had a long history in this region—much longer than either Buddhism or Brahmanism—and any religious tradition that hoped to establish itself in Bengal could do so only by making strategic compromises with it.

In Bengal Mahayana Buddhism came to be deeply influenced by *tantric* ideas and concepts. In brief, these included the emergence of a pantheon of Buddhist goddesses and the acknowledgement of the notion that the material body (*kayasadhana*) was central to spiritual upliftment and that sexual union between men and women comprised an essential first step towards achieving it (Bharati 1965; Dasgupta 1974). These theological issues apart, tantra succeeded in considerably blurring the boundaries between Brahmanism and Buddhism for ordinary people. In popular understanding, Buddhist and Brahmanical deities were perceived to perform similar functions and lay Buddhists of Pala Bengal began for all practical purposes to follow Brahmanical social injunctions, life-cycle ceremonies, etc. (Chakrabarti 2001; Shastri 1980). Given this situation it is not surprising that the Pala–Chandra dynasties combined their championship of Buddhism with respect and patronage for Brahmanism as well. But such royal patronage for both traditions served to further blur the distinctions between them at least as far as the laity was concerned.

An important way in which the forces of Brahmanism sought to handle the problem of *tantra* was by deliberately rationalizing and absorbing some of its ‘less disruptive’ elements. Chakrabarti (2001) quite correctly points out that no matter what the Bengal Puranas did at the conceptual level, it was critically important to build a bridge to tantra at the level of practice. As his detailed study demonstrates, this was done through the absorption of many *tantric* rituals into Brahmanical ceremonies. The two most important arenas in which this process was evident were: first, by appropriating and Brahmanizing the cult of the goddess, which had for long prevailed in Bengal; and second, through the assimilation and Brahmanification of a great many *vrata* rites. Buddhism in Bengal was believed to be in decline—at least from the Sena period onwards—primarily because of changes that had occurred in the nature of Buddhism. But still, Buddhism as a distinct non-Vedic, anti-Brahmanical tradition was regarded as a force to be feared, condemned and battled with in Bengal’s Brahmanical texts, especially in the Bengal Puranas. Hence, the Bengal Puranas identified the Buddhists as the deviant and

dangerous ‘other’. Buddhists, thus, were demonized and stigmatized as *pashandas* (heretical, impious). This epithet, as a term of abuse, seems to have had a long life in Bengali culture and literary expression. Many centuries later this term surfaces, for example as a word of abuse in Bengali Vaishnava literature (Brindabandas 1356 b.s.). Many of the *kulajis* reflect a strong hostility and disdain for Buddhists. In the *karika* (chronicle) of the Kandi *raj* family, King Vijay Sena was depicted complaining about the fact that his entire kingdom was flooded with the negative phenomenon of Buddhism. According to this *karika*, Vijay Sena and subsequently his son and successor Ballala Sena dedicated their efforts to exterminating Buddhism from their kingdom and instead installing ‘*vaidika achara*’ (Basu 1335 b.s.). What rendered the cultural climate in Bengal even more complex was the interpenetration of *tantra*—and sometimes Buddhist ideas and practices, too—into the various sects, Shaktas, Shaivas, Bhagavatas, etc., which had come to characterize Brahmanism over many centuries.

The *kulagrathas* of many Kayastha communities and the genealogies of the Barendra Brahmins and the Baidyas shed very interesting light on the tangled contests among different shades of ideology at the court of the Sena rulers and suggest that the introduction of *Ballali maryada*, as kulinism was sometimes called, may have been intimately associated with a broader project of social engineering attempted by the king partly in response to the pulls and pressures generated by the politics of ideology and culture of the time (Basu 1321 b.s., 1334a b.s., 1335 b.s.). The chronicles of several Kayastha lineages state that Ballala Sena, although a champion of Brahmanism, was also attracted to tantra—first Buddhist tantra (under the influence of his preceptor Aniruddha Bhatta who was also known to be a great scholar) and then ‘Hindu’ tantra (due to the influence of another *tantric* adept, Simhagiri ([ibid.: 1321 b.s.]). The *kulajis* of the Barendra Brahmins indicate that Ballala Sena’s interest in Buddhist tantra may have been derived also from the practical realization that large numbers of his subjects still considered themselves to be Buddhists—particularly in the region of Banga or eastern Bengal—and he could hardly afford to be seen as the implacable enemy of something that enjoyed considerable popularity (*ibid.*: 1334a b.s.). But apparently the anti-Buddhist pressure exerted on him by the Shaiva and Shakta Brahmins, who were reportedly close to the king, compelled Ballala Sena to oppress and persecute Buddhists (*ibid.*: 1321 b.s.). Those among Buddhists who came to accept the supremacy of Brahmins, particularly those being promoted by the king, were apparently given the status of Shudras from whose hands it was permissible to accept water for drinking (*jalacharaniya Shudra*). Other Buddhists who resisted the pressure to acknowledge the social predominance of Brahmins were cast out of mainstream society at the order of the king (*ibid.*). Ballala Sena was also supposedly involved in acrimonious relations with the Suvarnavanik *jati* of his kingdom, although, in this case, the cause of the ill feeling was not apparently caused by ideology. The Suvarnavaniks apparently resisted the king’s efforts to extort money from them and their unwillingness made them the objects of royal displeasure. Ballala Sena

is supposed to have declared that their *jati* rank should be reduced and placed at the level of the lowest possible Shudra *jatis* from whom drinking water could not be accepted (*anacharaniya Shudra*) (ibid.). Nagendranath Basu (ibid.) is sceptical of this story, but it is significant that centuries later, many from the Suvarnavanik *jati* were drawn into the fold of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement by Nityananda, a close associate of Sri Chaitanya known for espousing the more socially radical principles of the early Gaudiya Vaishnava movement, that is, disregard for *varna/jati* hierarchies and the social hegemony of Brahmins (Chakrabarti 1996). Second, the testimony of the sixteenth-century work of Anandabardhan entitled *Ballalacharitam* (discussed later), illustrates at least a historical memory of animosity nurtured by groups of Suvarnavaniks in Bengal towards Ballala Sena (Anandabhatta 1901). Thus, the introduction of Ballala Sena's *kula bidhi* might need to be contextualized against a wider impulse towards social engineering along the lines of *varna/jati* hierarchies, which were perceived to comprise the core of a *dharma*nic Brahmanical social order.

Just as Ballala Sena reportedly regulated the *jati* status of Buddhists and Suvarnavaniks by using the criterion of faith in the foundational elements of Brahmanism, so also the latter are supposed to have used the same criterion to blacken the king's reputation for posterity by questioning his conformity to Brahmanism. Both the disgruntled and marginalized Buddhists and the Suvarnavaniks are reputed to have been the source from which unsavoury rumours about Ballala Sena were generated (Basu 1321 b.s., 1334b b.s.). In the case of the Suvarnavaniks, their antagonism towards Ballala Sena was kept alive and re-expressed in Anandabhatta's *Ballalacharitam*. According to this work, Ballala Sena was an immoral king, incapable of observing the principles of ethical behaviour mandated by the Brahmanical authorities. According to the testimony of the *Ballalacharitam*, this monarch indulged in secret *tantric* rites, including sexual orgies with low-caste women and prostitutes. Furthermore, Ballala Sena was reportedly infatuated with a young woman who was either from the Dom *jati*, or the daughter of a leather worker—in either case, from the lowest possible background in terms of *varna/jati* rankings—and worse still, he may even have married her (ibid.). The king was, thus, personally guilty of transgressing the norms of social conduct through a sexual and marital relationship, which was completely prohibited by *varna/jati* rules. What is significant in this episode of hostility between the king on the one hand and the Buddhists and Suvarnavaniks on the other is that all parties took a stand in which the overarching normative principle was Brahmanism and any deviation from it was to be censured and condemned. Thus, in the discourse of the *kulagrantas*, rhetoric about the preservation of the Brahmanical order became the idiom through which the politics of culture, ideology and status were played out.

There were other groups—and high-status groups at that—with Brahminical society who also rejected and challenged the institution of kulinism introduced by Ballala Sena. These groups included the Vaidika Brahmins, some families of Barendra Brahmins, some relatives of Ballalal Sena, and the Barendra and Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha communities.

According to their *kulajis*, the institution of *Ballali maryada* was a violation of customary rankings among various *jatis* as well as of the pattern of social relations (including marriage practices) prevailing among them; it also transferred too much power into the hands of the king who could misuse it to settle personal vendettas and petty sectarian rivalries (*ibid.* b.s. 1334, 1335 b.s.). There are sufficient indications in the *kulajis* that tantraism too had influenced very many Brahmin communities in Bengal. Ballala Sena, too, as seen earlier, had to battle aspersions cast on him by those who were intent on portraying him as a profligate and a violator of Brahmanical norms because of his involvement with *tantric* practices and his entanglement with a young woman of the lowest possible social rank. In this situation, Ballala Sena apparently introduced his *kula bidhi* in an attempt to bestow *kula* status (that is, the highest possible status *within* the existing *jati* rankings) on those of his Brahmin and Kayastha allies who too had accepted certain *tantric* practices and beliefs or, at any rate, refrained from openly attacking him for straying from the *dharmic* path by succumbing to the attractions of *tantra*. Thus, according to the genealogies of those lineages who defied the *Ballali maryada*, kulinism was just a ploy to elevate those Brahmins and Kayasthas who had strayed from the right path of uncorrupted Brahmanism and to camouflage it in terms of a newly enunciated set of mandatory practices called *kulachara*, which were nothing but *tantric* practices recycled into the highest levels of *varna* society as new and strict requirements (*ibid.* 1334b b.s.). Here, too, what is interesting is that the king was condemned because he had apparently failed to stay on the path of undiluted, pristine Brahmanism. In other words, the critiques of kulinism were also cast in the *kulajis* as the discourse of Brahmanism or rather the need to protect and preserve it from polluting and dangerous influences. The *dhakur grantha* attributed to Jadunandan that was prevalent among Barendra Kayasthas for several centuries contained stringent criticism of the institution of kulinism. In the words of Jadunandan, ‘This is how the seeds of adharma were sown’ (*‘ei to adharma bij sanchar hailo’*) (*ibid.*: 1334b b.s.: 89) The institution of *Ballali kula* was in itself the result of the king’s capriciousness and misuse of royal power and had little to do with the actual evaluation of merit and virtue in Brahmanical terms. This chronicle of the Barendra Kayasthas also articulates the anger and indignation felt by them when Ballala Sena elevated the status and prestige of certain Brahmin lineages to unprecedented levels through his *kula bidhi*. Many of the Kayastha *kulajis* also record the reprisals attempted by the king against some of his highest officials and ministers like Bhrigu Nandy and Vyasa Simha who opposed the king’s new initiative. These ministers fled from Ballala Sena’s court, partly to avoid the king’s vengeance, but also partly because they were concerned that their own *jati* status rank would be jeopardized if they continued to maintain contact (*‘ahara, vihara’*) (*ibid.*: 92) with a morally degenerate king. The genealogies of those *jatis*, which rejected *Ballali maryada* also record what they represent as widespread censure and criticism of the king who had strayed from the *dharmic* path. What emerges from these criticisms as the severest flaw in Ballala Sena’s character (or ‘*charitra dosha*’ [*ibid.*]) was his total disregard of the disapproval of his subjects and, even

more significant, the good advice of eminent, virtuous men whom he had appointed as his highest officials. As recorded by the Barendra Kayastha Dhakur, ‘The king did not hesitate to commit bad deeds/he drove away whoever was critical of him’ (*Ku-kriya karite raja nahi kare bhaye/Je keho nindaye tahe dur kori daye*) (*ibid.*: 89).

The Ideological Concerns of the Post-Twelfth Century

Just as the fear of Buddhists and *tantrics* framed the ideological tensions manifest in the earlier *kulajis*, the chronicles that were composed after the Turkish conquest of Bengal, or recast to reflect current conditions of the twelfth/thirteenth centuries, mirror the anxieties of Brahmanical society vis-à-vis the presence of Islam both politically and culturally.

The Turkish invasion of Bengal led by Bakhtiyar Khalji resulted in the establishment of a Muslim ruling power in Bengal whose stronghold, at least during the earlier years of its existence seems to have been centred primarily in northern Bengal (Sarkar 1973). It also brought about the demise of a ‘paramount’ Hindu monarchy in Bengal. It is far from uncommon to find statements by scholars of the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (mainly historians and literary scholars) about the devastation wrought on ‘Hindu’ Bengali society by Islam—ranging from depredations on their property, persons, Hindu women, and efforts to destroy their *varna/jati* status, etc.⁴ Such characterizations are not necessarily borne out by contemporary materials that discuss the treatment of Hindus by Muslims (that is, in cases where such a subject was discussed at all) in a far more nuanced and context-specific manner. Scholars like Ashim Roy (1983), Richard Eaton (1994) and some others have explored those spheres of cultural life where a creative interaction occurred between certain groups within Hindu Bengali and Muslim society. The support of Bengal’s pre-Mughal sultans for literary production in the regional vernacular is well known as is their support for individual poets and authors who composed such works (Sarkar 1973; Sen 1405 b.s.). Individual rulers like Alauddin Hussain Shah were eulogized as ‘*jagat bhushan*’ (ornament of the world) by Hindu Bengali writers. Politically, Bengal’s chieftains and landed magnates continued to be predominantly Hindu and specially since the time of Raja Ganesh, they are known to have prospered, and upon occasion sided with these Muslim sultans vis-à-vis external forces (for example, the Delhi sultanate). Literate Hindus of gentry backgrounds—particularly Baidyas and Kayasthas—did remarkably through their involvement in bureaucratic positions at all levels of the government.

⁴ Representative examples would include Majumdar (1971). Sukumar Sen (1405 b.s.) has a more nuanced view, but does mention Muslim atrocities on Hindus. Nagendranath Basu (many vols) has a tendency to characterize Muslims as oppressive for Bengali Hindus even though he also mentions the ascendancy of many high status Hindu *jatis* to high offices under Muslim rule.

Not surprisingly, though, the Hindu/Brahmanical authorities (the Smriti literature, the *kulagranthas*, etc.) continued to vilify Muslims in terms not significantly different from the ones that had been deployed to condemn Buddhists and *tantrics*. As seen earlier, Brahmanism needed to keep up a constant vigil against those forces perceived as dangerous ‘others’ in order to preserve its own vigour and relevance. In the case of Islam, not only was it castigated as a dangerous and different religious tradition and a set of cultural practices, it was, moreover, a political force with the ability to influence and attract/seduce those affiliated to Brahmanism with possibilities of material advancement.

Many of these concerns harboured by Brahmanism in medieval Bengal came to be manifest in the Navya Smriti literature of the period and in the *kulagranthas* of many high-status Brahmanical *jatis* that were composed and/or recast the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries till the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and possibly beyond. The codification of the Bengal Smritis during the medieval period, and particularly the work of Smarta Raghunandan, should be seen as Bengal Brahmanism’s anxiety to regulate the boundary between *varnashrama*-based social organization and conduct on the one hand and Islam on the other (Bandyopadhyaya 1961). Linked to this agenda was the perceived need to maintain a sharp watch on the health and vigour of Brahmanism itself by policing the many boundaries among *varnas*, *jatis* and *kulas* within it.

According to R.C. Majumdar (1979), there was a new urgency in the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries to rewrite older *kulagranthas* and compose new ones. He attributes this to the danger posed to Brahmanical society by Islam. M.R. Tarafdar’s (1989) view about the *kulaji* literature is broadly similar. The deepening professional, and as a result of it, cultural interaction between dominant, influential *jatis* such as the Kayasthas in particular and those perceived as representing the forces of Islam particularly since the time of Raja Ganesh and his son Sultan Jalaluddin may have produced an intensification of concern among the Brahmanical authorities. I agree that the spurt in *kulaji* production during this period can be attributed to a degree of continuing anxiety about the influence and power of Islam, but it should be conjoined to the newer and subversive threat posed by Gaudiya Vaishnavism—especially in its more socially radical agenda. Thus, there may have indeed been potent reasons for Brahmanism to try to raise its ramparts and lock its doors, at least in principle, during the medieval period. Brindabandas’s *Chaitanya Bhagabat*, reports, for example, the fears generated among the orthodox Brahmins of Nabadvipa by those who had begun to adhere to the teachings of Sri Chaitanya, especially Brahmins who had become attracted to the message of the early Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in Bengal. In Brindabandas’s words:

These [Vaishnava] Brahmins will destroy the kingdom . . . [Terrible disasters like] famines will occur because of them [that is, their sinful activities].

Upon hearing this, the *pashandis* [that is, heretics—this term was once reserved for Buddhists; here the Vaishnavas are being called by the same

deregotary epithet] almost died in fear . . . They [the Vaishnavas] drink alcohol under cover of the darkness of the night.

They all know the Madhumati Siddhi [associated with Tantra] . . . They recite mantras at night and then bring in five women. Various other objects [that is, associated with *tantric* rituals] are also brought to them . . . [These include] things that are to be eaten, fragrances of various kinds, garlands and different kinds of clothes.

After eating [those foods] they engage in sexual activities with them [that is, the Panchakanya] (1356 b.s.: 119–28).

As this passage indicates, the old fear of Buddhists and *tantrics* had not been completely eliminated. Anxieties about religious/cultural movements whose origins were derivative from Brahmanism tended to be couched in the vocabulary that had been used to demonize and marginalize them in the earlier *kulajis* (pre-Sena and Sena periods) and in the Bengal Puranas and Upa-Puranas. Sri Chaitanya himself was described as wicked (*dushta*) and degenerate ('*nashtamite baro*') in the *kulaji* chronicle attributed to Nulo Panchanan (cited in Basu 1318 b.s.: 187–88, fn.4). In fact, there was a great deal of fear regarding all major cultural and intellectual influences prevalent in Bengal at that time—Sri Chaitanya and his Gaudiya Vaishnava movement as well as Navya Nyaya associated with Raghunath Shiromoni. These new forces or influences, according to *kulacharyas* like Nulo Panchanan, became 'thorns' ('*kanta*') (*ibid.*) in the task of maintaining what the Brahmanical authorities would consider a *dharmic* social order, and the desirable influences of *nyaya* (as distinct from Navya Nyaya, which was being condemned), the *Smritis* and *brahmacharya* appeared to be in decline. In verses attributed to Nulo Panchan, he mourned the fact that in these times, a '[social] crisis became apparent in the Rarh and Banga regions [that is, southern and eastern Bengal] and the reputation of the great lineages in these areas became dim in terms of their moral/*dharmic* lustre' (*ibid.*).

Where Islam was concerned, however, the *kulajis* followed a somewhat different path. As seen earlier, one of the most important mechanisms available to Brahmanism was to continuously police its internal and external margins through periodic reforms known as *samikaranas* and *ekjais*. Ballala Sena's famous (or infamous) *kula maryada* represented one such landmark reform initiative. Here, I study two sets of reforms initiated by *kulacharyas* for two separate *jatis* during what can be regarded as the medieval period. One set was initiated by the famous Barendra Brahmin *kulaguru* Udayancharya Bhaduri, who is believed to have lived during the time of Raja Ganesh, or Sri Ganesh Datta Khan (reigned A.D. 1414–18), as he is called in the *kulaji* literature (Basu 1334a b.s.). The second set of reforms discussed are associated with Debibar Ghatak, one of the most well known of the Rarhiya, *kulin* Brahmin *kulacharyas* during the late fifteenth century (*ibid.*: 1318 b.s.).

The Reforms of Udayanacharya Bhaduri

As seen earlier, orthodox Brahmins had been trying for a long time to preserve their high social status in Bengal. But the influence of Buddhism, to some extent the *tantras* and, finally, the advent of Islam had rendered this endeavour difficult. The accession of Raja Ganesh was apparently regarded as a signal by Brahmanical society that difficult times might be over. Raja Ganesh is supposed to have appointed many Barendra Brahmins in particular as his ministers; he also encouraged and supported Brahmanical scholars and *kulacharyas* to initiate reforms or *samikaranas* of many *jatis* and he actually presided over these sessions. Udayancharaya too was reputed to have carried out reforms among Barendra Brahmins with support and patronage of Ganesh Datta Khan. Another famous *kulacharya* who collaborated in the launching of these reforms was Kulluk Bhatta (Basu 1334a b.s.).

These reforms attributed to these two Barendra Brahmin *kulagurus* need also to be located in the wider context of the milieu ushered in by the reign of Raja Ganesh. There was reportedly a great ascendancy of high-status Hindus—particularly Kayasthas—but also Barendra Brahmins during this time through their accession to many important bureaucratic offices in the king's administration. This situation continued into the reign of Ganesh's son and successor, Sultan Jalaluddin, and beyond (Basu 1334a b.s.). Since the base of Raja Ganesh's power, as of the pre-Mughal sultans, was in northern Bengal, it is easy to see why Barendra Brahmins in particular would be the beneficiaries of the ascendancy of the former to the monarchy. In the discourse of the *kulajis*, the downside to this was constituted by the fact that many of these highly placed Barendra Brahmins began to assume customs and manners associated with the Muslim elite and to attach titles like 'Khan' to their names. There was also serious alarm and consternation at the inevitable physical/social proximity and contact that resulted between highly placed Barendra Brahmins and Muslims associated with the ruling circle. In the purity/pollution paradigm that underlay the vocabulary of the *kulajis*, the discomfort at such goings on found expression in charges that Barendra Brahmins were being physically 'touched', insulted and harassed by Muslims.

To regulate such undesirable developments, the reforms attributed to Udayanacharya Bhaduri sought first of all to create categories of non-normative or polluting behaviour evident among the Barendra Brahmins. Second, an effort was made to devise solutions (*vyavasthas*) to such problematic behaviour. Instances of wrong conduct were divided into two categories known as '*aaghāt*' (literally, 'injury' or 'hurt') and '*abasad*' (literally, 'devoid of energy' or 'lack of lustre') (Basu 1334a b.s.). The terminology itself is interesting. They seem to suggest, conceptually at least, that instances of anti-normative behaviour resulted in the diminution of the Brahmins' ethical energy or lustre or, even worse, caused an injury—almost a bump or a dent—in the *dharmic* strength of that Brahmin. In the case of *aaghāt*, the transgressive behaviour was noticed and recorded and, presumably, the individual who had committed the transgression as well as his family and those who came into contact with them were supposed to bear the taint and censure embodied by

the *aaghat*. In the case of the *abasad*, however, the *kula* authorities came up with solutions/penances or *vyavasthas* for its removal.

The *aaghats* conceptualized in the reforms of Udayanacharya were precisely thirteen in number. Of these only three related to cases of misdemeanour committed by male members of the *jati* against women and included instances of women being murdered (*kamini aaghat*) and insulted (*saandhya aaghat*). The other ten *aaghats* listed in these reforms all involved occasions of contact between Brahmins of the Barendra community and Muslims. These included the *Bharataaghat*, which had been generated when a certain Bharatacharya had been ‘harassed’ by a Muslim soldier, and the *Kafur Khani aaghat*, which resulted from a certain Purandar Acharya being again ‘harassed’ by a soldier of Kafur Khan. The efficacy of the taint or injury or *aaghat* lay in the manner in which it spread to others who came into contact with the transgressor either through marriage connections or through social interaction—usually through sharing a meal. Thus, in the case of the *Bharataaghat*, the person who married the daughter of the ‘tainted’ Bharatacharya became polluted with the same taint (Basu 1334a b.s.: 58–65).

The other category of transgressive behaviour called *abasad* created by these reforms were sixty-eight in numbers, and the overwhelming majority of these were focused on cases of improper contact with Muslims (Basu 1334a b.s.: 68–69). A typical example would include, among others, the *Almas Khani abasad*, which owed its origin to an incident in which a certain Sidhu Karial was (yet again) ‘harassed’ by Almas Khan’s soldier. Similar other *abasads* would include the *Shubharaj Khani abasad*, the *charia dosha or abasad*, the *Nasib Khani abasad* and many others. A few among the *abasads* related to the treatment of women such as the *bhatar daag abasad*, which grew out of the pollution produced by the abduction of the wife of a certain Banamali Bhala by Naorang Khan, the son of Mahmud Khan (Basu 1334a b.s.: 70–75).

The principal distinction between the *aaghat* and the *abasad* lay in the fact that there were no formal provisions in these reforms for the removal of the former, while *kulacharyas* devised solutions (*vyavastha, nishkriti*) in the case of the latter to relieve the transgressor of the burden of having to bear the taint for a long time, or even permanently (Basu: 1334a b.s.: 69). Both categories of transgressions—particularly the *abasads* that could be expiated—indicate that the norms of social conduct laid down by *kulagurus* could not be enforced. On the other hand, as Nagendranath Basu quite correctly points out, many among Barendra Brahmins had acquired so much material power and wealth that the *kulacharyas* (ultimately dependent on influential persons within the community) could not actually expel them forever on account of transgressive behaviour (Basu 1334a b.s.: 69). The only recourse for *kula* leaders like Udayanacharya Bhaduri was to acknowledge and record the types of transgression in the *kulajis*, which functioned as archives of the community’s social behaviour. The provision of expiation of the *abasads* in particular might suggest that these transgressions had been committed by specially powerful persons, and in practical terms it was not in the interest of the *jati/kula*-based community or the *kulaguru* to associate them with this taint forever. In the

specific cases of the *Mathurkopa abasad* and the *Darpanarayani abasad*, people belonging to eminent families pleaded with those who commanded great respect within the community—such as *kulins* and *kulacharyas*—for the removal of the problem (Basu 1334a b.s.). The provision of specific steps that could free the transgressor from the taint served to relieve the individual and/or lineage that had strayed from the norms then in prevalence within the group (and therefore to resume the important task of making suitable matrimonial alliances with other equally high-status families within the community because pollutions produced through transgressive behaviour could and did spread via marriage alliances) and also underscored the power, importance and relevance of the *kulacharyas*.

The Reforms or Mel Bandhan of Debibar Ghatak

The reforms of Bandyaghotiya Debibar Mishra or Debibar Ghatak were known as ‘*mel bandhan*’ and should also be regarded as a response to the crisis that was deemed to have befallen the elite *jati* of *kulin* Rarhiya Brahmins. As in the case of Udayanacharya Bhaduri’s reforms for the Barendra Brahmin community, here too an important component in this crisis was believed to lie in a situation in which highly placed respected *kulin* Rarhiya Brahmins were engaged in close professional, social and cultural interactions with upper-class Muslims—particularly those associated with the ruling power of the Bengal sultanate. This kind of interaction occurred through the involvement of Brahmins in bureaucratic positions at different levels of the sultanate’s administration. There are plenty of examples of Brahmin lineages that rose in material power and dominance through successful bureaucratic and military careers. Among Brahmin individuals who used their military and bureaucratic prowess as stepping stones towards professional and material ascendancy were Lakshmikanta Majumdar who became the founder of an expanding *zamindari* in the region later named the Twenty-four Parganas by the Mughal administration in Bengal (including the area where the city of Calcutta later developed) (Roy 1928), the founder of the family of the Nadia Rajas (Pertsch 1872), the Aakhandal family of Naldanga, which included a certain Srimanta Roy who also came to be known as Ranabir Khan for his prowess in driving out the Afghan *zamindars* of the area in the sixteenth century (Basu 1318 b.s.), the Brahmin *zamindars* of Kasimbazar who claimed descent through a certain Krishnanda (*ibid.*), and Sanjoy Roy who was rewarded with large tracts of land in eastern Bengal as appreciation for his services to the emperor Akbar’s effort to conquer Bengal (*ibid.*). As is well known, instances of actual religious conversion to Islam, especially by individuals of such high *jati/kula* backgrounds were rare. But a strong degree of personal, social and cultural interaction developed among such people with elite Muslims. Not only Brahmins, but Kayasthas and Baidyas too attached titles (for example, Majumdar, Hazra, Chowdhury, etc.) bestowed by Muslim regimes of power to their names, and adopted manners and customs prevalent in upper-class, especially courtly, Muslim society. From the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in particular, it almost became the norm for biographies

and genealogies of families enjoying high *jati* status and landed wealth and power to proudly proclaim their proficiency in Persian and their familiarity with a Persianized courtly culture (Basu 1801; Pertsch 1872). The genealogical chronicles of the Barendra Brahmin *zamindars* of Ektakia and Bhaduria in north Bengal, for example, highlighted and glorified the service of these rajas to the Mughal emperor and even boasted of marriage alliances with Muslim noblewomen (Sanyal 1317 B.S.). As Jayananda (1307 B.S.), one of the foremost of the biographers of Sri Chaitanya wrote in disgust in his *Chaitanyamangal*, it had become common—maybe even fashionable—for Brahmins to imitate Muslims by sporting beards, wearing socks, becoming familiar with the use of the canon and even reciting Persian *masnavis*.

Among such Brahmin groups there were smaller local communities that stood out even more on account of their particularly close relations with Muslims. Well-known among them were the so-named Pir Ali and Sher Khani communities in the Rarh region, and the Srimanta Khani community of eastern Bengal (Basu 1318 B.S.). According to the *kulajis*, called *mel karikas* and attributed to *kulacharyas* like Hari Kabindra, Danujari Mishra and Harihara Bhattacharya, the shameful, polluting behaviour of these (presumably powerful and wealthy) clans was causing havoc and degeneration among Rarhiya Brahmins. One of the *karikas* actually stated that these three communities in particular, through the deliberate disregard for the normative code of behaviour mandated for them, had become the ‘scourge of the earth’ (*yatha Rarhe Sher-Khani Pir-Ali bhagnata kvachit/ Bange Srimanta-Khani cha tribhirdagdha vasundhara*) (ibid.: 218, fn.2). *Kulajis* also tended to describe the social/cultural interaction among high-status Hindu *jatis* and Muslims as a huge moral and social crisis—practically a ‘revolution’ (*viplava*). In the discourse of the *kulagranthas*, a glaring example of this was that Muslims, according to them, had started showing up at high-status Hindu homes when ceremonies such as marriages were in progress with the deliberate aim of causing a scandal (ibid.).

The reforms of Debibar known as *mel bandhan* were apparently a response to this situation (as also to other forces deemed to be threatening by the *kulajis* and other Brahmanical literature, for example, Gaudiya Vaishnavism). In these reforms, Debibar (like Udayancharya before him), identified the various kinds of ‘*doshas*’ or violations committed by *kulin* Rarhiya Brahmins. These *doshas* were of three kinds: *kula gata doshas* (including things like marrying an older woman, marrying a woman with physical deformities, the murder of a Brahmin, consorting with prostitutes, etc.), *Shrotriya gata doshas* (entering into marriage relations with non-*kulins* like Shrotriya Brahmins and some others) and *jati-gata doshas* (mostly involving contact with ‘prohibited’ *jatis* such as Muslims) (ibid.). An important *dosha* listed in the *mel karikas* was ‘*yavana dosha*’. As the name indicates, it quite clearly denoted contact/interaction with Muslims (Tarfdar 1989).

The next big step in Debibar’s reform involved the division of *kulin* Rarhiya Brahmins into units called *mels*, which derived from a specific *dosha* or violation committed by a prominent member of the lineage. Debibar Ghatak is said to have

created thirty-six such *mel* divisions. Some *mels* such as Hari Majumdari, Dehata and Bhairab Ghataki had grown precisely out of the *yavana dosha*. As shown by Nagendranath Basu (1318 B.S.), practically every *mel* was perceived to be contaminated to a greater/lesser degree by the *yavana dosha*.

Rarhiya *kulin* families who were deemed to have committed *doshas* were not directly expelled from the community. Theoretically at least, the *mel bandhan* scheme created a new configuration of ‘polluted’ families whose taint was thereby recognized and contained by the *kulagurus*. A new pattern of marriage practices arose, which were to be conducted, as authorized by *kulacharyas*, within the circle of ‘contaminated’ lineages (*ibid.*). On the one hand, Debibar Ghatak’s *mel* scheme could and was represented as an example of the strictness of *kulin* society and the toughness and vigilance of its *kulacharyas* who did not apparently hesitate to hang labels connected with specific *doshas* or offences on to the reputations of well-known *kulin* lineages. But, as some post-Debibar *kulacharyas* (for example, Nulo Panchanan) and some modern scholars (for example, Nagendranath Basu and M.R. Tarafdar) agree, *mel bandhan* actually represented a strategic compromise and, simultaneously, a way of preserving Rarhiya *kulin* Brahmin society from complete extinction (*ibid.*; Tarafdar 1989). It was an indirect way of recognizing that the rules supposed to govern marriage practices had become so very restrictive that they could not actually be followed. (Even during Debibar’s lifetime, the thirty-six *mels* had been further placed in categories called *paryayas* and even more complicated subdivisions were created post-Debibar. The cumulative effect was to make it virtually impossible for *kulin* Brahmin marriages to conform to such rules since the enabling conditions became non-feasible [Basu 1318 B.S.].) In a large measure, the unenforceability of *kula* rules was due to the social/political reality of medieval Bengal. Nulo Panchanan, who probably lived a century or so after Debibar, gave voice to the doubts and dissatisfaction of those who considered the *mel bandhan* scheme a step that paved the way for the doom and degeneration of Rarhiya *kulin* Brahmin society. ‘Debibar,’ wrote Nulo Panchanan, ‘planted a poison tree [*bisha brikha*] which [should have] been exterminated’ (*ibid.*: 227). The ‘poison’ in Debibar’s reform, according to Nulo Panchanan, inhered in the fact that it allowed ignorant, non-virtuous people to continue to hold the rank of *kulin* because of considerations of heredity. The survey and categorization of *doshas* did not lead to the expulsion of these individuals and their families from the prestige of holding the rank of a *kulin*. On the contrary, as Panchanan wrote sarcastically, ‘[Debibar] did a wonderful thing [indeed]! He made violations [of *kula* norms] the basis of continuing to hold *kulin* status!’ (*ibid.*).

The preceding discussion—especially the cases of materially powerful people who were deemed by *kulacharyas* to have committed ‘*doshas*’ and yet not expelled from their *jati/kulin* status—raises the question of how the conceptual and theoretical paradigms within which the *kulashastra* of medieval Bengal was situated handled it. According to the theoretical underpinnings of Brahmanism, status—and here status referred to *varna/jati/kula*-based status only—was based on ‘purity’ of conduct and on ritual rank. This could (and usually did) bring with it material

rewards/entitlements, but this was not what defined status. The stark dichotomy of (material) power and (ritual/spiritual) status postulated by Louis Dumont (1980) as the hallmark of the caste system has been disputed by others, and the examples given earlier seem to support the position of those opposed in this regard to Dumont (for example, Dirks 1987). The genealogies of practically all high-status *jatis* in Bengal bear ample testimony to the fact that material success gained through means not approved by the norms of *jati/kula* conduct were nevertheless proudly recorded and remembered. In these chronicles, the fundamental principles of Brahmanism were neither openly flouted nor scorned (in fact, quite the reverse) either. In effect, thus, the two kinds of power (material power and status-based power) existed in tandem and reaffirmed one another.

The obvious practical benefits of doing things that according to normative standards should not have been done (for example, accepting employment under Mulsims and thereby making some types of contact with them unavoidable, establishing marriage connections which were forbidden by *jati/kula* law but which made eminent sense according to other considerations, etc.) are understandable. But what needs to be underscored here is the continuing legitimacy and cultural hegemony of Brahmanism. Through its long struggle for cultural hegemony in Bengal, Brahmanism exhibited a resilience and power that were remarkable. As mentioned earlier, many *jatis* that had apparently resisted and condemned the innovation of Ballala Sena's *kula maryada* eventually created *kulin* lineages among themselves. This is borne out by the cases of the Uttar Rarhiya Kayasthas, Barendra Brahmins and some other *jatis* (Basu 1334a b.s., 1335 b.s.). Even those who defied *jati/kula* norms rarely abandoned Brahmanical society altogether. The cases of the rajas of Nadia and of Lakshmikanta Majumdar (later Roy Chowdhury) provide excellent illustrations of this. Lakshmikanta Majumdar, the sixteenth-century military entrepreneur, did not possess the highest rank within Rarhiya Brahmin society—he was a Vamsaja Brahmin, one of the lower grades among the Rarhiya Brahmins. On his ascendancy to considerable power in the Rarh region through the acquisition of landed estates in the southern part of the area, Lakshmikanta, demonstrated his clout by compelling Brahmin leaders of his community to agree that Rarhiya *kulins* were to be permitted to marry his daughters without penalty of losing *kulin* status (Roy 1928). This apparently amounted at the time to a total violation of *kula*-based laws. What is significant here is Lakhsikanta's anxiety to try to improve his standing within *kula* society by arranging the marriages of his daughters with Brahmins of the highest rank within the community of Rarhiya Brahmins. Clearly, an explicit repudiation of Brahmanism was not what he wanted. Lakhsikanta, furthermore, sought the formal position of leader of the local community of Rarhiya Brahmins; supported and patronized Brahmin scholars and *kulacharyas*, and wished to be known as a patron of the Kali temple located within his *zamindari* (later known as Kalighat). The case of the rajas of Nadia is not dissimilar. These chieftains, who were also Shrotriya (that is, non-*kulin*) Brahmins, successfully compelled the principal *kulins* belonging to the much-respected Phulia

mel to marry the daughters of their family. These marriage connections with well-known *kulin* lineages allowed these rajas to posture as the leaders and arbiters of local *kulin* Brahmin society. This was, of course, achieved in part by generous support and patronage of scholarly Brahmins. By the eighteenth century the Nadia rajas were claiming to be the leaders of all of Bengal's Brahmanical society (Basu 1318 b.s.). Here too, thus, the rajas of Nadia flexed their material/political muscles to elevate their own standing within *kulin* Brahmin society. There are many other examples of such a phenomenon at work in sixteenth/seventeenth century Bengal. There are plenty of recorded cases too where *kulacharyas* explicitly stated that they would elevate the *jati/kula* status of an individual because he was too politically powerful to be offended through either a diminution of *jati* rank or outright expulsion from it.

Hegemony, Ideology and the Centrality of Practice

As seen earlier, the whole 'discipline' of *kulashastra* was, therefore, a reflection of the efforts of Brahmanism to entrench itself in Bengal vis-à-vis influences that were perceived as inimical to it. This raises the question of why Brahmanism succeeded overall (albeit via occasional strategic compromises) in being accepted as the mainstream, hegemonic ideology in medieval and even early modern Bengal. In the Gramscian scheme, hegemony is established not by means of force but through ideological legitimacy (Femia 1981). Brahmanism's success in establishing itself as a hegemonic, legitimate ideology may have derived from a number of factors. It could claim a very long antiquity through its connection with the infallible authority of the Vedas. Brahmanism had a long history of being associated with the power of the state in Bengal that defended and promoted its ideological concerns. There also seemed to be a correspondence between the foundational principles of Brahmanism (that is, *varnashrama*-based social organization) and actual social 'reality', that is, the higher *varnas/jatis* were positioned at higher material and political levels than the lower ones. This could be interpreted as both confirmation and justification of the conceptual/theoretical arguments on which Brahmanism was founded.

The hegemonic ideology of Brahmanism was not exclusively concentrated in something called a civil society that stood outside of the purview of the state (as in some conceptualizations of state and civil society that have come to us via Western political theory) (Chatterjee 1993; Habermas 1989; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Taylor 1990). Instead, the hegemonic ideology embodied by Brahmanism was shared by the monarch (including smaller chieftains/potentates who postured as monarchs and assumed, in theory at least, the responsibility of maintaining a *dharmic* social order) and by their influential, high-status subjects. After the Turkish conquest the Islamic political power refrained for the most part from interfering in and/or trying to disrupt the foundational principles of Brahmanism. Brahmanism for its part transferred the source of state power from a 'paramount' regional monarchy to smaller landed potentates willing to and eager to act as the

arbiter of a Brahmanical social order. Second, Brahmanism treated Islam both in its political and cultural dimensions as a source of ritual/spiritual pollution just as it had to the forces of Buddhism and tantra earlier. All these influences also—whether Buddhism, tantra or Islam—were used by Brahmanical discourse to create a set of dangerous and subversive ‘others’. This enabled it to highlight the unique beliefs and practices of Brahmanism vis-à-vis those of Muslims, *tantrics*, etc. This also made it possible for Brahmanism to claim (at least textually) a situation of chronic crisis and threat from these anti-Brahmanical forces, to use it to reinforce allegiance and obedience from those within its folds, and to exercise a sharp vigilance (at least theoretically) within and among its *varna/jati* clusters on the one hand and with the impure hordes of *pashandis*, *mlechchas* and *yavanas* on the other.

Kunal Chakrabarty has suggested that Brahmanism may have come to take the place of a regional culture in early medieval and medieval Bengal. As pointed out by him, Bengal did not have a unified temple cult—like that of Jagannath *deva* in Orissa—or an active awareness that the sharing of a common regional vernacular was an important unifying link, or a unified regional state that could claim to be the enforcer of *varnashrama* principles. Almost by default, thus, Bengal’s regional variant of Brahmanism (associated with goddess cults, concerns about *jati*, kulinism issues, etc.) came to occupy the position of a regional tradition (Chakrabarti 2001). I have argued elsewhere that upper-class, upper-caste (Brahmanical) society in Bengal had come to be quite deeply influenced by an Islamicate political culture—both during the reigns of the Turkish/Afghan sultans of Bengal and during the era of Mughal rule over Bengal. This was probably even more noticeable after the conquest of Bengal by Akbar in the late sixteenth century (Chatterjee 1996, unpublished). But the continuing power and legitimacy of Brahmanical Hinduism was rarely, if ever, undermined. The same upper-class, high-caste people were usually practitioners of both. An Islamicate culture—identifiable more appropriately in the post-sixteenth century with a Persianized/Mughal courtly culture—helped them integrate with and participate in a wider, trans-regional polity and imperial culture (Alam 1998; Waggoner 1996). But upholding the principles, practices, features of the region’s Brahmanical tradition was equally and vitally important. It allowed the Hindu aristocracy and elite to assume the mantle of ancient rajas in continuing support to an ideology of long antiquity and legitimacy. Second, It allowed them to preserve a cultural arena where they could be patrons and sharers in a common Brahmanical culture involving things like the production and dissemination of Bengali Brahmanism’s vernacular Puranas (that is, the Mangalkabyas, etc.), consecrating deities and temples and supporting the intellectual custodians of Brahmanism (for example, the *kulacharyas*). This is not to suggest that no interpenetration had occurred among the cultural forms and practices associated with Brahmanism and Islamicate/Persianized culture. But the identities of these cultural forms retained a distinctiveness and were never totally submerged.

In the long historical battle of Brahmanism vis-à-vis its ‘others’, a feature that emerged as a means of safeguarding Brahmanism and of highlighting its points

of distinction from the influences that threatened it was the centrality given to social-cultural practice. Brahmanism was presented less as a cluster of metaphysical ideas (although that existed too) and more as a range of cultural practices manifest in normative conduct, rituals, ceremonies, customs, etc., which were to be diligently followed in order to remain securely on the path of *dharma*. Equally important were the expiations, which were prescribed to atone for any failure in the sphere of cultural observance. Puranic literature (both the Mahapuranas and the Upa-Puranas) as well as the Navya Smriti literature of medieval Bengal collectively served to complement the preoccupations expressed in the *kulagrathas*.

The detailed and painstaking researches of R.C. Hazra (1940, 1958, 1963) have established beyond doubt that social-cultural practice was foundational to Brahmanism, especially as far as the vast majority of ordinary people were concerned (Hazra 1940: preface). Thus, the Puranic corpus that played so critical a role in the preservation and dissemination of Brahmanical values—especially among ordinary people—gave considerable importance to social practice and behaviour as manifest via rituals, ceremonies to be performed and customs to be followed. Both the Mahapuranas and the Upa-Puranas are replete with instructions about how funeral rites (*shraddha*) were to be performed, how specific festivals and ceremonies (ranging from the worship of the goddess to festivals like Dipavita, Rasa, etc.) were to be observed, the duties of Shudras, students, directions for householders, the duties and conduct of women, and even whether the consumption of fish by Brahmins was to be permitted. This literature, which spans several centuries, also serves to illustrate how Brahmanical authorities sought to adjust and accommodate the norms of social conduct to current social and cultural needs. Thus, in the Puranas designated ‘later’ (post-third century A.D.) by Hazra, there is much greater attention to the glorification of sectarian deities, on the performance of *puja* (ceremonial worship), *vrata* (a long-term vow that was executed through ceremonies and rituals) and *tirtha* (pilgrimage), and the absorption of very many *tantric* rites into Brahmanical practice (*ibid.*).

The Navya Smriti literature of medieval Bengal also embodied its concern for the preservation of Brahmanical principles through elaborate instructions regarding social behaviour and practice, and to some extent personal behaviour and practice (Bandyopadhyaya 1961). The principal subjects that preoccupied the smarta scholars of Bengal were *achara* (observance/custom), *prayashchitta* (expiations for misconduct) and *vyavahara* (can be roughly translated as law). The *achara* sections of the smriti-nibandhas contained detailed instructions about the performance of life-cycle ceremonies (for example, *namakarana*, *annaprasana*, *vivaha*, *shraddha*, etc.) and *puja*, *vratas*, etc. (for example, Durgotsava, Janmashtami, Shivaratri, etc.). These instructions included guidelines about the correct time to perform these ceremonies, the correct modalities of these ceremonies, types of people to be allowed to participate actively in them, as well as standards of personal ‘purity’ (the taking of ceremonial baths, abstinence from sexual intercourse,

fasting, etc.) required of those closely involved in these observances. The *prayashchitta* sections of the Smriti treatises attempted to define and categorize various kinds of social and personal misconduct and sin (*mahapataka*) and prescribed various forms of penances and ceremonies for their expiation. The discourses on *vyavahara* (law) contained elaborate and sophisticated discussions about the principles of evaluating evidence and types of decisions to be made in cases of complaints about property rights, inheritance, murder, theft, etc. (ibid.).

As noted, the *kulajis* also emphasized practice but in a somewhat more restrictive sense than the Smritis. The principal preoccupation of the *kulajis* was with the regulation of marriage practices within and among *jatis* and to some extent some forms of social interaction (for example, inter-dining) and personal conduct (such as, instances of getting ‘polluted’ via person/s with whom social contact was forbidden, etc.). But various other kinds of matters that were of the utmost importance to the Smritis, for instance, the right ways of performing *pujas*, *vratas*, life-cycle ceremonies, prescriptions for the expiation of misconduct and the entire field of *vyavahara/law* that dealt with issues of property and inheritance rights and the analyses of evidence were beyond the scope and purview of the *kulagrantas*. The subject of marriage (*vivaha*) comprised the only exception. The concern of the *kulajis* with regulating intermarriage among and within *jatis* compelled it to set out the detailed conditions under which marriage practices were to be allowed or disallowed (for example, the kinds of women with whom marriage was to be prohibited and the age of the bride vis-à-vis the age of the groom). Debibar’s injunctions, for example, that marriages to women who were orphaned, physically deformed, handicapped, sharp-tongued (*mukhara*), etc. were not to be sanctioned are very similar to textual prohibitions in the Smritis regarding the types of women with whom marriage was to be avoided.

King and Samaj

As seen throughout the discussion in the previous section, the maintenance of Brahmanical principles, particularly in its application to social order and social status, was enabled, according to the discourse of the *kulajis*, by the collaboration among three important entities: the king, the *kulacharya* and the community or *samaj*. The monarch was the ruler who exerted military/political power over a specific swathe of territory. But, the king in addition had an indispensably significant function, that is, to regulate and maintain social order according to the principles of *dharma*. This was needed because the well-being of the earthly order was linked to that of the cosmic order, and the latter had a profound impact on human beings and their lives. As noted earlier, on the demise of the region’s paramount monarchy in the thirteenth century, smaller local potentates—frequently, important officials of the Turkish/Afghan and then the Mughal regimes—performed the role played earlier by the Sena dynasts. They appointed *kulacharyas*, presided

over assemblies (*samikaranas/ekjais*) where social verdicts were delivered and served as important patrons of the former. Raja Ganesh's role in acting as the arbiter of Brahmanical society of his time and convening an assembly where issues of *jati/kula*-based status were decided is well known (Basu 1334a b.s., 1335 b.s.). There are plenty of similar examples from subsequent centuries. Among Dakshin Rarhiya Kayasthas, the reputation of a certain Purandar Khan Mullick (alias Gopinath Basu) stands tall as one of their most eminent 'leaders' who had hosted the thirteenth *samikarana* of this group, probably during the late fifteenth century (ibid.: 1335 b.s.). Rarhi Brahmin *kulajis* refer to a certain Keshabram Chakrabarty and Bishnu Thakur as the patrons of the *kulacharya* Nulo Panchanan who probably belonged to the sixteenth century (ibid.: 1318 b.s.).

Social engineering, particularly with regard to the lowering and elevating of social status, was authorized by the monarch/potentate in tandem with the deliberations and decisions made by the *kulacharyas* and *ghataks*. The *kulacharyas* though, despite their scholarship and erudition, which they were believed to possess in the early centuries, was nevertheless an appointee and protégé of the monarch. Without the backing provided by the political muscle of the king, it is doubtful how effective the reforms and 'laws' promulgated by the *kulacharyas* would be. Hence, the prominence given in the genealogical chronicles not only to eminent *kulacharyas* but also equally to their kingly patrons and backers. Some *kulacharyas* in particular reportedly conducted themselves in the style and manner of aristocrats. Debibar Ghatak, author of the *mel bandhan* reforms among Rarhiya Kulin Brahmins allegedly

acted as the uncrowned king of the Bengal Brahmins. No royal procession contained such a number of elephants, camels, horses, palanquins and retainers as did that of Debibar during his march to a kulin conference [*samikarana/ekjai*] whichever village he had to pass through, the inhabitants thereof were bound to find provisions for Debibara and his retinue. (Roy 1928: 35)

It is hard to believe that Debibar could have sustained his grand style without the backing of a strong and powerful potentate. Thus, despite the relevance and importance of *kulacharyas* and *ghataks* in the production of *kulashastra* and in the dissemination of *jati/kula*-based culture, I prefer to see them as dependent on and connected to the political structures which underlay the world depicted by the *kulajis*.

The third element in the triumvirate (of king/*kulacharya*/community), that is, the *samaj* or the community, while also not unconnected to structures of political power, nevertheless possessed certain free-standing functions that are of critical importance for an understanding of something akin to a civil society, a public sphere, in middle period Bengal. The term '*samaj*' literally meant 'going together'—a collectivity of persons who shared some things in common. But this term, as used in the discourse of the *kulajis*, did not quite mean what the term '*samaj*' regarded as coterminous in meaning to 'society' does currently. The *samaj* referred

to in the *kulaji* literature represented a collectivity of people who were biologically related to one another through *jati* connections. It was, thus, a large kinship network brought into existence by and perpetuated through intermarriage.⁵

These *jati-based samajs* were usually territorialized in a particular locality and often their names reflected it, for example, the Barendra Kayastha or Barendra Brahmin *samaj* or the Bangaja Kayastha *samaj*. Under these broader regional *samajs*, smaller and even more localized ones developed. These took their names often from clusters of villages or towns where members of the *samaj* lived, or from the name of some dominant local raja or potentate around whom a particular *jati/kula-based samaj* had developed. Thus, a *samaj* of Bangaja Kayasthas known as the Jessore *samaj* developed around the family of Maharaja Pratapaditya (Basu 1801). Similarly, a *samaj* of Baidyas known as the Bikrampur *samaj* crystallized in the Dhaka region of eastern Bengal under the leadership of Raja Rajballabh, one of the most powerful figures of eighteenth-century Bengal (Gupta 1905).

There were clearly designated leaders of the *samaj*: *kulacharyas/ghataks*, important and well-respected *kulins*, formed part of the leadership—but by far the more powerful role belonged to the person who held the office of *samajpati* or *goshthipati* (Basu 1317 B.S.; Deb 1931). In most cases the rajas and potentates who served as patrons and protectors of these *jati-based samajs* also held the offices of *samajpati* or *goshthipati*. Potentates like Purandar Basu Khan, Lakshmikanta Majumdar, Maharaja Rajballabh, Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia and others proudly assumed the title of *samajpati* (for example, Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S.; Gupta 1905) to indicate that in addition to their political/material might, they were also the leaders of their respective *jati-based samajs*. There existed specific ceremonies to honour the person who held the office of *samajpati*: garlands of flowers, sandalwood paste, etc. were ceremonially offered at public occasions within the community, most typically at weddings (Gupta 1905). The office of *samajpati/goshthipati* was often held by successive generations of the same family. The leadership of the Dakhsin Rarhiya Kayastha *samaj*, continued to be vested in the family of Purandar Basu Khan for some generations, for example. The same is true of the descendants of Raja Rajballabh in the eighteenth century. But the office could and did shift to different families. Following the Mughal conquest of Bengal, Kayastha families that had been particularly close to the Bengal sultans were eclipsed by the rise of new Kayastha and other lineages who attached themselves as collaborators to the incoming Mughal regime. Dayaram Pal, an important functionary in the Mughal administration in Sarkar Saptagram, was typical of the latter. His political rise was complemented by his assumption of the office of *samajpati* of the Dakhin Rarhiya Kayasthas from the older *samajpati* family, descended from Purandar Khan (Basu 1340 B.S.).

These *samajs* moulded and shaped rules of social conduct and were responsible for their enforcement as well. It also provided a large network of lineages among

⁵ The best illustration of the meaning associated with the term *samaj* in the *kulaji* literature is contained in the many volumes of Basu's *Baner Jatra Itihasa*.

which marriage connections could be established. Very importantly, the *samaj* also functioned as a forum for the formulation and dissemination of public opinion—the ‘public’ here comprising all those lineages that belonged to it. The leaders of the *samaj*, that is, the *kulacharyas/ghataks*, important and respected *kulins*, local potentates/*samajpatis*, etc. were the principal architects of this kind of community opinion. The *samaj* could and did authorize the social isolation and ostracism of an individual and his/her family. Public condemnation and ridicule orchestrated by these same authorities and acquiesced to by the bulk of the community could also serve to exert considerable pressure. Clearly, mockery and taunts were an effective way of expressing communal condemnation. A type of *abasad* recognized by Udayanacharya Bhaduri’s reforms was called the *chhagi pora abasad* (literally, the she-goat burning offence/*abasad*). This particular *abasad* originated from the scandal involving a certain Madan Lahiri whose wife had disappeared, but who, to cover this up, spread the word that she had died. He then took the carcass of a she-goat for cremation, all the while pretending that it was the body of his dead wife. Madan Lahiri’s ruse was discovered; the *kulacharyas* reacted by a very formal condemnation of such behaviour: they created a specific category of offence or *abasad*. But there are clear indications that the enormity of what was perceived to be a heinous act produced general outrage within the community. The transgressor, Madan Lahiri, was shunned by his immediate family and even Vaishnava mendicants stopped going to his door to beg for alms. To further shame Madan Lahiri, the *kulagurus* came up with the following verse: ‘Madan wanders around [crying] wife, wife/[Yet] he goes to the cremation site to burn a she-goat’ (Basu 1334a b.s.: 72). This particular taint also had a long life—it remained in force for forty-two years, during which any lineage that intermarried with the disreputable family of Madan Lahiri also became tarred with the *chhagi pora abasad*.

The genealogies of almost all the high-status *jatis* in Bengal contain overwhelmingly large numbers of instances when violations of customs or rules pertaining within a *samaj* had been overlooked or gone unpunished because of the involvement in these affairs of the most powerful lineages—sometimes the families of the local potentates-cum-*samajpatis*. But, it would be a mistake to conclude that material clout could invariably neutralize the principles of social conduct, which theoretically at least underpinned the *jati*-based *samaj* or community. There are also suggestions in the *kulajis* that material clout did not always hold sway over principles of Brahmanism whose custodians were the *kulagurus* and *ghataks*. The descendants of Raja Anadibar Simha held a very high position as leaders of the Uttar Rarhiya Kayasthas for many centuries. Raja Madan Simha, a descendant of Anadibar Simha brought infamy on himself and his immediate family through his drunkenness and his misbehaviour at the *shraddha* ceremony of his father. The status and power of Madan Simha’s lineage among the Uttar Rarhiya Kayasthas could not protect him from the threat of expulsion from the *samaj* on account of his scandalous behaviour (Basu 1335 b.s.). There are reports of a similar

case regarding Raja Pratapaditya in the seventeenth century. Pratapaditya apparently expressed his desire to marry a beautiful young widow (whom he had also apparently raped). But even the might, ferocity and power of Pratapaditya as well as his dominance over the Jessore *samaj* of Bangaja Kayasthas could not persuade the guardians of the *samaj* to relent to his wishes. Pratapaditya is believed to have dropped the demand that he be allowed to marry the widow. Clearly, there were contingent lines beyond which the normative principles of social conduct could not be pushed—even upon occasion by the mighty and the powerful. Thus, the *samaj* could also be the site through which dissent was expressed vis-à-vis a king and his policies. The strong criticisms and condemnations of Ballala Sena expressed in many Baidya, Barendra Brahmin and Kayastha chronicles is testimony to it (*ibid.*: 1334a b.s., 1335 b.s.).

But despite its not inconsiderable influence, the *jati*-based community or *samaj* was theoretically subservient to the power of the state embodied in the person of the monarch. Indeed, the king's duty to regulate *jati*-based status by overseeing the principles on which social conduct was supposed to be based was foundational in Brahmanical philosophy. This probably explains why the generic 'annals of kings' type literature that was prevalent in Bengal, at least from the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries and into the eighteenth century under the label of *Rajabali* or *Rajtaranga* included references to the regulation of *jati/kula*-based hierarchies by kings together with their other usual royal pursuits (conquests, etc.).⁶ The disappearance of a regional 'paramount' monarchy interested in upholding the ideals of Brahmanism had forced devolution of such powers on to local potentates. But the underlying concept, that is, that the maintenance of a proper *dharmic* order divided into hierarchies of *jatis* and *kulas* needed to be connected to a form of political/material power was not explicitly challenged. The challenges to Ballala Sena's moral stature by the leaders of the Baidya, Kayastha, etc. communities of the time notwithstanding, the principle that political power or state power necessarily had to provide the foundation on which *dharmic* social relations and social conduct could be enacted was not really questioned. After all, the leaders of the anti-Ballala movement—Raja Anadibar Simha and others—replicated on a smaller scale the *dharmic* functions of the Sena monarch: they convened assemblies and established principles of *jati*-based hierarchy among members of the community on the basis of the 'purity' of their social interactions (*ibid.*: 1335 b.s.).

Thus, the *samaj*, which figures in the discourse of the *kulagrantas* over several centuries, does not really approximate the civil society of European political theory (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). The question naturally arises as to why a concept derived from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Western political thought is being raised in the context of medieval Bengal. The historical experience of Western colonial rule introduced at least to the Indian literati categories and concepts of

⁶ 'Rajabali', Sanskrit manuscript housed in the Dhaka University Library (accession no. K577A). I am grateful to Dr Sonia Amin for helping me to gain access to this material. Also Bidyalankar (1808: 80–87).

public and political life derived from European political philosophy. The concept of a civil society was one such concept. Raising the concept of civil society in the context of an essay on the *jati*-based *samajs* of medieval and early-modern Bengal is relevant because modern Indian scholarship does deploy these terms and concepts to understand and explore the institutions and practices that governed society in India, both in the past and the present. The *samaj*, which is given such centrality in the phenomenon of *kulashastra*, was a form of community that policed itself and regulated itself in matters of social behaviour. It was not a sphere that was distinct from the state as in the classic Western understanding of the term (at least, post-Hegel), but was linked to it. To the extent that the *samaj* provided a forum for the formulation of the community's opinion and dissent, it comes closest to resembling a civil society. The *samajs* also served as an archive of communal memory through the constant production and reproduction of these genealogies. Their oral/performative dimensions served to articulate and disseminate such communal, public opinions far more widely than imagined. But it is extremely important to bear in mind that the *jati*-based *samaj* that figures so prominently in *kulaji* literature did not exhaust other types and forms of community that coexisted in the region during the medieval and early modern periods (there is more discussion on this later in the segment entitled 'Limits of Kula-based Ideology').

The Historicity of the *Kulajis*

As mentioned at the outset, the subject of the historicity of the *kulajis* became a subject of intense debate and controversy in the 1920s (Chatterjee 2005). A large part of this debate was coloured naturally by the 'modern' notion of history as a rational-positivist discipline based on verifiable evidence. This concept of history had come to be enshrined among the Indian middle-class intelligentsia—particularly professional historians who associated themselves with the newly professionalized discipline of history which had arrived in India primarily via the institutions of colonial education.

By the definition and criteria deployed by professional historians of early twentieth-century Bengal, the *kulagrantas* certainly fell short of the claim to qualify as history.⁷ The tendency of *kulajis* to mix the fabulous with the factual, the perceived impossibility of dating them precisely, the difficulty of ascertaining the authors of these genealogies, and other factors combined to reinforce the notion that the *kulajis* did not qualify as history. Modern professional historians of the early twentieth century were prepared to concede that at a stretch some elements embodied in the *kulajis* might be used as *sources* of history, but only after the professional historian had subjected these elements to rational, critical scrutiny and evaluation. There was also a tendency among modern, professional Bengali historians of the time to associate history with chronological accounts of dynasties

⁷ A good illustrative example of such arguments is to be found in Majumdar (1979).
Downloaded from <http://sin.sagepub.com> at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on September 30, 2009

and kings of past times. The *kulajis* were certainly not reconstructions of the histories of various dynasties that had ruled over different parts of Bengal. The *sloka* verse style and chronicle form of the *kulajis* also seemed to disbar them from the category of history in the modern sense (Chatterjee 2005).

Indeed, the *kulagrantas* of medieval Bengal were not careful reconstructions of the chronological histories of various dynasties that ruled over different parts of the region. At one level they were accounts of marriage practices (*adana-pradana*) among lineages. But they were simultaneously commemorations of various other long-term trends and developments in the region's social and cultural history. The *kulagrantas* embodied the story of a process, spread out over many centuries, through which individuals and families could trace the experiences and vicissitudes via which a lineage or a *jati* had acquired its current position in the *jati/kula* hierarchy. These chronicles, by discussing the roles and actions of monarchs, *kulacharyas*, *samajpatis*, etc., drew attention to the constitution and evolution of several key political and social institutions of medieval Bengal. Actually, the *kula panjikas* were not exclusively concerned with the king's governmental activities, but rather the interaction between the monarchy and other civil institutions like the *samaj*. These genealogical materials also, as seen earlier, embody the story of the struggle of Brahmanism vis-à-vis its perceived enemies. However, as apparent to anyone who has actually read through all or parts of *kulagrantas* that are now available to us, the *kulajis* never explicitly tell its listeners or readers that they were providing an insight into the functioning of monarchical or other types of institutions in medieval Bengal. Neither do they consciously draw attention to the need to combat the subversive influences of Buddhism, the *tantras* and Islam. These agendas, implicit in the *kulajis*, become apparent to us now, via the benefit of hindsight and the sort of broad perspective about medieval Bengal to which contemporaries may not necessarily or invariably have been privileged. But it would not be befitting for the modern researcher interested in the nature and political/cultural function of the *kulajis* to erase these extremely potent and significant agendas, which, I argue, enabled the continuous production and recasting of these materials over many centuries. This brings us to the far more difficult and challenging subject of trying to figure out what medieval Bengali society saw in this corpus of materials. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to examine pre-modern notions of history as well as the significance and function of the chronicle form, which was typically associated with the *kulajis*.

The greatest challenge in the task of understanding the definition, nature and function of history in medieval and early modern Bengal is comprised by the semantic difficulty of using the term 'history' together with its rational-positivist baggage for a milieu in which the practice of recording the past was guided by considerations that were significantly different from those currently in prevalence. As discussed, a large part of the scholarship devoted to exploring the nature and function of history (especially in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century India) has tended to define history as a rational discipline based on verifiable, factual evidence

(Chatterjee 1993; Guha 1988; Kaviraj 1992). But this was not how most of medieval and early modern South Asian societies understood it. The indigenous South Asian term that is now regarded as synonymous with history is the term ‘*itihasa*’. The grammatical derivation of the term *itihasa* as ‘*iti ha asa*’ or, ‘thus it was’, indicates that the range of meanings associated with it were far broader than that denoted by the modern definition of the term history (Thapar 1986). *Itihasa*, thus, could be a carefully factual biography of a king; a story intended to provide entertainment; and/or recounted for the purpose of conveying a moral message. An *itihasa* narrative, thus, could and did combine in itself all these functions and purposes, or discharge one or several of these functions. *Itihasa* almost invariably, however, referred to stories about past times—about ancestors, divine beings, kings and heroes, and about the origins of things, be it a lineage, a *jati* or the cult of worship of a particular deity. Thus, the association of the term with accounts of things, events and people of the past seems quite clear. Another term that was used closely and almost synonymously with *itihasa* was the term ‘*Purana*’ (Hazra 1953–62; Rocher 1986). Although the actual substance of the corpus of texts that comprised the Puranic tradition was far more comprehensive than the formal definition of it, it is nevertheless true that according to the classical definition the topics discussed by these materials were supposed to include accounts of the creation of the universe, the cosmic cycles, genealogies of sages and kings, exploits of the gods, and accounts of royal dynasties. By the time of the Vayu Purana, the terms *Purana* and *itihasa* were being used interchangeably for one another, frequently in the form of a compound term, that is, *puranetihasa*, and no distinction was maintained between the two (Coburn 1985: 24). This was possibly because both terms were used synonymously to refer to bodies of stories about the past or knowledge about the past.

Bengali vernacular narratives—be they the Mangalkabyas or other types of Panchali literature, which were ubiquitous in the region during the medieval and early modern periods—also used the term *itihasa* and *Purana* interchangeably to indicate accounts or stories about the past. In his *Dharmamangal*, Kabiratna, an eighteenth-century poet, referred to his composition as: ‘Panchalika, *itihasa*, Dharmer *Purana*’ (cited in Sen 1405 b.s.: vol. 2, 153). One also finds the equation of the term *itihasa* with the term ‘*katha*’ simply meaning ‘story’ or narrative in eighteenth-century works such as in the highly reputed *Annadamangal* of Bharatchandra Roy (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 b.s.: 290). In the encyclopaedias compiled in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, such as, the *Shabdakalpadruma* of Raja Radhakanta Deb (1931: part 1) and the *Bishwakosha* associated with Nagendranath Basu (1317 b.s.: vol. 2, part 2), the terms *akhyan*, *itihasa* and *katha* were given very similar or synonymous meanings. But these *itihasa* narratives, as Rao et al. (2001) have pointed out, were also preoccupied with explanation, with chains of causation and sequence that linked events to each other, and, above all, with a need to erect an interpretive ‘frame’, that is, a need to fold these elements into a coherent concept or world-view. Many of these features, such as, the issue of causation, were not necessarily presented in the same way as the modern

historians' concern with the hunt for causality. But, then, as I hope to show, medieval *itihasa* narratives need to be read and understood with much greater sensitivity to their own modes of exposition, explanation, etc. rather than being weighed against the notions of positivist history derived from the nineteenth-century German historical profession and eventually transmitted to India via colonial rule.

The perceived shortcomings of the *kulagrantas* in terms of their perceived lack of commitment to chronological precision, evaluation of evidence, etc. made them unsuitable to be given the status of history in the view of many 'modern' twentieth-century scholars. The style and form of these genealogies reinforced the difficulties of bestowing on these materials the legitimacy and validity of history. The verse/*sloka* style together with the annal/chronicle form of the *kulagrantas* combined to strengthen the case against them. As scholars have shown, written prose narratives have tended to be associated with a certain sense of dialogue and with the process of gaining the readers' assent to the text through holding up to transparency (via the evaluation and critical questioning of evidence, etc.) the process of research. Poets and story-tellers by contrast are believed often to give much greater weight to the effort to 'suspend his hearers' disbelief and engage them in his created world' (Humphreys 1996; Spiegel 1993). In the case of the *kulajis*, their *sloka* form deepened the unease regarding their historicity among modern objectivist historians of the twentieth century (Maitra 1879). The annal/chronicle form, typical not only of the Bengal genealogies, but of genealogies in general from many historical periods and regions all over the world, constituted yet another difficulty for the modern historical sensibility when it came to evaluating the historicity of these *kulagrantas*.

As Hayden White (1990) points out, to the modern historiographical establishment, there are three basic kinds of historical representation—the annals, the chronicle and history proper, or the historical narrative. Of these three forms, the first two are seen often as significant because they function as steps leading to the efflorescence of genuine history, but fall short of being admitted to the realm of proper history on their own. The annal, since it consists of a list of events ordered in chronological sequence and totally lacks the narrative component, probably ranks lower than the chronicle in the perceived progression towards 'real', that is, narrative history. The chronicle, defined by Spiegel (1997: 106) as 'a series of biographies linked together by the principle of hereditary succession', often seems by contrast to the annal to want to tell a story, that is, it aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve it. According to Hayden White (1990), the pre-eminent feature of the chronicle lies in its failure to achieve narrative closure. I argue that instead of viewing chronicles and annals, whether of kings or elite lineages as stages in the inexorable march towards full-blown narrative history, it may be far more useful to see them as existing simultaneously in the same society and at the same time, but performing distinct functions in it.

As the discussion of *kulaji* literature has established, at their most explicit and transparent level, these chronicles, while recording the creation of dense webs of marriage relationships within a *jati*, also commemorated biological descent within

the lineage. As Spiegel's work has shown, the annals or chronicle form performed critically important functions in pre-modern societies in terms of creating and reinforcing a sense of continuity and linear temporality. Genealogies also asserted the temporal durability of their subjects, whether a family or a ruling dynasty, and allowed perceived relationships between historical figures and events of the past and present to be viewed as one continuous stream of history. Most importantly perhaps, chronicles provided a 'perceptual grid' (Spiegel 1997: 103) within which to arrange, organize and present the past. As seen in this article, this perceptual grid took the form of discrete biographies of kings or heads of *kulin* lineages linked together through generational change, which was manifest through descent and/or succession. Genealogies, furthermore, connected the past and the present by grounding it in biology and since they suggested that the human process of filiation and procreation were metaphors for historical change, they also served to secularize the notion of time (*ibid.* 1993).

But I would argue that above all, the *kulaji* literature strengthened and perpetuated a collective sense of identity, that is, a *jati*-based identity, which found concrete expression through the territorial *samaj*. Medieval Bengali literature is replete with examples of the prevalence and ubiquitousness of such *jati*-based collective identities. Writing at the very end of the eighteenth century, when the relevance of the world depicted in the *kulagrathas* (that is, the relevance of distinctions among various *samajs* of the same *jati*, the scrupulous observance of the finer distinctions such as *mukhya/gauna kulin* and various *paryayas* within *mels* in the matter of arranging marriages) was probably already much weaker than before, the polyglot Ram Ram Basu, the *munshi* of various Englishmen and the author of *Maharaja Pratapaditya Charitra* introduced himself as a Bangaja Kayastha and a *sva-jati* (same *jati*) of the subject of his biography (Basu 1801). Finally and very importantly, the *kulajis* formed a large reservoir of collective, social memory. To return to the example of Ram Ram Basu's *Maharaja Pratapaditya Charitra*, the author explained in the preface to this work that the exploits and achievements of Pratapaditya were transmitted through generations within the Bangaja Kayastha *jati* and thereby kept alive (*ibid.*). This, however, brings us to the issue of how collective/social memory relates to history—a topic that engrossed the attention of scholars like Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, to Pierre Nora and others in the relatively recent past (Halbwachs 1980; Nora 1989).

As most scholars agree, 'memory is not only what we personally experience, refine and retain...but also what we inherit from preceding generations and pass on to the next' (Butler 1989: 13). The beginnings of disagreement appear when we seek to explore the relationship between collective/social memory and history. Pierre Nora (following the trail set much earlier by Halbwachs) has attempted to make a forceful case for distinguishing between history and memory. In Nora's (1989) opinion, memory is spontaneous, free-form and a 'phenomenon of emotion and magic', whereas history is concerned with analysis and other methodological concerns and is actually antithetical to memory. In my opinion, the cleavage between history and memory envisioned by Nora—even if it works for post-Enlightenment,

rational, professional history—cannot be used as a paradigm through which to understand the historicity of the *kulajis*. As the work of Rao–Shulman–Subrahmanyam (2001) makes clear, history or *itihasa* in medieval and early modern India was not seen as a formal *shastra* or discipline; it was not associated with a particular style (prose/verse); and there were no distinct groups of persons who were considered to have specialized training and skills to compose history. There were also no specifically designated genres (poetry, genealogy, etc.) that were earmarked as more suitable for the writing of *itihasa* than others. Thus, what we would recognize in contemporary terms as historical awareness could and did coexist with fabulous tales of demons, divinities and miracles in medieval and early modern works. There are enough examples of this in various kinds of works produced in medieval and early modern Bengal. In fact, the fabulous stories sometimes served to underscore and strengthen the message/s embedded in the ‘factual’ parts of these materials. I would argue that the much more modern need to separate and categorize texts and other materials into fiction, history, fairy tales, folklore, etc. did not operate, or operated with far less urgency in a pre-modern milieu. Thus, perhaps to the writers and singers of the *kulajis* and to the listeners and readers of these materials, these genealogical chronicles performed many of the functions that history (in the sense of records of the past) did. To borrow a term from Spiegel (1997: 103), they provided a ‘perceptual grid’ which enabled lineages and *jati*-based communities to constitute a sense of their collective past. The claim of Bengal’s genealogical chronicles to be regarded as social memory is further strengthened when we consider that the most fundamental reason for the creation and preservation of these chronicles lay in the recognized need to transmit them as widely as possible. These chronicles, at least in the period before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were not materials whose primary utility lay in being stored carefully in personal libraries—they were primarily intended for dissemination. As seen earlier, the use of rhyming verse and fairly rustic and unsophisticated type of vernacular underscores the perceived urgency to spread the message/s contained in the *kulajis* as widely as possible. As Fentress and Wickham (1992: ix–x) remark, ‘How does one make individual memory “social”? Essentially by talking about it. The sorts of memories one shares with others are those which are relevant to them, in the context of a social group of a particular kind.’ And in this case, singing or reciting the *kulajis* became a mode through which the collective memory of the *jati*-based community was continuously preserved, recast and commemorated.⁸ I make no claim for the historicity of the *kulagranthas* in the late nineteenth century rational-positivist sense of it. But I do believe that the *kulajis*, in terms of function, provided medieval and early modern Bengali society a chronological view into the past and gave the *jati*-based *samaj* a sense of its origin, evolution and continuation as a collectivity. In this regard the *kulajis* came very close to

⁸ Scholars working on Africa and Latin America have done valuable work on these aspects of orality and memory, for example, Abercrombie (1998); Hill (1988); Larson (2000); Vansina (1985).

what *itihasa* was expected to accomplish, that is, give people a sense of the past for the purpose of edification, entertainment and instruction.

The Limits of Kula-based Ideology

In the final analysis, however, the picture of Bengali society and culture as projected by *kulaji* literature represents only a vision produced through the prism of its Brahmanical concerns, anxieties and priorities. Its significance, as seen in this article, is indeed that it conveys a particular kind of ideological /cultural and social message. But the configurations of political and cultural identity in medieval and early modern Bengal were naturally far more complex and diverse than those captured through the lens of the *kulaji* tradition. As much of the literature from medieval and early modern Bengal indicates, people formed friendships and ties of loyalty and dependence across the myriad boundaries of *kula*, *jati* and *varna* to create different kinds of communities based on work, neighbourliness or other kinds of endeavours.⁹ Biographies and genealogies of Bengal's high-caste Hindu Brahmanical rajas and *zamindars* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicate that they proudly participated in communities of elite and aristocratic culture deriving from a common acknowledgement of Mughal hegemony, and this in no way cancelled their memberships in *jati/kula*-based *samajs* described by the *kulajis* (for example, Pertsch 1872). Communities of scholars referred to themselves as *samajs* and these were also territorial. But the pandit *samajs* represented communities of intellectuals resident in one locality and sometimes represented a particular kind of intellectual and scholarly specialization (Sinha 1993). Thus, people in medieval and early modern Bengal could and did belong to several *samajs*/communities, 'not simultaneously, but contextually, invoking in each context a collectivity' (Chatterjee 1993: 222). The concerns articulated by the *kulaji* tradition indeed comprised significant markers of individual, family and communal identity—but these identities and affiliations coexisted contextually with other forms of identity whose sources and legitimacy lay elsewhere.

References

- Abercrombie, T.A. 1998, *Pathways of Memory and Power*, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Alam, M. 1998, 'The pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal politics', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, pp. 317–49.
- Anandabhatta (ed. and trans.). 1901, *Ballalacharitam*, Calcutta.
- Bandyopadhyaya, B.N. and S.K. Das. 1369 B.S., *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, Calcutta.
- Bandyopadhyaya, S. 1990, *Caste Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872–1937*, Calcutta.
- Bandyopadhyaya, S.C. 1961, *Smriti Shastre Bangali*, Calcutta.
- Basu, N. 1317 B.S., *Bishwakosha*, parts 6 & 11, Calcutta.

⁹ A representative example, for instance, is provided by Mukundaram Chakrabarty's 'Chandimangal' in which the poet, a Brahmin, describes deep village/neighbourhood-based friendships with people who were not of his *jati*. See Sen (1993: pp. 3–4).

- Basu, N. 1318 b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Brahmanyakanda—Prathamamsha, Prathamakhanda*, Calcutta.
——— 1321 b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Rajanyakanda—Kayasthakander Prathamamsha*, Calcutta.
——— 1334a b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Barendra Brahman Bibaran—Brahmankander Dvitiyamsha*, Calcutta.
——— 1334b b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Barendra Kayastha Bibaran—Kayasthakander Dvitiyamsha*, Calcutta.
——— 1335 b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Uttar-Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda—Kayasthakander Tritiyamsha*, Calcutta.
——— 1340 b.s., *Banger Jatiya Itihasa: Dakshin Rarhiya Kayastha Kanda*, Calcutta.
- Basu, R.R. 1801, *Maharaja Pratapaditya Charitra*, Searampore.
- Bharati, A. 1965, *The Tantric Tradition*, London.
- Bidyalankar Mrityunjay 1808, *Rajabali*, Searampore.
- Bidyanidhi, L. 1355 b.s., *Sambandha Nirnaya* (5 vols), Calcutta.
- Brindabandas 1356 b.s., *Chaitanya bhagabat*, S.K. Ghosh, (ed.), Calcutta.
- Butler, T. 1989, 'Memory: A mixed blessing', in T. Butler, ed., *Memory, History, Culture and the Mind*, Oxford.
- Chakrabarti, K. 2001, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, New Delhi.
- Chakrabarti, R.K. 1996, *Bange Baishnabdharma*, Calcutta.
- Chatterjee, K. 1996, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India: Bihar, 1733–1820*, Leiden.
———, 1996, unpublished. 'Performance narratives and Mughal political culture in eighteenth century Bengal', in C.A. Bayly, S. Bose and A. Jalal, eds, *Region, Religion & Identity in Early Modern India*.
———, 2005, 'The king of controversy: History and nation-making in late colonial India', *American Historical Review*, forthcoming.
- Chatterjee, P. 1993, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton.
- Clancy, M.T. 1979, *From Memory to Written Records: England, 1066–1307*, Oxford.
- Coburn, T.B. 1985, *Devi Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Columbia, Missouri.
- Dasgupta, S.B. 1974, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, Calcutta.
——— 1976, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta.
- Dasgupta, S.N. 1982, 'General introduction to tantric philosophy', in S.N. Dasgupta, ed., *Philosophical Essays*, Calcutta.
- Datta, K. 1282 b.s., *Datta Vamsavali*, Calcutta.
- Deb, Raja R.K. 1931, *Shabda-Kalpa-Druma*, Calcutta.
- Dirks, N. 1987, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge.
- Dumont, L. 1980, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, (trans.) M. Sainsbury, et al., Chicago.
- Eaton, R.M. 1994, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, New Delhi.
- Femia, J. 1981, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process*, Oxford.
- Fentress, J and C. Wickham, eds. 1992, *Social Memory*, Oxford.
- Foucault, M. 1977, 'What is an author?', in D.F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, New York.
- Guha, R. 1988, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and its Implications*, Calcutta.
- Guha-Thakurta. 1912, *M. Kayastha Kulachandrika*, Barisal.
- Gupta, U.C. 1905, *Jati Tattva Baridhi*. (Vol. 1: *Baidya-Kayastha-Moha-Mudgar*), Calcutta.
——— 1912, *Jati Tattva Baridhi* (Vol. 2: *Ballala-Moha-Mudgar*), Calcutta.
- Habermas, J. 1989, 'The public sphere: An encyclopedia article', in S.E. Bonner and D.M. Keller, eds, *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, New York.

- Halbwachs, M. 1980, *The Collective Memory*, New York.
- Hazra, R.C. 1940, *Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, Dhaka.
- 1953–62, ‘The Puranas’, in H. Bhattacharya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India* (4 vols), Calcutta.
- 1958, *Studies in the Upapuranas* (Vol. 1), Calcutta.
- 1963, *Studies in the Upapuranas* (Vol. 2), Calcutta.
- Hill, J.H. ed. 1988, *Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past*, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Humphreys, S.C. 1996, ‘From riddle to rigor: Satisfactions of scientific prose in ancient Greece’, in S. Marchand and E. Lunbeck, eds, *Proof and Persuasion: Essays on Authority, Objectivity and Evidence*, Belgium.
- Inden, R. 1976, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture*, Berkeley.
- Jayananda. 1307 B.S., *Chaitanyamangal*, A.K. Goswami, ed., Calcutta.
- Kaviraj, S. 1992, ‘The imaginary institution of India’, in P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey, eds, *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi.
- Kaviraj, S. and S. Khilnani, eds. 2001, *Civil Society. History and Possibilities*, Cambridge.
- Larson, P. 2000, *History and Memory in an Age of Enslavement: Becoming Merina in an Age of Enslavement*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.
- Ling, Trevor. 1976, ‘Buddhist Bengal and after’, in D.P. Chattopadhyaya, ed., *History and Society. Essays in Honour of Prof. Niharranjan Ray*, Calcutta.
- Maitra, A.K. 1879, *The Antiquities of Orissa* (Vol. 1), Calcutta.
- Majumdar, R. 2004, ‘Looking for brides and grooms: Ghataks, matrimonials and the marriage market in colonial Calcutta’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 63:4, pp. 911–35.
- Majumdar, R.C. 1346 B.S., ‘Sanskrita Rajabali Grantha’, *Sahitya Parishat Patrika*, Vol. 4, pp. 233–39.
- 1971, *History of Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta.
- 1979, *Bangiya Kulashastra*, Calcutta.
- Mitra, R.C. 1954, *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, Shantiniketan.
- Nora, P. 1989, ‘Between memory and history: Les Lieux De Memoire’, *Representations*, 26, spring, pp. 7–25.
- Pertsch, W. (ed. and trans.). 1872, *Kshitish-Vamsavali-Charitam: A Chronicle of the Family of Raja Krishnachandra of Navadvipa*, Berlin.
- Pollock, S. 1996, ‘The Sanskrit cosmopolis, 300–1300’, in J.E.M. Houben, ed., *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, Leiden.
- (ed.). 2003, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley.
- Rao, N., D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam. 2001, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*, New Delhi.
- Rocher, L. 1986, *The Puranas*, Wiesbaden.
- Roy, A. 1983, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton.
- Roy, A.K. 1928, *Lakshmikanta: A Chapter in the Social History of Bengal*, Benaras.
- Sanyal, D.C. 1317 B.S. *Banger Samajika Itihasa*, ed. F.C. Datta, Calcutta.
- Sarkar, Sir J.N., ed. 1973, *History of Bengal* (Vol. 2), Patna.
- Sen, S. 1405 B.S., *Bangla Sahityer Itihasa* (Vols 1 & 2), Calcutta.
- ed. 1993, *Kabikankan O Tanhar Chandi*, Calcutta.
- Shastri, Mahamahopadhyaya H. 1963, *Preliminary Report on the Operation in Search of Bardic Chronicles*, Calcutta.
- 1980, ‘Bener Meye’, in *Haraprasad Shastri Rachanasangraha* (Vol. 1), Calcutta.
- Sinha, S. 1993, *Pandits in a Changing Environment*, Calcutta.
- Spiegel, G. 1993, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth Century France*, Berkeley.
- 1997, ‘Genealogy, form and function in medieval historiography’, in *The Past As Text*, Baltimore.
- Tarafdar, M.R. 1989, ‘Kulaji sahityer aitihasikata’, in *Itihasa O Aitihasika*, Dhaka.

- Taylor, C. 1990, 'Modes of civil society', *Public Culture*, Vol. 3: 1, pp. 95–118.
- Thapar, R. 1986, 'Society and historical consciousness: The itihasa–Purana tradition', in R. Thapar and S. Bhattacharya, eds, *Situating History: Essays in Honour of Sarvepalli Gopal*, New Delhi.
- 1990, 'Genealogy as a source of social history', in *Ancient Indian Social History*, New Delhi.
- Vansina, J. 1985, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Waggoner, P. 1996, 'Sultan among Hindu kings: Dress, titles and Islamicization of Hindu culture at Vijaynagara', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55: 4, pp. 851–80.
- White, Hayden. 1990, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore.