

Equality or Hierarchy: The Organisational Structure of a Sect in Bengal

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Abstract: *During the seventeenth and eighteenth century numerous deviant vaishnava and semi-vaishnava sects emerged among the lower orders of both the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. Challenging the great traditions of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity these sects altogether rejected the Vedas, Shastras and most importantly the caste system. Dumont, while emphasizing the hierarchical characteristics of the Indian caste system, held that in opposition to castes sects have an egalitarian nature. The present paper is concerned with the structure of one such sect, namely Kartabhaja, which emerged as an anti-Vedic, anti-caste group and survives till date. The study attempts to examine whether the sect follows a true egalitarian structure or not. The necessary data for the study were gathered in the annual fair of the sect called Satimar Mela through personal visits for seven consecutive years (1999-2005) and again in 2012, 2016 and in 2018. The methods of non-participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from about 100 sect members on a snowball sampling basis. Historical accounts were also used to construct a history of the sect. The study reveals that the sect, which rejected the exploitative caste hierarchy and emphasized on equality of human beings, irrespective of caste, religion and sex, had to develop a new form of three-level stratified system of Karta, Mahasaya and Barati for organizational solidity. These separate and independent groups within the sect could easily be distinguished through their different ritual performances. The formation and continuation of stratified structure within the sect obviously is contrary to the image of egalitarian structure of the sect.*

Keywords: Sect, Sahajiya, Kartabhaja, Equality, Hierarchy, Satimar mela, Karta, Mahasaya, Barati.

Introduction

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century numerous deviant Vaisnava and semi-Vaisnava sects or minor religious sects emerged in Bengal. The development of these sects could be explained as a reaction against the domination of Brahmanism during the period. The political situation during the seventeenth century must be taken into consideration in this context. The downfall of the Mughals after 1709 and the slow consolidation of the British in Bengal before 1757 made the life and society in Bengal highly hazardous. The *Nawabs* of Bengal failed to tackle the various problems of this period of transition. As a consequence of such political scenario, economy of Bengal also suffered during this period. The internal and external markets for indigenous goods began to die out. Again with the gradual penetration of British mercantile capital into the traditional Bengali industries the old economic order was totally upset. Both the Bengali peasants and the weavers were badly affected by the work of the foreign monopolists (Chakrabarty 1985:346).

The social situation, on the other, was also reflective of such political as well as economic turmoil of the period. The supremacy of Brahmanism almost shattered the economic and social life of all people belonging to the lower order of the society. Vaisnavism in the earlier society provided a space for all these lower order people, both from Hindu and Muslim community as also for those large number of people who converted from lower caste Hindus and Buddhists into Islam during the Mughal period. But soon, vaisnavism was diverted from its original philosophy to treat people equally irrespective of their caste or religion. The caste rules were strictly applied after the historic festival of Kheturi (Rajshahi in undivided Bengal), held sometime between 1576 and 1582, which was attended by representatives of nearly a hundred Vaisnavagroups from all over Bengal. The Kheturi council laid down the doctrinal and ritual framework of what was to become the dominant orthodoxy of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, based on canons prescribed by the 'Goswamis' of Vrindavan (Chatterjee 1989). There emerged differentiated forms of social identity and distinction appeared in the body of the Vaisnava *sampraday*. The earlier practices of non-Brahmin vaisnava *gurus* such as Narahari Sarkar or Narottam Datta having Brahmin Disciples, or in the later period the practice of wearing sacred thread irrespective of caste, from now on, were not accepted by the new orthodoxy.

The emphasis now was against indiscriminate proselytization, and the highest status was accorded among vaisnavas to the Brahmin '*kulaguru*' who acted as initiator and spiritual guide to a small number of respectable upper-

caste families. Gradually there emerged social distinctions between high-caste Gaudiya Vaisnava householders and the low-caste *jat*-vaisnava (i.e. vaisnava by caste) who were considered by the former as outcastes (Ibid). Thus with the development of orthodox Gaudiya Vaisnavism the lower order Hindus and Muslims again lost the respectable place they had achieved through vaisnavism. This led to the emergence of a number of smaller sects among the lower order population of Bengal. These sects challenged the great tradition of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity where these people found no respectable position for themselves and sought for a new identity in order to live a better life.

Chakrabarty (1985) provided a list of fifty-six vaisnava or semi-vaisnava heterodox sects including Aul, Baul, Balarami, Darbesh, Jaganmohini, Kartabhaja, Kishoribhajana, Khusivisvasi, Sain, Sahebhdhani and so on. These sects were mainly the offshoots of vaisnavism and were called *Sahajiya* sects as they adopted simple way of practicing their religion that emphasized human body and body centered practices. They had no caste bias. Most of these sects are broadly classified as vaisnava or semi-vaisnava, but it is heterodox, which is the hallmark of their status as 'minor sects'.

All these sects evolved in opposition to caste society and thus rejected caste hierarchy as well as the dominance of the upper castes. Louis Dumont held that the caste in Indian Hindu society is a hierarchical system based on religious ideas of purity and pollution. The system, according to him, is contradictory to the egalitarian Western society where Christianity stressed upon the individual, not on group. Dumont noted that the individual is given greater importance on many Hindu sects and cults that, thus, could be considered as egalitarian formations. The present study is concerned with the origin and evolution of one such sect, namely Kartabhaja, which emerged as an anti-vedic, anti-caste group and has survived till date. The study attempts to examine whether the sect follows a true egalitarian structure at all.

What the Literature says

Srinivas (1968) found that in contemporary times there are a very large number of sects (in India), a few major and many minor. Each sect has a founder, a cult, a body of doctrine and social organization of its own. He observed that the major sects are known for their distinct philosophical standpoints whereas the minor sects do not have elaborate philosophies although they do have their own special ideas and beliefs. Membership in a

sect is not hereditary like caste, rather it comes through initiation. Srinivas observed that hardly any sect is composed of only one *Jati*, who are considered as a caste itself, but have members from different castes. He also held that no sect recruits members from all castes. Untouchables are rarely admitted into a sect including upper castes, whereas untouchables have created their own sects. He opined, “even though a sect includes members from more than one caste, caste distinctions are not entirely obliterated” (Srinavas and Shah 1968: 362).

Cohn (2000:135-36) held that the participation of the *Chamars* (untouchable caste) of eastern Uttar Pradesh in the Sivanarain sect served as an agency of sanskritization and helped to improve their status. Therefore, it is understood from the above literature that the sects whether major or minor give a special individualistic identity to its members and this identity raise them above the ordinary caste identity.

Indian society, according to Dumont (1970) is based on caste. Caste or *jativyavastha* is a hierarchical arrangement with the Brahmin at the top and the untouchable at the bottom. Caste hierarchy contrasts with the egalitarian ethic of the West. The caste system based on purity and pollution forms a hierarchy of several interdependent caste groups. For him, the man-in-the-world or the householder possesses an identity primarily defined by membership in a caste group. Brahmins being on the top of this caste hierarchy determine the social rules to be followed by the householders. Thus householders do not have individualistic identity at all. In such a society humans are identified by their roles in society (Homo Major, as Dumont termed) in contrast to individual identities (Homo Minor) in Western Society. Dumont juxtaposed the householder with the renouncer. For him the renouncer in Indian society after performing the death rituals of his own can leave this society of caste ranking to pursue his own liberty (*moksa*) and in so doing he can define himself as an individual. Obviously he is an individual – outside the social world, because the caste society has no room for the individual. The religious outlook of the renouncer has therefore, provided a civilizational alternative to caste-based religious values. In opposition between those in and out of the social world, the Brahmins are left in a difficult position. As priests they are settled in society while the renouncer being outside the social world remains beyond their purview. According to Dumont orthodox Brahmins have therefore expressed subdued hostility to renunciation, which they have always tried to control. According to Dumont sects are a distinct creation of the renouncer. He held that “the Indian sect is a religious grouping constituted primarily by

renouncers, initiates of the same discipline of salvation, and secondarily by their lay sympathizers any of whom may have one of the renouncers as a spiritual master or guru” (Dumont 1970: 187).

Adherence to such a sect for both the man-outside-the-world and the man-inside-the-world is an individual matter and the Indian sects, as Dumont felt, in contrast to caste hierarchy, form an egalitarian social structure. To him the absence of the notion of impurity, which he took as the ideological basis of the castes, makes the sects egalitarian instead of hierarchical. Dumont examined the case of the Lingayats or the Virasaiva sect in Karnataka. They comprise a considerable part of the population of its northern districts (Dharwar). Following McCormack (1963), he notes how the Lingayats have been transformed into a dominant caste in the region.

There are a number of studies on the Kartabhaja sect. Among the earliest studies on the sect Aksay Kumar Dutta (1870), Jogendranath Bhattacharya (1896) and other contemporary writers criticized the religious practices of the sect and the advantages taken by the *gurus*. For Dutta the Pals were increasing both properties and social dominance being the *gurus* of the most of the Kartabhajas. Although they mentioned the levels within the sect, they have not attempted to analyze the nature of the structure in detail. In their recent studies Sumanta Banerjee (2002), Hugh B. Urban (2001) also presented their perspectives about the sect. Banerjee discussed about the factors that led to the institutionalization of the sect; one of the factors being the Ramsaran's attempt to consolidate the hierarchical structure of the sect through a network of sub-*gurus* called *mahasayas* who recruited the grass-root level disciples called *baratis*. However, he too, did not clarify the hierarchy within the sect.

Method of study

The Kartabhaja sect since its emergence has tried to maintain secrecy and the sect members were reluctant to disclose their membership to the sect. They also do not display any special sign or symbol of membership. In fact, they observe conventional social customs and norms in society, while they follow sect norms in the company of their *guru* and fellow sect members. Moreover, the members of the sect are scattered all over Bengal and outside Bengal or even outside India. The annual gathering of the sect members at Ghoshpara (popularly known as *satimar mela*) is the one occasion when almost all the sect members gather and perform all their customs and rituals. The outsiders can experience, to some extent, the sectarian rituals and

observances in this fair only. Therefore, the present study is based on the data collected from the members of the sect at its headquarter in Ghoshpara in the district of Nadia, West Bengal mainly on the occasion of the annual fair and also during the *rath-utsab* when they congregate here. The present study is a part of my Ph.D. research. The study has been done on the basis of field research method. For this I studied the fair for seven consecutive years from 1999 to 2005 and also studied further after Ph.D. in 2012, 2016, and in 2018 by repeated visits to the fair in order to have an in-depth understanding. I interviewed a total of 100 Kartabhaja members as well as at least 50 people not belonging to the sect on the basis of snowball sampling method. I have used the methods of non-participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Historical accounts were also used to gather the historical information about the sect.

The Kartabhaja Sect

The Kartabhaja was among the most prominent sects emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth century and that continue their existence still today. The sect was founded by Aulchand or Aulechand whose identity itself was shrouded with mystery. Various legends are available to describe the personality of Aulchand. Myths have been created to attach supernatural power to him. Chakrabarty (1985) mentioned seven such legends describing his emergence and development into a personality with extraordinary power. According to a common legend, Mahadeva Barui, a betel grower of village Ula of Nadia district found an eight-year-old boy in his betel field on the first Friday of the month of *phalgun* in 1694 or 95. This boy of unknown antecedents was later known as Aulchand. Mahadeva took him home and he lived with Mahadeva for twelve years. Later he lived with different persons in both West and East Bengal till he was twenty-seven. He then renounced the world and became a *fakir* mendicant. It is not clear whether Aulchand was a Muslim by birth or whether he was a Mohammedan proselyte. Later Aulchand came to Bejra village where Ramsaran Pal, Hatu Ghosh and others became his disciples and the Kartabhaja sect was formed. Aulchand while visiting East Bengal probably became a mendicant of the Aul sect. In one song of the *Bhaber Geet* (the law book of the Kartabhajas and which is a compilation of over 500 songs composed by Dulalchand, the most prominent leader of the sect) there is a reference to a brilliant gem preserved in Dacca city who was possibly the preceptor of Aulchand. There is also reference of Aulchand's visit to Sylhet in the *Bhaber Geet*. Sylhet was the center of the Jaganmohini sect, the members of which

along with other sects such as Khusivisvasi, Sahebhdhani, Balarami etc. also attend the fair of the Kartabhajas at Ghoshpara. Possibly Aulchand was influenced by Jaganmohini theism and *guru*-worship, and also by the contemporary Sufi *fakirs* of both East and West Bengal.

According to the Kartabhaja accounts Aulchand was no one else but Sri Chaitanya himself in disguise. The myth goes like this – Sri Chaitanya decided to disappear from Puri. Since he was believed to be immortal God he did not die and again appeared sometime between 1760 and 1770 as young and handsome *fakir* Aulchand in Triveni. He then miraculously crossed the Ganges and came to Jagadishpur village where Ramsaran Pal found him and became his disciple. The identification of Aulchand with Sri Chaitanya by the Kartabhajas was obviously to lend respectability to the Kartabhaja sect. Again providing a Muslim *fakir*'s identity to Aulchand made the sect popular among both the Muslim and Hindu peasantry of Bengal. Thus the foundation of the sect was laid in such a way that it soon spread among the masses of lower orders of both the Hindus and the Muslims who needed to come out of the conservative Brahmanism.

A number of myths were also created to describe the meeting of Aulchand and his most important disciple Ramsaran Pal and his wife Sarasvati Devi (who became famous as Satima in later years). All these myths in some way or the other depicted the supernatural power in Aulchand. Some stories described how Aulchand cured Sarasvati by sprinkling water from his *kamandalu* (small container of water). According to some other version Aulchand told Ramsaran to bring some water from the nearby pond (which, afterwards, became famous as Himsagar) and after infusing some magical power into the water Aulchand sprinkled it over Sarasvati. Some water fell on the ground under a pomegranate tree (now popular as Dalimtala) and Aulchand took the mud and asked Ramsaran to spread it over her body and Sarasvati was completely cured this way. Aulchand stayed at Ramsaran's house in Ghoshpara in Nadia district where he initiated Ramsaran and other twenty-one persons to form the Kartabhaja sect. They are popularly known as '*baish fakir*' (twenty-two *fakirs*). Aulchand derived the origin of the new religion (which was initially called *satyadharm*) from both the syncretic personality cults and syncretic sects. Like other contemporary sects the Kartabhaja attempted to reject the Vedas and all Brahmanical rituals. Instead it developed a simple mode of worship that was centered on human body. The influences of *sahajiya* Buddhism and Sufism are evident in the Kartabhaja philosophy. The term *karta*, which may mean the Prime Mover, was used in *hevajra tantra*. Moreover, the

traces of *sahajiya* Buddhism and Islamic Sufism could also be in certain concepts of the Kartabhaja philosophy like the body as the microcosm of the universe, the concept of *moner manus* (the man of heart) or *sahajmanus* (simple man) etc. as found in a number of songs of the *Bhaber Geet*. Different songs of the *Bhaber Geet* refer to the *sadhana* to realize the *moner manus* or the *sahaj manus* as the ultimate purpose of the *sadhak*. The *sadhana* includes certain body centered secret practices like controlling the breaths and others, which could be learnt from the *guru* (the *murshid* in Indian Sufism) or the spiritual guide. Now, to what extent the *tantrik* or any kind of body related *sadhana* was performed by the sect people may not be ascertained, but definitely the sect was based upon the anti-vedic *sahajiya* philosophy and as reflected in the *Bhaber Geet* the sect did emphasize the difficult body-centered practice in order to understand the meaning of *sahaj manus* or *moner manus*. According to this ideology the orthodox rituals and practices prescribed by the *shastras* and Vedas were based on *anuman*, literally meaning inference and more colloquially ‘guesswork’. On the contrary, like the *sahajiya* theology the Kartabhaja sect, too, placed much importance on *bartaman*, or the path of direct knowledge and extension of unorthodoxy, which is evident in their song:

Bartaman satyagnan jatha sambhab,
Anuman anarthak brtha he bhab ...
(Bhaber Geet)
[Bartaman is the true knowledge as far as possible
(whereas) anuman is meaningless (and) useless idea...]

All these *sahajiya* groups were also called *bartamanpanthi*, (the followers of the path or philosophy of *bartaman*) who are engaged in esoteric practices. Although, again to say, it is hard to find out how far the Kartabhaja sect was engaged in such esoteric practices, we find, like in other *bartamanpanthi sahajiya* groups, the categorization of stages of attainment in *sadhana* in the Kartabhaja sect too. Aulchand emphasized the distinction between *vyavahara* or social behaviour and *paramartha* or the supreme spiritual interest. The Kartabhajas were advised to assert their individual freedom in matters concerning faith, but at the same time they were also instructed to respect the social norms as they say, “Lok-madhye lokachar, sadguru-madhye sadachar.” In fact, the Kartabhaja had to promise that excepting the caste rule, they would violate no other Hindu convention, or conventional morality. Since the Kartabhaja (worship of *karta*) itself was *paramartha*, it could be cultivated by people whose *vyavahara* compelled them to worship different Gods and Goddesses. There are the following stages of spiritual attainment for the Kartabhaja:

- a) *sthul* or *daik* (simple Kartabhaja);
- b) *mul* or *kangal* (main Kartabhaja): i) *pravarta*, ii) *sadhaka*, iii) *siddhi*, and iv) *nivrtti*.

Sthul, which means gross, signifies the stage before the esoteric practice begins. The *mul* or main stages are for those Kartabhajas who undertake esoteric practices. The four stages under the *mul* category are again linked with four types of eligibility, namely, *sadhu*, *sati*, *sura*, and *mahat* respectively. The first stage *pravarta* means the state of the neophyte, when he is also called as *sadhu*. The higher stage is that of the *sadhaka*. At this stage the disciple is permitted to be associated with a woman, who was to be his wife. The female partner of the *sadhaka* is called *sati* (Chaste woman) and *sadhaka* and *sati* form a single word, *sadhaka-sati*. The third stage of *siddhi* (Achievement) is that of the lesser Gods and *sura* and *siddhi* are combined together. The highest stage is *nivrtti*. In this stage man realizes the non-duality with the cosmic greatness of God and he is now called *mahat*. At this stage the Kartabhaja is *jiyente mara* or “un-living”, because now he is free from the shackles of desires. The Kartabhaja *guru* belongs to the highest category. However, this hierarchy of the Kartabhajas on the basis of spiritual achievement is not easy to realize and to make clear distinction between people achieving different stages is obviously hard for an outsider, because these esoteric *sadhana* is done secretly and is never expressed publicly, if at all practiced on mass scale.

As mentioned earlier the sect rejected the hierarchy of the caste system. There was a firm commitment to the upholding of equality of all human beings irrespective of caste, religion and sex. Thus developed on an egalitarian basis the Kartabhaja sect provided a more or less secure social space to those large numbers of people, who remained in the lowest rungs of both Hindu and Muslim religion.

Differentiation within the sect

Aulchand did not become the chief (or *karta* as they call their chief) of the sect. He was considered the *adiguru* or the main preceptor of the sect. After his death Ramsaran Pal, *sadgop* by caste, became the chief or the first *karta* of the sect. Ramsaran after taking over the responsibility of the *karta* or the chief of the Kartabhaja sect attempted to organize the sect on a structure of three strata or levels, namely, *karta*, *mahasaya* and *barati*.

Karta: *Karta* is the chief religious guide and occupies the highest position within the sect. Ramsaran Pal, *sadgope* by caste and one of the twenty-

two main disciples (*baish fakir*) of Aulchand, was the first to be worshipped as *karta* by the sect members after the death of Aulchand. He was called 'Kartababa' and this chief position is inherited by the descendants of Ramsaran till today. According to Aksay kumar Dutta (1870), a person usually a descendant of the Pals whom the present or existing *karta* chooses to inherit the position can become a *karta*. However, the whereabouts of other main disciples of Aulchand are not clearly known. After Ramsaran's death his descendants like his son Ramdulal and grandson Iswarchandra became *kartas* successively. In between them Sarasvati Devi, wife of Ramsaran became *kartama*. She was reputed to have had a strong personality, and to disciples and devotees came to represent the *adyashakti* or the Universal Female Principle. As her fame spread, Sarasvati soon came to be known as 'Satima'. *Karta* is worshipped by the sect members as God. For them, *karta* is the only truth others are untrue, they follow their *karta* in every step of their life, as is evident in their saying "I speak what *karta* speaks, I do what *karta* makes me do, I eat what *karta* feeds me, I go where *karta* takes me" (Sarkar 1975:04). Sarkar (Ibid) opined that the hereditary nature of the *karta* and his absolute power reflects the influence of feudalism rather than democratic ideology.

Mahasaya: *Mahasayas* were the upper level Kartabhajas who took direct initiation from the *Karta* and are also in a higher stage of the Kartabhaja *sadhana*. *Mahasayas* are considered sub-*gurus* who initiate people at the grass-root level with the permission of the *kartas*. *Mahasayas* convey the ideas and sayings of the *kartas* to their disciples or *baratis*. *Karta* sanctions the status of *mahasaya* to a person with higher level of achievement in the *sadhana* (religious practice) as prescribed by the sect. Obviously it is *karta* who decides the eligibility of the person to be a *mahasaya*, however, the exact eligibility criteria were not elaborated by the present *kartas*. A *mahasaya* is allowed to set up *asana* of Satima in his house and he can retain the *asana* till his death if he maintains the rules. After his death his position may be passed on to a person according to his wish with the permission of the *karta*. *Mahasaya* is liable to submit the part of *khajna* taken by him from the *baratis* to the *karta* during *dol-mela*. Aksay Kumar Dutta (1870) wrote that the *mahasaya* also received different kinds of gifts from the *baratis* and the *mahasaya* always enjoyed excellent food, clothing and many different types of goods sitting at home only. However, the *mahasayas* might have received gifts from their disciples, but perhaps it was a bit of an exaggeration to say that *mahasayas* received so much expensive items regularly from their disciples, who mostly belonged to poor lower caste section of the society.

Dutta found some Muslim *mahasayas* having Hindu disciples who also secretly took food from their *gurus*. Muslim *mahasayas* like Shibshekhar Mandal from Murshidabad, Ismael Fakir from Nadia were prominent *gurus* and have large number of disciples from both Hindus and Muslims. Their descendants still come to the fair and continue their legacy. A *mahasaya* is supposed to test the person before giving them the mantra for initiation into the sect. Only after this does the *mahasaya* give the *guru satyamantra* to the devotee and tells him not to disclose the *mantra* (which is also termed as *bij mantra* or the core hymn) to anybody. The person is given the final initiation only after he gets much knowledge about the sect and his respect toward the *guru* is proved to be true. Since the Kartabhaja *mahasayas* are the local level *gurus* who directly interact with the grass root level disciples or *baratis* and spread the ideas of the *Kartabhaja* sect throughout these mass people, their position is very important within the sect.

Most of the *mahasayas* strictly maintain the sectarian rules and even today these *mahasayas* mostly follow the Kartabhaja rituals only. However, some like Goswami from Berhampur, Murshidabad district worship other Gods as Mr. Goswami has *narayanshila* at his home. He worships it regularly because he claims that his predecessors were originally the followers of Nityananda, the Vaisnava leader. But the *kartas* at Ghoshpara instructed him not to disclose the fact to others because this may affect the sanctity of his identity as a Kartabhaja *mahasaya*. Another female *mahasaya* Ms. Pal from Bali, Howrah district, who gives Rs.22/- as annual *khajna* to the *kartas*, discloses that she herself is also a worshipper of Krishna and along with Satima worships Bipadtarini and Lokenathbaba as well. Daughter of an old *mahasaya* Mr. Mukherjee from Katoa, Burdwan claims that they are originally the descendants of Kesab Bharati, the *guru* of Sri Chaitanya and along with Kartabhaja rituals of singing of *Bhaber Geet*, eating vegetarian food on Fridays they also worship Gods and Goddesses like Krishna, Laksmi, Saraswati and others. Thus although the *mahasayas* or the sub *gurus* of the Kartabhajasect who are placed below the Pal *kartas* follow Kartabhaja rules and perhaps some even practice the *sadhana* prescribed by the sect, sometimes they too (in most of the cases the female descendants of them) worship other Hindu Gods and Goddesses. However, most of the *mahasayas* today do not accept the worship of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses as the part of their sectarian practices. Still, some of them admitted that their wives and children worshipped these Gods and Goddesses. The lower orders of the sect, i.e., the *baratis* have a greater tendency to worship different Gods and Goddesses and more recently even other popular *gurus* like Loknathbaba, Balak Brahmachari, etc. In most of

the cases the descendants of the *mahasayas* get that position, but if the descendant is not able to attain the desired stage of spiritual achievement, he may not be considered a *mahasaya*.

The present *kartas*, the descendants of Ramsaran and Satima do not seem to be much active to spread the sect philosophy, they are more concerned to collect the share of the earning of *Thakurbari* (House of Satima). However, some old, knowledgeable and energetic middle aged *mahasayas* are presently trying to organize the sect in a better way. Dr. Roy from Dhaka, Bangladesh and some others have initiated to form an association of the *mahasayas* called *satyaseba sangha*. They meet together, mainly during the *dol mela*, to discuss about the strategies to increase the number of sect followers. Dr. Roy and some other relatively modern educated *mahasayas* (mainly from Bangladesh) now want to popularize the sect among the elite section of society.

Barati: *Mahasayas* initiated enumerable disciples throughout Bengal and these disciples at the grass-root level formed the third stratum, namely, *baratis*. *Baratis* constitute the largest section of the Kartabhajasect. They belong to the lowest level of the organizational structure of the sect. *Baratis* or the grass root level disciples are first tested by the *mahasayas*. Before the final initiation a probationary or temporary initiation is provided, and they are given the complete initiation (*sholo-ana mantra*) into the sect only if they prove their honesty toward the *guru* and the sect. Most of the *baratis* belong to the *sthul* or primary level of sectarian *sadhana*, which means they follow the rules prescribed by the sect that they come to know from the teachings of their *mahasayas* as well as from the songs of *Bhaber Geet*. The *sadhana*, which is not simple at all, is performed by the *mul* or main level of Kartabhajas and probably hardly any *mul* Kartabhaja comes from the category of *barati*. *Baratis* maintain social rules and rituals in their own community, either Hindu or Muslim, but carry out the sectarian rituals among their fellow sect members and *gurus*. Almost all the *baratis* at present participate in the social ceremonies in their own community and also worship Gods and Goddesses like Laksmi, Saraswati, Narayan and others in their houses. Many of them worship the popular *gurus* like Lokenathbaba and Balakbrahmachari. Mr. Goswami, a *mahasaya* from Berhampur says that many of his *baratis* even left the sect to be the disciples of these famous *gurus*. Many *baratis* like a woman *barati* from Medinipur, worship Laksmi, Saraswati, Lokenathbaba along with Satima. Some others like Mr. Mandal from Cuttack come to Ghoshpara during different pujas like Durga puja, Viswakarma puja etc. Mr. Mandal also

performs Laksmi puja in his house during the Bengali month of *baisakh* and also visits Puri during *rathayatra*. Mr. Santra and Mr. Dolui from Howrah keep the photographs of both Satima and Lokenathbaba in their houses.

Although *baratis* constitute the largest category of the sect, they are more or less a floating population. The large section of lower caste people joined the sect where they received a respectable position, had the opportunity to mix up with all castes – upper or lower and dine with them at least during the annual fair at Ghoshpara as also they got their very own Satima for redressing their sufferings. They learn about the sect philosophy from their *mahasaya*. In many places the local *baratis* gather at their *mahasaya's* house on the Fridays and other sacred occasions and listen to their guru and sing songs from *Bhaber Geet*. Such practices obviously renew and confirm their identity as Kartabhaja. Many of the *baratis* come to the annual fair at Ghoshpara where they get chances to meet the *Kartas*, *Mahasayas*, all other *baratis* from different places as also visit the sacred spots at Ghoshpara. But not all the *baratis* are fortunate enough to visit the fair every year, as this is a quite expensive journey for the poor *baratis* to avail every year. Many of the *baratis*, mostly poorer section of them attend the fair with a gap of few years. One can even find *baratis* who came for the first time to the fair. Moreover, when the local *mahasaya* dies with no one to continue his legacy the *baratis* lose the opportunity to meet the Guru every now and then. In such cases they have to go to other *mahasayas* in distant villages or visit Ghoshpara to keep in touch with the *gurus* of the sect and nurture the sectarian ideas. Since both the options often become inconvenient for many *baratis* they perhaps take refuge of other popular available *gurus*. Some leave the sect completely as Mr. Goswami of Berhampur opined, when most of them adore different *gurus* along with Satima. Again many people also take initiation every year into the sect and one can even see people taking initiation at the fair. So at least a section of the category of *barati* can be considered floating. However, although in most of the cases the *baratis* do not enter the *Mul* stage of Kartabhaja *sadhana* and many of them may not be strong or permanent adherents of the sect, this group of *baratis* constitute the main source of *khajna* for the *kartas* at Ghoshpara. Thus the sect survives mainly on the flow of fund from the lower most category of *barati*.

In short, we can say that *Karta* was the chief religious guide and occupied the highest position within the sect. The position of the *Karta* was hereditary, i.e., only the descendants of Ramsaran Pal acquired the status. *Mahasayas* were the upper level Kartabhajas who took direct initiation from the *karta*

and are also in a higher stage of the Kartabhaja *sadhana*. *Mahasayas*, who might also be considered as sub-*gurus*, initiated enumerable disciples throughout Bengal and these disciples of grass-root level formed the third stratum, namely, *baratis*.

Deviation in the structure

Presently some deviations in the organizational structure of the sect can also be noticed. Some of the Kartabhajas who are not given the status of *mahasaya* are seen to be the direct disciples of the Pal *kartas*. Even initiation given by the *kartas* to such people (who are not family members of *mahasayas*) can be seen during the *dolmela* at Ghoshpara. The explanation for such exceptional practices given by the *kartas* is that they sometimes give initiation to people who are of old acquaintance. By old acquaintance they, perhaps, mean those people who are for long attached to the sect. Mrs. Sarkar from Lake Town, Kolkata, Mr. Baen from Joynagar, 24 Parganas, Mr. Mandal from Cuttack and many others are direct disciples of the Pal *kartas*, but are not considered *mahasayas* and do not have the right to initiate others as well. So they are the direct *baratis* of the *kartas*, not of any *mahasaya*. Although such deviation in the organisational structure of the sect is not mentioned in any previous work about the sect, the practice does not seem a new one; rather it is an old practice as the *baratis* mentioned earlier are quite old disciples of the Pals.

The organizational structure of the sect, however, prevails with all these exceptions and deviations. Of course the deviations on such a large scale implies that the stratified organizational structure of the sect was never too rigid, rather it welcomed people to be a member of the sect in every possible way. Still, this differentiated structure, I feel, was the most important advancement of the apparently egalitarian sect. The organized structure became the backbone of the sect and is well maintained till today. Although the sect initially had members from lower castes only, later some upper caste people also joined the sect. As some of the prominent upper caste influential persons like Jaynarain Ghosal, a zamindar of Bhukailash, were attracted to the sect and joined it Perhaps others too were influenced by such events and also joined the sect. Since Kartabhajas rejected the caste hierarchy, upper caste disciples touched the feet of their lower caste *gurus* – the practice continues to the present. But instead of showing respect to the upper caste the sect members pay their respect to their *gurus* – *baratis* to their *mahasayas* and *mahasayas* in their turn to the *karta*. Thus although

the sect rejected the exploitative hierarchical caste structure, they created an organisational structure, which though not egalitarian was devoid of the exploitative nature of the caste system. In this new structure the *kartas* belonged to the topmost position having authority over the sect. For the disciples, *baratis* are liable to pay *khajna* (tax) to their immediate gurus, i.e., the *mahasayas*, who pay that tax to the *karta*. This confirmed flow of tax from below helps to sustain the organisation within the sect.

Conclusion

It is now clear that the sect was never an egalitarian one as it is constituted of three groups of people who are obviously not of equal status within the sect. However, the sect is different from caste in many aspects. The commensal and connubial separateness which is the characteristic feature of caste hierarchy is totally absent in the case of the Kartabhaja sect. The members of the different strata within the sect interact freely with each other. Moreover, organisational position within the sect has to be attained and is not inherited like caste ranks. But at the same time it can also be said that the three categories, which were formed in the early stage of the development of the sect continued to exist as distinguished groups having different ritual status, value as well as prestige within the sect. This definitely led to the development of a hierarchical system, to some extent like caste hierarchy, in the form of Kartabhajas. One can thus obviously say that the Kartabhaja sect instead of being egalitarian formed a new system of caste within caste. Therefore, the assertion made by Dumont regarding the Indian sects as egalitarian is contradicted in this case of the Kartabhaja, one of the largest and popular sects of Bengal. Perhaps, people, mostly belonging to lower orders of rural areas are a helpless lot in all walks of life and are not prepared enough to live independent individual life. They still need some group to the common sufferings and some guidance to lead a better life. For this reason, the categories of gurus, i.e., the *kartas* and the *mahasayas* of the Kartabhaja sect are still necessary categories for the large number of *baratis*, and this in turn strengthened the hierarchical structure of the sect.

The study reveals that the sect, which rejected the exploitative caste hierarchy and emphasized on equality of human beings, irrespective of caste, religion and sex had to develop a new form of three-level stratified system of *karta*, *mahasaya* and *barati* in order to organize the sect on a firm basis. These separate and independent groups within the sect could easily be distinguished through their different ritual performances. The

formation and continuation of stratified structure within the sect obviously is contrary to the image of egalitarian structure of the sect. The study is significant for understanding the social structure of sects constituted mainly by the people of lower orders in society which in turn will help to realize social behaviour of a large section of population who deviate from the institutionalized structure while living within the same society.

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