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CASTE AND SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

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## CASTE AND SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

Partha Chatterjee\*

### I

It is now widely recognized among social anthropologists of India that the religious beliefs and practices of subordinate caste groups are quite often based on principles that are contradictory to those of the ~~Brahmanical~~ Brahmanical religion.<sup>1</sup> The question that is raised for us is: what do these observations mean for a description of the consciousness of the subaltern classes? Even at a surface level, we can sense the importance of these findings, for no matter how we choose to characterize it, subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution.

But before we proceed to deal with this problem, it will be useful to summarize the methodological approach in considering the question of religion as a constitutive force in subaltern consciousness. Since the tenets of the Marxist method have been developed primarily out of the historical records of the class struggles in Europe, a convenient point of departure would be a presentation of the ideas of the one European Marxist who has studied the question of religion in subaltern consciousness with the greatest insight.

The Common Sense : Immediate and Mediated

In the third part of the English selections from the Prison Notebooks<sup>2</sup> - the part entitled 'The Philosophy of Praxis' - the following characterization will be found of what Antonio Gramsci calls 'common sense'. The ordinary worker - 'the active man-in-the mass' - is engaged in practical activity. This necessarily involves some form of understanding of the world which he transforms through his work. But he has 'no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity'. Rather,

his theoretical consciousness can be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit and verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.<sup>3</sup>

Further exploring this contradictory consciousness, Gramsci notes that the contradiction between the implicit and explicit aspects is a reflection of the contradiction between opposing social groups :

'It signifies that the social group in question [a subaltern group of great mass] may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is

not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in 'normal times' - that is, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.<sup>4</sup>

We have here the clue to a possible method for analysing the consciousness of the subaltern classes. We see this consciousness as contradictory, fragmented, held together in a more or less haphazard whole - the common sense. It is 'an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept'.<sup>5</sup> It is formed, and transformed, in the course of a historical process which brings dominant and subordinate classes into relations with each other. Common sense, therefore, is the contradictory unity of two opposed elements: one, the autonomous element which expresses the common understanding of the members of a subaltern group engaged in the practical activity of transforming the world through their own labour, often at the behest, and certainly under the domination of the ruling groups, and the other, the element which is borrowed from the dominant classes and which expresses the fact of the ideological submission of the subaltern group.

The specific combination of these two elements is not fixed; it changes in the course of the historical process of relations between dominant and subordinate groups. On the one hand, the emergence of new philosophies and religions which acquire a dominant position in society will have its impact through the borrowed element in common sense.

Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of the former's historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas, and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the emergence to dominance of new religions and new systems of philosophy is also not unrelated to the process of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. The autonomous element in common sense erupts precisely at the moments of heightened conflict between classes, and at such moments the crisis of society is expressed in the threat of a rupture of the community into two opposed faiths, two opposed religions, two opposed views of the world. The emergence of new religions or social philosophies fulfils the need for restoring, either on a progressive and new basis or on a forcible reassertion of the old basis, the ideological unity of the entire social bloc.

The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower.<sup>7</sup>

In the past such divisions in the community of the faithful were healed by strong mass movements which led to, or were absorbed in, the creation of new religious orders centred on strong personalities (St. Dominic, St. Francis) .... The heretical movements of the Middle Ages ... represented a split between masses

and intellectuals within the Church. The split was 'stitched over' by the birth of popular religious movements subsequently reabsorbed by the Church through the formation of the mendicant orders and a new religious unity.<sup>8</sup>

Religions which succeed in establishing a dominant and universalist moral code for society as a whole can then be looked at from two quite different standpoints. For the dominant groups, it offers the necessary ideological justification for existing social divisions, makes those divisions appear non-antagonistic and holds together a potentially divided society into a single whole. For the subordinate masses, religion enters their common sense as the element which affords them an access to a more powerful cultural order; the element of religion then coexists and intermingles in an apparently eclectic fashion with the original elements of common sense.

The one religion will then appear among different social groups and strata in several distinct and particular forms.

Every religion, even Catholicism (indeed Catholicism more than any, precisely because of its efforts to retain a 'surface' unity and avoid splintering into national churches and social stratifications), is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions : there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petits-bourgeois and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals, which is itself variegated and disconnected.<sup>9</sup>

In studying religion in relation to consciousness, then, the point is to identify in their differences these particular forms of the one religion, and hence to see religion in class-divided society as the ideological unity of two opposed tendencies - on the one hand, the assertion of a universal moral code for society as a whole, and on the other, the rejection of this dominant code by the subordinated.

The starting point of this critical study will be 'that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude.'<sup>10</sup> In other words, the task will be to extract from the immediate reality of the diverse particular forms of religion as believed and practised among various social groups the implicit element which stands in opposition to the dominant form. Gramsci himself makes a few suggestions regarding the general characteristics of this element in common sense as observed in the history of religion in Europe. In the first place, common sense tends to apply a principle of causality which relies primarily, often exclusively, on direct sense-perception. There is in it 'a certain measure of "experimentation" and direct observation of reality, though empirical and limited.'<sup>11</sup> Second, 'popular religion is crassly materialistic' and even in the 'many beliefs and prejudices' and 'almost all popular institutions (witchcraft, spirits, etc.) it reveals its closeness to a 'materialist conception'. 'This can be seen in popular Catholicism, and, even more so, in Byzantine orthodoxy'.<sup>12</sup> Third, the explicit and implicit elements in the contradictory consciousness which is common sense appear in turn at moments of submission and moments of historical initiative. When the popular groups lie defeated and scattered,

mechanical determination becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance ..... It



should be emphasised, though, that a strong activity of the will is present even here, directly intervening in the 'force of circumstance', but only implicitly and in a veiled and, as it were, shamefaced manner ..... But when the 'subaltern' becomes directive and responsible for the economic activity of the masses, mechanism at a certain point becomes an imminent danger and a revision must take place in modes of thinking .... if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because 'resisting' a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative.<sup>13</sup>

Here Gramsci is also supplying us with a political criterion for a critique of subaltern consciousness. It is not a condemnation of 'fatalism' as a determinate character of subalternity, as argued by those who 'don't even expect that the subaltern will become directive and responsible'. Rather it is shown to be one side of the contradictory essence of subaltern consciousness : 'fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position'.<sup>14</sup> The other side is active, which can absorb new ideas, new techniques, new ways of living, which constantly modifies and enriches common sense by adapting to new conditions of life and work. The critical study of subaltern consciousness

must be a criticism of 'common sense', basing itself initially, however, on common sense ..... it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity. <sup>15</sup>

Gramsci's comments suggest to us a methodological approach in which we see subaltern consciousness as contradictory, consisting of two opposed elements - one autonomous and the other borrowed. Similarly, we see the history of religion too as constituted by two opposed tendencies - one, the attempt to articulate a universal code for society as a whole, and the other, the struggle by the subordinated to resist the dominating implications of this code. Both constituents of the approach will be relevant for the study of consciousness in any class-divided society if we accept the crucial political premise that it is the dominated classes which necessarily bear in their existence the active principle of historical change. Nevertheless, even this relatively schematic ordering of Gramsci's scattered comments on the subject does not resolve our immediate problem. It is incumbent upon us to show that this approach does in fact yield a potentially fruitful way of studying the history of consciousness in the class-divided social formations of India, and second, to identify the specific elements and demarcate the specific ground on which a dialectic of consciousness can be said to operate in our history.

The attempt in this essay will be to argue the validity of this dialectical, as opposed to a synthetic, approach and inter alia to suggest some specific questions which we need to explore if we are to give sufficient concreteness to the concept of subaltern consciousness. I do this with particular reference to a contemporary problem - that of mounting an adequate critique of the caste system.

#### The External Critique of Caste

When a Marxist is confronted with the question of caste, his or her basic response is to try and conceptualize caste relations within a theoretical framework in which class is the central concept.

This is perfectly understandable, since the Marxist must contest any argument which claims that while class stratification may be the relevant principle in understanding the history of Europe, Indian society is based on a completely different principle, viz., hierarchy, and that consequently caste must replace class as the fundamental explanatory framework. To admit an argument like this would be to discard the generality of class as the central concept for describing the dialectical movement of human history and to throw the Marxist method into the welter of relativism. Now, in making the contrary argument, Marxists have chosen either of two approaches. Most have argued that caste is a feature of the superstructure of Indian society and ought to be understood in terms of its efficacy as an ideological system which reflects the basic structure of material (i.e. productive) relations, the latter of course being characterised in terms of class relations. Others have suggested that caste is in fact the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base, with its own historical dynamic; caste, in other words, is the form in which classes appear in Indian society.

Neither approach has thus far enabled the Marxist to reach a satisfactory understanding of the immediate phenomena related to caste as presented in historical evidence or in contemporary events.

The first approach has the advantage of offering a way to historicize the practices of caste. To the extent that the emergence of specific structures of caste relations can be shown to be connected with major historical changes in the productive organization, it can produce explanations of great sweep and richness. Kosambi's works contain several hypotheses of this sort; Dipankar Gupta has recently attempted a historical explanation of the transition from varna to jāti<sup>16</sup>; and practically every cultural region of Indian has its

share of studies relating the regional caste structure with changes in production structures over particular historical periods. The crucial difficulty with this approach is that in maintaining the base/superstructure distinction and treating caste as an element of the superstructure explainable by the base, the form of the explanation must become one of functionalism. That is to say, a given set of caste beliefs or practices have to be explained as functionally necessary for the establishment or continuation of particular production relations at the base. The problem of circularity involved in such functional explanations is now well known and need not be elaborated here. Of course, one can extricate the explanation from this tangle of tautology by specifying a necessary sequence to the historical progression of production structures, so that the final explanation would lie not so much in the correspondence of particular superstructural forms with particular structures at the base, but rather in the historical necessity of a specified sequence of modes of production, the logic of transition to the next mode being determined by the structure of the previous mode in the sequence. This, however, leads to a problem of a different order; without entering into it at this stage, suffice it to say that a considerable trend in Marxist thinking has rejected the ascription of such a supra-historically ordained sequence of progression of social forms (however specified) in all of human history, and that we locate ourselves unequivocally within that trend.

The second approach seeks to avoid the problems of the first by treating caste as both the form and basic content of class divisions in Indian society. It is not as though the specific structural relations of caste have not changed over time; in fact, with changes in production organization these have undergone major transformations

since the earliest periods of Indian history down to the present day. Therefore, as Gail Omvedt argues, caste cannot be characterized as a superstructural form associated with a particular mode of production; it must be seen as the form as well as the content of the social relations of production in Indian history. Caste is 'a material reality with a material base,' it is 'not only form but also concrete material content,' and it has 'historically shaped the very basis of Indian economy and society and continues to have crucial economic implications today.'<sup>17</sup>

On the face of it, this seems to come dangerously close to abandoning the generality of class and replacing it with caste in the case of Indian society. The search for historical specificity, it would appear, must mean a jump into relativism. To save their position, the proponents of this approach must define a distinct basis for the conceptualization of class in Indian history and the determination by it of caste relations. Omvedt attempts to do this by arguing that with the imposition of capitalist relations of production in the colonial period, classes as legal-economic entities came to be formally separated from caste; not only that, the new legal structure of property now constituted the 'caste system' itself as a concretely separate system. Because of the separation of the economic and social levels under conditions of capitalist production, class and caste no longer coincide.

From this, a Marxist could well argue that the historical conditions of knowledge have been now established for looking back on Indian history as the stages of 'pre-capital' out of whose development has appeared the separation of the 'economic' level as the determinant instance. Unfortunately, this argument too cannot be easily sustained. The 'separation' occurs not because of an immanent development, but by

the external intervention of colonialism. To the extent that the new conditions of capitalist production are treated as external, a duality between the two structures of class and caste becomes unavoidable. Omvedt, therefore, is forced to look for the purely empirical correlation (or lack of it) between class and caste in contemporary history and to talk about the forms of popular struggle in the colonial and post-colonial periods as 'complex', 'very complex', 'highly interconnected', etc. - sure indications that a theoretical conceptualization of the essence of social relations has slipped from her grasp.<sup>18</sup>

It has been clear for a long time<sup>19</sup> that the problem of duality of structures cannot be resolved at the level of production relations at the base, unless of course one resorts to the formal, and eminently vacuous, argument that all productive structures are finally unified at the level of a global capitalist system. The question then becomes one of identifying the appropriate level where the dual structures exist as parts of a whole. Disregarding the validity of the base/superstructure formula, it is my argument that this level cannot be found either in determinate productive structures or in determinate legal-political institutions. As a point of access, this level of unification, its historical effectiveness and its contradictory character need to be sought in social consciousness. The method will be the method of critique, i.e. of identifying the conditions of possibility of the forms and content of consciousness, and of determining their sources, extent and limits.

We may recall that in the modern history of Europe, the existence of particular interests in capitalist society was sought to be unified by the bourgeois construct of economic man whose concretely universal forms and content were identified by Hegel in

the concept of Right. Marx's critique of political economy was designed precisely to show that this universal was itself historically conditioned and that its form of equality promised on a necessary inequality between the owners of capitalist property and those dispossessed of their means of production. For countries like India, the concepts of bourgeois equality and freedom, owing to their externality to the immanent forms of social consciousness, cannot even claim the same degree of effectiveness as expressions of the unity of society, despite their formal enshrinement in the political constitution. For this reason, a critique of caste based on the notion of bourgeois equality can never hope to surmount its condition of externality. And yet, we cannot, for the same reason, dismiss the reality of the presence of capital in India today. My argument is that an identification of the contradictory essence of popular consciousness is likely to give us better answers regarding the possibilities, forms and limits of capitalist insertion into the social institutions and practices of our people. It is in consciousness, let us remember, that people make sense of the world in which they live; it is in consciousness again that they make their judgements on how to change it.

#### Requirements of an Immanent Critique of Caste

1. The starting point is the immediate reality of caste, viz. the diversity of particular jātis with specific characteristics. Each jāti can be shown to have in its particular quality, on the one hand, a definition-by-self which is the positive characteristic which identifies the jāti as itself, and on the other, a definition-for-another by which other jātis are distinguished from it. Any particular qualitative criterion which is supposed to identify a jāti will imply both the positive and the negative definitions. Thus, if the Camār is identified as a caste which disposes of dead cattle, this

definition-by-self immediately implies a definition-for-another, viz. that other castes (at least, some other castes) do not have this occupation. It is thus that distinctions and classifications by quality can be made among jātis.

Now, these distinctive qualities of particular castes are finite and hence alterable. We have innumerable examples of the qualitative marks of particular jātis varying both regionally and over time. We also know that there is a multiplicity of qualitative criteria which can serve to distinguish jāti from jāti. This finiteness of quality is negated by a definition-for-self of caste which shows the diverse individual castes to be many particular forms, distinguished by quantity, of one universal measure of caste. To give an example from another scientific field, particular commodities are immediately distinguishable from one another by a variety of finite qualities, but a definition-for-self of commodity, viz. value, enables us to order by quantity, i.e. exchange-value, the entire range of particular commodities. Similarly, we can make determinate distinctions by quantity among all castes if we have a similar definition-for-self of caste. The most powerful candidate in sociological literature for this definition of 'casteness' is hierarchy. According to this argument, hierarchy fixes a universal measure of 'casteness' so that, at any given time and place, the immediate qualitative diversity of jātis can be ordered as a quantitative ranking in a scale of hierarchy. The universal measure appears for each particular caste as a determinate position, quantitatively fixed (higher/lower) and hence comparable, in the hierarchy of all castes. Thus the move is made from the unintelligibility of immediate diversity to an identification of the being-for-self of caste. Now it is possible to identify determinate castes, here and now, as an



ordered set, unambiguous and non-contradictory, at least in principle. In fact, like the Maitre de Philosophie telling M. Jourdain that he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it, this is precisely what Louis Dumont tells us in Chapter Two of Homo Hierarchicus<sup>20</sup>: he uses the substantive material of caste ethnology to fix the determinate being of castes.

2. Dumont does something more, which also happens to be the next step in our immanent critique of caste. The being-for-self of caste, viz. hierarchy, can be shown to imply a contradictory essence. As soon as we try to arrange the determinate, here-and-now, evidence of the ethnological material in a sequence of change, we will discover in place of the immediacy of being, on the one hand the reflected or mediated self-identity of caste and on the other a self-repulsion or difference. Dumont identifies from within the immediacy of caste practices a contradictory essence, mediated by ideology (or religion), viz. the opposition between purity and pollution. While the need to maintain purity implies that the castes must be kept separate (thus, Brahmans cannot engage in the polluting occupations of the menial castes), it also necessarily brings the castes together (since Brahmans cannot do without the menial/<sup>castes</sup> if their economic services are to be provided). The unity of identity and difference - in this case, vide Dumont, the unity of purity and pollution - gives us the ground of caste as a totality or system. The being of caste is here shown as mediated; its existence is now relative in terms of its interconnections with other existents within the totality of the ground. Dumont devotes the greater part of his book to defending his case that the unity of the opposites purity/pollution provides adequate ground for defining the totality of caste relations as a system.

Once grounded, the immediate relation in the system of castes will appear as the relation between the whole and the parts. Only the parts have independent being, but the relations between the parts themselves are the result of the contradictory unity of identity and difference. The parts can be held together only if they are mediated into self-relation within the whole of the system by force. In Dumont's treatment, the force which holds together the different castes within the whole of the caste system is the ideological force of dharna. It is the construct of dharna which assigns to each jāti its place within the system and defines the relations between jātis as the simultaneous unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence.

The movement of force must make apparent the process of uniting the essence of a system with its existence. Here, Dumont's claim is categorical. The central argument of his work is that the ideological force of dharna does in fact unite the mediated being of caste with its ideality. Thus the ideal construct of dharna is actualised in the immediacy of social institutions and practices. This claim is central not merely in Dumont; it must in fact be central to all synthetic constructions of the theory of caste, for all such theories must claim that the conflicting relations between the differentiated parts of the system (viz. jātis) are effectively united by the force of dharna so that the caste system as a whole can continue to reproduce itself. I have here chosen to use Dumont's book as the most powerful and persuasive construction of the synthetic theory of caste.

3. In order to make a critique of the ideology of caste, then, we must show that this process of actualisation necessarily contains a contradiction. We must show, in other words, that the unification of the essence of caste with its existence through the movement of

the force of dharma is inadequate and one-sided; it is a resolution which reveals its falsity by concealing the contradiction within it. This is the crucial step in the critique of caste. By locating our critique at this level, where the claim that the mediated being of caste (i.e. its ideality) has been actualised in immediate social reality is brought under critical examination, we look at caste neither as base nor as superstructure but precisely as the level of social reality which claims to unite the two. If this claim can be shown to be false, i.e. if the idea of caste can be shown to be necessarily at variance with its actuality, we will have the elementary means for an immanent critique of caste.

It can be shown that Dumont traverses the first two stages of this dialectic without attempting to move to the third. It is at the third stage that a Marxist critique, properly conceived, of Dumont must be grounded. There may of course be several inaccuracies or incorrect statements in Dumont's delineation of the movement in the first two stages. To point these out is undoubtedly justified, but it would not amount to a critique of Dumont, for it is theoretically possible to modify the actual contents of Homo Hierarchicus to yield a more correctly constituted Dumont-type construction. The critique must consist in showing the inherent plausibility and justification of the transition from the second to the third stage - and that is a move that will destroy the central claim of Dumont (or of any synthetic construction of that type) that ideality lies united with actuality in the immediate social reality of caste.

Interestingly, Dumont seems to be aware of this line of attack, and in his 1979 Preface has attempted to fortify his position against it by declaring that the anthropologist's construction of a global ideology can never hope to 'cover without contradiction the

entire field of its application' and must, at every stage, leave a certain irreducible residue in the observed object. The demand for an ideology which is 'identical in its breadth and content to the reality as lived' is, he says, the demand of idealism, 'and it is surprising to see it formulated by the same critics who have reproached us in the name of empiricism for granting too much importance to ideas and values.' He then states his own position, now suitably modified : 'At the most general level, what our conclusion means is that hierarchical ideology, like egalitarian ideology, is not perfectly realised in actuality, or, in other terms does not allow direct consciousness of all that it implies.' <sup>21</sup> One could, of course, say to Dumont that he cannot have it both ways. But let us refrain from raising this obvious objection, and point out instead that the matter is not simply one of the empirical residue of unexplained observations. Our objection will be that any Dumont-like construction of the ideology of caste will be necessarily at variance with its actuality because the unification is contested within the 'observed object', i.e. within the immediate system of castes.

We may also note here that Dumont himself acknowledges that he has confined himself to the first two stages of the movement we have delineated above : his object, he says, is to 'understand' the caste system, not to criticise it. Speaking from within the system of castes, we cannot, unfortunately, afford this anthropologist's luxury, notwithstanding the fact that many Indian anthropologists, in the mistaken belief that this is the only proper scientific attitude to culture, have presumed to share the same observational position with their European teachers. Dumont further says that his is a study of 'structure', not of 'dialectic'. The oppositions within his structure

do not 'produce' anything; they are static and not surpassed through a 'development'; the global setting of the structure is given once and for all.<sup>22</sup> We are, of course, looking for contradictions that are dialectical, where oppositions are surpassed through negation, producing a developed unity and, once again, a new set of contradictions. We do not, however, agree with Dumont that the dialectical method is necessarily 'synthetic'. It is rather the Dumont-type method of 'structure', where the whole is a 'structural' rather than a 'dialectical' whole, which, when applied to immediate phenomena bearing the unexamined content of history, becomes profoundly 'synthetic' in its assertion that all oppositions are necessarily contained within a global unity 'given once and for all.'

#### Dumont Disinterred

It would be redundant here to attempt a review of the contents of such a well-known work as Homo Hierarchicus. I propose instead to rearrange the materials of a recent criticism of Dumont by Dipanker Gupta<sup>23</sup> in terms of the framework outlined above and then assess what remains to be done for an adequate critique to emerge.

Gupta's central criticism of Dumont consists in questioning the latter's claim that the essence of caste lies in a continuous hierarchy along which castes can be ordered in terms of relative purity. Gupta's counter-argument is that the essence of caste lies in differentiation into separate and discrete endogamous jātis; the attribute of hierarchy is a property which does not belong to the essence of caste, and in any case where hierarchy exists it is not purity/pollution which is the necessary criterion.

A little reflection will show that, put in this form, the criticism cannot be sustained. The discreteness of separate endogamous jātis is of course the most obvious aspect of the immediate phenomenon of caste. When this separateness is seen as based on qualitative differences, we necessarily have for each jāti its being-by-self and being-for-another, involving, in this case, the ascription of the natural differences of biological species on an order of cultural differentiation. Every recognized qualitative attribute of a jāti serves to establish its natural difference from other jātis, and this difference is upheld above all in the rule of endogamy which lays down that the natural order of species must not be disturbed. Kane notes the agreement of all medieval dharmasāstra texts on this point and cites the Sūtasamhitā which states explicitly that the 'several castes are like the species of animals and that caste attaches to the body and not to the soul.'<sup>24</sup> The point, however, is that as soon as these discrete jātis are recognized as particular forms belonging to the same class of entities, i.e. they are all recognized as castes, the finiteness of discrete qualities will be negated by a being-for-self of caste embodying the universal measure of 'casteness'. Dumont identifies this universal measure as one of having a place in the hierarchy of caste. In relation to this being-for-self, particular castes can only be distinguished from one another by quantity, viz. their relative place in that hierarchy. An ordering among determinate castes will then be necessarily implied. (Continuity is not, strictly speaking, necessary, even in Dumont's scheme : an unambiguous and transitive ranking by quantity is all that is required.) Gupta's criticism here is misplaced, for the critique of Dumont's method cannot be sustained at the level of the determinate being of caste.

Gupta, however, makes another set of criticisms which is far more promising. There is no one caste ideology, he says, but

several, sharing some principles in common but articulated at variance and even in opposition to one another. Now, this is a criticism which is levelled at the essence of caste as identified by Dumont. We have seen already that Dumont locates the essence of caste on the religious ground defined by the oppositions purity/pollution and claims that the force of dharmā unites the determinate parts (the separate jātis) into a whole. To establish this claim, however, Dumont has first to dispose of a rather serious problem which arises in establishing the unity of the actuality of the institutions and practices of caste with its ideality. This problem has to do with the fact that the actual rankings of caste take variable forms in space (regional caste systems) and in time (caste mobility) and further that these specific orderings are not necessarily consistent with an ideal ordering in terms of purity/pollution. Dumont attempts to solve this problem, first, by positing an absolute separation between dharmā and artha, and then asserting the absolute superiority of the former to the latter. This enables him to allow power (economic, political) to play a residual role in the actual ranking of castes; specifically, the quantitative criterion of hierarchical ordering becomes a weighted numeraire where purity/pollution is the only variable which is allowed to fix the two extreme poles of the scale of ranking while power variables are allowed to affect the ordering in the middle.

There is something inelegant in this solution offered by Dumont and a large number of his critics have produced both textual and practical evidence of show that <sup>his</sup> assertion here is doubtful. But Gupta's criticism that there is not one caste ideology (dharmā) but several has the potential, if adequately theorised, for a more serious critique of Dumont. If substantiated, it would amount to saying that the very universality of dharmā as the ideality of caste

is not generally acknowledged by every part of the system of castes. This criticism would hold even if Dumont's specific characterization of dharna is modified to take care of the factual inaccuracies; in other words, the criticism would hold for any synthetic theory of caste.

To develop these criticisms into a theoretical critique of Dumont, one would need to show : (1) that the immediate reality of castes represents the appearance not of one universal ideality of caste, but of several which are not only at variance but often in opposition, (2) that the universal dharna which claims to be the force binding the parts of the system into a whole is a one-sided construction, (3) that this one-sided ideality succeeds in its assertion of universality not because of the self-conscious unity of subject and object in each individual part but because of the effectiveness of a relation of domination and subordination, and (4) that the fragmented and contradictory consciousnesses represent an actuality that can be unified only by negating the one-sided ideality of the dominant construction of dharna.

Let me state the implications of this project. I am suggesting, first, that there is in popular beliefs and practices of caste an implicit critique which questions the claim of the dominant dharna to unify the particular jātis into a harmonious whole and which puts forward contrary claims. Second, just as the effectiveness of the claims of the one dharna is contingent upon the conditions of power, so also are the possibilities and forms of the contrary claims conditioned by those relations of power. Third, in their deviance from the dominant dharna, the popular beliefs draw upon the ideological resources of given cultural traditions, selecting, transforming and developing them to cope with new conditions of subordination but remaining limited by those conditions. Finally, the negativity of these contrary claims is



an index of their failure to construct an alternative universal to the dominant dharma and is thus the mark of subalternity; the object of our project must be to develop, make explicit and unify these fragmented oppositions in order to construct a critique of Indian tradition which is at the same time a critique of bourgeois equality.

What we have identified here are therefore the requirements for an immanent critique of caste ideology. The critique itself cannot be sustained unless one can address the corpus of caste ethnology right up to our contemporary times from this standpoint. I cannot claim any such expertise for myself. All I can attempt here is a brief illustrative exercise to show some of the possibilities of this approach. The interested reader may wish to compare our approach with Dumont's treatment of the same problem in his essay 'World Renunciation in Indian Religions'.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Dumont treats the series of oppositions - life in the world/life of the renouncer, group religion/disciplines of salvation, caste/individual - as having been unified within the 'whole' of Hinduism by integration at the level of doctrinal Brahmanism and by toleration at the level of the sects, we will offer a different interpretation which treats these oppositions as fundamentally unresolved - unified, if at all, not at the level of the self-consciousness of 'the Hindu' but only within the historical contingencies of the social relations of power.

#### The Dharma of the Minor Sects

The so-called 'minor religious sects' of Bengal commanded, at various points of time between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the following of quite a major section of the population of Bengal. Ramakanta Chakrabarty has compiled a list of fifty-six heterodox sects of this kind,<sup>26</sup> many of which survive to this day.

Of these, the Bāul, the Jagannoharī, the Kartābhajā, the Kisorībhajan, the Sāhebdhanī and a few others are relatively well known, the Kartābhajā in particular attracting much attention for its easy syncretism from the Calcutta intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, and the Bāul, of course, having been granted cultural benediction in the twentieth by its elevation to the status of an export item in the Festival of India circuit. Most of these sects are broadly classified as Vaiṣṇava or semi-Vaiṣṇava, but it is heterodoxy which is the hallmark of their status as 'minor sects'. Besides the general presence of what is loosely described as sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavism, observers have variously noted the strong doctrinal and ritual influence on these sects of Buddhist Sahajiyā ideas, of 'left' Tantric practices, of the religion of the Nāth cults, of Sufi doctrines and of the Dharma cult of lower Bengal. The other crucial characteristic is that their following was predominantly, though not always exclusively, among the lower castes.

If one situates the rise of these cults in relation to the history of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal, the crucial development that has to be noticed is the systematic introduction of caste practices in the religious and social life of orthodox Vaiṣṇavas. Ramakanta Chakrabarty suggests<sup>27</sup> that caste rules began to be strictly applied after the historic festival held in Kheturi (Rajshahi) sometime between 1576 and 1582, which was attended by representatives of nearly a hundred Vaiṣṇava groups from all over Bengal. The Kheturi council laid down the doctrinal and ritual framework of what was to become the dominant orthodoxy of Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism, based on canons prescribed by the gosvāmīs of Vrindavan.<sup>28</sup> The attempt, as Hitesranjan Sanyal suggests, may have been, on the one hand, to provide doctrinal respectability to a relatively unsophisticated popular religious movement by engaging

in the discourse of Purānic Brahmanism and the great systems of Vaisnava religious thought, and on the other, to create the forms of practical religion which would integrate the diverse sahajiyā Vaisnava cults into the main trend of the bhakti movement.<sup>29</sup>

But soon enough, the differentiated forms of social identity and distinction appeared in the body of the Vaisnava sampradāy. In contrast with the earlier phase of the movement when several prominent non-Brahman Vaisnava gurus such as Narahari Sarkār, Narottam Datta or Rasikānanda had Brahman disciples, or unlike the 'neo-Brahman' phase when some Vaisnavas such as the followers of Syāmananda Pāl in Midnapore began to wear the sacred thread irrespective of caste, the new orthodoxy which grew up frowned upon such practices. Indeed, the emphasis now was against indiscriminate proselytization, and the highest status was accorded among Vaisnavas to the Brahman kulaguru who acted as initiator and spiritual guide to a small number of respectable upper-caste families. Gradually, a clearly recognized social distinction emerged between high-caste Gaudīya Vaisnava householders and the low-caste jāt vaiṣṇav (i.e. Vaisnava by caste) who were for all practical purposes regarded by the former as outcastes. Indeed, a whole series of stereotypes of the jāt vaiṣṇav, combining the familiar prejudices of caste impurity with aspersions on their sexual morality, emerged to condemn the low-caste converts beyond the pale of the orthodox Gaudīya Vaisnava sampradāy. The sexual aspersions, in particular, derived from the simplicity of the marriage ceremony practised by the followers of most minor sects which explicitly rejected the injunctions of the smṛtis; upper-caste Vaisnavas refused to regard these as proper weddings. Further, the sects were looked down upon for the refuge they often provided to widows and abandoned women;<sup>30</sup> it was believed that the women were engaged in illicit

liaisons with cult-followers and used in orgiastic rituals, and the ranks of the sect were swelled by the children of such unsanctified unions.

Seen from the standpoint of the history of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal, this imposition of more or less orthodox caste practices on the Vaisnava movement was part of the same process which gave rise to the deviant sects. As historians have pointed out, it was a situation where, after a spell of substantial mobility and readjustment of positions mostly in the middle rungs of the caste hierarchy in Bengal, and a significant process of incorporation of tribal populations in the peripheral regions into some form of Purānic religious practice,<sup>31</sup> the dominant ideological need was to reproduce a stable structure of social divisions within a harmonious whole. A universalizing religion such as Vaiṣṇavism could only unify by accommodating those differences within itself. The points of historical interest for us, therefore, are first, the doctrinal and practical means by which this was attempted, and second, the marks of unresolved and continuing conflict which this process of unification bears.

'The assertion of Brahmanical dominance,' says Ramakanta Chakrabarty, 'in a religious movement which was rooted in mysticism, and which was anti-caste and anti-intellectual, inevitably led to the growth of deviant orders.'<sup>32</sup> He then gives an account of the origins, mostly in the eighteenth century, of some of these orders which were usually founded by Vaiṣṇavas from the 'touchable' Śūdra castes and which usually had a following among the trading and artisanal castes, the untouchables and sometimes tribals converted to the new faith.

In talking about the doctrinal beliefs and ritual practices of these sects, the usual description offered is 'eclecticism'. Thus: 'The spread of Vaiṣṇavism among the low castes strengthened eclectic tendencies. Eclecticism was produced by a combination of circumstances.'<sup>33</sup> Rāmānanda Chakrabarty lists some of these: the secret practice by Vaiṣṇava gurus of Tantric worship while openly professing Vaiṣṇavism, the continued respect for folk gods and goddesses among Vaiṣṇava converts, the obeisance paid to Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā and Caitanya by non-Vaiṣṇava medieval poets, even Muslim poets, and in non-Vaiṣṇava temple art, and the participation of non-sectarians, including Muslims, in Vaiṣṇava festivals. But to characterize these faiths as eclectic is, of course, nothing more than to acknowledge that they cannot be classified under one or the other of the well-known and dominant theological systems. It is, as a matter of fact, merely to recognize that the existence of these sects is itself evidence of an unstable layering in popular consciousness of material drawn from diverse dominant as well as subordinate traditions, the only principle of unity being the contradictory one of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of domination. To characterize the particular structure of this consciousness, we must identify in the particular historical conjuncture, the specific form of this contradictory unity.

What were the doctrinal means used by Vaiṣṇavism to construct the unity of an internally divided community? In the post-Caitanya phase, the fundamental devotional attitude of bhakti was itself explicated along two lines. On the one hand, the more orthodox strand following upon the canonical strictures of the Vrindavan gosvāmīs insisted on the performance by ordinary devotees of vaidhī or ritually sanctioned bhakti. The Haribhaktivilāsa of Gopāla Bhatta Gosvāmī became the authoritative text for this form of Vaiṣṇava devotion and

it went a long way in reconciling the ideal of Vaisnava love with the ritual norms of Brahmanical caste practices. On the other hand, Gaudīya Vaisnavas also granted doctrinal sanction to what was called rāganugā bhakti, which had a more mystical inward form and which was said to originate in an unbearable desire or thirst for God in the being of the devotee. Although the forms of rāganugā devotion soon acquired their own disciplinary modes of practice, and the orthodox school insisted that they could be open only to a select few, the important point was that these forms were not required to conform to scriptural injunctions or institutional arrangements. This was the first mode of doctrinal differentiation by which the religion of Vaisnavism in Bengal would try to unify its fold of believers. It provided a means by which Vaisnava householders could retain their allegiance to the faith while participating in the ritual procedures of social and personal life as laid down in the śāstras, whereas the deviant orders of the sahajiyā sādhak could also proclaim to their followers the esoteric connection between their pursuit of ecstatic bhakti and the doctrinal principles of the main body of the movement.

The second mode of differentiation was provided in the forms and methods of Vaisnava worship. It took some time, and a fair amount of debate, for the idea of Caitanya as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa to be firmly fixed, and even then there was much controversy about a suitable hagiology that would replicate the divine deeds at Vrindavan with those at Nabadwip, a matter complicated further by the Gaudīya doctrine of Caitanya as the dual incarnation of Kṛṣṇa as well as Rādhā. But the crucial concept which gained predominance within the Bengal school of Vaisnavism and which enabled a wide variety of forms of devotional worship to be doctrinally unified was the theory of parakiyā love. Shashibhusan Das Gupta has shown how the celebration

in Vaiṣṇava thought of the extra-marital love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā was appropriated into the forms of an earlier tradition in Bengal of yogic practices leading to the state of mahāsukha or sahaja as conceived in Tāntric Buddhism.<sup>34</sup> But the important point for us is that even in this process of transformation, the doctrine of parakīyā love became internally differentiated. While it was generally acknowledged that the līlā of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā was the means by which Kṛṣṇa in his active, worldly, quality-infused form of bhagavān realised the unity of his ultimate nature or svarūpa-sakti in the form of an infinite state of love or bliss, the attitude of the Vaiṣṇava devotees to this sport of the gods came to be structured in a differentiated form.

The Gaudīya orthodoxy (or at least that section of it which subscribed to the superiority of parakīyā over svakīyā love) insisted that the rādhābhāva, or the attitude of worship of Kṛṣṇa as a married woman for her lover, was proper only to Śrī Caitanya himself. For his devotees, the prescribed attitude of worship was that of the sakhī or the mañjarī who comprised a differentiated circle of female companions of the divine couple and whose task it was to act as reverential accomplices, attendants and voyeurs to the sacred union. In time, especially in the post-Kheturi phase, the orthodox prescription to devotees was to adopt the mañjarī mode of worship, for only by choosing to serve as the humble attendant could one eliminate from one's person all traces of puruṣābhimāna which was proper only to Kṛṣṇa and not to a true Vaiṣṇava devotee. For the latter, the eternal sport of nityavṛndāvana was only a memory to be cherished, contemplated and ritually remembered in daily life.<sup>35</sup> It was a prescription which seems to have opened a way for personal peace and harmony through a devout religiosity but only at the cost of an all-suffering social quiescence.

The deviant sahajiyā orders, however, turned their affiliation to parakiyā worship in a wholly contrary direction. They subscribed to the doctrine of eternal love as represented in the līlā of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in aityavindāvana and called it the state of sahaja or supreme bliss, but argued that it was possible for mortal men and women living in a gross material world to make the transition to the state of supreme love through a disciplined process of spiritual culture or sādhana. The sahajiyās supplemented the orthodox doctrine of bhakti with a theory of āropa, i.e. the attribution of divinity to mortal men and women, and thus effected its transformation into a fundamentally different doctrine. The argument now was that the svarūpa or true spiritual self resided within the physical form (rūpa) of every human being and had to be realised in its developed and perfect state without denying or annihilating his or her physical existence. Indeed, it is human love, moving from the gross forms of carnal desire through successive stages of spiritual development, which finally attains the perfect and infinite form of divine love while retaining and subsuming within it the earlier forms. Through such a process of sādhana, it is possible for men and women to realise the svarūpa of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in their own selves.

As a doctrine this was heretical, and the actual procedures of parakiyā love practised by the various sahajiyā sects were looked upon by 'respectable' Vaisnave householders as unclean and disreputable. Sometimes there were fairly violent attempts at suppression, such as in the pāśandīdalan diatribes launched by the defenders of Brahmanical orthodoxy and in the unrelenting campaigns by the Islamic orthodoxy to suppress the various mārfatī sects and particularly the Bāuls. At other times, they were allowed to exist, but as degraded orders on the peripheries of normal social life. Nevertheless, the



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possibility of a doctrinal attachment between the domain of the regular and orthodox on the one hand and that of the degraded and deviant on the other, through an appropriation of one or the other meaning of the inherently polysemic concepts which sought to unify the field of dogma and ritual, meant that on either side the unity, however tenuous, of the whole could be emphasized when required, just as the irreconcilability of differences could also be asserted if necessary.

The question of identity or difference, one dharma or many dharms, then becomes not so much a matter of judging the inherent strength of the synthetic unification proclaimed by a dominant religion. Any universalist religion, as we have argued, will bear in its essence the contradictory marks of identity and difference, the parts being held together in a whole by an ideological force that proclaims, with varying degrees of effectiveness, its unity. The question, rather, becomes a historical one of identifying the determinants that make this unity a matter of contingency.

It will be apparent from the histories of the minor sects that the varying intensities of their affiliation with the unity, the degree of 'eclecticism', the varying measures and subtleties in emphasizing their difference and their self-identity, reveal not so much the desire to create a new universalist system but rather varying strategies of survival, and of self-assertion. The Bauls openly proclaim their unconventionality and rejection of scriptural injunctions, both Brahmanical and Islamic, but live as mendicants outside society. They talk of love and the divine power which resides in all men and women and thus engage philosophically in the discourses both of Vaisnavism and Sufism and yet are marked out as unorthodox and deviant, not a proper part of the congregation. They enthrall their audiences

by singing, with much lyricism, subtlety and wit, of the 'man of the heart' and the 'unknown bird' which flies in and out of the cage which is the human body, but practise their own disciplines of sādhana and worship in secret, under the guidance of the muraqid.<sup>36</sup> Of sects which live on among a lay following of ordinary householders, most do not display any distinct sect-marks on the person of the devotee, so that in their daily lives the sectarians are largely indistinguishable from others. What they offer to their followers, as in the case of the Kartābhajā or the Sāhebḍhānī, is a congregational space defined outside the boundaries of the dominant religious life, outside caste society or the injunctions of the shariat, but a space brought into active existence only periodically, at thinly attended weekly meetings with the mahāsai or the fakir, and at the three or four large annual festivals where sectarians perform the prescribed duties of allegiance to their preceptor and their faith, while numerous others come just as they would to any religious fair - to eat and drink, listen to the music, pick up a few magic cures for illnesses and disabilities and generally to collect one's share of virtue which is supposed to accrue from such visits. The doctrines preached by the sect leaders, often in a language which conceals under its surface imagery an esoteric meaning open only to initiates, will talk of their rejection of the Vedas and of caste, of idolatry and sāstric or shariati ritual, but the greater their reach across the caste hierarchy, the less strident is their critical tone and the more vapid their sentiments about the sameness of all faiths. The Kartābhajās, for instance, originated in the eighteenth century from a founder who was probably of Muslim origin, but the sect was organized in its present form in the early nineteenth century by a prosperous Sadgop family. It has retained its following among the middle and lower castes, and in particular draws a very large number of women, especially widows, to its festivals, but a fair number of upper-caste people have also

been initiated into the faith. Not surprisingly, a distinction has been innovated between the vyavahārik or the practical social aspect of the life of the devotee and the pāramārthik or supreme spiritual aspect, the former virtually becoming marked as a ground of inevitable compromise and surrender to the dominant norms of society and the latter the secret preserve of autonomy and self-assertion.<sup>37</sup>

All of these, then, are strategies devised within a relationship of dominance and subordination, and they take on doctrinal or ritual attributes and acquire different values according to the changing contingencies of power. But in all their determinate manifestations in particular historical circumstances, they are shaped by the condition of subalternity. I now propose to discuss the case of a minor sect whose historical effectiveness in propagating a religion for the lowest castes seems to have been particularly unsuccessful: let us see if even this rather extreme case of 'failure' tells us something about the strategies of resistance and assertion.

#### A Teacher among the Hādi

Along with the Dom, the Hādi is an archetypal, antaja caste of Bengal. It is not particularly numerous in Nadia district where in 1931 it constituted only about 0.02 per cent of all untouchable castes and was considerably fewer in number than the Bāgdi, Muci, Namaśūdra or Mālo which comprised the bulk of the 30 per cent or so of the Hindu population of that district which was classifiable as untouchable.<sup>38</sup> But it stands as a cultural stereotype of the lowest among the low; thus, for instance, when a Chittagong saying ridicules the proclivity among low castes to assert mutual superiority in ranking, it illustrates the fact precisely by picking out the Hādi and the Dom: 'The Dom thinks he is purer than the Hādi, the Hādi thinks he is purer than that the Dom.'<sup>39</sup> Risley classifies the Hādi<sup>40</sup> as 'a menial and

scavenger class of Bengal Proper' with whom no one will eat and from whom no one will accept water. The Hādīs have priests of their own and are forbidden from entering the courtyards of the great temples. In the nineteenth century, they sometimes had tenancy rights in land as occupancy or non-occupancy raiyats, but were mostly day-labourers in agriculture, while their traditional occupations were the tapping of date-trees, making bamboo implements, playing musical instruments at weddings and festivals, carrying palanquins, serving as syces, and scavenging. The removal of night-soil was confined exclusively to the Nethar subcaste. Risley also reports that the Hādīs also preferred infant-marriage and permitted both divorce and the remarriage of widows, although the synonymous caste of Bhūimālī in Dacca did not at that time allow the latter.

James Wise<sup>41</sup> tells a story about the Dacca Bhūimālī. They were, they say, Śudras originally and were once invited along with all other castes to a feast given by the goddess Pārvatī. On seeing the goddess, a guileless Bhūimālī remarked : 'If I had such a beautiful woman in my house, I would cheerfully perform the most menial offices for her.' Śiva overheard the remark, took the Bhūimālī up on his word, gave him a beautiful wife and made him her sweeper for life. A Dacca proverb makes the comment that the Bhūimālī is the only Hindu ever to be degraded for love of garbage.

Balarām Hādī, founder of the Balarāmī or Balāhādī sect, was born in Meherpur in Nadia<sup>42</sup> sometime around 1780.<sup>43</sup> In his youth, he was employed as a watchman at the house of the Malliks, the Vaidya zamindars of Meherpur. It is said that among the employees of the Malliks, there were a number of Ehojpuri Brahmans who worked as guards and servants with whom Balarām spent a lot of his time, listening to recitations from Tulsīdās's Rāmāyana and other devotional compositions.

At this time there occurred one night a theft of some valuable jewellery with which the family deity of the Malliks was adorned. Balarām was suspected to have been involved in the crime and, by the order of his employer, was tied to a tree and severely beaten. Mortified by this, Balarām left Meherpur and did not return to his village for the next twenty years or more. He is said to have wandered about in the company of religious men and when he came back to Meherpur to found his sect, he was fifty years old and a mendicant.

Balarām was illiterate but was credited with a quick wit and an unusual flair for the use of words. The Hādīs, he used to say, did not have any of the taints with which the Brahmans had stigmatized them; just as the Gharamī was one who built houses (ghar), so was the Hādī one who had created hād - the bones with which all living beings are made. Akshaykumar Datta relates an apocryphal story which illustrates rather well Balarām's reputed facility with argumentation.

Balarām had gone to bathe in the river, when he saw some Brahmans offering tarpan to their ancestors. Imitating their actions, he too began to throw water on to the river-bank. One of the Brahmans asked him, 'Balāi, what do you think you are doing?' Balarām answered, 'I am watering my field of spinach.' The Brahman asked, 'Your field of spinach? Here?' Balarām replied, 'Well, your ancestors aren't here either. If you think that the water you pick up and throw back into the river reaches your ancestors, then why shouldn't the water I throw on the river-bank reach my fields?' 44

Balarām emerged as a religious leader sometime in the 1830s. Writing in the 1890s, some three decades after Balarām's death, Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya reported that the sect had a following of

about twenty thousand people.<sup>45</sup> Collective memory within the sect has it that at some point in his life as a preacher, Balaram was invited by one of his disciples to Nischintapur in the Tahatta area of Nadia (not far from the infamous fields of Plassey) where he set up another centre of activity. Sudhir Chakrabarti gives a list of twelve of his direct disciples, all of whom were low-caste (Muci, Namasudra, Jugi, Hadi, Mahisya and Muslim) and three were women described as 'earning their livelihood by begging.'<sup>46</sup> Balaram also had a female companion, described variously as his wife or his sevikā (attendant),<sup>47</sup> who later came to be known as Brahmanātā. She was Malo by caste and ran the Maherpur centre after Balaram's death, while the Nischintapur centre was run by a Mahisya disciple called Tim Mandal. Unlike the sahajiyā Vaisnava sects, the Balaramis do not have a guru-disciple structure in their order: the various centres are run by leaders called sarkars, but the post is not necessarily hereditary. Until a few decades ago, there were about a dozen active centres in various villages in Nadia. At present, most are in a decrepit state, although a few centres survive in Burdwan, Bankura and Puzulia where two or three large festivals are held every year.

Like many other religious leaders who have been invested with the attributes of divinity, Balaram too has been the subject of myths which give to the story of his birth an aura of extraordinariness. It is said that at the time of his father's wedding, the astrologers had predicted that the son born of this marriage would be the last in the lineage. When the wife became pregnant, she concealed the fact from everyone else. One afternoon, a small child with a full growth of hair and beard suddenly dropped from the ceiling and, miraculously, the woman found her womb empty. She wrapped the child in a piece of cloth and quietly left it in the jungle. But she had a sister who

lived in the next village. Balarām visited her in her dream. The next morning, she came to the jungle and found the child lying under a tree, protected by two tigers. She took him away with her. The foster-mother found work in the house of a landlord, and when Balarām grew up to be a young boy, he was employed to tend the landlord's cattle.

The birth was miraculous, and the story has a certain resemblance with that of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa, brought up by his aunt in Vrindavan. One day, the landlord Jiban Mukherjee was visited by his family guru and the boy Balarām was asked to accompany him to the river Bhairav where the guru was to bathe. It was here that the aforementioned conversation between Balarām and the Brahmans supposedly took place, and the story goes on to assert that Balarām did in fact perform the miracle of sending the river-water to a distant field. Greatly impressed by this feat, the Brahman guru came back and reprimanded his landlord disciple for employing a person with such miraculous powers as a mere servant. Balarām then asked that he be allowed to go back to the jungle from where he had come. Jiban Mukherjee donated a small piece of forest land to Balarām<sup>48</sup> and it was there that he set up his ākḥḍā.

Not all Brahmans, however, were quite so generous in acknowledging Balarām's spiritual merits. The Brahman landlord of Nischintapur, for instance, greatly resented Balarām's growing influence over his tenants. One afternoon, while Balarām was away, the landlord arranged to set fire to the Nischintapur ākḥḍā. When Balarām was told of this, he remarked, 'He who sets fire to my house destroys his own.' Saying this, he left Nischintapur and in three long steps he was ten miles away in Meherpur. Apparently, it began to rain from that moment and it did not let up for the next nine days. Huge cracks appeared on the

land surrounding the zamindar's barnhouse, and by the time the rain stopped, the entire barn had been swallowed by an enormous crater. The place is now called the 'barnhouse lake'.

Balarām's teachings, not surprisingly, were directed against the Vedas, the ritual injunctions of the sāstra and against the practices of caste. J.H. Bhattacharya, in his brief account of Balarām's sect, makes the remark : 'The most important feature of his cult was the hatred that he taught his followers to entertain towards Brahmans'.<sup>49</sup> He also forbade them to display any distinctive marks of their sect or, significantly, to utter the name of any god when asking for alms. The mantras they were asked to chant were in plain Bengali, devoid even of the ornamental semblance of an om or a Tāntric hrīm klīm ślīm, and without the hint of an esoteric subtext. When Balarām died, his body was neither cremated, nor buried, nor thrown in the water : on his instructions, it was simply left in the jungle to be fed to other living creatures. For a few generations after Balarām, the sect leaders were buried after death or their bodies thrown into the river, but now the sāstric procedure of cremation is generally followed.

The sectarian ideology of the Balāhādīs pitted itself not only against the dominant Brahmanical religion, it also demarcated itself from the religion of the Vaiṣṇavas. Their songs refer with much derision to the practices of the sahajiyā - their fondness for food, drink, sex and intoxicants, their obsession with counting the rosary, indeed their very existence as vagabonds without habitation or kin. They laugh at the Gaudīya dogma of complete servility of the devotee and retort : 'Why should I stoop so low when Hādīrām is within me?' Ridiculing the concept of Caitanya as the dual incarnation of Kṛṣṇa



and Rādhā, they ask, 'If Caitanya is Kṛṣṇa, then why does he cry for him? If it is the Rādhā in him that cries, then Caitanya is only half a being. Who is the complete being? Hādirā, of course. It is for him that Caitanya cries, for Caitanya can never find him. The perfect being appeared not in Nabadwip but in Meherpur'.<sup>50</sup>

The songs of the Balarāmī breathe the air of sectarianism. Boastful, aggressive, often vain, they produce the impression of an open battle waged on many fronts. There is little that is secretive about the ways of the sect. Although its following consisted overwhelmingly of low-caste and poor labouring people, there is none of the esoteric practices associated with the sahajiyā cults. Perhaps the absence of prosperous householders among them made it unnecessary for the Balarāmīs to conceal their defiance of the dominant norms - after all, who cared what a few Hādīs or Mālos proclaimed in their own little circles? As far as 'respectable' people were concerned, these untouchables were not particularly good religionists anyway - indeed, in a certain sense, incapable of good religion. It was their very marginality which may have taken the sting out of their revolt against subordination, and by asserting the unrelenting negativity and exclusiveness of their rebellious faith, they condemned themselves to eternal marginality.

#### The Genealogy of Insubordination

But the defiance was not without conceit. It would be worth our while to delve into some of the mythic material with which the Balarāmīs constructed their faith in order to address the question we raised before : how do the contingencies of power determine the form and the outcome of rebellions against the dominance of a dharma which proclaims its universality?

Among the myths is a very curious and distinctive account of the origin of the species, which the Balaramīs call their jātitattva. It seems that in the earliest age, the ādi yug, there was nothing: this was, so to speak, time before creation. In the next, the anādi yug, was created plants. In the third age, the dibya yug, there was only Hādirām - and no one else. From his hāi (yawn) was created Haimabatī, the first female, and from her the first gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva who would direct the course of the sacred and profane histories in the satya, tretā, dvāpar and kālī ages spoken of in the Purāṇas. This historical time of the four ages is described in the Balaramī songs as a trap, a vicious snare that binds people to Vedic and Purāṇic injunctions. The quest for Hādirām is to find in one's mortal life the path of escape into that mythic time before history when the Hādi was noble, pure and worthy of respect.

The form of this creation myth is the same as that which occurs in most of the popular cult literature of Bengal, the archetypal form of which is to be found in the Sūnyapurāna.<sup>51</sup> There too we find an age before all ages when there is nothing and the supreme lord moves about in a vacuum. The lord then creates out of his compassion another personality called Nirāñjana, out of whose yawn is born the bird Ulūka. From the lord's sweat is born Ādyāśakti, primordial energy in the form of a woman. From Ādyāśakti are born the three gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. In the Balaramī cosmogony, not only does Hādirām take the place of Nirāñjana but he seems to usurp the powers of the supreme lord as well.

Specifically, however, there is in the story of Haimabatī's birth a more direct and yet curiously unacknowledged element of borrowing. The literature of the Nāth cults of northern and eastern Bengal<sup>52</sup> tells the legend of how at the time of creation, Śiva came

out of the mouth of the primordial lord, while out of the lord's hād or bone was born Hādipā. When Śiva decided to take Gaurī, the mother of the earth, as his wife and come down to earth, Hādipā, along with the other siddha Mīnanāth, accompanied them as their attendants. Hādipā, however, expressed his willingness to accept even the occupation of a sweeper if he could have as wife a woman as beautiful as Gaurī, and Śiva ordained that he live on earth as a Hādi in the company of the queen Maynāmātī.<sup>53</sup> Hādipā was later to be celebrated in the Nāth literature as the preceptor of the great siddha Gopīoandra.

The similarity between this creation myth, hallowed in a much more well-known tradition in Bengal's folk literature, and the one held by the Balarāmīs strongly suggests that Balarām in fact picked it up in order to assert a sacred origin of the Hādi. It is also not surprising that a further transposition should be introduced into the Nāth legend in order to give to Hādirām himself the status of the originator of the human species. What is remarkable, however, is that this source of the myth in a fairly well-established strand of popular religious tradition is entirely unacknowledged. There is nothing in the Balarāmī beliefs which claims any affiliation with the Nāth religion, or with any other tradition of Śaiva religious thought.

All that is conceded is a somewhat desultory recognition that of the three sons of Haimabatī, Śiva went a little further than his brothers Brahmā and Viṣṇu along the path of worship that led to Hādirām. For it is said that Mahādeva alone had an inkling of the tattva of Hādirām: he counted all of the 108 bones created by the latter and still wanders about, wearing a necklace of bones around his neck and singing the praises of Hādirām.<sup>54</sup> Of the other two sons of Haimabatī, we get in the third generation in the line of Brahmā's eldest daughter

Ghānkāncanī,<sup>55</sup> two brothers called Ājir Methar and Bhusi Ghos, the Methar being a sub-caste of the Hādī but the most degraded among them, while by Ghos is probably meant the Goālā caste which is a 'touchable' Sūdra caste, higher in status than both the Methar and the Hādī. Viṣṇu's section is more colourful, for in the line of his second daughter Mucchundarī Kālī, we get Hācyā and Ādam of whom are born two sons Hābel and Kābel. Undoubtedly, we have here the Old Testament story of the genesis as retold in the Koran - that is, Hawwā (Eve) and Ādam and their sons Hābil (Abel) and Qābil (Cain) - slotted in the fourth and fifth generations of the human species. In Hābel's line, we then get four jātis - Sheikh, Saiyad, Mughal and Pathan, the four traditional classificatory groups among Indian Muslims, and in Kābel's line we get Nikiri, Jolā (low-status Muslim fishermen and weaver castes) and, believe it or not, Rajput.<sup>56</sup> Of Viṣṇu's third child, Muśuk Kālī, are born three sons. The eldest, Parāśar, is a sage and he gives birth to eleven children, namely, goat, tiger, snake, vulture, mouse, mosquito, elephant, horse, cat, camel and monkey. The youngest son, Rṣav, is also a muni and from his grandsons originate thirteen Brahman groups, whose names are Dobe, Cobe, Pāthak, Pānde, Teoyāri, Misir, etc. - most recognizable names here are those of Bihar and U.P. Brahmans and none are Bengali names. (Perhaps we ought to recall Balarām's early association with Bhojpuri Brahmans in the house of his landlord employer.) The Bengali Brahmans originate in a particularly degraded section, for Pāthak had two children, Vṛsa (bull) and Meṣa (sheep), one born of an untouchable Bede woman and the other of an untouchable Bāgdi woman. From them originate all the Brahman lineages of Bengal, such as Bhatije, Badije, Mukhuje, Gāngāl, Ghusāl, Bāgji, Lahadi, Bhādariya, etc.

There is much more in this extraordinary genealogical tree whose meanings are not transparent to the uninitiated; even the present-day leaders of the cult cannot explain many of the references. The ramifications of Balaram's jātitattva, in as much as it attempts to define a new set of relations between various existent social groups, are for the most part unclear. What is clear, however, is first, that the scheme continues to undertake the classification of social groups in terms of a natural division into species, and it does this to a great extent by transforming the relations between elements within a popularly inherited mythic code, and second, that by overturning the hierarchical order of the Puranic creation myths, it pushes the very ideality of the dominant scheme of caste to a limit where it merges with its opposite. Balaram's jātitattva does not assert that there are no jātis or no differences between social groups akin to the differences between natural species. Rather, by raising the Hādi to the position of the purest of the pure, the self-determining originator of differentiations within the genus, and by reducing the Brahman to a particularly impure and degenerate lineage, it subverts the very claim of the dominant dharmā that the actual social relations of caste are in perfect conformity with its universal ideality.

Without, of course, asserting a new universal. That is a mark imprinted on consciousness of the yet unsurpassed limit of the condition of subalternity. The conceit shown in the construction of Balaram's jātitattva is a sign of conscious insubordination. But there is no trace in it of a self-conscious contest for an alternative social order. Or are <sup>we</sup> being too hasty in our judgment?

#### The Body as the Site of Appropriation

Caste attaches to the body, not to the soul. It is the biological reproduction of the human species through procreation

within endogamous caste groups which ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity or pollution. It is also the physical contact of the body with defiling substances or defiled <sup>bodies</sup> that mark it with the temporary conditions of pollution which can be removed by observing the proscribed procedures of physical cleansing. Further, if we have grasped the essence of caste, it is the necessity to protect the purity of his body that forbids the Brahman from engaging in acts of labour which involve contact with polluting material, and which, reciprocally, requires the unclean castes to perform those services for the Brahman. The essence of caste, we may then say, requires that the labouring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity. All the injunctions of dharma must work to this end.

When popular religious cults deviate from the dogma of the dominant religion, when they announce the rejection of the Vedas, the sastric rituals or caste, they declare a revolt of the spirit. But the conditions of power which make such revolts possible are not necessarily the same as those that would permit a practical insubordination of labouring bodies. To question the ideality of caste is not directly to defy its immediate reality.

It is not as though this other battle has not been waged. Let us leave aside those high points of popular protest which take the explicit political forms of insurgency: these have received a fair amount of attention from historians, their general features have been examined and their historical limits broadly delineated. We are also not considering here those particular or individual instances of disobedience, whether demonstrative or covert, which undoubtedly

occur in the daily life of every village in India. Instead, let us turn our eyes to the practical aspects of the religious life of the deviant cults we have been talking about. All of these are fundamentally concerned with the body. The sahajiyā cults, we have noticed, practise the forms of bodily worship which do not respect the dicta of either the śāstra or the shariat. But they can only be conducted in secret, under the guidance of the guru, and their principles can be propagated only in the language of enigma. Where they seek an open congregation, it takes the anti-structural form of the communitas of periodic and momentary religious festivals. And yet, there is underlying it all the attempt to define a claim of proprietorship over one's own body, to negate the daily submission of one's body and its labour to the demands made by the dominant dharma and to assert a domain of bodily activity where it can, with the full force of ethical conviction, disregard those demands. Notice, therefore, the repeated depiction of the body in the songs of dehatattva not simply as a material entity, but as an artefact - not a natural being at all, but a physical construct. The body is a house, or a boat, or a cart, or a weaver's loom, or a potter's wheel, or any of countless other instruments or products of labour which remain at the disposal and use of one who possesses them. But the very secretiveness of these cult practices, the fact that they can be engaged in only, as it were, outside the boundaries of the social structure, sets the limit to the practical effectiveness of the claim of possession; not surprisingly, it draws upon itself the charge of licentiousness.

The practical religion of the Balāhādīs takes a different form. Their sectarianism is not, as we have been, secretive, nor is it primarily conceived as a set of practices engaged in beyond the margins of social life. Rather, their forms of worship involve a

self-disciplining of the body in the course of one's daily social living. Here too the body is an artefact, but it can be used by its owner with skill and wisdom or wasted and destroyed by profligacy. The specific forms of self-discipline, as far as one can gather from the material supplied by Sudhir Chakrabarti, again seems to bear close resemblance with the hathayoga practices of the Māth cults. The main principle is that of ultāsadhana which involves yogic exercises that produce a regressive or upward movement in the bodily processes. It is believed that in the normal course, the force of pravyrtti or activity and change moves in a downward direction, taking the body along the path of decay and destruction. The aim of self-discipline is to reverse this process by moving it in the upward direction of niyrtti or rest. More specifically, the bodily practices involve the retention of the bindu or sukra (semen) and preventing its waste. The Balāhādī literature does not, of course, prescribe the full range of hathayoga practices, which can only be performed in strict celibacy, with a view to reaching the perfect siddha state of immortality.<sup>57</sup> What it does, however, is lay down a sort of new āśramadhama for its adherents - a graded series of states of bodily discipline that can be attempted in the course of a mortal, and social, life.

The lowest state is that of bodhitān where the body is completely a prisoner of impulses and base desires. It is a state where one does not even will an escape from the debilitating demands of the 'four ages' - that snare of historical time in which all the forces of activity and change work towards the bondage and annihilation of free life. To us, this appears to be a state characterized by the mindless pursuit of instant pleasure, although the Balārāmī would put this as its opposite. The body, he would say, is here completely under the sway of man, i.e. of mind which is the storehouse of impulse



and desire. In bodhitān, the body is not its own; it is the state of alienation of the body from itself. Indeed, this bodily state becomes the representation of that condition of the labouring classes which provokes such remarks as 'The Mādi's Lakṣmī finds her way into the Śundi's [liquor-seller's] house.'<sup>58</sup> The passage of the body from this state to that of eyotan is the crucial transition for a Balaramī householder. In eyotan, the bodily processes are under the control of its owner. The semen is preserved and spent only for procreation.<sup>59</sup> This, in this world of representations where the body stands as microcosm for the universe, is the daily affirmation of a proprietorship constantly threatened. If the purity and perfection of the body can be controlled from within itself, nothing external can pollute it. For most lay followers of the sect, this is as far as their sādhān is expected to go. For the fortunate few, a successful life in eyotan is followed by the state of nityān where there is complete unconcern for the world. This is a stage of life spent outside the bonds of family and kin. The final and most perfect state of sādhān is that of khāstan. It is a state of complete freedom and hence of unconditioned proprietorship over one's bodily existence, for, as the Balaramīs say, the prajā of khāstan are entities such as light, air, sky, fire or water which do not pay a rent to anyone for their earthly existence. This is a state which only Balaram was able to attain.

What are we to say of this? There are unmistakable signs here of a consciousness alienated from the dominant dharma, but apparently bound to nothing else than its spirit of resolute negativity. Its practical defeat too is borne out by the facts of social history. Yet, is there not here an implicit, barely stated, search for a recognition whose signs lie not outside, but within one's own self? Can one see here the trace of an identity which is defined not by

others, but by oneself? Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to be taken in too easily by the general presence of an abstract negativity in the autonomous domain of subaltern beliefs and practices and have missed those marks, faint as they are, of an immanent process of criticism and learning, of selective appropriation, of making sense of and using on one's own terms the elements of a more powerful cultural order. We must, after all, remind ourselves that subaltern consciousness is not merely structure, characterized solely by negativity; it is also history, shaped and developed through a changing process of interaction between the dominant and the subordinate. Surely, it would be wholly contrary to our project to go about as though only the dominant culture has a life in history and subaltern consciousness eternally frozen in its structure of negation.

#### The Implicit and the Explicit

We must, however, be careful in avoiding the easy, mechanical, transposition of the specifics of European history. The specific forms of immanent development necessarily work with a definite cultural content. It seems quite far-fetched to identify in the criticisms of caste among the deviant religions the embryo of a Protestant ethic or an incipient urge for bourgeois freedom. What we have is a desire for a structure of community in which the opposite tendencies of mutual separateness and mutual dependence are united by a force that has a greater universal moral actuality than the given forms of the dominant dharma. For want of a more concrete concept of praxis, we may call this desire, in an admittedly abstract and undifferentiated sense, a desire for democratization, where rights and the application of the norms of justice are open to a broader basis of consultation, disputation and resolution.

Every social form of the community, in the formal sense, must achieve the unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence of its parts. The system of castes, we have seen, makes this claim, but its actuality is necessarily in disjunction with its ideality. The external critique of caste, drawn from the liberal ideology of Europe, suggests that a legal framework of bourgeois freedom and equality provides an alternative, and in principle more democratic, basis for this unification. This has been the formal basis of the constitutional structure of the post-colonial state in India. And yet the practical construction of this new edifice out of the given cultural material has been forced into an abandonment of its principles from the very start - notice, for instance, the provisions of special reservations on grounds of caste.<sup>60</sup> The new political processes have, it would seem, managed to effect a displacement of the unifying force of dharmā but replaced it with the unifying concept of 'nation' as concretely embodied in the state. What has resulted is not the actualization of bourgeois equality at all, but rather the conflicting claims of caste groups (to confine ourselves to this particular domain of social conflict), not on the religious basis of dharmā, but on the purely secular demands of claims upon the state. The force of dharmā, it appears, has been ousted from its position of superiority, to be replaced with a vengeance by the pursuit of artha, but, pace Dumont, on the basis again of caste divisions! On the one hand, we have the establishment of capitalist relations in agricultural production in which the new forms of wage labour fit snugly into the old grid of caste divisions.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, we have the supremely paradoxical phenomenon of low-caste groups asserting their very backwardness in the caste hierarchy to claim discriminatory privileges from the state, and upper-caste groups proclaiming the sanctity of bourgeois equality and freedom (the criterion of equal opportunity mediated by skill and merit) in order to beat back the threat to their existing privileges! What are we to make of these conflicting desires for democratisation?

There is no alternative for us but to undertake a search, both theoretical and practical, for the concrete forms of democratic community which are based neither on the principles of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality. The posure by Dumont of the principles of homo hierarchicus against those of homo equalis is a false, essentialist, positing of an unresolvable antinomy. We must assert that there is a more developed universal form of the unity of separateness and dependence which subsumes hierarchy and equality as lower historical moments.

The point is to explicate the principles and to construct the concrete forms of this universal. In Indian politics, the problem of unifying the opposed requirements of separateness and dependence has been concretely addressed only at the level of the structure of federalism, a level where the problem is seen as permitting a territorial resolution. The <sup>attempt</sup> has had dubious success. In other domains, of which caste is a prime example, politics has drifted from one contentious principle to another (bourgeois equality, caste-class correlation, discriminatory privileges for low castes through state intervention, etc.) without finding adequate ground on which it can be superseded by a new universal form of community.

But, and this has been my argument in this essay, there does exist a level of social life where labouring people in their practical activity have constantly sought in their 'common sense' the forms, mediated by culture, of such community. The problem of politics is to develop and make explicit what is only implicit in popular activity, to give to its process of mediation the conditions of sufficiency. The point, in other words, is to undertake a criticism of 'common sense' on the basis of 'common sense'; not to inject into popular life a 'scientific' form of thought springing somewhere else, but to develop and make critical an activity which already exists in popular life.

NOTES

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1. A few examples of empirical work containing detailed observations of this phenomenon are Pauline Mahar Kolenda, 'Religious Anxiety and Hindu Fate,' Journal of Asian Studies, 23 (1964), pp.71-82; Owen Lynch, The Politics of Untouchability (New York, 1969), Mark Juergensmeyer, Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-century Punjab (Berkeley, 1982); R.S. Khare, The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars (Cambridge, 1983); Rosalind O'Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology. (Cambridge, 1985).
  2. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 325-43.
  3. Ibid, p. 333.
  4. Ibid, p. 327.
  5. Ibid, p. 243.
  6. Ibid, p. 326n5.
  7. Ibid, p. 328.
  8. Ibid, pp. 331 and 331n.
  9. Ibid, p. 420.
  10. Ibid, p. 421.
  11. Ibid, p. 343.
  12. Ibid, p. 396.
  13. Ibid, pp. 336-7.
  14. Ibid, p. 337.
  15. Ibid, p. 331.
  16. Dipankar Gupta, 'From Varna to Jati: The Indian Caste System, from the Asiatic to the Feudal Mode of Production', Journal of Contemporary Asia, 10 (1980), 3, pp.249-71.

17. Gail Omvedt, 'An Introductory Essay' in Omvedt, ed., Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States (Delhi, 1982), pp. 9-50.
18. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Omvedt's considerable, and in every way very important, work on the relation between caste and class in popular struggles in India. But what seems to me as the theoretical inevitability of a slip into empiricism, brought about by her inability to unify the immanence of a dialectic of caste with the imposition of capitalist relations, is well illustrated by her recent article 'The "New Peasant Movement" in India,' In the Wake of Marx (Calcutta), 3 (1987), 3-4, pp. 3-10. Having argued for a long time that 'the main lines of conflict are no longer between middle and low-caste peasants on one side and high-caste landlords on the other, but are now between the rich farmers and the agricultural labourers-poor peasants,' she has now suddenly woken up to the realisation, again on purely empirical grounds, that 'the peasant movement, claiming to represent the united interest of all categories of peasants ... has become perhaps the single biggest mass movement in India.'
19. Most graphically so after the inconclusive end of the 'mode of production in Indian agriculture' debate of the 1970s.
20. tr. Mark Sainsbury (London, 1970).
21. Homo Hierarchicus, revised English edition (Delhi, 1988) p. xxx.
22. Ibid, pp. 242-3.
23. Dipankar Gupta, 'Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes,' Economic and Political Weekly, 19, 46-48 (17, 24, November and 1 December 1984), pp. 1955-8, 2003-5, 2049-53.
24. P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, vol. 2, part 1 (Poona, 1974), p. 52. It is thus that when the exception to endogamy is allowed, it is only in the case of anuloma, which literally means 'with the hair', that is, in the natural order, and never in the case of pratiloma, which would be against the natural order.

25. Homo Hierarchicus, revised English edition, Appendix B, pp. 267-86.
26. Vaisnavism in Bengal (Calcutta, 1985), p. 349.
27. Ibid, p. 321.
28. Five of this celebrated circle of six gosvāmīs were Brahmans. The intellectual leaders of the circle - the brothers Rūpa and Sanātana and their nephew Jīva - were Karnataka Brahmans settled in Bengal and came from a family of senior ministers to the Bengal Sultan. They are said to have considered themselves somewhat impure because of their close contact with the mlecchas, but were all highly learned in the philosophical and literary disciplines. Gopāla Bhaṭṭa is also said to have been a Karnataka Brahman. Raghunātha Bhaṭṭa was a Brahman settled in Varanasi, and may have been of Bengali origin, while Raghunātha Dāsa was from a Kayastha landlord family of Hooghly. The last two, however, made virtually no significant contribution to the doctrinal development of Gaudiya Vaisnavism. See Sushil Kumar De, Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal (Calcutta, 1961), pp. 111-65.
29. Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal,' Occasional Paper 76 (July 1985), Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.
30. The slurs on the sexual reputation of the women followers of Vaisnava sects are legion. A popular saying has a Vaisnava woman declaring: 'I was a prostitute first, a maid-servant later, and a procuress in between; now at last I am a Vaisnavī.' (Āge beśye, pare dāśye, madhye madhye kuṭnī, sarba karma parityājya ekhan boṣṭami) Sushilkumar De, Bāmlā prabād (Calcutta, 3rd ed., 1986), p. 9.
31. For an account of these processes in the period of Caitanya and after, see Hitesranjan Sanyal, Social Mobility in Bengal (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 33-64.
32. Vaisnavism in Bengal, p. 324.
33. Ibid, p. 342.

34. Obscure Religious Cults (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 113-46.
35. The activity of 'remembrance' of the līlā was ritually formalized in the eighteenth century. See Chakrabarty, Vaisnavism in Bengal, pp. 309-18.
36. On the Baul, see Upendranath Bhattacharya, Bāmlār baul o baul gān (Calcutta, 1957). On the relationship between the Baul and the Sufi doctrines, also see Muhammad Enamul Haq, A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal (Dhaka, 1975), pp. 260-367.
37. On the Sāhebhdhānī, see Sudhir Chakrabarti, Sāhebhdhānī sampradāy : tāder gān (Calcutta, 1985); on the Kartābhajā, see the brief account in Chakrabarty, Vaisnavism in Bengal, pp. 346-384.
38. Computed from Imperial Table XVII, Census of India, 1931, vol. 5 (Bengal and Sikkim), part 2, pp. 226-42. The Hādī is in fact more numerous in the western districts of Bengal such as Burdwan, Birbhum and Midnapore.
39. 'Hādittun dom kulīn, domattun hādī kulīn.' Mohammad Hanif Pathan, ed., Bāmlā prabād pariciti, vol. 2, part 1 (Dhaka, 1982), p. 86.
40. H. H. Risley, The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1891), pp. 314-6.
41. James Wise, Notices on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal (London, 1883), cited in *ibid.*
42. Meherpur is now an upajilā (sub-district) in Bangladesh.
43. This account is based on the biographical details collected by Sudhir Chakrabarti, Balāhādī sampradāy ar tāder gān (Calcutta, 1986). Unless otherwise indicated, all information on the sect and its songs are also from the same source. Dr. Chakrabarti, of course, is not to be blamed for my interpretation of the material presented by him.
44. Akshaykumar Datta, Bhāratvarṣīya upāsak-sampradāy, ed. Benoy Ghosh (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 137-9. Balarām's argument here resembles a much older form of nāstika argumentation found in



the so-called Cārvāka philosophy. 'If those living in heaven can be nourished by the offerings of those living on earth, then why should not those living on the upper floor of a building be nourished by offerings made in the lower floor?' See Cārvāka-darsanam, tr. (in Bengali) Panchanan Shastri (Calcutta, 1967), p. 87.

45. J. N. Bhattacharya, Hindu Castes and Sects (Calcutta, repr. 1973), pp. 388-9.

46. Balāhādī sampradāy, pp. 27-8.

47. Sudhir Chakrabarti thinks the latter is more probable, and that is certainly the version accepted by the sectarians. *Ibid*, p. 20.

48. This, according to Sudhir Chakrabarti, is confirmed by the land records at Meherpur where a gift of 0.35 acres of land from the landlord Jiban Mukherjee to Balarām Hādī is recorded. *Ibid*, p. 31.

49. The meeting of this English-educated Brahman scholar with Brahmanātā was not without a touch of irony. 'I met her in the year 1872. Her first question to me was about my caste. I knew well about the hatred of the sect towards Brahmans, and instead of mentioning that I was a Brahman, I used a pun to say that I was a human being. She was very much pleased, and after offering me a seat she went on propounding the tenets of her sect. The greater part of her utterances was meaningless jargon, but she talked fluently and with the dignity of a person accustomed to command. Though a Hari by caste, she did not hesitate to offer me her hospitality. I declined it as politely as I could but considering the courtesy that she showed to me, I could not but feel some regret that the barrier of caste rendered it quite impossible for me to comply with her request.' Hindu Castes and Sects, p. 389.

50. Balāhādī sampradāy, pp. 44-5, 49.

51. See Das Gupta, Obscure Religious Cults, pp. 311-37.

52. *Ibid*, pp. 211-55, 367-98.

53. This is undoubtedly the source of the story picked up by James Wise about the origin of the Hui-māli.

54. Here again is an element of commonality with the Sūnyapurāna cosmogony, for there too it is Śiva alone of the three sons of Ādyasakti who is able to recognize the supreme lord in disguise.
55. Gṇān = sweat. In the Sūnyapurāna myths, the first female Ādyasakti is born from the sweat of the lord, but the relation here has been transposed to the progeny of Brahmā.
56. Actually, the classification of jātis in Hābel's line is elaborated still further and includes divisions such as Shia and Sunni among the Mughals, or Sur, Surani, Lodi and Lohani among Pathans. Hābel's line seems to comprise groups that claim an aristocratic Muslim lineage, while Kābel's is definitely of inferior social status, although the inclusion of Rajputs in the latter line remains a complete mystery.
57. This may be a good reason why it does not claim any allegiance to the religion of the Nāth siddhas. However, the stories about Balarām's own miraculous powers of transportation indicate a claim of considerable facility in hathayoga skills.
58. 'Hādir lakṣmī sūndir ghare yāy.' Sushilkumar De, Bāmlā prabād, p.224.
59. Once a month, before sunrise on the fourth day after the end of the wife's menstrual cycle. It will also be evident that the attempt to claim proprietorship over one's own body is an exclusively male enterprise. Woman is in fact the embodiment of external pravṛtti which tempts, subjugates and destroys the male body. This raises a very crucial question about the relationship of subaltern consciousness to gender, a matter which unfortunately has received little serious attention.
60. For an account of the legal muddle on this question, see Marc Galanter, Competing Equalities : Law and the Backward Classes in India (Delhi, 1984).
61. Numerous recent studies have shown this. See, for example, John Harriss, Capitalism and Peasant Farming : Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu (Delhi, 1982).