The Effectiveness of the Hindu Sacrament (Saṃskāra): Caste, Marriage, and Divorce in Bengali Culture

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In *Kinship in Bengali Culture* Ronald Inden and I analyzed the symbolic constitution and meaning of kinship in Bengal at a level of generality that we think is shared by most Bengali Hindus. Our most significant discoveries concern how relatives are categorized, the love relationships among them, and the existence of alternative dominant and subordinate patterns of classifying kin together with corresponding alternatives for the proper display of love. The general importance of this portion of the analysis lies in our demonstration that, rather than separating relatives into two opposed categories, as consanguines and affines, the Bengali system classifies them into two overlapping categories. Although these are matters of intense interest to students of kinship, they are not important to most people, and they are not the subjects of this essay.

Marriage seems to be more intrinsically interesting than the classification of kin, and it seems to be a universal practice. In *Kinship in Bengali Culture* our analysis of Hindu marriage, both as a rite and as a
relationship, focused on the forms of solidarity it creates and sustains among people as kin. We did not deal with failures of solidarity, which led some readers to think we idealize Hindu marriage, or are biased toward a Brahmanic view of Bengali culture at the expense of a putative lower-caste culture. In this paper, therefore, I consider some facts about divorce as I encountered them in fieldwork in rural Bengal to see if these alter our analysis of marriage in some way. Since divorce is very differently distributed among castes, I also discuss how Bengali Hindus think about differences among castes. Much of the Bengali theory about castes, their various capacities, and their distinguishing characteristics is contained in a version of the myth of the wicked King Vena and his virtuous son Prthu. I discuss the Bengali variant of this myth, which relates the origin of the Bengali castes and of their qualities. Before doing so, however, I review briefly the conception of the samskāra rites, and particularly the samskāra of marriage in Bengali culture. Although we have discussed these rites at some length, we did not say much about variety in the practice of the samskāras among Bengali Hindus, simply noting that “in our view, one of the most important sources of variation [in the practice of these rites] has been caste, with the samskāras of higher-caste people being more elaborate and regarded as more efficacious than those of lower-caste people.”

The Samskāra Rites

Although we followed the general practice in anthropology since the publication of van Gennep’s Rites of Passage in referring to the samskāras as “life-cycle rites,” in fact the implications of the term samskāra are somewhat different:

The word samskāra means to “complete,” “prepare,” “make over,” “fully form,” and above all, to “purify” (śuddhi). Every samskāra is regarded as a transformative action that “refines” and “purifies” the living body, initiating it into new statuses and relationships by giving it a new birth. A samskāra removes “defects” (doṣa) from the body, such as those inherited “from the seed” (baijika) and “from the womb” (gārbhika), and infuses “qualities” (guna) into it. These goals are accomplished by immersion, aspersion, or sprinkling, by touching various parts of the body, by donning new clothes, by anointing and feeding with special substances, and by the recitation of special words into the ear. Each samskāra in the sequence prepares the person for the next; all of them cumulatively prepare him for the penultimate goal of attaining “heaven” (svarga), “rebirth” (punar-janma) in a higher caste, or becoming a proper “ancestor” (piṭṭ), in preparation for the ultimate goal of “release” (mukti, mokṣa) from the cycle of birth and “life in the world” (samsāra) by the separation of the person’s ātman from his body and its union with brahman.
Bengalis conventionally say that there are ten of these rites (daśa-samśkāras) and that they are to be performed upon a person in a fixed sequence at particular times of life. Observation and analysis reveal that each of the samśkāras initiates a person into a new status and a new set of relationships by means of the symbols of rebirth. At the same time, observation also reveals that very few persons receive ten samśkāras; women and Śūdras—that is to say, the great majority of Bengali Hindus—are considered ineligible for some of these rites, and most Brahman males do not receive a complete sequence. Moreover, certain rites are often done together rather than at discrete stages of life. For example, the famous upanayana, or “initiation into Vedic learning,” in which Brahman boys are said to become “twice born” (dvija) and in which they are first invested with the sacrificial thread, is often done in a severely truncated form as a preliminary rite just before the marriage. Facts such as these may make it appear that we rested entirely too much weight on the rich symbolism of the samśkāras at the expense of contemporary reality. Bengalis who are much better aware of the facts about their contemporary practices than I am have not, however, quit talking about the ten life-cycle rites as if they were matters of some importance. And at least one of them—marriage—remains very nearly universal.

Various explanations are offered for failure to observe rites that are considered important. Poor people blame poverty, and there is no doubt that paying for food and shelter often takes precedence over ceremonial expenses—often, but not always. Western-style education is sometimes blamed for creating an outlook on life that disvalues ritual. But some of the most elaborate ritual observances of all kinds, including the samśkāras, take place in households of very well-educated people. Perhaps the most generally invoked of all explanations for inobservance is a rather vague statement about the condition of the “contemporary age” (vartamāna kāla). On first inspection this looks like a Bengali version of what might be called “explanation by modernization”: as a society becomes more “modern,” people become more enlightened and rational; ceremonies seem increasingly mystical and the importance given to the supernatural declines. The image of “modern society” held by most Bengalis—particularly in rural areas—is, however, quite different from this: the modern age is the Kali yuga, in which morality declines and disorder increases, in which the qualities of persons that are sought to be refined and purified in the samśkāras are inferior. There is, in this explanation, a reference to a distinc­tively Hindu conception of cyclic time, to which I shall return. However, insofar as it implies the existence of a golden age in the past, this form of explanation is familiar from other cultures. And, in this respect, Bengalis show themselves to be no better historians than most of the anthropologists of modernization.
Since practically nothing is known about the rates of performance of the various samskāras today, much less in the past, it does little good to speculate about a decline (or an increase) in them. And since little is known about the popular, nontextual customs associated with—or standing in place of—the samskāras as they were formerly practiced, there is little ground for saying that the forms of the contemporary rites have been degraded or corrupted. The only datum available is the widespread perception that the life-cycle rites are not sufficiently and/or properly performed in the contemporary period. This is significant because it means that the samskāras are not disvalued or considered a quaint archaism; if this were so they would likely be ignored or discussed merely for their curiosity. An additional piece of information is afforded in the very nearly universal unwillingness of Bengalis to neglect the samskāra of marriage, which gives it a place of particular importance in the cycle.

Marriage

Marriage (vivāha) is the final samskāra of a living body; it effects profound transformations of persons by permanently joining together into a single body what were previously two separate bodies. Marriage is said to complete the body of a male and thereby to lift him into the status (īśrama) of householder (grhastha). A man without a wife is not considered capable of making offerings to the gods, so little good can come of his life. The transformation for a woman is even more profound: she is made over from a person of her father’s family and clan, into a person of her husband’s family and clan, and she is thought to become the “half body” of her husband. Such a change requires the transformation of the substances of her body, so that when the marriage is completed—and some say that this is not until the birth of her first son—she is fully a person of her husband’s clan and family, a closer bodily relative to them than to her own father, mother, brothers, and so forth. At the most generally shared level of Bengali Hindu culture, the marital transformation is considered irreversible. However, it is also asymmetrical: a woman cannot be made into the half body of a man for a second time, while a man may take additional wives.

Such far-reaching transformations in persons—altering their natural and moral qualities, their qualifications for action, and their standing in society—are not easily made. The marriage rites that Inden and I describe (pp. 39-51) extend over a minimum of five days, most of which are filled with intensive ritual work. The external and internal bodily parts of the bride and groom, and the gross and subtle substances of which they are made, are operated on with a kind of energetic activity that is difficult for persons from Christian cultures to
imagine. They are purified and protected by bathing and anointment, sprinkled with powerful fluids, and made to fast so that their bodies will be more susceptible to auspicious influences. The father or other male master of the bride (kanyā) should make a selfless "gift of the bride" (kanyā dān) to the groom with no expectation of return. The groom accepts this "complete gift" (sampradāna) by taking the bride's hand, and their garments are tied together, all under the influence of powerful Vedic mantras. The rites of the first day are repeated in synoptic form on the second day so as to ensure that nothing went amiss. The principal rites of the second and subsequent days, done in the groom's house, are longer than those of the first day and heighten the intensity of the ceremony, concentrating even more heavily on forming a perfect bodily union between the bride and groom. I shall not say any more about the ritual details here since we have given an account of them in Kinship in Bengali* Culture. I merely want to emphasize that the Hindu marriage in Bengal involves a great deal of demanding ritual work and engages a great deal of power in order to bring about the indissoluble unity of husband and wife.

The nature of Hindu marriage and the assumptions on which it is based would appear to make divorce impossible if not altogether unthinkable. And yet, in my own fieldwork in rural Bengal, I have encountered divorces and other irregularities in marital unions that would seem to be culturally precluded. Such empirical facts appear to vitiate our analysis and to open us to charges of idealism.

A cultural or symbolic analysis of the content of kinship cannot explain a rate of divorce or a percentage or frequency of anything else. In Kinship in Bengali Culture we attempted to discover the assumptions on which relationships among "one's own people" (atmiya-svajana) are based. On these assumptions is elaborated a consistent and intelligible conceptual universe—a "folk theory" of kinship, if you wish—that we refer to as "the domain of kinship in Bengali culture." The symbols of which this domain is constituted are symbols of solidarity—various complementary forms of love, notions about binding together, and a natural pull or attraction that persons who share the same body feel toward one another. In Bengali culture a phenomenon like divorce cannot be explained by a theory about solidarity, although such a theory may do so elsewhere.

Divorce is a regularly constituted procedure in Bengali Muslim culture, where it is based on Islamic law and on the premise that marriage is a legal or moral relationship. But the Hindu conception of marriage is different; the marriage rites create a moral relationship between bride and groom, but they also equally create a natural relationship in which the bride shares asymmetrically in the physical body of her husband and in which the two of them together are seen as making up a single body. There is no ritual procedure for reversing a trans-
formation brought about by a *saṃskāra*, and the Hindu "code books" (*dharmaśāstra*), extraordinarily detailed on the subject of marriage, are silent on divorce. Divorces are rare among the highest castes of Bengal, and, until the recent rise of civil marriage ceremonies, divorce was almost unknown in the Calcutta middle class, except as a foreign social problem. Divorce seems to many people to be simply impossible for Hindus and to be symptomatic of the poor moral condition of a country where it is commonly practiced.

The Bengali conception of the moral condition of a country is premised on cosmological ideas about time, order, and entropy. Time (*kāla*) is an ever-present dimension of existence; this time is not simply duration but an active, destructive element that increases its activity and decreases order as the universe becomes older. The time in which the universe exists is a single unit of "four ages" (*caturyuga*). Astrologers have calculated the length of this unit as 4,320,000 solar years. Time is the force of entropy, registered in and characterized by the continuous weakening of *dharma* through the ages. *Dharma* is the universal code for conduct that both supports (*dhiīra*) everything and is supported by all actions that are right and orderly. In some texts *dharma* is visualized as a bull. In the first of the four ages, the Kṛta ("four-spot" on a die) or Satya ("good") *yuga*, *dharma* is said to have stood firmly on four legs. When it was deprived of one leg, the Treta ("three-spot") age began; it was only three-fourths the length of the Kṛta age. In the succeeding Dvāpara ("two-spot") *yage*, *dharma* stood on two legs, and the age was two-thirds the duration of its predecessor. On a full-moon day in the month of Māgha (equivalent to February 18, 3102 B.C.E., according to astrological calculation), *dharma* was deprived of yet another leg and the present Kali ("one-spot") *yuga* began; it will endure only half as long as the Dvāpara age. When *dharma* can no longer stand at all, there will be complete disorder, entropy will prevail, and there will be a total dissolution (*pralaya*) of the universe, initiating another cycle of existence in another Kṛta age.

People in rural Bengal frequently refer to the degraded condition of the Kali age in discussing the bad moral condition of their country and themselves. There are numerous folk sayings that characterize the weakened *dharma* of this age and the disorder that prevails everywhere. The *Purāṇas* contain extensive descriptions of the qualities of the ages, with particular attention to the miserable character of the present one. The *Matsya Purāṇa*, in a passage dated by Hazra* to the sixth or seventh century A.D., describes it thus:

During the Kali age, people indulge in Hīṃsa, theft, falsehood, deceit, vanity, etc., and delusion, hypocrisy and vanity overshadow the people. And *Dharma* becomes very weak in the Kali age, and people commit sin in mind, speech, and actions. And works done with the whole heart and body sometimes become accomplished and sometimes not.
The account goes on at great length, but I pause after the sentence last quoted because in it what might appear to be "a Hindu theory of divorce" is implicitly enunciated. "Works done with the whole heart and body sometimes become accomplished and sometimes not" might be understood as saying that in the Kali age you can boil a pot of rice and it may cook properly, but then again, it may not. A work done with the whole heart and body is, of course, something done with a more profound intention than cooking rice; the works referred to here are such things as worshiping the gods and performing the *sāmāskāras.* In the Kali age a ritual may be done with the best of intentions and with all the proper form yet fail to achieve its intended results. This is precisely what is thought to be the case with Hindu marriages that end in divorce in rural Bengal—the rites failed to accomplish the results that were intended, the bride was not effectively united with her husband and transformed into a person of his family and clan, as evidenced in the disunity that led to their separation. Although the language they use to speak about divorce—*biye-kātā* or *vivāhaviccheda*—suggests "cutting the marriage," or "putting it asunder," what is done more nearly resembles annulment than divorce. It is not the termination of a marriage, in fact, but a public statement that it never happened in the first place.

In the disorder of the Kali *yuga,* any cause-and-effect relationship might become disconnected, so, although general blame for the failure of human action is often laid upon the age, explanation for the success of some marriages and not others cannot be found there. In particular, the Kali age cannot explain why the marriages of the highest castes are so regularly accomplished while those of lower castes are not. The most complete marriages reiterate, over a period of several days and in a large variety of ritual words and gestures, the union of bride and groom, so that sheer redundancy may guarantee against ineffective ritual work. If the elaborateness and duration of the rites are important determinants of the success of a marriage, then it is surprising that at least a few upper-caste unions do not fail. The entire ritual extending over five or more days is not often carried out for persons of any caste. It is true that the most complete form of the marriage is rarely done by persons of any but the highest castes and that there is a rough relationship between lower-caste standing and the extent to which ceremonies are abbreviated. But there are more than enough instances of severely shortened marriage rites among the highest castes to expect some instances of divorce if ritual insufficiency is responsible.

The form of marriage involving the unreciprocated *kanyā dān,* in which the bride, ornamented with golden jewelry and accompanied by costly gifts, is freely given by her father to the groom, is generally agreed to be the best. The opposite form, involving *kanyā-paṇa* (bride-price), in which the bride is given in exchange for money, is generally con-
demned and is referred to in the *dharmasāstras* as the āsura, or "anti-gods," rite. In rural Bengal, until the middle of the present century, the practice of giving bride-price was generally followed only among the lower castes, while among the higher castes the practice of giving a dowry (*yautuka*, or *vara-pana*, "groom-price") was—and is—nearly universal. Some changes in these practices have taken place in recent years: almost all the marriages that I studied, among castes above the lowest category, were done with at least the form of the unreciprocated gift of the bride accompanied by a dowry. Some well-educated families of the highest castes have discontinued offering very lavish dowries (usually on grounds that it is undignified to "purchase a good bride-groom" for a daughter whose qualities merit such a husband in their own right). Even these changes, however, have not secured lower-caste marriage against breakup, nor have they undermined the stability of the higher-caste marriages. The unreciprocated gift of the bride does not guarantee the success of marriage among lower castes, and marriage done without the gift of a large dowry does not cause the failure of marriages among the higher castes. Moreover, marriages among the lower castes, where bride-price (which is given credit, in much utilitarian anthropological literature, for securing marital stability) is still usually paid, end in divorce more commonly than those of any other castes.

Most people of all castes give their children the best marriages possible within the limits of their capacities (*yathā-saktī*). There appear to be some intrinsic differences in the capacities of persons of different castes to effect permanent marital unions. To understand what these differences of capacity are thought to be and how they came about, I have examined a Bengali myth relating the origin of the castes.

### The Myth of Veṇa and Prthu

The *Brhaddharma Purāṇa*, although not among the most eminent texts of its class, is an important document in the cultural history of Bengal. It was composed in Bengal, probably in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. At this time Bengal had come under Muslim overlordship and, although there were many small Hindu kingdoms throughout the region, there was no central Hindu kingdom to encompass them. The shape of Hindu society was profoundly affected by this change, and the *Brhaddharma Purāṇa* seems to register this new configuration in a reworking of an ancient narrative about a good and a bad king. This myth observes the convention, still current in Hindu Bengal, of designating all the castes apart from the Brahmanas as the "thirty-six castes," and it explains their origin in a way that sheds light on the differential effectiveness of the *samskāras* and on a good deal more as well. There follows a summary of the myth.
Even as a child, Vena, son of King Anga, was fond of cruel sports. The king was so distressed at reports of his son’s evil conduct that he abandoned his kingdom to dwell in the forest. Without a king, anarchy prevailed, and at last some Brahman sages (muni) were obliged to make Vena king in hopes of restoring order. Vena’s first royal action was a total prohibition of the practice of _vrañasramadharma_, including marriages between persons of the same _varṇa_. The sages approached Vena with a warning about the evils that would befall his kingdom if he encouraged the spread of anti- _dharma_, but he would not accept their advice. He forced Brahman to cohabit with Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra women; Kṣatriyas with Vaiśya and Śūdra women; and Vaiśyas with Śūdra women. He also compelled Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras to cohabit with Brahman women, and Vaiśyas and Śūdras with Kṣatriya women. He forced men sprung from the first set of mixed unions to cohabit with Vaiśya and Śūdra women, producing still further mixed offspring. Then he compelled men born of these further mixed unions to cohabit with women of the first mixed group, as well as with Vaiśya and Śūdra women.

[The mixed castes created by Vena are listed in table 6.1.]

These were declared to be the thirty-six castes with a few more. The first twenty had Śrotātriya (Vedic) Brahman as their priests, while the lowborn castes were declared to be outside of _vrañasramadharma_. The mixed castes originating from the four original _varṇas_ were classed as high mixed castes; those created by men of the high mixed castes on women of other castes were classed as medial mixed castes; those created by men of medial mixed castes on women of other castes were classed as inferior mixed castes.

The Devala (Image-worshiper) who came from Śākadvipa became famous as the Śākadvipī Brahman, from whose union with a Vaiśya woman were born the Gaṇaka (Astronomer) and Vādaka (Instrumental Musician). From Vena’s own body was born the son Mleccha (Non-Hindu), who in turn begot various Mleccha tribes, including the Muslims. When they saw the ruinous conduct of the Mlecchas, the outraged Brahman sages killed Vena by shouting _mantras_ at him. They rubbed together the hands of the dead Vena and produced from them the son Prthu together with his wife.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Bengali Name</th>
<th>Product of</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Mixed Castes</strong> (uttama sakara jāti)**</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Aguri</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>Jālika</td>
<td>Jāli</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuḍava</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Svarnavanik ([B+v]+v) + Vaidya (B+v)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cāṇḍāla</td>
<td>Cāṇḍāl</td>
<td>S + b</td>
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Caste, Marriage, and Divorce in Bengali Culture

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<th>Bengali Name</th>
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<td>Pāṭani ?</td>
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<td>Malla</td>
<td>Mālo ?</td>
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</tr>
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B = Brahman, K = Kṣatriya, V = Vaiṣya, S = Śūdra. Uppercase letters/left-hand elements = males; lowercase letters/right-hand elements = females; + = union.

The order and orthography provided by Hazra, *Studies in the Upapurāṇas*, pp. 437-39, are followed here. I have supplied a currently used Bengali name for each caste that is identifiable with one of those listed in the text. See Majumdar, *History of Bengal*, pp. 567-70, and Raya, *Bāmali hindur varna-bheda*, pp. 89-94.


Banerji says Brahma.

Banerji says Śūdra.

Banerji, *The Brhad-dharma Purāṇa*, p. 208, says Śūdra, which is in agreement with the Vangavāsi ed. and a manuscript source cited by (Hazra, *Studies in the Upapurāṇas*, p. 437n).

Or Tailika according to some sources.

See endnote 11.

The Episode of Pṛthu

The sages made Pṛthu king, and he ruled with ability, but he could not find peace of mind and his subjects began to suffer from lack of food. He called the Brahmans to his court and consulted them about the source of the distress in his kingdom. They told him that the country was suffering because of the mixed castes, who were born of anti-dharma (adharma-sanbhava) at his father’s command, and who were making still further mixed unions. Pṛthu said that he could not bear to kill these poor wretches, although they were a permanent threat to the well-being of his country; he asked the Brahmans what he should do. They advised him to put a stop to any further mixed unions and to divide those already created into distinct castes with fixed occupations, chastising the defiant ones.

Accordingly, Pṛthu summoned the mixed castes before him and asked them why they were so deformed and ill dressed. They replied to the king that they were strong and handsome, with fair complexions and well-formed bodies, and dressed in fine clothing. They accused him of having lost his vision and told him that, since they had been created and cared for by Vena, they should be respected like him; they were in no way inferior to Brahma, Viṣṇu, and the other gods. The Brahmans merely laughed at the vain words of the
mixed castes, but Prthu was angry and ordered them bound hand and foot. They immediately revealed that they were cowards by crying aloud for mercy and promising complete obedience to the king. Then he requested the Brahmans to determine their castes (varna) and occupations (vṛttri).

The Brahmans declared the thirty-six castes (ṣaṭṣramsa jāti) to have been born as Śūdras and asked them what occupations they wished to follow in accordance with their own intrinsic capacities (svaśakti), telling them that they would be named by their occupations. The Kāraṇas came forward first and said to the Brahmans: “We are ignorant, devoid of caste (jāti-hīna), and especially devoid of wisdom. You are all-knowing: make us what we should be.” The Brahmans found them to be of humble conduct and knowledgeable in statecraft, so they classed them as good Śūdras (sat-śūdra), advised them to avoid enviousness (mātsyārya), and to pursue the work of the state and of scribes.

The Ambaśṭhas got their name because they had created mixed castes (Svarṇakāra and Svarṇaṇi) upon (sthā) women of the same caste as their mothers (ambā), for which they were condemned as great sinners. In order to purify them of this sin, they were given the samskāra of second birth (vipra-janma, “Brahman birth”), thus making them almost like Brahmans. The Brahmans told the Ambaśṭhas they would be Vaidyas (physicians), and while they should follow the Śūdra code for conduct (dharma), they should also follow the Vaśya occupation (vṛttri) of making and distributing medicine, and they should study the Ayurveda (Veda of long life) but not other Sanskrit texts.

The Brahmans asked the Ugras (whose name means “violent” or “cruel”), who were physically strong (balavat) and brave, to follow the occupation of Kṣatriyas in warfare. The Māgadhās, who were unwilling to fight because of the necessity of killing (himśā), were asked to be bards (vandi) to Brahmans and Kṣatriyas, to carry messages, and to study the Kṣatrapaśā (Sanskrit works on warfare). The other castes were given the following occupations:

Tantuvāya—making cloth
Vaṇiḥī [ = Gāndhūka]—selling scents
Nāpita—shaving and dressing of hair
Gopā—writing
Karmakāra—working with iron
Taulika—selling areca nuts
Tāmbūli—selling betel leaves
Kumbhakāra—making earthenware
Kaṁsakāra—working with copper, brass, etc.
Śāṅkhika [= Śāṅkhakāra]—making conch-shell ornaments
Dāsa—agriculture
Sūta—helping Dāsas in agriculture
Modaka—making sweets with molasses
Mālākāra—supplying flowers for the worship of deities
Svāmākāra—making gold and silver ornaments
Kānakavanik [= Svāmāvanik]—testing the purity of gold and silver

The Brahmans gave the Sanskrit texts on astronomy and astrology to the Gaṇakas and made them the “Brahmans of the heavenly bodies” (graḥa-viṣṇa). The mixed castes asked the Brahmans for priests to perform their rites. The Brahmans declared that they, the Śrōtriya Brahmans, were the priests of the first twenty castes. The priests of the second twelve castes were “fallen” (patīta) Brahmans, who would be equal to those castes and known as the “friends of Brahmans” (brahma-bandhu). Thus Prthu put an end to the further mixing of castes, and the world obtained propriety and well-being.

Analysis

Even excluding numerous other features that identify the Brhadādharma Purāṇa as a Bengali work, this discussion of the castes leaves no doubt that it is speaking about Bengal. Six centuries later most of the caste names still appear in Bengal—and not elsewhere in India—little modified from those given in the text. The places of the Karṇas (Kāyasthas) and Ambaṭhas (Vaidyas) above the other Śūdras are quite evident in contemporary Bengali society. And the high-ranking Brahmans’ provision of priests for the high Śūdras, while “fallen” Brahmans provide them for others, is a characteristic pattern today. However, there are respects in which this myth is an all-India one, such as the relationship between kings and Brahmans it illustrates.

The kings employ the distinctive royal power of coercive force (danda). The evil Veṇa uses it to compel the unions of persons of different castes, and the good Prthu uses it to chasten the mixed castes and make them obedient to his commands. The Brahman sages possess a power that is different from and superior to the coercive force of the king, and this power is demonstrated in four different forms: (1) the Brahmans control the words and other actions necessary to make or install a king; (2) their words have the power to kill a king; (3) they have the power to produce a king (from the body of a king, not from their own bodies); and (4) they possess the mental power of wisdom, discernment, or discrimination. Even the evil Veṇa does not attempt to use
coercive force on the Brahman sages, and the good Prithu calls on them in situations requiring wisdom or discernment. The mixed castes show themselves to have neither coercive force nor wisdom, thus establishing a tripartite distinction among the king, the Brahmans, and the mixed castes.

The mixed castes are classified twice in the myth, once in each episode. In the episode of Veṇa, the principle on which they are classified is that the quality of the less-mixed castes is superior to the quality of those that are more mixed. Thus, the high mixed castes are produced from a single mixture, the medial ones from a double mixture, and the inferior ones from quadruple and further mixtures. This is an example of what Tambiah describes as a "key" classification, in which the categories are produced by the overlap of classes. However, unlike the examples Tambiah discusses, which are drawn from the early dharmaśastras, this is a very gross key in which only the number of overlapping classes and not the ranked standings of those classes nor the propriety of the unions (anuloma versus pratiloma) represented by their overlaps is made to count. Even unions between males of one varṇa and females of another (e.g., Brahman men and Vaiśya women) do not always produce the same mixed caste, although a thoroughgoing key classification would seem to call for consistency in this respect. Thus, unlike the caste hierarchy described in the Māṇavadharmashastra, the key classification employed in the episode of Veṇa is based only on the "principle of compounded degradation" and generates only three ranks. The fact that there are anuloma (hypergamous) as well as pratiloma (hypogamous) unions is mentioned, but no use is made of this distinction in classifying the castes.

There is considerable redundancy between the first and second episodes of the myth. The occupational names given to the mixed castes by the Brahmans in the second episode have been previously announced in the first. The assignment of the Vedic Brahmans to be priests for the high mixed castes is made in both episodes. And the threefold distinction among the mixed castes, which is pronounced ex cathedra in the episode of Veṇa, is reestablished under Prithu. However, the distinctions that are made in the first episode are carried further and refined in the second, and there is a significant change in the principle on which the classification of castes is based.

In the episode of Prithu, the mixed castes of all categories reveal themselves—in their vainglorious boasting, deluded self-perception, and display of cowardice—to have something in common with one another. What they display overtly in their conduct is seen by the Brahmans to be an outward manifestation of their inborn Śūdra character. But, while they are all Śūdras, the very discerning Brahmans are also able to discover many further distinctions among them, based, it is said, on individual innate capacities (svaśakti). Not only are there caste differ-
ences between the products of different mixtures, but there are even different castes whose varna ancestries are identical.

The Karnaṇas are identified by the humility of their conduct, their knowledge of statecraft, literacy, and, perhaps, a propensity to enviousness as well. The Ambaśthas are identified in quite a different way: because of their sinful character, they are marked by a samskāra of rebirth and thus become somewhat like their twice-born Brahman fathers; at the same time, although they have the dharma of Śūdras, some characteristics of their Vaiśya mothers are also present in them. The Karnaṇas and the Ambaśthas are marked out in the myth in two ways: they stand at the top of the rosters of high mixed castes in both episodes of classification (which otherwise present different orders of castes), and there is a detailed discussion of the qualities only of these two castes. The modern representatives of these castes, the Kāyasthas and Vaidyas, stand at the top of the Śūdra category in Bengali society, in several respects much “closer” to Brahmans than to other Śūdras.

The next pair of castes picked out for special distinction in the myth, the Ugras and the Māgadhas, are identified by still different features. The Ugras, whose fathers were Kṣatriyas and whose name identifies them as “violent,” are suited by their physical strength to that portion of the Kṣatriya occupation involving warfare. The Māgadhas, by contrast, whose mothers were Kṣatriyas but who appear to have inherited a propensity to nonviolence from their Vaiśya fathers, are seen as qualified to be bards who sing the praises of Brahmans and Kṣatriyas, to serve as their messengers, and to engage in the literary study of warfare.

The Brahmans do not go into much detail concerning the distinctive qualities of the remaining high mixed castes, simply identifying the various occupations for which they are qualified. However, they perform two operations that are of interest. The list of high mixed castes given in the first episode is now rearranged so that, with the exception of the closely allied occupations of selling areca nuts and selling betel leaves, mixed castes of common ancestry are now no longer adjacent to one another. It is not said that this order represents any conception of ranked precedence, and I do not think that is what is intended. I think that the significance of the second order of presentation is to say that neither varna ancestry nor the hypergamous or hypogamous direction of the union that produced a particular caste determines its standing in relation to the others. It is their intrinsic qualities or capacities that are important in this respect. Second, in the episode of Prthu, two of the high mixed castes mentioned in the first list—Rājputra and Vārajīvī—were passed over in silence, while two of the medial categories are taken up. Although the reason for the exclusion is unclear, the inclusion of two castes from the medial category sharply distinguishes them from the others of their category. These two—the Svarṇakāra, or Goldsmith, and the Svarṇavanik, or Gold-seller (here
called Kānakavaṇik, which means the same thing, but which is given the occupation of assaying silver and gold)—were earlier identified as the products of the especially sinful connection of Ambaṣṭhas with women of their own mothers' varṇa.

It is not easy to understand why the Svarṇakāra and the Svarṇavaṇik should receive this “promotion” without examining the overall structure of castes created by the second classification. By declaring all of the mixed castes to be Śūdras, the Brahmans eliminated Kṛṣṇaṇiyas and Vaiṣṇyas from the society (and, with a few exceptions of recent origin, it is still a premise of their culture that all Bengalis are either Brahmans or Śūdras). However, the features that they found characteristic of Karṇas and Ambaṣṭhas, and the occupations they assigned to them, are “Brahman-like.” Similarly, the Ugras and the Māgadhikas have some of the features of Kṣatriyas, and they are assigned fragments of the Kṣatriya occupation. In other words, it appears that the myth recreates a classical set of varṇas in ranked order within the Śūdra category. Thus, the third class to be created would be the Vaiṣya, a name that, in ancient India, denoted an “increaser” or “producer from the soil” but which by the thirteenth or fourteenth century in Bengal usually meant a person who brought about increase through trade—a merchant. Most of the high mixed castes remaining after the removal of the first four are groups that get their livelihoods either directly through trade or by selling the specialized products of their occupations. The absence from this list of the castes who make and sell things made of gold, and their presence in the medial category, are striking anomalies that are rectified in part by the designation of their occupations among the high mixed castes, although they are not moved into this category so far as I can tell.

Allowing that there was some ambiguity in the standing of the Svarṇakāra and the Svarṇavaṇik (an ambiguity that persists in contemporary Bengali society), the medial mixed castes appear within this reconstituted caste order as the “Śūdras of the Śūdras.” They are the Takṣa (a kind of carpenter), Rajaka (Washer), Abhira (Cowherd), Tailakāra (Oilpresser), Dīvara (Fisherman), Sauṇḍika (Distiller), Nātha (Actor), Šāvaka (?), Sekhara (?), and Jālika (“Netter,” another kind of fisherman). They receive priestly services from fallen Brahmans whose ranks are the same as theirs. The inferior mixed castes are left outside the four varṇas in the reconstituted system.

The pattern of classification that is employed in the second episode of the myth is not the “key” system based on the overlapping of categories used in the first episode. Rather, the Brahmans identify groups of characteristics shared by the persons of a caste to define that caste. These characteristics seem to be quite heterogeneous—humility, specialized knowledge, receipt of a particular samskāra rite, bodily strength, and so on—and no single one serves alone to distinguish one caste from
another or one caste from all others. This seems to be an ethnoso­
ciological example of what Needham had identified as “polythetic
classification.” A polythetically defined class is one in which all
members have a majority of stated characteristics in common. No sin­
gle one of these characteristics is necessary or sufficient to define the
class. Thus, some members of a polythetically defined class may lack
some of the characteristics in the defining set, and some elements that
are not members of the class may possess some of the defining char­
acteristics, although not a majority of them.

The polythetic approach to classification is, in my experience, a
much more common form of discourse about castes in Bengali society
than is the approach through a key based on the systematic mixing
of categories. When they want to explain why castes stand in a par­
ticular relationship to one another, Bengalis most often adduce an
apparently heterogeneous list of characteristics for one caste to be
compared with a different heterogeneous list relating to another caste.
There are disagreements about the relative importance of various
characteristics and about the valuation of them, which leads to am­
biguity in rankings and to the existence of fairly large groups of castes
of more or less equal rank. Putative origin from a mixing of varnas
may be included in such a list, but it is only one characteristic and not
an essential one. Victorian ethnographers collected many such lists,
which explains the extraordinary length of many of the Tribes and
Castes of compilations. Later analysts experienced much frustration
with these lists because it looked as if we were being asked to compare
mangoes with lemons. It is not my purpose here to explore the con­
sequences of a polythetic classification of the castes of Bengal, al­
though such an exploration appears likely to open a new door to caste
systems (or, rather, reopen an old one). The purpose of analyzing the
myth of the origin of the Bengali castes is to understand why the
samskāra rites—particularly marriage—are less effective for some
castes than for others. What a grasp of the polythetic system of cate­
gorizing castes contributes to this understanding is an orientation to­
ward the large and seemingly heterogeneous lists of “qualities” (often
spoken of as guṇa in Bengal) that may be used to characterize a caste.

Caste and the Samskāra Rites

Among the myths of the origins of things that anthropologists study,
the myth of Veṇa and Prthu ought to hold a place of particular inter­
est. Far from concerning itself with a primal act of incest necessary for
the multiplication of living beings, it deals with numerous latter-day
acts of the opposite type (which David Mandelbaum called “excest”),
pointing to the Hindu consideration of miscegenation as anathema. The
incestlike relationship between the virtuous Prthu and his queen, both
Ralph W. Nicholas

born from the body of Vēṇa, is created by the wise Brahmans. It is the disastrous products of excessively heterogeneous unions that are the source of all the world's evils. In the case of incest, it is a particular sexual union that is abominated. But in the case of the mixed castes, it is a particular kind of birth that is held responsible for the misfortunes of humanity; as the Brahmans told Prthu, the mixed castes were "born of anti-dharma."

Inden and I argued at some length that birth is the central symbolic act of kinship in Bengali culture, and I cannot reproduce all of that argument here. Briefly, a person is said to "receive" or "accept birth" (janma grahaṇa karā) from its parents, who together give it birth (janma dāna karā). Specifically, what a child receives at birth is its body (deha, sarīra), which is thought to be made up of the different but complementary substances of the bodies of its mother and father. Those substances, the semen (ṣukra) of the father and the uterine blood (ārtava) of the mother, respectively, provide the hard but inert structuring parts of the body and the soft but energetic parts. Rather than semen and uterine blood, Bengalis usually refer to the "seed" (bijā) and the "field" (kṣetra); the father plants the seed, which is nourished and grown in the field of the mother. As is the case in agriculture, seed and field must be closely matched to one another. The seed of rainy season rice sown on a low-lying field suitable for winter rice will produce a very poor crop. The qualities of seed and field—of the bodily substances of husband and wife—that match them to one another are not only "natural" qualities, as we think of "nature" in Western cultures, but are at the same time "moral" qualities.

There are many ways of illustrating the postulate of Hindu cultures that both the "natural" and the "moral" qualities of a person—indeed of anything—are coextensive with one another and are intrinsic in the substance of that person or thing. Analysis of the Hindu conception of dharma provides only one such illustration, but it is a particularly important one, since dharma is, among other things, the highest of the goals attainable by a person living a life in this world. Earlier I said that dharma is the universal code for conduct that both supports everything and is supported by all right and orderly action. Each person, each thing, each genus of things, has its own code for conduct (svadharma); its contribution to universal order. The dharma of a rice seed is to sprout a stalk, flower, and bear an ear of grain for the nourishment of gods and humans. In doing so, the rice seed accomplishes its dharma and realizes its own cause for existing. An unplanted seed cannot accomplish its dharma; a seed planted in an improper field produces improper fruit bearing defective seed. It is just the same with human seed and human field. Properly planted in a correctly matched field, a human seed is nurtured into a product that has the same substances and dharma as its parents. But planted in a mismatched field, that seed produces a child
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lacking in the qualities and dharma of either parent. It is this deficiency in the offspring of caste miscegenation that the Brahmans point to when they say that the mixed castes are born of anti-dharma.

All of the samskāra rites are based upon the latent paradigm of birth as it is culturally defined in Bengal. They transform the natural and moral qualities of a person by refining and purifying the substances of which the body is made in an action that is symbolic of rebirth. A samskāra is an antientropic act that “completes” a person by moving that person bodily toward the most organized, self-controlled condition he or she is capable of achieving. However, there are limits on the maximum state of organization and self-control that any human being can attain, and these limits are defined by the qualities of the body that person received at birth. Thus, a person born as a female is considered always to have a more limited capacity for refinement than a male; her interior organization and self-control are inherently of limited perfectibility. She will always lack the qualification to receive a complete set of ten samskaras, and is expected to live her life always under the control of a male. Similarly, a person born as a Śūdra remains intrinsically limited by the natural and moral qualities of his body and, even though a male, is never qualified to receive the upanayana samskāra that is said to give second birth to a Brahman. Moreover, what any of the applicable samskaras can achieve in the purification, refinement, and completion of a body possessing chaotic qualities is severely restricted by its limited inherent capacity. Further ritual work after that potential of perfectibility has been achieved is, at best, wasted and, at worst, productive of results opposite those sought because of its inappropriateness.

In Bengal, marriage is an extremely important samskāra, and all aspects of it, from the selection of the spouse through the completion of the rites and the birth of a child to the new couple, are undertaken with profound seriousness by everyone involved, whether rich or poor and regardless of caste. This seriousness necessarily includes a self-assessment of the capacities of those undertaking the marriage, a making of allowances for what they can expect of themselves, which is usually in fairly close agreement with what others expect of them. Bengalis of all castes with whom I am acquainted seem determined to make the best marriages they can—permanent, productive, harmonious unions of grooms and brides whose qualities are as closely matched as possible—but they recognize the limitations imposed by their own natural and moral qualities. It would call for a great deal of fieldwork of a very delicate kind to assess the differences in the marriages of persons of different castes on all the dimensions of unity Bengalis think important. I have not done such work, and I am probably not capable of it. However, I can comment generally on the achievement of unity in marriage, as indexed in gross terms by the incidence of failure of mar-
riage, among the ranked groups of castes established in the Braddharma Purāṇa as I have come to know representatives of these castes through fieldwork.

In my experience, marriages among Brahmans and "Brahman-like" Śūdras very rarely fail to achieve the permanent union of husband and wife. Among the "Vaiśya-like" Śūdras, including the Goldsmiths and Gold-sellers, marriage failures are slightly more frequent but by no means common. The castes in the category that I have called the "Śūdras of the Śūdras," so far as I know them from my fieldwork, face the prospect of a mismatched bride and groom and of unaccomplished marriages with a kind of resigned disapproval. They try so far as possible to carry out everything correctly, but there is no denying that some men do not succeed in selflessly giving their daughters in marriage or are willing (or able) to pay for a ceremony of only short duration, and that too from a Brahman of inferior quality. Discovering information about unsuccessful marriages among these castes is often not easy; they are shamed by their failures, if for no other reason than that these are demonstrations of their natural and moral inferiority at a time when prospects for increased caste honor are better than ever before.

Shame does not so often seem to me to afflict persons who belong to the castes of the lowest category, those who in the myth are said to be outside varnāśramadharma. Divorce is common among them, and the remarriage of divorced and widowed women is usual. Most of the castes in this category—Leather-workers, Scavengers, Bamboo-workers, Palanquin-bearers, and so on—now have Brahman priests who perform rites only for persons of a single caste. These Brahmans have very ambiguous standing in society at large because they combine qualities of the very highest and very lowest castes. Occasionally sanskāras of the lowest castes are performed by non-Brahman—initiated Vaiśnavas, who are their preceptors. It does not matter much who performs a particular rite, however, because the castes of this category often expect of themselves what others generally expect of them—that they will not gain very much effect from rituals. Their naturally and morally chaotic characters, evident in the loud quarrels, brawling, and drunkenness so common in their neighborhoods, and in the promiscuity and lack of modesty of their women, prevent them from accomplishing much through ritual action, even though they carry it out with the greatest resolution possible for them.

The "facts" about rates of divorce or marital discord do not bear on the cultural explanation of failures of solidarity except as they are "cultural facts," that is, symbols whose meanings are shared by a people. I suspect that if the truth were known about such things, the incidence of unhappy marriages in Bengal would turn out to be pretty much the same in all castes. However, the outcomes of such marriages are different for people of different castes: unhappy or unwanted
wives of the higher castes more often return to their fathers' houses to live out the rest of their lives in quiet misery or, failing that possibility, end their despair through suicide; badly made unions among lower-caste people are more often publicly acknowledged in divorce and remarriage. In many villages scandalous affairs between higher-caste men and lower-caste women are talked about in whispers, while those of lower-caste men and women are made the subjects of noisy village adjudication. An advantage of the polythetic approach to the classification of the castes used by Bengalis is that the same item of conduct can be used to characterize one caste, even though it is not universal among persons of that caste, and ignored when it is displayed by persons of another caste. Thus, statistical rates need never impinge very heavily on meaning.

Divorce is not a cultural fact for Bengali Hindus, even though a great many of them recognize that it takes place among Bengali Muslims, among Americans, and sometimes even among themselves. Divorce for a Hindu couple is not a statement about the dissolution of marriage but rather about the failure of the achievement of the goals of the marriage samskāra. There are several reasons why a samskāra rite might not accomplish its purpose: in the weakened dharma of the Kali age any rite might fail, and the abbreviated rites most people perform may be insufficient to achieve the large transformations they seek. But the principal reason for the failure of marriage rites lies in the bodily qualities of the persons these rites attempt to unite. These qualities are seen by Bengalis as, at the same time, both natural and moral. The natural disorderliness brought about by the mixing of different castes is a "biological" expression of the moral chaos from which they were born. Human bodies born from persons of more mixed caste ancestry are more entropic—have lower potential capacity for the marital transformation—than bodies of persons born of less mixed ancestry. The Bengali expressions biye-kāṭā and vivāha-viccheda, "cutting a marriage" or "putting asunder a marriage," sound as though they mean more or less the same thing as the English term "divorce." But in Bengali Hindu culture, two persons who have been successfully joined together by the samskāra of marriage cannot be put asunder by human agency, for their relationship is not only a legal or moral one—a relationship only in culture—but also a permanent, natural relationship.

NOTES

1. This essay was written in 1978 for presentation at the Tenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in New
Delhi. It was conceived as an appendix to *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, which had then been recently published and which was criticized for ignoring the realities of kinship and marriage in favor of idealized representations. I have conducted many household censuses in Bengali villages and have a lot of data on "divorce rates" and the like. The purpose of the present exercise, obviously, is not to talk about why and how often marriages fail but rather to explore the way people explain such failures at the highest level of generality. Focusing on caste differences, as I have done here, may make some readers want more information about class conflict and low-caste perspectives. I will try to discuss these matters further, but I know enough not to make rash statements about essays that I hope to write. I apologize for making no mention of the important work on kinship and marriage in India published since 1978.


3. Ibid., p. 37.


5. Ibid., p. 235.

6. There are two printed editions of this Purana, according to Hazra (*Studies in the Upapurāṇas* Vol. 2: Śākta and Non-Sectarian Upapurāṇas [Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1963], pp. 396–97), one in Bengali characters published by the Vangavāśi Press and a Devanāgari edition published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain either of these and have relied on Hazra’s detailed summary and the “popularized,” abridged, and expurgated translation by Syama Charan Banerji, *The Bhārata-dharma Purāṇa* (Lucknow: The Indian Commercial Press, 1915).


8. The myth of wicked King Veṣa and his son, the good Prihu, is very ancient. O’Flaherty (*The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], pp. 321–69) summarizes many versions of it and analyses a number of the recurrent symbolic elements in them. The particularly Bengali version constitutes chapters 13 and 14 of the Uttara-khaṇḍa of the Bhṛddharmā Purāṇa. This version is briefly summarized by Inden (*Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], pp. 49–51), who provides an illuminating discussion of some of its implications. The Dacca *History of Bengal* contains further details about the “thirty-six castes” (see R. C. Majumdar, *The History of Bengal*. Vol. 1: *The Hindu Period* [Dacca: University of Dacca, 1943], pp. 567–70), as does the work of Nihararangana Raya (*Bāmāli hindur varṇa-bheda* [Calcutta: Viswa Bharati University, 1945], pp. 89–94). Another Sanskrit text that underwent a post-Islamic rescension in Bengal, the *Brahmāvaivartta Purāṇa*, provides a different narrative of the mixing of castes (Brahmā-khaṇḍa, chapter 10.13–21, pp. 89–137). This is a very popular purāṇa and qualities of the castes mentioned in it are often cited by people today. I have not yet undertaken an analysis of this text.

9. Although mixed, these unions are in the proper direction (*anuloma*, "with the hair"), that is, the man belongs to a higher-ranking group than the woman.
10. These unions are in the improper direction (prati/oma, “against the hair”), that is, the woman belongs to a higher-ranking group than the man. Curiously, it is not said that Vena compelled a Śūdra man to cohabit with a Vaiśya woman.

11. The list of inferior mixed castes given here is by way of example and is not intended to be exhaustive; it concludes with iyādi (“and so forth”).

12. The Cāndala is an anomaly in a class defined in this way. A great deal of smṛti literature, going back to the Maṇavadharmaśāstra 10.12.26 (see Georg Bühler, trans., The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 25 [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964]), declares the Cāndala to be the product of a Śūdra father and a Brahman mother, and to be “that lowest of mortals.” I surmise that the author of the Brhaddharmapurāṇa could not avoid the weight of this tradition even though it created an inconsistency in his system of classification.

13. Whether the etymology is historically accurate or not, the dharmāśāstra interpretation seems obscure. For an ordinary man, union with a woman of the mother’s caste (which would, of course, be the same as the father’s caste) is usual. Why it should acquire this special incestlike onus in the case of the mixing of castes is unclear. There are four further instances of such unions among the “examples” of inferior mixed castes, and these are all identifiable with contemporary Bengali castes of very low rank.


15. Ibid., pp. 195, 204.

16. Rājputra or Rajputs are today considered by Bengalis not to be indigenous to their country. Whether there was a Bengali caste with such a name six centuries ago is difficult to say, but I know of no textual sources that would support such a supposition. Vārjīvis are identified with the contemporary Bārul caste of betel-leaf cultivators (those who get their livelihood [jīvita] under a cover [vāra], namely, the covered garden [baro] that protects the delicate betel vines from the sun). Bāruis are considered high-ranking Śūdras in Bengal today. There is no apparent reason for excluding them from the discussion of occupations in the myth except as an arbitrary means of creating a “slot” for another caste without going beyond the established number of twenty high mixed castes.


18. My own fieldwork had not brought me into contact with Vaiḍyas, although I have a good many acquaintances among persons of this caste in Calcutta and elsewhere. The Aguri caste, who consider themselves the modern representatives of the Ugras and refer to themselves as Ugra Kṣatriyas, are heavily concentrated in Burdwan district and the immediately surrounding areas. There is no caste in contemporary Bengal identifiable with the Māgadha, and the occupation of bard, common in regions of India where a Kṣatriya warrior cultural style is dominant, is not represented among the Bengali Hindu castes.
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