

We are in the process of editing Kedarnath Datta's Autobiography for publication. If you would like to be informed when it becomes available, email us at [Sukulina@vaishnava.com](mailto:Sukulina@vaishnava.com).

## Village Life in Bengal

In those days the village of Ula was situated on the bank of the river Bhagirathi, the most western mouth of the Ganges, about 100 kilometers upstream from Calcutta. Today, the river has shifted a few miles to the west and no longer passes through the village.

The origins of Ula are obscure, but the Reverend James Long, a well-known missionary and senior contemporary of Kedarnath, records a short description of Ula in his essay, "The Banks of the Bhagirathi." He informs us that the village received its name from the goddess Uliā, also known as Ula Caṇḍī, whose festival was held there annually. During the celebration many thousands of people would come to Ula and leave presents for the goddess. Kedarnath tells us that there were nearly 1400 *brāhmaṇa* families and many more *kāyasthas* and *vaidyas* living in Ula during his time. Reverend James Long records one peculiar detail about the village: "As Guptapara (the village across the river from Ula) is noted for its monkeys, Halishar for its drunkards, so is Ula for fools, as one man is said to become a fool every year at the *melā* (festival)." Kedarnath affirms, "Everyone was expert at buffoonery. Many people received a reputation for being crazy. There was Isha *pāgala*, Ganga *pāgala*, Pasha *pāgala*, and Shambu *pāgala*. Many respectable people had these names and would go to local and distant places to collect money by sly and crafty means for the public *pūjās*." The Bengali word *pāgala* means crazy or fool. Here it is used in an affectionate sense.

Unfortunately, the happy village of Ula was devastated by cholera in 1857. Whole families were lost in a matter of days. Today the village is known as Birnagar and is located three rail stops south of Krishnanagar on the Sealdah rail line to Calcutta. When I visited the village in 1987 I was told that Ula remained vacant for almost forty years after the epidemic. What remained of Ula's residents after 1857 did not return until the turn of the century, when the town was renamed Birnagar.

Throughout his autobiography Kedarnath recalls his early childhood in glowing terms. These were predictable and joyful times of festivals, good eating, and wealth. In the evenings he listened to the servants and guards reciting stories of tigers, ghosts, and romance.

But not all of his early life in Ula was happy and peaceful. After age five there were increasing difficulties and uncertainties. The village schools in Ula, like most village schools at the time, were rough places for a young boy. William Adam, a Baptist missionary, describes the typical village school in a report on rural education in Bengal prepared in 1835. He writes:

These schools were housed in shabby straw-built structures or held in open air under shady trees, and run by teachers who were little respected and poorly rewarded. Discipline was enforced in these institutions in a rough and ready manner by the lusty exercise of the cane as well as numerous forms of sadistic infliction.<sup>1</sup>

In Kedarnath's own school the teacher would use the older students to inflict terror on the younger ones. In one incident the teacher forced his students to steal various things from their parents' homes. Haridas, Kedar's younger brother, became so incensed by this constant harassment that he finally plotted to kill his teacher with a machete! Luckily, Kedarnath caught wind of the plot and managed to confiscate the knife, but the incident created such an uproar that the teacher apparently fled from Ula the same day.

Later an English school opened and during lunch Kedarnath would attend the classes. The headmaster was a Frenchman named Dijor Barrette. Kedarnath's interest in learning English endeared him to Monsieur Barrette, who requested his father to allow Kedar to attend the English school. Amongst the *kāyasthas*, attendance at an English school was a social asset, so his father readily agreed. This was Kedarnath's first European contact.

## **The Datta Family**

In 1876 Kedarnath produced a Sanskrit work entitled *Datta-vamśa-mālā*. The *Datta-vamśa-mālā* is a collection of Sanskrit verses giving a genealogical description of the Datta family. Kedarnath claims to be the twenty-fifth descendant from Puruṣottama Datta, who came to Bengal in the twelfth century at the request of King Ādiśura. According to Kedar the Dattas are *kāyastha* descendants of the original families who immigrated to Bengal.

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1. *Report on the State of Education in Bengal*, cited in *The History of Bengal (1757-1950)*, ed. N. K. Sinha, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1967), 273 & 480-1.

Today the *kāyasthas* have about 100 surnames among which Datta, De, Das, and Mitra are prominent.

From the time of Caitanya (1486-1533) the Dattas were mainly Vaiṣṇava. The fifteenth descendant from Puruṣottama Datta was Rāja Kṛṣṇānanda, the father of Narottama Dāsa Ṭhākura and an associate of Nityānanda Prabhu. According to Dinesh Candra Sen, Nityānanda Prabhu used to visit the home of Rāja Kṛṣṇānanda Datta.

The particular branch of Dattas to which Kedarnath belonged was known as the Hathkhola Dattas. They descended from Rāja Kṛṣṇānanda's grandson, Govindasharan Datta, who received a plot of land from the Sultan of Delhi on the banks of the Ganges in West Bengal. On this land Govindasharan established the town of Govindapur, named after himself. When the British wanted to construct a base at Govindapur, Govindasharan and his family moved to Hathkhola in the north. From that time onward the family became known as the Dattas of Hathkhola. Govindapur eventually became Fort William, which later combined with the neighboring villages of Kalighat and Sutanuti to form the site of the present-day city of Calcutta.

Govindasharan's grandson was Ram Chandra Datta, the nineteenth in line from Puruṣottama Datta. Ram Chandra's son was Krishna Chandra whose son was the famous Madan Mohan Datta, a contemporary of Lord Clive. Madan Mohan was a wealthy Vaiṣṇava merchant, ship-owner and zamindar in Calcutta. Madan Mohan Datta's son was Ramtanu Datta whose son was Rajballabh Datta, a well-known Śākta living in Calcutta. Rajballabh's son was Anand Chandra, the father of Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda. Śāktas are followers of Śhakti, the goddess Durgā. In Bengal the most popular form of Durgā is Kālī. During the eighteenth century there was an upsurge of Śhaktism when many prominent zamindars adopted this faith. This accounts for the change from Vaiṣṇavism to Śhaktism in Kedars's paternal line.

Traditionally Kedarnath would have lived in his paternal family's home. However, a few years before Kedarnath was born, his paternal grandfather, Rajballabh Datta, ran into financial problems in Calcutta and so moved to the village of Chutimangal near Cuttack in Orissa. At that time Kedarnath's father, Anand Chandra, moved from Rajballabh's home in Calcutta to the estate of his father-in-law, Ishwar Chandra Mustauphi, in Ula. For this reason Kedarnath grew up in the home of his maternal family, the Mitras, instead of his paternal family, the Dattas.

The role that Anand Chandra played in Kedarnath's life was more the result of his absence than presence. As soon as the family arrived in Ula, Anand Chandra left for Orissa to help Rajballabh regain his property. Anand Chandra was naturally concerned about the future of his family since the financial situation of both families was weakening.

He considered moving back to Calcutta to find work, but dismissed the idea due to the high cost of living there. Finally, Anand Chandra made arrangements to move to Firashdanga, present day Chandernagore, where he had found work managing an estate. As fate would have it, however, Anand Chandra was also stricken with cholera and abruptly passed away.

## **The Mitra Family**

Little is known about the origins of Kedarnath's maternal family, the Mitras, except that his maternal grandfather, Ishwar Chandra Mustauphi, was a descendant of the noble Rameshwar Mitra from Mustauphi. Rameshwar Mitra was a prominent zamindar in the eighteenth century. The Mitras, like the Dattas, are also supposed to be *kāyastha* descendants of the original five families who immigrated to Bengal. Ishwar Chandra Mustauphi, was famous as a prosperous landowner whose liberality was widely known throughout the region. The surname Mustauphi was originally a Muslim title indicating aristocracy. Later it became a surname prevalent in Bengal amongst even wealthy Hindu landowners.

In the mid 1840s increasing debt became a grave threat to the Mustauphi family. They retained extensive land holdings in the Murshidabad district north of Calcutta, but since the Permanent Settlement many of their properties had been lost in government auctions. The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 was passed during the time of Lord Cornwallis (1786–1793) as a measure to stabilize land revenues and improve the condition of the land. The settlement recognized the zamindars as the proprietors of the land so long as they paid the government an annual fee. Unfortunately, the fee was so exorbitantly high that many zamindars were hard pressed to pay the lease. On their default the zamindars' land was auctioned. This resulted in the total ruination of many landowners in Bengal, including the Mustauphi family. Ishwar Chandra had to borrow heavily to maintain his social status in the village, especially during *pūjā* season. He even considered remarriage as a means to improve his situation.

## ***Kāyasthas* in Bengal**

According to legend there were five *kāyasthas* families who immigrated to Bengal at the request of King Ādiśura. They were: Puruṣottama Datta, Makaranda Ghoṣa, Daśaratha

Vasu, Kālidāsa Mitra and Daśaratha Guha. In this regard Professor Thomas J. Hopkins writes:

Tradition says that there were no upper-level orthodox Brahmins in Bengal until the eleventh century A.D. At that time a local king named Ādiśura—himself a member of the Vaidya or physician caste of Sudra origin—became concerned about the ignorance of those who claimed to be Brahmins in his kingdom and imported five learned Brahmin families along with their five Sudra servants from the Hindu kingdom of Kanauj in Aryavarta to the west. These five Brahmin and five Sudra families settled in Bengal and became the progenitors of five Brahmin and five *kāyasthas* clans respectively. To distinguish them from the indigenous Brahmins, the five imported Brahmins and their descendants were classified as *kulīna* (superior) Brahmins and became the families known later by their Anglicized names as the Mukherjis, the Chatterjis, the Bannerjis, the Gangulis, and the Bhattacharjis.

According to the traditional accounts, it was expected that all of the imported Sudras and their *kāyasthas* descendants would also be given *kulīna* status. As it turned out, however, only four of the imported Sudras were designated as *kulīnas* and only three of the four remained in Bengal proper; these three produced the three main *kulīna kāyasthas* families of Bengal, the Mitras, the Boses, and the Ghoses, while the fourth produced the *kulīna kāyasthas* family of the Guhas in eastern Bengal. The fifth Sudra, the account tells us, was presented to King Ādiśura for approval like the others, but refused to accept the role of a servant appropriate to a Sudra; instead, he claimed that he was superior even to the Brahmins. Having failed to meet the standard of humility expected of a *kulīna*, he was denied that status and became instead the progenitor of the highest non-*kulīna kāyasthas* family, the Dattas.<sup>2</sup>

There is another version of this story found in Sanskrit recorded by Devīvara, one of the genealogists of the Rādhī *brāhmaṇas*. Devīvara's version of the story is similar to Professor Hopkin's version except that he makes no mention of the downgraded status of the Dattas.<sup>3</sup>

Nripendra Dutt argues that the *kāyasthas* of Bengal originated from Bengal's *kṣatriya* class that was dismantled by a combination of *brāhmaṇa* dominance and Muslim conquest.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Thomas J. Hopkins, "The Social and Religious Background for the Transmission of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to the West". A paper presented in New Vrindavan, West Virginia (1985) and published in: David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn, eds., *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 36.

3. R. B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 56-58.

4. Nripendra Kumar Dutt, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, Vol. II (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1965), 64.

## **History of Calcutta**

The history of Calcutta as a British settlement dates from the 1690 establishment of a trading post there by Job Charnock, an agent of the English East India Company. The site was carefully selected, being protected by the Hooghly River on the west, a creek to the north, and by salt lakes about two and a half miles to the east. Moreover, before the coming of the English, three local villages—Sutanati, Kālikata, and Gobindapore, which were later to become parts of Calcutta—had been chosen as places to settle by Indian merchants who had migrated from the silted-up port of Satgaon, farther upstream.

By 1696, when a rebellion broke out in the nearby district of Murdwan, the Mughal provincial administration had become friendly to the growing settlement. The servants of the company, who asked for permission to fortify their trading post, or factory, were given permission in general terms to defend themselves. The rebels were easily crushed by the Mughal government, but the settlers' defensive structure of brick and mud remained and in 1700 came to be known as Fort William. In 1698 the English obtained letters patent that granted them the privilege of purchasing the zamindari right (the right of revenue collection; in effect, the ownership) of the three villages.

In 1756 the Nawab's successor, Siraj-ud-Dawlah, captured the fort and sacked the town. Calcutta was recaptured in January 1757 by Robert Clive, one of the founders of British power in India, and by the British admiral Charles Watson. The Nawab was defeated shortly afterward at Plassey (June 1757), after which British rule in Bengal was assured. Gobindapore was cleared of its forests, and the new Fort William was built on its present site, overlooking the Hooghly River at Calcutta, where it became the symbol of British military power. Fort William was later combined with the neighboring villages of Kalighat and Sutanuti to form the site of the present-day city of Calcutta. The name "Calcutta" is thought to be an anglicization of the Bengali village of Kalighat. Calcutta did not become the capital of British India until 1772, when the first governor-general, Warren Hastings, transferred all of the important offices to Calcutta from Murshidabad, the provincial Mughal capital. In 1773 Bombay and Madras became subordinate to the government at Fort William.

## **The *Bhadraloka***

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The class of Bengali elite that interacted with the ruling British. They were a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment. The term *bhadraloka* is commonly used in Bengali literature to refer to any educated and respectable gentleman mainly of the three Bengali upper castes (*brāhmaṇas*, *kāyasthas* and *vaidyas*). In a more technical sense the word refers to the *abhijāta bhadraloka* and the *gṛhastha bhadraloka*. The *abhijāta bhadraloka* became permanent residents of Calcutta in the second half of the eighteenth century. Some rapidly acquired fortunes by working as junior partners with the British. The *gṛhastha bhadraloka* were the next layer of middle-income Bengalis that included small landholders, government employees, members of the professions, teachers, and journalists. Kedarnath and most of his colleagues were members of this latter class. For more information see Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

### **Ram Mohun and the Brahma Samaj**

Ram Mohun (1772–833) was an important religious, social, and educational reformer who challenged traditional Hindu culture and indicated the lines of progress for Indian society under British rule. He is sometimes called the father of modern India. In August 1828 Roy formed the Brahma Samaj (q.v.; Society of Brahma), a Hindu reformist sect that utilized Unitarian and other liberal Christian elements in its beliefs. The Brahma Samaj was to play an important part, later in the century, as a Hindu movement of reform. In 1829 Roy journeyed to England as the unofficial representative of the titular king of Delhi. The king of Delhi granted him the title raja, though it was unrecognized by the British. Roy was well received in England, especially by Unitarians there and by King William IV. Roy died of a fever while in the care of Unitarian friends at Bristol, England, where he was buried. Roy's importance in modern Indian history rests partly upon the broad scope of his social vision and the striking modernity of his thought. He was a tireless social reformer, yet he also revived interest in the ethical principles of the Vedanta school as a counterpoise to the Western assault on Indian culture. In his textbooks and treatises he contributed to the popularization of the Bengali language, while at the same time he was the first Indian to apply to the Indian environment the fundamental social and political ideas of the French and American revolutions.

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