

**OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**8**

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HINDU IDENTITY  
IN MEDIEVAL WESTERN BENGAL ?  
THE ROLE OF POPULAR CULTS**

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# THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HINDU IDENTITY IN MEDIEVAL WESTERN BENGAL? THE ROLE OF POPULAR CULTS

Jawhar Sircar

## Abstract

The paper is basically a study of the Dharma cult, one of the major schools of the genre of Mangal Kavyas, and its absorption in the 'greater tradition' of Hinduism in medieval western Bengal from a historical perspective. Though it began from an anthropological field study of Jamalpur in Bardhaman district of West Bengal in the 1990s and later covered 271 other sites of the cult, the author expanded his theme to analyze the complex terrain of a longer period of social history of the western Rarh region of the undivided Bengal. The paper tries to build a meta-narrative of Hindu identity in western Bengal and to modify a few existing ones for this specific region. While largely accepting the celebrated Eaton thesis for the Islamization of eastern Bengal from the sixteenth century onwards, it raises significant questions about its relevance for the Western part of Bengal. The paper identifies the overwhelming importance of the three phenomena for the latter region, namely, the impact of the Chaitanya movement, the social significance of the Mangal Kavya campaigns in medieval Bengal (for the acceptance of the popular deities) and a widespread peasantization of the various low antyaja castes of the Rarh region from the sixteenth down to the twentieth centuries. The larger impact of the phenomena on religion and demography has also been analyzed over the timespan of half a millennium, while the peculiarities of the emergence of the Hindu agricultural castes in the western Bengal have been highlighted. The author ends with the suggestion of a modification of the processual aspects of Srinivas' Sanskritization thesis : the study of a step-by-step mechanism of the absorption of Dharma cult in Rarh, as evidenced in the heightened activity from 'above', i.e., of the considerable number of poor Brahmans of the region. The paper introduces an economic dimension by arguing that impoverished pujaris entered, for livelihood reasons, the religion of the peripheral but populous antyaja and agricultural castes - bringing them thereby into the fold of a greater Hindu identity.