CHAPTER FIVE

Socio-Cultural Practices of
the Educated Bengali Protestant Christians

The emerging process of cultural distinctiveness of the Bengali Christians was very much palpable in the social practices related to birth, marriage, death, style of attire, taste for music and the cuisine of the educated and bhadralok Bengali Christians residing in the city, who imbibed the colonisers’ culture through everyday interaction with them. This chapter looks into the gradual development of the distinguishing features that were so typically Bengali Christian in sartorial, musical and gastronomical matters and were yet neither typically Bengali nor typically British in style.

In terms of religious persuasion the educated Bengali Christians, the upper layer of the newly emerging religious community, had a commonality with the coloniser which the rest of the Bengali Christian population did not. However the educated, affluent Hindus in Bengal did connect with the colonial rulers in economic and political matters. These were the young and highly articulate members of the emerging Bengali intelligentsia like the ambitious Young Bengal and other emerging new groups of professionals and also the traditional mercantile groups.

The urban Bengali Christians’ proximity to the colonisers would automatically raise the question whether similarity with the rulers mediated the process of educated Bengali Christian identity in such a way as to make it significantly culturally different from other contemporary Bengali identities. This leads to the question whether these educated Bengali Christians were unwittingly

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1 Bhadralok: ‘The basic and most rigidly maintained distinction between bhadra and abhdra, between high and low, the respectable and the others, was the bhadralok’s abstention from manual labour and their belief in the inferiority of manual occupation.’ (Broomfield, op. cit., p. 6.) Broomfield further says that, as many of the bhadralok were drawn from the three upper castes of Bengali Hindu society Brahm, Baidya and Kayastha the term was often used as a synonym for high caste in the late nineteenth century. In Bengal those from the high castes did not till the soil and even if they were engaged in agriculture they would employ people to work in their fields as manual labour was considered degrading.
caught in a cultural dilemma and how well did they deal with it? At the very outset it is important to remember that not all educated Bengali Christians were from the originally *bhadralok* class as many of them attained this position through education which brought with it wealth and a better standard of living. In other words besides caste, socio economic conditions could also be a consideration in the Bengali Christian community when categorizing people as *bhadralok*.

**Section I: The Making of the Educated Bengali Christians’ Social Identity**

When looking at the development of *educated* Bengali Christian social identity we are mainly observing a section of the urban middle class Bengalis. What adds to the complications in the process of analysis of this particular section of people is the fact that they were not a single, homogenous group, because with education and grooming by the Christian missionaries several from the lower strata of society, both rural and urban, had enhanced their means of income and thus moved up the social ladder into the upper segments. But the complexity of the relationships within the multilayered educated Bengali Christian society is rather difficult to recognize from external appearances for the social power struggle was extremely subtle. These Bengalis had carried the baggage of caste differences and social stratification with them into their new lives as Christian converts, as already mentioned in an earlier chapter. What defined and differentiated the educated Bengali Christians from the rest of the members of the Indian Christian community and the other Hindu or Muslim educated Bengalis is difficult to indicate, as Oddie has rightly commented (with reference to almost all Indian Christians, as they maintained contact with their pre-conversion associates), that these converts did not completely reject the old identity for a new one but they struck a balance between the new and the old, ‘they were rather like people who keep “dual citizenship” where the experience, memories and culture of the old world continue to permeate and flavour the new and where the old concerns and values are not always left behind.”\(^2\)

This is very true of the converts of South India where the number of conversions was far greater than in any other part of India. But quite unlike the situation there, in Bengal, caste relationships and class stratifications within the community of converts was not overt. Caste discrimination is strongest among Christians in South India even today, and comparatively weakly present among urban Protestant congregations in North India. This is due to the fact that in South India whole castes converted *en masse* to the religion, leaving members of different castes to compete in ways parallel to Hindus of the Indian caste system.\(^3\) Even today there are separate seats, separate communion cups, burial grounds, and churches for members of the lower castes,\(^4\) especially in the Roman Catholic Church. The Syrian Christians in Kerala date back to the sixth century and ‘they were accorded a high status in Hindu society, married within their own community, kept aloof from low castes and never tried to convert them’\(^5\) Ballhatche also says that caste had never been a problem for these Syrian Christians as they insisted on deference from low castes. For them it was a social matter, with no religious implications. There were some missionaries who also believed that it was merely a social matter and people from the high castes would never convert unless they could retain their caste status.

Caste was a long-standing problem for the Jesuits in the Madurai mission. Roberto Nobili, who settled there in 1606, lived like a Brahman, observed caste strictly, and converted some Brahmans.....The Jesuits provided separate entrances for low castes and little walls to separate them from high castes in their churches, and separate burial grounds.\(^6\)

In Bengal, the picture was rather different as most of the converts both Catholic and Protestant were from the lower castes and one of the many reasons for conversion was escape from caste atrocities. As the main thrust of

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\(^3\) S. M. Michael, *Untouchable Dalits in Modern India* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 17

\(^4\) Sundararaj Manickam, *Studies in Missionary History: Reflections on a Culture-Contact* (Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1988), also John Webster, *The Christian Dalits: A History* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1994). There is a discussion on this issue in both these books.


\(^6\)Ibid., p. 7
this thesis is on the educated Bengali Protestant Christians we will first look at their social outlook. The Protestant converts from higher castes, comparatively very few in numbers, associated with people from their castes and class but there was no apparent segregation in social gatherings or even in church. However, caste had its role in matters of matrimonial alliance as upper caste Bengali Christians would seldom negotiate a marital relationship with someone from a lower caste. This was an unwritten ‘law’ that was consciously obeyed though of course sometimes concessions were made for socio economic reasons.

Section II: Rites and Practices Related to Birth, Marriage and Death

The birth of a child calls for celebration in every community with this are associated some religious rituals. A month after the child was born it was taken to church by its parents for thanksgiving as the process of childbirth and the following month could often prove fatal for the mother or the baby. The Hindus would probably call this shuchi hoa (a puja for cleansing oneself) but the Christians looked at it as an occasion for thanksgiving. Both communities offered prayers to the creator but looked at the practice from two different points of view. Some months later, the first rice eating ceremony of the baby is very important for the people of Bengal. It involves certain rituals and puja. The Bengali Christians also had and still have this practice but sans the puja and it was never a grand occasion for community celebration for them. Here again we must remember that it is not a general practice.

However the christening ceremony or baptism (an important ceremony for all Christians even today) of the child, when it is offered by the parents to the church for the ritual of cleansing it of its original sin, and the parents promise to bring it up as a Christian is an important ceremony and it was carefully observed by all the Christians both rural and urban, and it was followed by celebration. This was when the child was given a name officially announced by the priest and it would be recorded in the church Register of members and their children. A certificate would be given by the church acknowledging the baptism and accepting the child as a Christian. This was as per the rules laid
down by the European churches, but not by the Baptists as they believed in adult baptism. However they also maintained records of their baptized members. Thus the church maintained and still maintains a record of the number of people within its command. This pattern of maintaining records about members of a community, meeting church members at Sunday service, and also during social outreach work or in educational institutions run by them and in Sunday schools gave organisational strength to each of the missions and because of this the missionaries could control and mobilise their converts more easily.

Most marital arbitrations began through the church members as this was a common source for ready availability of information about prospective brides and grooms. The community being small and due to caste and other considerations the choice being limited the church circle was a large enough source for information on match-making. Arranged marriages were common, just as in the Hindu community, and the rituals related to the occasion were a large mixture of Western and local Bengali traditions. Almost all of those customs related to marriage are practiced even today.

The wedding ceremony conducted by the parish priest, was always held in the church, during the day – generally in the late afternoon, and the vows were exchanged in the presence of the clergyman besides relatives and friends. This was followed by a wedding feast which all the guests attended. This cycle of practices continue even today. Every marriage under the Indian Christian Marriage Act, 1872, is to be solemnized between 6a.m. to 7p.m. Hence wedding ceremonies are held in the late afternoon so that soon after the service people can gather for a heavy meal in the form of a dinner as is customary in the Hindu community. In the remote villages of course people preferred an earlier part of the day for the wedding service in order to be home by sunset.

The following are some recollections/observations regarding traditional wedding rites, practices and celebrations in various Bengali Christian homes in the late nineteenth and the early to mid-twentieth century’s gathered through interviews of members (senior citizens, with a few exceptions) of the educated
Bengali Christian community of today. \(^7\) Questions were asked keeping the Bengali Hindu marriage social rituals in mind as almost all the interviewees are of Hindu ancestry.

All of them spoke about church weddings and the rites and rituals that are associated with such occasions. The main ceremony being conducted very obviously according to church specific rules, but the social customs preceding and following it sometimes differed from family to family. Differences in social customs have also been there even in the mainstream Hindu community as there have always been differences in customs between the people of East Bengal and those of West Bengal. In the case of Bengali Christians the socio economic background along with the degree of westernization makes all the difference in the various ritualistic practices related to marriage.

Marriage negotiations always took place between families of equal rank either in caste or in social status. The first step taken after a marriage was arranged was the engagement or betrothal ceremony – the paraphernalia surrounding this very religious ceremony was a carryover of the Hindu custom of *ashirvad*. \(^8\) Since marriage is a union of two families there was great celebration in anticipation of the union. The Bengali Christian engagement ceremony was/is a religious function conducted by a priest, though not in the church. In a Christian engagement service the couple exchange vows and rings in the presence of close relatives and friends and thus two consenting individuals are officially affianced with the blessings of the church and their near and dear ones. It is an official announcement of the approaching final bonding through marriage. Native social customs are not forgotten and prior to

\(^7\) The following is a motley crowd of respondents. Each one has been very briefly introduced in the List of Interviewees. My account of all the social practices of the Bengali Christians is based on my conversation with all these ladies and gentlemen who very kindly cooperated and eagerly responded to my queries.


\(^8\) Some religious rituals performed to confirm betrothal of two individuals.
the formal engagement ceremony the groom’s side sends clothes, gifts and sometimes even jewellery along with fruits and sweets to the home of the prospective bride and her family and she appears for the ceremony adorned in these clothes and jewellery. The bride is attired in a sari and the groom is either in a dhoti and kurta or in a formal suit. This function was/is followed by a period of courtship during which the couple and the two concerned families get to know each other better, while wedding preparations are on and the date of the final union is decided upon. A period of courtship suggests a very progressive community with this idea obviously borrowed from the western world. But again this was modified to suit the conservative bend of mind of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengalis. The couple never met in isolation, they were always accompanied by siblings or friends close or distant.

Once the wedding date was/is fixed banns⁹ were/are published, in the respective churches of the bride and the groom. These announcements also create an opportunity for the rest of the community to register their objection to the match, if any. These were the rules laid down by the church. But the other social rituals observed began with aiburobhat,¹⁰ followed by gaye halud or gatro haridra,¹¹ with the turmeric for the ritual coming from the groom’s residence along with clothes, jewellery, sweets and savouries. This was followed by the hurry to prepare for the church wedding in the late afternoon.

The Bengali Christian wedding was/is a strange mixture of western traditions introduced by the European missionaries along with those Bengali traditions which the converts thought appropriate to their new religion. They had just shunned idolatory so any custom that would suggest heathenism or the venerating of anyone else besides the Christian God was systematically

⁹ Public announcement made on three successive Sundays, in a parish church, regarding an intended marriage, giving an opportunity for objections if any.
¹⁰ A grand ‘bachelor’ meal fed to the prospective bride/groom rotationally by his/her relatives and parents – a typically Bengali Hindu tradition.
¹¹ The ceremonial smearing of turmeric paste on the bride by married women. This turmeric is sent from the groom’s house for the bride, along with sundry other gifts like jewellery, clothes, cosmetics and sweets.

Quite interestingly this turmeric smearing ceremony of the bride and the groom has been given official recognition by the church as the Sebak Samiti of Thakurpukur has included in the list of Biblical verses for different occasions, in its hymn book Krishtiyo Sebak Sangeet, edited by Sebak Tapas Adhikari, Krishtiyo Sebak Samiti Thakurpukur, 1999, p. 169, a list of verses for gatro haridra (turmeric ceremony)/bagdan (betrothal ceremony) – i.e. those verse may be recited/read out during either the turmeric ceremony or the engagement ceremony.
rejected. There was no hard and fast rule regarding the tradition of the purely native rituals. Some performed more of them while others carried out few. So it was quite a lot of rituals executed out of sheer choice indicating that the Bengali Christian had no intention of rejecting his ‘old identity’, ‘old concerns’ and ‘old values’.

The rituals and practices related to the wedding ceremony, that are held outside the church are a carryover of the Hindu ceremonies, though not religious but more to do with social practices and beliefs. These practices however reflect patriarchy in its true colours, which implies that although religious beliefs had changed and Christian women had come to the forefront of society through education and exposure to new ideas, the old social pattern had moved into the new community without any change.

Women observe certain norms in Hindu Bengali society which are specifically for women only. It is expected that they wear sindoor (vermilion) in the parting of the hair, wear shakha (conch shell bangles), on both hands pola (red coral bangles) on both hands and loha (an iron bangle, sometimes coated with gold) on the left hand etc. These are special symbols of marriage carried by the women so that society understands that the woman is already married. But one does not find that the men have to follow any such norm to prove that they are already married. Symbols are powerful expressions of human culture which in turn is transformed with time, space and need. Culture develops, grows or is imbibed through direct instruction or through observation, imitation as well as adaptation. Continuous socialization makes the individual internalize the thoughts and most often people accept the rituals without reasoning.

Those who use these symbols of marriage believe that wearing them could ward off bad omens, in other words the use of these symbols appear to have turned into superstitions which the Christian women also believed in. The loha is the most popular symbol of marriage which a majority of them used as it was given to them by their mother-in-law as in the Hindu custom and like in the Hindu tradition when the husband passed away the wife ceased to wear all these symbols. The Bengali Christian wife also had the wedding ring – the more westernised lady had a plain gold band as is worn in the west, with hers and her spouse’s name and their date of marriage inscribed on the inside – or
some other design for the wedding ring which her husband had given her at the
time of marriage in the church. She was never to take it off even if her husband
passed away. But in this hybridization of cultural practices the Bengali
Christian widow dressed in a plain white sari exactly like a Bengali Hindu
widow sans jewellery or any other adornment. There were others who wore the
plain white sari after their husband’s death but also wore some light jewellery
including the wedding ring. But the *loha* was taken off very consistently by all
widows who had worn them when their husbands were alive. There was no
fixed rule to be followed by these people so each family decided on its own set
of rules depending perhaps on how much it had been influenced by western
culture. There were some who did not believe in wearing the *shakha, pola,
loha* or *sindoor* as in the family of the brothers Samuel Proshanto Kumar Bose
and Peter Ronodhir Bose, \(^{12}\) or that of Satish Chandra Goswami. \(^{13}\) On the other
hand Bishop Gorai \(^{14}\) had an interesting anecdote to narrate about the practice
of wearing *sindoor*, and some people’s reaction to it. When he took charge as
the Secretary of the Bible Society of India in Calcutta \(^{15}\) in the sixties, many
objected to his wife using *sindoor*, after all she was the spouse of an important
official of the church! An indication of the confusion whether native social
practices have religious roots, and are therefore associated with heathenism, or
are adopted due to socio-cultural reasons or are they there out of mere habit.
Cultural traditions were a mixed and fluid set of practices to be accepted and
rejected according to the individual or family’s outlook which again was

\(^{12}\) Refer to the List of Interviewees. They hail from an extremely westernized Bengali
Christian Serampore family.  
\(^{13}\) Refer to the List of Interviewees. He is of Bengali parentage, but his mother was brought up
in Lahore and his father served in the Indian Air Force. The family is westernized and has a
cosmopolitan outlook.  
\(^{14}\) Refer to the List of Interviewees.  
\(^{15}\) The Bible Society of India (BSI), was established on February 21, 1811 in Calcutta, but now
has its headquarters in Bangalore. It is responsible for translation, publication, distribution and
sale of the Bible in India. The Bible Society movement was officially launched on March 7,
1804 in London, with the purpose of making the Bible available to whoever wanted it. Today
there are respective national Bible Societies operating in each country. The BSI is a non-
denominational body which belongs to all Christians. The Central Council of the BSI is the
decision-making body which comprises of representatives from various church denominations
from all over the country.
tempered by personal/family specific background and socio-cultural influences.  

The Dutt family of Rambagan, known for its learning and westernised ideas and also its contribution to Indian writing in English in the nineteenth century especially the Dutt sisters Aru and Toru, the first Indian women to write poetry in English, and to be educated in France and England, was an interesting mixture of western and Bengali cultures. In the context of the above-mentioned marriage symbols it is noteworthy that the married ladies of this household wore *shakha, loha* and *sindoor*.  

When asked about their belief in superstitions none of my interviewees thought of the use of the marriage symbols, which had been so thoroughly internalized that they had become a part of the community’s culture. For those who used them it was related to the ultimate welfare and long life of the spouse on whom most women were dependent even if they themselves were into a profession. Patriarchy was an unquestioned way of life for the Bengali Christian women just as patriarchy was also a way of life in all the other dominant religious communities in Bengal. Perhaps this was the educated Bengali Christian women’s unconscious manner of fitting into the surrounding social milieu without disturbing the existing social environment.  

As Christianity had been brought to the Bengalis by European missionaries the cultural and religious activities associated with the church, in which these Christian converts participated, were organized in the European manner, at least in the urban areas. So for their church wedding the bride and the groom would dress in the European style. The groom most often wore a suit but sometimes he did opt for the indigenous *dhoti* and *kurta*. The bride normally

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16 Even in the sixties and seventies I can recall my grandaunt Angelina Arun Probha Bose (nee Ghosh): Born: 1915; Died: 1996, a product of St. John’s Diocesan Collegiate School, in south Calcutta, fluent in English, smart and accomplished, applying *sindoor* in the parting of her hair. If my mother or any other married lady happened to be present then she would touch their *loha* with a speck of that powder, a custom observed by Hindu wives wishing each other long married lives. On the other hand her own sister-in-law my paternal grandmother Naba Nalini Ghosh (nee Basu): Born: 1905; Died : 1977, also a product of St. John’s Diocesan Collegiate School, fluent in English, smart and accomplished, applied *sindoor* in her youth but as I saw her, in her middle age she had given it up though she wore the *loha*. Whereas my maternal grandmother, Jyotsna Shephalika Mitter (nee Sinha): Born: 1918; Died : 1997 who was a Matriculate from Christ Church School, in north Calcutta, could just about manage a conversation in English, was shy and diffident, wore *sindoor* and *loha* but never practiced any of the rituals that Hindu women associated with them.  

17 Kalyan Chunder Dutt, refer to the List of Interviewees.
dressed in an expensive white silk sari which was most often a Benarasi sari and some light gold jewellery. She carried a bouquet of flowers and she covered her head with a white veil. The wedding procession that walked down the aisle in the church would also comprise of the bride’s maids and the flower girls and a tiny page boy. Besides the exchange of the marriage vows the couple would also exchange rings. The wedding service could be conducted in English or in Bengali. After the wedding ceremony in the church the procession would come out and the newly married couple would cut the wedding cake (of course this was optional) in the presence of all the guests. The bride and groom would then leave for a drive the destination being a photographer’s studio – in Calcutta it would often be the renowned studio Bourne and Shepherd in the Esplanade area. After this they would proceed to the bride’s residence where a handful of close relatives would be waiting to blow the conch shell and witness the groom applying sindoor in the bride’s parting as is typical of a Bengali Hindu marriage. The bride quickly changed into a bright sari to look like a typically Bengali bride bedecked with jewellery, a quick exchange of garlands between the bride and the groom and the just married couple would be whisked back to the wedding venue. The European part of the wedding ceremony was over the Bengali chapter had begun. This typically was the manner in which the affluent Bengali Christians especially from the Anglican Churches went about their wedding ceremony in two distinct phases, very obviously trying to do justice to both the cultures to which they now owed allegiance. No one considered them incongruous; the process of acculturation had been so effortless and easy. Bishop Gorai mentioned that there was a difference in the practice of traditional wedding customs between the rural and the urban Bengali Christians The European style was followed by the urban Bengali Christians, most certainly by the Anglicans. The rural people were generally poor so they just bought a set of new clothes and wore them to church for their wedding ceremony. The other paraphernalia were missing but they certainly gathered for a wedding feast. The marriage ceremony was conducted by the priest in the presence of other villagers – relatives and friends. But all Christian weddings – both rural and urban – were registered in the church, immediately after the religious ceremony.
On the following day the new bride went to the groom’s house to join his family, some rituals were also held there, of them the most important one being that of the serving of rice by the bride to all the guests present. Thus the traditional Bengali rituals associated with marriage were retained with a few modifications, as these people had to remember not to bring in anything that might be considered as heathenism. Therefore the constant conflict between past social practices which the incumbents were used to and the new perspectives that had come with the new religion was something these people had internalised.

On speaking to my interviewees of the early and mid twentieth century i realised that most Christian women from the educated class were married after a minimum education up to the Matriculation Examination, i.e. they were around the age of 15-16 years old, well above the age of consent laid down by the government which was 12 years only. Many of them were graduates or more at the time of marriage.

Another important aspect of life is its inevitable end that is death, and after conversion the Indian Christians had to follow the rites and rituals laid down by the church relating to death and mourning. Instead of going to the burning ghat they had to bury their dead and even regarding this matter the imperial authorities created problems for the native Christians. The point of contention was the place where the native Christians were to be buried. According to a Government Order issued by the Home Department Nos. 6----370-82 dated November 9, 1876, paragraph 5, ‘It should be understood that the Government cannot provide cemeteries at the public expense for Native Christian communities.’ Babu Vishnu Churn Chatterjee sent a response to this Government Order addressed to the Secretary to the Government of India, Financial Department dated May 15, 1877. He explained that the dead bodies of the native Christians had been buried in public cemeteries in the past but as a result of this rule there would be no place where the native Christians would be able to bury their dead. He further explained that as the majority of the native Christians were financially weak they would not be able to purchase

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18 Babu Vishnu Churn Chatterjee’s letter, dated May 15, 1877, in ‘Cemeteries and Burials’, Box 1, File No. 1, Bishops’ College Archives, Calcutta.
their own plot of land for burial nor could they contribute in a group to buy a whole burial ground. He concludes with the following words that show the humiliating position of the Christian converts in their relation to the European Christian community.

I think I have stated enough to show with what hardship the rule referred to will operate, and I would fain believe that the Government will yet reconsider the rule specially, as it is not possible that any European or Eurasian Christian, would object to be buried in the same cemetery with Native Christians who would rise with him to meet their common Lord and Saviour.\(^{19}\)

The problem was later solved and in the Christian Burial Grounds in Calcutta today one can see that a specific area in the cemetery was demarcated for the burial of Indian Christians far removed from the European and Eurasian plots. Although the battle for survival in the new community was difficult as the perpetrators of the change in the identity of these Christian converts never accepted them as their equals, despite the fact that they shared the same religious beliefs, the native Christians observed all the rites of the new religion they had embraced. But even in the matter of mourning and last rites for the dead a certain amount of hybridization is observed as all the individuals I met spoke about a memorial service and days of mourning, but the number of days were not fixed for some it stretched over a period of forty days whereas others observed a seven day mourning period. But a prayer service for the soul of the departed family member at the end of seven days was strictly observed by all. The colours of mourning were both black and white though white was the more popular colour as it is a throwback of the familiar Hindu practice. There is no elaborate ceremony in memory of the dead but prayers are said at the memorial service at the end of the seven days and friends and family share some of their memories with the congregation that gathers. It is a solemn and formal service held most often in the church. No meal is served at the end of the service as is done in the Hindu custom but there are light refreshments. Again borrowing from the Hindu practice, family members who had observed

\(^{19}\) Ibid. Concluding paragraph of the same letter.
abstinence by partaking vegetarian food revert to their normal non-vegetarian diet after the prayer service. Those who observe a forty day period of mourning continue their life of abstinence till the period of mourning is over with another round of prayers. The church has a fixed set of rules for the funeral service held in the cemetery which is conducted by the departed individual’s parish priest. But the rituals differ from one denomination to the other, though the basic practice of burial of the dead is observed.

Christians do have the option of cremating the dead and a defunct crematorium still exists behind the Lower Circular Road Cemetery in Calcutta. The lane on which it stands was earlier known as Crematorium Street. The ashes of the dead were buried in an urn, after cremation. But with the crematorium becoming non-functional this practice is no longer observed though it is very much within the Christian norm.

Section III: Celebration of Festivals, Sartorial Style, Musical Inclination etc.

The main festivals of the Christians are Easter and Christmas and these are celebrated with great fanfare by them everywhere. In the city people attend service in the church for Easter. But as Rev. Gorai and Rev. Dipankar Haldar20 have mentioned the Christian cemetery played and still has an important role in the celebration of Easter in the rural areas as an early morning procession would walk round the village and finally assemble in the grave yard where an Easter service would be held before the people dispersed. However in the city people went to church to attend Easter service. Christmas is associated with the Christmas tree and Santa Claus and plenty of gifts, and of course church service to celebrate the birth of Christ. The tree, the gifts and Santa are very much borrowings from the western world taught by the missionaries through

20Refer to the List of Interviewees. Dipankar Haldar is rather young compared to the other interviewees, and does not belong to the timeframe of the respondents interviewed for this project, but as he had wonderful insights and observations regarding this matter, with reference to his mother and other elderly people in his family I considered them valuable and relevant for my work.
the church, the Sunday schools\(^{21}\) and even in their educational institutions. But as Bishop Gorai and Rev. Ali and Rev. Haldar have explained the villagers had their own way of celebrating Christmas by singing *kirtans*, moving from house to house, enacting scenes from the Bible or plays on biblical themes, in some public place in the village locally scripted for the people of the village and instead of Christmas cake the people would have a local home grown folk sweet *pithe*. Incidentally Christmas is celebrated in December, in winter, which coincides with the season of fresh palm jaggery or *gur* as it is locally known. December in the English calendar coincides with the month of *Poush* in the Bengali calendar. The end of this Bengali month is a time for celebration known as *poush shankranti*, when people take a dip in the river Ganga and the making and consuming of *pithe* using the seasonal *gur* is almost mandatory. So for the rural Bengali Christian the making of *pithe* for Christmas was a part of a tradition associated with that season and that month. Christmas day in the village was a day for putting on new clothes (for those who could afford it), and eating rice and a meat curry.

During Christmas a *mela* (fair) is held in Chapra and it is said that this tradition of a *mela* during Christmas began in Ballabhpur which is now in Bangladesh. *Kirtan* competitions were held and participants would assemble in Ballabhpur from distant villages. The first *mela* in Ballabhpur was held in 1891. This *mela* had other attractions too like display of agricultural products and domestic animals and also handicrafts. The people of Chapra used to attend the *mela* in Ballabhpur; today they have one of their own.\(^{22}\)

Congregational singing is a part of religious worship and music was an important component of the evangelical form of worship and it was a significant constituent of the Protestant ministry in India. At the common man’s level the missionaries encouraged the composition of hymns in Bengali sung to indigenous styles of music like *kirtan, tappa, kawali* etc. on the other

\(^{21}\)These were meant for the Christian children for Bible classes and other related activities to keep them occupied with thoughts and deeds that were not evil, as they do not attend regular school on Sundays.  
hand some of the hymns were also translations of English lyrics sung in their original melody. Certain concepts related to the kirtan particularly inspired the Christian composers of Bengali church songs to adapt kirtan melodies to their songs. In the medieval Bhakti tradition Chaitanyadev’s concept of bhakti, self-realisation comes through the blossoming of the mind, rituals are unnecessary and the meaning of religious scriptures is not important. ‘One’s heart will be automatically filled with love if one sings in praise of God. In this form of worship there is no place for caste, rank or status.’23 Chaitanya’s religion had wide appeal among the lower classes of people in the villages. The missionaries approached the uncomplicated rural people with Bible stories and songs, and familiar styles of music like the kirtan adapted to express Christian concepts would certainly draw their attention. Also Christianity spoke about a class and caste free society like Chaitanya and just as the Vaishnava kirtans sing the story of the love of the divine beings Radha and Krishna Christian hymns also sing of God’s love for mankind and they are sung in praise of God. Besides, the Christian hymns are sung in unison by all those who are present at the place of worship just like a samkirtan24 during which everyone can join in and sing and dance in a state of devotional ecstasy. These are unostentatious methods of worship that the people are familiar with therefore Christian worship through kirtans would have an immediate appeal to the village folk inspiring them with the same kind of devotion that the Vaishnava kirtans did.

In many of the westernized Bengali Christian homes of Calcutta the women cultivated a taste for western music especially introduced to them through church music. As mentioned in an earlier chapter the first generation of bhadralok Christians had to struggle in the initial years in order to financially establish them as they lost all support from their own family after conversion to Christianity. So the luxuries of a western lifestyle could be indulged in at a much later stage. By and large it was the second and third generation of these families who could indulge in such pleasures which were also indicative of their growing affluence. Women were given music lessons at home by

24 Samkirtan: A song in praise of God or a deity.
professional teachers and even art teachers were employed for painting lessons. Ira Ghosh (nee Mitter) spoke about such lessons being given to her paternal aunts in the nineteen twenties in their Ahiripukur home in Calcutta. She had heard about this from her aunts Lillian Probas Nalini Nandi (nee Mitter) and Irene Suhashini Jivanandam (nee Mitter) and also from her father, Basil Sushil Kumar Mitter. Rabindranath Tagore’s music was very popular in these Calcutta households. He had borrowed popular western melodies (e.g. Auld Lang Sine), for his lyrics and these songs could be sung to the accompaniment of the piano or the organ or even the violin. The harmonium had become a popular instrument for accompaniment to these songs. The piano and the organ became a part of the drawing room set up of the well to do Calcutta bhadralok in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s.

The case of Toru Dutt and her sister Aru was different as they were brought up more like European rather than typically Indian girls. However they were Bengali Christians and alongside their native way of life they also imbibed western culture, especially during their stay abroad. In her letters to her cousins Arun Chunder Dutt and Omesh Chunder Dutt Toru mentions the music lessons that she and her sister Aru received in London.

‘We are getting on capitally with Mr. Pauer. I am now learning with him Schmetterlinge or Butterflies. It is a very pretty and easy piece. Aru is learning a sonata by Mozart, edited and revised by Mr. Pauer.

Mrs. Macfarren, our singing governess... has a beautiful contralto voice. We are now learning to sing a duet ‘Hame never cam He’, a very pretty and touching Scotch song. Aru is learning for a solo, ‘Sunbeams of Summer’, and I am learning ‘My soul to God, my heart to thee’, a very pretty French song..."

On 11 December 1870 Toru wrote to her cousin Omesh Chunder Dutt,

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25 Refer to the List of Interviewees.
I am learning with Mr. Pauer a piece called *Myrthenbluten* No.III. It is very pretty, soft and melancholy. We are learning to sing the duet ‘I know a Bank’ with Mrs. Macfarren...\(^{28}\)

Living in Europe the Dutt sisters would naturally cultivate a taste for western music; they represent the exceptionally affluent westernised Bengali Christians’ taste for music, at one end of the scale. Back home the Bengali Christians in the rural areas were still singing their *kirtan, bhajan, etc.* only their lyrics expressed Christian sentiments. They also sang translations of English hymns in their original English melody accompanied by the harmonium and the *tabla* or *khol* or *kartal.* A single glance through a hymn book\(^{29}\) of the Bengali church service would disclose songs sung to typically Indian melodies and beats like the *bhatiali, jhaptal, ektal, kirtananga, bhairabi ektala, artheka, thumri, kawali,* etc. and jostling side by side with these hymns are translated English hymns like the well known *Abide with me, Near the Cross, Holy, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty* or even *O God our help in ages past* etc.

**Section IV: Dining with the Educated Bengali Christian**

In a letter to her cousin Omesh Chunder Dutt, written from London in November 1870, Toru Dutt in the process of giving sundry details of activities in their household and expressing her thoughts on political developments in the world mentions that their cook Isabella has been taught how to prepare Indian dishes.

We have taught Isabella to cook some Indian dishes, and on our table, with mutton cutlets and roly-poly, comes up hot *Kuchoree* or cabbage *Churchuree* or *ambole* of eels. Isn’t this nice?\(^{30}\)

The Toru who longed to be back in England while in her ancestral Garden House in Calcutta, (as expressed in her letters to her friend Miss Martin),

\(^{28}\)Ibid. p.221  
\(^{29}\)All information on Bengali church hymns is taken from *Christiya Dharmageet,* compiled by Sourindra Mohan Bandyopadhyay, Probodh Kumar Adhikari and Santosh Kumar Biswas (The Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society, 1970). This is a collection of Bengali church hymns.  
\(^{30}\)Ibid. Letter to Omesh Chunder Dutt, from London, 3November, 1870, (pp.219-220), p.220
spoke French and English fluently and wrote in these languages but had the taste buds of a true Bengali. Despite the acquired taste for western classical music, western literature and western style of dressing she relished the home-grown simple fare of an ordinary Bengali menu. The impact of western influence was intellectual, in all else the Bengali Christian remained rooted to the soil of Bengal whether in India or abroad. Food habits form at an early age and despite newly acquired tastes the longing for dishes savoured in childhood is universal.

The spread on Toru Dutt’s dinner table is representative of the kind of meals the affluent urban Bengali Christians enjoyed. It also portrays the hybrid culture of these city native Christians. The Europeans had influenced the lifestyle of those Bengali Christians who could afford to imitate the coloniser’s standard of living, and eating habits had changed. Like the Dutt family of Rambagan other Calcutta Bengali Christians had a gastronomically mixed taste hence although midday meals were usually typically Bengali the dinner veered towards continental menus. In the course of their interviews a number of the interviewees have mentioned this. Breakfast was continental, lunch typically Bengali, dinner was a mixture of Indian and continental.

Here let us take a look at particular families in Calcutta and their dining habits as described by their members. At the very outset they made it very clear that beef was a ‘no no’ in these households. Again a throwback of their Hindu past as beef is a forbidden meat according to Hinduism. Rev. K.M. Banerjea and his band of Young Bengal friends indulged in partaking of this forbidden meat in order to shock the rest of society into accepting the change in social outlook and the defiance of traditional beliefs. But the next generation of people had moved out of those socially turbulent times and these Bengali Christians had carved an identity that had worked out a balance of characteristics and beliefs from the old and the new – i.e. between tradition and the new found religion.

Deepika Mookerji, Ira Ghosh, Kalyan Chunder Dutt, Sumita Sircar31, etc. mentioned that they were used to a continental breakfast. They spoke of

31 Refer to the List of Interviewees.
porcelain crockery being used for this morning meal but in the afternoon bell metal (*kansa*) utensils were used to serve the typically Bengali fare. Dinner was a mixture of native and continental food – it could begin with a soup (optional) to be followed by *roti/rice* and a vegetable dish and also a meat or fish dish cooked in the continental or Indian style and could conclude with a dessert either Indian or continental. This could be eaten out of porcelain crockery or bell metal utensils. This is how it was in the childhood days of the interviewees – all of them considered here being senior citizens.

One interesting point brought up by K.C. Dutt is the eating style of the Dutts of Rambagan. Known for their interest in English literature which implies English culture these members of a family that owned a solicitor’s firm and boasted of English poets and authors had their meals squatting on the floor. They were liberal as the women in the family dined together with the men but the children would eat before the adults. All meals were taken sitting on the floor and out of *kansa* utensils and some of the men would even use spoon and fork to eat, all the while squatting on the floor. Eggs were served for breakfast in egg cups and they would be consumed on the floor too. However incongruous this might seem to us it did not strike them as unusual or strange. Quite an interesting mix of the east and the west!

The Dutts were also interested in going on *shikars* (hunting) so they owned a number of guns which would be on display on one of the walls of their drawing room in the sprawling mansion in Rambagan. They had a large collection of books and their family library was pretty well known amongst close friends and books would be lent out in the same way as one would borrow books from a public library. A *dufturry* (record keeper) would come in once every week to dust and maintain the books and their records.

The main drawing room of the house was for visitors and it had Victorian/Georgian style furniture and small chandeliers. The decor of the house spoke of good taste and wealth but not opulence. It so turns out that every aspect of the life of the members of the Dutt family shows clearly how much the lives of the educated Bengali Christians had become a mixture of
two cultures. Although not in every way some of these characteristics also applied to the other educated Bengali Christian families.

One really strange and rather queer activity that some of the Dutt adults indulged in were sessions of *séance*, certainly an offshoot of the influence of European culture. They had Victorian tripod tables which would be used for the purpose and certain members of the family would function as mediums through whom the visiting spirit would speak. These sessions of interaction with the dead apparently attracted quite a few seriously enthusiastic visitors to the Dutt household. This was certainly an elitist pastime which only those who were familiar with western culture would think of indulging in.

**Section V: Attire**

The attire of an individual goes a long way in defining his personality. Hence special importance is being given to this aspect of the Bengali Christian converts of the colonial period and in this matter alongside the narration of the interviewees a number of photographs have been consulted for the final comments.

As narrated earlier in this chapter the women were very much in the clutches of a traditional patriarchy hence their attire was no different from that of the other Bengali Hindu women of their status. However dress reform had occurred in Bengal. As we are aware that with the missionaries entering the *zenanas* women became conscious of the style of wearing blouses under the single piece of cloth they used to drape their body. Dress reform was required

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32 *Séance*: An attempt to communicate with spirits in order to receive messages from spirits of the dead. A séance usually takes place in darkness or subdued light because strong light is said to hinder communication. It generally involves six or eight persons, who normally form a circle and hold hands. Believers assert that communication has been established when a disembodied voice is heard, or a voice speaks through the medium, or a ghostly apparition appears... Many of the seemingly mysterious phenomena manifested during séances are affected by the medium to validate his or her claim to supernatural powers. That some spiritualists actually possess the ability to communicate with spirits, however, remains open to debate. *(www.britannica.com – downloaded on 23. 8.’13).*

It was in the 1800’s that séance became popular in the West and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s spiritualism – a belief that spirits of the dead can communicate with the living – was all the rage. There was no trendier activity than holding a séance led by a medium, who would mediate between the living and the dead.

Kalyan Chunder Dutt mentioned that this was an interesting pastime for the adults in the Dutt household during some of their leisure hours and that he has also participated in some of those sessions even in the 1950’s.
if the women were to step out of the andarmahal. Jnanadanandini Debi came in contact with Parsi women in Bombay and she had designed her style on the Parsi gara but had introduced the blouse instead of the sudreh, and the chemise and the jacket were important components of this new style.\textsuperscript{33} Urban Bengali Christian women often dressed in this style. The style of the English dress also influenced the draping of the sari and women would wear pumps on their feet and drape the sari showing the shoes like a gown would normally do. The style of wearing a brooch was common among the Brahmoo women and among the westernized Hindu Bengali women and also among the Bengali Christian women in the urban areas. However the head was covered by many of these Christian women using the one end of the sari that went over the left shoulder and several clips were used to keep it in place on the head. The Bengali Christian women also adapted their hair styles according to the hair style of the European women as did many upper class westernised Hindu and Brahmoo women. But within the house most of them draped the sari in the plain Bengali style without pleats. Another rule generally observed by the women was sobriety in dress as they grew older. That is, they would not wear bright colours after the children were married or the ladies themselves were middle aged. Most often such ladies switched over to draping white saris with coloured borders.

Like other Bengali Hindu widows of the time, the Bengali Christian widows were expected to abide by certain social norms similar to that of the Hindus. These were unwritten rules that were practiced by the Christian women according to what was customary in Hindu society probably because that is what they were familiar with and Bengali patriarchy demanded it of the widowed women. Such women would adorn white borderless saris known as thaan or wear a white dhoti as dhotis had extremely thin borders or some of them would even wear narrow bordered white saris. The blouse would invariably be white. Some went without any jewellery whereas others would go for very light inconspicuous ornaments. The whole idea was to look unattractive to the opposite sex as the lady’s husband had passed away and she no longer had any reason to indulge in any kind of feminine vanity. Of course

\textsuperscript{33} Malavika Karlekar, (ed.), \textit{Visualizing Indian Women ,1875-1957} (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2
colours like red or yellow were taboo on the sari borders. The irony lay in the fact that the same women got married in a white sari – white being the colour of western bridal finery – changed into a brightly coloured sari immediately after the solemn church ceremony to dress like a typical Bengali Hindu bride, then switched to white saris in the Hindu style once they lost their husband. This certainly was a confused state of affairs but the people themselves never thought it was so!

Christianity had come to Bengal through European missionaries therefore religious rituals practiced in the church by Bengali converts were performed in the western style, according to the instructions of the missionaries. However traditional native social customs that they were familiar with lived with them in their new community. Once the wedding ceremony moved out of the religious domain of the church into the social space of the individuals all community issues related to marriage and married life became traditional Bengali.

The Bengali Christian men continued their traditional style of dressing but like other educated westernized urban Indians – they took to the wearing of suits, though within the confines of their home they would prefer to wear a dhoti and a short kurta. Short jackets were also a fashion for the men and the women. Sometimes the men also carried a walking stick or cane as was the fashion in Victorian England. Some of them also carried snuff boxes in imitation of the British gentlemen. British influence on sartorial style was very evident in the attire of the urban population in general.

Section VI: Case Study: Some Rules formulated by the Missionaries for the rural converts of Nadia

The educated Bengali Christians in Calcutta had carved out a life of their own adopting the new ideas that the European missionaries had introduced through their educational institutions and also through their instructions in church and Sunday schools. How did they deal with the rural converts? How much were they able to control their social lives? The following is a glimpse of the way of life adopted by a particular group of rural converts whom the missionaries tried to mould entirely according to their own outlook on life.
As this rural Bengali Christian community grew in size new rules had to be defined to keep the people together and also to guide them to observe a socially admissible Christian code of conduct. A set of rules and regulations were evolved for the people of Ballabhpur Nadia Christian Church (under the CMS) in January 1904, to be conformed to in their day to day lives. These rules have taken care of four aspects of their lives – social life as Christians, debts, marriage, and protection of young widows. The rules give a clear picture of the important social aspects in the lives of these rural people and the reforms that were introduced by the missionaries gave these converts a new way of life bound by definite guidelines within the control of their Christian mission. Simultaneously a set of rules common to this particular group also had a unifying effect keeping them together as a close-knit community.

The rules belonged to four different categories, the first being, Rules Related to Social Life, which informs the people that they will remain a rural community working collectively with the rural Church Committee, with the pastor or any other individual of equal rank at the helm. As a community they will be vigilant about their members being God-fearing, of good moral character, strict observers of the Sabbath and receivers of the Holy Communion. Aware of the overbearing attitude of the upper caste and upper class people, measures were taken to see that they do not in any way command control over these marginalised villagers. Therefore another rule said that no undeserving person should become the leader of their community by virtue of his superior family lineage. The next few clauses under this category of rules clearly expose the friction that existed between the Protestants and the Catholics. If any man from the Protestant community desired to marry a Catholic maiden he need not receive any instructions from the Catholics, and none of their girls will ever...

34 The Catholics had a significant presence in Ballabhpur and in several other places in Nadia district. The Protestant and Catholic mission stations were sometimes located in the same place – Krishnagar, Ballabhpur, Ratanpur, etc. As the relationship between the two denominations was not cordial they were constantly competing with each other regarding the number of converts they could get. Those natives who moved over from either of the Christian denominations (Catholic or Protestant) to the other, along with Hindus and Muslims who embraced Christianity, were all known as ‘converts’. Strict rules were formulated by the CMS missionaries (who were really German missionaries of the Lutheran mission in Germany working for the CMS in Nadia) in order to exercise sufficient control over the converts who could quietly move over to the Catholic church if not kept under the strict surveillance of the Protestant mission.

35 Instructions: Counselling of the betrothed couple by Church ministers before they begin their life together as husband and wife having exchanged their vows in the Church.
study in Catholic institutions. In this situation, after marriage the Catholic girl would be joining a Protestant family and participating in their forms of worship hence there was no necessity for the Protestant groom to attend pre nuptial counselling sessions with the Catholic priests. No Catholic would be permitted to join them in any community feast without the permission of the local Church Committee. This implies that the Catholics who would attend the wedding function held for the Protestant-Catholic marriage suggested above would have to have the permission of the local Church Committee to do so. As Christians of one denomination sometimes crossed over to the other side, most often for material gain, it was decided that if any of their Church members strays to the Catholic Church he will have to suffer disciplinary action on his return and to prevent any interaction between the Catholics and the Protestants no one from the Protestant community was permitted to participate in any social function organised by the Catholics.

A second set of rules dealt with Debts as this was a recurring problem among the poor Christians of Ballabhpur and the missionaries considered it their duty to alleviate the social burden of their converts. Incurring debts for organising wedding feasts, the purchase of jewellery and hiring musicians for wedding celebrations was not permitted by their Community. It is harmful to incur debts due to splurging and living beyond one’s means. However, if a debt is incurred due to unavoidable reasons it should be as small as possible and it should be cleared at the earliest opportunity. It is advisable to invest in a savings bank whilst solvent. Church rules were meant to give them a stable and comfortable life; this was the means to keep them within the mission’s fold.

Marriage was the third important aspect in the lives of the people which needed to be given a definite set of rules in order to stabilize the Protestant converts of Ballabhpur. Hence the rules related to Marriage were clearly defined. None of the wedding related activities like marriage negotiations, fixing wedding dates and the bringing home of the newlywed bride should take place on a Sunday. The following rules regarding marriage were to be observed by all:
Banns will not be published unless the bride is at least 13 years of age and the groom is at least 18 years of age.

No wedding ceremony can be held without the publication of the Banns through 3 Sundays. A fee has to be paid before the publication of the first Banns.

A wedding date can be arrived at only in consultation with the Pastor.

The prospective bride and groom must be present in the Church when the Banns are published.

Dowry was an extremely destructive social evil that created several other social problems. Hence accepting dowry was strictly prohibited, even as contributions towards wedding expenses. The custom of giving new clothes to guests was to be replaced by the practice of offering aid to them according to one’s means. All wedding related superstitions hitherto believed in had to be immediately renounced.

A fourth set of rules were related to the *Professions of Young Widows*. Problems of widows were also considered in the larger Hindu community. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, enacted in response to the campaign of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, provided legal safeguards against loss of certain forms of inheritance for a remarrying Hindu widow, though, under the Act, the widow forsook any inheritance due her from her deceased husband. In this set of rules the church has thought in terms of employment of the poor widows in Ballabhpur, keeping in mind their safety and security as young widows would be vulnerable. Young widows were prohibited from working as ayahs or midwives. However, a widow could earn a living if she was granted permission by the local Church Committee on assessment of the nature of the work, the place of work and the widow’s age and character. If adjudged suitable, the Chairman would issue her a letter of recommendation. All these above mentioned rules were given a stamp of authenticity as the Secretary Gopal Chandra Biswas and the Chairman, E.T. Butler are signatories to this document.

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36 1904 Krishtabder 13, 14, 15, January tarikher Ballabhpur Mission e Nadia Krishtiyo Mondali somuher reeti neeti sambandhiyo Alochona Sabhar shikrito niyom. ’Rules formulated at the Meeting of the Nadia Krishtiyo Mondali at Ballabhpur Mission on 13th, 14th and 15th January, 1904.’ A two page printed leaflet in Bengali, Bishop’s College Archives, Calcutta, (Nadia Box No: 2). Translation mine.
The nature of the above rules indicates the simple, rustic mind set and lifestyle of the people in Ballabhpur. These were the low caste Christians who had converted to Christianity for material gains hence there was a lurking fear that they could change allegiance easily if offered more material growth by the Catholics. Problems of this nature were never thought of among the upper caste educated Christians in Calcutta who would only betray their frivolous nature if they flitted from one Christian denomination to another for material reasons.

The Christian converts in the villages of Nadia were mainly from the *kartabhaja*[^37] and the *sahebdhani*[^38] communities that comprised of poor people of the lowest castes and ranks of society, both uneducated and helpless in Hindu and in Muslim society.

[^37]: Kartabhaja: This sect arose in the mid eighteenth century and the founder was Aulchand of Nadia, Ghoshpara. It is commonly regarded as an offshoot of the Bengali Vaishnava movement. Aulchand’s most important disciple was Ram Saran Pal, a Sadgop (milkman) by caste but cultivator by profession. In the early nineteen century the community included Brahmans and some well placed Western-educated members of the burgeoning middle class. However, most of the members of this sect were low caste, poor and illiterate people involved in agriculture related occupations. It was Ram Saran’s educated and extremely capable son Dulalchand who helped to spread the movement through a network of disciples and the hierarchy was as follows, in order of ascendance, ‘barati’, ‘mahashay’ and finally ‘karta’, who was the leader. They had an extremely simple system of worship and believed in the prime importance of ‘man’ and ‘truth’ in this life. The Christian movement spread among the kartabhajas in the Krishnagar district in the 1830’s and 1840’s. For more details see Geoffrey A, Oddie, ‘Old wine in new Bottles? Kartabhaja (Vaishnava) converts to Evangelical Christianity in Bengal, 1835-1845’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XXXII No: 3, July – September, 1995, pp. 327-43 and Lewis Prabhat Sarkar., *Bangadeshe Krishtodharma o Krishtiyo Sampraday (1573-1960)*, Vol. I (Calcutta, Prabhu Jishu Girja, 2002), pp. 116-18.

[^38]: Sahebdhani: This sect was established by Mulichand Pal in a village called Shaligram-Dogachhia on the west bank of the river Jellinghy, 16 miles north of Krishnagar town. He too was a Sadgop (milkman) by caste. His second son Charan Pal was responsible for consolidating the sect and shifting their headquarters to village Britthuda, near Krishnagar. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century to this day the Sahebdhani sect organizes its annual celebrations and mela there. Both Hindus and Muslims participate in these celebrations. This is one of the many examples of folk culture where we witness the smudging of boundaries between the Hindus and Muslims irrespective of caste and religious beliefs. This kind of bonhomie between people of different religions is visible among the subalterns of Bengal society who believe in the worship of the Creator without paying heed to social differences. The beliefs of the Sahebdhani sect is really a combination of veneration of Allah on the one hand and Radha on the other. It is a religion derived from a combination of Hinduism and Islam. Hindus and Muslims worship together in this community, they do not believe in caste differences, they dine together and Sahebdhanis believe in burial of the dead. The influence of Sufism is clearly visible among these people. From the mid nineteenth century onwards several members of this sect converted to Christianity under the influence of the Christian missionaries. (Lewis Prabhat Sarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-21).
The most important social event in the lives of the people was marriage and this involved a large number of superstitions and traditional beliefs – here, they were given a completely novel system bereft of superfluous customs. Debts, a common problem with the rural Bengali trying to live up to social demands, was something the converts would be free from due to the discipline of their new community. Young widows were rather insecure in the prevailing social conditions – they would be comfortable and cared for in the new community. Thus a well planned framework had been laid out within which these people would have to exist – all actions being controlled by the rules put down by the church. Thus the imperialist white missionaries had this particular region (however small) within their control.

The power struggle between the Protestant missionaries and the Roman Catholic clergy was felt everywhere in Bengal as they had to continuously divide control over the various territories. Orphans were the most vulnerable in this constant internal strife between the two denominations as being helpless and unprotected they were the easiest to seize and be in command of. A report on the success of the Bengal Catholic Orphanage very clearly exposes this discord between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant missions.

The fact is, that in India, as in Ireland, Protestantism would have been practically unknown among the humble classes of Christians, if it were not for the artful and bigoted policy of those wolves in sheep’s clothing, who profited of the hunger and the poverty of the poor Catholic Orphans, to seduce them into Schools and into Institutions erected apparently for charitable purposes, but in reality, in order to make them exchange the heavenly inheritance of the true faith for a miserable mess of pottage.39

The quarrel between the Catholics and the Protestants for seizing turf was an ongoing one and sometimes the clever converts would manage to benefit from either or by switching allegiance at opportune moments. The battle between these denominations was palpable both in Calcutta and in the rural areas. A well known tussle between the Catholics and the Protestants in Calcutta is the quarrel over La Martiniere. An announcement in The Bengal Catholic Herald dated October 30, 1847 states that after a thorough study of the system adopted

39 The Bengal Catholic Herald, No. 9, Vol. V (Saturday, August, 26, 1843, Calcutta), p. 115
in La Martiniere College regarding religious education, ‘the Holy See\(^{40}\), through his Eminence the Cardinal Prefect\(^{41}\) of the Sacred Congregation, expressly condemned that system, and strictly charged the Vicar Apostolic\(^{42}\) of Bengal to detach himself, his clergy and his flock wholly, from all connection with that Seminary.’\(^{43}\) That General Martine the founder who was a Roman Catholic had desired all children of Christians irrespective of denomination should benefit from his handsome donation of thirteen lakhs of rupees was known to all the people, but because the Protestants were managing the school and the religious instructions included in the curriculum were according to the Protestant church, the teachers were all Protestant the education imparted in La Martiniere was declared unsuitable for Catholics by the Catholic church leaders.\(^{44}\) There would be a subtle difference in religious and moral values between the Protestant children and the Catholic children it is assumed.

Another interesting cultural development among the Bengali Christians both Catholic and Protestant was in the 24 Parganas where both the Catholics and the Protestants participated in ‘Namer Gan’\(^{45}\), a sort of religious concert where two singers, accompanied by a drummer and cymbalist, sang songs with religious, biblical themes. These performances were generally held on special occasions as during Christmas or Thanksgiving Day for the harvest or even on the occasion of the fulfilment of a manot\(^{46}\) of an individual etc. The place of performance could be the church or chapel or courtyard of the chapel, or of a private house decorated for the purpose with statues and religious pictures. The function usually opened with the blessings of the priest or in his absence with a prayer led by the catechist. But Catholics were forbidden in August 1947 from participation in such celebrations with the Protestants. The dividing line between these two communities was as sharp and well defined as it was between the Christians and the Hindus, even in the mid twentieth century.

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\(^{40}\) Holy See: The See of Rome or the central government of the Roman Catholic Church.

\(^{41}\) Cardinal Prefect: Official of the administrative apparatus of the Holy See.

\(^{42}\) Vicar Apostolic: An apostolic vicariate is a form of territorial jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church established in missionary regions and countries where a diocese has not yet been established. It is led by a vicar apostolic who is usually a titular bishop.

\(^{43}\) The Bengal Catholic Herald, No. 18, Vol. XIII (Saturday, October, 30, 1847, Calcutta), p. 234.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 240. Quoted from Hurkaru, October 28, 1847.


\(^{46}\) Manot: a vow