CHAPTER - V
CONCLUSION

Emergence of new religio-mystical cults and cultic associations is not a new phenomenon in India. But in the post-independence period, newly emerged and emerging religio-mystical cults of gurus and their associations can be described as a modern attribute of Indian religion, particularly in its Hindu segment. Though there may be the emergence of new pirs among the Muslims or that of cults centering around specific religious figures in the areas of other religions, the thesis considers the origin of a specific cult, viz., Lokenath cult, which veers more towards Hinduism despite its claims to liberalism, catholic outlook, even syncretism. These cults of gurus such as the cult of Lokenath are different from their traditional counterparts. They borrow elements from what may be deemed the essential core of various schools of Hindu philosophy, although they project the message to new members in a seemingly rational, secular, non-sectarian manner. As Mehta rightly points out, in a modern pluralistic society, where various forces and ideologies are constantly juxtaposed, no tradition can remain purely orthodox. This has resulted in innovation and experimentation in terms of projecting the basic beliefs of a sect or cult to attract a larger following for itself. (1993: 41-42). Mehta's words apply to the very many cults too and the Lokenath Cult bears testimony to that.

Some of these gurus standing at the centre of cults are gurus of elites and some others are connected with the subalterns. The cult of Lokenath is nearer to the subaltern section of the society though in its initial stage it was favoured by the elite section. Most of the devotees of Lokenath, it is found, belong today to the subaltern sections of the society. The term subaltern refers here to low income groups and low-caste group people. Although, a section of other strata of society also has been attracted by the cult of Lokenath Brahmachari. Probably, this fact has prompted Chakraborty to comment that Lokenath Brahmachari is a universal guru. (2002: 281).

Organizers of the Lokenath Sevashram Sangha like to identify themselves as Hindus or the followers of Sanatana Dharma (Traditional or Eternal Religion). But at the same time they made a certain kind of breach with the traditional Hinduism, in the cult of Lokenath Brahmachari, on the one hand, traditional mode of Hindu wor-
ship and rituals have been followed, and, on the other hand, the rejection, to a large extent, of brahminical orthodoxy and caste hierarchy seems to be a remarkable feature of the cult. Besides, several committees of the Sangha have incorporated not only (the so-called) low-caste Hindus but also the members of the Muslim community. It has been found that from the very beginning the Sangha is being led by the non-brahmin low-caste and middle caste organizers. Very few members of the Governing Body of the Sangha were/are brahmans. As a result of the presence of non-brahmin leadership, the importance of brahmans and casteism seems to have weakened to a great extent in the realm of Lokenath cult and movement. For instance, the brahmin priests are no better than the salaried employees like clerks or other workers of the Sangha. So their status is inferior to the position of the non-brahmin organizers when one looks at the organizational structure of the Sangha and especially its operative aspect. But, at the same time, the monopolistic right of brahmans to act as the priest in the daily as well as special worship of Lokenath has been accepted by the Sangha. It marks the process of continuity and change, unity and discord in the cult of Lokenath Brahmachari. It also shows the process of reinterpretation of Hinduism, which is being fostered by the Sangha in the realm of the Lokenath cult.

Casteism is the sociological basis of Hinduism. The idea of hierarchy is central to the caste system. The customs, rites, rituals are different among the higher and lower castes. But “there is occasionally a hiatus between secular and ritual rank.” (Srinivas. 2001 : 13). Ritually, a brahmin is superior to the other castes. But, “on secular criteria alone a Brahmin may occupy a very low position in the occupational hierarchy” (Ibid). The Lokenath Sevashram Sangha denies the caste system and the supremacy of brahmin in everyday life. But in ritual and purity-pollution contexts the brahmans are regarded as the superior caste. The Sangha allows only brahmans to lead the worship of Lokenath in the temple of Chakla. But in the organizational structure of the Sangha, nobody can enjoy any additional power or privileges due to his caste identity. In other words, brahmans have no special status in the secular context of the Sangha’s organizational structure. Priests and brahmin cooks are appointed by the non-brahmin lower caste organizers. It shows the relatively inferior positon of the brahmans in the organizational frame work of the Sangha, the working of which depends more on secular rules and regulations, as are followed in other organizations, than on ritual considerations. It leads to a certain kind of reinterpretation of Hinduism.
The Sangha repudiates the practice of untouchability. The caste identity of devotees has a secondary significance in the eyes of the Sangha. Some persons from untouchable caste work in the temple complex of Chakla. According to the organizers of the Sangha, Baba Lokenath did not consider anybody untouchable. Everybody is equal to him. Not only that but the Sangha considers that untouchability is a social evil which must be eradicated from society. This kind of humanitarianism is expressed in its practice, preaching and propaganda. Besides, the Sangha criticises several other evils of Hinduism, e.g. low-position of women, child marriage and polygamy, dowry system, etc. These are not at all the essential features of Hinduism. In this way the Sangha reinterprets Hinduism in the context of changing circumstances to make Hinduism popular and to ensure its increasing acceptance by everybody and thus revitalise Hinduism.

The cult of Lokenath fosters the path of devotion or bhaktimarga. This bhaktimarga is relatively free from the strict ritual practice of Hinduism. Consequently, this path is the most popular among the low caste/class people who are debarred by Brahminical canon from practising many religious rituals. According to the interpreters of Lokenath cult, the way to worship of Lokenath is simple. It is through simple faith in and piety to Lokenath that a devotee can earn the blessings of Lokenath and attain thereby spiritual bliss as also success in mundane life. Devotees may worship Lokenath collectively or individually in the privacy of their homes. The Sangha does not ask the devotees to follow any strict rules. Besides, the cult ignores class, caste and even religious differences.

The process of reinterpretation can be found in the syncretic aspect of Lokenath cult. The term, Syncretism, refers to the combination of different religions, cultures or schools of thought. The village of Chakla is situated in Deganga Block of North 24 Parganas. This region is remarkably free from any kind of communal tension. Both Hindu and Muslim communities live here together peacefully. This area has a long tradition of syncretism, which can be found in local religion and culture.

a. In this area *Ma Manasa* or mother goddess Manasa, a non-Vedic snake deity (Bhattacharya, H. 1997 : vol.3 : 126), is worshipped by both the Hindu and the Muslim communities. There is a singer group of Manasa's song in Kahar Para of Chakla village panchayat. Occasionally Muslim families invite this opera party to listen to the folk songs celebrating the activities of *Manasa*. On this occasion, Muslim women
make preparations for observing *Manasa Vrata* or the vow taken in the name of and for propitiation of *Manasa*. They gather different kinds of fruits, sweetmeats, milk, plantain, napkin, etc., which are kept in a bamboo basket as offerings to the deity. After the completion of the songs, the Muslim women go to the nearby pond to float the basket on the water. This *Vrata* is *dala bhasano*. Quite a few Hindu families to observe *Manasa Vrata* in a similar manner. This common vow creates a syncretic milieu in this area.

b. The cult of *Manik Pir* is very much popular among the Hindus and the Muslims. There is a darga in the village of Swalipur near Chakla. People of both the communities visit it frequently. There are some opera groups of Muslims singers who sing the song of *Manik Pir*. The cult of *Manik Pir* has in popular belief a therapeutic function. If the cows suffer from any disease, local people of both the communities go to the Darga of Swalipur and promise to offer milk to *Manik Pir* on fulfilment of their vows, i.e., on the recovery of their cattle from the trouble suffered by on them. They perform this ritual particularly on Saturdays and Tuesdays. They invite the opera group and listen to the song in praise of *Manik Pir*.

c. *Badsa Fakir*, a saint of *Kadria-Chistia* sect, lived in this area who preached syncrertic ideas among the local people. Though he passed away many years ago, still a considerable number of people follow his teachings. Devotees, irrespective of their caste and religious faith or affiliation take part in *pankti bhoj* (act of dining together sitting side by side in a row).

d. The cult of *Pir Gorachand* of Haroa is a popular and syncretic cult in this area. The village of Haroa is situated 20 K.M. away from Chakla. There are two popular beliefs related to the cult of *Pir Gorachand*. First, in the first half of 14th Century, 22 sufi saints came from Arabia to this place to preach their religious idea. Gorachand was one of them. According to the second belief, Gorachand was a converted Muslim. In his early life he was a follower of Vaishnavism. Later on, he came in contact with sufi saints and converted himself into Islam/Sufism. The former belief is supported by historical data. *Pir Gorachand* was known as Gorai Gazi. He was born around 1265 A.D. In the first half of 14th century he came to the village of Balanda (Haroa). He passed away at the age of 80, in the house of Kalu Ghosh of the village of Kulti Bihari. After his death, his body was brought to Haroa was and buried there. Allauddin, the ruler of Gaur, constructed a tomb on his grave. Kalu Ghosh and his associated /
relatives acted as the sevayate (votary) at the darga or mausoleum of Pir Gorachand, for a long time. (Choudhury, 1987 : 96). According to another source, the real name of Pir Gorachand was Sayad Abbas. Low caste Hindus and Buddhists were attracted by his teaching and adopted the religion he preached. (Ghosh, 2002 : 397). Interesting folk-lore and legends have emerged around the cult of Pir Gorachand and they convey the message of a certain kind of syncretism. A village fair in memory of Pir Gorachand is held in the last week of every February, in the village of Haroa. People of the both the communities, the Muslims and the Hindus, take part spontaneously in the fair.

e. The Local Muslims of Chakla believe that once upon a time a Muslim saint, called Lokeman Gazi, lived in the area of what is known today as chakla. Some of them hold that Lokenath Gazi might be Lokenath Brahmachari. Though they are not sure of it, they find some similarity between these two saints. For that reason they respect Lokenath Brahmachari too.

f. It has been found in Chakla and its vicinity that some of the marriage rituals of Muslims are identical with Hindu rituals. Besides, a few inter-religious marriages have been witnessed here and they have not created any great commotion.

This syncretic milieu prevailing in the area contributes a lot to the lives of the common people of both the communities. The information above suggests that the people of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities maintain amicable relationship with each other and, side by side, both keep their separate and autonomous identities. This may be prompted by a spirit of syncretism. Lokenath-devotees follow the Hindu mode of idol worship and, at the same time, they allow the Muslims to take part in different rituals. Muslims take prasada (food offering made to Lokenath and believed to carry his blessings) and other kind of food that are distributed by the Lokenath temple. It shows not only a reinterpretation of Hinduism but also a certain kind of reinterpretation of Islam. Because, idol worship or this kind of the ritual of taking prasada of any deity is strictly prohibited in Islam. Of course, it should be noted here that some of the Muslims of this area, who take this prasada or bhog from the temple, have observed that they take the fruits or food distributed as prasada simply as some eatable item and not as prasada or an article carrying or bestowing divine favour of any deity or icon. At the same time, some of the Muslim respondents have expressed the view that Lokenath was a great fakir, so, there is nothing wrong.
to take his prasada and it is not anti-Islamic. One may note here that these people
are converted Muslims. It may be a reason why they like to keep this tradition through
generations.

Another important point to be mentioned here is that the Sangha propagates that
Lokenath Brahmachari once addressed a Muslim Fakir as brahmin. According to
Lokenath, those who have the knowledge of Brahma are brahmins. Abdul Gaffar of
Mecca had the knowledge of Brahma and that is why he should be called a brahmin.
Not only that, but Lokenath called himself a Mussalman. For Lokenath, those who
have ‘mukkallam iman’ (cent percent faith in spiritual or divine entity), are Muslims.
Lokenath claimed that he had ‘mukkallam iman; that is why he is a Mussalman’. It
seems to be a radical [?] reinterpretation of Islam. Side by side, this reinterpretation
reduces the feeling of hostility, if any, between the two communities. So this process
may be viewed as an example of inheritance of Bhakti and Sufi movement of the
Middle Ages. The cult of Lokenath fosters the process of harmonization, rather than
conflict. India today occasionally gets tormented by fundamentalism and communal­
ism. In this context the harmonizing activites of the Sangha are undoubtedly very sig­
nificant.

There is a possibility which should not be ignored. Syncretic approach of the Sangha
may be related not merely to a strategic question but to a tactical question. 67% of
the total population of the Chakla village panchayat is Muslim. The support of the
majority in the vicinity of the temple is badly needed for the smooth functioning of
the Sangha. And, for that reason, the organizers seek to legitimize their cult among
the Muslims by propagating their liberal and syncretic approach and values while
spreading the message of Lokenath. The Sangha has appointed some Muslims as se­
curity guards or workers in Bhoga Centre (to serve the bhoga to the devotees at the

In this place one may recall that Max Weber (1974) has written in his famous work,
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 'Here we have only attempted to
trace the fact and the direction of its [Protestantism’s] influence to their motives in
one, though a very important point. But it would also further be necessary to inves-
igate how Protestant Asceticism was in turn influenced in its development and its character by the totality of social conditions..." (Weber, 1974:183). Taking a cue from Weber the present investigator has tried to understand not only how the Sangha and the temple have influenced the villagers in places including Chakla but also to follow how the Sangha and the cult are influenced by the social milieu prevailing in the locality where the Sangha is situated. The people in the locality are predominantly Muslims and they have displayed through decades a remarkable degree of religious tolerance and maintained amicable relationship with their Hindu brethren and sisters.

THE CULT OF LOKENATH AND MODERNIZATION

Another important aspect of the cult of Lokenath Brahmachari is modernism. The term modernism refers to "modern thinking or method." (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2006:814*), which is the product of the process of modernization. "Modernization is understood as a process which indicates the adoption of the modern ways of life and values." (Rao, S. 1999:766-67). It is commonly thought that due to the modernization traditional religious systems, values and beliefs tend to lose their hold or influence on the lives of people. Powerful non-religious ideologies such as patriotism, nationalism, democracy, secularism, etc., arise in modern times. And, tradition is replaced by modern scientific values and thoughts. From this point of view traditional system is identified with a stagnant and unchanging system. But it is not true in case of Indian society. Srinivas writes, "Indian society, for instance, has been adjusting itself to new forces and circumstances throughout its recorded history and has evolved certain strategies of adaptation which continue to serve it well" (Foreword to Singer. 1972:ix). Kothari did not accept the notion which conceives modernization as the rejection of traditionality. He holds, "The model of those who conceive of modernization as a rejection of traditionality and a 'transformation' on modern lines does not apply to India" (1995:88). Kothari correctly points out the especial nature of Indian response to modernization. He writes, "...when an ancient society comes to terms with the demands of a new age, seeks its continuity essentially through change, and achieves a new unity and a new identity without destroying either its rich diversity or its other, antecedent identities" (Ibid). Much earlier than Kothari, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, a pathfinder of Indian sociology, highlighted this remarkable feature of the Indian society. "The entire gamut of Sarkar's indological and sociological studies has been pervaded by a quest for the sources of a possible reju-
venation of the Indian (Hindu) culture in its past so that it could draw its sustenance from its tradition for facing up to the challenge of the industrially and scientifically advanced nations of the west (Bhattacharyya, 1990 : 419). The preceding statement is an affirmation of the quality of catholicity and liberalism of dynamic Hinduism that has from time to time proved, of course, to a limited extent, to be "inclusionary", i.e., it has accommodated the people of other religious faiths in its fold without losing its identity or jeopardizing the identity of the "others" (non-Hindu). This has been most clearly manifested in cults like that of Lokenath.

The cult of Lokenath represents in a way the traditional guru cult of Hindu society in India. It has evolved in a changing society in which the process of modernization plays a very significant role. In order to fulfil the demands of a new age, the cult of Lokenath seeks its continuity through adoption of new programmes and through rejection of some of the old elements and ritual procedure. And, in this way the cult of Lokenath achieves a new identity, without giving up its traditional kernel. Precisely, the Lokenath Sevashram Sangha permits the co-existence of tradition with modernism. The Sangha does it in various ways.

1. The process of modernization hinges on the phenomenon of mass communication. The development of mass communication (including newspapers, periodicals and magazines, T.V., radio, telephone, movies, postal system, internet, etc.) is an important means of spreading modern ideas at a more rapid pace than before. The Sangha fully manipulates these means of communication. It was not possible for the disciples/devotees of Lokenath Brahmachari to spread the message of Lokenath at a rapid rate in 19th century. The development of mass communication has made it possible now. From the very beginning the Sangha took the advantages of modern means of communication.

   a. Publication of books and pamphlets. From time to time the Sangha publishes books and pamphlets on the biography and teachings of Lokenath and aims and activities of the Sangha in both the languages : Bengali (intelligible for the mass of Bengali followers) and English (understood by the non-Bengalis and the educated and elite among the Bengalees). Costly paper is used for the books and the quality of printing is good but the price of the books is minimal.

   b. Publication of advertisement in popular newspapers:— Newspapers can cover a large member of the reading public. That is why it is a more effective means of
communication than the books. It has a wide circulation. The Sangha utilizes the opportunity provided by the newspapers. The Sangha publishes various advertisements in newspapers to propagate the teachings of Lokenath and to announce different programmes and activities of the Sangha.

c. Another important medium is television which is the influential and the strongest or the most effective means of communication in present times. Serials and films on Lokenath's life have been telecast many times on different channels on different days.

d. The Sangha has also published cassettes and V.C.Ds which contain devotional songs and dances.

e. Telephone and postal system have also been used by the Sangha to maintain contact with members and patrons of the Sangha.

Apart from these the Sangha uses computers to maintain the world wide contact and calculation and for other purposes. Mobile phones, walkie-talkies, close-circuit cameras, etc., have been used in the temple complex. At the time of festivals and dharma sabha or religious congregation the Sangha uses loud speakers and other kinds of sound system which cover a large audience.

The function of mass media is to convey to the large masses in society new information, new thoughts, new attitudes and new aspirations. The mass media are the device that can spread the requisite knowledge and attitudes quickly and widely. The point that should be noted here is that the Sangha uses the modern equipment not to modernize itself or society as a whole, but to reinforce what may be called sanskritic Hinduism. Milton Singer (1972) has observed this process in the cultural structures of the little traditions and the great traditions of the city of Madras and several other Indian cities. In these cities modern media of communication are being used for the spread of the traditional culture. Srinivas has pointed out the same thing. He writes that the recent and effective development of the means and techniques of communications have favoured the spread of sanskritization as well as westernization. (2002:228).

Thus traditional religion became stronger, instead of being weaker, as scientific and technological developments took place. In fact, the technological innovations have helped to spread and strengthen these traditional moorings that tied people to their
religious beliefs or in cases primordial beliefs. Scientific improvements have facilitated larger gatherings at places of pilgrimage and enabled many god-men and god-women to satisfy the spiritual needs of the people who simultaneously adhere to traditional beliefs and at the same time seek to satisfy the needs of life in the modern age which are often of a mundane nature and are fulfilled with the help of ways and means provided by science and technology.

ACCEPTANCE AND SURRENDER

The impact of religions has tremendous implications in shaping the Indian society. Religion in Indian society, particularly Hindu religion, fosters such a socio-political milieu in which the cult of gurus and swamis enjoys a natural validity and acceptance. For that reason the Lokenath Sevashram Sangha and Lokenath movement are not interfered with by any major social political or cultural opposition. On the contrary, common people welcome this cult.

In the state of crises, contingency and powerlessness, if people fail to organize themselves to fight against the objective causes of their crises, they try for the path of religion to overcome their problems. The Lokenath Sevashram Sangha seems to assume an important role in what appears to be a period of crisis and contingency arising from such uncertainties as communal strife, difficulties in making the means and end meet together in the backdrop of rising prices and increasing pressure of population on available resources. Organizers of the Sangha propagate that Baba Lokenath appeared to inspire the common people to follow the correct way of religious life which make their life happy and prosperous and liberated from narrowness of communal considerations. The Sangha does not focus on the need to bring about any change of the social structure. It wants to change the life of the devotees through changing their ideas and values. The Sangha asks the devotees to harmonize their lives with the existing conditions of society. The Sangha opposes the anti-establishment movement and expresses its strong support to the existing socio-economic system. The Sangha has a remarkably strong appeal to the downtrodden segment of the society. Simultaneously, it is true, though not clearly explicable, that the Sangha and its movement are not known to have taken the side of the striking workers of any factory or any of the sharecroppers or bargadars or the landless labourers making protests against what appears to them oppressive and exploitative. Indeed, quite a few important members of the Governing Body of the Sangha have betrayed strong reaction to such move-
ments, their necessity and viability. It seems to be a paradox that the Sangha has a
great appeal to the masses but it does not stand by the masses in their struggle against
the existing political or economic arrangement. How does the Lokenath cult particu-
larly the Lokenath Sangha meet the paradox?

Two important and highly significant elements are noticed in the preaching of the
Sangha—(1) acceptance of the existing social structure, and, (2) unquestioning submis-
sion to what is proclaimed by the leaders of the organization to be the message or
gospel and doctrine of Lokenath. According to the Sangha, the devotees have nothing
to do with the alteration or change of the existing social structure because they
are unable to change it. The whole social structure is determined, maintained and con-
trolled by the supreme power or God. So it is neither desirable nor feasible to bring
about any change into the social system through the effort of any single man or group
of human beings. What is given by God is enough and sufficient for the people and,
of course, this social system is good for all. So, none should waste their time and
energy in trying to change it, rather, it must be accepted by all. Men can do only one
thing, i.e., they can change themselves and they should try to strike a balance between
their individual needs and judgement and the prevailing course of development of the
social system. In other words, man can change his/her inner world. This change is
possible through the chanting of Lokenath’s name. Chanting of Lokenath’s name brings
unlimited happiness to the devotee’s mind. It can cure one’s disease or can solve any
kind of material or spiritual crises of individuals. The cult of Lokenath as it is prac-
tised by the mass of devotees under the guidance and organization of the Sangha seems
to have granted the devotees a panacea for all sorts of problems they may face. The
devotees should do only one thing, i.e. to recall Lokenath’s name with all their heart
and Lokenath would save them against all sorts of hazards. The oft-quoted state-
ment which is said to have been made by Lokenath gives this assurance: “I shall
readily come to your rescue on your just recalling me, be it in the midst of war, or in
dense forest or in deep water”. Lokenath’s name has, as if, a measure of magical
potency which is effective against all sorts or dangers or evils. No especial or elaborate
rite is necessary for a devotee of Lokenath to ward off the evils that may confront
him. He is not required to engage in any austere practice. Baba Lokenath or Lokenath,
the father of all his devotees, has already performed all kinds of sadhana, i.e., under-
gone all kinds of austere practices on behalf of and for the welfare of his devotees

for the humankind as a whole. So, there is no need for a devotee of Lokenath to observe any austerity in his pursuit of a religious life.

Religious life for a devotee of Lokenath lies in absolute faith in Lokenath, the embodiment of solutions to all kinds of problems that may confront him. The Sangha therefore tells the devotees, "Surrender, unconditional surrender, to Lokenath is the only path to spiritual realization and solution to many a mundane problem. You have to consistently strive for sacrificing your ego, your heart and intellect at his lotus feet. Maybe, you will not succeed in achieving it overnight or in a day. But, you will definitely achieve the goal through the grace of Lokenath if you simply persist in your endeavour and it is not at all difficult to do it. You just follow the path that is suggested for the devotees. It can be done without observing any ritual paraphernalia. All your miseries and unhappiness would come to an end, the moment the grace of Lokenath will descend, and, for that moment you have to prepare yourself with piety and devotion" (Cf. Brahmachari, 1986 : 66).

The plain and simple way of piety and the assurance of enjoying the blessings of Lokenath has proved to be immensely attractive to the devotees of Lokenath or followers of Lokenath cult. The lack of discrimination against any person on grounds of caste or class or gender has farther reinforced the element of devotion and piety in the way of life of the devotees of Lokenath. Everyone irrespective of caste, class, gender, or religious creed (Cf. a Sikh carrying the bamboo pole wherefrom the waterpots carrying water which is to be poured over the marble image of Lokenath has been witnessed by the researcher in one of the pilgrimages to Lokenath temple at Chakla) can offer puja or worship to Lokenath, enter the area of the temple, climb up to the Natmandir where the image of Lokenath has been kept, touch the image and empty the pots of water on his image.

A feeling of euphoria and festive mood is enjoyed by the devotees while they, like pilgrims to the temple of Tarakeswar or Siva, go on the birthday of Lokenath to the birth place (Chakla) of Lokenath in a seemingly unending procession of scores of Lokenath devotees. It promotes a sense of we feeling among the devotees. And, it strengthens the bond between the devotees and the central figure of the cult, i.e., Lokenath. Though it has been reported from certain quarters that the Muslims too join the pilgrimage, the researcher could not test the veracity of the claim. He could not identify any Muslim among the devotees (from outward features of the devotees)
carrying water in pitchers hanging from the bamboo poles borne by them; nor did any respondent participating in the pilgrimage introduce himself/herself as a Muslim.

Simultaneously, it must be mentioned that on the days of pilgrimage a large number of Muslims throng together in the courtyard of Lokenath temple for taking the prasada or food offered to Lokenath at the time of his worship. It is also found that Muslim men and women in a large number stay in the precincts of the Lokenath temple to watch the arati or the ritual of waving of lighted lamp and other auspicious articles around the image of Lokenath housed in the mul(a) mandir(a) (the devotees watch the arati from the Verandah of the mul(a) mandir(a). And, it is a remarkable feature that the Muslims are allowed to climb up to and stand on the floor of the mul mandir, which phenomenon is extremely rare in other Hindu temples). Not only that but many of them like their Hindu brothers and sisters touch the burning flames of the wicks of the lamp used for arati of Lokenath and feel blessed with the heat of the flames and put their hands after touching the flame on their children or their near and dear ones present by their side, as if, to ensure their welfare.

When the researcher asked some of these Muslims, who were found taking prasada or watching the arati, whether their action violated the injunction of Islam that strictly prohibits idolatry worship of idols or images, they did not feel embarrassed though they did not give any direct and affirmative answer to the question. A few of them remarked that at home they do not keep or worship any photo or picture or clay image of Lokenath or perform arati of Lokenath.

But, while they come to the temple of Lokenath, they feel deeply moved by the spirit of devotion and piety with which the temple arena is suffused. Further, the non-Muslim devotees of Lokenath as well the organizers and managers of the temple complex have never followed any policy of exclusion in relation to them, i.e, the Muslims. In this way, the ambience in the temple complex of Lokenath at Chakla has been inclusive and does not practise any policy of discrimination towards any segment of the devotees of Lokenath. Lokenath's message of equality, non-discrimination and inclusion seems to be honoured in the equal treatment of the devotees of high and low castes, of rich and poor strata, of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Another fact may be mentioned here. The Muslims in Chakla and its surroundings are mostly those who or whose ancestors were Hindus and later converted into Islam: They have not, it seems, totally forgotten or forsaken all the old beliefs and practices which they
once followed as Hindus. The researcher has not met any Christian among the respondents though he has noticed the presence of some white men, European and American, in the precincts of the Lokenath temple on several occasions when he has been present on the ground of the temple.

The inclusive nature of what may be termed Lokenath temple complex and Lokenath movement is evident from the responses of the respondents of different castes and creeds and linguistic groups. Its everwidening circle seems to include people of different states or regions that lie outside the state of West Bengal.

The charitable dispensaries or blood donation camps or programmes of distribution of books or cloths or garments among the people who require such assistance obviously strengthen the appeal of Lokenath cult. Added to this is the extraordinary faith of the people, high or low castes, Hindus or Muslims, the rich or the poor, in the efficacy of the soil of Lokenath bhita in healing physical sufferings caused by ailments and in offering protection against many problems and predicaments of mundane life as well as in promoting peace of mind. Indeed, many a respondent narrated to the researcher their experience of getting over the troubles or difficulty faced by them through what they described as the grace of Lokenath or the extraordinary quality of the soil of Lokenath bhita. Even the Muslims waxed eloquent on the quality of the soil from Lokenath’s vastu bhita and they too narrated the miraculous experience of getting over difficult situations in their life because of what they believed to be the grace of Lokenath.

Though the Sangha maintains silence regarding the problems of social, political and economic inequality, it preaches the message of spiritual equality as propagated by the cultic figure, i.e., Lokenath. It fosters universal approach of Lokenath’s teaching, in which devotees irrespective of their class, caste, religion and gender, are all equal. Everybody is equal in the eyes of the Sangha. Both Hindus and Muslims, (so-called) upper-castes and (so-called) lower-castes may find a place in the leadership of the Sangha of the organization. Participation by people of different castes and religions in the activities and programmes of the Sangha confirms this claim. Through this mechanism, the Sangha offers a spiritual democracy to the members and devotees. But, of course, this kind of spiritual equality and democracy do not have any great significance to the objective condition of society. It is a noteworthy feature of the
Lokenath Sangha that even Muslims find a room in different committees and it is a fact that persons like Dr. Isha Haque or Abdul Nayeem or Abdul Zabbar took a very active and fruitful role in building up the Sangha, strengthening its movement and building of the temple of Lokenath at Chakla. At the same time, not a single Muslim has up till now found a position in the Governing Body of the Sangha, which is an all Hindu body, of course, without brahminical dominance.

One of the most puzzling points about Lokenath Brahmachari is the striking lack of interest shown in him by both Western and Indian scholars. While Hinduism of the intellectual and the mystic varieties has been studied in great detail, and anthropologists have contributed their share with descriptions of numerous village godlings and spirits, it is indeed regrettable that the cults so popular among the Bengalis of today have received so little attention. They are a vital part of living Hinduism, a religion whose remarkable flexibility has ensured that it continues to prosper even today. An added advantage is that the folklore accompanying these modern cults—and nowadays this includes films as well as the usual stories and songs—also provides a fine example of Indian popular culture. The language of this cult is the language of the common man. Within such an amorphous and organic religion as Hinduism there has always been scope for new gods and gurus such as Lokenath Brahmachari who emerged in direct response to the needs of certain sections of society, but ultimately have gained a much more widespread popularity.

In continuation of the point noted above it should, however be mentioned that the rituals observed in connection with the puja or worship of Lokenath, viz., conscripting the food offering made to Lokenath through chanting of the Sanskrit mantras, worshiping Lokenath with the help of different asanas and mudras, waving of lighted lamp around the image of Lokenath, are performed only by the brahmin priests. It is the brahmin priests that offer the rice and other food articles cooked by the brahmin cooks to Lokenath. In this way, the Brahmical Hindu core of Lokenath cult is sustained across time through the observance of several ritual injunctions as mentioned above though claims are made by the organizers about the caste-transcending or secular character of the Lokenath cult and movement. Thus, Lokenath cult is still a cult of evercreative Hinduism. Side by side with this aspect, it should also be emphasized that the Lokenath cult has earned enormous popularity among the masses. No doubt, a section of the devotees belongs to high castes. But, it seems, they are far outnum-
bered by the devotees belonging to low castes including the scheduled castes. Any observer who happens to watch the incessant stream of pilgrims, covering a great distance from a ghat (a point on the bank of the Ganges, such as Bagbazar ghat in North Calcutta) to the Lokenath temple at Chakla or the Lokenath temple at Kachua (which has not been examined in this work because of limitation of time), cannot help feeling overwhelmed with the spontaneity and religious fervour of the devotees undertaking the pilgrimage.

This fact seems to overshadow the presence of Brahminical elements in the cult of Lokenath.

The presence of a large number of Muslims in the precincts of the temple of Lokenath on the days when the worship of Lokenath is especially celebrated or when it assumes the character of a ceremony is an additional factor to reckon with in this connection. Their partaking of food distributed by the organization of temple, their watching of the arati of Lokenath appear to lend the cult a sort of syncretic character.

Many of the vendors of different articles that are offered by the devotees to Lokenath are Muslims. They, the shop-keepers as well the young boys and girls, sell Lokenath's printed pictures or photographs of Lokenath to the devotees. They sell small pieces of brick and the pieces of red thread used for tying the roundish lumps of brick with the branches on aerial roots of the peepul tree standing at the courtyard of what is known as Lokenath's vastubhita. The Muslims thus have a genuine interest in the increasing number of pilgrims to the temple of Lokenath at Chakla. An especial kind of milieu has thus been created around the temple of Lokenath.

While the results of the present research work reveal this especial character of Lokenath cult, a careful observation lays bare the hard fact that the organizers and priests of the Lokenath temple complex do carefully nurture the Brahminical values or core-values of Brahminical Hinduism. The Brahmin priests as well as the organizers of the temple strictly prohibit the entry of devotees into the garbha-griha in the main temple or mula-mandira.

Even the few privileged who are granted entry into the garbha-griha are allowed only to offer prayer to or lie prostrate before the image of Lokenath. Nobody is permitted to touch the image of Lokenath within the garbha-griha or pour water on the
The sacredness (in the Durkheimean sense) in relation to *garbha-griha* of the mulamandira which contains the image of Lokenath that is worshipped daily by the brahmin priests, is thus zealously guarded and the brahmin priests are the guards. Thus, despite the talks about syncretism in Lokenath, the attempts at protecting the Brahminical core of the religious values in Lokenath cult can hardly be disregarded by the scrutinizing mind of an acute observer. One may find here a contradiction. Another may read in the activities of the Lokenath Sevashram Sangha relating to the cult of Lokenath an attempt at harmonizing the preservation of Hindu Brahminical values and the efforts towards inclusion of an increasing number of followers or devotees to the cult of Lokenath, thus ensuring the continuance of the cult and keeping pace with the demands of modern times which defy caste restrictions and seek to transcend the narrow confines of communal identities.

The nature and role of the governing body merit due consideration in this respect. Uptil now it does not have a single Muslim member though it is not, as it has been pointed out earlier, dominated by the brahmins. It has proved imaginative in spreading the idea that the cult of Lokenath has an element of syncretism in it. It has successfully essayed and/or spread the myths and legends regarding Lokenath and his catholicity as well as miraculous power. It has taken resort to the practice which has been traditionally very popular among the devotees of Siva at the temple of Tarkeswar, a traditional centre of Saivism in Bengal. Lokenath is an incarnation of both Siva and Krishna. The coincidence of Lokenath’s birth on Janmashtami, the birthday of Krishna, has been skillfully highlighted. The devotees can earn merit (punya) by going on pilgrimage to the birthplace of Lokenath and pour the water of the Ganges on the image of Lokenath (an incarnation of Siva Himself) on the auspicious day of Janmasthami (since Lokenath is simultaneously an incarnation of Krishna as well). The organizers would like the devotees to believe that Lokenath is more than an incarnation of either Siva or Krishna. He is simultaneously Siva and Krishna. Hence, to worship him at the end of pilgrimage by pouring water on the image of Lokenath situated at the *Natmandir* and/or at a corner on the large varanda of *Mula mandira* would definitely enrich the pilgrims or devotees with the bliss of spirituality and also material well-being. And, this path of collective participation by the devotees in the pilgrimage and the resultant effervescence have endeared the Lokenath cult to thousands of souls in West Bengal. The organizer’s success in channelizing the stream of devotees with a
spectacular measure of discipline every year is itself a noteworthy feature of the cult of Lokenath as it is practised today.

While the overwhelming majority of the pilgrims evidently comes from lower classes and castes and consists of the young and the middle aged males and females, no untoward incident has yet been reported to have taken place in Chakla which turns into a sea of men and women on Janmashtami day. If the younger ones ever show any tendency indulge in any aberration they are immediately prohibited from that by the others. The cult has become so popular among the masses as different organizations distribute water and sweetmeats and even cooked Khichuri (rice and pigeon pea boiled together with spices and oil) from different camps spread alongside the way traversed by the pilgrims.

All this takes place because a large number of men and organizations volunteer to ensure the safe and secure journey of the pilgrims and look after their comforts. But, at the back of it the importance of the role of the organizers at Chakla can hardly be minimized. The veiled but concerted effort made by the organizers in propagating the message and majesty of Lokenath or the importance of Lokenath in granting the people release from the cares and anxieties of life prompt so many organizations, rich and poor, men and women, to make the pilgrimage a success and to impress upon the minds of the people the glory of Lokenath and the positive results of worship of Lokenath.

The organizers raise huge resources to make the pilgrimage and the festivals at Chakla a success. Resources are spent on securing the service of the young men, guards and volunteers, for cooking a massive quantity of food which is distributed among the devotees (the devotees, of course, pay a small amount of money for food which they get as prasada) and for distributing the same, for erecting huge pandals, for arranging the use of amplifiers which pour out devotional songs, for organizing musical sairees dedicated to different deities and to Lokenath and also the yatras or dramas. The efficient management of the activities mentioned above speaks volumes for the ability of the Governing Body for organizing and managing the large stream of activities.

At the same time, the members of the Governing Body at Chakla, the organizers behind the spread of the cult of Lokenath, are human beings very much related to such mundane affairs as competition for the power to manage and organize the af-
fairs relating to Lokenath. They have differences in opinion and of interests. Hence, those who are at the helm of the organization are ever conscious of what is to be done to maintain themselves in power and to effectively contain the dissenting voice. This very fact, the account furnished above shows, has been responsible for the bifurcation of the persons marturing the Lokenath cult into two groups, either vying with the other, for attracting the devotees into their respective domains. While one group preaches that Chakla is the birth place of Lokenath and therefore, the pilgrims and devotees should visit *Mahatirtha* the great pilgrimage centre, at Chakla, the other group makes a serious effort to establish that Kachua is the Saint's / deity's birth place. So Kachua should be regarded as the genuine place for pilgrimage. Interestingly enough, both the parties have succeeded in attracting segments of devotees and pilgrims to their centres. Though the temple complex at Chakla and the pilgrims thereto have been examined in some detail in the present work, the organizers at Kachua too can claim a modicum of success in popularizing the cult of Lokenath. The present work, because of certain limitations, has not taken into consideration the organization of the cult at Kachua. Such a study may be undertaken in future. But, what emerges from what has been done in the present study is that the scope for registering differences with the same cult has, it seems, enlivened rather than weakened, the cult. This is a noteworthy feature of the popular cults emerging newly and operating successfully in the arena of Hinduism in India of today.