CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY, BRAHMANICAL HEGEMONY AND READING THE PURĀNIC TEXTS
Bhabani, the protagonist of Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyaya's novel *Ichāmatī*, studied the Vedas and the Upaniṣads during his religious apprenticeship in the 'West' in his youth. After his return to Bengal he found to his dismay that the Vedic tradition formed no part of the Bengali culture. He lamented that in Bengal there were only the songs of Maṅgalacandī, the bhāsān of Manasa and the marriage of Śiva by way of religion. At best, the Bengalis were familiar with the epics.¹ This is the impression of an author who knew rural Bengal both instinctively and through wide experience. But is this a realistic depiction of the state of religion in Bengal? Is it correct to say that the Vedic tradition never sufficiently penetrated Bengal and a Bengali, seeking as it were 'the wisdom of Hinduism', had to travel to the proverbial 'West' - the Gangetic valley mainland - even in the nineteenth century, while Bengal retained its essentially regional character of pantheon, rituals, and beliefs? In other words, did Bengal create and preserve a socio-religious tradition which became regionally identifiable and therefore distinguishable from the dominant high culture of Vedic Hinduism? This is what I propose to investigate in this dissertation through a study of the corpus of the Bengal Purāṇas, which, along with the Bengal Smṛtis, to a large extent determined the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindu Bengali ever since they were composed and disseminated. In particular, I intend to examine the process by which this tradition came into being.

Indology, ever since its inception, has focussed its attention on the all-India Sanskritic tradition and social anthropology has remained concerned with the study of Indian village societies. Thus both the disciplines have tended to ignore the various regional traditions of South Asia which, in my opinion, embody the cultural continuum of Indian tradition. It has been suggested that this trend is primarily due to an uneasy feeling that the regional traditions represent neither the unspelt Sanskritic tradition nor the
popular/folk culture in its pure form, but a distorted provincial variant of both. But it is futile, even ahistorically, to look for linearity of traditions in "indigenous civilizations" such as the Indian. Rather, it is the making of the regional traditions and the formation of regional identities which reveal the pattern of socio-cultural interaction between the pan-Indian and the local levels, so crucial for an understanding of the long term historical processes in India. Unfortunately, historians have tended to take this process for granted and consequently little attempt has been made to actually study this very complex process in all its ramifications.

So far the only significant work on the regional tradition in India, which is based on the crystallization of a religious complex, has been the volume on Jagannātha. However, while Orissa developed a central cult focus and the factors that contributed to the construction of its regional tradition revolved round the temple of Jagannātha, Bengal singularly lacked such a dominant symbol supported by the regional state, and its many local traditions, although they converged on a number of autonomous goddesses, were hopelessly fragmented. It was left to brahmanism, which introduced its social order in Bengal by the early medieval period, to bring about a semblance of homogeneity into this variegated cultural landscape. The account of this process of cultural interaction is contained in a set of texts called the Upapurāṇas, many of which were composed in Bengal roughly between the eighth and the thirteenth centuries A.D. Thus Bengal chartered a distinct course, as each region developed its own specificities. But there is an essential similarity in the process of formation of regional traditions in India which is generalisable, and therefore my conclusions may also apply to areas beyond the geographical limits of the region under study.
Despite the abundance of material, the Bengal Purāṇas have been persistently ignored as source of information for the reconstruction of the early history of Bengal. I have discussed the date and provenance, as well as the negotiations involved in the process of codification of the Bengal Purāṇas, in the next chapter. In this section I will deal with the historiography on the Purāṇas in an attempt to explain why the historians have remained reluctant for a long time to accept the Purāṇas in general and the Bengal Purāṇas in particular as a valid and reliable source of historical information.

In a recent article Gregory Schopen has argued that the early European historians of Indian Buddhism had relied more or less exclusively on literary evidence, although archaeological and epigraphical materials, reflecting the actual beliefs and practices of the lay Buddhists, were available in plenty. He suggests that this curious preference may be explained by those historians' implicit assumption that 'real religion' is located in the "Word of God" and not in those material objects which record the beliefs and customs of the practitioners of the religion. Schopen concludes that this assumption derives from the sixteenth century Protestant polemical conception of what constitutes true religion, which was thoroughly absorbed by the Western intellectual tradition. 4

Although the Western intellectual tradition exhibited the same attitude with regard to the Vedic religion, this trend seems to have been reversed in the case of the Purāṇas. For one thing, in brahmanism 'direct' divine revelation ended with the Vedas. The later Vedic literature, through association, also acquired a high degree of sacredness. But, even though the gods continued to speak through the mouths of the brāhmaṇas, the later texts were far too numerous to constitute an authentic corpus of scriptures of
equal status, acceptable to all votaries of brahmanism. Thus, while the brahmanical law codes acquired the status of remembered truth, the Purāṇas came to occupy a curious position in which these had neither the unquestioned sanctity of the Vedas nor the decisive normative significance of the Smṛtis. Those European scholars who began to write about the Purāṇas from the mid-nineteenth century partly treated these texts as repositories of fantastic tales about gods and demons which contaminated the high seriousness and idealism of the Vedic religion. H.H. Wilson's translation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa contains a long preface which may be considered to be the first systematic-and scholarly statement on the Purāṇic literature in English, although incidental observations on the Purāṇas had already been published by Colebrook and Ellis in the Asiatic Researches. In the preface Wilson remarked that the Purāṇas were sectarian in character, which indeed is true, but the conclusion he drew from this observation is that these texts were composed by "pious frauds for temporary purposes" "in subservience to... sectarian imposture", and therefore these are no longer authoritative for Hindu beliefs as a whole. This seems to be a little baffling in view of the fact that two decades later Wilson, in his major study of the Hindu beliefs and practices, had divided the practising Hindus into three major Purāṇic sects, the Śaivas, the Vaiśṇavas and the Śāktas. Perhaps his suspicion with regard to the status of the Purāṇas as authentic texts is symptomatic of the attitude of the early scholars on the stages in the evolution of Hinduism.

In 1855 E.W. Hopkins published his work on the religions of India which includes detailed studies of the Ṛg Veda, the Brāhmaṇic pantheism and the Upaniṣads. The section on "Hinduism" contains an account of Viṣṇu and Śiva, primarily based on the epics. Significantly, Wilson considered the two epics as "the safest sources for the ancient legends of the Hindus", after the Vedas. Clearly, the
conflicting claims about the names and numbers of the Purāṇas, the uncertainty about their dates, and their unwieldy corpus had made the Purāṇas less acceptable to these scholars than the epics. Hopkins had devoted a short, indifferent chapter to the Purāṇas which deals with the early sects, the religious festivals, and the formation of the Trinity. His preference for Vedism as the true religion of the Hindus, compared to the later debasement, is inescapable.

A number of important monographs were published on the subject in the late 1870s and early 1880s. M. Monier-Williams' study of Hinduism makes a distinction between Vedic religion, brahmanical law and domestic usages on the one hand, and Hinduism on the other, which "best expresses Brahmanism after it had degenerated - to wit, that complicated system of polytheistic doctrines and caste usages which has gradually resulted out of the mixture of Brahmanism and Buddhism, with the non-Aryan creeds of Dravidians and aborigines. Hence Hinduism (sic) is something very different from Brahmanism, though the one is derived from the other". One may notice that the Vedic origin of later Hinduism is recognised, but it is a reluctant concession. The book contains a separate chapter on the Purāṇas and the Tantras in connection with the development of "the doctrine of faith", i.e, bhakti. In an expanded version of the work, published a few years later, Monier-Williams makes a similar distinction between Vedism/brahmanism which now includes the six systems of Hindu philosophy, and Hinduism which is characterised by the subordination of "the purely spiritual Brahman" to the personal deities Śiva and Viṣṇu, though he admits that these are not "mutually antagonistic". The book however carries detailed discussions on aspects of popular worship such as accounts of village deities, festivals and centres of pilgrimage, and the rites of passage, based on the Purāṇas, the Smṛtis, and personal observations. Once again one observes a grudging acknowledgement of the fact that the living beliefs and
practices of the Hindus had substantially moved away from its supposedly pristine origin. A. Barth's study of the religions of India also distinguishes between brahmanism and Hinduism, but he takes the Purānic evidence into account in his reconstruction of the sectarian religions of the Vaiṣṇavas and the Śaivas. W.J. Wilkins' study of the Hindu mythology, published a year after Barth's, implicitly accepts the division of Hinduism into Vedic and Purānic, but in fact the Purānic deities receive far greater coverage in his work.

At the turn of the century, the most important trait discernible in the historiography on Hinduism was the gradual recognition conferred on the Purānic religion. Consequently, the three landmark volumes published in 1913 contain strong emphasis on the Purāṇas as a valid source of early Indian history from different points of view. F.E. Pargiter argued that several Purāṇas contain resonances of the actual political events of the so-called Kali age, supposedly ushered in by the Mahābhārata war, and the account was brought "up to date" through continuous redactions. A number of Pargiter's assumptions and conclusions are wrong, or at least doubtful, but he treated the Purānic material with a respect previously unheard of. The book on the Hindu and Buddhist myths, retold by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita with illustrations by Abanindranath Tagore, the doyen of the Bengal school of art, was a covert nationalist defense against the colonial critique of the current state of the beliefs and practices of the Hindus. The apparent disorganisation in the arrangement of the book, both chronological and thematic, seems to have been deliberate, for the Vedic and the Purānic myths, which follow those from the epics, were purposely clubbed together to both emphasise and justify one continuous tradition. The most significant contribution to the Puranic studies, however, came from the historian R.G. Bhandarkar who, for the first time, produced a rigorous and extensively text-based - from
the Vedic through the Purānic to the later bhakti literature account of the Purānic religious sects. He very rightly pointed out that the prevalent "mental attitude" of distinguishing between Vedantism and theism does not always work in the Hindu context. Nicol Macnicol on the other hand, in his study of Indian theism, published only a couple of years later, ignored the Purānic evidence altogether. Despite Macnicol's erudition in the current theological issues, he fundamentally misjudged the nature of brahmanical religion, for the Purānas, though polytheistic in their outward form, are essentially theistic in character, due to their sectarian emphasis. Thus, while the Purānas were being steadily subsumed into the mainstream of historiography on Indian religions, uncertainty about their status continued to persist.

In the early 1920s another set of important monographs appeared which further strengthened this prevalent trend. H.C. Raychaudhuri, in putting together the materials for the study of the early history of the Vaishnava sect, had utilised the Purānic texts without undue scepticism and treated them with the same degree of seriousness as the Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, the Upaniṣads, the epics, the Buddhist Jātakas and the Jaina Śūtras, the vernacular bhakti literature of the Tamils, as well as the epigraphic and numismatic evidence. It may be said that with Bhandarkar and Raychaudhuri, Purānic studies eventually came into its own. These efforts, however, did not completely dispel the doubts that still lingered with regard to the authenticity of the Purānas. J.N. Farquhar, for example, in his otherwise comprehensive study of the religious literature of India, placed a disproportionate emphasis on the six systems of Hindu philosophy. The Purānas are only occasionally and briefly mentioned, even though he acknowledged that these "are the real Bible of the common people". It is also interesting to note that in a discussion devoted to the religious literature of India, the Purānas occupy much less
space than the specialised texts of even the comparatively obscure sub-sects. However, with the publication of Charles Eliot's authoritative work on Hinduism and Buddhism in three volumes, the framework for the subsequent studies on aspects of Hinduism was firmly laid down for sometime to come. The Purānic religion received adequate attention and both the phallic emblem of Śiva as well as the butter-thief motif in the Kṛṣṇa cycle of myths were treated without condescension.

But serious research was only beginning to recognise the worth of the Purāṇas, and in the popular introductions by the Western authors, which began to appear at around the same time, the Purāṇas continued to be disregarded. It is not surprising therefore that even in the late 1920s and the early 1930s Indian scholars of eminence, such as Haraprasad Shastri or V.R. Ramchandra Dikshitar, were still making a plea for the Purāṇas, outlining their dates and corpus, and projecting them as the repository of an overwhelmingly important segment of the Hindu belief system. It was only after the publication of R.C. Hazra's study of the Purānic records on Hindu rites and customs in 1940, in which he delineated with meticulous care the period of composition of the Purāṇas - both the approximate time bracket for the individual texts as well as the several layers of redactions in each of these - on the basis of a close comparison between the contents of the Purāṇas, the Smṛtis and other contemporary texts, that historians began to feel comfortable with these texts as important, genuine and viable source of history.

If this has been the checkered history of the Mahāpurāṇas, it is not difficult to imagine that the Upapurāṇas, disadvantaged by its designation to begin with and thus relegated to a secondary position even within the Purānic corpus, took much longer to be noticed as a valuable source of history. Once again, it was primarily due to the efforts of R.C. Hazra that the dates and provenance of the Upapurāṇas
Although Hazra pointed out that these texts are regionally identifiable and, due to far less interpolations, are often better preserved than the *Mahāpurāṇas*, historians by and large remained indifferent to them. Hazra has convincingly argued that the majority of the extant *Upapurāṇas* were composed in Bengal (discussed in detail in the next chapter), but the standard histories of ancient Bengal have persistently refused to take these into cognizance. It is not that these texts were unknown, for the *Vaṅgavāsī* edition of most of the Bengal *Purāṇas* were published by the early twentieth century, but the historians have remained exceptionally wary of using them, presumably because these were not considered sufficiently dependable as source of information, at least compared to the archaeological and inscriptional evidence. Unlike the early historiography on Vedism and Buddhism, material objects were preferred to written texts for the reconstruction of the history of *brahmanical* religion of early Bengal.

The first definitive history of ancient Bengal, edited by R.C. Majumdar, was published in 1943. The chapter on religion, a substantial part of which is naturally devoted to the development of *Purānic* mythology and sects, was written by Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, a highly competent specialist on the subject. Bagchi more or less entirely relied on epigraphic evidence in his essay. Even the Tantras, for some unstated reasons, are more frequently mentioned than the Bengal *Purāṇas*, one of which is cited, rather casually, only once. S.K. De, on Sanskrit literature, has discussed the Bengal *Smṛtis* in some detail, but the *Purāṇas* do not figure at all in his essay. The historiographical assumptions responsible for this scepticism towards the Bengal *Purāṇas* have remained with us since then. Niharranjan Ray's history of the Bengalis, one of the finest examples of regional history in India, was published just a few years later. Ray has a little more space to accommodate the *Purāṇas*, but only marginally. He has referred to two
"arvācīna" (literally young, and therefore, by implication, inexperienced and unwise) Purāṇas, Brahmaṇavaivarta and Brahad-dharma, in connection with the jāti structure of early medieval Bengal, but for religion he has stuck to the epigraphic and iconographic evidence alone. Despite Ray's strong emphasis on the compelling presence of indigenous elements in the religious culture of Bengal, he chose to ignore the voluminous data available in the Purāṇas in support of this contention, and only cursorily mentioned the Brhad-dharma and the Kālikā for Sabarotsava to affirm the non-brahmanical antecedents of goddess worship in Bengal.

These two books were published before Hazra's seminal volumes on the Upapurāṇas had arrived and one can understand the historians' caution in not using the Purānic texts in their works. However, it is somewhat surprising that in 1971, when R.C. Majumdar published the revised version of his edited volume on the history of ancient Bengal, now completely rewritten by him, the Bengal Purāṇas continued to remain out of reckoning, except a brief mention in the subsection on the non-brāhmaṇa castes and a short appendix on the date and provenance of the Brahmaṇavaivarta and the Brhad-dharma Purāṇas, based entirely on Hazra. The historians' resistance to the Bengal Purāṇas as a source of information persists, as is evident from Rama Chatterjee's comparatively recent monograph on the religion of ancient Bengal. Chatterjee refers to a few of the Bengal Purāṇas in her bibliography, but rarely, if ever, in the text.

There exists another genre of literature which may be broadly classified as 'Purāṇa: a study'. These are often little more than thematic summaries of the contents of the Purāṇas. Several of the Mahāpurāṇas have had the dubious distinction of being thus studied; so do two of the Bengal Purāṇas. Of these, P.G. Lalye has at least made an attempt to correlate the contents of the Devībhāgavata with those of the other Purāṇas, place the ideas contained in the text in
the perspective of relevant philosophical doctrines, and assess its literary qualities. But A.J. Rawal's study of the *Brahmavaivarta* is practically an annotated index of the text, arranged under such uninspiring chapter-heads as society, economy, religion and mythology, with appendices thrown in on flora and fauna etc. Pushpendra Kumar's work on the Sakti cult in ancient India has a chapter on the *Upapurāṇas* which also follows the same dreary format.

The *Purāṇas* are now enjoying an undisputed sway over the field of early Indian religion. Particularly the Anglo-American scholarship on the subject has owned up the *Purāṇas* with a vengeance that more than compensates for the initial indifference shown to them. However, competent and imaginative though most of these studies are, the historian's problem with them is their general disregard for the context. A good example of this genre of literature is Mackenzie Brown's dense textual study of the *Brahmvaivarta Purāṇa*. Brown has conceived and articulated the problematic of "a feminine theology" with a good deal of analytical sophistication and empirical rigour, but he seems to be completely oblivious of the fact that the *Purāṇa*, in its present form, was composed in early medieval Bengal. Thus it appears as if the centrality of Radhā in Bengal Vaishnavism developed in a vacuum, without the support of a congenial religious milieu, and therefore the process is generalisable at the pan-Indian level, as the subtitle of the book suggests. Besides, the emphasis on the assumed elements of continuity in Indian tradition in a number of such studies has discouraged strict adherence to chronology and consequently the anonymous *Purāṇas* have been rendered even more impersonal. The long and learned introduction of van Kooij to his translation of parts of the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, on the other hand, has been so much more meaningful, simply because he has placed the text in the context of eastern India and particularly Assam, where it belongs. It helped him to bring out the tension inherent in the process of the intro-
duction of brahmanism into a region where indigenous local religious traditions were fairly well developed, with ease and precision. But such instances are rare. The indications are that the currently dominant trend in Purāṇic studies has come to stay for a considerable period of time and studies such as Brown's will continue to proliferate in a structuralist void. However, the historian will have to be careful in assimilating their many attractive and provocative insights.

II

In this dissertation I am concerned with the process of the formation of a social, cultural and ideological system conforming to what were projected as norms by the brāhmaṇas in Bengal. Cultural systems, as Talcott Parsons puts it, are organized about patterns of the meaning of objects and the expression of these meanings through symbols and signs. In other words, these are patterns of empirical existential ideas which function through their institutionalization in the social system and internalization in the personality. Thus a culture acquires its distinctive form through the common acceptance of an ideology which makes coherent meaning of the objects that constitute the existential reality, and their relations, by the majority of the members of a community. The construction of the brahmanical ideology in Bengal, which inheres continuity in trans-regional symbols and adoption of local symbols, and the process of its socialisation are the themes of this dissertation.

However, the term ideology subsumes such a wide range of meanings that it has no practical use as a conceptual category unless specifically restated in each context. Terry Eagleton has listed sixteen definitions of ideology currently in circulation which include a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class, false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power, forms of thought motivated by social interests, the conjunc-
ture of discourse and power, and the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure. He points out that not all of these formulations are compatible with each other.\textsuperscript{46} Besides, an unqualified use of the term ideology raises other related problems such as whether ideology should be conceived in negative (socially necessary illusion) or positive (world-view of a group) terms, whether ideology has a subjective and psychological character or is entirely dependent on objective factors, and whether ideology is a particular aspect of the vast range of superstructural phenomena or is equivalent to and co-extensive with the whole cultural sphere.\textsuperscript{47} These dichotomies need resolution before the concept can be put to any meaningful use. Therefore a brief discussion on the sense in which I have used the term ideology is called for.

It is generally agreed that all societies require one or more ideologies for them to function properly. This suggests that they fulfill some vitally important social requirement. Stability of social organizations are continuously threatened either by mutually exclusive interests of opposed classes or by the anxiety of socio-psychological malintegration of individuals or groups in the face of contradictory demands arising out of discrepancies between forces of continuity and change, liberty and political order. Ideology helps to contain these potentially disruptive elements either by justifying the established social order to the detriment of oppressed classes who are somehow persuaded to be reconciled to their lot, in which case it is an "exploitative value-system" imposed on the people, or by providing remedial support through explanation, obfuscation or amelioration of social discrepancies by non-rational means such as religion, in which case it is a "patterned response to patterned strains" allowing symbolic outlet to emotional disturbances.\textsuperscript{48}

It may be noted that in both these understandings, ideology has been conceived primarily in the prejorative
sense. Ideology performs necessary social functions, but it does so by distorting objective realities, by obscuring real contradictions, even though it may satisfy some very genuine and deep-seated human needs, such as freedom from a sense of alienation, impotence and guilt. Raymond Geuss argues that traditional religions owe their persistence to their ability to meet some of these basic needs by providing human beings with approved models of action, goals, ideals and values and by furnishing interpretations of such existential features of life as birth and death, suffering and evil. But its explanatory and didactic framework is based on an assumption of the existence of some empirically unverifiable transcendental power which never intervenes directly to alter human condition. Thus ideology does not solve actual problems but diffuses them and in the process may even justify, reinforce, and perpetuate human suffering. It only offers imaginary resolution of real contradictions. In this sense ideology is a form of consciousness which is sustained by false beliefs.

This Marxist characterization of ideology as false consciousness has been one of the most influential understandings of the nature and functions of the concept. However, it is now being argued that so complex and pervasive a concept as ideology can hardly be pushed into one or the other of the black and white compartments of true and false, because an ideological formulation often contains elements of both. What is important for us is to recognize that, true or false, ideologies are always conditioned by the objective situations in any society. As Eagleton puts it, "in order to be truly effective, ideologies must make at least some minimal sense of people's experience, must conform to some degree with what they know of social reality from their practical interaction with it.... They must be 'real' enough to provide the basis on which individuals can fashion a coherent identity, must furnish some solid motivations for effective action, and must make at least some
feeble attempt to explain away their own more flagrant contradictions and incoherences. In short, successful ideologies must be more than imposed illusions, and for all their inconsistencies must communicate to their subjects a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough not to be simply rejected out of hand. 

Clifford Geertz has remarked with even greater emphasis, "Whatever else ideologies may be... they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience."

As a result, a number of important Marxist scholars are now rejecting the notion that normative conceptions of what is good and bad or what is possible and impossible are accessible only through 'true knowledge' of the reality of existence, which ideologies suppress and mask. Instead, it is necessary to remember that if ideologies are lived beliefs, then they are internal to social practices and thus constitutive of those practices. Therefore they can hardly be called false in the sense of being unreal. Ideologies are much more than mere states of mind, for they continuously constitute and reconstitute social subjects. Hence it is possible to move a step further and argue that ideologies are not only shaped by existential reality but are a part of it, an active material force which must have enough cognitive content to help organize the practical lives of human beings. This does not necessarily deny the fact that ideologies often contain beliefs which are even empirically untrue, or at least undemonstrable. But what kind of falsehood will this involve also depends on the availability of social options, since an ideology must appear plausible for it to succeed.

However, ideology is much more than a neutral set of beliefs, articulated through a pattern of interlocking symbols. The function of ideology in a society cannot be understood without reference to the question of power.
Power may be exercised through coercion, or legitimation, or more frequently, through a combination of both. It has been the cumulative experience of all organized societies that power cannot be sustained over a large and diverse group of people for a long period of time by means of coercion alone. It requires ideological support to legitimise the authority of the dominant social group.

David Beetham characterises legitimate power as power "that provides grounds for obedience on the part of those subordinate to it, because of the normative force that derives from rules, from justificatory principles, and from actions expressing consent." He adds that the maintenance and reproduction of legitimacy do not take place independently of the structures of power that they legitimate. The ongoing power structures legitimate themselves through their preferential access to the means of cultural development and the dissemination of ideas within society. Beetham reminds us, that the processes of developing and transmitting ideas require an independence from the powerful to secure their authenticity, for the power of ideas, unlike other forms of power, can be measured only in terms of their credibility to the recipient. However, even this credibility is indirectly created by that same system of power as it shapes the expectations and interests of subordinate groups through a variety of social processes, so that justifications for the rules of power becomes credible because they are confirmed by their own experience. Thus legitimation is a self-confirming circle which makes the socially constructed appear as natural, although this fact is obscured by the complexity of the process. Beetham sums up the functions of a system of power thus: "to confirm the differentiation between dominant and subordinate which justifies their respective positions; to structure the common interest so that it can only be met through satisfying the purposes of the powerful; to help shape the desires of the subordinate in directions that the system is capable of meeting; to limit the choices available.
so that consent to a position of subordination, although constrained, is also at the same time voluntary." Legitimation therefore can be more effective in maintaining unequal relations of power on a long term basis, because it depresses rather than excites the opposing forces.

III

The question of domination and consent brings us to the related concept of hegemony, formulated by the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Most of Gramsci's thoughts, contained in his Prison Notebooks, are polemical, deliberately abstruse to baffle prison censor, and fragmented and provisional, for they were never intended for publication, at least in this form. As a result some of the most important concepts which Gramsci developed are not defined with any precision, leading to the production of a large exegetical literature containing conflicting interpretations. Gramsci's most interesting ideas cluster around the concept of cultural hegemony which I have used as the theoretical premise for my understanding of the phenomenon of brahmanism in Bengal. Hence a clarification of the term from my point of view is necessary.

Gramsci made a distinction between domination which is realized through the coercive organs of the state, and intellectual and moral leadership which is objectified in and exercised through the institutions of civil society. It is this latter form of domination, which is far more pervasive and durable than the one achieved through coercion alone, constitutes hegemony. Gwyn Williams has encapsulated the nature and extent of hegemonic control thus: Hegemony consists of "an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religions and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intel-
lectual and moral connotations." In other words, hegemony is a relation of domination, not by means of force but through ideological legitimation. It is the organization of consent.

Is the consent, thus achieved, an active one? Gramsci himself seems to have been unclear on this question. At times, he suggests that consent in a hegemonic situation takes the form of active commitment which derives from a complete internalization of dominant values and definitions. On other occasions he implies that consent is only a passive one due to a very partial assimilation of dominant values and is conditioned by an uneasy feeling that the status quo, while shamefully iniquitous, is nevertheless the only viable form of society. Thus consent for Gramsci is never one-dimensional; it is a complex mental state where approval and indifference, resistance and resignation co-exist. Therefore hegemonic situations differ in intensity and the degree of variation depends on the dynamics of historical development. That is why "hegemony maintenance" has to be an active unfolding process, "a process of continuous creation".

The most important contribution of the concept of hegemony to the study of intellectual and cultural history is that it offers historians "an opportunity to connect ideas with the 'social matrix' that they are being constantly urged to locate, without reducing the ideas to mere epiphenomena." However, this flexibility in Gramsci has raised doubts about his credentials as a Marxist thinker. Gramsci undeniably departed in important ways from classical Marxism. In his scheme of things mental life is more than a pale reflection of more basic developments in material life and the relationship between the two realms is one of circular interaction rather than of linear causality. Therefore Gramsci broadened and deepened the Marxist notions of ideology in significant ways. His emphasis on the role of consciousness in maintaining social equilibrium as well as in
accelerating social change has led many of his critics to discover idealist tendencies in his writings. However, Gramsci did not reject the crucial centrality of the material basis in shaping this consciousness. Gramsci never made a complete theoretical statement on this issue, but in several passages in his notebooks he either explicitly states or obviously implies that "the economic base not only sets limits but also determines... the form and content of the superstructure." He merely suggests that base does not automatically determine consciousness but it indicates what forms of consciousness are possible. Therefore hegemonic situations must have to be understood with reference to the total historical context.

However, the strongest criticism of Gramsci, best expressed by Perry Anderson in his famous critique, has been that he has over-emphasised the role of ideology and underplayed coercion in his formulation of the concept of hegemony. Gramsci is said to have neglected the fact that culture and power are too pervasive and intertwined to be conceived as separable categories and that the state in the capitalist system combines within itself both the mechanism of coercion and the ideological apparatus. That is why Anderson points out that Gramsci is mistaken in locating hegemony in civil society alone, rather than in the state.

While it is undeniable that Gramsci's major concern is legitimation obtained through ideological discourse, he has neither relegated coercion to the background nor conceived of culture and ideology independently of power. Indeed, he has pointed out how consciousness itself is shaped by power relations and has drawn attention to the advantages of invisibility of power which is disseminated throughout the texture of social life and thus naturalised as custom, habit, and spontaneous practice. It is the power of the dominant in all sense of the term - politically through control of the state, economically through control of rela-
tions of production, and socially through control of culture and mass media - that ideology legitimates. But coercion need not be exercised through violence alone; the threat of retrenchment or of divine retribution may be as effective. Power is such a constant in determining social relations as also in the Marxist understanding of social formations that Gramsci, in his attempt to create greater space for the role of consciousness, tends to give the impression that beliefs, values, and norms, and not power, are the key variables for explaining social order. But in fact Gramsci has never said so, although by his insistence on the importance of shared values he does seem to suggest relative autonomy of spheres.

James Scott, on the other hand, accuses Gramsci, and more particularly his followers Miliband and Althusser, for substituting a kind of ideological determinism for material determinism they sought to avoid. He argues that the notion of hegemony fails to differentiate between submission offered under economic compulsion and consent willingly offered due to ideological conversion. Thus, Scott continues, theories of hegemony frequently confound what is inevitable with what is just, an error that the subordinate classes rarely, if ever, make. As a result, in power-laden situations, the subordinate classes only routinely submit to the dominant group out of pragmatic considerations, although they are perfectly capable of penetrating and demystifying the prevailing ideology on the basis of their daily material experience. However, it has been argued that this critique is based on a rather limited conception of Gramsci which insist that hegemony can exist only when the ruling ideology determines all consciousness. But recent interpretations of Gramsci, notably from Femia, Adamson and Lears, are increasingly emphasising the fact that Gramsci recognized the possibility of conflict and coexistence of contradictory consciousness in the outlooks both of single individuals and groups within any given hegemony.
The problems of utilising the insights of Gramsci for an understanding of how brahmanism organized consent are obvious. Gramsci was attempting to understand how the capitalist society functions. Therefore, most of the examples cited by him are drawn from such societies. He also assumed that the dominant group or the ruling class necessarily controls the production process. Finally, he had a preeminently political agenda in front of him; he was seeking ways to subvert the passive consent that the working class offers to its capitalist masters. None of these conditions help to facilitate an understanding of the creation and maintenance of brahmanical hegemony in early medieval Bengal. To begin with, the nature of both the social organisation and the state was vastly different in the two cases. Especially, the typical institutions of civil society that Gramsci had in mind did not exist in early medieval Bengal. Secondly, and this is crucial, the brahmanas cannot be said to have been the leaders in the production sector, even though it is difficult to decide who were. Independent petty peasant producers seem to have formed the backbone of the economy of early medieval Bengal. A sizeable section of the peasantry must have been under varying degree of subordination to the dominant socio-economic groups - from the intermediaries to the landlords, some of whom were brahmanas, under the general surveillance of the state. Thus the interest of the brahma donee/landlord was closely tied to that of the ruling class/state in economic management, but they themselves hardly controlled production. The political agenda is outside of my purview.

And yet there is an essential similarity in the manner in which hegemony operates in any society. The context-specific variables determine the nature and intensity of hegemonic control, but the necessity of having ideological support for a stable socio-political order, irrespective of its form, cannot be denied. Georges Duby's description of the process of diffusion of cultural patterns in eleventh
century France may serve as an illustrative parallel. He noticed that the centres of cultural creation were located in the upper levels of the social structure, among the members of the ecclesiastical avant-garde. "But since they were consciously working towards a popular audience, they readily accepted some of the diffuse tendencies, general ideas and mental images which were widely spread in lower cultural levels. The intention was to harness these tendencies, so that the propaganda, couched in familiar terms, could more easily reach the masses."70 Barring a few specifics, such as the absence of the knight as the other and competing cultural model, this could easily have been a description of the Puranic process in early medieval Bengal. The efforts of the clerics to create a popular culture and transmit it through carnivals finds an unmistakable resonance in the brāhmaṇa adoption of the indigenous goddesses as a symbol of apparently shared myths, rituals and beliefs and the dissemination of these through the vratas, involving the entire village community. Moreover, the role of the brāhmaṇas, performing the functions of the "traditional intellectuals", their attempts to manipulate the popular themes, the location of the ideological domination in the non-coercive organs of the society and the mutually supportive function of the state and the civil institutions in terms of division of power,71 thus offering the advantage of invisibility of power and credibility of the dominant, are all conditions that fit into the Gramscian conception of hegemony.

However, this phenomenon was not unique to Bengal. Ainslie Embree has described brahmanical ideology as one of the two most important unifying linkages in Indian civilization. By brahmanical he does not imply an ideology that is confined to one group, "but rather a set of values, ideas, concepts, practices and myths that are identifiable in the literary tradition and social institutions."72 Embree argues that Hinduism comprises divergent strands which vary
in time and space, while brahmanism consists of much more coherent and consistent intellectual statements about a cosmic order that links all its elements in a continuous and understandable pattern. The brāhmaṇa, who possesses the knowledge of the Brahman, and therefore has the right to decide the rules of proper conduct (dharma), maintains this order in which each entity occupies a necessary and logical place in a hierarchical structure. It is this remarkable continuity of the core of brahmanism with the flexibility to adjust to radically different political and social situations without yielding ground, that gave the brāhmaṇas an awareness of sharing a common heritage of language and value with others of their varṇa throughout the subcontinent, despite fluctuating patronage under different political authorities.

Embree thus suggests that the brāhmaṇas were not an artistocracy in the European sense, which combines blood lineages with economic and political power, but rather a group which identified itself with the ideology that provided rationality and coherence to society. Individual kings could have been ignorant or impious, large segments of the population might have been unfamiliar with the brahmanical ideology in its articulated form, but the deference paid to it over the ages shows its extraordinary dominance as an ideology.73 I agree with Embree's reading of the basic contents and the essentially unchanging nature of the core of brahmanical ideology, except that he does tend to underscore the textual basis of brahmanism and view the brāhmaṇas as one homogeneous community, ignoring the enormous regional variations and complex internal differentiations. However, it should also be noted that when it came to the assertion of brahmanical superiority, particularly in such peripheral areas as Bengal where the intermediate varṇas were conspicuous by their absence, they did succeed in projecting a collective identity.
This conception of the structure and function of the brahmana varṇa helps us to understand not only the process of construction and propagation of the brahmanical ideology in early medieval Bengal, but also the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world defined by them in the Purāṇic texts which eventually shaped Bengal's cultural tradition and regional identity. As mentioned earlier, the goddesses and the vratas were two of the important elements adopted by the brahmaṇas from the religious practices of the local population of Bengal and these were invested with a significance that transcended the purely local boundaries. The brahmaṇas did not disturb most of the prevailing normative goals, such as those which were sought to be achieved through the performance of the indigenous vratas for example, but they made it appear as if these goals would be best realised if the vratas were performed in the brahmanical way. These measures facilitated the acceptance of the brahmaṇas by the local people and at the same time demonstrated that they possessed a superior knowledge and had access into supra-local resources. Thus the diverse local traditions were brought under the over-arching canopy of brahmanism which paved the way for a larger social identity. The institutionalization of the brahmanical principle of social organization - the caste hierarchy - strengthened this bond. While this ensured brahmana-dominance beyond question, it also allowed the fragmented indigenous social groups entry into wider social networks, a point noted by Nírmal Kumar Basu in passing, although its significance and multiple ramifications have not yet been properly explored. Implicit in this complex relationship was the asymmetrical organization of power, sustained by the persuasive potential of the brahmanical ideology. With the gradual acceptance of this ideology, what was once the world-view of a privileged social group became coextensive with almost the entire cultural sphere of Bengal.
I have found the concept of hegemony useful in understanding the socio-religious processes initiated by the Brahmaṇas in Bengal from the post-Gupta times, the effects of which began to crystallize from the early medieval period. Ever since the discovery of Gramsci by the English-speaking world in the early seventies, his insights have been widely used to explain a variety of historical situations, but rarely by the Marxist historians of ancient India. The prevailing attitude is best exemplified by K.M. Shrimali who, after an erudite and sensitive review of the relevant literature, wrote in his presidential address to the ancient India section of the Indian History Congress: "While we appreciate the considerable influence exercised by religion and ideology at a given point of time and perhaps even their functioning as material force due to passage of time, the sort of autonomy-hegemony-dominance attributed to them from the days of Durkheim Weber Eliade Gramsci and Godelier is exaggerated and unwarranted. Religion and ideology and their role in the society should be taken as the components of the 'superstructure' formulated by Marx and Engels."76

I think it is unfair to bracket Gramsci with Eliade for example, whose conception of the autonomy of the religious sphere is in no way compatible with that of Gramsci. As I have pointed out, Gramsci does not advocate ideological determinism, that he firmly locates ideology within the power relations which the ruling class controls by virtue of its ownership of the means of production in any given society, and therefore the disjunction he posits between the state and the civil society is a theoretical one for the sake of analytical convenience, that, despite his notorious inconsistency, Gramsci clearly accords primacy to the base in determining what forms of consciousness are possible. Gramsci's insistence on the role of ideology in shaping consciousness only helps to bring into relief what already existed,77 but remained dormant, in classical Marxism.
The question of autonomy of the religious sphere is a complex one and Gramsci never directly addressed this question. Religious speculation, at a certain stage of its evolution, may acquire relative autonomy from its immediate determinants, but religion in isolation of the larger social needs can survive only as an esoteric faith. In any case it does not concern me, because the religious process of my study is actually a social process expressed through religious idiom. The most significant aspect of the concept of hegemony is its comprehensiveness, its ability to understand and explain the multiple ramifications of the dynamics of social existence. Brahmanism succeeded in establishing an order in early medieval Bengal in which the brahmanical conception of reality pervaded both the political principles and social relations, particularly in their ideological connotations. It is of no consequence if this domination does not qualify to be characterised as hegemonic. The nomenclature is not important.

IV

An unavoidable word about the method of analysis, particularly when my sources are, quite literally, the 'texts'. I have dwelt at length on the method of reading the Purānic texts primarily for two reasons. In recent years the pervasive influence of literary critical theory on the social sciences have so undermined some of the fundamental assumptions of these disciplines that it has become necessary to acknowledge its presence and assess its applicability to the study of texts from the historian's point of view, and in my case the didactic texts in particular, instead of simply dismissing it or making eclectic use of the terminology. (As a matter of fact, in the dissertation I have consciously made as little use of this terminology as possible.) This requires enunciation of the relevant issues involved in the debate. The question of how my qualified acceptance of some aspects of critical theory
for an understanding of the narrative strategy of the Purāṇas is compatible with the larger conceptual framework of brahmanical hegemony also calls for an explanation. I feel that a statement of my position towards the beginning will save tiresome repetition of the same later in the dissertation.

For a long time historians have understood texts as displaying the intention of the author, which in turn is shaped by the socio-economic and politico-cultural context in which the author is located. It was believed that the two reinforce each other and together they provide the clues to the causal explanation of historical processes of continuity and change. Historians took every possible precaution to check the authenticity of the text and safeguard the neutrality of the information, always assuming that the information thus derived 'reflect' the 'reality' of the situation in which the text was composed or to which it refers. Once the veracity of the information was proved beyond reasonable doubt and the biases neutralised, the text was considered to be the transparent storehouse of historical 'truths' from which the historian was supposed to select and arrange the relevant material for the reconstruction of past events.

The greater the sophistication in method, the more discriminating has been the approach to the sources such as the text. But very few historians have discarded as a matter of principle context dependent causality as the fundamental factor in historical explanation. Those practising historians who have written on the historian's craft, and those philosophers of history who have speculated on its nature and function, have usually upheld the centrality of a hierarchy of causes and the human agency which dictates them as two of the most important constituents of history. They suggested that the texts reveal their 'meaning' (which permits the historian to arrive at his explanation of the succession of ideas and events) when read
with reference to the intention of the author and the forces that shape this intention.

Even as late as 1969 Quentin Skinner insisted that the study of intellectual history presupposes an understanding of what authors of texts meant to say in different historical contexts and communicative situations. Skinner argues that our ideas constitute a response to more immediate circumstances and therefore we should study not the texts in themselves but the context of other happenings which explains them. If this is accepted then it seems clear that at least a part of such understanding must lie in grasping what sort of society the given author was writing for and trying to persuade. This context, he says, gets mistakenly treated as the determinant of what is said in a text. "It needs rather to be treated as an ultimate framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of that kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate." Thus the context consists of both what the texts were intended to mean and how this meaning was anticipated to be taken. Skinner adds: "It follows from this that to understand a text must be to understand both the intention to be understood, and the intention that this intention should be understood, which the text itself as an intended act of communication must at least have embodied." For the sacred texts in particular, Joseph Kitagawa has emphasised the need to take into consideration "the total context", the "culture as a whole", in order to comprehend the meaning of specific symbols, myths or rituals contained in such texts.

But what has been termed postmodernist critical debate has radically questioned these assumptions in the last twenty years and has threatened to alter the foundation of the historian's traditional understanding of the text. The most easily discernible consequence of this debate from the
The historian's point of view has been the shift from material reality to language as the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning. Language is no longer construed as simply a transparent medium for the representation of a reality outside of itself. Instead, language is conceived of as a self-contained system of signs whose meanings are determined by their relations to each other rather than some extralinguistic object or subject. Thus, postmodernism tends to posit that far from being a part of the social world, language precedes the world and makes it intelligible by constructing it according to its own rules of signification. It denies the idea of an objective universe existing independently of speech and universally comprehensible despite one's membership in any particular language system.84

The first casualty of this understanding was the individuality of the author. Roland Barthes declared the author dead, because "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing".85 Barthes drew upon linguistics to show that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocuters. He argued that a text is not a sequence of words releasing a single theological meaning (which he dismissively called "the message of the Author-God") but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. None of these writings are, however, "original", because the author is born into an already existing language which governs him. Thus, "once the author is removed the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing".86 Such a view completely transforms the traditional notion of the author as a centred subject, in conscious control of and responsible for his own utterances.
The second major categorical opposition questioned by this semiologically oriented history of meanings is that between representation and reality. If meanings do not simply represent but actually constitute reality experienced by human beings, then there can be no extratextual reality. When the author ceases to exist, the variables which situate an author, which Barthes called his "hypostases" \(^{87}\) - society, history, psyche etc., - also become redundant. It therefore follows that, as Towes remarks, "the context in which a textual artefact or systematic pattern is to be understood must itself be conceived as a compound world of constituted meanings, as a text requiring interpretation. Both text and context are complex relations of 'signifying practices'. The connections between them must thus be construed as 'intertextual'. The context never 'explains' the text in the sense of providing the essence of its appearance or the cause of its effect or the reality of its representation". \(^{88}\) Thus text and society are homologous to each other and the focus of interpretation is directed not to the content of social life or texts but to the linguistic codes which constitute social and discursive formations.

An inevitable consequence of this understanding is the dismantling of the hierarchy of causes in historical explanation, because it is impossible to establish the priority of the society to the texts or claim that society determines or causes the cultural production of meaning. Mental structures no longer depend on their material determinants. The representations of the social world themselves constitute the social reality. In other words, as Gabrielle Spiegel argues, what is real is the semiotic codes that govern the representation of life both in writing and in incorporated social structures. "If the imaginary is real and the real imaginary and there are no epistemological grounds for distinguishing between, then it is impossible to create an explanatory hierarchy that establishes a causal relationship between history and literature, life and thought, matter and
meaning.... It becomes impossible, on this basis, to identify aspects of social, political, or economic life which somehow stand apart from or make up a 'reality' independent of the cultural constructions which historically conditioned discourses generate". When society is implicitly emptied of its normal significance and reinscribed as social text, they cannot admit of a cause and effect relationship.

This conception of text and context so fundamentally militates against the traditional notions of the construction of the past that one would have thought that it will be by and large unacceptable to the historians. However, a number of historians seem to share this understanding. Thus Dominick LaCapra, for example, suggests that to believe that authorial intentions fully control the meaning or functioning of texts is to assume a proprietary relation between the author and the text as well as a unitary meaning for an utterance, while this relationship may involve multiple forms of tension, including self-contestation. He similarly discounts a straight correlation between author's life and text and society and text. Instead, LaCapra advocates that the text should be seen as "the 'place' where long tradition and specific time intersect, and it effects variations on both. But the text is not immobilized or presented as an autonomous node; it is situated in a fully relational network." Thus put, it may superficially appear that he is neither completely denying authorial intention nor materiality of the text, but is merely attempting to correct the social historian's supposedly one-dimensional reading of texts as documentary representations of reality. But implicit in his formulation is the negation of the context as the source of the realities traditionally believed to have been reflected in the text, and by extension, of causality, stability of meaning, human agency and social determination.
Very recently, however, one can observe a slight shift from this disregard for the extralinguistic context and the "authorial intention fallacy" to a more circumspect appraisal of the discipline of history. For instance, J.R. Jackson makes a distinction between historical criticism and literary criticism in unearthing the meaning of texts. "Historical criticism", according to Jackson, "is criticism that tries to read past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new".94 This view does not gloss over the text-context relationship by treating culture, institution, ideology, and power as merely interworked systems of symbolic codes, but recognizes an intention that was contemporaneously understood. Cultural materialism, advocated by Raymond Williams, addresses this problem through its insistence on the materiality of thought and writing as "actions-in-the-world" with real consequences comparable to what historians call events.95 Another variation of the relationship between the "real" and the literary text within Marxist categories has been suggested by Frederick Jameson. He views literary texts as an allegory of history in which "the literary text... may... be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext...."96 He also seems to accord priority to history as the "interpretative master code",97 since the linguistic usage has to be traced back to the historical process.

In fact "post-structuralist Marxism", i.e., Marxism which is responsive to the structuralist and post-structuralist criticism, has devoted some attention to this problem and its conclusions appear to be more conducive for a historical understanding of the text. Tony Bennett has defined the concerns of Marxist literary theory thus: "the development of a historical and materialist theory of the interactions between texts classified as literary, other ideological phenomena and broader social and political process and relationships, recognising that the system of
classification within which the 'literary' is produced are always culturally specific and that, therefore, their functioning and effects are a part of what needs to be studied". He adds a rider that such a theory cannot be adequately developed if predicated on the assumption that the relations between literary texts and the broader social processes can be determined, once and for all, by referring such texts to the conditions of production obtaining at the moment of their origin. On the contrary, "the actual and variable functioning of texts in history can only be understood if account is taken of the ways in which such originary relations may be modified through the operation of subsequent determinations - institutional and discursive - which may retrospectively cancel out, modify or overdetermine those which marked the originating conditions of a text's production".

On the basis of this consideration Bennett suggests that the proper object for Marxist literary theory consists not in the study of texts but in the study of "reading formations". By a reading formation he means "a set of discursive and intertextual determinations which organise and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another in constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways". This understanding of course explicitly accepts context as the point of reference for the text, but this context is not an extratextual social context but a set of discursive and intertextual determinations, operating on material and institutional supports, which motivate a text not just externally but also internally. This insistence on intertextual and discursive determination of the meaning of texts argues for a method of analysis apparently so removed from the fundamental postulates of Marxism that it can hardly be considered a variant of Marxism at all. But Bennett points out that "it is precisely because texts are material phenomena
that their social and ideological articulations may be discursively re-ordered, and by social and material means since, of course, discursive processes are social and material processes produced within specifiable institutional conditions".101 Thus Bennett operates within recognizable Marxist categories. He only wishes to emphasise that a text must not be understood with reference to its originating conditions of production alone, but should be viewed together with the manner in which it is discursively remoulded within an institutional framework, in order to appreciate the nature of its subsequent functioning.

I have found this approach helpful for an understanding of my texts - the Bengal Purāṇas. Instead of emphasising the unproblematic superstructural character of literary production, this approach takes into account the discursive practices without disregarding the materiality of the text, the context, the shared and evolving cultural presuppositions and their interrelationships. The Bengal Purāṇas are not the "complex texts" of LaCapra; they are normative texts with an obvious pedagogical intention. It is therefore necessary to trace these texts to their authors, their audience and the discursive field to appreciate both the particular manner of their codification as well as the modalities of their function in a communicative situation. Hence a brief statement on the brahmanical vision and the textual strategy of the Bengal Purāṇas will help to demonstrate how this method of analysis reveals the most significant and historically verifiable meaning of the Purāṇas.

The brāhmaṇas, especially in the peripheral areas, wanted to enter into a dialogue with the indigenous population through the composition and propagation of a set of texts, because the success of their undertaking of establishing and maintaining brahmanical hegemony depended on the acceptance of their normative prescriptions and the internalisation of their cultural assumptions by the local people. In other words, they composed their texts with a view
to invoking a particular response in their intended recipi­
ents. These socio-religious prescriptions consisted of a
series of legitimations of local beliefs and practices
already in vogue and reiteration of the fundamental princi­
ples of brahmanism. These legitimations had to be worked
out in such a way that they did not impair the recognition
of the original model and yet privileged the brāhmaṇas with
the authority to decide the degree of admissibility of the
local usages. The brahmanical prescriptions are contained
in the Bengal Purāṇas, composed and redacted over half a
millenium or more, and propagated through the mandatory
exposition of them during the performance of the transformed
indigenous popular ritual of the vrata.

This context to a large extent determined the character
and the textual strategy of the Bengal Purāṇas. In the
first place, the need to accommodate diverse local customs
had built into the Purāṇas fully valid multiple voices,
voices other than exclusively those of their brāhmaṇa au-
thors. I use the term voice in the Bakhtinian sense to
include matters not just linguistic but also those relating
to ideology and power in society, which attempt to situate
the reader/listener in certain ways. "Language is not a
neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the pri­
vate property of the speaker's intentions", Bakhtin wrote,
"it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of
others". The Bengal Purāṇas naturalise the speech of
several others and in the process display inner tensions,
collaborations and negotiations, which are more than mere
authoritative statements, but are comparable to dialogues.
This plurality of voices make the Purāṇas truly polyphonic
in character. However, in any text the voice of the narra-
tor is also an essential presence, and the contending voices
in the Bengal Purāṇas are harmonised by the governing atti-
tude or the ideology of the brāhmaṇas. The Purāpic texts
were constituted through this complex process of negotia-
tion. Once formulated, they became a part of the material
context, and their subsequent discursive reordering within the institutional framework continued to redefine the brahmanical agenda in Bengal.

The formal and thematic features of the Purānic texts primarily derive from this process of formation of the brahmanical discourse in Bengal. The Bengal Purāṇas are highly persuasive. Although they seldom engage in 'rational' argument, they also do not issue commands without providing what they consider suitable justifications. Justifications are usually provided in the form of an anecdote describing an incident in the life of a mythical character of the past. These stories illustrate the consequence of conforming to or transgressing a Purānic injunction in which threat of retribution and allurement of reward are delicately balanced. But the grounds of justification may vary from one narrative context to another and a slight shift in emphasis in the common and familiar plot may present a very different message within the universe of brahmanical discourse. Thus descriptive rhetoric is the principal mode of enunciation in the Bengal Purāṇas.

As a result, these texts are invariably prolix, hyperbolic, endlessly repetitive and in certain respects manifestly self-contradictory. They disproportionately exaggerate one possibility often only to contradict it later. This tension is sustained throughout. Due to a certain sectarian commitment a particular Purāṇa may adopt an internally consistent position, but all the other Purāṇas are unlikely to subscribe to the same view. In several matters of detail, the Purāṇas implicitly differ with one another. The repetitions are apparently simple reminders, aimed at convincing a diverse audience. But often a statement is repeated with a minor, almost imperceptible, difference, so that the listener is lulled into believing that he is being told the same thing, while at the end the proposition may have changed substantially. This ceaseless reiteration of
mutually exclusive statements is a narrative device which helps to create an impression of ambiguity. It allows interpretive space to the individual listener which unequivocally stated categorical positions do not permit.

It is not as if the Purāṇas do not make decisive statements; they always do. But the contrary statements are equally emphatic and self-assured. Thus no fixed value can be attached to each isolated statement in the Purāṇas, but collectively they underscore the authority of the brāhmaṇas. Each statement is authentic in its ever-shifting relative context because it has been made by a brāhmaṇa and is included within a textual corpus which defines the social milieu within which it has normative significance. The brāhmaṇas impart organic unity to the discursive process. However, there are certain matters, such as the infallibility of the Vedas, the ritual prerogative of the brāhmaṇas, maintenance of the varṇāśrama-dharma and rejection of Buddhism, regarding which the Purāṇas display an absolute unanimity of opinion. It is this uniformity which saves the open-ended Purānic arrangement from dissolving into chaos. But in most other matters the Purāṇas offer their listeners a semblance of freedom through perpetual restatement of binaries - the popular customs vis-a-vis the Vedic ordinance, the indigenous goddesses vis-a-vis the brahmanical śakti, the local traditions vis-a-vis the supra-local perspective. This duality, though deceptive, theoretically admits of several possibilities in a single situation. "The formal points of repetition, variation, contradiction, detail, and scale thus assume a dimension of content as well". This textual strategy is particularly appropriate from the point of view of brahmanism for it diffuses the conflicts and reconciles the irreconcilable. As O'Flahery points out, everything is constantly in flux; the conflicts are resolved in suspension rather than in solution. But everything keeps coming back to the stable social order ensured by the institution of caste which limits individual
options, to the dominant voice of the brahmaṇa in which all oppositions are fused.

This dominant voice, however, is impersonal and it is unaffected by any particular linguistic practice, because the Purāṇas were composed in a language to which the indigenous population had no access. This is not surprising in view of the fact that disputes over language domains are contests of power. By excluding the majority from access to one of the most potent symbols of brahmanical authority - literacy, embodied by the texts -- they succeeded in exercising much greater control. But if historical criticism consists of reading the past works in the way in which they were supposed to have been understood by the people for whom they were meant, then language use does not help us in recovering the meaning of the Purāṇic texts as these were conveyed to their audience. The Purāṇas were the repository of brahmanical wisdom written in Sanskrit, but they were purveyed in the vernacular for popular consumption. Therefore the exposition must have consisted of annotated commentary of the Purāṇic myths and legends by a class of professional narrators, who presented the essential content and the rhetoric of the Purāṇas rather than the exact words. Thus it is the internal arrangement of the Purāṇas more than the precise use of language, that should concern the historian.

This view comes close to what Frederick Jameson has called the semantic approach to genre criticism. Several genres can of course simultaneously coexist in a single discourse and therefore what is of interest to us is not the sensibility of a particular genre, but the totalizing worldview of a corpus of texts representing a coherent discourse. The Purāṇic texts of Bengal, despite sectarian discontinuities, form an indivisible corpus, and I am seeking the brahmanical worldview that they collectively portray, submerging the other minor differences. From the point of view of textual strategy it is as if "a single text writ large",
and what is at issue here is the unity or the identity of the corpus as a whole. Although LaCapra warns us that relation among texts in a corpus may involve uneven development and differing forms of repetition or displacement that may make simple models of intelligibility questionable, it does not create much difficulty in the case of the Bengal Purāṇas. I have already mentioned (and explained in greater detail later in the dissertation) how Purānic texts themselves engaged in procedures of exclusion or domination that tended to neutralise their more disconcerting or contestatory movements, such as sectarian tensions or attitude towards a body of rituals. It would have been more convincing if the synthesising tendency of these texts could be brought out in a chronological sequence displaying a linear movement towards uniformity, but it is virtually impossible to set the Bengal Purāṇas (or, for that matter, any anonymous normative text of this kind) to such an order. Therefore generalisations on the entire corpus have to remain somewhat impressionistic.

This impression is, however, strengthened by the absence of individual authors for these texts. Purānic scholars such as R.C. Hazra have established that many of these texts were written over a long stretch of time, often spanning centuries. They were strung together by the shared interest of a social group which justifies a common denomination and authorship. Therefore the conclusion is inescapable that the Purāṇas were not written by individuals with a specific identity, but by an idealised collectivity - the brāhmaṇa varṇa. The Bengal Purāṇas have indeed been attributed to Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana Vedavyāsa, who is also supposed to have written the proto-Purānic Mahābhārata and all the Mahāpurāṇas. But obviously this was a generic name used for the convenience of classification. Michel Foucault has pointed out that when several authors of a number of texts are referred to by one name, it implies that "relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authenti-
cation, or common utilization were established among them".106 He adds that in this sense the function of an author, however fictitious, is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.107 Thus if brahmanism found it reasonable to classify the authors of all these texts under a single name, it indicates an internal perception of the coherence of the Purānic discourse as an original underlying signification system, beyond the personal preference, intention, or idiosyncracy of an individual author. The significance of the anonymity of authorship of the early Indian texts was recognised by Velcheru Narayana Rao as early as 1983, although the problem continues to beset us. Rao observed: "Authorship in India does not signify the physical producer of the text, but rather authorizes the status of the text and a specific meaning that is derived from it. From this point of view, the author is a function of the text and a signifier of its received meaning. The author does not precede the text, as we think he does in our 'print-culture', but follows it. To put it differently, the author does not 'write' the text; rather, it is the text that 'writes' the author".108 In this sense, the Bengal Purāṇas wrote the name of Vyāsa as their author and thus imparted to themselves the necessary authority and a context-determined meaning.

Indeed, even within the realm of discourse, Foucault argues, a person can be the author of much more than a book -- a discipline or a tradition for instance (he cites the examples of Marx and Freud) -- within which new books and authors can proliferate. They clear the requisite space for the introduction of elements other than their own, which, nevertheless, remain within the discourse they initiated.109 Then the subsequent elaborations and emendations may be understood with reference to the original text(s). It may appear at first sight that the usual anonymity of the brahmanical texts prevents us from even speculating about the
possible intiactor of the Purânic discourse. However, since it can be stated with a fair degree of certainty that the rules of composition of the Purânic texts were formulated pretty early and commonly understood, it is not difficult to perceive why all subsequent contributions fed into the corpus without much friction. In fact there is such a symmetry even in the use of language in these texts that those Sanskritists who attempted to work out a comparative chronology of the redactions within each text on the basis of linguistic peculiarities had to ultimately depend on extra-linguistic considerations such as the introduction of a new social custom or a religious ritual or intertextual references as their guiding index. Even the grammatical errors in some of the Bengal Purâpas are uniformly distributed throughout the text. But more than the distinctive use of language, it is the surprising uniformity in the major thrust of the contents which points to a shared understanding of the discourse.

Therefore the right questions to ask from our point of view is not the authenticity of the author or how an individual author is revealed in the texts, but where the discourse comes from, how is it circulated and who controls it? Undoubtedly it came from the brâhmaṇas who initiated and controlled its circulation. However, the brâhmaṇas were a heterogeneous group, both socially and in sectarian persuasion. They had a closely guarded complex hierarchy of status and ranking; they had personal loyalties to different gods and goddesses and their modes of worship were accordingly determined; not all of them pursued the same profession, nor were they expected to have the same intellectual ability or moral distinction. This diversity could put my argument about the coherence of Purânic discourse in jeopardy, but it does not, because the texts not only take infinite care to gloss over these differences but also make every conceivable effort to present the brâhmaṇas as one monolithic community. The brâhmaṇa to be revered and propi-
tiated with gifts is never an individual but the representa-
tive of an entire social group, whatever be the internal
differences. The Purāṇic anxiety about the degenerate
brahmana relates only to the future, the dreaded but hope-
fully remote Kali age. For the present they are one, or so
the texts would have us believe. This common front is
fostered by a commonality of interests. This is implied in
the Purāṇic texts but is confirmed by the history of the
brahmaṇas in Bengal, as revealed in the other contemporary
sources. When read in conjunction with these, it is impos-
sible to overlook the Purāṇic attempt to foreground brahman-
cal interest. The many instances of self-contestation in
the Purāṇas do indicate, among other things, collective
authorship, but the brahmanical voices in them are diverse
rather than discordant, because these are pulled together by
the overriding motivation of self-interest.

Thus there was an intention to propagate the brahmanical
values and establish brahmanical institutions which
would guarantee the preservation of brahmanical interests.
But were these the intentions of the authors of the Purāṇas
or of the texts themselves? In the conventional
understanding of the relationship between the author and the
text, this question may appear redundant or even absurd.
But contemporary theories of literary criticism do make a
distinction between the two. Indeed, Umberto Eco provides
an ingenious answer to this question. He argues that the
intention of the text plays an important role as a source of
meaning which, while not being reducible to the pre-textual
intention of the author, none the less operates as a con-
straint upon the free play of the intentions of the reader
to make meaning of the text. Therefore Eco places the text
between the "empirical" and the "model" author and the
"empirical" and the "model" reader. The model author is not
the empirical author who actually writes the text, but a
textual strategy. The model reader is the one who reads the
text as it is designed to be read and the empirical reader
only makes conjectures about this designed reading. Placed between the two, the text's intention is only revealed as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader.¹¹¹

But how can one prove that a conjecture about the intention of the text is appropriate or even tenable from among the potentially inexhaustible range of possible conjectures? He suggests that, "the only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole.... The internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader".¹¹² Thus between the model author and the model reader the empirical author's intention becomes largely redundant, because the finished text may differ from the author's original intention and in any case the author knows that he will be interpreted not according to his intentions but according to a complex strategy which involves the reader's competence in language - not just the grammatical rules, but the entire range of cultural conventions - as a social treasury. Eco has not completely abandoned the empirical author and has introduced the concept of the "liminal" author who stands in the threshold between the intention of a given human being and the linguistic intention displayed by a textual strategy. On the threshold situation the liminal author is no longer an empirical person and not yet a mere text, but he obliges the words to set up a possible series of associations.¹¹³ But Eco certainly prefers the intention of the text to that of both the author and the reader: "Between the unattainable intention of the author and the arguable intention of the reader there is the transparent intention of the text, which disproves an untenable interpretation".¹¹⁴

However, the intention of the text is transparent when it approximates the intended meaning of the author, as it is designed to be read. What is being referred to by meaning here is neither the semiotics and the syntax of specific words or sentences in a text, nor the subjective response of
an individual reader to a text, but what the author means in what he says in the text. The fact that the author has a recognizable intention is derived from the reasonable supposition that any author must standardly be engaged in an intended act of communication in writing a text. Borrowing from J.L. Austin the concept of illocutionary force (what the author was doing in issuing a particular utterance, such as attacking or defending a particular line of argument, or criticizing or contributing to a particular tradition of discourse), Skinner, in a later article, has therefore argued that the recovery of an author's illocutionary intentions is not merely a necessary condition of being able to interpret the meanings of his works, but is actually equivalent to a knowledge of the meanings. Taken in this specific sense, the author's intention is not altogether unattainable. Skinner suggests that to recover the illocutionary intention the reader should not focus on the text alone, but on the prevailing conventions governing the issues or themes with which the text is concerned, which in turn is conditioned by the author's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs. The internal textual coherence of Eco is thus broadened by Skinner to encompass the larger discourse. We are fortunate in possessing abundant evidence in texts other than those with which we are concerned about the empirical beliefs of the brāhmaṇas and it is not difficult to construct their mental world. The intention of the Purānic texts of Bengal are transparent in that the illocutionary intentions of their authors have an unbroken continuity, and are therefore inescapable.

Thus the place of intention in the textual process is recognized, even though it may not be exactly the pre-textual intention of the author. The difference between the intention of the author and the text may appear too subtle for the historian (and the difference between the liminal author and the author's intention in the traditional sense of the term a mere quibbling with words), but theoretically
it is possible to dissociate the two. Undoubtedly the author is not available to interpret his work, but the text remains. However, the strategy of the text embodies the intention of the model author. I have already done away with the notion of the empirical author for the Bengal Purāṇas; they were composed by the brāhmaṇa varṇa, by which I mean the collective identity of the community. Therefore I am effectively left with the textual strategy. But all the members of the community could not have actually written those texts. These must have been written by only a handful of them. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that the propagation of brahmanical interest was not the intention of those empirical authors, the texts themselves irrefutably point to it and repeat with a tenacious regularity. This is the one coherent formulation that harnesses the many points of contestations, variations and displacements in these texts. Thus it would be nearly impossible for the model reader not to recognize it and make the right conjecture about it. The Bengal Purāṇas stand in the intersection between the long brahmanical tradition - the cultural repertoire of these texts, and the specific time - the circumstances of the composition of these texts, and together they constitute their textual strategy. The meaning of the Purāṇas will have to be derived from the interaction of these two.

This is a perspective that both the authors and the listeners of these texts lacked. From my vantage point I see in the Purāṇas more than what their textual strategy could possibly contain. The Purāṇas consist of information which are purely provisional in nature. I have read in them an intention which, I believe, the texts intended me to read. But I have also discovered in them a process which is my construction. I have picked up elements from the Purāṇas and arranged them in an order which is not necessarily the Purānic order and might have surprised their authors. The Purāṇas are, by their very nature, loosely organized and
would have fallen apart but for the running thread of brahmanism. I have chosen to highlight this brahmanical aspect of the Purāṇas, both its fixed and flexible structures in creative interplay with the indigenous elements, and, to borrow a phrase from Hayden White, "emplotted" all the other materials around it.

I have already stated that I have a certain advantage which the authors of the Purāṇas lacked; I am both an observer of and a participant in the process that these texts had set in motion. I presume that I share with most Hindu Bengalis of my time the rules, sensibilities, and presuppositions of my culture. I may happen to know a little more about the Purānic texts than some others, but it is not this special knowledge but the "tacit knowledge" which I share with them that governed the choice of my plot structure. However much I may rationalise, this choice is made by my cultural endowment, by a conflation of personal and public pasts. I have seen the brahmanisation of Bengal primarily as a creative process - the creation of a regional tradition and a cultural identity. But this was gained at the cost of enforcing the oppressive institution of caste and all that follows from it. This regional tradition is my point of reference, the whole in relation to which I have arranged the segments of my narrative. But since I have been attempting to trace the process rather than to look at the product, I have naturally laid much greater emphasis on the operational modalities of brahmanism in which the propagation and perpetuation of the varṇāśrama-dharma, symbolised by the figure of the brahmaṇa, looms large. The brahmanical cultural product - the Purāṇas - naturally do not see any oppression in the system. This is my perception, as much as the regional tradition, which is the essential byproduct of the process.

Those textual purists, who are unwilling to recognize anything beyond the text, may object to my method and my conclusions, but I have done nothing more than relate dispa-
rate story elements into a structured narrative which makes sense to me and, I hope, to others of similar sensibility. An empiricist may reject my emplotment as fiercely subjective and fictitious, and an orthodox Marxist may disagree with my characterization of the Purānic process in Bengal as creative when it so obviously thrived on the oppressive institution of caste. But all historical narratives contain fictive elements and the recognition of this does not degrade the historiography to the status of propaganda. In fact, as Hayden White has pointed out, "this recognition would serve as a potent antidote to the tendency of historians to become captive of ideological preconceptions which they do not recognize as such but honor as the 'correct' perception of 'the way things really are'." For instance, I have ascribed to the Purānic texts and their dissemination the role of initiating the twin processes of formation of caste structure and crystallization of regional identity in Bengal, irrespective of whether either of these is a correct perception or not. But seeing only one and refusing to recognize the other would involve as much suppression or highlighting of historical information as any conceivable configuration of them. It is my reading of the Bengal Purāṇas, as indeed is unavoidable. This is not to preempt possible criticism of my findings, but to clarify how I came to find them.
Notes:


3. Ibid.


11. Ibid., p.60.


13. Ibid., p.54.


20. Macnicol writes that he had not had the advantage of consulting Bhandarkar's book while preparing his manuscript, ibid., "Preface", but his definition of theism itself is so amorphous (p.9) that nearly everything could have been included under the title. In any case, it is inconceivable that the Purāṇas are left out of a discussion on Indian theism.


23. Ibid., p.136.


25. For instance, see Brian Brown, The Wisdom of the Hindus, Heritage Publishers, Delhi, 1973 (originally published in 1921), which contains selections from the Rg Veda to the writings of Swami Vivekananda, including the epics, the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali and the compositions of the bhakti poets, but not from the Purāṇas, or Lionel D. Barnett, Hindu Gods and Heroes, Ess Ess Publications, Delhi, 1977 (originally published in 1922), in which "The Vedic Age" and "The Age of the Brāhmaṇas" receive far greater attention than "The Epics and Later".


43. Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India* (An Historical and Theological Study of the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa), Claude Stark and Company, Hartford, Vermont, 1974. In his excellent study of the theological visions of the goddess in the *Deviḥāgavata Purāṇa*, Brown concedes that the text might have been written by a or a group of Bengali scholar(s) who migrated to Banaras and later to Ayodhya, and is on the whole a little more sensitive to the historical context.


50. This exact phrase has been used by Engels in his letter to Mehring, July 14, 1893, K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1965, p.459, but throughout Marx's writings, the term ideology has been used in its critical and negative connotation, most notably in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State*, *German Ideology*, and *Grundrisse*, see Jorge Larrain, "Ideology", in Tom Bottomore et. al. (eds.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, pp.219-20.


71. Gramsci called all social relations and the organizations which embody them, other than the state, the civil society. Thus it is possible to conceive of civil society even in the pre-capitalist social formations. But the concept has got so inextricably enmeshed with the complex network of relations in capitalist societies that I have deliberately avoided the use of the term in the context of early medieval Bengal. However, this difference in detail does not abrogate the application of the concept of hegemony as a whole in the non-capitalist contexts.


73. Ibid., pp.12-18.


75. Ingalls, in a rather uncharacteristically simplistic description of the brāhmaṇa tradition, makes this very significant point that "there is a wide area where it is impossible to set a boundary between Brahman culture and the general culture of India", Daniel Ingalls, "The Brahman Tradition", in Milton Singer (ed.), Traditional India: Structure and Change, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1975, p.3.


77. Shrimali has himself quoted Engels on this point, Ibid., p.50, note 222.

78. Marc Bloch, for example, suggested that "establishment of relations of cause and effect constitutes an in-
distinctive need of our understanding", The Historian's Craft, Vintage Books, New York, 1953, p.190, and E.H. Carr defined history as a selective system "not only of cognitive, but of causal, orientations to reality", What is History? Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, 1965, p.105. Both of them suggested a number of qualifications for determining the causal linkages but they maintained that this was an essential element in the process of the construction of history.

79. "The cause of the event... means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself," R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, pp.214-5. Carr similarly argues that the facts of history never comes to us "pure", because they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder, and therefore it is necessary for the historian to have imaginative understanding of the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, What is History? op. cit., pp.22-4.


81. Ibid., p.49.

82. Ibid., p.48.


86. Ibid., p.171.
87. Ibid., p.171.
92. Ibid., pp.60-2.
93. Ibid., p.64.
97. Ibid., p.10.
99. Ibid., p.69.
100. Ibid., p.70.
101. Ibid., p.75.


105. Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts", op. cit., p.73.


107. Ibid., p.124.


112. Ibid., p.65.

113. Umberto Eco, "Between Author and Text", in Ibid., pp.69-70.

114. Ibid., p.78.


116. Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact", Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978. By emplotment White means "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures" (p.85). He argues that no given set of causally recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story: "The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like -- in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play" (p.84).
