

# Old Wine in New Bottles? Kartabhaja (Vaishnava) Converts to Evangelical Christianity in Bengal, 1835-1845

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This paper owes a great deal to the anthropologist, Robin Horton. In the 1970s, he produced several important articles on the role of indigenous or pre-conversion ideas in the spreading of Islam and Christianity in Africa.<sup>1</sup> While his specific arguments about the African situation are still a matter of debate, there can be no doubt that his work has had a considerable impact on studies of conversion and religious change, not only in Africa, but in other countries as well.<sup>2</sup>

Of special relevance in what follows are three of Horton's more general and interrelated points — ideas and assumptions which have influenced much of our discussion of Kartabhaja conversion. Firstly, Horton joins with many other scholars in calling for a return to 'the intellectualist approach', an approach 'which takes systems of belief at their face value — i.e. as theoretical systems intended for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events'. Secondly, and in line with this, he underlines the role of reason and endorses Weber's concept of 'rationalization'. To 'rationalize', in Weber's view, is 'to reorder one's religious belief in a new and more coherent way to be more in line with what one knows and experiences'. Thirdly, when discussing ways in which 'rationalization' or change takes place, Horton stresses the importance of continuities and links between old and new systems of belief. As he writes in the second of his articles on African conversion, 'One does not treat any human group as a *tabula rasa* automatically registering the imprint of external cultural

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<sup>1</sup> 'African Conversion', *Africa*, vol. 41, no. 1, April, 1971, pp. 85-106; 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part I, *Africa*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1975, pp. 219-235, and Part II, *ibid.*, pp. 373-99.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of Horton's work see D. M. Schreuder and G. A. Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"?' History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 15, no. 4, December, 1989, pp. 496-518.

*tabula rasa* automatically registering the imprint of external cultural influence. Rather one treats it as the locus of thought-patterns and values that determine rather closely which of these influences will be accepted and which rejected.<sup>3</sup>

In 1972, one year after Horton published the first of his articles on African conversion, Dennis Hudson published an analysis of Hindu and Christian theological parallels in the conversion of H. A. Krsna Pillai — a nineteenth century Tamil convert.<sup>4</sup> This might be rated as another example of 'the intellectualist approach'. Furthermore, although it is a study of the intellectual development and process of adaptation involved in the conversion of *an individual*, it does provide some clues as to how the dynamics might work in a Hindu and more general 'mass movement' context — the term 'mass movement' being used in this and in the following discussion to indicate both 'quantity and connectedness' in low caste and tribal conversion. In 1984 Richard M. Eaton published a study of pre-Christian cosmology and the role of indigenous ideas in the conversion of large numbers of tribals in northeastern India (1876-1971),<sup>5</sup> and there has also been some attempt to explore the relationship between south Indian religious ideas about famine and subsequent mass conversions to Christianity in Travancore in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

However, apart from the latter somewhat restricted investigation, there has been no serious study of the role of pre-conversion ideas in the rise and growth of Christian group or mass movements which originated within the framework of Hindu caste society. How important were religious ideas or assumptions in these movements? How far did pre-existing beliefs and attitudes either inhibit or facilitate the conversion process? What parallels were there in Hindu and Christian thought and how important were these parallels in conversion? This paper is an attempt to explore these issues with reference to Kartabhaja conversion in the first half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> Horton, 'On the Rationality', p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> D. D. Hudson, 'Hindu and Christian Theological Parallels in the Conversion of H. A. Krsna Pillai, 1857-1859', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. X1, no. 2, June, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> R. M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XX1, no.1, January-March, 1984, pp. 1-44.

<sup>6</sup> Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 81-82, 188-189.

## The Social Context and Rise of the Kartabhaja Movement

The Kartabhaja sect is commonly regarded as an offshoot of the Bengali Vaishnava movement.<sup>7</sup> The sect, together with many other movements, arose in the flux and turmoil of rapid political, social and economic change in Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. The first in a succession of hereditary leaders of the sect, Ram Saran Pal, who died in about 1783, was a Sadgop (milkman) by caste, but cultivator by profession.<sup>8</sup> In the early nineteenth century the community also included Brahmans and some well placed Western-educated members of the burgeoning middle class.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, however, members of the sect were low caste, poor and illiterate people engaged in a variety of agricultural operations.

In districts like Krishnagar, where they remained integrated within the existing caste system, they appeared to be much the same as their Hindu and Muslim neighbours among whom they continued to live. But while generally speaking they continued to conform to the customs and practice of their low caste neighbours, they were strongly influenced by a spirit of restlessness and spiritual discontent. As we shall see, they attended their own secret or semi-secret religious meetings and were already showing signs of wanting change and revolution.

'Change', to echo one of Horton's remarks, was 'in the air'. In this case, it was not so much because of alterations in the basic structure of Hindu society, as because of chronic rural indebtedness, landlord oppression, floods and famine.<sup>10</sup> These events meant that tens of thousands of the poor low caste people were driven from their homes, unsettled in mind and spirit, and were in the process of seeking for something better. Some, including Kartabhajas who had only recently settled on the banks of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Vaisnavism in Bengal 1486-1900*, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 354-356, 359; Apama Bhattacharya, *Religious Movements in Bengal and their Socio-Economic Ideas (1800-1850)*, Patna, 1981, pp. 45-46.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. E. Garrett, *Nadia*, Calcutta, 1910, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> CMS archives, Birmingham, CI1/0 306/71, J. Weitbrecht, *Journal*, 3 May, 1839, and CI1/0 306/71, Dealtry's *Journal of a Visit to Krishnaghar*, July, 1840 (Deerr's answer no. 1).

<sup>10</sup> For social and economic conditions in Bengal during this period see especially Dharma Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, pp. 86-176, 270-331; and for conditions in Krishnagar, Garrett, *op.cit.*

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Jellinghy river,<sup>11</sup> were searching for a new messiah who would deliver them from all their woes. Many more, perhaps most, were open to new teachings including the competing claims of gurus, faqirs and other religious leaders.<sup>12</sup> It was in this atmosphere of economic hardship, social disruption and crisis that the Kartabhaja movement grew and flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

### Early Contacts with Evangelical Christianity and the Christian Movement among Them

Before discussing Kartabhaja teachings in detail it is important to say something about the origin of Kartabhaja contact with Evangelical Christianity and the spread of the Christian movement among the Kartabhajas in the Krishnagar district in the 1830s and 40s. The Christian movement among Kartabhajas was centred in villages near the town of Krishnagar (the district headquarters) which is about 100 miles north of Calcutta. This was and still is in the heart of the picturesque rice-growing region well watered by the Jellinghy River and its tributaries.

Like many other Christian movements in India it was preceded by a fairly long period of exposure to Christian teaching and preaching. The Serampore Baptists, Carey, Marshman and others, were actively preaching in the area in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries<sup>13</sup> and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) began missionary operations in the district in the early 1830s.

In 1832 the CMS opened schools in the district headquarters and in Nadia (Nabadwip), an ancient cultural and religious centre (the birthplace of Chaitanya), on the opposite side of the Jellinghy. Christian scriptures were introduced and read. In 1835 the Rev. William Deerr, a man fluent in Bengali<sup>14</sup> who had spent thirteen years in neighbouring districts, returned from Europe. Leading a team comprising himself, a Bengali school teacher and two Bengali catechists ('native' co-workers), he commenced preaching

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<sup>11</sup> *Church Missionary Register*, June, 1839, p. 305.

<sup>12</sup> Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-348; Steven Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets*, Bombay, 1965, pp. 108-124.

<sup>13</sup> *Church Missionary Register*, October, 1839, p. 461; *Periodical Accounts Relative to the BMS*, no. XI, pp. 262-266.

<sup>14</sup> CMS CII/M18, 1839-43, Bishop of Calcutta to Earl of Chichester, 14 April, 1841.

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in the town of Krishnagar and surrounding villages.<sup>15</sup> In 1835, in the course of their preaching, the two catechists, Paul and Ramathon, visited the village of Dipchandrapore about six miles west of Krishnagar. The people most interested in what the catechists had to say were Kartabhajas led by an educated village blacksmith called Chandy. In this case, the Kartabhajas had already publicly renounced idol worship and were suffering some degree of annoyance and persecution from Hindu neighbours. The catechists presented them with a portion of Christian scripture and left. This visit was followed up by the Rev. Deerr who had further discussions with Chandy and others on several occasions.<sup>16</sup>

The Christian movement among the Kartabhajas began at Dipchandrapore, or as one missionary put it, Dipchandrapore was the '1st and moving point' of conversion to Christianity in the Krishnagar district.<sup>17</sup> Many of the Christian 'mass' movements elsewhere in India began with local initiative, indigenous leaders seeking out the Christian missionaries.<sup>18</sup> In this case, however, it was Bengali Christian preachers who stumbled across a village where the people were especially willing and anxious to listen, and it was Chandy, the Kartabhaja leader, who played a key role in discussion with the missionaries.

In 1836 about 30 persons, including Chandy, were baptised.<sup>19</sup> This event created a great deal of interest especially among the converts' relatives. Persecution increased, but so too did interest in the Christian movement. Visitors came to the village and news spread among relatives in other villages nearby.<sup>20</sup> In 1838 leading men in 10 villages belonging to the Kartabhaja sect, along with their families (400-500 people), embraced Christianity.<sup>21</sup> By this time the movement had spread extensively among

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<sup>15</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 548.

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the origins of the movement see especially Deerr's account in CMS C11/088/8, Deerr to Jowett, 15 October, 1835, and Deerr's answers to Dealtry's questions in CMS C11/087/7 'Account of an Extraordinary Work which it is hoped is a work of Grace amongst the Heathen in some Villages North of Kishnaghur', 15 February, 1839. See also CMS Kruckeberg's Journal, 20 May, 1843, which includes important details on Chandy's life.

<sup>17</sup> CMS C11/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850.

<sup>18</sup> John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians. A History*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 55-57.

<sup>19</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 549.

<sup>20</sup> *Church Missionary Register*, June, 1839, p. 304.

<sup>21</sup> CMS C11/087/7, Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 15 February, 1839.

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Kartabhajas — at least 50 miles north-east of Dipchandrapore and in and around centres such as Solo, Joginda and Ranaband.<sup>22</sup>

It was at this point that the whole character and tone of the movement was suddenly transformed and came to include not only Kartabhajas, but many other Hindus as well. Towards the end of 1838, as a result of unusually heavy rain, all the flats alongside the Jellinghy river were seriously flooded. Everyone, Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike, lost almost all their crops and faced starvation. Deerr and other missionaries who had limited resources concentrated almost all their efforts on providing relief for Christians. The message was crystal clear. If you are starving and need food and other assistance join the Christians. The next few months saw an unprecedented upsurge of interest in joining the CMS mission. By October, 1839, when the Bishop of Calcutta visited the area, there were more than 4,000 enquirers and baptised Christians.<sup>23</sup>

The Christian movement in the Krishnagar district therefore began with the Kartabhajas and continued to include a high proportion of Kartabhajas right up to the end of 1838. A few more were swept into the fold along with thousands of other Hindu converts after the floods and subsequent relief measures. Among the latter-day Kartabhaja enquirers were at least seven gurus who commanded the allegiance of numerous disciples scattered in villages throughout the district.<sup>24</sup> The great majority of those who embraced Christianity in this the second phase of the movement were, however, ordinary Hindus and not Kartabhajas.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen, it was the Kartabhajas who first responded to missionary preaching and it was these people who persevered in spite of the suffering and persecution which occurred in the early stages of the

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<sup>22</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, pp. 545-547; *Church Missionary Register*, March, 1840, pp. 166-167, and November, 1841, pp. 501.

<sup>23</sup> For these dramatic events see especially CMS C11/08/4/26, Bishop Wilson to Earl of Chichester, 30 October, 1839, and C11/M8, 1839-43, 14 April, 1839; J. Long, *Handbook of Bengal Missions*, London, 1848, pp. 183-184, and *Friend of India*, 11 April, 1839.

<sup>24</sup> CMS C11/087/6, Archdeacon Dealtry's Journal of a Visit to Krishnagar, July, 1840, with answers of missionaries to Queries by the Archdeacon in 1840 (Deerr's reply); *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters addressed to his family*, London, 1863, pp. 309, 314 and 317.

<sup>25</sup> G. T. Spencer (Bishop of Madras), *A Brief Account of the Church Missionary Society's Mission in the District of Krishnagar in the Diocese of Calcutta*, London, 1846, p. 16.

Christian movement.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as the missionaries most closely associated with the movement declared, it was the Kartabhajas who were 'the most consistent Christians', the 'best and steadiest', or those who gave them 'the greatest satisfaction'.<sup>27</sup> When asked to give an account of why they were involved in the new religion it was they who constantly pointed to the nature of their religious journey and the way in which Christianity seemed to satisfy long felt religious needs and make sense *in the light of their own Kartabhaja system of beliefs*. Indeed, it is through the Kartabhaja movement that we can see more clearly than in many other cases of Christian conversion in India the way in which pre-conversion ideas predisposed indigenous groups in favour of Christianity.

### **Kartabhaja and Evangelical Christian Belief**

The Kartabhaja movement was from the beginning a fairly open, fluid and eclectic movement — absorbing and reflecting a wide variety of influences as it developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its somewhat amorphous and heterogeneous character, reflected in a variety of sub-divisions, was partly a consequence of the fact that for much of the nineteenth century the Kartabhajas had no written scripture which they could call their own. There was an oral tradition that began to develop under Dulalcand (1775-1832). This comprised songs, including theological comment, noted down by four of his disciples, but not finally sanctioned and published by one of his successors as the *Bhaver Gita* until the 1880s.<sup>28</sup> The Baptist missionaries met members of the sect in the early nineteenth

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<sup>26</sup> For references to the persecution of Kartabhaja Christians see especially CMS CII/087/7, Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 15 February, 1839; CII/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 9 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840; CMS CII/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850; CMS CII/0306/72, J. Weitbrecht, Journal, 7 December, 1840, and CII/0306/73, Journal, 9 February, 1845; CMS CII/019/3, Journal of a Native Catechist (Paul Chakrabarty), 11 April, 1839; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 91, and September, 1844, pp. 370-371.

<sup>27</sup> CMS CII/M10, J. Pratt, 'Minute on the Necessity of Strengthening the Missionary Establishment ...', 20 October, 1845 (Section 19); Kruckeberg, Journal, 2 January, 1843; J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 2nd ed., London, 1844, p. 324.

<sup>28</sup> CMS CII/M10, J. Pratt, 'Minute on the Necessity of Strengthening the Missionary Establishment ...', 20 October, 1845 (Section 19); Kruckeberg, Journal, 2 January, 1843; J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, 2nd ed., London, 1844, p. 324.

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century, and the editor of the Baptist journal *Friend of India*, who was in a position to know, wrote in January 1836 that

the sect have not yet produced any account of their doctrines. Indeed they hold pens, ink and paper in contempt. They are too material for them. Their doctrine is therefore wholly traditional, and is propagated by initiated disciples, in correspondence with the chief at Ghospara.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of this lack of a written tradition the teachings and sayings of the Kartabhaja leaders (further illuminated by the publication of the *Bhaver Gita*) are now fairly well known. What are less well known are the teachings of the lesser Kartabhaja gurus and the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary disciples who operated at the grass-roots level. Here, however, scholars are fortunate in having access to an abundance of missionary comment which reveals a great deal about the variations in belief and practice among ordinary followers of the Kartabhaja way.

### Kartabhaja Links with the Vaishnava Tradition

The Kartabhajas have always claimed that they are part of the Vaishnava tradition and that the roots of the sect lie in Chaitanya's *bhakti* or devotional movement of the 16th century.<sup>30</sup>

(a) *Avatara*. Like Vaishnavas or followers of Vishnu in other parts of India they therefore have a theology which has some important parallels with Christianity, perhaps the most obvious point of similarity being a belief that God has become incarnate in human form. According to the Vaishnava and Kartabhaja tradition Vishnu or God, the Creator and Maker of all things, was and is generally seen as a beneficent deity who, whenever the world is out of joint, takes the form of a creature, usually an animal or human, to visit the world and save human kind. As the *Bhagavadgita* has Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) say, 'In every age I come back to

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<sup>29</sup> *Friend of India*, 14 January, 1836 (vol. 2, p. 11). According to the Rev. Weitbrecht, who met members of the sect in Burdwan, 'they read different works, and quote largely from any shasters which favour their views' (CMS C11/0306/71, Journal, 3 May, 1839); and, according to Deerr, they had no special 'written account' of their faith, 'but they teach their tenets, by verbal communication' (CMS C11/087/6, reply to Dealtry, 1840).

<sup>30</sup> Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-356, 359; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.



deliver the holy, to destroy the sin of the sinner, to establish righteousness' (chapter 4, stanza 8).

(b) *Bhakti*. Chaitanya (1485-1533) who was born at Nawabdip only a few miles from Krishnagar where the Christian movement took place, was a devotee of Lord Krishna, one of Vishnu's most popular incarnations. He not only propounded Krishna as the one God and object of worship, but through his highly emotional movement of song and dance conveyed the simple message that *moksha* or salvation could be obtained through devotion or love of God. Priestly rituals, learning or logic were all unnecessary. As in Evangelical Christianity his stress appears to have been on the *accessibility of salvation* which was open to all irrespective of religion, social status or background. And as was the case in all forms of Christianity he, or at least some of his followers, appear to have adopted some form of *congregational worship*.

### **Specific Kartabhaja Teachings**

The Kartabhajas not only shared with other branches of the Bengali Vaishnava movement some basic theological ideas and teachings which, at least to some extent, paralleled ideas in Evangelical Christianity; there were also parallels between some of their more distinctive doctrines and Christian views.

As already mentioned, one of the most striking features of the Kartabhaja movement was the openness of Kartabhajas to the possibility of further truth. They were, therefore, more open and less certain or settled in their views than the followers of many other religious groups. Their very background speaks of a long-term quest. While some of them were Hindus who became Kartabhajas and then Christians, others had an even longer history of changing religious affiliation. Their forebears had been Hindus converted to Islam.<sup>31</sup> They were therefore born as Muslims with a Hindu background, they joined the Kartabhaja movement and were finally baptised as Christians.

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<sup>31</sup> On Kartabhaja converts of Muslim background see CMS C11/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 2. in Dealtry's Journal, 1840; *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters*, pp. 293, 311, 317; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546; G. T. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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For some of the Kartabhajas the long search was a search for truth. The leaders of the movement seem to have placed some emphasis not only on being truthful,<sup>32</sup> but also on seeking truth through discussion. In the *Bhaver Gita* there are, for example, passages which encourage a questioning approach towards scripture and religious propositions.<sup>33</sup> The idea of seeking truth was also prominent among the converts to Christianity. When asked why he had become a Christian one old man at Solo replied that 'the habit of Kurta Bhojas was to enquire after truth, and search and examine different religions'.<sup>34</sup> The quest was not, however, always put in terms of seeking some kind of intellectual truth or understanding. For Gokool, the Baptist convert, the search was for a way of happiness through the performance of Hindu rituals;<sup>35</sup> for Kangali, another Baptist convert who had spent many years as a wandering ascetic with begging bowl and matted hair, the search was a desperate attempt to find 'the true guru',<sup>36</sup> and, for those who became Christians at Dipchandrapore, their greatest longing was to have a vision of God — to see God with their own eyes.

The Kartabhajas' familiarity with Vaishnavite notions of *bhakti* and incarnation and their somewhat tentative views and lack of a rigid commitment to any one particular religious position were all factors which made it easier for them to understand and respond in a favourable way to Christian teaching. But perhaps of even greater significance were specific Kartabhaja ideas which provided further parallels and linkages with Christian doctrine. Like Christians, they placed emphasis on the worship of one God. They also rejected idol worship, questioned concepts of hierarchy implicit in the caste system and practised congregational and inter-caste forms of worship. As the Baptist missionary, the Rev. J. Marshman,

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<sup>32</sup> One of the main teachings of Aulcand, the founder, was 'Speak the truth and follow one God', and, because of its emphasis on truth, the movement was sometimes known as *Satyadharm* or *Sahajdharm* (Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 44).

<sup>33</sup> According to Chakrabarty (*op. cit.*, p. 374) the *Bhaver Gita* stated that 'an unquestioning attitude is deplorable. One must determine the truth and untruth of propositions before they are accepted or rejected. The supporters of the scriptures very wrongly deplore the questioning attitude'.

<sup>34</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546 (J. H. Pratt).

<sup>35</sup> *Periodical Accounts Relative to the BMS*, vol. 2, no. viii, p. 124 (22 December, 1800).

<sup>36</sup> BMS archives, Oxford, folder IN/7 ('Kangali Mahant' c. 1795-1864).

pointed out, for Kartabhajas, caste was nothing, idols were nothing and Brahmans were nothing.<sup>37</sup>

Followers drawn from different caste backgrounds met perhaps weekly or once a month but in the strictest secrecy. The Rev. Weitbrecht who had several discussions with the leader and other members of the sect in Burdwan, wrote that

they meet every Thursday in certain villages, after sunset, two or three hundred together, sitting cross-legged in a circle, on the ground, They sing hymns in praise of their Creator. Every distinction of caste ceases at these nightly meetings, the Brahmin is sitting in brotherly fellowship by the side of a Sudra and the Mahomedan. They break bread together and a cup passed round the circle, from which all are drinking.<sup>38</sup>

The Rev. Deerr, who had considerable knowledge of Kartabhaja ideas and practice in the Krishnagar district, explained that there, after the hymn, they 'admonish each other to be virtuous, and inculcate the doctrine that God is pure, Merciful & Holy'.<sup>39</sup> Referring to the love feast which, he argued, 'seems to form the principal part of their Worship', he described the ignoring of caste distinctions, the atmosphere of mutual love and support and the fact that during the feast they not only took food from each other's hands, but frequently put rice in each other's mouth.

Any refusal to perform image worship or observe the usual caste distinctions and taboos in public was extremely dangerous as it invited ostracism and outright persecution. In practice, therefore, most Kartabhajas (like the Bahais converted from Hinduism at a later date) lived a double life. Once the meeting was over they reverted to the practices which operated in ordinary everyday life. As Deerr pointed out, the Brahman once more became the Brahman and the Muslim resumed his life as a Muslim.<sup>40</sup> Except for the few occasions when they joined in secret with other members of the sect, Kartabhajas therefore continued to observe the rules of social behaviour, rituals and forms of worship which they had always practised prior to their involvement in the movement — the women of Hindu background, for example, continuing to play a prominent role in

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<sup>37</sup> See extract from his Journal (15 April, 1802) in *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, p. 263.

<sup>38</sup> J. J. Weitbrecht, *Protestant Missions in Bengal*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>39</sup> CMS C11/087/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 3 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Deerr's reply to question nos 3-6.

keeping up Hindu rituals within the home.<sup>41</sup> The Protestant missionaries tended to regard this type of behaviour as hypocrisy, and Kartabhaja converts who had not already been made outcastes were expected to publicly and openly renounce caste and all forms of idolatrous worship.<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding disappointment that the Kartabhajas had not come further in their rejection of the caste system, many of the missionaries underlined the extent to which Kartabhaja teachings and lifestyle were already in accordance with Protestant Christianity. As the *Friend of India* remarked, the Kartabhajas recognised two of the main principles of true religion: 'the spirituality of divine worship and the obligation of mutual good will and love'.<sup>43</sup>

As already implied, parallels in Kartabhaja and Christian thought were not confined to ideas about the spiritual nature and oneness of God, social equality and congregational forms of worship. The notion of God becoming incarnate (of his being present in the life of a person on earth) was a part of Vaishnava tradition. This idea, further refined and re-expressed in Kartabhaja theology, provided yet another fundamental link and parallel with Christian belief — in this instance with Christian teachings about the nature of Jesus.

### God's Revelation and Activity through the *Karta* or Guru

After his death, Chaitanya was regarded by his followers as an incarnation of Krishna and therefore God.<sup>44</sup> During the early years of the Kartabhaja movement Ram Saran, who was viewed by many as the first *Karta* or guru

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Deerr's reply to question no. 5.

<sup>42</sup> The early Baptist Kartabhaja converts, Krishna Pal and Gookool, publicly 'threw away' their caste by eating with the missionaries. The Dipchandrapore enquirers, who were 'more respectable' than the converts who came later, were outcasted prior to their baptism on the grounds that they had prayed with the missionaries and were therefore already Christians (the implication being that all Christians were polluted). Converts at an Anglican service in Ananda Bas (NNW of Krishnagar) some years later were asked immediately prior to baptism if they would 'give up caste' and they replied, 'yes we have already' (*Periodical Accounts*, vol. 2, no. xi, pp. 123); CMS CI1/087/7, Dealtry, 'Account of an Extraordinary Work ...', 15 February, 1839; *Church Missionary Register*, February, 1840, p. 107).

<sup>43</sup> *Friend of India*, 11 April, 1839.

<sup>44</sup> Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

of the sect, was believed to be an incarnation of Chaitanya, and hence he too was regarded as Krishna or God on earth.

Referring to the attitude of devotees of the Ghospara *Karta* or guru after conversations with members of the sect at Burdwan in 1839, the Rev. Weitbrecht wrote that

The Kurta bhojas have peculiar ideas about the divine presence. While they acknowledge it to pervade over the universe, they believe at the same time, that there is a divine incarnation continued in the world, one particular person being the representative of God. The leader of the sect is considered as bearing that exalted character. He resides in a village near Hooghly river, called Khasbara.<sup>45</sup>

When disciples were initiated into the sect they were given a special mantra or incantation. There are references in a variety of sources to at least three different mantras which were used by Kartabhaja gurus on various occasions. In at least some cases, the conversation which took place immediately prior to the disciple's initiation placed some emphasis on the notion of the guru himself being 'the truth'. The claims attributed to Jesus in St. John's Gospel that 'I am the Truth' are echoed in the words of the Kartabhaja guru who asked the disciple to say to him that 'You are truth. Whatever you say is true.'<sup>46</sup> The mantras themselves convey an idea of what was expected of the relationship between guru and disciple — a view which was also similar to Christian notions of the appropriate relationship between Jesus and his followers. They emphasise the power of the guru who can bestow salvation and blessings on the disciple, the unworthiness and insignificance of the disciple and thirdly the need for the disciple to serve and obey.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, for those devotees who swapped the *Karta* for Jesus there must have been a certain *déjà vu* about the 'new' discipleship.

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<sup>45</sup> CMS C11/0 306/71, J. J. Weitbrecht, Journal, 3 May, 1839.

<sup>46</sup> Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 365-366.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Ward's translation of the Ghospara guru's mantra, which is as follows: 'O Sinless Lord, O great Lord; at thy pleasure I go and return: not a moment am I without thee. I am ever with thee; save, O great Lord' (William Ward, *View of the History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos*, vol. 3, London, 1822, p. 176). Variations of this mantra given by Krishna Pal (himself a disciple) and also by Deerr omit the reference to the 'sinlessness' of the *Karta*, but otherwise they are much the same (William Ward, *Brief Memoir of Krishna-Pal*, 2nd ed., London, 1823, pp. 10-11, and CMS C11/087/6,

## Kartabhaja Converts

Like Jesus, and as an incarnation of God, the *Karta* was also believed to possess supernatural powers. It was said of Iswar Chandra, who met Marshman in 1802, that he could, for example, heal incurable diseases and give speech to the dumb.<sup>48</sup> Ram Saran's wife, Sati Ma, who succeeded him for a short period, was buried under a pomegranate tree at Ghospara. Pilgrims who resorted there in great numbers, including some of those who subsequently became Christian, considered the dust of the place especially sacred, so much so that a touch or taste of it would help them in attaining their objective.<sup>49</sup>

### Contrasts with Christian Teaching

One of the key factors in Kartabhaja conversion was not just parallels in thought and teaching, but also differences. The parallels facilitated understanding, but it was the perception of difference which seemed to make the transfer of faith worthwhile. The Kartabhaja debates with the Bengali and European Evangelicals took place within a framework of thinking which both parties appear to have had little difficulty in understanding. For Kartabhajas the most persuasive arguments appear to have related to Christian claims about Jesus — his moral qualities, advent and second coming — all of them ideas which had an appeal in the early nineteenth century climate of disillusionment and dissatisfaction.

### Jesus as the True Guru

The familiar concept of the guru could be linked with the image of Jesus. But what sort of guru was Jesus? Was he like the *Karta* or subordinate gurus in the Kartabhaja sect, or was he different? Notwithstanding their possession of a mantra and formal allegiance to the *Karta*, some of those involved in the movement had doubts about whether they really had found

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Deerr's reply in Dealtry, 1840). According to Kruckeberg, Chandy was often told by 'a mantra in his ears' to join himself to 'the righteous one' (CMS, Journal, 20 May, 1843).

<sup>48</sup> *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, Extracts from Marshman's Journal, p. 262; Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 50-51.

<sup>49</sup> CMS C11/086/6, Deerr's reply to question no. 1 in Dealtry's Journal, 1840.

the true guru, without whom no one could hope 'to cross the river of life'.<sup>50</sup>

According to much in Kartabhaja teaching, gurus were not supposed to be caught up in worldliness or immoral behaviour. The *Bhaver Gita* declared, for example, that 'one must practise both modesty and poverty if one really wishes to realise God'.<sup>51</sup> There can be little doubt, however, that Dulalchand, the third leader of the sect, lived in considerable luxury. Describing a visit to his residence in 1802, J. C. Marshman wrote that 'Dulal's handsome and stately house, exceeding that of many Rajahs, and his garners around filled with grain, all the gifts of his deluded followers, convinced us of the profitability of his trade'.<sup>52</sup>

Dulalchand's sons (Iswarchandra and Indra Narayan) were singled out and especially condemned by Bengali writers as not living up to the highest of moral standards. And this was precisely at the time the largest number of Kartabhajas were converted to Christianity.<sup>53</sup> Even if allegations of greed, corruption and sexual immorality levelled against them were largely untrue, these allegations must have created further unease among more ordinary members of the Kartabhaja sect.

What is very clear is that some of those Kartabhajas who began to think about adopting Christianity already had doubts about the integrity or moral standing of the Kartabhaja gurus. For them there was a contrast between what they knew of contemporary gurus and the Jesus of the Gospels. Two of these converts were Krishna Pal, the Baptist convert, and Peter Chandy, the first, best known and most highly respected convert of the Krishnagar district.

Krishna Pal was especially struck by Jesus' humility and by his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. According to the writer of his memoir, when Krishna preached,

he would contrast, with wonderful effect, Christ washing the feet of his disciples, with the Hindoo spiritual guide, having his foot on the disciple prostrate at his feet. He would dwell with delight on the divine properties of the Redeemer, proving from thence that he only was the

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<sup>50</sup> Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, p. 374.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 375.

<sup>52</sup> *Periodical Accounts*, no. xi, Extracts from Marshman's Journal, p. 266.

<sup>53</sup> Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

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true Gooroo, and would confirm these descriptions by reading to his heathen auditors the Redeemer's sermon on the mount.<sup>54</sup>

Peter Chandy was also convinced that the true guru would be a man of great love and humility. When in the 1830s a certain faqir proclaimed himself as the true heir of the Rajah of Burdwan and deliverer of the people, many Kartabhajas rallied in support of the rising ruler. However, after giving him his initial support, Chandy decided that the faqir could not be the expected messiah, as he was quite clearly 'subject to hatred and pride'.<sup>55</sup> Having developed some idea of what the true guru should be Chandy found these ideas and expectations fulfilled in teachings about the person of Christ.

### Messianic Expectation

Messianic expectation, such as that reflected in Chandy's comment, was widespread in Bengal in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century<sup>56</sup> As we have noted, it was a period of great instability, turbulence and change, not to mention the economic hardship and suffering of ordinary people who naturally longed for some kind of leader who would deliver them from all their trouble.

Messianic ideas were quite explicit in the Vaishnava tradition. They are reflected in the imagery of Kalkin who like Krishna was recognised as an *avatar* of Vishnu. God Himself would one day reappear as Kalkin riding on a white horse and carrying a blazing sword in his hands, to punish the wicked, comfort the virtuous and re-establish a golden age. Nor were messianic ideas unknown in Islam especially in Shiah and Sufi circles, including among Sufi preachers in the Krishnagar district in the early nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

Among Kartabhajas messianic expectation reflected disillusionment with contemporary gurus and a recognition that they were not able to satisfy long-felt needs. A commonly held view was that God would appear in

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<sup>54</sup> Ward, *Brief Memoir*, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> CMS Kruckeberg's Journal, 20 May, 1843.

<sup>56</sup> Fuchs, *op.cit.*

<sup>57</sup> *Church Missionary Register*, November, 1840, p. 505; *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 91.



human flesh — perhaps through some extraordinary public intervention, or perhaps in a more personal way whereby the individual would ‘see’ God through the inner eye and through that encounter achieve salvation.

When Deerr first visited the Kartabhajas of Dipchandrapore they said, at least twice, that ‘unless you can show us God as plain as we can see your body we cannot believe’.<sup>58</sup> Chandy was however in the habit of opposing the missionaries in order to elicit information,<sup>59</sup> and in a subsequent conversation with Kruckeberg, he revealed that he and his party were somewhat less concerned with God’s physical or bodily manifestation. ‘On their first visit to Kishnaghur they found me walking under a tree’, wrote Kruckeberg:

Chandy asked me to show them God. I replied, ‘Do you want to see him with your outward eyes?’ It had been one of their rules, before they came in contact with Christ, that an inward eye was necessary to see God. My reply led to a confirmation of that rule, and gratified them.<sup>60</sup>

This latter interpretation of Dipchandrapore Kartabhaja belief was subsequently confirmed by Deerr when in 1839 he declared that the Dipchandrapore Kartabhajas’ ‘chief principle’ was that ‘by devotion God will give them eyes, and they will obtain a sight of Him, and through that sight salvation’.<sup>61</sup>

The Kartabhajas of Dipchandrapore were of Hindu origin.<sup>62</sup> Those of Muslim origin scattered in villages elsewhere in the region were possibly influenced less by the idea described above (that the individual would see God through an inner eye) than by the local Islamic preaching that God himself would take the initiative and intervene. While on a preaching tour in 1838, Deerr met with a ‘learned Mahomedan’, a ‘Terpish’, who was preaching the message that ‘God was to appear in the form of a human body’,<sup>63</sup> and this appears to have been the view of a Muslim Kartabhaja convert interviewed in Ranaband who declared that his people had been

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<sup>58</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1835, p. 577.

<sup>59</sup> CMS Kruckeberg’s Journal, 20 May, 1843.

<sup>60</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 549.

<sup>62</sup> CMS C11/0167/19, Kruckeberg to Sec., 4 March, 1850.

<sup>63</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 92.

looking for 'a visible appearance of the Deity', by a sight of whom they hoped for salvation.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Bengali and European Christian Response**

No matter what the questions were about God's activity, the Bengali catechists and European missionaries were faced with the task of convincing persistent enquirers and also critics that Christian scripture and Christianity were relevant to their situation and provided at least some of the answers. It certainly does not appear that either Deerr or Kruckeberg believed in an immediate Second Coming or that God would act in the near future in some unusual way.<sup>65</sup> But what is clear is that the missionaries and their assistants were able to point to three of the basic claims in Christian scripture in order to attempt to satisfy messianic hopes and expectation. In the Old Testament there was the prediction that God would appear as a messiah in human form, in the New Testament there was the claim that this had already happened through the advent, life and death of Jesus Christ and in the latter part of the Bible there was the promise that He (the risen Christ) would come again. All of these themes were exploited in missionary preaching among the Kartabhajas. For example, when preaching to Christians and non-Christians alike at Dipchandrapore in August, 1837, Kruckeberg read and explained Isaiah, chapter 9, 'by which they seemed to be much edified'.<sup>66</sup> This includes the well-known verses where God is described as being on the side of the oppressed and where the prophet predicts God's coming as the Messiah who will rule in justice for evermore. The message one can safely assume was that this promised Messiah had already come, that Kartabhaja longing could be satisfied through worship of Him and that His rule was (as verses 4 and 5 so clearly state) associated with justice for oppressed and exploited people. In developing the Christian idea of the incarnation, Deerr honed in on the Kartabhaja quest for a sight of God by referring to the passage in St. John's Gospel, chapter 14, verse 9, where Jesus says, 'he that hath seen me hath seen the Father'. According to Deerr, Jesus was God 'manifest in the flesh'

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>65</sup> In this sense their views reflect main-line Evangelical teaching. See S. Piggin, *Making Evangelical Missionaries*, Appleford, Abingdon, Oxford, 1984, pp. 70, 146.

<sup>66</sup> CMS C11/M7, Kruckeberg's Journal, 6 August, 1837.

and all that the Kartabhajas were seeking was 'in the Gospel'.<sup>67</sup> Nor did the missionaries ignore the doctrine of the Second Coming. The Rev. Weitbrecht, referring to his conversation with a Kartabhaja leader, noted that the latter 'was exceedingly pleased to hear that Christ was to appear a second time, and that all true believers in him, wait for his advent'.<sup>68</sup> There is clear evidence then that missionaries who played a key part in the Kartabhaja Christian movement made a deliberate attempt to link pre-existing beliefs with the presentation of the Christian Gospel.

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It is the argument of this paper that Kartabhaja interest in Christianity was somewhat different from that of most other groups who joined the Protestant churches in large numbers in Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike the other mass movement converts who joined the churches later (1839-1840) after the floods and handouts, the Kartabhajas were especially interested in the theological and other ideas associated with Christian teaching and the Christian way of life.

In common with many other oppressed and low caste peoples the Krishnagar Kartabhajas had been uprooted and forced to move. They had been searching for a new and better place in which to live and, like many of their fellow-travellers, their physical journey was not unrelated to an open-mindedness and spiritual quest. As the Christian missionaries might well have said, their search was for 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Amongst other things they were seeking for 'the true guru', a messiah, or a saving vision of God, a more accepting, less hierarchical fellowship, and rituals and forms of worship more expressive of their changing views of God and the world around. Though many of them found what they wanted in the Kartabhaja religion, others were less strongly committed, and, for them, participation in the movement was only one stage in an ongoing journey somewhere else. For those who found in Christianity greater religious and ideational satisfaction, the Kartabhaja experience was, nevertheless, an important stage in their religious and conceptual journey. It was at least one of the factors which predisposed them more in favour of Christian teaching. As we have seen, Kartabhaja belief and doctrine

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<sup>67</sup> *Bishop Wilson's Journal Letters*, p. 317.

<sup>68</sup> CMS CI1/0306/71, Weitbrecht's Journal, June, 1840.

provided striking parallels with Christian belief. And because they already shared many of the same basic assumptions, values and beliefs, the Kartabhajas were in a better position than most of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours to be able to understand and respond to Evangelical claims about God and the Christian message of salvation.

In conclusion there are three points one might keep in mind.

First, it is not our contention that belief or intellectual conviction was the only factor in Kartabhaja conversion. But what we are saying is that, at least in this case, pre-Christian ideas played an important part in the conversion process. Furthermore, there is some evidence that pre-conversion ideas also played a part in the conversion of other groups, if not in Bengal, then elsewhere. The best known case is that of the Madiga (untouchable) followers of the Rajayoga sect who joined the American mission in Andhra Pradesh, South India, in the 1860s and 70s.<sup>69</sup> According to missionary and other accounts the Rajayoga gurus taught many ideas which were similar to those in Christianity. Like Chandy and other Kartabhajas they and their followers were influenced by ideas of incarnation and were looking for a messiah which they eventually discovered in Jesus Christ.

Second, while Horton in his theory of African conversion stresses the overriding importance of one particular teaching, namely monotheism, we cannot point to the overriding importance of any one idea in Kartabhaja conversion. Different Christian ideas appealed strongly to different individuals — though, as we have noted, some teachings had a greater impact and were more influential than others.

And third, as Horton himself points out with reference to the situation in Africa, it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between ideas of Christian and non-Christian origin. Some Christian commentators argued that similarities in Kartabhaja and Christian belief were not accidental; that Kartabhaja practices, such as the communal meal, were the result of earlier contact with Christian teaching. However, there is no way of establishing whether this was the case. What one can say is that Bengal had a long history of indirect and direct contact with the Christian movement. As is well known, Jesus is mentioned and respected in the Koran — a text which had been important in the life of some Kartabhaja converts. Dominican,

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<sup>69</sup> See especially Emma Rauchenbush-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals. Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*, New York, etc., 1899, pp. 113-201.

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Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries were active in Bengal in the 17th and 18th centuries,<sup>70</sup> and lastly, there is specific evidence that some of the Krishnagar converts had been influenced by earlier Protestant preaching.<sup>71</sup> There can be no doubt, therefore, that missionaries were building on earlier Christian foundations. Nevertheless, the point remains that some of the basic concepts and practices which were important in Kartabhaja conversion, such as the institution of the guru, concepts of incarnation and the practice of *bhakti*, were a part of Bengali culture well before the rise of the Christian movement. Kartabhaja conversion, like the conversion of the Madigas in the American mission, may have been encouraged by long-term and very gradualistic Christian influence, but older pre-Christian systems of belief also played a part in creating conditions which fostered and facilitated the adoption of Evangelical Christianity.

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<sup>70</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 3, New York, 1971, pp. 258-259, 263, 273.

<sup>71</sup> *Christian Intelligencer*, 1839, p. 546.