

## Multiple Identities of the Kapalis of Bengal

### An Ethnohistorical Perspective

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As a subfield of cultural anthropology, ethnohistory is devoted to reconstruct the history of primitive and ethnic groups. Besides written documents ethnohistorians also use oral traditions, archaeological remains, and linguistic data as sources of information. It is also used to mean a group's folk explanation of their past. A good number of castes and communities in India have no written records about their ancient past. To reconstruct their past, they often try to relate their origin with ancient religious books like "Purana," "Veda," "Ramayana," "Mahabharata," history, and many others. Sometimes they try to relate their origin with archaeological remains, historical facts, or folk stories. Often they create myths to establish their identity. Occasionally, castes reconstruct their origin and identity with the help of specialists (e.g., Sanskrit *pandits* or masters who are conversant about ancient Sanskrit religious books) according to their contemporary social need and demand. Sometimes the elite section of the caste mimics the cultural behaviors of the desired one (mostly the upper caste) with some explanation. These practices among castes are going on in India. India has a long history of innumerable sociopolitical upheavals from time immemorial, and vast ecological changes caused a vertical and horizontal mobility of population, population admixture, economic changes, religious changes, conflict within and between the castes and many others among the people. Its impact upon the populations is varied in different contexts and most of all were not written down due to the lack of relevance or patron, at that time. Occasionally, those facts were written down on an individual initiative and not all were properly preserved. Sometimes facts are continuing as oral traditions. Through time those traditions have also diverged into different directions due to varied interpretations. In spite of that, the oral tradition is an important source of information through which the ancient past of a caste or community can be reconstructed where written record is lacking. It is also evident that rulers and the role of state also contributed a lot to the nomenclature of a caste and its identity. These deviations caused a multiple identity of a caste. The social status of a caste is used to explain its identity. Thus, so many external factors are responsible for a multiple identity and the status of a

caste at the same and at different times. In the present context, the Kapali caste of undivided Bengal is taken into consideration to reconstruct their past and to understand the cause and effect of a multiple identity and statuses of the caste through time and space. Therefore, this study is important, because the present caste is less studied and less known among the mainstream. Secondly, how the state plays its role in multiple identities of a caste? Thirdly, why (studied) caste men identify themselves in varied names and statuses through time and space?

The Kapali is a Hindu caste of Bengal whose members are traditionally cultivators by occupation. The population is now widely distributed in all districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The people identify themselves as Kapali and Vaishya Kapali. Ancient documents support their Kapali identity, but from the 1960s on they (a section of the caste) adopted Vaishya Kapali as caste name and became a bone of contention between the rival groups (within the caste). Some documents from the early 20th century could be traced which support their Vaishya Kapali identity. Rivalry between the factions regarding the adoption of a new name is continuing till date. So many traditions of origin are claimed to establish their identity. Somewhere they claimed equal status with the so-called upper castes of Bengal. Sometimes they were recognised as untouchable. So, many authorities made remarks in support as well as against their claim, which also played a vital role for their varied social status (claimed and conceded) and identity and caused a multiple identity of the caste. It is also claimed that the Kapalis were socially degraded by King Ballal Sen due to disobedience.

W. W. Hunter declared the Kapalis to be a "very low caste and utterly despised" (1998a [1875]: 59). H. H. Risley (1892: 421) claimed that the Kapalis were a population from Bengal due to admixture. But he could not produce data in support of his claim. Only a few intercaste marriages are reported from the field, which hardly supports Risley's population admixture theory, but its extent could not be understood. A wide morphological variation may be the result of admixture. The caste is found not so liberal, rather they are more orthodox regarding marriage, at least in the study area, which does not support the above mentioned view. The British Government of Bengal declared the "Kapali Scheduled Caste" (here after SC) in the 1920s. That was done obviously considering their (low) socioeconomic status at that time. Later the Kapali caste was withdrawn from the schedule in 1935 by the then British Government of India and were considered "General Caste" (here after GC) which continued till 1994.

Then, in 1994, the Government of West Bengal again included both factions as “Other Backward Classes” (here after OBCs, referring to a certain economic category) for administrative purpose, but not in the other states of India. Findings undoubtedly state that the Kapali and the Vaishya Kapali are the factions of a single caste. Why both were separately included in the list of OBCs (in West Bengal) in different serial numbers could not be understood. Thus, through time the state also played an important role for their multiple identity.

At present, the caste belongs to an intermediate status in West Bengal in the local caste hierarchy. A section of the urban elites are found to be reluctant to disclose their caste identity and occasionally identify themselves as Kayastha or other upper castes, due to a wide range of morphological variation. Wide use of surnames is also helpful in this regard. But other section of elites is orthodox enough. At the same time, cultural practices (religious ones, and rituals and food habits) of a section of the rural elites are comparable with the so-called upper castes of Bengal. Contextually, a section of the Kapalis are till date demanding for getting SC status in West Bengal which is not recognised (by the government) and supported by other sections. Thus, the controversy regarding their identity and status is prevailing till date.

In spite of being a large population (165,589 in 1931), serious research on the caste is numerous. Since long, there is a controversy regarding nomenclature and identity, which is continuing. This controversial (multiple) identity is a burning issue in the present context. Contextually, the Government of India as well as the State Government are taking different policies for the upliftment of different castes and classes. It will be a problem to implement the policy when identity and status of a caste is in question. Thus, the issue of identity of a group of people or a caste is equally important from academic, administrative, and development point of view.

## 1 Material and Methods

Data are collected from four different agro-based Kapali dominated villages, e.g., Polta, Kamardanga, Madia, and Chalki under Swarupnagar, Basirhat, Baduria, and Gopalnagar police station areas, respectively from the North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. To establish the identity of the caste, the origin, changing social status from ancient to present day, role of state, economy and environment, etc. is studied.

Documentary evidences on the Kapalis are nu-

merous. Only a few elderly persons, mostly octogenarian immigrant informants, are aware of the ancient society. Those elderly people are considered as key informants. The interview method is mainly followed to collect data. To avoid any kind of controversy due to the fragile memory of the elderly informants, special emphasis is put on cross-checking. The present generation is not knowledgeable about their ancient past. Only a few written records are available in this regard and are used as secondary source of data. Special emphasis, therefore, was put on immigrant informants who once lived in the territory of present Bangladesh but migrated to India, especially after the independence of India in 1947, and in 1971 after Bangladesh gained its independence as well. They seem to be more knowledgeable and better aware of the ancient Kapali society. Data are also collected from some tourist informants of the caste who, from time to time, might visit a relative in India, all with a view to understand the present society in Bangladesh.

In this attempt, due to the lack of documentary evidence, the oral historical approach is applied to collect data. Mostly, the interview method is applied and followed by an open-ended questionnaire. In course of the field study, several issues of two caste journals, *Samaj Barta* (1995, 1999, and others) and *Yugachetana* (several volumes between 1988 and 2004), and one booklet (Kargupta 1991) written on the Kapalis served as data source. A few books (religious and literary) could be traced, where some information about the Kapalis is presented. After a subsequent cross-checking, the data are analysed. Last of all, the facts are explained following the traditional ethnographic style.

## 2 Traditions of Origin

To establish the identity of a caste, studying its origin is very important. To trace the origin of the Kapalis, the primary and secondary sources of data were studied extensively. It is not new in anthropology to refer to ancient religious books, myths, folklore, folktales, folk tradition, oral history, etc. to reconstruct the origin of a less known population. In this context multiple sources are studied purposefully. Sometimes primary data supported the secondary data. Interestingly, multiple traditions of origin could be found:

- mythological tradition;
- northern Indian tradition;
- biological admixture tradition (or mixed caste population by H. H. Risley);

- population identity according to traditional occupation and surname.

These traditions often partially support and sometimes contradict the present field data. None of the traditions supports each other. No link between the traditions could be established so far. In the following the traditions are described.

## 2.1 Mythological Tradition

This tradition has developed based on the Hindu religious books and myths. The origin of the caste is derived from the explanations given in those ancient books. In the “Kalika Purana” (one of the ancient Hindu religious books) the Kapalis are said to be originated from the monk Bhairab Kapali. This monk was a Pallabi (one of the ancient inhabitants of North India) by birth and a worshiper of the Gujhaswari Temple, which was located on the bank of the River Bagmati in Nepal and once also was famous as Bhairab Temple (Yugachetana 1988, 1995–96).

The mythological origin has a beautiful background. In the ancient time, there was a king named Prajapati Daksha. His daughter, Sati married Lord Siva on her own choice and without her father’s consent. Prajapati Daksha became furious. Meanwhile, Prajapati Daksha arranged a great sacrifice (*yagna*) with great assemblage where he did not invite his son-in-law, Lord Siva, with an intention to insult him. In the “Debi Bhagbata” (a Hindu religious book), Lord Siva has been described as “Kapali,” in a derogatory sense for his activities (e.g., wearing tiger hide, residing in the cremation ground, smearing ash on the body, smoking hump, etc., considered degraded), and that was the reason for being not invited in the said *yagna*. Sati came to her father’s house to enjoy the great sacrifice. Lord Siva also came later, without being invited. Prajapati Daksha insulted Lord Siva. Naturally, Sati could not tolerate the insultation of her husband and embraced death as self wish. Hearing the news of Sati’s death, Lord Siva became furious and came to Daksha’s palace and began a destructive dance, after keeping Sati’s dead body on the soldier. The Earth began to ruin. Then the protector of the Earth, Lord Vishnu destroyed Sati’s dead body with *Sudarshan Chakra* into 51 pieces. The destructive dance of Lord Siva gradually stopped and the Earth became stable. Each piece of Sati’s dead body fell onto different places of the Earth and those places later became the famous sacred places (of the Hindus) or *pithasthanas*, which are known as “Ekanno Pith,” e.g.,

“Manas-Sarobar,” “Bakreswar,” and “Hinglaj,” etc. In Nepal, where both thighs were fallen, this place is known as the famous Mahamaya Temple. From that time Mahamaya’s Bhairab (i.e., “Thigh of Sati”) is being worshipped there as “Kapali.” The ancestors of the present Kapalis are claimed to be the disciples (Kargupta 1991: 102, 117) or descendents (Baidya 1988: 24) of the priest of the temple “Bhairab Kapali” in Nepal.

In the ancient time, the vast territory from Nepal to Kashmir was resided by different inhabitants/populations like the Pallabi, Lichhabi, Kopoli, Koliari, etc. Large sections of those populations accepted the religious initiation or followed the rituals as prescribed from the temple of Mahamaya. The religious group or community would use a symbol of trident (*trishul*) on their name as an identification mark or as a (religious) custom of the Mahamaya Temple. Later the entire group or community was known as “Kapali” caste. Actually, a group (who believed in common religious practices) was recognised as a caste (Kargupta 1991: 102).

In the “Bishnu Purana,” Rishi Kashyapa is explained as son of Marich, who was the son of Lord Brahma. Rishi Kashyapa had several sons and daughters. Kapali was one of them, from whom the caste is said to be originated, as opined by a tradition.

In the “Baman Purana” (chap. VI), it is stated that Brahma Siva disguised himself in the form of a penis (in Bengali *linga*) with a view to spread the worship of Lord Siva. He also prescribed different rituals to worship of self among all the four *varnas* (castes), in the name of Shaibya, Pashupata, Kalabadana, and Kapali, respectively first, second, third, and fourth *varna*. The descendents of the fourth *varna* were known as the Kapali who was *Sudra* by birth. Concerning this, it could be inferred that the Kapali population was *Shaiba* by religion and later they converted into different religious sects.

In the “Mahabharata” (*Aadiparba*-61, *Adhayay*-2, *Shloka*-3) the names of 11 *rudras* are mentioned – Mrigabyadha, Sharpa, Niruti, Ajaikapada, Ahibrahma, Pinaki, Dahana, Iswara, Kapali, Sthanu, and Bhaga. The Kapalis are claimed to be the offspring of the 9th *rudra*, i.e., “Kapali” (Baidya 1991: 4).

In “Varna Ratnakar” (an ancient palm leaf book, from Asiatic Society, page no. 48/34), written in Bengali by Shekharacharaya Jyotirishwar, assembly poet of King Hari Singh (A.D. 1000–1020, Mithila), the names of 84 ancient holy worshipers (*siddha, sadhak*) are mentioned. The 11th one is that of Kapali. That “Kapali” has been claimed to be the ancestor of the Kapalis. Names of the Kapalis could be found in “Baman Puran,” “Linga Puran,” “Charbak

Darshan,” “Akhanda Samhita,” “Rajtarangini,” and so many other ancient books. No detailed information is available in this regard. None of the traditions are sufficient enough to establish the origin.

## 2.2 Northern Indian Tradition

According to this tradition the Kapalis are claimed to be originated from northern India. They are described as disciples (Kargupta 1991: 102) and elsewhere as descendents (Baidya 1988: 23) of “Bhairab Kapali” in the different literatures. In the ancient time, the vast area of North India was resided by such inhabitants as, e.g., Pallabi, Lichhabi, Kopoli, Koliari, etc. A large section of people probably were disciples of the said worshiper or temple. The entire religious group was later known as the Kapali caste. This tradition hints at the assumption/theory/hypothesis that the Kapalis are homogenous by religious but heterogeneous by population. So, an inherent heterogeneity is supporting the view of a biological admixture tradition (or mixed caste population as by Risley 1892: 421).

In the 1st decade of A.D. 800, after the demise of “Bhairab Kapali,” the Kapalis left North India. It is said, that one of the reasons for the leaving could be the torturing by the neighboring Buddhist community, but no evidence could be found. Kalhan Mishra described in the “Rajtarangini” (A.D. 813), that there was a famine taking place in the vast territory of North India which forced them to leave the country. Actually, detailed information on North India between A.D. 800 and A.D. 900 (more or less) is lacking in the history. At that time, many feudal lords were ruling parts of North India and different regional languages were originated. A rapid political upheaval there caused a population migration and major socio-economic changes, which are not recorded properly. This phase remained unveiled and is a dark part of Indian history. Naturally reason for migration remains unearthed due to lack of records, if they are really northern Indian.

## 2.3 Biological Admixture Tradition (Or Mixed Caste Population by H. H. Risley)

Risley (1892: 421) mentioned that the Kapalis had claimed to be the offspring of either a Kamar father and a Teli mother or a Tiyar father and a Brahman mother. He described them as a mixed caste. Regarding the origin, Bishwakosh (Basu 1896: 475) also agreed with the later pedigree. But both pedigrees have been regarded by them to be wholly

imaginary. Risley also presumed a remote relationship between the Kapalis and the “Sib-banshi-Koch” on the basis of the existence of “Shiba” and “Kashyapa” sections (*gotra*) among the Kapalis, although these have not been exogamous units. Kapalis have no regular subcastes, but a distinction seems to be drawn between those who make gunny bags and those who sell them. The later claimed themselves to be socially superior to the former and to avoid intermarriage with them. Though, present generations are not aware of their previous economy. Now they are mostly engaged in agriculture, business, and other white-collar jobs.

In this regard, Hunter (1998a [1875]: 59) opined that the Kapalis were the offspring of a Tiyar father and a Baity mother. He also described the Tiyar as the offspring of a Pod father and a Chunari mother. The Tiyar were fishermen and boatmen by occupation. In 1872, the Tiyar population was around 49,709 in the 24 Parganas districts. The Baity were the offspring of a Sudi father and Barber (in Bengali: Napit) mother. Baitis were mat maker and dancer by occupation and only 900 in number in 1872 (*Census of India* 1872: 233) in the district of 24 Parganas, while the Kapali population was 28,061 in number. A contextually wide variation of morphological features may also be an indication of a population due to admixture. Somatological features of the Kapalis (Majumdar, Nath, and Rao 1960) depict them as having an average stature, dolichocephaly, and leptorrhiny. These physical features of the Kapalis suggest that the tendency to affiliate themselves to higher castes also has been biologically manifested. It is an indication of the incidence of a biological admixture with higher castes (Mukherji, Sarkar, and Mukherjee 1996: 268).

Some questions arise from the claims above: Why it was possible to create such a large (Kapali) population while the parent populations (Brahman, Tiyar, and Baity) were so small? Why was that kind of intercaste marriage a regular practice (sanctioned by the society) in ancient Bengal, at least among the said castes? If so, how could caste boundary and identity be maintained? And how was this kind of patriarchal caste society originated? It is accepted that all the castes maintained their boundary naturally. So, there is a question regarding the “biological admixture traditions” referred to some Bengal castes including the Kapalis. It may be mentioned that authorities often opine in a support of biological admixture (on the basis of some morphological features) of the south Bengal population in general. It is obviously not conclusive that all the above theories of “biological admixture population” are imaginary. No evidence could be found in support

of their claim. No cultural relation with the proposed contributing castes could be established, so far. At this stage of study an in-depth genetic level of research is required to untie the knot.

In the recent past, Sarkar and Mukherjee (2010: 587) observed that the Kapalis “follow the traditional Hindu system [of marriage] in the upper castes of North India.” *Gotra* exogamy is not strictly observed, but *sapinda* exogamy is observed. Endogamy is not always observed among the population. Intercaste marriage did not exceed 3.5%. According to Sewall Wright (1940) the caste population is endogamous and still virtually isolated due to a low admixture rate. It does not support the biological admixture tradition.

#### 2.4 Population Identity According to Traditional Occupation and Surname Analysis

Risley (1892: 422) described the Kapali economy as jute-centered. O'Malley (1913 [1911]: 232), Thompson (1923 [1921]: 355), Porter (1933 [1931]: 307), Mitra (1951 [1914]: 78), and Bhattacharya (1995 [1896]: 181) they all have described the Kapalis as a weaving caste. Mentioning Dr. Wise's note, Risley (1892: 422) also described them as weaving caste. He also mentioned that their loom was different from that used by the Tantis. Their shuttle is called *vaya* and dispensed with reed (*shana*). Their shuttle is shot with the hands, as is done by the Tantis, but not driven by pedals as do the outcaste Jogis. Thus, Kapalis have a separate identity based on their traditional occupation, which is different from other weaving castes of Bengal. Hunter (1998b [1876]: 36) described them as cultivators and petty shopkeepers while Mitra (2013 [1922]: 1035) and Kargupta (1991: 122 f.) described that their occupation was the cultivation, trading, weaving, and domestication of cows, which generally is considered as a Vaishya *varna* occupation.

From the ecological point of view, the alluvial soil and the climate of South Bengal (hometown of the Kapalis). Accepting cultivation and a jute-centered economy as occupation is the easiest option and quiet natural. Even today they are engaged in cultivation, domestication, and trading, and for domestic purpose they prepare rope (by traditional spindle made of wood; locally called *takur*) but not for sell. No data in support of a weaving occupation could be collected so far, at least concerning the field area. Rather a majority of the people was engaged in cultivation, trading, and white-collar jobs in small number. With regard to their occupation their claim for Vaishya *varna* is justified.

In another attempt to specify their identity, their affiliated surnames are analysed. 168 surnames could be traced so far, which is too much for a caste. This suggests the possibility of an inherent heterogeneity of the caste. Almost 50% of the surnames point to a Vaishya identity and the other to extreme categories, i.e., to higher and lower castes (Mukherji, Sarkar, and Mukherjee 1996: 269). This is probably due to an influx of low-caste people into the population and an outgoing of Kapali caste people to higher castes. A tall stature, fair complexion, sharp nose, etc. suggest a tendency to affiliate themselves to higher castes. A wide variation in physical features also supports the tradition of a biological admixture population. Contextually, the existence of a wide variation in cultural practices suggests the process of *sanskritisation*. Field data also suggest that there is a trend of class formation within the caste through marriage isolation.

### 3 Field Observation

Data from the field survey reveal that the social ranking of the Kapali caste is claimed to be like this: Brahman, Kayastha, Vaidya, Kapali, and so on. A section of them identified themselves as Vaishya Kapali with a clarification that they belong to Vaishya *varna*, while Kapali and Vaishya Kapali are synonymous. Neighboring other Hindu-caste people do not agree with this view. They opine that the status of the Kapali was low but admit that their cultural practices are comparable with that of the upper caste Hindus. *Sanskritisation* is the reason for this.

The Kapalis practice elaborate Hindu religious rituals. A general inclination towards religiosity is markedly observed. Some of them often visit local *Math* (*Vaisnava*) and occasionally visit religious places like Puri, Vrindavana, Hardwar, Dakshinashwar, etc. Good numbers of elderly persons are vegetarian, decorate the body with sacred marks (*tilak charcha*), some wear garlands made of holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum* L.) or sacred threads (as the Brahmans), pour water on the holy basil, count the beads of holy basil, and maintain a virtuous conduct. Often their educational, economic background is better and enlightened. They think their social status is higher than that of the caste men.

Once, their social status was low. An octogenarian informant from the field reported that in his early life, while he was going to the *patshala* (traditional primary school), a *pandit mahasay* (teacher, who was Brahman by caste) told him to sit at the farthest corner of the room meanwhile the Brahman and the other boys sat in the front rows. They were

viewed in derogatory terms due to their low birth status. To avoid humiliation they established their own schools. Thus, a primary school was built there on a plot of land, donated by a Kapali person, which later got government affiliation and is continuing till date. Humiliation was so common that many secondary schools were built in different districts of undivided Bengal and all are continuing till date. In all the studied villages, the Kapalis' contribution in establishing primary and secondary schools could be noticed. In most of the cases they have donated the land. Based on this, it could be stated that the Kapalis were conscious of the need for education and took a positive role in social reformation. Some sort of untouchability was practiced then. From this it may be ascertained that their social status was low. That was the reason for considering them SC until the early decades of the 20th century.

On the other hand, a section of the Kapalis under the banner of “*Paschimbanga Kapali Unnayan Samity*” is demanding to get SC status in the upcoming years, with a view to get reservation facility, on the basis of some government documents and ancient social status. They claimed to get back their original caste name (as identity), i.e., “Kapali”, and not use the adopted one “Vaishya Kapali” which had become a bone of contention between the two rival organisations (supported by the other organisation “*Akhil Bharatiya Vaishya Kapali Samaj*.” The economic situation is not so good (at least in the study area), but the percentage of literacy is better (however, the percentage of higher education is too low) than the average West Bengal literacy. In this context, poverty, unemployment, and severe competition are the driving forces for a *de-sanskritisation*. Once, they had accepted water, *kutchcha*, and *pucca* food only from the upper caste Hindus of the village, but now the situation is changing rapidly among the young generations (but never from the Muslims).

#### 4 Ancient and Present Social Status

In the Hindu religious books like “*Brihaddharma Purana*,” “*Brahmabaibarta Purana*,” and ancient as well as historical records there were mentioned thirty-six castes (others say forty-one) and eight untouchables. Surprisingly, the caste Kapali or Vaishya Kapali was not mentioned there. Naturally, ancient social status of the caste could not be understood. Rather, this silence has raised some questions regarding its origin or appearance in Bengal. Some documents from A.D. 900–A.D. 1000 only hint upon their occupation, which mainly concerned agriculture,

domestication of cows, and trading. Based on the occupation a Vaishya varna status may be assumed.

In the Sen Dynasty, King Ballal Sen (A.D. 1159–A.D. 1179), introduced an orthodox Hinduism or *kulinism* in Bengal, in the name of social reforms. The object of practicing *kulinism* is to (keep supremacy of the Brahmans and to dispose of the *shudras* or non-Aryans) make divisions within the society and rule the society by the influential. The position of a caste in the Hindu-caste hierarchy was determined by the king. It is said, that the Kapalis were asked to serve water to the Brahmans in certain occasions, but they refused. The king became angry and the Kapalis' social position was degraded. Being influenced by this royal idea, the influential section of most castes (tenants) of Bengal began to practice *kulinism* and stratified the society hierarchically (within the caste). Through time, the Kapali society also adopted this. *Kulinism* was a pernicious system in Bengal, but now it cannot be found anywhere. As regards this, it may at least be inferred that before King Ballal Sen the social status of the Kapalis was higher, and their disobedience then caused the social degradation of the caste.

Risley (1892: 422) reported that the Kapalis are positioned between Jalias (fishermen caste) and Dhobas (washermen caste) and claim a higher position than the Bhuinmali, Chandal, or Sunri castes. The Dhobas and Napits admit them to be clean *shudras* and that they have no objection to work for them. Their practice in the matter of food is the same as that of other orthodox Hindus of Eastern Bengal (Risley 1892: 422). J. N. Bhattacharya (1995 [1896]) described the caste as not belonging to the “Naba Sayakas” or the nine *shudra* castes. Risley (1901) classified the Bengal castes into seven broad categories and placed the Kapalis in the sixth category, whose water was not taken. In both cases Kapalis are considered as an unclean (*shudra*) caste.

A section of the Kapalis sought Vaishya Varna identity under the names “Kapali Vaishya” or “Vaishya Kapali” in 1921. Seeking a new nomenclature of the Kapalis is to get rid off their untouchability status. In 1921, the Calcutta University Commission considered the Kapalis as “Other Depressed Classes.” In 1931, according to the “Census of India” (Porter 1933) the caste population was considered as depressed class. In 1931, the claim for a Vaishya Kapali nomenclature was disallowed by the Government of India. Interestingly, in 1933, the then Government of India declared them as SC (*The Calcutta Gazette* 1933: 44). In the meantime, the Government of India Act was passed in the year 1935, and, accordingly, the matter came under for public discussion. On the ground, an in-

fluent section of the Kolkata-based elites gave a representation to the Government to exclude the Kapalis from the schedule and allow their new nomenclature. So far known, the matter remained unknown to the larger sections of the caste. The Kapali caste was excluded from the schedule (*The Calcutta Gazette* 1935). Naturally, the question comes if their exclusion was true, why they were considered as SC. This controversial inclusion, exclusion, and new nomenclature created factions and controversies since then. Till 1993, they were considered as a general caste. In 1994, they were included in the list of OBCs in West Bengal. The inclusion of both factions of the caste (Kapali and Vaishya Kapali) in the list of OBCs in West Bengal in different serial numbers is a surprise. Interestingly, the Kapalis residing in Tripura and Assam remained unchanged. Thus, through time, the Government was playing a vital role to consider the identity of a caste. Due to this inclusion, sometimes they are viewed in a derogatory sense. It is equally derogatory to the Kapali elites also. With the intention to regain the SC status, a caste-based organisation is active in this respect since the 1960s. Now both sections are OBCs, but the Kapalis are dissatisfied with the status. Until today, a section of the caste claim them as SC (Chakrabarti 2009: 98).

## 5 Findings

None of the traditions of origin is conclusive to establish the identity of the Kapalis. Kapalis and Vaishya Kapalis are factions of a single caste and both claim common traditions of origin. In spite of that, both names are separately used by themselves, others, and the Government also. In the 1930s, the British Government of Bengal considered the Kapali as SC, but later withdrew and considered them GC till 1994. Findings also show that monarchy, British Indian state and post independent Indian government time to time dictated the identity and social status of the caste. In all times, this interference of the state is done with a view to achieve some political goal. Now Kapalis' social position is claimed to be in the 3rd or 4th rank (e.g., Brahman, Kayastha, Baidya, and Kapali), at least in the area of study. A section of the Kapalis maintains a sacred life. Their food habits and cultural and religious practices are similar to those of the upper-caste Hindus and some of them like to identify themselves with those of the upper castes. On the other hand, the section which religiously is initiated in the Vaishnava sect disbelieve in this kind of social hierarchy. A small section of the caste occasionally claimed a sa-

cred status by mentioning their superior mythological origin. No evidence could be collected in support of this claim. Contextually, it is reported from Gondal Pada, Chandanagar (in West Bengal) that a family who works as priests in a temple nearby, traditionally and previously maintained a Sanskrit *toll* (traditional school). Ruins of Sanskrit traditional schools could be traced until a few years ago. This supports the view of a Brahmanical way of life, but could not be explained logically. But present way of Brahmanical way of life of a section of the people is due to the influence of *Vaishnavism* which is observed.

Sanskritisation and socialisation play an important role in this regard. A small section of the elites is orthodox enough about Kapali identity and culture while another section claimed for SC (lower social status) till date, though not recognised by the government. Both, the Kapalis and the Vaishya Kapalis, are now recognised as OBCs in West Bengal, while the people residing in neighbouring states like Assam, Tripura, etc are considered GC. Thus, the multiple identity of the caste is established.

Findings also point out to the fact that society and environment also dictate the identity of a caste (identity markers like occupation, cultural practices, situation wise need of the society, enlightenment, etc.). It is not a single case, but that so many communities are facing the consequences of multiple identities is one of the burning issues of the day. If it continues, it will be a problem (to identify a community) to implement the developmental programmes of the Government.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Even though the study progressed, origin and identity of the caste could not be conclusively inferred. Rather the probe, unearthed multiple identities, factions, within the caste rivalry, tendency towards class formation within the caste, sanskritisation, and many others. To establish the identity, further studies into the matter are required. So many responsible factors are detected which influence the identity of a group of people. It is the need of the hour, to develop a model to bridge the gap between the three main determining factors, i.e., state, society, and environment, and it is required to overcome the problem. Genetic level research may be done to trace the origin of the population. More intensive and extensive study is required in India and Bangladesh to trace the origin and identity of the population.

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