

A Demographic Study of Kapali Caste Population in North 24 Parganas District of West Bengal

¹PRASENJIT SARKAR[†] & ²D. P. MUKHERJEE[‡]

¹*Department of Anthropology, Bangabasi Morning College,
19 Rajkumar Chakraborty Sarani, Kolkata 700009, West Bengal*

²*Department of Anthropology, Calcutta University, Kolkata 700019, West Bengal*
E-mail: prasenjitsarkar70@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT: The present investigation has been undertaken with a view to explore a little known Bengali speaking Hindu caste population, the Kapalis of the village Polta, Swarupnagar Police Station area of North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. The Kapalis are an agro based community, and are mostly settled in the villages of West Bengal. The population is less studied in the field of anthropology. In 1930s the population was declared as scheduled caste by the then British Government of Bengal, and in 1935 the Government excluded them from the schedule list, and now the community has been included in the list of other backward classes of West Bengal. Presently the population has been studied from demographic perspective, with reference to population composition, marital status, fertility and mortality. The result suggests good community health status.

INTRODUCTION

The Kapali is a little known, Bengali speaking, indigenous Hindu caste community, traditionally cultivators (Risley, 1892) by occupation, and widely distributed in different districts of West Bengal and different neighbouring States. Census information from 1872-1931 suggest that the population was also distributed in large number in the different districts of East Bengal, now Bangladesh (Mukherjee *et al.*, '96). It is also claimed that the population had originally resided in Kashmir from where they arrived in Bengal (Mitra, '14). 1931 Census of India, (Porter, '33) the caste population was considered belonging to the depressed class. Government of Bengal (1933) declared the Kapali as scheduled caste and published in "The Calcutta Gazette" (19.01.1933, Part-1, page-44). But a small urban-based elite section of the

Kapalis gave a presentation (11.02.1933) to the then Government of Bengal, with a view to exclude the name of Kapali caste from the prior mentioned list of scheduled castes. But majority of the population remained ignorant of the situation. The presentation was accepted and published in the Calcutta Gazette on 03.01.1935. At present they are included in the list of OBC's (i.e. Other Backward Classes) in West Bengal. The Kapalis of Polta also identify themselves as 'Vaishya Kapali', which strengthens their *Vaishya Varna* affiliation.

O'Malley ('11), Thompson ('21), Hunter (1875), Porter ('31), Mitra ('51), and Bhattacharaya (1896) have all described the Kapalis, as a caste with the traditional occupation of weaving. But in the present field situation, no tradition of weaving could be traced. They all claimed themselves as cultivators. Besides agriculture, they are also engaged in small business and service presently. Mostly they are poor and rural dwellers. W. W. Hunter (1875: 59) in "A Statistical

[†]Assistant Professor

[‡]Professor (Retired)

account of Bengal, 24 Parganas”, described the Kapalis as poor. But in the present studied village economic condition of a section of the Kapalis is found to be better. Interestingly, not a single family could be traced, having no agricultural land in the studied village, though the land size is small, thus having land justifies their claim of land holding. Though literacy percentage is high among this caste, however higher educational attainment is extremely low.

The spatial distribution of the Kapalis, as recorded in the Census records of Bengal from 1872 to 1931, show that the Kapali population is distributed in different districts of undivided Bengal, with its major concentration in ten districts of which two falls in the present day West Bengal (i.e. 24 Parganas and Nadia). Again nine out of ten districts are located in southern part of Bengal. In the northern districts the population was numerous. According to 1931 Census (the last caste based Census) the population was 1,62,601. The district-wise distribution of the Kapalis in West Bengal, according to 1931 Census, is presented below.

Districts	Population
24 Parganas	15255
Nadia	6200
Howrah/Hoogly	3306
Burdwan	1020
Birbhum	1
Bankura	1
Jalpaiguri	934
Maldah	97
Murshidabad	12
Darjeeling	35
Coochbihar	99
Midnapore	307
Calcutta	474

The Kapalis are really less known to the mainstream population of West Bengal. The population size of Kapalis is not negligible, as evident from the table, however this caste population has remained beyond the knowledge of the common people of West Bengal. In course of the study, some possible reasons could be assessed for this unawareness. Information on the caste people is least available, as compared to many tribal population of

the State. This is because the government and the academics are more inclined towards the tribal people. Serious research on this population is lacking except only a few reports. In course of study it is noticed that the people claim themselves to be much less known. They are basically rural dweller and mostly poor cultivators, and thus naturally less known in the urban areas. Again, political representation from the caste is almost absent and employment in the government services is rare. So far they could not have successfully raised their voices against the government regarding their demands. Only a very negligible section resides in the urban area. It has been observed that some of them occasionally hide their actual identity, and identify themselves as ‘kayastha’ or some other caste, particularly those who are residing in urban areas. On the other hand, the majority who are living in rural areas, are conservative enough to maintain their identity, so that they can enjoy the benefits of reservation facility.

The purpose of the present study is to report on a little known rural caste population of a village of West Bengal, with specific focus on their (a) the age and sex composition, (b) fertility, mortality and (c) and the changes that are taking place now.

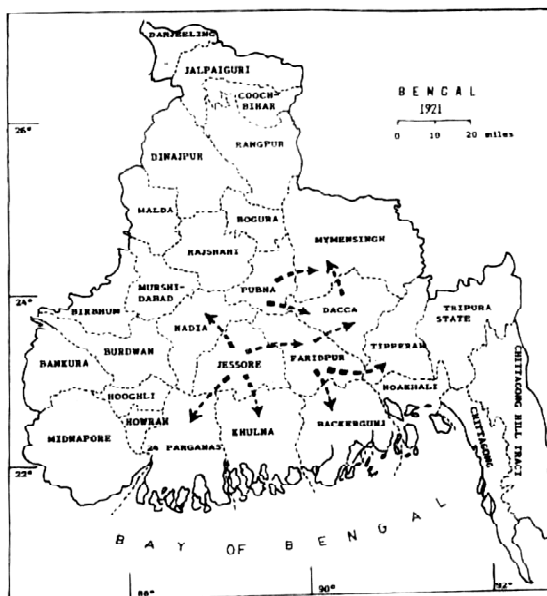


Figure 1: Distribution of the Kapali population throughout Bengal, according to Census of India 1921. (Arrows indicate mobility of the population, Mukherji *et al.*, '96)

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The demographic data were collected from 137 households of the village Polta, under Swarupnagar Police Station area in North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. Household information was collected from each and every household of the village belonging to the specified caste. Data were collected personally using structured schedule, completed to give information on age, sex, marital status, education, household members, occupation of the head and other elderly members of the household from each household or from the other elderly members of the household. Reproductive performance e.g. live birth, deceased children, reproductive wastage were collected from the married females, or from the husband after subsequent cross-checking. In the absence of reliable written records, age of individual has been estimated by reference to some important local events such as major droughts or floods, the date of Independence of Bangladesh or the age of individuals from whom age records could be collected. Where records could not be collected, in such cases ages were determined by the nearest approximation.

RESULTS

It appears from the analysis of the age-sex composition and marital status of the individuals (Table 1) that the over all preponderance of males over females (with a sex-ratio of 1.13) in almost in all 5 yearly age-groups except three reproductive and three post-reproductive age-groups. The age structure shows 28.97 per cent, 56.37 per cent and 14.65 per cent of the population are in the age-groups 0-14 years, 15-49 years, and 50+ years respectively, suggesting a fertility decline. The population is not a typical growing population due to low fertility rate during last five years, in spite of having 94.05 per cent males aged about 25+ years, and 92.98 per cent females aged 20+ years are married, which are conducive to the high fertility. This is due to a greater acceptance of family planning. Population pyramid reflecting a transitional pattern in both the sexes. Child-women ratio is too low (29.7) in comparison to high fertility population. It is also showing an increasing tendency of fertility in recent years or a sudden drop a few years back. Death of the infants, results in a sudden fall in fertility.

TABLE 1
Total population by age, sex and marital status

Age group (years)	UM*		Married		WDS**		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
0-4	27	22	—	—	—	—	27	22
5-9	40	35	—	—	—	—	40	35
10-14	33	27	—	—	—	—	33	27
15-19	33	11	—	12	—	—	33	23
20-24	15	7	10	27	—	—	25	34
25-29	14	1	14	36	1	—	29	37
30-34	5	—	36	28	1	—	42	28
35-39	—	—	31	17	—	1	31	18
40-44	—	—	17	17	—	1	17	18
45-49	—	—	16	6	—	1	16	7
50-54	—	—	10	8	—	0	10	8
55-59	—	—	9	11	—	3	9	14
60-64	—	—	9	2	—	6	9	8
65-69	—	—	6	6	—	3	6	9
70-74	—	—	4	1	—	5	4	6
75-79	—	—	5	—	—	2	5	2
80-84	—	—	1	—	—	2	1	2
Total	167	103	168	171	2	24	337	298

Note: *Unmarried; **Widowed, divorced and separated

In both sexes, showing relatively higher frequency in reproductive age groups, child-women ratio, child dependency and old age dependency ratios are respectively 29.7, 46.1 and 13.0 in the Kapali population. This is an indication of better economic condition as well as education and health awareness.

Among those who have completed family size (i.e. 45+ years), 7.18 per cent of ever married females have never been pregnant, whereas in the age-group 35-44 years, shows no ever married female without pregnancy, and only one in the age-group of 25-34 years (Table 2). But the percentage of never pregnant women, past the reproductive age (45+ years) is high (14.29%). With the completed family size, mean number of live births is 5.18 ± 0.36 of ever married women, showing a continuous decreasing tendency till date from oldest to youngest age period in (Table 3).

TABLE 2
Numbers of ever married women never pregnant and pregnant at least once, by age period

	Age period (years)	Age period (years)	Age period (years)	Age period (years)	Total
	<25	25-34	35-44	45+	
Never pregnant	12	1	0	1	14
Pregnant at least once	95	68	12	6	181
Total	107	69	12	7	195
Never pregnant (%)	11.21	1.45	0	14.29	7.18

TABLE 3
Live births to ever married women by age-group

Age period (years)	Number of live births		
	Females	Mean \pm SE	SD \pm SE
<25	39	0.97 ± 0.13	0.84 ± 0.09
25-34	64	2.01 ± 0.01	0.87 ± 0.08
35-44	36	2.84 ± 0.22	1.34 ± 0.16
45+	56	$5.18^* \pm 0.36$	$5.18^* \pm 0.36$

Note: *Completed family size

TABLE 4

Number of ever married women, by surviving and total sib ship size

Number of surviving children	No.	%	Number of live births	No.	%
	0	17		8.72	0
1	46	23.60	1	40	20.51
2	60	30.77	2	60	30.77
3	23	11.79	3	24	12.31
4	18	9.23	4	19	9.74
5	10	5.13	5	11	5.64
6	9	4.61	6	10	5.13
7	7	3.59	7	6	3.08
8	3	1.54	8	3	1.54
9	—	—	9	2	1.02
10	2	1.02	10	3	1.55
11	—	—	11	1	0.51
12	—	—	12	1	0.51
Total	195	100.0		195	100.0
Per female					
Mean \pm SE		2.58 ± 0.14			2.87 ± 0.17

Table 4 shows minor difference between live birth and surviving children (i.e. 2.87 ± 0.17 , and 2.58 ± 0.14) indicating a decline in infant (and toddler) mortality. Again a decreasing tendency of live birth and minor difference with surviving children both are possible effects of increase in the level of education and economic status.

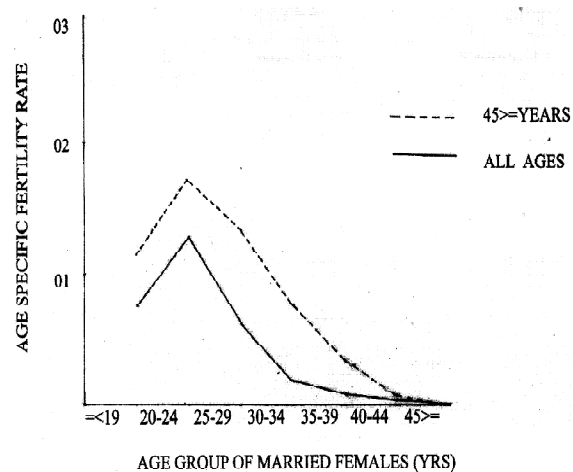


Figure 2: Age specific fertility rates

TABLE 5
Live births during each 5 yearly age periods to married women living in wedlock by present age

	Present age of married women (in years)				
	<25	25-34	35-44	45+	All ages
Number of women	26	62	35	33	156
Age-groups (in years)					
<19	0.77	0.58	0.71	1.18	0.77
20-24	0.69	1.15	1.29	1.73	1.22
25-29	–	0.32	0.74	1.33	0.58
30-34	–	–	0.17	0.76	0.19
35-39	–	–	–	0.33	0.07
40-44	–	–	–	0.03	0.01
45+	–	–	–	–	–
Total fertility rate				5.364	2.853

Total fertility rate of the community (Table 5) is low (2.85) supports, the findings of Mukherjee *et al.*'s ('96) analysis of the average growth of the population during 1872-1931, which was much less than that of Bengal population. Age specific fertility among the four 10 year's cohorts showing decline in fertility pattern with age occurring in different age periods. Age specific fertility of married females of all ages reaches its peak in the age period 20-24 years and then declining rapidly (Fig. 2) and it reaches into zero in the age period 45+ years.

Table 6 shows, the highest infant (i.e. <1 year) mortality rate is 6.55 and toddler mortality rate (i.e. 1-4 years) 7.59, occurring among the children of the mothers aged 45+ years. Infant and toddler mortality rate both are low and almost equal (5.18 and 5.36) among the children of the married females of all the age periods.

TABLE 6
Number of live birth and child mortality of married women in the present age

Age period of married women (in years)	Number of married women	Total number of live births	Number of deceased children (<1 year)	Number of deceased children (1-4 years)	Mortality rate (infant)	Mortality rate (toddler)
<25	26	38	1	–	2.63	–
25-34	62	127	4	3	3.15	2.36
35-44	35	105	5	5	4.76	4.76
45+	33	290	19	22	6.55	7.59
All ages	156	560	29	30	5.18	5.36

DISCUSSION

No study on this community has been undertaken except on ethnohistory (Mukherji *et al.*, '96) and patterns of marriage (Sarkar and Mukherjee, 2010). All the household heads are cultivating their own land (holding small quantity of land) and a remarkable number of people are also engaged in service, business etc. as subsidiary occupation, suggesting their better economic condition, and literacy percentage is also high (84.09%), and are showing (Table 5) the total fertility rate as 2.85, while the infant and toddler mortality rates (Table 6) are 5.18 and 5.36 respectively. The low mortality rate is indicating good community health status. Continuous decline in fertility and infant mortality are also revealed

(Table 5 and Table 6) from the study, which is an impact of education, health awareness, higher age at marriage (i.e. 7.01% married female are in the age group 15-19 years) and wide acceptance of family planning practices.

Comparative (Table 7) study between the general people of India (2010 estimates) and the Kapalis also reveal good community health status. Extensive studies on the population are needed for a better understanding of the demographic features of the Kapali population.

CONCLUSIONS

The demographic data suggest a tendency to lower fertility and mortality in the population, which

TABLE 7
Demographic features between the general population of
India and the Kapalis

Criteria	India* (2010 estimates)	Kapali (Present study)
Age structure	0-14 yr.= 30.5%	28.98%
	14-64 yr.= 64.3%	65.51%
	65 yr. and above = 5.2%	5.51%
Birth rate	21.34/1000	28.7/1000
Death rate	7.53/1000	5.33/1000
Literacy	71.7% (age 7 yr. and above)	100% (age above 4yr.)
Sex-ratio	m/f = 1.12 (at birth)	1.23
	1.07 (15-64 yr.)	1.13
Infant mortality rate	49.13/1000 LB	26.3
Total fertility rate	2.65	26.3
	Child born/woman	2.85

*Source: India Demographics Profile, 2010.

adopts family planning and takes on the available occupations with a high literacy percent. The Population maintains its separate identity in the area close to the border of Bangladesh in the North 24 pargana district of West Bengal and shows a progressive trend of economic development.

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