

Occasional Paper No. 52

A STUDY OF A FEW
MANGALKAVYA TEXTS

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**Literary Sources of Medieval Bengali History :
A Study of a few Mangalkavya Texts**

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Literary Sources of Medieval Bengali History:
A Study of a Few Mangalkavya Texts

Bratagit panchalis (as distinct from the Pauranik panchalis) are the old Bengali folk tales describing the exploits and the glory of the popular folk gods and goddesses, such as, Manasa, Chandi, Dharma, Sitala and Chashthi. Some of these divinities occur in the Puranas also. But in the Bratagit panchalis they appear as simple folk gods loosely related to their Puranic manifestations. Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century the Bratagit panchalis were transformed into long poems (kavya). Several poets have composed kavyas on the same Bratagit panchali. The works of these poets constitute an enormous body of kavya literature which is one of the remarkable features of the history of Bengali literature between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century. The titles of these kavyas have been composed by suffixing the epithet ayan or vijay but more frequently mangal to the name of the god concerned. Thus there are such titles as Sivayan, Manasavijay and Chandimangal. But Mangal was more popular because the performance of the singing of the kavyas was supposed to bring mangal (welfare) to all the people concerned. It is due to the frequency of the term mangal in the titles of the Bratagit panchali narrative poems that these kavyas have been designated in the modern writings on Bengali literature as Mangal-kavya.

II

In this paper I propose to deal with three Bratagit panchali stories. These are the stories of Chandi, Siva and Dharma. The Chandi panchali consists of two different narratives, namely, the Achetik khanda and the Banik khanda.

I will deal with the Alkhetik part of the Chandi story. Among the nine palas (sections) of the Siva story only two, namely, the Chash pala and the Matsyadhara pala will be taken up. The Dharma narrative is a long story divided in to twentyfour palas. I will concentrate on the second, fifth, seventh, tenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth palas.

The earliest known complete narrative of the Chandi story occurs in the Chandi kavya composed by Mukundaram Chakrabarti about the end of the sixteenth century. Mukundaram's work is considered to be the finest composition on the Chandi theme. It is also by far the most popular among the Chandi poems. The most elaborate account of Siva's exploits has been narrated in the Sivayan composed by Rameswar Bhattacharya. He composed the kavya in the early eighteenth century. The complete form of the Dharma story may be found in the kavya by Rupram Chakrabarti. Rupram's work was the most popular Dharmamangal poem. But the most comprehensive narrative on the Dharma theme was composed by Ghanaram Chakrabarti in the early years of the eighteenth century. Dharmamangal by Manikram Ganguli (end of the eighteenth century) is another elaborate composition on the Dharma story. Like Rameswar's poem, Rupram's work is remarkable for clarity and simplicity. The kavyas of Ghanaram and Manikram are also notable for literary excellence.

The Chandi, Siva and Dharma stories as narrated in the kavyas of the poets referred to above will be compared with the contemporary historical developments in southwest Bengal where these kavyas were composed. The purpose of this exercise is to find out how an to what extent these literary works can be used for the reconstruction of the historical developments in Bengal during the contemporary period.

III

All the poets named above were closely related to the western part of the Rarh region, a hilly, lateratic, undulating forest clad tract which had a large concentration of autonomous principalities ruled by tributary Rajas such as, Birbhum, Sikharbhum, Gopbhum, Mallabhum, Barahabhum, Bagri, Brahmanbhum and Karnagarh. Mukundaram and Rameswar were born in the eastern plains of the Rarh. But both of them had left their ancestral home and had settled down in the western part of the Rarh under the patronage of the local princes. Mukundaram enjoyed the patronage of Raja Bir Bankura Ray of Brahmanbhum and his son and successor Raghunath Ray. Rameswar was patronized by Raja Ram Singh of Karnagarh and his son Raja Jasobanta Singh. Several poets of the Dharma story including Manikram were born and resided in Mallabhum or in the adjoining tracts along the north bank of the Damodar river. Like Mukundaram and Rameswar, Rupram Chakravarti, the earliest major poet of the Dharma story, had left his ancestral village in the plains and migrated to the lateratic principality of Gopbhum lying along the northern side of the Damodar river.

Some of the Dharma poets enjoyed the patronage of the Malla Rajas. One of the major Dharmamangal poets, namely, Narasinha Basu, was the agent of the Raja of Birbhum in the court of the Nawab or Subahdar (Mughal Governor) in Murshidabad.

IV

Before going into the different aspects of the narratives it is necessary to relate them briefly.

Alhetik story : The hero of the story is Kalketu. Kalketu was a rude hunter. Though very strong and virile Kalketu could make only a meagre living by haunting and by

selling meat in the market. Indiscriminate killing by Kalketu ~~was~~ terrified the animals. The poor creatures appealed to Chandī, the goddess of the forest and the protector of the animals, to save them. Responding to their appeal, Chandī went down to the earth, met Kalketu and extended her benevolence to him. By her grace Kalketu reclaimed forest and established a kingdom called Gujrat. Many people came to live in the new kingdom. They prospered because Chandī favoured them. Gujrat was situated within the kingdom of Kalinga. The Raja of Kalinga did not realize what was happening in the outlying forest. When he came to know of Kalketu's Gujrat, the Raja despatched an army against the upstart. Both Kalketu and Chandī were taken unaware. The Kalinga army killed many people in Gujrat and took Kalketu prisoner. But the courtiers of the Raja advised him not to kill Kalketu. So he was put in chains and thrown into the prison. When Chandī came to know of these developments, she rushed to Kalinga. The goddess went straight into the prison ^{she} unleashed Kalketu. Then /sent horrible visions to the Kalinga Raja and his courtiers during the night. Next morning the terrified Raja himself went to the prison and released Kalketu. Then the Kalinga Raja gave Kalketu many presents and installed him as the Raja of Gujrat.

Siva story : Siva was a bhang (hemp) addict and a vagabond without any respectable occupation. He begged for subsistence. But when he married Parvati and his family problems increased - two sons with great appetites were born to them - Siva was compelled to make some efforts for a livelihood. His wife advised him to do some trading. But trade involved capital which Siva did not possess as also deceit which he was not capable of. So he decided to be a farmer. Siva then went to Indra, the king of the gods, and prayed for some land. Indra gave him a piece of rent free land as devottar (grant for maintenance of gods) which was situated at some distance from Siva's abode in ^{the} Kailas. Having secured the land Siva proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for cultivation.

He went to Kuber, the god of wealth, and borrowed seeds from his store. Then Visvakarma, the god of the artisans, manufactured ploughshare, spade and other implements out of Siva's iron weapon, the trident. Siva took the plough of Balarama and the buffalo Yama, the god of death, to plow it with his own vehicle, the bull Nandi. Siva then took leave of his wife and children and went to stay on the land with his servant Bhima, the second Pandava, who was taken there for cultivating the land.

Siva was not a conscientious employer. He would not give Bhima enough food. He even advised Bhima to go home for meals. This irritated Bhima. He cursed Siva with the destruction of the crops on his land. At this Siva agreed to feed Bhima. Then Bhima worked very well. The rains were abundant. Consequently the crops were very good. But there came a tough woman belonging to the Antyaj Bagdi caste. She began to destroy the standing crops in the pretext of catching fish in the paddy field. Even Bhima could not drive her away. The sharp tongue of the rustic woman forced him to withdraw. Bhima went to Siva and reported to incident to him. Siva came to the field for an encounter with the woman. But he was so overwhelmed by the youthful bearing of the Bagdi damsel that he even offered to marry her. He also agreed to adopt the occupation of the lowly Bagdi caste and began to help the woman in fishing. The Bagdi woman pretended to accept Siva's offer, but vanished from the field. Siva was befuddled. However, he came to know later that the woman was Parvati herself in disguise. Disgraced as he was, Siva gave up cultivation and went back home in Kailas.

Dharma story : A son of king Dharmapala ruled in Geur. Under him there was a subordinate chief called Karnasen in the Trishashthirgarh. An officer of the king had implicated Som Ghosh, a Goala by caste, under a false charge of default in rent payment and imprisoned him. When the king came to know of this incident, he not only set Som Ghosh

free but also appointed him as the overlord of Karnasen. Accordingly Som Ghosh went to the Trishashthirgarh to take up his assignment. Som Ghosh's son Ichhai Ghosh was a devotee of Syamarupa who is none other than Durga herself. By the grace of the goddess Ichhai became very powerful. Being under divine protection and with the help of his general Lohata Bajjat Ichhai affected to be independent. He refused to pay revenue to the king, killed the sons of Karnasen and drove him away from Trishashthi which he renamed Dhekur.* Vanquished and bereaved Karnasen went to Gaur. But the Pala king failed to do anything but to get him married to his young sister-in-law Ranjabati. By the grace of god Dharma Ranjabati gave birth to a son called Lausen. In course of time Lausen became a great warrior because he was favoured by Dharma. By the grace of Dharma Lausen performed many difficult tasks and conquered a few territories for the Pala king. The king then asked him to punish the rebellious Ichhai Ghosh. Again by the grace of Dharma Lausen defeated and killed Ichhai Ghosh and captured Dhekur despite Syamarupa's efforts to save her devotee.

V

The story of the establishment of Gujrat by the low caste hunter Kalketu, Kalinga Raja's raid on Gujrat and of the final adjustments between the Kalinga Raja and Kalketu resemble the account of the emergence and growth of the frontiers

* According to another version of the story Karnasen was the subordinate ruler of Mayna and he was not related to Dhekur the charge of which was given to Som Ghosh. Som Ghosh was a devotee of Syamarupa. Emboldened by the grace of the goddess Som Ghosh defied the Pala king. Upon this the king sent a large army against the rebel. Karnasen and his sons had joined the expedition. In the battle that ensued Som Ghosh killed the sons of Karnasen. After Som Ghosh's death his son Ichhai Ghosh, who was an ardent devotee of Syamarupa, continued the rebellion.

principalities in southwest Bengal. These principalities came into prominence during the sixteenth century at the end of which Mikundaram composed his poem. Most of these principalities are known to have been established by the otophthonous tribes such as, the Munda, Bhumij or such low castes as the Goala, Bagdi and Mal. These princes appear to have ruled independtly until Mighal intervention began in southwest Bengal in the closing decades of the sixteenth century. The Mighals subdued the frontier principalities through successive invasions but finally accomodated the princes in their administrative system. The frontier princes were given the position of autonomous peshkash (tribute) - paying zamindars having the right to build fort as in the case of Mallabhum, Sikharbhum or the Garhjat principalities of Orisa. These princes also enjoyed the right of collecting rents of land and other taxes according to their own discretion. Usually the Mighal authorities did not interfere with the internal affairs of the principalities.

Mallabhum was the most famous among the autonomous principalities in Bengal. The Malla Rajas, after whom the principality was named, maintained a very strong and well-organized army, conquered several territories and were great patrons of learning and culture. It is mainly due to their patronage that Bishnupur, the capital of Mallabhum, had become a great centre of Sanskrit learning, architecture, terracotta sculpture, miniature painting and classicial music. The Malla Rajas claimed to be Rajput Kshatriya. But they are popularly believed, not altogether unreasonably, to be Bagdi or Mal in origin. Like the haunters, both the Bagdis and the Mals belonged to the lowest rung of the Hindu society.

The Malla Rajas are known to have flourished under the auspices of Durga known by her particular name Mrinmayi. According to the chronicles of the Malla Raj family Adi Malla or the original Malla had established a small chiefdom

in the forests of eastern Bankura with the help of the neighbouring forest chiefs. But in course of their expansion of Mallas appear to have annexed the neighbouring territories. The late sixteenth century Mughal text Akbarnama indicates that Hamir, the Raja of Mallabhum, was a powerful prince. It is believed that the power and prosperity of the Mallas was due to the grace of Mrinmayi. The goddess is said to have come in contact with the Raja on her own accord. Originally Mrinmayi lived in a dense forest. When the Raja came there for hunting she revealed herself to him. Later during the night she told the Raja in dream that he will prosper and his subjects will flourish if he would worship her. The Devi specified the spot where she existed and asked the Raja to worship her there. This is a strategically located place protected by the course of the Dwarakeswar on the north and deep natural depressions on the other sides as well as by dense forest all round. Later the depressions were converted into extensive reservoirs flanked by high embankments. After the Devi appeared before him, the Raja shifted the capital in the forest near Mrinmayi's abode and named the place Bishnupur. Characteristically Mrinmayi is similar to the tribal Thakuranis of the Garhjat principalities of Orisa. In the Garhjat territories the Thakuranis are the Rashtradevatas (tutelary deity of the state) and constitute a link between the Rajas who may have been originally tribal but claimed Kshatriyahood and the tribals who formed the major bulk of the population in the Garhjat territories. Mrinmayi was the Adhishtatridevata (presiding deity) of Mallabhum. Mrinmayi's image and worship have been designed according to the Puranic idioms. Yet the Durga puja in the Mrinmayi shrine contained certain significant tribal features and the ^{Antyaj} Doms had specific roles in certain rituals of the Durga puja. The Malla Rajas were also intimately connected with the Ind puja which was primarily the festival of the tribals and the Antyaj castes as also with the Gajan of Siva which was dominated by the lower castes. Ind puja and Gajan

were the festivals of the people held outside the Rajas fort. But Mrinmayi was the Raja's deity installed in a temple within the fort. It was therefore easier for the Rajas to transform the worship of Mrinmayee according to the Puranic idioms and thus conceal the tribal or folk origin of the deity as far as possible within a relatively short span of time.

VI

As in the case of the Garhjat principalities, the legitimization of the Malla Rajas, who also pretended to be Kshatriya, vis-a-vis the tribals and the Antyaj castes depended much on the Raja's position in the cult of the Devi. A tripartite relation between the Devi, the Raja and the subjects was established. In this arrangement the Raja acted as the medium between the goddess and the people due to the special favour that the goddess had bestowed on him. This is also the position of Kalketu, the Raja of Gujrat. Chandi had showered her grace on Kalketu. It is due to the grace of the goddess that Kalketu became Raja, the goddess made his subjects prosperous and protected Kalketu and his subjects. Ichhai Ghosh of Dhekar was also specially favoured by Gyamarupa, who is Durga herself. She was so pleased with the hard penance that Ichhai had undergone for gaining her favour that she always kept herself informed about the developments in Dhekar and had descended on the earth to protect her devotee from Lausen's attack.

Gujrat was inhabited by many castes, the majority of whom belonged to the low Ajalchal or the lowest Antyaj rank. But Kalketu had announced that he will rule Gujrat as the servant of the Brahmans. All the lands he had given to the Brahmans were made rent free. The Kayasthas appear to have been given a position of importance in Kalketu's administration: they formed the beaurocracy. The Malla Rajas had made very substantial quantity of rent free land grants for the maintenance

of the Brahmans and the devatas (gods) and had built many temples in honour of the deities. The profusion of such rent free grants indicates the urge for accelerating the process of Brahmanisation which was another means for the rulers of low caste origin to validate their rule.

VII

When Kalketu began to organize his administration in Gujrat he appears to have conceded a certain degree of autonomy to the local leaders like Bilan Mandal, the headman of the peasants who had migrated to Kalketu's kingdom. Kalketu had promised not to bring in any intermediary official between himself and the Mandal. Kalketu made settlement of lands through the agency of the Mandal. From the peasants he demanded only one rupee per plough after seven years of cultivation. The peasants were permitted to retain everything else that they produced. There was no tax on grain trade or on houses. No levy was imposed by the Raja. It is not known what the Mandal demanded of the tenants. But it is the Mandal who enjoyed the right to control the local resources at the village level. On the other hand, they represented the village to the Raja.

Adjustments with the autonomous local forces was one of the crucial features of the polity built up by the Malla Rajas. The Raja entered into an agreement with the village and the caste headmen, namely, the Mandals and the Mukhyas and the leaders in the forest tracts who were designated as Sardar Ghatwals, Digwars and Dikpatis. The Mallas had a centralized army stationed in the capital. The Malla beaurocracy operated at the levels of the sadar kachari i.e. head office and the taraf (division) headquarters. Below the taraf level the political, economic and social power remained under the control of the local forces. The Rajas tried to absorb them in their administrative set up by appointing the Mandals and the Mukhyas

as subordinate revenue and police officials, such as, the Dihidar, Sikdar and Thanadar and by converting the tenures of the Ghatwals into regular service grants.

Another means of controlling the local forces, which the Rajas frequently adopted, was to distribute the service grants which were given to the Raja's employees as well as the devottar and brahamottar (for maintenance of Brahman) grants in such a manner that they remained juxtaposed to the lands held by the local leaders and the peasants under the influence of these leaders. Under this arrangement the direct beneficiaries of the Raja, namely, the grantees of the service, devottar and brahmottar land grants could emerge as the alternative focus of leadership in the villages.

The extension of the land grants in the interior villages tended to disturb the indigenous system of internal social and economic relations. The grantees tried to exert superior rights on land at the cost of the peasants whose right to hold land followed naturally from their participation in the reclamation of forest and the establishment of villages on reclaimed lands. The peasants paid a nominal rent to the Raja, mostly in kind. Kalketu settled the peasants in the forest clad territory of Gujrat on similar terms. The Mandal whose leadership may have been due to the initiative he took in the reclamation of forest and ^{in the} establishment of villages was the spokesman of the village and its representative to the Raja. But he did not get a share of the rents paid by the peasants. This is also the position of Bulan Mandal of the Kalketu story. The grantees cultivated their lands by agricultural labourers, sometimes brought from outside as Sive did or settled the lands with the peasants on produce rent. Thus the grantees encroached upon the peasants' natural right on land and formed a new and qualitatively new set of intermediaries between the peasants and the Raja in replacement of or parallel to the traditional village leaders the Mandals and the Sardar Ghatwals. The destruction of Siva's crops by the Bagdi woman may symbolize the tension that grew between the grantees and

the local people. Like Siva, the grantees may have tried to effect a compromise with the local forces and made certain concessions to them. Yet the tension appears to have persisted. This may be one of the reasons why the people of in some of the jungle principalities, such as, Mallabhum were alienated from the Raja's administration. In some cases the peasants left the villages to set up new settlements within the forest.

VIII

The task of combining local autonomy and the centralized civil and military administration within a single administrative and political system may have created a series of problems in the polity of the jungle principalities like Mallabhum. The Rajas appear to have accommodated the local forces in their administration but failed to integrate these forces in their centralized administrative and political system which was designed to negotiate the problems that inevitably followed from the growing pressure of the superior state system of the Mughals. The Malla Rajas had evolved a control system through a large beaurocracy, and a strong army as well as through religious and cultural elaboration with strong Puranic Brahmanical overtone. It is important to note that the religious and cultural elaboration did not centre around the cult of Mrinmayi or the sect to which the goddess was affiliated, namely, Sakta or the Gajan and the Ind festivals with which the Rajas were related. The elaborations were made under the influence of Gauriya Vaishnavism which was a highly literate Vaishnava sect and directly inspired the cultivation of art, architecture and music. Although the Malla Rajas had retained their original relations with the Gajan and the Ind festivals and the cult of Mrinmayi throughout they had become devout Gauriya Vaishnava and had devoted much of their resources for the promotion of the Gauriya Vaishnava sampradaya. Under the Malla Rajas there occurred unique developments in the fields of art, architecture, music and learning for which Mallabhum is famous. The Rajas had

built a large number of temples some of which are exquisitely decorated by ornamental terracotta friezes. The worship in these temples, particularly the festivals, assumed the form the character of public functions. Many poets, scholars and musicians were patronized by the Rajas. Numerous copies of a large number of Sanskrit and Bengali texts were prepared. The wooden covers of the manuscripts were decorated by miniature paintings. A substantial section of the population of Mallabhum had come to be directly involved in the religious and cultural elaborations under the patronage of the court. Gauriya Vaishnavism originated from the protestant Bhakti movement led by Sri Chaitanya. But some of the followers of Chaitanya had transformed the Bhakti movement in terms of the rigid Puranic Brahmanical regulations and rituals in order to build up the highly systematized sect of Gauriya Vaishnavism. Gauriya Vaishnava sampradaya propogated this creed at the formal behavioural level. But the legacy of the Bhakti movement persisted. The spirit of liberalism and the different forms of congregational worship of the Bhakti movement which percolated through the different strata of the society down to the lowest levels of the Antyaj castes and the tribals became the integral parts of the Gauriya Vaishnava sampradaya. It is due to the combination of these two aspects in it that Gauriya Vaishnavism had become the most popular creed in Bengal. The Malla Rajas sought to consolidate the mass appeal of Gauriya Vaishnavism in organized institutional forms through their efforts of religious and cultural elaboration.

Apparently the cult of Mrimayi and the Sakta sect appeared to be inadequate for the purposes of the religious and cultural policies of the Malla Rajas. Hence they concentrated on Gauriya Vaishnavism. In Bengali public memory the Malla Rajas are known as devout Vaishnavas. Their capital Bishnupur is still famous for the Gauriya Vaishnava deity Madanmohan and not for Mrinmayi, the Adhishtatrivedi of Mallabhum. But the Rajas' emphasis on the organized and the canonical aspects of Gauriya Vaishnavism appears to have removed them from the popular culture of Mallabhum with which

the Malla Rajas had initially identified themselves through their involvement in the Ind and the Gajan festivals as well as by their efforts to build up the cult of Mrinmayi. The organized and canonical aspect of Gauriya Vaishnavism involved elaborate and intricate Puranic rituals and encouraged concentration of resources at the centres of social power. As a matter of fact the organisation and success of the religious and cultural elaborations that the Rajas made depended more on the active participation by the upper strata of the society than on the initiative of the common people at the lower rungs of the society. The people of the Antyaj castes and the tribals constituted the greatest majority of the participants in the Gajan and the Ind festivals respectively. But in the Vaishnava religious and cultural organisation of the Raja these people had no position of importance. On the other hand, the Raja never participated in the Gauriya Vaishnava congregations and festivals which the common people may have organized on their own initiative. This disjunction between the Raja and his subjects was potentially disastrous in a social and political situation dominated by the tribals and the Hinduized tribals belonging to the Antyaj rank who retained much of the heritage of the autonomous tribal norms and institutions. The alienation of the people from the Raja may have been one of the reasons why the Malla Rajas did not get the support and sympathy of the people when the Malla polity and dynasty collapsed under the pressure of the English East India Company's administrative changes. Under similar circumstances the people of the jungle principality of Sikharbhum had combined with the Raja in resisting the intrusion of British authority.

IX

Ichhai Ghosh was a devout Sakta. Syamarupa was his Ishtadevi / ^{(personal god).} His enemy Lausen was an ardent devotee of Dharma. When Lausen proceeded against Ichhai Ghosh, Durga came forward to protect Ichhai. She gave him three specially

powerful arrows and a boon. According to the boon no one could kill Ichhai by severing his head; the head would be restored to him as soon as it touches the earth. Lausen's position was also very strong. He enjoyed the protection of Dharma and as the devotee of Dharma received the help of the other gods and of Hanuman, the lieutenant of Rama. In course of the battle Lausen decapitated Ichhai several times but could not destroy him. Then at the instance of the gods Hanuman got hold of Ichhai's head immediately after it was cut off again and carried it down to the neather world. But Durga revived Ichhai to life. The tactic of the gods angered her so much that Durga resolved to go to the battle field herself and kill Lausen. Hearing this the gods prepared an illusory figure of Lausen and sent it to the battle field. Durga killed the fake Lausen. Then Durga went back to her home. In her absence Lausen severed Ichhai's head which was immediately despatched to the feet of Dharma. At the touch of the Lord's feet Ichhai was emancipated. Thus Lausen became victorious.

X

Like Chandi, Dharma is also a god of the tribals and of the Antyaj castes. He is mainly worshipped by the tribals and the Antyaj Doms, Haris and Keots in the Chhotanagpur plateau. But the cult of Chandi was adopted by the upper strata of the Hindu society long before the higher castes got interested in Dharma worship. Chandi was identified with the concept of Sakti, the primeval force which inspired great metaphysical formulations as well as ritualistic and mythopoic aceretions both among the Hindus and the Buddhists. The cult of Chandi has been modified, refined and systematized in terms of the Puranic and Tantric metaphysics and ritualism. According to the Puranic and Tantric theogony she is the basic force of the Universe and all qualities emanate from her. Nothing comes to fruition without her grace. Her infinite power destroys all

evil forces. She is Durga who relieves the world from churgati i.e., distress. She killed Mahishasura, the buffalo demon and hence is worshipped as Mahishamardini. There is also the folk Chandi known by such non-Sanskrit, non-Puranic names as Harijhi Chandi, Makar Chandi, Betai Chandi and Atbai Chandi. But the Puranic Chandi exerts strong influence on her folk counterpart. The worshippers of the folk Chandi almost invariably try to identify their deity with the Chandi of the Puranic tradition and while retaining the original features of her worship, try to elaborate the rituals in terms of the Puranic idioms.

Dharma is still now a predominantly a tribal and folk deity who is worshipped by the tribal Laya or the Antyaj Pandit. It is only in a few cases that the clean Brahmins, who minister to the upper castes, conduct Dharma puja. Even in most of such cases the clean Brahmins do not work as the regular priests; they officiate in the annual ceremonies only. During the rest of the year the Laya or the Pandit conducts the daily worship. The testimony of the eighteenth century poets of the Dharma story shows that even in their time worshipping Dharma and composing Dharma poem were considered to be disreputable acts for the higher caste people. However it is from about the beginning of the eighteenth century that the position of the Dharma cult had began to improve and the higher caste attitude towards Dharma had began to change slowly. Usually Dharma is represented by a piece of naturally fashioned triangular, circular or oval stone (sila) and like other gram devatas is worshipped under a tree. From about the middle of the eighteenth century temples began to be built for ~~the~~ Dharma and sculptures of Dharma in the form of tortoise began to be made.

The Dharmamangal poem written mostly between the middle of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century indicate a trend of acceptance of the Dharma cult in the upper strata of the society. Most of the poets of the

Dharma story belong to the higher castes. Dharma's special expertise in curing eye disease, gout, leprosy and barrenness of women and in bringing rain was being recognized by the upper castes. Dharma's qualities are similar to those of Vishnu, Surya and Siva. These qualities were being emphasized upon for indicating his relation with the established Hindu gods. Yet Dharma is still far from being recognized as a Puranic god.

The rise of Dharma in the estimation of the upper strata of the society envisage a new area of interaction between the original devotees of Dharma, namely, the tribals and the Antyaj castes and the new devotees of the god from the upper castes. Lausen had mobilized the military and political support of the Pal Raja of Gaur on the one hand and the support and sympathy of the lower strata of the society as represented by his Dom army and the devoted service of Kalu Dom the commander of the army and his wife Lakhai. Ichhai remained outside the combination between the upper caste royalty and the lower caste people. Ichhai was Goala by caste. The Goala caste belong to the intermediary rank in the caste hierarchy. He was devoted to the Puranic form of Sakti. Apparently he was trying to improve upon his social position by adopting Puranic rituals through the worship of Syamarupa. But he does not appear to have received the support and sympathy of the lower castes which his opponent, an upper caste devotee of Dharma commanded

XI

The story of Lausen gives an account of the expansion of a subordinate power under the patronage of the centralized authority and of the destruction of the autonomous power in the outlying areas. Lausen conquered the territories of several Rajas and married their daughters. The account of his rise is similar to the phenomenal growth of the zamindar family of Burdwan. Originally a revenue-paying official

zamindar as well as a Chowdhuri, i.e., superior revenue collector under the Mughals, the Burdwan family annexed in quick succession several neighbouring territories which included the old principalities of Senbhum, Gopbhum, Chandrakona and Brahmanbhum as also a few revenue-paying estates including Bhursut, Baligari and Chitua. Besides the Burdwan zamindar had occupied a portion of Mallabhum for some time. Finally the estates of the Burdwan Raj grew into enormous size extending from the Ajay on the north and the Silabati-Kansabati valley in Midnapur on the south. The extended estates of the Burdwan zamindars surrounded Mallabhum on the north, east and on the southeast. Such an expansion of the Burdwan zamindari was possible because of the policy of the later Mughal administration in Bengal during the first half of the eighteenth century. Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, the Mughal governor of Bengal, and his successors tried to pamper certain official zamindars into importance as the leading political, administrative and social forces under their tutelage. Burdwan grew into prominence in this context of the official policy. The growth of the Nator zamindari in to enormous proportions is also due to this policy of the Nawabs. The tributary Raja of Karnagarh was brought under direct official control. Then he was appointed to the position of the superior revenue collector of Chowdhuri with jurisdiction extending over several zamindaris and talukdaris spread along the neighbourhood of Mallabhum on the west and on the south. By the middle of the eighteenth century the territories of the Burdwan and the Karnagarh zamindars and the subordinate zamindars and talukdars under them had practically encircled the territory of the Mall Rajas whose polity had started disintegrating by this time.

There were several autonomous princes in Bengal at the time of Mughal conquest. The Mughals had recognized them as tributary landlords. But the Mughals always tried to absorb the principalities in their directly administered territories by converting them into crown land or in to

official zamindaris paying revenue on the basis of assessment. By the end of the seventeenth century most of the autonomous principalities, particularly those in the plains had disappeared. Mirshid Quli Khan and his successors turned their attention to the principalities in the south western jungle tracts of Bengal. Mirshid Quli increased the tribute of Mallabhum to a very considerable extent and included the Malla territory in the revenue division of the Burdwan chakla. The expansion of Burdwan had began before Mirshid Quli Khan adopted these measures. The combination of the growing influence of the zamindars of Burdwan and Karnagarh almost all around Mallabhum and the drastic measures adopted by Mirshid Quli to curb the power and position of the Malla Rajas imposed tremendous pressure on the Malla polity. Now it became imperative for the Malla Rajas to mobilize the resources of the principality under their direct control so as to meet the inflated financial demand of the Mughal state and to face the political and military problems created by the expansion of Burdwan and Karnagarh. But the Malla Rajas did not possess the machinery needed for organizing the principality's resources at the central level. Nor was it feasible under the social and political situation of Mallabhum to effectively exert central authority on the outlying Sardar Ghatwals, Mandals and Mukhyas. An attempt to exert central authority straight away was likely to disturb the norms of reciprocity on which the Raja's relation with the autonomous local forces was based. Naturally the mounting pressure of the larger state system on Mallabhum inevitably precipitated the decline of the Malla polity.

XII

It may not be a mere case of coincidence that the major bulk of the Dharma poetry was composed between Mallabhum and Burdwan at a time when the Malla power was declining and Burdwan was rapidly growing into importance under Mughal tutelage. The Malla polity was formed through a series of

experiments in adjustment between the autonomous local forces and the inevitable need for centralisation at the level of the Raja. The Raja's involvement in the Gajan and the Ind festivals, their position in the cult of Mrinmayi and finally their role in promoting Gauriya Vaishnavism indicate the different stages of the experiment. Ind and Gajan were primarily the festivals of the lower rungs of the society. The Raja did not organize these festivals. But the Raja's role in these festivals was important because it symbolized the recognition by the tribal and the lower caste people of the superiority of the Raja on the one hand and the recognition by the Raja of the autonomy of the social organisations of the lower rungs of the society on the other. The transformation of Mrinmayi into the Puranic deity of Durga and her growth as the Adhishtatrivedi of Mallabhum under the auspices of the Raja indicate a definite stage in the consolidation of the Raja's authority in the context of the tradition of autonomous social organisation and leadership at the level of the villages. As the need for consolidation of authority became stronger, the Rajas concentrated on Gauriya Vaishnavism which had a strong appeal to the lower rungs of the society down to the level of the Antyaj castes and the tribals, but also offered the opportunity to expand and consolidate the social power of the Raja and by organizing the religious and cultural institutions related to the creed. The Rajas had built up elaborate religious and cultural institutions, in which the different strata of the society were involved. These institutions, no doubt, exerted considerable influence on the people who had come to be acquainted with the behavioural aspects of formal Gauriya Vaishnavism and had imbibed Gauriya Vaishnava ethics and forms. AS the greatest promoter of Gauriya Vaishnavism in the Rajas naturally wielded much greater social and moral authority. But even so the Rajas could not absorb the autonomous forces in their central administration. The contradiction between the central authority and the outlying autonomous forces and the consequent tension persisted in the Malla polity and the Malla society.



By the eighteenth century, when the Malla polity entered in a period of crisis the cult of Dharma had started rising into importance as a new medium of communication between the upper and the lower strata of the society. Tribal and lower caste idioms predominate the Dharma cult. Its rise into importance and its acceptance in the upper strata of the society indicate the growing power of self-assertion acquired by the lower rungs of the society vis-a-vis the upper strata. It is interesting to note that the Dharma story tells us of the combination between the lower caste Dom and the upper caste agent of the superordinate authority. This combination fought against Ichhai Ghosh an intermediate caste Goala warlord who had defied the central authority of the Pala king. Unlike his opponent Lausen, Ichhai Ghosh had no devoted lower caste following. He relied on the prowess of the commander of his army, the invincible Lohata Bajjat and on the divine support of the goddess Syamarupa, who is a Brahmanized form of Sakti. Both of them indicate a tendency to acquire exclusive power which Ichhai ruled from the fort of Dhekur seems to represent. The combination of Syamarupa, Lohata, the fortifications of Dhekur and the personal courage of Ichhai constituted a formidable concentration of power. But the concentration was crushed by the combination of Dharma, the Pala king, Lausen and the Doms.

Apparently Ichhai Ghosh and his historical counterpart the Malla Raja failed to identify their social role with rising forces in the lower strata of the society, such as, the Dharma cult. The Malla Rajas appear to have been aware of the phenomena. They used to visit the Dharma temple of the Karmakar community of Bishnupur and bow to the deity on certain ritual occasions. At least two Dharma poets, namely, Dvija Ramchandra and Prabhuram Mikhopadhyaya, both of whom flourished in the first half of the eighteenth century, enjoyed the patronage of the Malla Raja Gopal Singha. It is said that the temple of Bankura Ray Dharma at Baital (Bankura) was founded by a Malla Raja. But the Malla Rajas were so much

engrossed with Gauriya Vaishnavism that it was hardly possible for them to divert their resources and attention to an appreciable extent towards the promotion of the Dharma or any other newly growing cult. The religious and cultural activities of the Malla Rajas, particularly the elaborations, which were made almost entirely with the Gauriya Vaishnava idioms, were interwoven with the political and administrative policies that the Malla Rajas had evolved for dealing with the autonomous local forces. In view of the limited resources of Mallabhum and the increasing pressure of the Mughal state power on the principality the Malla Rajas were not in a position to modify their system in order to accommodate a new symbol like the Dharma cult and to develop new terms of relationship with the emerging forces in the lower rungs of the society.

XIII

The Panchali stories are myths. It is practically impossible to ascertain who created the myths and how they were formulated. But there is a substratum of historical facts in the myths. These facts may be useful for reconstructing the course of historical developments of the region in which the myths originated or were prevalent. The scale of the Panchali stories is very wide. Many characters belonging to the different strata of the society including the lowest ones have been included in the narratives. The characters include kings, tributary princes, subordinate landlords, rich merchants and farmers, learned Brahmans, petty traders, agricultural labourers, domestic servants, cowherds and the Antyaj people, such as, the haunters, Bagdis and Doms. In some cases the characters belonging to the lower rungs of the society occupy very important positions in the stories. The congregation of such widely divergent characters and the description of their exploits, values and aspirations in the Mangala poems make them a veritable source of social history. A detailed analysis of this source may give us an insight into the character and the course of movement of the social forces behind the historical developments.

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