

Locating *Dharmamangal* in the Rarh Bengal: A Brief Analysis of its Social Significance

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The present study is an attempt to locate the *Dharmamangal* texts of the *Mangalkavya* genre, in the context of social history of Bengal. Since time immemorial, Bengal had been the intermingling of diverse races, creeds, religions and cultures. Unlike in the north, where we find Aryan domination or in the South where there was the prominence of Dravidian culture the heterogeneity of the Indian history and culture was nowhere so markedly pronounced as it happened in Bengal. Bengal can be rightly called an ethnographic museum. This uniqueness of Bengal's diverse and heterogeneous cultural mosaic also manifests its assimilative character. It can be said in anthropological and sociological terminology various types of cultural changes have been taken place in Bengal for example assimilation, acculturation, diffusion, syncretism and transculturation. Even after the process of aryanisation, the bulk of the population consisted of non Aryan elements and on them, the impact of that late aryanisation was rudimentary and partial. Even the high caste Bengali population was very much influenced by non- Aryan elements, which can be termed as folk element or folk tradition. From the anthropological point of view it can be said that there existed the little and great traditions of Hinduism in ancient Bengal side by side influencing each other.

The *Dharmamangalkavya* belonged to the sub genre of the *Mangalkavya* tradition and formed a part of the 'little tradition' of the Indian religious trend. The text was composed between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in the south-western parts of Bengal, to glorify Dharmathakur, a folk deity, who was at times identified with Siva, Vishnu and even represented Lord Buddha in the days of degeneracy of Buddhism in Bengal. In the later years a wave of Hindu thought transformed the deity into a more semi Hinduised cult of the lower orders of Bengal. With this development, a very rich folk literature grew up in the Rarh region of Bengal in the name *Dharmamangalkavya*. The paper will thus highlight a trend of acceptance of the cult in the upper strata of the society as it has been depicted in the narrative that his qualities that of Siva, Surya & Vishnu, which are actually emphasized for indicating his relation with the established Hindu Gods. At the same time, the paper would also focus on how the indigenous population of this region got attracted towards this cult, associated with this narrative.

Introduction

The *Mangalkavyas* were long narrative poems which were composed between the 13th and 18th centuries. They depicted the greatness of popularly indigenous deities like Manasa, (Snake Goddess and Goddess of human Fertility) Candi, later metamorphosed in to Brahmanical Durga, Dharmathakur, Sitala, (goddess of small pox and fever) Sasthi, Annapurna, Dakshin Roy (Tiger God) and others. The main strains of the *Mangalkavyas* – *Manasamangal*, *Chandimangal*, *Dharmamangal* and *Annadamangal* were woven round these deities and in course of time, Lord Shiva was inducted in the pantheon of the *mangalkavya*.

Between the fifteenth – nineteenth centuries, these *panchalis* were transformed into long poems known as *Kavyas*. The works of several poets, who had composed *Kavyas* on the same *bratagit panchalis* constituted an enormous body of *Kavya* literature, which is one of the remarkable features of the history of Bengali literature during the pre-colonial period. The stories were handed

down in the oral tradition for many generations and were not in many cases committed to writing as late as eighteenth or even the nineteenth centuries. According to T.W. Clark the authors were not writing of contemporary life and worship but of periods preceding their own by three or four or even more centuries.¹ It is therefore necessary to analyze how these literary texts developed as an important historical source in the context of the social history of Bengal.

The *Mangalkavyas* thus played a great role in shaping the tradition of worshipping the indigenous deities of Bengal.² The defeat of the Aryan deities and the victory of the local deities as depicted in the *mangalkavyas* were in fact symbolic of the victory of the Bengalees over the foreign races. In analyzing the causes of the Hindu defeat at the hands of the Turkish invaders, it was believed that the Sena rulers who were the patrons of Brahmanical Religion, did not have the support of the lower section of the population, who were neglected and oppressed by them. So when the alien Muslim became the new rulers, the pride of the dethroned upper castes was hurt and their strangle hold over religion, culture and literature was broken leading to proliferation of folk, religion, rituals and oral traditions.³ P.K. Maity, has rightly observed that the Turkish conquest played a decisive role in the elevation of the popular gods to respectability and their subsequent adoption by the upper castes.⁴ T.W. Clark however argues that that 'the disruption caused by the invasion, attached no great importance to the indigenous population.'⁵ Tagore has analyzed why the Hindus had to abandon their patron deities like Siva and Vishnu, who had been in capable of protecting them and to turn instead to folk deities, who believed to more powerful.⁶ His scattered reflections on the subject have been collected by Asutosh Bhattacharya who endorses them. This theory is vindicated by the fact that there was very little Hindu except for upper castes could not been Hindu at the time of invasion. It appears that the social structure as a whole was still largely tribal. J. C Ghosh however offers another theory. He says that the Brahmins aware of the dangerous attractions Islam had, for the common people were forced to turn to popular cults, to keep the population from converting to it in masses. Such a step was necessary for the survival of Hinduism in Bengal.⁷

Under such circumstances the stories of the *Mangalkavyas* came to fill the real literary and cultural want of the lower sections of the society who were exploited not only by the foreign Muslim rulers but also by the native rulers. Thus it is believed that the contemporary social, political and religious conditions had some connections with emergence of the *mangalkavyas*. As the present study is an attempt to study the *Dharmamangal* in the social context of Bengal, we must relate the text with contemporary social and religious upheaval as well as with the 'aboriginal' population to whom the Dharma cult had turned out to be an important deity.

The cult of Dharma was primarily very popular among the lower castes, who were originally Buddhists. This was because, the revival of Hinduism under the Senas and the Muslim invasion of Bengal, dealt a death blow to all schools of professed Buddhism in Bengal. Buddhism in its tantric form was pushed aside and was gradually assimilated into the cognate religious system, among the Hindus and Muslims and the Dharma cult was the outcome of such a popular assimilation.⁸ The Buddhists were facing persecution from the rising Brahmans of the new ruling dynasties, particularly the Senas. When the Muslims conquered Bengal and began to persecute the Brahmans these

followers of Dharma welcomed it as divine justice.⁹ The Muslims of Bengal, were in their turn invariably influenced, by these minor cults of Bengal, and as a matter of fact, we find that in the popular Muslim literature of Bengal, the Muslims used all the terminology of the Dharma cult and Nath cult in their description of god¹⁰

In *Sunnya Purana* there was an extraordinary narrative entitled *Sri Niranjaner Rusma* or the ‘Wrath of Lord Niranjan’. It tells us how the god Dharma in his abode in Vaikutha arrived on earth in the incarnation of Khoda (the god of the Muslims) in a village in Bengal.

Dharma hoilo Jaban rupi
Mathayete Kalo tupi
Hatey shobbey triruch Kaman

(Dharma assumed the form of a *jaban* – a muslim – with a black cap and a bow and arrow in his hand)

Brahma hoilo Muhammad
Vishnu hoilo paigambar
Adampha hoilo Shulapani
Ganesh hoiya Gazi
Kartik hoilo Kaji
Fakir hoilyo jato muni

(Thus Brahma became Muhammad, Vishnu the paigambar and Shiva became Adam, Ganesh became gazi and Kartik a Kaji and all Hindu hermits became Muslim fakirs)

All these gods entered the village and destroyed all the temples to punish the Brahmans.¹¹ The entire poem suggests the vicarious thrill of the persecuted lower orders watching the humiliation of the erstwhile rulers, the Brahman aristocracy.¹² In the *Sunnya Purana* and in the *Dharma puja vidhan*, the followers of Dharma were found to welcome the Muslim advance and later to rejoice at their oppression and humiliation of Hindus at Jajpur in Malda and other places.¹³

It seemed that the followers of Dharma, suffered much for their religious beliefs and practices from the caste Hindus and when the Muslims entered Bengal, as invaders, the Dharmites took shelter under them, and when the caste Hindus were being persecuted in the hands of the Muslims ‘the ancient grudge’, which the Dharmites had against the Hindus was laured. The historical fact behind the legend *Yama Purana*, was the persecution of the Dharmites by the caste Hindus. We find that some of the poets of the *Dharmamangal*, at first refused to comply with the request of Dharma to compose any poem, in his honour, for the fear of social persecution and it was after repeated assurance that the Lord could persuade them to compose *Dharmamangal* (Manik Ganguli *Dharmangal*).¹⁴

Influence of Buddhism on the Dharma cult

Historians and social scientists have discussed at length about the popularity of the local cults as mentioned in the *Mangalkavyas*. To begin with I must quote Ralph W. Nicholas, who is of the opinion, that the process of aryanisation in Bengal, was carried out by the Brahmans, who had come from Kanauj and had settled in large numbers all over Bengal by the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.¹⁵ Though, Aryan culture was gradually set up in Pundravardhan the interior of

Rarh with its pre-Aryan population remained unaffected by its influence for a considerable period of time due to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism.¹⁶ In fact Buddhist and Jaina monks may be regarded as pioneers in carrying civilizational influences into culturally backward areas, thus inaugurating the process of acculturation.¹⁷ Kshitimohan Sen has rightly remarked that, although during the Vedic age, Bengal was considered as the land of the barbarians, but from the Buddhist and Tantric influences, it had been proved that the Rarh region had occupied an important place in the cultural history of ancient Bengal.¹⁸

As a popular religious cult, the Dharma cult also owed many of its elements to that of later Buddhism, which was known as *Mantrayana* and later most commonly, as *Vajrayana*. Dharma cult was a local cult of western Bengal and was prevalent in the present days, in some districts. In the *Sunya Purana*, the compendium entitled the *Dharma Puja vidhana*, would remind one of the liturgical texts of *Mantra-yana* or *Vajrayana*. With the *Sunya Purana* and *Dharma puja vidhana* of the Dharma cult, we might compare the compendium of religious practices of Vajrayana Buddhism viz *Kriya Samgraha*. This text began with the details of the construction of *vihara*, worship of various gods and goddesses and hundreds of other ceremonies and practices including the placing of the jar (*kalash*), ablution, fire-sacrifice etc. (of the details of constructing the temple of Dharma or *Niranjan* found in *Sunya Purana*). In the *Kriya Samgraha*, we find that the offering to the goddess Hariti, consisted of fish, blood of animals, meat along with other articles, in the *Sunya Purana*, also we find that the goddess associated with Dharma was very fond of animal sacrifice. Some Nepalese Buddhistic practices were also indeed found in the practices of Dharma cult.¹⁹

In 1894, the noted Bengali Sanskritist and educator, Haraprasad Sastri (1853- 1931) published a brief report in the proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Shastri 1894) in which he suggested that the imagery, symbolism and worship of Dharmaraj, bore very close resemblance to Buddhist notions of the sacred.²⁰ In his book, titled *Discovery of Living Buddhism* he has stated that Dharmathakur was a Buddhist deity. According to some scholars, the influence of Mahayani Buddhism was more in this cult of Dharmathakur and the rituals performed with the deity were more like Tantrayani Buddhism.²¹ The influence of Buddhism and Jainism however was noticed on the *charak* and the *gajan* festivals of Siva and Dharmathakur in Bengal. Places where Buddhist influence was more there, the *gajan* festival was celebrated in the month of Baisakh but where Siva was more influential, there *gajan* was held in the last day of Chaitra.²²

Thus from the above discussion it is clear though the cult had a deep influence on Buddhist and Jaina doctrines, the Tantric influence was no less important. This is because, Tantricism was also a very primitive religion in Bengal²³ which played a vital role in negotiating between Brahmin theology and indigenous religious practices. Shashibhusan Daguja thus aptly remarked that greater India territories adjoining the Himalayas beginning with Kashmir in the north to Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Bengal and Assam may be described as Tantric zone. The presiding goddesses were Dakini, Rakini, Sakini, Hakini, which are non-Sanskritic names. From Atharaveda it was also known that Bengal pursued Tantricism as a distinct socio-religious tradition.²⁴

Popular appeal of the Dharma cult

The story of the *Dharmamangal* and the cult originated in the South - western parts of Bengal which had been identified with the Rarh. It was an isolated rolling upland covered by dense forests and was mainly inhabited by the aboriginal communities of Bauris, Hadi, Chandals, Doms and others.²⁵ From the writings of the ancient Greek scholars we can very well understand that till the Maurya period, the Bagdis formed the bulk of the population in Bengal in this region and were the ancestors of Hadi, Dom and the Bauris.²⁶ These aboriginals used to worship the Dharma cult in this region and the story of *Dharmamangal* revolved round this deity. According to Risley and Sherring, the Doms were mostly Vaishnavs. But in later times, they became worshippers of Dharmathakur, Kaluburi and other local deities.²⁷ There is a popular Bengali lineric '*Akdum Bakdum Ghora Dum Saje, Dhak Mridanga Sakal Baji*' regarding *Dharmathakur* and his role on the Dom community who were considered to be very powerful in this region.²⁸ In later years they became the priests of *Dharmathakur*.²⁹

Lausen, of *Dharmamangalkavya* belonged to the Dom community, and was the devotee of Dharmathur and Ichchai Ghosh, a local chieftain, was a devout Sakta. Due to the help and cooperation of Dharmathakur, Lausen was able to defeat his rival Ichchai several times.³⁰ While, Lausen had mobilized the military and political support and sympathy of the lower strata of the society as represented by his Dom army, Ichchai remained outside the combination between the upper castes royalty and the lower castes people. He was a Goala by caste, which was an intermediary rank in the caste hierarchy. He was thus 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.³¹

It seemed apparently, that the main characters of this narrative, Lausen and Ichchai were not real, as they could not be linked with contemporary historical facts and evidences. But Haraprasad Sastri in his '*Ramcharita*' had mentioned, about Lausen and Ichchai as feudal chiefs under Devapala, the Pala king. The cordial relation mentioned by Devpala with Kamrup and Kalinga and similar other incidents had helped scholars to draw a link between *Dharmamangal* and the Pala dynasty.³² Further, a copper inscription, discovered at Ramaganj (East Dinajpur, Bangladesh) revealed the existence of a feudal chief called *Isvara* Ghosh.³³ In this connection we must take the arguments of Nirmal Kumar Bose discussed earlier and Surajit Sinha, according to whom the petty local chieftains who were tribal in origin, after the acquisition of land rights and appropriation of political power through state formation was drawn to the process of *hinduisation* to legitimize their new found authority and to improve their status into the caste society. The ideal examples of social mobility are the those of Malla Rajas of Bishnupur, Koch / Rajbanshis of North Bengal, Bhumij Kshatriyas of Purulia and adjacent areas of Singbhum districts as investigated by him.³⁴

In this narrative *Isvara* Ghosh, was a *Mahamandalika* i.e. a chieftain exercising control over a few administrative divisions called *mandals*, when the central power of the Pala kings of Bengal had declined and their kingdom in Bengal had disintegrated. His headquarter was at Dhekkari. The inscription has been ascribed to the middle of the eleventh century. Dhekkari had been identified with Dhekur or Senpaharir garh in the village of Sibpur, on the south bank of the Ajay. It falls within

Gopbhum which stretched between Ajay and the Damodar in the northern part of the Burdwan district. The memory of Isvara Ghosh appeared to have been preserved in the story of Ichhai Ghosh of Dhekur. This story was a component of *Dharmamangal* narrative in which Ichchai Ghosh had been identified as Goala or Gop by caste.³⁵ According to the *Dharmamangal* Ichchai's father, Som Ghosh was originally a cowherd of the king of Gaur. Later he earned the favour of the king who entrusted him with the charge of Dhekur.³⁶

This narrative definitely represented a socially segregated class and its main purpose was to establish the superiority of Dharmathakur in comparison to the Hindu Puranic deity Parvati. In course of time, the worshippers became more and more Hinduised, the sacrifice of animals was gradually giving way to offerings of rice and milk, while the image is enshrined in a temple instead of under a tree. It was due to the Brahmin influence that Dharma thakur was identified more with Siva. Sakti worship was also related to Dharma.³⁷ The pioneer Bengali anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose has described this aspect as the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'. According to him, the dominant caste ideology could be noticed in its obvious influence on tribal communities who lived at the periphery of the settled *varna* society. A constant interaction between the two cultures transformed the understanding of both of them. While the *varna* system in Bengal became less rigid, the tribes also went through a process of *Hinduisation*.³⁸

The cult of Dharma was associated with many local deities. For instance, *Manasa* has been referred as the daughter and wife of Dharma by the 17th century poet Jagjibban Ghosal. It is further reported that Dharmathakur is rarely seen without *Manasa*. The association is not confined in West Bengal but also in Assam.³⁹ The deity named Kaluburi in Ghatal subdivision of Midnapur was associated with Dharma worship. In Chandrakona of Medinipur district Dharmathakur was worshipped along with the goddess, Kaminya. In different places of Rarh region namely Gobindapur, Narayanpur Dharmathakur resides almost in every temple in different names like Sital Narayan, Rajballabh, Bankura Rai, along with his goddess counterpart namely Kaliburi, Raiburi, Jay Durga.⁴⁰ The Nath cult had associated itself with the Saiva cult and it had become possible through Dhrama *nirajana* cult. The people who practised Nathism did not enjoy high social status in the caste hierarchy and were weavers by profession.⁴¹

The *Dharmamangal* texts were recited in the twelve day ritual ceremony known as Gajan. In this festival it was the lower caste people who took vow and become Sannyasi which implies their active and ceremonial performance. In the rural areas of Bengal, South Bihar and Orissa, every shrine of Dharma or Siva has to perform the annual *Gajan*. The last ritual of this festival is the hook- swinging ceremony, which has been borrowed from a popular form of sun festival and has nothing to do with *Puranic* Siva. Popular sun cult in both parts of Bengal has incorporated in itself considerable elements of indigenous culture. Dharma worship had now been completely merged with popular Saivism as in most parts of North Bengal. But in those areas of North Bengal where the Proto- Austroloid racial element, was still predominant it has retained some of its special features. In the districts of Malda, Dinajpur, the sun or Dharma is identified with Siva. The primitive sun worship has been in existence among the aboriginals of this area. Subsequently, when, Buddhist cult of the Mahayana school, spread in Pundravardhana, several Buddhist Tantric rituals, also

came to be mixed with it. Later when Saiva cult gained ascendancy over decadent Buddhism, the earlier popular religion with traces of Buddhist influence was again affected by Saivism. Thus the festival of *Gajan* became a mixture of three distinct forms of culture- aboriginal, Buddhist & Hindu and is sometimes called *Dharma Gajan* or Siva's *Gajan*. The Mal Pahariya of the Rajmahal Hills worships the supreme deity in the name of Dharma Gossain and identifies him with the Sun.⁴²

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear, that the *Dharmamangalkavya* occupied an important place towards the study of popular cults in Bengal. The power and authority of the Dom community had been very well documented in this narrative. Often an old Bengali phrase '*Agdum, Bagdum, Ghoradum Sajhe*', was used to describe their power and authority. Unlike the other *Mangalkavyas*, the main aim of this narrative was to establish the cult of Dharmathakur, in the Rarh region and also to boost up the confidence of the aboriginal population, who remained secluded from the main stream Hindu population.

Asutosh Bhattacharya, in his book titled '*Bangla Mangalkavyer Ithihas*' has stated that *Dharmamangalkavya* was not only based on contemporary historical accounts, but at the same time it had emphasised the culture and heritage of the Rarh. So it had been termed as the Epic of Rarh.⁴³ The rise of Dharmapuja which occurred at the critical time in Bengal history was later, in the nineteenth century, during British domination, was singled out of the local pantheon for intense investigation by indigenous scholars, searching desperately, for an authentic Bengali identity. Today his annual worship service (puja) called (gajan) in some areas is confined to the core of three districts in West Bengal, as well as isolated pockets in other parts of the province and its contiguous border areas. Although his worship, and ritual recitation of the texts, written in his honour, had declined considerably, in post colonial times, Dharmaraj still served an important religious figure of the predominately rural population of the Bengalis, who used to worship the deity even today.⁴⁴

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28. Asutosh Bhattacharya *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal* Firma KLM Pvt. Cal 1997 pp. 8-17, 19-21, 48-53, 57, 59, 65, 67-68, Actually the tradition of worshipping the deity surrounded with clay horses was very primitive. Rarh , being the confluence of various cultures, its majority of population consisted of Advasis like Santhals and Mundas. These aboriginals were the forest dwellers, used to worship the different wild animals in the form of clay horses, elephants, tigers etc. For instance we find the image of Boram, who used to roam about sitting on a tiger just like Dharmathakur. Even the place of Pir dargah in this region we find clay horses. See for details Benoy Ghosh *Paschim Banga Sanskriti op. cit.* pp.100, 110-113, 191
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34. For details see Surojit Sinha ‘The Media and Nature of Hindu – Bhumij Interactions’, *Journal of Asiatic Society Letters and Science* Vol XXIII no 1 , 1957

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36. In the fort of Dhekur, Ichchai , the son of Som Ghosh became so powerful by the grace of goddess Bhavani or Syampura that he defied the king and withheld the dues to the royal treasury. Karnasen , one of the potentates of the king was asked to proceed against the rebel. But Ichchai killed his four sons and ruled Dhekur independently for some time. But ultimately, he was defeated by Lausen , Karna Sen's son, who was an ardent devotee of Dharma. The ruins of the fort and other buildings known as Senpaharir garh or the garh of Dhekur was still visible in Sibpur. As cited in Saratchandra Ghosh *Sadgoptattva* I (in Bengali) (Calcutta 1938) pp. 89-90, 183
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