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Mangalakavyas and Its Tryst with Islam: The Creation of a Unique Regional Tradition in Bengal

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The Mangalakavya literature evolved during the somewhat violent cross currents of competing religious cultures during the political ascendancy of Islam in the region, hence the functional meanings of these texts cannot be grasped without underling their relationship with the threats posed by Islam. Basically Mangalakavyas are seen as texts composed to contain Islamic influence, but in the process of resisting Islam how it contributed in the creation of a unique regional tradition of Bengal, that is actually an amalgam of myriad beliefs and cultures, shall be the scope of this present discussion.

Keywords: *Mangalakavyas, Islam, Bengal, Brahmanism, Buddhism.*

I

The Mangalakavya literature arising from a hybrid religious culture of Bengal, combining the folkish with the Puranic, was intended in a way as texts of containment of Islam. This argument can be sustained by a closer look at the larger social and political context between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries when most of these devotional poems were composed. Usually written by high caste poets, a large majority hailing from priestly communities, well-informed in the Puranic tradition, the Mangalakavyas can be studied at one level as the vernacularization of the Puranas. Yet at another level, this genre of literature touches on a 'religious process' of co-option of local folk deities within the rubric of Brahminical religious culture. It was in a sense a continuation of a similar process at work earlier in early medieval times, an aspect of the religious history of Bengal on which Kunal Chakrabarty has written persuasively in a significant work.[1] By writing the Mangalakavyas and reciting them before the illiterate public, the custodians of the Brahminical religious culture sought to integrate the relatively less Brahmanized rural folks within the Brahminical fold at a time when its existence was somewhat threatened by the rise of the Islamic political power in the region. The discussion shall try to offer a contextualist explanation for the Mangalakavyas keeping the aspect of religious devotion in mind. David Curley however has cautioned against using the Mangalakavyas as historical documents arguing that such compositions, as it always happens in fictional literature, allowed free play of fantasies.[2] Curley further reinforces that before these were poetic compositions, they had remained as forms of popular entertainment for the rural folks. Indeed Mangalakavyas were always intended to be performed, not read in solitude.[3] The author's main content however brought into sharper focus different facets of social relations between the rulers on the one hand and social classes including traders and agriculturists and forest dwellers on the other.[4] Even if one assumes that the literary

dimensions of the Mangalakavyas prevent us from using them as mirrors of history, it is important to recognize that they served important functions. The entertainment aspect of literature does not necessarily run into conflict with the aspect of devotion. On the contrary what is entertaining might as well be more persuasive than recondite statements about religion. This medium of folk entertainment was perhaps the most convenient medium through which a religious message could be relayed downwards to the popular levels. The present discussion seeks to emphasize the very critical functional role that the Mangalakavyas had performed in acts of religious indoctrination, a very important objective of which had been to broaden the influence of Brahmanical social ethos.

It is well-known that much of this kind of eulogistic poetry had a close connection with vratas, panchalis and palaganas, all of which were varied aspects of ritualistic recitations and singing expressing devotion to particular deities. To the extent that the composers of these poems wished to perpetuate the hegemony of the priestly class over the ordinary rural folks by cajoling them into what they regarded as a virtuous 'Hindu' life, these were texts of power as well. Notwithstanding this, power in such conditions required a greater degree of accommodation and commensality with people who had hitherto lived on the margins of the Brahminical social and ritual order. Created during the somewhat violent cross currents of competing religious cultures during the political ascendancy of Islam in the region, the functional meanings of these texts cannot be grasped without underlining their relationship with the threats posed by Islam.

II

The Muslim Sufis came to preach in Bengal even before Islamic rule was established here in the thirteenth century. The Arabs too had commercial contacts with Bengal much before Bengal passed to the Turks. The records of the Arab geographers also attest to this.[5] Arguably such an understanding of the Mangalakavyas has to consider the competing historical visions about the impact of Islam in Bengal. In an influential work on the early impact of Islam in Bengal, Richard Eaton has classified the conventional historical opinion regarding mass conversion to Islam into four basic models. These are the Immigration theory, the Religion of the Sword Thesis, the Religion of Patronage Theory and the Religion of Social Liberation Thesis.[6] However, none of these can explain massive conversions, indeed as Eaton highlights that in Bengal the majority of the Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbangshi, Chandala, Koch, and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to Brahmanic culture or rather those who did not belong to any organized religious system. Nonetheless even if the people, who became Muslim, did not belong to a well-defined religious community, competing for their allegiance became a necessity once Islam established its power in Bengal, on the part of the local Brahmin priests.

Eaton's explanation has tried to locate the massive conversion to Islam particularly in eastern Bengal in the region's material culture associated with the expanding agrarian frontier. This interpretation enables us to go further backwards in time to trace in the long term the evolution of popular religious culture in the region. Eaton shows how pre-sixteenth century foreign references to Muslims in Bengal in most cases mention only immigrant or urban Muslims and it is only from

the late sixteenth century, particularly after the Mughal conquest that we have a solid evidence of a Muslim peasant population anywhere in Bengal.[7]

The answer to the riddle of mass conversion lies, in Eaton's opinion, in the expansion of the agrarian frontier in eastern Bengal. In this period East Bengal became important because of its far greater agricultural productivity and population growth relative to contemporary western Bengal. This arose from the long-term eastward movement of Bengal's major river system, which deposited the rich silt that made the cultivation of wet rice possible. The delta as a whole experienced a gradual eastward movement as men cleared dense forests, thereby throwing open a wide zone for field agriculture.[8]

Atis Dasgupta states that the process of economic growth in Bengal which was initiated during the reign of Sultan Hussain Shah assumed wider dimension in the Mughal period. There were primarily two reasons behind this. The first was geographic in nature laden with economic consequences. In the ancient and early medieval times, the Ganges flowed down the Bengal delta's western corridor through the Bhagirathi- Hooghly channel emptying into the Bay of Bengal near Calcutta. This left eastern Bengal disconnected from the Ganges system. However due to continuous sedimentation the Ganges gradually began to spill out its former river bed and find new channels to the east- the Bhairav, the Mathabhanga, the Garai Madhumati until finally in the late sixteenth century it linked up with the Padma enabling its principal course to flow directly into the heart of East Bengal. This eastward movement of the Ganges linked the economy of eastern Bengal with wider markets, as it opened up a heavily forested and formerly isolated region to direct commercial contact with upper India. In the second place, the eastward movement of the Ganges carried with it the epicenter of Bengali civilization, - the annual flooding deposited the immense load of silt which enabled better cultivation of wet rice in eastern Bengal and hence could sustain larger concentration of population. Unlike the Turk and Afghan rulers of Bengal, who situated their capitals in the north-western delta that is Gaur- Pandua, the Mughals in the early seventeenth century had their provincial capital in Dhaka in the heart of the eastern delta. They granted favorable or even tax-free tenures of land to industrious individuals who were expected to bring the vast stretches of forest lands under cultivation and since the majority of the pioneers were Muslims, a major group of people here became adherents of Islamic faith.[9] Thus a number of factors, natural, political and economic contributed to create the booming rice frontier in the east. This phenomenon coincided both in time and place with the emergence of Muslim peasantry. The eastern side noticed from about the sixteenth century the presence of Muslim holy men or charismatic persons engaged in forest clearing. The names of some of them like Mehr Ali, Zindah Ghazi, Mubara Ghazi, Khan Jahan, Pir Umar Shah and many more still persist in people's memory. The Chandimangala kavya of Kavikankana Mukundaram also shows in one place, how Muslims were involved in forest clearing operation only after which the city of Gujarat could be established under the rule of Kalaketu. Nevertheless, what is evident that there were people, many of them were Muslim holy men who played the enterprising role of clearing forests and extending cultivation and as this happened, people gradually came to venerate these men who were most often Muslims. Thus, in this part of the delta Islam was introduced as a civilization

building process. Unlike the western part of the delta which was sufficiently Hinduized and peasantized, the eastern part was far removed from Brahmanical domination and therefore when it was brought under cultivation, the inhabitants being adherents of heathen cults easily succumbed to Islam. This is the reason why there was a greater proportion of Islam in eastern Bengal than in the western.[10]

However, the economic factors were not solely responsible for the spread of Islamic influence, the interaction between the pre-Muslim Sahajiya tradition led by the Bauls of Bengal and Sufism popularized by Muslim Sufis and Saints played an important role in this regard. The Islamic faith that was transmitted to the populace was influenced by Sufism and not by any Islamic scriptures. This Sufism which drew many people to the Islamic fold was in turn to some extent shaped by the Sahajiya tradition.[11] Though Sahajiya tradition is connected or rather can be said to be an offshoot of popular Buddhism, its origin is not to be traced to Buddhism, as it was essentially an esoteric yogic cult that was adopted by the Shaiva, the Shakta, the Vaishnava and the Buddhist sects. It was the followers of the Vaishnava Sahajiya school, bearing the general name Baul, who came to exert considerable importance in social and religious life of Bengal, through their songs. These songs which portray man's love for God underlines the spirit of Sufism. It was for this reason that Sufism, which was to a considerable extent shaped by the Baul tradition, appealed to the rural folks because Sufi songs bespoke the same simplicity that the Bauls exhibited.[12] Thus, Islam that flourished in Bengal, mostly due to the activities of Sufi saints was mainly a syncretic tradition being shaped by the Sahajiya tradition. Like the Sahajiyas, the Sufis too opposed the Brahmanical stratification based on caste and opposed all sorts of intolerance,[13] thus widening their support base. This interaction of syncretistic ideas between Sufism and Sahajiya traditions that the Sufi saints propagated led to their wide acceptability among the masses. In this way Islam established its foothold in Bengal.

III

Just as the process of Islamisation progressed mainly through the Sufi saints who appropriated much of the Sahajiya ideas popular among the local populace, Brahmanism in order to outwit Islam chose to tread on a similar line. It fashioned local goddesses with brahmanical embellishments so that the people could be won over to Brahmanism and not being appropriated by Islam. It is in this context that one needs to understand the development of the Mangalakavyas and popularization of deities like Manasa, Mangalachandi, Dharmathakur and the likes, who became tools of Brahmanism to subvert Islam.

There are ample cues scattered throughout the Mangalakavyas that hint at these deities' later incorporation into the Brahmanical fold in face of an exigency. That the brahmanas gave grudging concession to deities like Manasa is evident in the Mangalakavyas' depiction of the clashes between Manasa and Chanda Saudagar, an ardent Shaivite, who refused to bow down before this lowly deity and it was only later that a compromise was reached. The Mangalakavyas make it clear that her worship in the beginning was confined to the lower classes, it was only at a later stage that the cult began to climb up the social ladder. Similarly, the local deity Mangalachandi adorned with

Brahmanical characteristics were also eulogized in the Mangalakavyas as the Mahadevi, but a close perusal of these texts betrays her original character, which had no such brahmanical attributes. Though she was elevated to the status of the supreme Devi, in reality she shares strands with many indigenous deities, all of whom were fused under the rubric of Mangalachandi, proclaimed as a High Goddess by the local brahmanas. The Dharmamangalakavyas also highlight the same process. The Dharmamangala was popular in Rarh, western Bengal where the masses, unlike in the eastern Bengal, did not accept Islam but veered towards Hinduism. This was because of the accommodative Brahmanism, which accepted the economic and social mobility that resulted from the antyajas and other marginal castes of the region also taking to the plough.[14] Thus unlike in eastern Bengal where peasantization brought forth Islamisation, in western Bengal, particularly Rarh peasantization resisted Islamization. In this region it was Chaitanya's influence along with peasantization and also the glorification of the popular deities in the Mangalakavyas that permitted the Brahmana's entry into the realm of popular worship. Like Manasa, Mangalachandi and many other deities, Dharmathakur too received much prominence only after the coming of Islam, in the face of the "threat" posed by Islam.

Hence it is necessary for us to understand the nature of the "threat" that Islam presented which made such autochthonous deities receive Brahmanical sanction.

IV

Reference may be made here to a book, entitled, Dharma Pujar Bidhan. This book contains a poem named Niranjaner Rushma which first narrates the demeaning manner in which Brahmanas treated the devotees of Dharma Thakur. Highly perturbed at this, the devotees prayed to Dharma Thakur for deliverance, and being moved by the devotees' earnest prayers, he came down to earth[15] and assumed the form of Khoda (Allah) and the other Hindu deities were so frightened that they converted themselves immediately to Muslim divinities.[16] Accordingly Vishnu became Paygambar, Brahma Pakambar, Shiva Adam, Ganesha came down as Ghazi, Kartikeya Qazi, Chandika Devi as Haya Bibi and Padmavati as Nur Bibi. Thus the Hindu gods came down to earth in the form of Muslims wearing trousers, entered Jaypur, demolished the temples and did mischief all around.[17] Jawhar Sircar says that these passages appear to present a sense of relief with which some sections of the Bengali society especially those influenced by Buddhism appear to have viewed the entry of Islam in Bengal in the early thirteenth century, but he also says that this is most likely not the real reason for any impulsive or instant conversion to Islam.[18]

The Mangalakavyas bear testimony to the fact about how Brahmanism looked down upon the religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous populace. Thus, there is nothing startling in the section of Niranjaner Rushma when it speaks about Brahmanical oppression. However, what comes as a surprise is that the gods disguised themselves as Muslims leading many to assume that the common people here welcomed Islam. Yet the followers of Dharma if were actually influenced by Islam, then as Jawhar Sircar argues the land of the Dharma cult, that is the Rarh, would have been the strongest bastion of Islamic converts which it never became.[19] In all likelihood, the indigenous community wanting to subvert domination of Brahmanical priesthood contemplated

some sort of alliance with Islam, without ever thinking about conversion.

Yet all this suggests the existence of a threat, a threat of Islam outbidding Brahmanism, that needed to be contained and Mangakavyas became one prime medium to contain this threat. Like Chaitanya who through his teachings managed to integrate the marginal sections into the fold of Hinduism, similarly the Mangalakavya phenomenon by accepting the popular deities of the indigenous communities also managed to broaden the horizon of Hinduism.[20]

The Brahmanas fearing a large scale Islamisation of the local populace, tried to bring those cults which were still at the fringes into the Brahmanical fold and the tools they chose for the task or to say it in the words of Jawhar Sircar, the 'sponge' chosen for the mopping task was not the usual sacred Puranic texts, but the immensely popular Mangalakavyas written in the language of the people.[21]

Thus, the religious process of assimilation of popular deities into the Brahmanical fold that was initiated by the Puranas, did not stop with Islamic conquest rather as stated before, it continued unabated. Both before and after the conquest, numerous popular cults flourished. Celebrated in the Mangalakavya literature, they were primarily worshipped as mentioned before by indigenous groups, whom the Brahmanas decided to give recognition in order to resist Islamization. However, an interesting trait of this period is that it did not just witness the assimilation of folk with Brahmanical ideas in order to counteract Islam, Islam also cast its influence and was influenced by the indigenous religious beliefs of Bengal.

The Mangalakavyas depict how the initial confrontation is replaced by conciliation; for instance, in Vipradasa's Manasamangal it is shown how the Muslim chieftain brothers, Hasan and Hosen, who though initially opposed the cult of Manasa later relented and Husen not just became her devotee but also dedicated a temple in her honour.[22] The process of acculturation is further highlighted in Vishnu Pala's poem which narrates that the birth of Hasan and Hosen was a result of Siva's ravishing Parvati in the guise of a Muslim sentry.[23]

The fusion of apparently two contradictory beliefs, that is 'Hinduism' and 'Islam', also found its manifestation in the cult of Satyapir, who represents the amalgamation of Hindu belief in Narayana and that of Muslim in Pir. Both Hindus and Muslims respected the saints and fakirs of either community. The Hindus also respected the Quran like their own religious text. In some versions of Ksemananda's Manasamangala, it is mentioned that to save Lakkhindara from snake bite, a copy of Quran was kept in the iron chamber, specifically built for this purpose of protecting Lakkhinder, along with a sacred text of Hindu. In one of the texts of Samser Gazi, it is stated that a Hindu deity had appeared in his dream once, making him arrange for her worship by a Brahmana priest. Another trait of acculturation is reflected in the Muslims' faith in astrology, generally considered to be associated with Hindu belief system. Both Alivardi and Sarfaraz Khan used to consult astrologers before any important event.[24]

Bengali literary texts are replete with such instances. For example, the Ray-mangala, a poem composed in 1686, celebrated both the Bengali tiger god Dakshin Ray and a Muslim pioneer, known as Badi Ghazi Khan. According to this poem, conflict between the two of them was resolved not by displacing or defeating the other, but the elevation of the latter to the position of revered

saint and by the peaceful coexistence of the two figures, which would henceforth hold a dual religious authority over the Sundarban forests of southern Bengal. The dual authority was represented by the installation of the symbol of the tiger's god head at the burial mound of the Muslim saint.[25]

Thus in spite of occasional tensions between these two communities, acculturation was also not rare rather it was very much evident. Hence in the Satya Pirer Mela (fair in honour of Satya Pir) held in Hooghly, both communities participate. Another example of this syncretic tradition is reflected in the cult of Bon bibi in Sundarban. Saba Naqvi Bhowmick states that in response to their environment the locals have evolved a religion which is a curious mix of animism, pirism and Shakti cult. The three most popular cults of the region are those of Shakti like figure named Bon bibi, a legendary pir called Mobrah Gazi and a tiger god named Dakshin Ray. Thus, there was continuous intermixture of indigenous, Brahmanical and even Islamic beliefs.[26]

All this suggests how the countryside possessed a human material which gave the priestly community and their local patrons the strength to negotiate. This is precisely the context in which the Mangalakavyas originated. Apart from being a literary mirror of the time, the Mangalakavyas had a functional role in the Bengali society as it was going through many changes and upheavals. By valorizing the folk deities in these kavyas, the Brahmanas were actually trying to hold on to their position and at the same time negotiate with the forces of Islamization.

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23. Vishnu Pala describes Siva as wearing a blue loin cloth and turban on head. He held a sword and knife- a yavana incarnate. He had flattened rice and sweets with him and stood waiting on the way ahead of Parvati. Ibid., p x
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