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## Contextualize *Mangal Kavyas* in the Socio-Cultural Scenario of Early Medieval and Medieval Bengal: A Historical Retrospect

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### Abstract

*It was at the juncture of the 12th and the 15th centuries that the Turkish forces led by Bakhtiyar Khilji defeated the then Sena ruler Laxmana Sena and conquered Bengal. So when the Muslims became the new rulers, the pride of the dethroned upper castes was hurt and their hold over religion, culture and literature was broken leading to proliferation of folk religion, rituals and oral traditions. The upper class Hindus then started respecting the religious beliefs and practices of the lower classes. This led the emergence of new deities combined with the power of the Aryan deities with that of the indigenous deities. This new breed of deities became the Mangal gods and goddesses and the epics composed in their honor became the Mangal Kavyas. The Mangal Kavyas were of the language of the mass and were undertaken not only by Brahman scholars but by individual rural poets. The stories of the Mangal Kavyas actually came to fill the real literary and cultural needs 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 socio-political and religious conditions had some connections with the emergence of the Mangal Kavyas. The Mangal Kavyas also vividly reflected contemporary socio economic as well as cultural scenario, for instance, the condition of society, the condition of education, condition of women, the monetary system, warfare, civic life, and the hopes and aspirations of the common people etc. The Mangal-Kavya tradition therefore is an archetype of the synthesis between the Vedic and the popular folk culture of India reflecting the socio cultural and religious scenario of contemporary Bengal.*

**KEYWORDS:** Mangal Kavya , Medieval Bengal, Society, Religion, Culture.

### INTRODUCTION

*Mangal Kavya* (literally, poems of well-being), a genre of Bengali narrative poems were written approximately between the 13th – 18th centuries, depicting the greatness of popular, indigenous deities as well as the social scenario. The poems were known as *Mangal Kavya* because it was believed that listening to these poems about the deities brought both spiritual and material benefits. *Mangal Kavya* described the greatness of a particular indigenous deity and also depicted the conflict between the indigenous deities and the Vedic deities which ended with the victory of the indigenous one. The narratives are usually written in the form of verses.

Between the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, the *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 medieval period. The stories were handed down in the oral tradition for generations and were not in many cases committed to writing as late as eighteenth or even the nineteenth centuries.

*Manasa Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal*, the three major genre of *Mangal Kavya* tradition include the portrayal of the magnitude of Mansa, Chandi and Dharma Thakur respectively. They are considered the greatest among all the native divinities in Bengal. But restraining the accounts of other deities, there are also minor *Mangal-Kavyas* known as *Annada Mangal*, *ShivMangal (Shivayana)*, *Kalika Mangal*, *Raya Mangal*, *Shashti Mangal*, *Shitala Mangal* and *Kamala Mangal* etc. Each strain is composed by more than one poet or group of poets who are on the whole the worshipper of that particular god or goddess concerning their verses. 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.”<sup>1</sup> It is therefore necessary to analyze how these literary texts developed as an important historical source in the context of the socio-cultural history of medieval Bengal. The *Mangal Kavyas* thus played a great role in shaping the tradition of worshipping the indigenous deities of Bengal.<sup>2</sup>

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL ARENA OF EARLY MEDIEVAL AND MEDIEVAL BENGAL**

It was at the juncture of the 12th and the 15th centuries that the Turkish forces led by Bakhtiyar Khilji defeated the then Sena ruler Laxmana Sena and conquered Bengal. In analyzing the causes of this defeat, historians believed that the Senas, being the chief patrons of the Brahmins, did not have support and sympathy to the lower castes who were neglected and oppressed for centuries under their rule.

So when the Muslims became the new rulers, the pride of the dethroned upper castes was hurt and their hold over religion, culture and literature was broken leading to proliferation of folk religion, rituals and oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> They realized their mistakes and the ignominy of their defeat brought them closer to the hitherto ignored lower class Hindus as well as Buddhists ending years of social discriminations. The upper class Hindus then started respecting the religious beliefs and practices of the lower classes. This led the emergence of new deities combined with the power of the Aryan deities with that of the indigenous deities and who could be implored for all sorts of material and spiritual boons. This new breed of deities became the *Mangal* gods and goddesses and the epics composed in their honor became the *Mangal Kavyas*. The defeat of the Aryan deities and the victory of the local deities depicted in the *Mangal Kavyas* were in fact symbolic indication of the victory of the Bengalis over the foreign races. The dethroned Hindus found some

sort of solace in these stories of victory. 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.<sup>4</sup> T.W. Clark however argues that that 'the disruption caused by the invasion, attached no great importance to the indigenous population.'<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to analyze 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 be more powerful.<sup>6</sup> Actually it is a fact that at the time of Muslim invasion, except the upper class Hindus, the social structure as a whole was still largely tribal. J. C Ghosh however opined that the Brahmins were very much aware about the possibilities of large scale conversion of the lower caste Hindus towards Islam and forced them to turn to popular cults, to keep the population away from Islam. Such a step was necessary for the survival of Hinduism in Bengal.<sup>7</sup>

Under such circumstances the stories of the *Mangal Kavyas* came to fill the real literary and cultural needs 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 socio-political and religious conditions had some connections with the emergence of the *Mangal Kavyas*. The main characters of the *Mangal Kavyas* were usually derived from the merchant community while the other characters were from lower social strata. The *Mangal Kavyas* also vividly reflected contemporary socio economic as well as cultural scenario, for instance, the condition of society, the condition of education, condition of women, the monetary system, warfare, civic life, and the hopes and aspirations of the common people etc.

A kind of mixed culture is prevalent in the *Mangal Kavyas* because of the extensive amalgamation between the Aryans and non-Aryans as well as between Hindus and Buddhists around the 10th and the 11th centuries in Bengal. As a result both the communities lost their individual religious identities and turned towards a syncretic religious culture deriving from both the Hindu Puranas and Buddhist Tantricism, which were vividly reflected in the *Mangal Kavyas*.

### **THE ROLE OF THE MANGAL KAVYAS IN SHAPING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CANVAS OF CONTEMPORARY BENGAL**

It is believed that the contemporary political and social conditions had some connection with the emergence of the *Mangal Kavyas*. The new unorthodox and pacifying approach of Brahmanism in Bengal was clearly evident from three phenomena:

- the efforts of Chaitanya to assure the antyajas of a better social position;

- the general Brahmanical accommodation of the upward mobility of 'lower castes' in the Mangal Kavya campaign.
- the valorization of the popular deities of the 'depressed' masses of the region would, in effect, permit or facilitate the Brahman's entry into this hitherto-abjured realm of 'low' local worships.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note at this point that the inclusion of the popular deities of the *antyajas* within the Hindu pantheon and also of the 'new agriculturists' who rose largely from among these forsaken castes that were either within or on the periphery of the Hindu fold, are likely to have paid economic dividends to the priestly class. Such an inclusive attitude helped not only in firming up the commitment of the beneficiaries to Hinduism (rather than to Islam) but also in their subsequent patronage of Brahmanism. T. W. Clark had expressed his observations that the 'upper' castes in this region slowly turned "not towards the suppression of indigenous cults and their mythology, but towards the incorporation of them within a framework of Sanskritic myth, thereby in effect Hinduising them. The operation of some tolerant and accommodating process is confirmed by the form in which the *Mangal Kavya* have been transmitted to us."<sup>9</sup> Asutosh Bhattacharyya is more realistic, when he declared that while "the primary task of the Mangal Kavyas was definitely to dress the folk deities in Puranic 'respectability' "<sup>10</sup>, yet the "poets never sacrificed the popular appeal of the folk beliefs at the altar of Puranic rigidity"<sup>11</sup>

It is also remarkable that most of the leading composers of the *Mangal Kavyas* were Brahmins, almost all of whom were from among the village *pujari* (priestly) class of the *Rarh* region, and many of them carried the 'omnibus' title of Chakraborty, though there also have numerous other Brahmin surnames among the composers, like Bhatta (Mayur), Ganguly (Manik), Banerji (Dwijja Gobindaram), Mukherji (Prabhuram) and Piplai (Vipradas). There were, of course, other composers who belonged to the other 'upper' castes, like Narasimha Basu and Vijay Gupta, and just too few from the 'middle castes'<sup>12</sup>— and almost none from the *antyajas* or the 'backward' castes — except Ramdas Adak (Kaivarta, most probably 'Mahishya') and may be Shyam Pandit. The Brahmin-inspired *Mangal Kavyas*, that 'incorporated' these strange gods of the rural masses, mainly of the *Rarh*, into the Hindu pantheon may surely have helped to wean the 'lower' strata to Hinduism in this region — during a period when their counterparts in other parts of Bengal were swelling the ranks of Islam. After all, the Brahmanical composers were not only composing or singing their paeans in honour of the gods and goddesses of the lower castes<sup>13</sup>— they were now ensuring that these deities of the marginal masses actually defeated the Brahmanized Puranic divinities worshipped by the 'upper' and 'middle' caste

Hindus . This was impossible in Hindu society, even a century or two before the *Mangal Kavyas* came into full bloom.

On the other hand, we find that the popular ballads of Eastern Bengal, like the songs of Mainamati and Gopichand and those from Mymensingh (*the Geetika*) may have provided entertainment to the masses both of Hindu or Muslim community, but they carried no ultimate religious message like that of the *Mangal Kavyas* to worship a particular popular folk deity, instead of any specific Puranic deity of the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon. For instance, at the end of both the *Manasa Mangal* and the *Chandi Mangal* is that their protagonists (Chando and Dhanapati Saudagar, respectively) are compelled to give up or dilute their obsessive attachment for their 'high Hindu' divinities (Shiva and Devi) and accept (however reluctantly be it) the popular deities of the *antyajas* — Manasa and Mangal-Chandi.

So to analyze the socio-religious context of the *Mangal Kavyas*, it is prominent that the *Mangal Kavyas* were an essential element within a 'rough overall strategy' worked out by the poorer sections of Brahmins scattered all over the countryside of Bengal — without either the consent or the approval of the better-maintained, urban or court-centered high class of Brahmin scholars and theologians — and also perhaps without any coordination among themselves.

The *Mangal Kavyas* of medieval Bengal were the inspired creations of literally hundreds of poets and copyists<sup>14</sup>, who could successfully popularize folk deities, chiefly the deities of the lower castes of the contemporary society through these ballads and in this way these deities were included with in the fold of Brahmanical Hindu pantheon. Though Dharma, Manasa, Chandi and the peasant-Shiva of Bengal were the main folk deities who entered the Hindu pantheon in Bengal, thanks chiefly to this genre of balladic poems, even the lesser goddesses like Annada, Kalika, Sitala and Shasthi, as well as minor male divinities such as Dakshin Ray and Panchananda, also received homage through their respective *Mangals*.<sup>15</sup> The *Mangal Kavya* phenomenon lasted for at least four or five hundred years and received enormous support and favor from the traditional rural people — the fisher-folk and pastoralists as well as the service castes and their associates — and of course, the ever increasing peasantry. After all, it must have delighted them to see the Brahmins and the 'upper castes', surrendering their earlier disdain for these gods of the small men and now showering ceaseless tributes to these same popular deities of the marginal folk.

The underlying theme of the *Mangal Kavyas* was invariably the victory of the popular deities of the 'marginal' multitudes of the region over their Puranic 'rivals'. The local audiences, especially those from autochthonous and their near castes, must have delightfully lapped up newer versions and variations of the symbolic triumphs of

their favourite deities — even though the same fixed, rigid stories were repackaged and reproduced for several centuries. Asutosh Bhattacharyya said, “Just as the Puranas were created as a Hindu (or Brahmanical) response to the challenge posed by Buddhism, the *Mangal Kavyas* of Bengal appeared as a similar reaction to the activities of Islam in Bengal”<sup>16</sup> He further stated, “the *Mangal Kavyas* emerged as a result of the inspiration or tradition established by the Puranas, but despite centuries of efforts they continued to remain as Puranas. This is because the Puranas could never institute any rapport with the masses, but as the *Mangal Kavyas* were based on the stories of the people themselves, they could transcend the limitations of the Puranas and establish themselves as popular balladic poems.”<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The *Mangal Kavyas* were of the language of the masses and were undertaken not by Brahman scholars of high standing and repute at the well-maintained ‘seminaries’, but by individual rural poets, most of who were Brahmans — perhaps with no coordination among themselves. The apparent task of these composers from the countryside was probably to refine the existing legends of selected popular deities — so as to dazzle the masses with their own tales recreated in more presentable forms. In the process of elevating the gods and goddesses of the subalterns, the poets constructed linkages with ‘respectable’ Puranic deities, to convince the ruling classes about the acceptability of these gods of the ‘outcastes’. This deliberate Puranisation of popular deities reached to its extreme point in the *Manasa Mangal* by declaring goddess Manasa as to be Shiva’s daughter, appears to have been done to make it easier for the rural Brahman to enter upon this ‘virgin territory’ of worship, without the fear of either ‘demotion’ in his ritual ranking or ostracization. Once the Puranic linking and the scriptural & theoretical framework was in position through the *Kavyas*, the rustic pujaris could also begin their subsequent process of sanskritisation of their new clients along with their deities. It may also be due to the Brahmanical religion’s own inadequacies. Prior to the sixteenth century, the Brahmanical Hinduism in Bengal was unable to accommodate and assimilate with the lower castes of the society. The sudden upward thrust of the marginalized castes of the region claimed its place under the sun in medieval Bengal after their centuries of darkness which creates a fertile ground for acculturation and the *Mangal-Kavyas* were the golden crops of that fertile land.

The *Mangal-Kavya* tradition therefore is an archetype of the synthesis between the Vedic and the popular folk culture of India. It is a fact that, indigenous myths and legends inherited from Indo-Aryan cultures began to blend with the local folk and non-Aryan deities around fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that were glorified by

the poets of *Mangal-Kavya*. As a result, a new cosmogony was evolved, which is different from Sanskrit tradition but has an unmistakable empathy with the indigenous religiocultural traditions of Medieval Bengal.

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