INTRODUCTION

The cultural history of India had its special attraction to me when I was a post-graduate student in the department of History of the University of Burdwan. When I was awarded the Junior Research Fellowship, I got an opportunity to probe into the cultural history of early India, especially its socio-religious aspects. From D.D. Kosambi's An Introduction to the Study of Indian History (Bombay, 1956), I could derive an idea that what is apparently a religious history is in fact the history of society and economy, because religion in India was to a great extent closely related to the material life of the people. In fact, most of the indigenous texts available so far for reconstruction of history are religious in character. But those texts can be utilised, provided they are subjected to an analysis from material point of view, to furnish us with valuable information regarding the stages of development of Indian society. On these grounds, I decided to take up religious history as the area of my research. So far as the exact theme is concerned I had to work hard for more than a year before I could make the final choice. I had in my mind to begin my investigation mainly on the basis of archaeological and anthropological data. The data which are available ultimately circumscribed the area of my study and I was rather guided by the sources available, published and unpublished, to take up the study of the origin and development of the Cult of Mother-goddess in Bengal since
earliest times to the beginning of the mediaeval period. I thought that the Cult of Mother-goddess characterizes the culture of Bengal, distinguishes the socio-economic development in Bengal and assigns to Bengal a unique position in India's religio-cultural life.

Eminent scholars have made their contributions to the religious history of India in general, and of Bengal, in particular. Mention may be made in this connection to the chapters on 'Religion' contained in the volumes published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and edited by R.C.Majumdar, *Dacca History of Bengal*, vol.I, edited by R.C.Majumdar and N.R.Roy's *Bāṅgālīr Itihās* (Ādiparvan). Of course, Sir R.G.Bhandarkar, author of *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Poona, 1928) is considered as a pioneer in this field of study. So far as the history of Śaktism is concerned, welcome light has been thrown by J.N.Banerjea in his *Development of Hindu Iconography* (Cal.1956), *Pañcopāsanā* (Cal.,1960), *Puranic and Tantric Religion* (C.U.,1966). In recent times, N.N.Bhattacharya has done commendable work on the history of Śaktism and his book entitled *Indian Mother Goddess* (Cal.,1970) deserves mention. Whatever has been done so far gives us an idea about the general trends in the writing of religious history of India including Bengal. No work is yet known to have been done exclusively on the history of Śaktism in Bengal. S.B.Dasgupta in his *Obscure Religious Cults* (Cal.,1946) has mainly treated with the development of Tantric
Buddhism which ultimately gave birth to some obscure cults of Sahajiyā, Nāthism, Bāul etc. D. P. Chattopadhyay in his Lokāyata (New Delhi, 1959) has devoted some chapters to explain the material foundation of Śākta and Tāntric religion. P. C. Bagchi’s Studies in the Tantras (Cal., 1939), Chintaharan Chakravarti’s Tantras: Studies on Their Religion and Literature (Cal., 1968) and R. C. Hazra’s Studies in the Upapurāṇas vol. II (Cal., 1979) seem to be relevant for our purpose. However, in spite of all these scholarly works published so far, a comprehensive study of the origin and development of the Cult of Mother-goddess in Bengal has appeared to be worth-undertaking.

While tracing the history of Śāktism in Bengal most of the scholars have so far given stress upon either in distribution of the Śākta-Pīthas or the study of the Śakti images or the development of the Kaula school of Śāktism following the decline of Tāntric Buddhism. In none of these studies one can find out a solution to the problem regarding whether the concept of Śakti had its independent origin in Bengal or was brought in Bengal from outside. Further, one misses in the above studies how the goddess of the Epics and the Purāṇas was gradually transformed into the goddess of the Tāntric religion. It has not yet been clearly indicated in any scholarly work how the female divinities had a checkered career that ultimately led to the emergence of the concept of great Mother-goddess who was no longer a female energy of a male divinity but who combined in herself the power
and attributes of all the female divinities together. Besides, no attempt is yet known to have been made to show how the respective supreme goddesses of the Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu pantheons were synthesised into one and the same Mother-goddess. The cultural contact, co-operation and assimilation that took place in the process of the emergence of the concept of a supreme Mother-goddess has yet not been given sufficient attention by previous scholars.

In view of the above considerations, a fresh comprehensive study of the Cult of Mother-goddess seems to be justified. Our investigation began with the collection of anthropological and linguistic data, for which fieldwork had to be undertaken. Next, we made an attempt to ascertain when and how the Vedic-Epic-Purānic-Tāntric concept of Mother-goddess made their appearance in Bengal. For this, we had to depend on an in-depth study of the epigraphic records of Bengal (from 4th century A.D. to 13th century A.D.) indicating the spread of Vedic Brāhmaṇism, Purānic and Tāntric beliefs. The epigraphic data were examined in the light of the Mahāpurāṇas, with special reference to the Mārkandeya-Purāṇa, and the Sākta Upa-Purāṇas which are known to have been composed in Bengal itself. The study of the Purāṇas is indissolubly linked up with that of the Tantras, because the Tāntric elements may be traced in their incipient form in the Purāṇas themselves. We have found numerous names and forms of Mother-goddess in the Purāṇas and the Tantras, for which
corroboration was found to be a necessity. The archaeological findings in different parts of Bengal have yielded in abundance terracotta figurines, sculptures of stone and metal. The iconographic attributes of different types of goddesses represented in terracotta figurines and sculptures has to a great extent corroborated the concept of goddess as found in the Purānas-Tantras. The question may naturally arise as to who were the worshippers of those goddesses. For a convincing reply we had to undertake a field-survey. We could locate the places of pilgrimage associated with worship of Sakti, generally known as Sākta-Pithas. Obviously, we had to compare the results of our field-survey with the Purānic-Tāntric textual references to those Pithas. It may be mentioned, in this connection that while undertaking field-survey we made use of questionaires at the time of taking interviews and also took photographs of the sites and relevant archaeological materials.

In Chapter I an attempt has been made to show that the concept of Mother-goddess may be traced in the primitive religious belief. The pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian inhabitants in Bengal appear to have been primarily dependent upon the agrarian economy for which they developed a magical belief in the Cult of fertility. The pre-and proto-historic archaeology, on the one hand and some significant Austric words having bearing upon the means of production and the nature of produces in an agrarian background, on the other, leave no scope of doubt about the
popularity of the female divinity presiding over fertility. The cultural-anthropological study of the contemporary primitive societies like those of the Santals and Oraons have led us to believe that their ancestors who lived upon the productivity of land might have developed among themselves the Cult of fertility. From the Palaeolithic to the Chalcolithic age the means of production gradually evolved ultimately leading to the replacement of stone by metal. An attempt has been made to indicate the synchronisation of the Austric and Dravidian cultures with those of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic ages respectively. As a result, the anthropological data along with the archaeological findings have furnished us with the tools for fresh examination of the views regarding the origin of the Cult of Mother-goddess in Bengal. R.P. Chanda and P. C. Bagchi have shown different grounds to put forward to same thesis that the concept of Śakti was imported in Bengal from outside. This view has been criticized on reasonable grounds.

In Chapter II an attempt has been made to show in the light of epigraphic records that the Vedic Brāhmaṇism had its penetration in Bengal before the 5th century A.D. While the Gupta records were found mainly in Varendrī Janapada, the post-Gupta and Pāla-Sena epigraphs have been found in Varendrī, Rāḍha, Vaṅga and Samataṭa. Therefore, before undertaking the study of records we have classified them according to their finds spots in different centres of culture. The chronological study of the data
culled from the epigraphs helps us to draw an outline of the development with regard to the belief in Mother-goddess in different centres of culture. In most of the records we find incidental and stray references to the names of Purānic goddesses in the context of drawing comparisons with some noble ladies belonging to the ruling class. But those references indicate no doubt that the names of such goddesses had gained familiarity and popularity in Bengal. It has appeared that the Epic-Purānic goddesses made their advent in Bengal by the 7th century A.D., if not earlier. Again, there are some epigraphs which directly refer to either Buddhist or Purānic goddesses. For instance, Sarvāṇī and Cāṇḍī are known from the records of the 7th and 12th century respectively, whereas the Buddhist Mahāyāna goddesses like Prajñāpāramitā, MahānĪlasarasvatī, Vāgīśvarī, Tārā and Durgottārā appear in the records of the 10th century A.D. onwards. Tāntric goddesses like Ărācā, Nava-Cāṇḍikā, Yōginīś etc. are found to be mentioned in a record of the 10th-11th century A.D. So the epigraphic study gives us to understand that the concept of Purānic-Tāntric goddesses side by side with the Buddhist Tāntric ones gradually developed in early mediaeval Bengal. From the point of view of centres of culture, an attempt has been made to locate the Purānic as well as Buddhist goddesses in Vaṅga-Samataṭa and the Tāntric goddesses in Varendrī and Rādha.

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In Chapter III an investigation has been made into the development of the Purānic Mother-goddess. In this connection, we have concentrated on the Devimāhātmya-section of the Markandeya-Purāṇa in which appear different aspects of the Mother-goddess Durgā, who has gained popularity in Bengal since early times. We have drawn a comparison of the goddess of the Markandeya-Purāṇa with that of the early and later Purāṇas and Upa-Purāṇas. From the comparative study it has transpired that the Markandeya-Purāṇa, which was composed most probably between the 6th and the 9th century A.D., accommodated in itself in a systematic form the ideas about the goddess that lay scattered in different areas and periods. The goddess who represents the Primeval Energy (Ādyā-Sakti) has appeared in her fierce (ghōra) form to fight against the demons through the ages and in her benign form (Saumya) to give protection to the vegetation and all living beings on the earth. In fact, no Purāṇa could add to the goddess more than these two main aspects which have been universally recognised.

In Chapter IV we have made an attempt to show how the Tantric elements associated with the goddess which were given maturer shape in mediaeval Bengal might be traced even in the Epics and the Purāṇas. The development of the Mother-goddess in the Tantras associated with her personality a large number of goddesses who may be classified as Mātrkās representing the emanations from the goddess herself and the Ganas, who are again associated with the Mātrkās. The Ganas include a large number of Yoginīs. Although the number is generally supposed to be sixty-
four, there are references to Kāti-Yoginīs also. The Tāntric development of the Mother-goddess hinges upon the attachment with the goddess an aspect of fierceness or fearfulness mainly, which has been enhanced by the association with Dākinīs and Yogīnīs. This aspect of the goddess mainly attracted the Śākta-Sādhakas who adopted left-handed practices (Vāmācāra). Further, the concept of Ardhanārīśvara representing the union of Śiva and Śakti, although it had its beginning in the later Purāṇas, was given a maturer form that proved to be the basis of the Tāntric philosophy and practices. The characteristic of the Tāntras appears to be the representation of the goddess as Kulakundalini, the psychic-cum-physical manifestation of Śakti. The explanation of Kundalini from materialistic point of view, as it has been advanced in recent times, has been re-examined.

The Tāntras in Bengal took their final shape in the 16th century A.D. and, therefore, might not be brought within the purview of the present investigation. But we have found that the study of the development of the Cult of Mother-goddess remains incomplete without an indication of her development in the Tāntras. Again the Tāntric elements may be traced in the Purāṇas themselves. We can not but make a study how these Tāntric elements associated with the goddess gradually developed till the beginning of the mediaeval period. Although the collections of Tāntric texts were made by scholars like Āgamvāglīśa in the mediaeval periods, those texts seems to have both contemporary and retrospective value.
In Chapter V we have made a study of the iconic representation of the Mother-goddess in different forms bearing various names. The iconographic study has begun with the ageless terracotta figurines. It has been followed by an analysis of the sculptural representations either in stone or in metal. The icons have been classified as Brāhmaṇical, Buddhist and Jaina. Again the Brāhmaṇical goddesses have classified under two heads Major and Minor. The so-called minor goddesses are those who are considered as folk-deities worshipped in villages. In course of our iconographic study due consideration has been given to the mutual borrowing of iconographic attributes of the Mother-goddess between Hindu, Mahāyāna Buddhist and Jaina sects.

Since J. N. B. N. K. Bhattasali and R. D. Banerjee made their iconographic studies, a large number of Sakti images have been discovered in different parts of Bengal and Bihar. Those images are now preserved either in the museums or private collections. We have incorporated those newly found images in our iconographic study. The study of the icons has to a great extent corroborated the representation of the goddesses as found in the Purāṇic and Tāntric texts.

Chapter VI deals with the sacred places of Sakti-worship, generally known as Sakti-Pīṭhas. Some of the Pīṭhas referred to in the Purāṇas and Tantras may be traced in some parts of Bengal. Besides, there are other sacred places of worship where we have found installation of either symbols or
images of Mother-goddess. The local tradition has recognised those places as Pithas, whether they are mentioned in the texts or not. The study of different types of the Pithas indicates the wide geographical extent of the Cult of Mother-goddess and the distribution of the people belonging to the Sākta sect over a wide region.

In the study of the Pithas we have made an attempt to adopt an anthropological approach. In most of the recognised Pithas, the sacred place of worship is often found to be consisting of a block of stone and a tree by its side. The symbolical representation might have in itself the belief in animism and aniconism that was handed over by the aboriginal tribal people from generation to generation and was later adopted by the Hindu Tantric Sādhakas. If a Sākta-Pitha is held to be the symbol of belief in the Mother-goddess, some elements of Tantric Sādhanā may be considered to be the heritage of the pre-Aryan past.

While making the present investigation I had to depend on the results of field-study, on the one hand, and the data collected from different museums and libraries on the other. I remain indebted to the authorities of the Visnupur Vangiya Sahitya Parisat Museum, Vangiya Sahitya Parisat Museum, Calcutta, Indian Museum, Calcutta, State Gallery of Archaeological Museum, Calcutta, Malda Museum, Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum, North Bengal University and Burdwan University Museum, and Art.
Gallery. The catalogues of the Museums have also been consulted. Again, I remain grateful to the librarians of Asiatic Society, Calcutta, Vangiya Sahitya Parisat, Calcutta, Central Library of the University of Burdwan, Library of the Visvabharati University and to all those who furnished me different information in course of my field-survey.

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