ORIGIN OF THE CULT OF MOTHER-GODDESS IN BENGAL :-

The Cult of Mother-Goddess is associated with the Cult of fertility. Fertility is related to production of natural vegetation and crops. It is also said to be the pre-condition for the growth of human species as well as animals. Woman, being the mother of children has ever represented fertility all over the world. Thus, fertility and motherhood were made equivalent in primitive religious belief. It was but natural for primitive people to invoke the spirit of fertility through mother. Mother was thus exalted to the position of a goddess.

It was universally believed since the earliest period of human history that women cause the fruits to multiply, because they know how to produce children; that whatsoever is sown or planted by a pregnant women grows and increase as the foetus in her womb; that a sterile woman is injurious to the garden and a barren woman makes the fields barren. Simultaneously, the Cult of Mother-Goddess was universally recognised all over the world since primitive times.

We have to diagnose exactly at which stage of human history the Cult of Mother-Goddess might have originated. L. H. Morgan thinks that "savagery preceded barbarism in all the tribes of mankind, as barbarism is known to have preceded civilization. The history of human race is one in source, one in experience,
The view that in the earliest period of his life, man lived as a food-gatherer (savagery) is supported not only by an anthropological study of the existing primitive societies but also by an archaeological study of the Palaeolithic people whose tools indicate the stage of hunting. Anthropology and archaeology combine together to show that the stage of food-production at the subsistence level (barbarism) synchronises with the Neolithic age, and so also the stage of surplus food-production (civilization) with the Chalcolithic age. It may be reasonably assumed that at the stage of subsistence level production, when man's technology of agriculture was primitive, the spirit of fertility and, for that matter, mother-goddess was first invoked.

The study of the pre and proto-history of Eastern India would reveal that the people inhabiting there witnessed the stages of general evolution of mankind. It was, therefore, natural for the Eastern Indian people to develop the Cult of Mother-Goddess at the stage of the beginning of agriculture.

STAGE OF FOOD-COLLECTION

The earliest inhabitants of Eastern India, according to the anthropologists' view, were the Negritos. They seem to have been connected with the Palaeolithic tools which are collected mainly from Chotanagpur Plateau. Stray finds of such tools may be traced in the districts of West Bengal, adjacent to Chotanagpur. The first Palaeolithic tool (a hand-axe, made of quartzite) in
Bengal, as reported by V. Ball (1865), was collected from the village Kunkuna, Dist. Hooghly. In the same year, he discovered some Palaeolithic tools (Hand-axes) from Gopinathpur, eleven miles south-west of the Biharinath hill in the district of Bankura. Krisnaswamy discovered a number of Palaeolithic sites in the districts of Purulia and Bankura. The explored sites are Hatikheda, Buddih, Chiada, Ambikanagar, Faresnath, Kajalkura, Uparson, Bhanrarhia. The Calcutta University team carried out a systematic work on the sites mainly in Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur districts. There are 48 artefact specimens in their collection including choppers, handaxes, cleavers, scrapers etc. A.K. Ghosh observes that the 'tools range from cruder to finer types'. The investigators also reported a number of caves and rock-shelters. The West Bengal Directorate of Archaeology explored Early Stone Age and Middle Stone Age implements from Barkola (Bankura), Jibdharpur (Birbhum), Bonkati (Burdwan), Amgora, Barabhum, Jargo (Purulia), and Deulpota (24 Parganas).

These archaeological discoveries of the Early Stone Age in Bengal seem to suggest that at this stage the people of this area used (a) to hunt in forests (with quartzite implements), (b) to fish in the rivers, and (c) to live on fruits and natural vegetables. At this stage, the people might have nurtured the belief in animism or the belief in the existence of spirits in all animate and inanimate objects of the world. Magic played a vital role in their religious belief.
STAGE OF FOOD-PRODUCTION

The Negritos of Early Stone Age seem to have been supplanted by the Proto-Australoids or Austrics, who are represented by the contemporary aboriginal tribes like the Santals, Mundas, Males and Malpahariyas. They are often referred to as 'Nisādās' in the Vedic texts. They had passed the stage of savagery, reached the stage of producing food, using Neolithic tools, manufacturing potteries and igniting fire.

The Neolithic tools and implements, used in the act of cultivation, have been mainly collected from the valley of the rivers like Ajay, Damodar, Kasai, Rupnarayan, Suvarnarekha, Sanjay and Burhabalanga, having their origin in the highlands of the Chotanagpur plateau. The river valley provided the Neolithic people of Bengal with the fertile lands that were congenial for agriculture. The other Neolithic culture centres lay in the northern part of West Bengal, that is, Darjeeling district.

Most of the Neolithic sites of Bengal have been discovered during and after the sixties of this century. The western sites are Nadiha, Bhimgarh (Burdwan), Bamal, Deulbash (Midnapur), Chiada (Bankura), Kukutia, Harinarayanpur (24 Parganas), Khunkrakhopi (finds of some ring-stones), Organda (Midnapur: ring-stones found near a temple). Neolithic stone-celts were found under a tree near the worshipping place of the village Bon Asuria, in the valley of the Damodar (Bankura). A number of Neolithic specimens like pounder, ring-stones, cels
Some Neolithic tools and implements were collected from a cultivated field of Potanda (Birbhum). Different localities of Susunia region (Bankura) named Chandra, Dhankora, Bisinda and Bankhora are the Neolithic-bearing sites. Stone-celts and ring stones were found in these area. The Midnapore district Neolithic sites are in the Tarapheni Valley: Muransole, Sondhapara, Chirudanga, Thakuranpahari, Kalgaon, Dumurgonda. The Purulia district Neolithic sites are reported to yield Early, Middle and Late Stone Age tools and also Neolithic tools and implements. Dhuliapahar (Burdwan) and Jhinaiipur (Birbhum) are two Neolithic-producing sites.

A prominent Neolithic centre in Northern Bengal is Bāngarh (Dinajpur dist.). After examining the Bāngarh-findings K.G. Goswamy commented, "it may be compared with the Neolithic celts found by John Marshall in his excavation at Bhita". Tamluk produced a stratified collection of Neoliths as a result of N. Despande's excavation in this area. Apart from Neoliths, Śuṅga terracottas, copper coins and other antiquities were found from this site. Pāṇdu-rājār-ṛhibhi, a renowned Chalcolithic site of Burdwan, yielded some polished celts which have been assigned to the Neolithic period. Apart from these sites, the villages of Dihar, Palashdanga, Batikar and Kotasur are reported to have yielded Neolithic tools and implements.

The artefacts of the Neolithic period seem to suggest that the people's process of cultivation was primitive in nature. The means of production, being stone tools, the primitive
sedentary food-producing society had to remain dependent on the fertility of the soil for which the people were forced to depend upon the mercy of an unseen power of Nature, the spirit of fertility, that was raised in course of time to the status of a divinity.

The early material culture of Bengal is supported by the linguistic data. The word लङ्गला derived from the Austro-Asiatic family of languages, stands for the plough that was the main tool for cultivation. On linguistic grounds, the production of rice-cultivation is attributed to the Austro-Asiatics. The words for banana, brinjal, gourd, betel-leaf, coconut, turmeric, betel-nut etc. are of Austro-Asiatic origin. Karpasa (cotton), Pāṭ (Jute) and Karpaṣa (Paṭṭavastra) are Austro-Asiatic words. The word 'Dheknī' (Seesaw), very closely associated with the agriculturist people, is also derived from the Munda dialect. The Austro-Asiatic-speaking people, it may be reasonably assumed, were familiar with the primitive tools for cultivation and agricultural products. It has been suggested that the Austro-Asiatics belonged to the Neolithic age of which remains have been found in different parts of Bengal.

**Stage of Surplus Production: Chalcolithic-Culture Centres in Bengal**

It is generally held that the Dravidians were the authors of the Chalcolithic culture. Pāṇḍu-rājār-dhibi, in the valley of the river Ajay (Burdwan) is the most important chalcolithic site in Bengal. The excavation launched by the West
Bengal Directorate of Archaeology (1962 – 1965) revealed for the first time in Bengal the evidence of a proto-historic civilization, the material culture of which is surprisingly comparable to those in Central India, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. The period IV is assigned to the latter half of the second millennium B.C. The excavation yielded various antiquities and a number of terracottas from various cultural periods of the site. The types of wares found at Pāṇḍu-rājār-dhibi provide a valuable evidence of human settlement in Bengal in the Chalcolithic age.

The other main Chalcolithic sites in Burdwan district are Bharatpur and Baneswardanga. Bharatpur is situated on the northern bank of the river Damodar near Panagarh Rly. Stn. Period I of the site has been assigned to the Chalcolithic period, that is about the middle of the second millennium B.C. and others to the iron-age (Period III is assigned to the Gupta Period). Baneswardanga situated in the village of Barabelun (Burdwan district) near the Brahmani river, where three occupational sites have been revealed. Among these three, the lowest two belong to the Chalcolithic period.

The Chalcolithic site at Mahisadal in district Birbhum is distinguished as Period I (from c. 1300 B.C. to c. 800 B.C.) and as Period II (c. 750 B.C.) . The most significant findings in this site are a number of terracottas which comprise a small phallus assigned to Period I. Thus the antiquity of Phallus (liṅga)-worship in Bengal can be traced back to a very early period. The Chalcolithic sites in Birbhum district are Nanur, Haraipur, and Bahiri. Nanur is situated on the east of Mahisadal.
Regarding its antiquities it has been remarked: "The site had been in occupation from Proto-historic through historical including mediaeval to modern times."

Regarding the characteristics of the Chalcolithic culture A. K. Coomaraswamy observes: "The Chalcolithic culture was everywhere characterized by matriarchy and a cult of the productive power of nature, and of a mother-goddess; and by a great development of the arts of design. We must now realise that an early culture of this kind once extended from the Mediterranean to the Ganges Valley, and that the whole of the Ancient East has behind it this common heritage". Archaeological evidences from Early Stone Age to Iron Age, as found in different parts of Bengal, seem to indicate that the inhabitants of this country passed through the three stages of social evolution and at the third stage developed a belief in the Cult of Mother-Goddess.

TRIBAL SOCIETY IN BENGAL AS MENTIONED IN EARLY LITERARY TEXTS

Modern anthropologists suggest, on the basis of their study of contemporary simple societies, distinct stages in the social formation. At the stage of hunting and fishing, the people lived in a 'band society'. At the next stage of primitive agriculture, they were more dependent on domestication of animals. They lived in a 'tribal society'. The tribal society gradually adopted intensive and extensive agriculture. The nomadic way of life was forsaken for sedentary life. The tribal
organisation came under the authority of a powerful chief. The 'tribal chiefdom' was ultimately replaced by a state-based society in which the institutions of family and the private property were recognised. However, the existence of the tribal society in Bengal is vouchsafed by the Vedic, Epic and Purānic references to the tribes like the Pundras, Vāgas, Suhmas, Rādhas etc.

The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (Vii, 13–18) refers to the Pundras as 'Dasyus' and the Aitareya Āraṇyaka (II. 1.1) refers to Vāṅgāvagadāhā in contemptuous terms. Assuming that the Pundras lived in North Bengal and the expression Vāṅgāvagadāhā really means Vāṅgas and Magadhas, it is quite clear that Bengal was outside the fold of Aryan culture even in the Later Vedic period. The state of things was not very different even in the Śūtra period. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra prescribes a penance for those who visit, among other countries, Pundra and Vāṅga representing North and East Bengal respectively. The Great Epic Mahābhārata (Śabhā Parvan) gives us to understand that Kṛṣṇa vanquished the Suhmas, Pundras and Vāṅgas, and Kṛṣṇa defeated both the Vāṅgas and the Paundras.

The Manusmṛti or Mānava Dharmasāstra (B.C.200 – A.D.200) indicates, the expansion of Āryavarta upto the Eastern Sea, although the Pundras are referred to as 'degraded Kshatriyas'. The Vinaya-Piṭaka locates the eastern frontier of Aryandom in ancient Bengal. It was through admixture of blood, political conquests, religious missionaries' attempt at preaching Jainism, Buddhism and Brāhmaṇism, and above all, trade and
commercial contacts, that the tribal people of Bengal were gradually absorbed in Aryan Varna based society. However, that the tribes in Eastern India began to live sedentary life is confirmed from the nomenclatures of their respective settlements or Janapadas such as Fundravardhana, Vaṅga, Suhma and Rāḍha. It was most probably at this tribal stage that Bengal witnessed the beginning of agricultural operations requiring the invocation of the spirit of fertility that invoked by the worship of the phallic symbols, both male and female. Later, under the Brähmanical influence the symbols were transformed into anthropomorphic images of Purānic Śiva and Śakti (Mother-Goddess).

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE EARLY HISTORICAL PERIOD

The worship of Liṅga (Male-generative organ), a conical-shaped stone, and that of Mātrikā is attributed to the Austric people. It has been shown on linguistic grounds by J. Przyluski that the Liṅga worship was known in primitive society. The primitive hoe is designed to resemble the male-organ, while the word Lāṅgala (Plough) is closely associated with Liṅga. It may be incidentally mentioned that the central object of worship in the Śaiva temples of Bengal is a phallic emblem. The first historical evidence of Liṅga-worship in Bengal is found from the Chalcolithic site at Mahisadal (district Birbhum) assigned to c.1300 – c.800 B.C. However, the principle of productivity as manifested in the male and female symbols of generation appears to have been upheld by the primitive people.
The productivity was sought for in respect of both agricultural crops and agriculturist population.

The prevalence of the Liṅga worship implies the predominance of the patriarchy in the family and the society. In the background of the predominance of the worship of the female symbol one may reasonably trace the tradition of the matriarchal society in which mother held the most honourable status. Even after the institution of patriarchal family had originated, the unique position of mother remained in tact.

The wide distribution of the terracotta female figurines, unearthed from different places of Bengal, may be reasonably considered as an evidence in support of the prevalence of the Cult of Mother-goddess in ancient Bengal. As it has been observed by S.K.Saraswati, "most of the human figurines represent females with heavy and bulging hips and prominent rounded breasts, sometimes with the navel and abdomen clearly marked. They seem to be associated with the primitive conception of a mother or fertility-goddess". The terracotta images found from Tamluk, Berachampa, Harinarayanpur, Gitagram, Bangarh, Mahasthan, Chadraketugarh, all of them bearing the characteristics of the fertility-goddess, as described above, have been assigned to a remote antiquity. The terracottas of Bangarh help us in fixing the chronology of Bengal terracottas as they are found from different cultural phases in a stratigraphic sequence. Bangarh continued to be an important site till the early medieval period, as it is revealed by the stone
inscriptions of the reign of Kamboja King Nayapāla, and the
associated antiquities of the Pāla period (c. 10th century A.D.)

The fertility-cult may also be traced in such figurines
as 'Yakṣinī Pāñcācūḍā'. Stella Kramrisch identified the figurine
as that of Apsarā Pāñcācūḍā who emerged at the time of churning
of the ocean. Prof. Johnston, however, thinks: "it looks as if
we are dealing with the Cult of Mother-Goddess, which we know as
wide-spread over the Near-East and indeed over most of the then
known world at this time and which seems to have prevailed in
India from time immemorial". The exploration at Pokharna
situated in the southern bank of the river Damodar (Bankura
district) unearthed a number of ancient relics which include a
rare terracotta Mother-goddess assigned to a very early date. The
symbolically accentuated form of the Mother-goddess bearing
decorations of the ears of corns seems to be of deep significance
in the context of the prevalent cults of ancient Bengal.

Apart from the motherly attributes shown in the
terracotta female figurings, already referred to, we should also
take into account the figurines of child-bearing Mother-goddess.
Three such images in the collection of the Tamuluk Museum may be
referred to in this connection:

i) Terracotta female figurine found from Ichhapur,
standing headless and suckling a baby (No. 272 of the
Tamuluk Museum);

ii) Seated female figurine with a child on her extended
legs collected from the same site (No. 462 of the same);
An interesting and archaic female figurine with two suckling babies executed on a pot found from Contai (No. 245 of the same).

A number of terracotta female figurines of Proto-historic period preserved in the Vah gianti Sāhitya Pariṣat Museum (Visnupur, Bankura) remain unpublished as yet. Some of these images are with heavy breasts, while two standing images are found bearing child on their laps and one, seated, headless with broken legs, is found suckling a baby. All these images have been collected from different ancient culture centres in Bankura district.

Serpent was also conceived as a source of generation (probably due to its power of multiplying of its family). Serpent-worship was prevalent in ancient Bengal as it is evident from a few terracotta images representing the Snake-deity. Two images of Nāginī are found from CandraKetugarh. The first has a long neck and tapering hood, showing two circular eyes, and the body rests on two stumpy legs. According to A.K.Coomaraswamy, such figures indicating splayed hips represent the Nāginī in the form of Mother-Goddess. The second represents a lady standing before an aura of snake-hood beneath a merloned roof. She, in all possibility, represents a Nāginī. This image resembles the images found from Kausambi and Sanchi. The period IV of the Pāṇḍu-rājār-dhibi has yielded a class of terracotta broken-headed Mother-goddess figures with pinhole decorations and one having prominent breasts. The torso is powerfully modelled and is rather
sophisticated with its sensitivity and volume. The lower part of a terracotta, possibly a fertility-goddess with splayed hips, encircled by a symbolic girdle represented by pinholes, found in the layer of ashes upon a floor of period III, may reveal the taste and feelings of the age.

Many of these terracotta-images of Bengal are found associated with other antiquities having ambiguous affiliation with the Maurya-Śuṅga period. But the terracotta images have been referred to as ageless on grounds of their traditional representation. In form and technique, the Mother-goddess images, found in different places of Bengal, differ a little from the terracotta figurines associated with the Harappan Culture. The age-less terracottas which abound in the Harappan sites also appear in the Gangetic Valley in diverse forms without any significant difference in the simplicity of expression and technique. It may not be unreasonable to hold that the terracotta art that had flourished in Western India long ago was handed down through generations to the people of the Maurya-Śuṅga period. It is difficult to arrive at any firm conclusion regarding this remarkable phenomenon of stylistic continuity in the midst of an advancement of material culture. The ritualistic use of terracotta figurines of Mother-goddess or fertility-cult figures and the similar use of animal figures produced even today in the villages of Bengal in archaic form and style indicate the continuity of an age-old tradition. It may be held that until the advent of the Purānic pantheon, the people of Bengal remained engaged in worshipping terracotta-figures of Mother-goddess.
HERITAGE OF PRE-ARYAN AND PRE-DRAVIDIAN CULTURE IN BENGAL

We may examine the religious beliefs and practices of the tribal peoples who had succeeded to maintain their separate identities and cultural distinctiveness, although, to some extent, they became Hinduised in course of time. The social and political privileges were enjoyed by the Hindu landed aristocracy to whom the Santals, Mundas, Hos and others were compelled to keep themselves mortgaged for economic reasons. But as they are successors of a deep-rooted culture of their own they never forget their ancestors. Economically and politically submissive, obedient to their masters, as the character they held, but in respect of their socio-cultural tradition they are very much conservative. The survivals of their religious characteristics, in spite of Hinduisation, would give us an idea of their ancestral beliefs and practices.

In Bengal, the descendents of the Austrics or Proto-Australoids are Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Hos, Sabaras, Bhumijas, Malpahariyas and others living mainly in the districts of Birbhum, Purulia, Bankura, Burdwan and Midnapur. They are now landless peasants but the cultivation in West Bengal, especially paddy-cultivation solely depends on the labour of those peoples. The roots of some of the popular gods and goddesses in India may be traced in the religious pantheons of the tribes belonging to both Dravidian and Austric linguistic families.
The Santals usually worship Sim Bonga, god of fertility, and Jáher Burhi, goddess of vegetation and fertility. The former is ceremoniously married to the latter, sometimes represented as the Mother Earth. It is quite natural that production becomes impossible, if there is no union between the sky and the earth, unless the rain from the sky mixes with the earth. It was the experience of the agriculturist "who has learnt to rely on the co-operation of earth and sky" that led to the rise of such a ritual-marriage between a heavenly spirit and a spirit of the earth. There is a legend among them regarding the origin of their clan. It is told that Jáher is the wife of Māniko, who is also her brother. Māniko is, like Manu of Hindu mythology the First Male, while Jáher is the First Female. They are the First Parents of the Santals. Today as goddess of fertility and of vegetation Jáher-Burhi acquires an exalted position of the chief Mother-goddess of the Santals. In some villages, she is now identified with the Hindu goddess Kāli having all attributes of a Hindu deity. 

Similar marriage of the chief male god with the chief female goddess is prevailing among the Oraons. During the Sarhul festival in spring time a ritual marriage of the goddess Dharti Nād or Basumati (otherwise known as Kālo-pakko among the Oraons) with the great god Dharme (representing Sun) is celebrated. This marriage, according to them, promotes the fertility of the soil and the growth of the crops. The Mahalis of Birbhum (Santali-speaking artisan class but originally belonging to agricultural community) also believe in such divine marriage-union. Every
year, an emblematic marriage of their chief god Dubâi Dâbâ with
that of Kâli Mâi, their Earth goddess, is celebrated on the last
day of the Bengali month of Caitra (mid-April). The Bengali
form and aspect of Śiva-Durgâ is very much consistent with the
above tribal concepts of god and goddess.

Cândî, one of the most popular goddesses of rural
Bengal, has its origin in the Oraon goddess 'Cândî', the
goddess of hunting and war. This goddess is worshipped by all
young bachelors, while they get themselves prepared for annual
hunting expedition organised on the full-moon night in the
spring-season. This goddess is the chief agent that bestows
success on individual Oraon in hunting expedition, the original
avocation of the primitive men in food collection stage. Her
attributes and forms differed in keeping with the characteristics
of different stages of socio-cultural development of the Oraons.
With the growth of agriculture, some portion of agricultural work
has been brought under her control and in this respect she is
called Dhanikṣā Cândî (goddess Cândî, presiding over wealth).

The archetype of group goddesses of later Hindu
pantheon may be found in the Malpahariya belief of three sister-
goddesses. Their chief goddess is Dharti-Mâi, the controlling
agent of the fertility of earth and growth of vegetation. Two
other spirits in charge of tigers and lions, designated as
Bâghräî and Singräî, are worshipped together with Dharti-Mâi, who
is considered to be the elder sister of Bâghräî and Singräî. The
deities are represented by three cylindrical stones of black
basaltic rock preserved in the sacred grove of the village.
One interesting ritual performed during the autumnal festival in Bengal bearing a non-Aryan character is 'śivarātrī', the reference to which is found in Śūlapāṇi’s 'Śurṣatsāva-Vivoka'. The ritual has also a tribal background and is probably borrowed from the annual worship of Dhartī-Māi. The male members participating in the sacrificial works must indulge in certain songs containing words related to sex-indulgence. In their opinion, unless slangs are used, the earth would not yield abundant crops. In some songs even the terms conveying the sense of vagina, the female organ of generation, are used. It has been found that among other savages also, sex or sex-emblems are associated with religious rituals, whenever they demand more corn from the field and more child from the women.

Most of these tribes are worshippers of Manasa, the spirit of snake, as they were dwellers in jungle and hill-areas. The Malpahariya’s Snake-spirit called Neru-Nādu and the deity named 'Maucă Den' is a corrupt form of the term Manasā, or the 'Manasā' is the Sanskritized form of the aboriginal term Maucă. In this connection, we may mention that the Dravidian speaking peoples of the South India have a goddess 'Maṅcāmmā' by name, who is a snake-deity. Manasa is the presiding deity of the Mahalis and the Koras.

Goddess Kālī, the most popular deity of Bengal, seems to owe her origin to some of the tribal people’s religious belief. Her tribal progenitors are Kālo-Pakko of the Draons, Kālo...
(Chal) Nāg of the Malpahariyas, Kālī Māi of the Mahalis and 'Sat-ti' of the Koras. To the Koras, she is the spirit of Earth-goddess and the wife of the hill-spirit (Pāhār-deotā). It is interesting to note that the goddess Kālī is generally attributed the title 'Sat-ti', the well known Hindu goddess, the consort of Śiva. The title of Sat-ti attributed to Kālī has also a meaning relevant to the soil. In Santali language 'Sat-ti' means 'kind-hand' and is usually used for a noble woman who fills up the hand of everyone with some food or grain. Kālī, is called 'Sat-ti', because she, when appeased, can fill the hands of the cultivator with corns and endow every house-holder with prosperity. The Mother-goddess Kālī thus stands for an agricultural mode of production. And as the people of this area are mainly dependent on land-economy from an early date without an interruption of advanced economy of trade and commerce, the socio-economic milieu and religious belief connected with it remained often unchanged.

The wide popularity of the concept of Śiva-Śakti in Eastern India was in keeping with the background of tribal religious beliefs. The Pāhār-deotā (spirit of hill) is adored by the Koras as the god of rain. According to them the god is supposed to look after the agricultural activities of the people. They maintain the idea that the Himalayas, the greatest mountain in India, is the abode of the god, where he lives with his consort. 'Pāhār-deotā' is identified with Hindu god Śiva. The word 'Si' means 'ploughing' and 'Va' means the source or origin in Santali language. Thus the word 'Śiva' stands for the source of ploughing. Śiva in popular belief of Bengal is related with
the origin of plough cultivation and his 'Vāhana' (mount) bull also is an inevitable part of plough-cultivation. In mediaeval Bengali ballads (Śivāyana Kāvya) god Śiva has been portrayed as a poor rural cultivator and his consort Durgā is not Candi or Mahiṣamardiṇī, but a simple house-wife of a farmer who is habituated in struggling with poverty. This peculiar element in the concept of the great goddess is undoubtedly Bengal's own. This element might not be traced in the aspects of the goddess as given in the Mārkandeya-Purāṇa. For this the Bengalees are indebted to their ancestors, the original inhabitants known as 'aborigines' or 'tribal people'.

SOME MATRIARCHAL TRAITS IN THE SOCIETY OF BENGAL

R. P. Canda, once remarked: "the Śākta conception of the Devī as Ādyā Śakti 'the primordial energy' and Jagadambā, 'the mother of the universe' also very probably arose in a society where matriarchal or mother-kin was prevalent". He again pointed out that an overwhelming majority of the higher caste Hindus of Bengal -- the Brāhmaṇas, the Kāyasthas and the Vaidyas -- are Śāktas. But the Cult is almost universally recognised among the lower castes (Bagdi, Baur, Dom, Muchi, Karmakara, Kumbhakara, Tanti, Hadi, Yugi and others) and the tribal peoples (Santal, Munda, Oraon, Malpahariya, Mahali, Kora etc.), who constitute the major part of the population in Bengal. The universal recognition of the Cult of Mother-goddess in Bengal seems to suggest that the social structure was favourable for its indigenous growth.
In a matriarchal society "mother-right is considered as a highly complex condition in which a good number of social processes is involved, e.g., descent, kinship, inheritance, succession, authority, marriage etc." Those symptoms of matriarchy can hardly be traced in any period of the history of Bengali society. But there might have been female domination in society in early times. According to D. D. Kosambi, the first stage (Period A) of Indian civilisation is to be marked as 'Classless Matriarchal Society' which is characterized by the emergence of primitive matriarchal cults and fertility rites. He thinks that the 'food-gathering tribal society' and the 'food-producing tribal society' belonged to the first stage. As pointed out above, the food-gathering followed by food-producing tribal society had its existence in prehistoric Bengal. In that case, the probability of female domination cannot be ruled out.

In primitive society agriculture and domestication of animals might have been the main occupations of the people. If agriculture developed considerably without any intervening pastoral stage, mother-right elements might be supposed to have been the guiding forces of the society. We have hardly an evidence to show that there was a period when the people in ancient Bengal adopted domestication of animals as their primary occupation for living. Rather, the fertile alluvial soil of Bengal and monsoon rain seem to have been considered more suitable for agricultural production than for large-scale domestication of animals. It may, therefore, be assumed that the
social infrastructure in Bengal was favourable for the growth of a matriarchal order in society, although the symptoms of matriarchy appear to have been conspicuous by their absence.

It is again held by some scholars that the underdeveloped agricultural economy had a natural tendency to create matriarchal society. If by far the largest portion of Indian population were predominantly agricultural, it was but natural that the most extravagant methods would have been necessary to impose upon the society the supremacy of the male. It is argued that the initial stage of agricultural economy created the material conditions for the social supremacy of the female, as agriculture was claimed to be the discovery of women. Thus, mother-right in India was historically connected with the early agricultural economy, and that was, in all probability violently superseded in the succeeding ages. Yet the peculiar tenacity with which some elements of mother-right have survived in the life of the Indian people is quite striking. The probable reason is that the majority of them still remain tillers of the soil. Among the vast masses of the Indian peasantry male deities (except Śiva) have only a secondary position. The background should be considered favourable for the indigenous origin of the Cult of Mother-goddess.

In this connection mention may be made of some of the hill-tribes of North-Eastern India who are still retaining matriarchal relics of a primitive type. The Austro-Asiatic speaking Khasis comprising its different branches (Synteng, Lynngam and others) and the Tibeto-Burman speaking Garos
comprising twelve branches are the most worth-mentioning representatives of Indian society having recognition of mother-
Right. Those North-Eastern tribes having a strong matriarchal tradition might have exerted an influence on the Eastern Indian society and culture. Ehrenfels further points out a number of castes living in India among whom one can trace a few social customs bearing matriarchal traits. The castes like Darzi, Domb, Jogi, Kumbara, Haddi, Mochi, Khond (most of these castes belong to the lower-stratum of Bengal) maintain a custom of assigning significant position to the maternal uncle in family affairs, follow puberty-rites for girls and worship female-goddess. Some of the social customs prevalent among the tribes like Kawar, Kurmi, Oraon, Santal and others living in the Chotanagpur Plateau must have had originated in a matriarchal society, although their property inheritance goes through patriarchal line. Ehrenfels' chief argument against the theory of basically patriarchal form of Indian society founded on three typical Indian Institutions, viz., hypergamy, child-marriage and Sati (burning of widows), is that these ruthless efforts were made by the patriarchal Aryans to establish male-superiority in the society where the female members deliberately enjoyed independence. But even then the matriarchal culture elements could not be erased altogether from the lives of the masses.

According to the sociologists, when garden tillage done with hoe was superseded by field-tillage with cattle-drawn plough, the work of agriculture was transferred to the male-folk. That the change-over in regard to the power of food-producing
was unacceptable to the women-folk is indicated by some *Vratas* or rituals performed by them. Every married woman of upper-caste Hindus of Sylhet-Kachhar area (easternmost part of modern Bangladesh adjacent to Assam) perform a *Vrata* known as *Sāvitrī-vrata*. The articles used in the *Vrata* are branches and leaves of banyan tree, a clay-made altar, red-thread, vermillion and 108 sheaths of paddy-grains in a small bundle. Those paddy-grains are collected from some unploughed fallow land, as the contact with plough is strictly forbidden. The fruits offered in this *Vrata* are also collected from unploughed lands. The participant women do not take any food prepared by paddy or wheat grains and anything produced in a ploughed land for three days and the farmers do not plough during the three-day period of *Vrata*. The entire ritual is performed without any priest and the women participants themselves perform all the required rituals. The strict prohibition in regard to plough and male-participation may be explained as an indication of a grudge against the end of the female dominance over agrarian economy and the beginning of male-dominance in society. The said *Vrata* may be considered as the symbol of their grievance against male-dominance. An aggrieved attitude of the women reflected at the end of the *Vratakathā* (tale or story of the vow) is suggested when Sāvitrī returned along with her alive husband Satyavāna from Yamarājā, she unfastened the Yokes of the ploughing oxen waiting at the roadside. The protest is sociologically significant.

Another instance of the remnant of mother-right is also found in the North-Eastern hill area. The society of the Dimasa

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tribe of north Kachhar (Assam) is a peculiar admixture of both male- and female-domination. The Dimasas uphold Hindu religion. In their society, male and female members of the society have their distinct gotra (line of descent). The female child usually inherits the lineage of her mother and the male child follows that of his father, although they belong to the male dominated Hindu society. The conservative Dimasas living in the hill-region are very strict in maintaining this customary rule. However the above custom may be considered as a partial preservation of the relic of primitive matriarchal society.

Again, mention may be made of some marital customs still prevalent among the upper caste Bengalee Hindus. These customs may reasonably be considered as remnants of ancient matrilocal marriage-system. The central function of a Hindu-marriage is Kanyāsampradāna (handing over the bride to the bridegroom by her father or guardian). But before this function, the female members of the bride’s household snatch the bridegroom from his Kinsmen, take him to a place called Chhādnātalā, where the bride is raised up higher than the stature of the bridegroom and the former’s female associates ask at the top their voice: “bār bāda nā Kane bāda” (who is greater? Bride or Bridegroom?) The answer is also given by them shouting Kane bāda (the bride is of greater importance). This is followed by the rituals of actual marriage which begins with the bride’s offering of garland to the bridegroom. The marriage is again followed by a sequence of rituals known as Strī-āchār in which women of the bride’s family play the dominant role. Here the role of the bride is positive,
and the whole process may be considered as remainder of matrilocal marriage. That usual custom of *kanyāsanpradāna* is proceeded by the positive role of the bride herself is quite apparent. The other functions of the marriage-ceremony are considered of less significance.

The coming of the bridegroom with his friends and relatives to get married at the house of the bride, the custom of offering *Kanyāpana* (bride-price) prevalent among some lower castes of Bengal even 50/60 years ago (as it has been learnt by me from some members of Bauri and Bagdi castes) and still prevailing among the Sabara tribe of Orissa, the significant role of the maternal uncle in the *Annaprāśana* (ritual on the occasion of the child’s rice-eating for the first time) ceremony, the active participation of the maternal uncles from both sides in the marriage ceremony—all these may be regarded as remainders of a pre-patriarchal society, where the women and her kinsmen enjoyed a position of superiority.

The custom of sister-marriage may also be considered as a characteristic of matriarchal society. In the *Daśarathajātaka* Sītā is represented as the sister as well as wife of Rāma, son of Daśaratha of the Ikṣvāku line. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Kernel of which can not be later in date than the *Daśarathajātaka*, leaves no doubt that the story of sister-marriage on the part of Rāma was an invention of the author of the Jātaka. However, the practice of sister-marriage seems to have been in vogue at one time in Magadha, the early centre of Buddhism. According to the
Ceylonese Chronicle Mahāvamsa it was at one time practised in Bengal. We are told that Sihavāhu, king of Vaṅga and Pādha (referred to as Lalā), married his sister Sihasivali. This was most probably a social tradition which can hardly be ruled out altogether.

OPINIONS OF THE SCHOLARS

An investigation on the basis of archaeology, anthropology and linguistics would leave little scope of doubt that the Cult of Mother-Goddess had its independent origin in Bengal itself. Previously some scholars favoured the theory of tracing the origin of this cult outside Bengal. R. P. Canda searched for the original home of Śāktism in a land outside the dominance of the Vedic Aryans and Avestic Iranians. He has traced the original home of Śāktism in the countries bordering the Mediterranean. His argument is based on the striking resemblance between Indian Śāktism on the one hand, and the Semitic, Egyptian and Phrygian conception of Śakti, on the other. Again, Chanda suggested that the concept of Śakti originated in a social background where matriarchy prevailed. He was of opinion that Bengal must have had a past history of matriarchal society as many upper and lower castes of Bengal are hereditarily followers of Śāktism.

P. C. Bagchi traced the foundation of Śāktism in the Sāmkhya philosophy. According to him, "the basis of Śāktism was a well-established system of philosophy like the Sāmkhya in which Prakṛti and Puruṣa play the same role as that of Śiva and
Sakti. As the Śāṁkhyā system is believed to have originated somewhere in Northern India outside Bengal, the Purāṇic concept of Śiva-Śakti might have been brought in Bengal from outside. Scholars are generally in favour of the opinion that Śaktism was developed by the authors of the Purāṇas. There is least doubt, however, that the pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian Cult of Mother-goddess was accommodated within the Purāṇic Cult of Śakti. Mother-Goddess is conceived as neutral, independent of and separate from any male-god. She is glorious in her own grace. She is alone able to rescue her devotees from distress. Her devotees conceive her in two forms, one independent and other associated with a male partner. The term Śakti originally denotes the female-energy of a male divinity. As Śakti, she is glorious by dint of the grace of her husband. She has to perform the duties assigned by her husband. The power and grace of the independant 'mother' are absent in her. Whereas the Mother-Goddess has been given the supreme position, even greater than that of the Great Gods, 'Śakti' holds a subordinate and secondary position.

The Śāṁkhyā system of philosophy represents later development of thought, whereas the Cult of Mother-Goddess may be traced to a remote past. The Chalcolithic culture in India, as elsewhere, has been unmistakably characterized by its association with the Cult of Mother-goddess.

According to the Śāṁkhyā philosophy it is presumed that Purusa is an inactive and passive spectator, while Prakṛti is viewed as the power in the process of action, the root cause of
the creation. It may reasonably be held that such a philosophical explanation has given an upper hand to the female principle. Again, the concept of Mother-Goddess exalts the female principle to a supreme position. But the difference lies in the fact that Prakṛti derives her energy from Puruṣa, whereas Mother-goddess is supposed to be one without dependence on any other divine agency. The Devisūktā of the RigVeda (X) represents the original form of Mother-Goddess.

The non-Aryan character of Mother-Goddess may be traced in some early indigenous texts. In the Mahābhārata (Vi. 6) it is said that the goddess has her perpetual abode in the Vindhyas and likes to enjoy spirituous liquor, flesh and sacrificial victims. In the Harivamśa (59) it has been said that the goddess is worshipped (Supūjitā) by the Śavaras, Barbaras and Pulindas. In Vākpati’s Gaṇḍavaḥo (V. 305) the goddess is addressed as Śavari or Śavara woman and in the Varāha Purāṇa (28.34) as Kirātinī or Kirāta woman (belonging to the Mongoloid stock).

Bengal remained for a pretty long time outside the fold of Aryan culture and was inhabited by the people belonging to the Austric, Dravidian and Mongoloid culture. It would be, therefore, reasonable to hold that the Cult of Mother-Goddess originated in Bengal on the foundation of a primitive belief in the spirit of fertility that was often invoked by the non-Aryan sedentary people living in an agrarian society.
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52. Ibid.


55. These terracotta images of child-bearing mothers are to be considered as prototype of goddess Saśthī, a very popular village-deity of Bengal who gives and protects village infants.
56. Biswas, S.S., op. cit., p. 65, pl. VII.

57. Ibid, pp. 71-72.

58. Camaraswamy, A. K., op. cit., p. 3


63. According to W. W. Hunter, "the Santal owes nothing of his skill in husbandry to the Aryan. He has crops of his own, implements of his own, his own system of cultivation, and an abundant vocabulary of rural life, not one word of which he has borrowed from a superior race" *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Cal., 1965, P. 115. So why they should not have a religious Panthe on of their own?


66. Ibid. p. 32.

68. Ibid. p. 50.

69. Roy, N. R., op. cit., p. 34.

70. The Concept of Purānic-goddess Cāṇḍī is very much similar to the Oraon-concept of their warrior goddess Cāṇḍī. One of her popular names in rural Bengal is Jay-Cāṇḍī, that is, Cāṇḍī, the giver of victory.


72. The Purānic and Tāntric concept of ‘Sapta-mātrkā’ and ‘Aṣṭamātrkā’ have close affinity with the tribal concept of sister-goddesses or group goddesses.


74. Ibid., pp. 48, 66, 151.

75. Ibid., pp. 60 - 70.

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