CHAPTER X
THE NOUKA PUJA — A UNIQUE MANASA — WORSHIP OF CACHAR-SYLHET
THE NOUKA PUJA—A UNIQUE MANASA-WORSHIP OF CACHAR-SYLHET

In its pomp and splendour and the sheer amount of expenses it involves, the Nourka Puja has no parallel among the numerous festivals of the Hindus of so-called lower castes of the districts of Cachar and Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). Though other Sukla Panchami tithis are not absolutely forbidden—in fact at some places Baisakhi Sukla Panchami is preferred—it is the usual practice to begin the puja on the Sukla Panchami (the fifth day of the bright half of the moon) of Magha (January–February). The Puja continues for five days.

The name of the Puja (lit. 'boat-worship') particularly in its present form, however seems to be misleading. It is not the boat which is worshipped but a legion of deities—Manasa, the snake-goddess being the most prominent among them—erected on seven tiers of bamboo fitted into a formidable structure designed for a boat. The boat is simply used as the abode of these deities.

At the centre of a field or somewhere in the vast expanse of a meadow, this huge structure would be raised. If the votary is rich, it could be as high as thirty feet, while a poorer votary would be content with one no less than twenty. The boat would have seven tiers or more, precisely, stories suitably spaced. On these would be placed rows of clay images two to four feet tall. This pantheon
would include Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and other deities and some mortals associated with the legend of Manasa—Lakshmindar, Chand Saudagar, Behula, Sanaka, Garamen and others. The number of images would vary in accordance with the will and ability of the votary but fifty would be considered modest enough.

The principal legionary is Manasa. She would be placed on the foreground and would stand out from the rest by her sheer massiveness. She would be seven to eight feet tall even in a sitting position so that the rest—two to four feet tall, would appear like so many statuettes beside a colossus.

This distinction is also apparent in the actual Puja. While the other deities would be worshipped rather curtly and summarily, the smallest details would be punctiliously observed to appease this presiding goddess. The priest is normally a Brahmin who belongs to the sub-caste of the votary though sometimes a Brahmin of a higher caste may agree to act. Each of the five days a professional singer (along with his colleagues) would recite the Manasa Mankal, popularly known as Padma Purana. These singers had originally been a class of eunuchs called Gurmi by the natives but since these Gurmies are rapidly disappearing, singers from other low communities have been replacing them. These non-Gurmi singers are called Ojhas.
the common meaning of the term ojha being one who cures snake-bites by recital of mantras. A curious feature of the Padma Purana recital is that the leading ojha will, as a rule, wear a female dress. Though the puja ends on the fifth day, the mood of festivity persists. A miniature fair just grows around the Nouka and it continues until after a month or so when the pandal is dismantled and the Nouka abandoned.

The Nouka Puja is extremely expensive, considering the average means of the votaries. In 1906 B.C. Allen said that a 'Nouka' cost between 200/- and 500/-.¹ In 1931 Padmanath Vidyavinode said it would cost about 2000/-. He noted a few prodigal worshippers who spent no less than 50,000/-.² Today a very modest Nouka would cost at least 5,000/-. Nowhere else in Bengal and Assam is Manasa worshipped so lavishly and with so much pomp.

Manasa is a very popular deity in the whole of eastern India but the Nouka seems to have several unique features to distinguish it from all other forms of Manasa worship. First, the use of the boat as the abode of Manasa is a novelty. A number of Manasa Mangal poets

relate the story of two neophytes Jalu and Malu who were fishmongers. P.K. Maity considers this legend and several others to conclude that "the cult of Manasa first spread among the people whose work was rendered dangerous by snakes." He holds that the worship originated among the cowherds and subsequently spread among the farmers and last of all among the fishermen. Maity does not expand his comment on the Houka but hints that it might be a festival of the fishermen community. The name Houka Puja, for instance, is derived from the name of a purely extraneous thing nowhere normally associated with Manasa except for the famous legend where this angry deity sinks seven mercantile boats to punish an obdurate merchant. A boat is not built anywhere else for an altar nor is it anywhere else regarded as the abode or shelter of the goddess. There is no knowing for certain what actually did happen but it would not be rash to conjecture that the boat itself, which should play a very important role in their life, used to be worshipped for its functional utility by the fishermen until long after when they were

4. Ibid., p. 174
5. Ibid., p. 309
It should appear very strange that the Nouka begins on Srripanchami which is not the day on which Manasa is generally worshipped. In Cachar, and also in Sylhet, her large-scale puja takes place on the Shravan Samkranti day, i.e., last date of Shravana (normally on 14th or 15th August). At present, on the Srripanchami day, goddess Saraswati is worshipped throughout Bengal and Assam. Scholars have noticed several affinities between Saraswati and Manasa. Some have cited a Sloka from the Atharva Veda to take back this affinity to the age of the Vedas.

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Janguli, the Buddhist prototype of Manasa, has several similarities with Sarasvati. In some Dhyanas of Manasa, her association with Sarasvati is distinctly traceable. Under the circumstances, one may conjecture that this resemblance between Sarasvati and Manasa might have led the votaries of the latter to adopt Sripanchami as the most suitable date for Kousha Puja.

But there are certain other considerations which seem to preclude such a possibility. First, amongst the rural-folk of this region, Sarasvati is not a very popular deity. Still there are villages, where she is only a name, venerated perhaps, but not formally worshipped. In fact she may be regarded as the goddess of the educated people of the upper castes, worshipped in large-scale chiefly in urban or semi-urban caste-Hindu pockets, having little to do with the country-folk amongst whom the spread of formal education is a recent affair. Secondly, according to Asutosh Bhattacharyya in Bengal Sripanchami day was associated originally with the worship of Lakshmi.

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Saraswati's association with this auspicious day is comparatively a recent development. So, though the date of Saraswati Puja and Nouka Puja normally coincides, there is no valid ground to suppose that the supposed affinities between Saraswati and Manasa have any direct bearing on this coincident.

So, to bring out the real significance of the date of the Nouka Puja, we should look elsewhere. We should keep in mind the fact that there still prevails a traditional form of worship on a large scale in the rural areas of Sylhet-Cachar that takes place on the very day of Sripanchami. It is the worship of professional tools and implements. On the Sripanchami day, husbandmen worship their corn-sieves, ploughshares, winnowing baskets; carpenters worship their saws, files, chisels; weavers their looms and shuttles and so on. Obviously, it is a post-harvest festival of the rural folk to worship the implements that feed them. The boat, being the professional implement of the fishermen, was perhaps worshipped on the same day. This worship of professional implements in all probability, took the shape of Nouka Puja among country-folk and at a later date, Saraswari worship among

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the literate middle class.

The association of harvest with the Nouka is also evident from the fact that the Nouka does not begin everywhere on Sripanchami. In some areas, Suklapanchami of Baisakh is preferred. In fact, Vyadhibhaktitarangini, the only Sanskrit treatise on the Nouka Puja composed perhaps in the marshy regions bordering Mymensingh-Habiganj, preferred Baisakha as the most suitable month for the Nouka Puja. In Cachar and in comparatively raised high regions of Sylhet the month of Magha is preferred. Such variations may be explained in terms of the harvesting pattern of the place. The period after a major harvest, when the granary is full and there is plenty of leisure to spend, would also be the time to gratefully recall the debt to the old tools which had fed their ancestors, and have been feeding them. In Cachar and the larger portion of Sylhet Magha would be the time. The Sali crop would ripen in Agrahayana (November-December) and harvest would be over in Pous (December-January). But in the low marshy areas of Sunamganj and Habiganj (Subdivisions of Sylhet, now in Bangladesh) the Sali is not the major crop. There, such respite would not come until the end of Chaitra (March-April) when the harvest of Buro (wet rice) sowed in winter would be over. So, Baisakha is their month for the Nouka.
It is significant that the image of Manasa is built out of all proportions to those of others. It appears like a physical demonstration of her superiority to the rest who stand on the background. Possibly it is a pointer to an old conflict between the zealous defenders of Manasa and the belligerent worshippers of the gods of older and more fortunate origin. It is apparent from the story of the Manasa Manala that Manasa was not accepted readily by the higher castes as a genuine goddess, and even when she was accepted for reasons more diplomatic than religious, she was perhaps despised by the high-brows of the upper castes as a deity of spurious and plebeian birth. It is only natural that her worshippers would be eager to retaliate seizing any opportunity they could lay their hand on to undermine the status of the deities worshipped by those high-brows and demonstrate the overwhelming superiority of their goddess.

Those troubled times are gone, the clashes that rocked between the lower and higher strata over the superiority of their respective gods are now forgotten. But under the tranquil superstructure of religion in this region the old tremor feebly persists and this a careful observer does not miss. A lower caste Hindu
venerates Durga; it is an ancient conventional deference, but in spite of the social dignity she commands, he regards Manasa as a greater goddess. If he will ever spend his life's savings, he will spend it for the Nouka. Durgapuja, much less expensive, would not occur in his dreams. Could this be an instinctive loyalty to his ancestors who in some forgotten times had built that formidable vessel as an answer to the pomp and grandeur of the other deity? Nouka Puja might have assumed its grandeur chiefly in course of the quest of the lower castes for a befitting reply to Durgapuja which has long been the greatest festival of the higher caste.

IV

It would be pertinent to mention here a Sanskrit treatise called Vyadhibhakti-Tarangini ascribed in the text to Vidyapatि. The MS was found in Mymensingh and first brought to the notice of scholars by G.C. Basu who published a paper in the New Indian Antiquary. Apparently, the purpose of the book is to popularise a

11. There is a common saying in the local dialect "Devatar madhye Bisari dailer madhye musuri." (As Masuri is the best among pulses, so Bisahari (i.e. Manasa) is the greatest among deities).

new mode of Naama worship which is thus described:

"In this world and in each reign it is proclaimed as
the popular tradition. In order to appease completely all
spirits and witches these are those popular (rite and)
mantras and the songs of Visahari and of Mangalasandika.
These are those famous popular reports that as by
Lakshinindara was given a boat named Madhukara one should
build a charming boat and worship there. An earthen image
should be made surrounded by devatas and others, and
after building the vicitra the worship should be performed
with singing and dancing. The word adi in the expression
devatadvati denotes the wives of the Siddhas, Nagas,
Kinnaraks, Gandharvas, Yaksas, Raksasas, etc. It is said
about the (degree of) worthiness to be worshipped that
a boat which is twenty cubits is inferior, that of forty
cubits is superior of medium quality, that which is sixty
cubits is superior and one of hundred cubits is the best
of all. If it is less than fourteen cubits it cannot be
called a boat. Those who came to see the dancing Vipula
before Bhutanatha should be worshipped in these respective
places. One should worship Brahman, Madhava, Rudrani,
Lakshai, Parvati, Kartikeya, Ganesa, Kaliya and the eith

p. 56 and also compared with the text published in
*Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihas* (A. Bhattechariya),
p. 943-944
serpents (in heaven) and also Jaratkaru, Astika and Chandradhara on earth, his wife Svarnarekha and son Lakshmindara, his (i.e., Lakshmindara's) wife Vipula, the Brahmin Sridhara, the astrologer Yasodhara, and the boatman Durlabha. At the forefront of the boat (should be placed) Ganesa, and the eight footmen and soldiers), store-keepers, and armed people should be placed in the middle, front and rear respectively, (pictures) should be drawn of the washerwomen, Sugandha and others, and Durga Suresvari and other deities on all sides; of all the keepers of regions, such as Indra on arms and on their riding animals. Puja and Homa should be accomplished by Brahmins in odd number of days. Sacrifices of animals should be made according to wish and capacity as recommended. After the triple symphony, the waving of light should be performed."

Though Shri Basu did not connect the treatise with Noukapuja, this description in fact is a description of Noukapuja in all its details as it is performed in the Sylhet — Cachar region till to-day.

The book is attributed to Vidyapati whom Basu identifies with the Vidyapati of Mithila, the famous poet and the author of the Durgabhakti-Tarangini. This identification seems to be arbitrary and rests on the sole
assumption that the mode of worship described in the text was not observed in Bengal. Basu contends that the book could only have been written where such a mode of worship prevailed because "the writer worked upon that he got in his own locality." Such a mode of worship existed and still exists in Sylhet and Cachar and if we accept Basu's contention that the writer worked on "what he got in his own locality" the author of *Vyadibhakti-Tarangini* must be said to belong to Sylhet or some place in close proximity of Sylhet. Basu searched in vain for the meaning of the word Gauhari, used in the text as the name of the boat on which images are installed and came to the conclusion that, "The word never occurred in Bengali literature." A little field investigation would have revealed that the Hindus of Cachar and Sylhet actually use the word and Noukapuja is also called "GauhariPuja". In the local vocabulary, the word Gauhari does not have a meaning, but it can be assumed that the word is an adoption from Assamese Gohari meaning a submission or appeal.

It is apparent from the text that the author of *Vyadibhakti-Tarangini* adopted *Durabhakti-Tarangini* of Vidyapati of Mithila as his model. He plagiarized some

   'Vyadibhakti-Tarangini' pp. 51-57
expressions from his original, probably for embellishment and even borrowed the name of his great predecessor. Such thievery was a common practice in medieval Bengal. The present impostor adopted this means most likely to impress upon his readers the importance of his treatise.

Sylhet had maintained a very close cultural relation with Mithila from a very early date. There is a tradition which maintains that some of the earliest Brahmin settlers of Sylhet were immigrants of Mithila. Students from Sylhet went to Mithila to learn Saritl and Nyaya. It is no wonder that whereas Raghunandan Saritl is followed all over Bengal in connection with the performance of religious rites, Sylhet has adhered to this day to the Saritl of Vachaspati Mitra of Mithila. So, Vidyapati who would have been famous in Sylhet, would be considered a model to follow in any attempt to compile a kindred treatise. The spurious Vidyapati of Sylhet followed it and even borrowed the name of the author of his original apparently with the hope that it would lend his work greater weight.

According to Basu, the manuscript of the book which he saw at Dacca Museum is 125 years old. The text is reportedly corrupt so that it could not have been copied from the original. The original treatise could be dated farther back, probably the first half of the eighteenth century. Whatever the date of its composition its existence nevertheless proves that the Brahminical priests at some period of history felt compelled to confer scriptural sanction on the Nukha. It bears testimony to a compromise which the higher castes were compelled to make with the lower strata of society.