INTRODUCTION

Eminent scholars made their contributions towards the reconstruction of the religious history of ancient Bengal in the light of the data that had so far been furnished by the literature, indigenous and foreign, and archaeology. Trends in the study of the religious history of Bengal may be traced by an examination of the nature of contributions made by different scholars. Dr. P. C. Bagchi wrote a chapter on the Religion of Bengal in *History of Bengal* Vol I (Dacca, 1943) edited by R. C. Majumdar. While Dr. Bagchi traced an outline of the history of Bengal's religion in the early period with an emphasis upon Vaishnavism, Šaivism and Buddhism, Dr. J. N. Banerjea contributed the section on iconography of the divinities in the light of the archaeological discoveries in Bengal. Dr. Niharranjan Ray in his *Bāngālir Itihās* (Ādiparva) (Calcutta, 1957) also dealt with the religious life of Bengal in the early period from a social perspective. Dr. R. C. Majumdar made a fresh study of the religious life in early Bengal in his *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1971), adding some new archaeological data discovered in recent times. Sri Tamonath Dasgupta made an attempt to study the religion of Bengal in the light of the epigraphic records for the first time. His study was published in the pages of *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Calcutta University (1957). Of late, Dr. Rama
Chatterjee made a study of religion in Bengal during the Pala-Sena period (Calcutta, 1985). She left out no aspect of the religious life and covered Vedicism, Pauranic Hinduism, Buddhism and even Jainism. She depended more on epigraphic and archaeological evidence than on other sources. From the trend of study, it appears of course, that no scholar as yet concentrated on a particular aspect of the religion of Bengal. We should, however, mention Shri N.N. Das Gupta's Bānglay Baudha Dharma (Calcutta, 1355 B.S.), written with an emphasis upon the rise and fall of Buddhism in Bengal.

However, the Pauranic religion in Bengal deserves a separate study. Commendable progress has been made with regard to the study of Vaishnavism and Saivism. In this connection, mention may be made of Dr. S.C. Mukherjee's Study of Vaishnavism in Ancient and Mediaeval Bengal (Calcutta, 1968) and Dr. P. Jash's History of Saivism (Calcutta, 1974). But very little investigation has been made into the minor religious systems which were of no minor importance in the religious life of Bengal. We have considered in this regard, Dr. J.N. Banerjee's Pañchopasana (Calcutta, 1960) and Purānic and Tantric Religion (Calcutta, 1956). In these works an attempt has been made to trace the history of the minor religious systems, in addition to Vaishnavism and Saivism. Bhagwant Sahai in his Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities (Delhi, 1975) has broken new grounds in the
field of religious history of India. The contributions of J. N. Banerjea and B. Sahai have only partial bearing upon the religious history of Bengal in the early period.

While making a study of the minor religious systems in Bengal, one can hardly be indifferent to the socio-anthropological data which reveal significant aspects of the religious life. It may be pointed out that in recent times an anthropological approach has been adopted by some scholars. For instance, D C Sircar in his *Sāṃskritik Itihās Prasānga*, (Calcutta, 1389 B.S.) has initiated an investigation on this line. Mention may also be made of Benoy Ghosh's *Paśchimvanger Sāṃskriti* (Calcutta, 1957), Gopendra Krishna Basu's *Laukik Devatā* (Calcutta, 1969), Amalendu Mitra's *Rāgher Sāṃskriti* (Calcutta, 1972) and, above all, Ashok Mitra's *Paśchimvanger Puja Pārvan O' Melā* (Delhi, 1969-1974). In these works, we find a survey-research on the religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Bengal. Although social anthropologists are more concerned with present times, the data collected by them may be fruitfully utilised to develop a correct perspective of the religious condition that was prevailing in the past. In a country like ours, where the people are mostly tradition-bound, the religious beliefs and practices are handed down from generation to generation with negligible minor changes. The changes that might have occurred do not make it imperative
to view the religious life as a whole in a different perspective. In fact, the religious beliefs and practices may be distin-
guished from community to community, from village to village. Further, one can hardly deny that the primitive beliefs and 
practices went a long way in moulding the religious systems in our country. Especially, in regard to minor religious 
system, there have been closer give-and-take between the Śāstric and Lokāyata beliefs and practices.

It is in this background that we have made an attempt to study the minor religious cults and sects in Bengal from C. 4th century to the 12th century A.D., taking into our consi-
deration not only the archaeological evidence but also the socio-anthropological data. As we have shown above, previous scholars have done scant justice to this aspect of Bengal's religion. As it has been a comparatively neglected field of study, it requires a separate investigation. Secondly, from a study of the minor religious cults, it would be possible to trace in Purānic Hinduism the folk-elements that had been derived from the Pre-Aryans and Pre-Dravidian religion, remnants of which may be traced in the beliefs and practices of the tribal people settled in parts of almost all the districts of Bengal. Thirdly, it should be underlined that Śaivism and Vaishnavism flourished due to the patronage of the ruling class and that is the reason why data are mostly available for the study of these two Purānic faiths. But that does not
necessarily suggest that one should ignore the minor religious systems. The lack of archaeological evidence in case of minor religious systems may be compensated, to a great extent, by taking into consideration the anthropological data at our disposal. Besides, there remains a considerable scope of re-examining the newly discovered archaeological material which may throw light on the obscure areas of the religious history of Bengal. Fourthly, even if it be admitted that Vaishnavism and Saivism were patronised by the ruling class due to their wide popularity, it would be rather unreasonable to complete their study without reference to the minor religious systems. Because, those two religious faiths can hardly stand independently, ignoring their indissoluble link with the minor religious cults.

From the major early Purāṇas as well as late Upa-Purāṇas may be derived the mythological base of the minor divinities and also the mode of their worship. Among the Purāṇas, special mention may be made of the Brihaddharma and the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇas which, though of late period, are generally associated with Bengal. The mythological data from the Purāṇas, along with the iconographic texts contained in the Brihat Samhitā, the Vishpudharmattora Purāṇa and others, have been re-examined by us in the light of the archaeological and socio-anthropological data. Among the archaeological data, we have made an attempt
to utilise the epigraphic records and the numismatic evidence at the first instance. The epigraphic records, discovered so far in Bengal and the adjacent areas, are mostly Copper Plate grants, recording donation of lands for some religious purposes. The material required for the reconstruction of the religious history are not plenty in the epigraphs. But still, as the epigraphic records, some of which are inscribed on the images of gods and goddesses, can be dated with a fair amount of certainty, even stray references to the minor divinities in them have been considered useful. It may be recalled, in this connection, that the records of Bengal often begin with an invocation to Vishnu, Siva or Sugata (Buddha). Minor divinities have been incidentally referred to either in association with Vishnu or Siva or in connection with some kings or queens to glorify their position. Even such incidental references may be utilised in view of the fact that they were held in high esteem by the people of Bengal conversant with the Puranic mythology. So far as the numismatic evidence is concerned, it may be pointed out that during the post-Gupta period, there was paucity of coins in Bengal as in other parts of Northern India. But whatever can be gleaned from the devices and symbols on the coins of the Gupta and Post-Gupta periods has been utilised properly. The myths and symbols in numismatic art, no doubt, hold a significant place as the
medium of expression given to the religious ideas of a people at a particular given point of time. In addition to the epigraphy and numismatics, we have made use of the material furnished in the form of images of divinities discovered so far in different parts of Bengal and remaining preserved in the Museums of West Bengal, Bangla Desh and also in the collection of the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal. The find-spots of the sculptures and icons have been traced in the Annual Reports and Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India. We have not depended upon the Museum-catalogues but personally visited the Museums to make an on-the-spot study of the icons, whenever necessary.

The study of the images and sculptures has been found useful in tracing the history of minor religious cults and sects in Bengal. The process of quantification of the images concerned would show, no doubt, the comparative paucity of the icons of Sūrya, Ganapati, Kārttikeya, Brahmā, Indra, Agni, Manasā, Saśthī and others. The images of Śiva, Vishṇu and Buddha are more pre-dominant. Keeping in view this position, we have been able to classify the major and minor divinities without any predilection for the Purānic accounts. Secondly, the find-spots of the images, recorded in the Reports, have been considered in determining the concentration of a cult or a sect in a particular janapada in early Bengal. Thirdly,
the chronological position of the images found so far, that is determined on the basis of either epigraphs inscribed on them or on stylistic grounds, has been attached with no less importance. Because, the chronology has shown the beginning, duration and discontinuity of the worship of a particular divinity. Fourthly, an attempt has been made to classify the available images of a particular deity on iconographic grounds. The iconographic variation has been sometimes found to be associated with the variations of the nomenclature of a particular deity. This has been taken as a ground to assume that a particular sect might be divided into sub-sects. Although it is difficult to trace the existence of different sects as such from the available records, the cult-deities themselves bear testimony to the prevalence of various sects.

The study of the minor religious cults has impressed us with the idea that there might have existed minor sects in ancient Bengal. The backward section of the society, including the Śūdras and the womenfolk, are known to have been deprived of the rights to perform religious rites and rituals in general. But we have found in case of the Śūdras that they have attached themselves to the worship of some minor divinities who were recognised by the Purāṇas at a late period. When the image-worship came to be discontinued by the Sauras,
Ganapatyas and Kaumāras, the worship of the deities concerned was continued by the womenfolk in the form of Vratas. As it appears from our study, the religious life in ancient Bengal was characterised by a sectarianism that distinguished the Brāhmans from the non-Brāhmans, between the followers of Śruti-Śrīṣṭi school of thought and those of the Lokāyata. However, an attempt was made by the authors of the Purāṇas and Śrīṣṭis to bridge over this gulf by accommodating the so-called Grāma-devatās in the Hindu Pantheon. Again, due to an indifferent attitude shown to the minor Purāṇic deities, they gradually stepped down to the folk-level and thus maintained their existence in the religious life of the people. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the minor cults represented the religious beliefs of those who had remained deprived socially, economically and politically for a long time.

However, the scheme of our study may be shown by the organisation of chapters contained in the present dissertation. In Chapter I we have made a study of the epigraphic records having bearing upon the history and culture of ancient Bengal. Incidentally, the numismatic data had been taken into consideration. Chapter II deals with the origin and development of the cult of Sungod. The worship of the Navagrahas or the Grahayajñā has been considered in this connection. In Chapter III we have attempted to make a fresh study of the cults of
Ganapati and that of Karttikeya in to sections. In Chapter IV we have considered how the male divinities like Brahma, Indra, Varuna, Kuvera, Yama, Agni, Vayu, Nirrti and Isana were recognised in the religious life of the people. Chapter V deals with some aspects of the cult of Mother-goddess manifested in the forms of Saptamatrikas, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Gangaa, Manasa, Sasthi, Sitala and Chandi, who are intimately associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the lower stratum of the society. In Chapter VI we have made an attempt to study iconographically the images of minor divinities discovered so far in Bengal. Chapter VII incorporates the results of an attempt to trace different sects associated with minor cults or beliefs.

I have a sacred duty to express my gratitude to the authorities of different Libraries and Museums where I have collected the data for investigation. Mention may be made of the Burdwan University Central Library, the Asiatic Society Library (Calcutta), the National Library and the Vangiya Sahitya Parishad Library (Calcutta). Among the Museums and collections of antiquities visited by me, mention may be made of the Indian Museum (Calcutta), the Ashutosh Museum (Calcutta University), the Malda Museum, the Vishnupur Sahitya Parishad Museum, Vangiya Sahitya Parishad Museum (Calcutta), the Tamralipta Museum (Tamluk),
the Burdwan University Museum and Art Gallery, the collection at the disposal of Directorate of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal, and also the private collection of Mr S P Roy Choudhury (Malda).

When I delivered seminar-talks at the Post-graduate Department of History, Burdwan University, the teachers and students present put to me searching questions and indicated some fresh lines of thinking. I derived much encouragement and inspiration from my teachers of the Post-graduate Department of History, Burdwan University. I owe an indebtedness to my Supervisor and Guide Dr Bhaskar Chatterjee, Professor, Post-Graduate Department of History, University of Burdwan, but for whose help and co-operation the present study could not be completed.

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