INTRODUCTION

Mythology is the study of 'myths' containing traditional tales and beliefs about ancient times and elucidating the entire religious life of a community unveiling the mystery of sacred acts and rituals of the deities and super-human beings. Derived from the Greek word *muthos* (word or speech), the English word myth denotes stories or narratives told about god or divine beings, narrated in a significant way, suitable for the community concerned. "A myth whether its subject is the act of deities or other extra-ordinary events, always takes us back to 'beginnings of all things', hence cosmogony, the birth of the world is a principal theme."¹ Myth takes us back to a time, beyond any human being's ken, to give the answer of the unending question of 'who made this world?' 'where do we come from'? In the process of making the answers available, mythology unfolds an incredible world of mystic happenings, which project the vital experiences of the people of the society in which they were formulated and thus possesses a great potentiality to attract the present day people irrespective of a scholar or a lay-man. It is true that myths "confer enormous power on the various deities credited with the creation, but it justifies also an existing social system along with traditional rites and customs".²

It is well-known that the inscriptions clearly have two major purposes — one to describe the purpose for which it is engraved and the other is the moral purpose i.e. to make the people aware of the heritage and culture of a country or people by citing examples of mythological figures and to uplift their morale.

While discussing mythology from the early Bengal epigraphs, first of all attention may be drawn to the fact that any analysis of an epigraph remains

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incomplete, unless and until we discuss about that part of the same inscription, which contains huge mythological elements. If the study of epigraphs is believed to be the right way of reconstructing the history of the past, then tracing and analysis of the mythological contents in the inscriptions must be considered extremely important for the study of the religious beliefs of the people of a particular people or period.

Study of the meanings of the different terms used in early Bengal inscriptions for different mythical personalities or incidents and sometimes different names for the same personality leads us back to the origin of the story. Thus study of the mythological events and personalities provides a direct access to the religious beliefs of the people of early Bengal. In other words, mythology having a tremendous influence on the mind of people, the composers of early Bengal inscriptions are often noticed to use materials from it, obviously revealing that they were well-versed in literary texts.

Indian mythology owes primarily to the vedic hymns. "The simple myths of the vedic hymns furnish many clues for unravelling the science of mythology."1 Sometimes people paid their tribute by praising the deities whose bounties they enjoyed, sometimes sought comfort and praised out of fear and sometimes the sheer beauty of nature kindled the poetic expression of their mind through hymns. Whatever it might be, Indian mythology is a fusion of divine activity and earthly reaction and the myths acquired a very dynamic character as they changed with the changing society. In the early period of vedic mythology, as a projector of experience of people, there were many deities who had distinct characteristics. In course of time life changed and a triad of deities became prominent, foreshadowing the trinity of later days. In that period, Agni (Fire) and Sūrya (the Sun) held a prominent position and the third place was assigned either to Vāyu (the wind) or to Indra (god of the Sky). Towards the later period, the great concept of one Supreme

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Being was beginning to take shape in people's mind not very distinctly, but the idea definitely influenced the divine world.

In the early centuries of the Christian Era, although the vedic culture continued to influence the eastern part of India, a culture of pūrānic and epic mythology began to captivate the people's mind. A changing pattern of the vedic and pūrānic components were recorded in the mythological contents of the inscriptions, as the myths were the outcome of vital experiences of man.

Gradually simplicity of vedic myths began to fade away and rituals gained ground and "myriads of gods in the vedic pantheon converged into the epic-pūrānic triad of Brahman, Viṣṇu and Śiva".1

The heroes of the epic mythology emerge as the greatest heroes and are regarded as the idols by the people. The avatāras of Viṣṇu assume a prominent place in the Purāṇas. Origin of vedic myths are forgotten, new ones are originated, Viṣṇu and Śiva become the most prominent deities worshipped by a vast number of people and Brahmā gradually vanishes into obscurity.

It is found that through the process of evolution of the vedic, epic and purānic mythologies many gods and goddesses rose to prominence and sometimes transformed into a different form of divinity having some traits of previous forms. In course of time, many new cults are established some of them being of folk origin. But people still used to remember the old myths with honour and that attitude is reflected in the inscriptions. "Bengal was not isolated from the wave of popular religion and the inscriptions of the Guptas, Pālas, Senas and other dynasties discovered in Bengal bear ample testimony to it."2

Just as the political, cultural and religious ambiences of early Bengal witnessed a lot of changes in different periods, similarly there were also ups and downs of different divinities and mythological figures in course of time.

1. Sukumari Bhattacharji, Ind. Theo., p. 3.
We must admit that in our study, we have been profusely benefited by the invaluable contributions of the stalwarts in the field of Indian Epigraphy like A. K. Maitreya (1861-1930), R. D. Banerji (1885-1930), R. G. Basak (1885-1982), R. C. Majumdar (1889-1980), N. G. Majumder (1899-1938), B. C. Sen (1899-1981) and D. C. Sircar (1907-1985). Besides these stalwarts, the epigraphical works of K. G. Goswami, G. Bhattacharya, B. N. Mukherjee and my esteemed teacher and supervisor Professor Dr. Samaresh Bandyopadhyay have also been fruitfully utilised. Other works of some help to us will be mentioned in the 'Bibliography' of this thesis at its end.

The present thesis will have following seven chapters —

Chapter I: Major Mythological Divinities

Chapter II: Other Mythological Personalities

Chapter III: Mythology in Cosmographic Elements

Chapter IV: Popular Folk Cults

Chapter V: Jainism and Buddhism

Chapter VI: Brāhmaṇa Beneficiaries Performing Different Rites

Chapter VII: Religious Eclecticism

There will also be a list of Inscriptions of Early Bengal in Appendix I and Bibliography in Appendix II.