CHAPTER IV
POPULAR FOLK CULTS

Most of our scholars think that the pattern of the religious history of Bengal has not been governed by the highly intellectual thoughts of learned men only, but also was influenced by characteristic culture of the common people. Thus the history of religion will remain incomplete if we do not discuss the popular religious faiths other than the major cults, on the basis of the inscriptions. In fact, study of inscriptions throws valuable light on the worship of the Sun, Dharma-thākur, Serpent, etc., originating from folk culture of the soil. This Chapter will contain discussion on the (A) Saura Cult, (B) Dharma Cult and (c) Serpent Cult on the basis of material available in early Bengal epigraphs.
SAURA CULT

Sürya, the resplendent body in a vast sky, perhaps became the prime cause of astonishment to the inquisitive mind of the primitive people before the growth of any developed religious thoughts. The Sun induced a feeling of respect to win the position of god as light appeared with the rising of the illuminous body and darkness fell with its setting down. A deep rooted tradition of Sun-worship left its mark on the early Bengal epigraphs also.

Sürya has got distinct individuality in the vedic mythology. The Rgveda tells in a hymn that Sürya shines from the lap of the dawns. He shines for all the world, for men and gods and dispels the darkness with light. He drives away sickness and every evil dream. Perhaps all these phenomena induced men to personify the cosmic Sun as the Sun-god. We find that early Bengal inscriptions attribute the Sun with many names. Here we mention those different names and discuss them below chronologically. Sahasrarasmi, Bhuvanapati, Savitā, Bhānu, Ravi, Caṇḍāṁśu, Bhāskara, Divasakara, Mārtaṇḍa, Divākara, Maunaṅditya, Vijayāditya and Mihira.

Sahasrarasmi

The Jagadiśpur copper-plate inscription belonging to the Gupta year 128 (448 A. D.) refers to the temple of lord Sahasrarasmi (the Sun-god) at Gulmagandhika. The record states that Bhojila purchased two druṇavāpas of land and donated for “Śambapura which seems to be the name of the religious establishment in which the Sun-god was installed and worshipped.”

D. C. Sircar remarks that probably Śamba, the most celebrated devotee of the Sun-god was also worshipped in the shrine.

1. VII, 6, 3; cited by A. Macdonell, op. cit., p.30.
2. Ibid., p. 31.
5. Ibid., p. 12.
In the epic mythology Sun has been often described as Sahasrarasmi with which he protects all beings. It is said that as the twelve fold Sun, Sūrya has one hundred thousand rays.\(^1\)

According to a legend described in the *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa*\(^2\) Śāmba constructed a Sun-temple on the bank of Chandrabhāgā, modern Chenāb, after he was cured of leprosy by the mercy of the Sun-god. He brought some Magas from Śākadvīpa as the priests of the temple. It is said that Magas sprang from Jaraśabda or Jaraśasta, who was the son of the Sun and Nikṣubhā, a daughter of the Mihir gotra. According to Al-beruni the Magas were of Persian origin.\(^3\) D. C. Sircar points out\(^4\) that Mūlāsthāna was famous as the place, where the Yādava prince Śāmba worshipped the Sun-god and was cured of leprosy.

Considering the various aspects of later vedic period and Gupta period, J. N. Banerjea believes that\(^5\) there was a school of Sun-worshippers known as the *Sauras*. P. C. Bagchi opines\(^6\) that Sūrya enjoyed a special favour in ancient Bengal, but the god was most probably a scythic importation to India. S. Bhattacharji thinks\(^7\) that the dress code of the Sun-god given in the *Brhatsamhitā* bears foreign influence. According to K. G. Goswami\(^8\) the Sun-worship appeared as a sectarian Saura cult from the early centuries of the Christian Era. Asutosh Bhattacharyya says\(^9\) that the Sun is the principal object of primitive worship and is a basic element of folk culture specially of the eastern and southern region of this country and has been found as the Supreme deity among various tribes known in different names. In the

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early Bengal epigraphs also we find that the Sun is mentioned with different appellations other than Sahasrarāśmi, discussed above.

**Bhuvanapati**

In the undated Nidhanpur plate\(^1\) of Bhaskaravarman (c. 600–625 A. D.) the Sun is designated as the lord of the world (*bhuvanapati*).

The Sun is considered as the god who can be seen in naked eye. The Rgvedic *ṛṣis* prayed to him to be free from any sin. K. G. Goswami points out\(^2\) that the daily rituals were still performed thrice a day by the orthodox Sun followers (*Sūryopāsthana sandhyās*). In the epic mythology\(^3\) the Sun-god bears the title *Deveśvara*, the lord of the gods. The later Saura Upapurāṇas glorify the Sun-god as the creator of Prajāpatis and various creatures in the capacity of Brahmā.\(^4\)

It may be interesting to mention here that the Pāla king Devapāla (c. 810-847 A. D.) is called as *bhuvanādhipa* in Verse 9 of the undated Ghośrāwā stone-slab inscription.\(^5\) Here the king is compared with the lustre of the all-pervading Sun, who dispels the darkness of all quarters by his daily rise (*prāptaprabhāḥ pratidinodaya-purītāśaḥ pūṣevas dārita-tamaḥprasarorāja*).

**Savitā**

Verse 8 of the Bāngadh copper-plate inscription\(^6\) of the 9th regnal year of Mahipāla I (c. 989-1037 A. D.) and Manahali copper-plate inscription\(^7\) of the 8th regnal year of Madanapāla (c. 1143-1161 A. D.), praise the king Gopāla as great as the Sun rising from the eastern mountains.

Verse 10 of the inscriptions, referred to above, elaborates that like the Moon

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born from the Sun with crores of rays (*saviturvasuksotivarṣi kāle na Candra*), Vigrahapāladeva was born from Gopāla as a bestower of crores of riches.

**Bhānu**

This name we find in three epigraphs.

i) In Verse 26 of the undated Bāngaḍh stone inscription\(^1\) of the time of Nayapāla (c. 1037-1043 A. D.) we find mention of the Sun as *bhagavān*. It illustrates that the temple mentioned in the record with a upper stroey was so high that god Bhānu (Sun) served the purpose of *Kalasa-dhvaja* of the temple.

ii) The Sun is referred to as Bhānu also in Verse 1 of the Gayā Śītalā temple inscription\(^2\) of Yakṣapāla (c. 1075-1085 A. D.).

iii) Verse 26 of the undated Deopāra inscription\(^3\) of Vijayasena (c.1096-1159 A. D.) mentions the Sun as Bhānu who touches the Eastern and Western mountains. Verse 27 of the inscription refers to the mythological legend in which Bhānu (Sun) made to humble the Mountain Vindhya by the help of the sage Agastya when the path of his horses were obstructed by rising Vindhya. Here in this passage the composer describes that the lofty edifice of the temple of Pradyumnesvara obstructs the path of the horses of the Sun and if Agastya breaks his agreement and let the Vindhya to rise again, then also the mountain will not be able to be equal in height of the temple.

In the *Āryasaptasati*\(^4\) of Govardhana, Vindhya is described as *sambhāvita-raviratha-stambhaḥ*.

**Ravi**

The Sun is referred to as Ravi in three inscriptions.

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i) Verse 2 of the Jagajjibanpur copper-plate\textsuperscript{1} of Mahendrapāla illustrates that like the Sun, the king Gopāla destroyed all darkness and seeing his resplendent body Śrī offered oblations of water (Ṛṣpatir=īha va(ba) bhūva dhvasta-dos-āndhakāro Ravir-iva).

ii) Verse 10 of the Kṛṣṇa-dvārikā temple inscription\textsuperscript{2} of regnal year 15 of Nayapāla (c. 1037-1043 A. D.) compares the great personality Viśvāditya with the heat of the Sun (Ravi riva prauḍāḥ pratāpa).

iii) Verse 12 of the Āmgāchi copper-plate inscription\textsuperscript{3} of regnal year 12 of Vigrahapāla III (c. 1043-1047 A. D.) compares the king with the different characteristics of the Sun.

a) The Sun dispels the darkness of the night and the king rejects the association of sins (tyajan dosāsānga).

b) The Sun rises over the mountains and the king dominates over the other kings by placing feet over their heads (śirosi kṛtapādaḥ kṣitibhṛtāṁ).

c) The Sun shines over the quarters dispelling the spread of darkness and the king rejects the darkness of ignorance filling the quarters with his prowess (prasabha mudayādreriva Raviḥ).

The inscription mentions the Sun as the eternal luminous power who saves from any kind of darkness. The \textit{Atharvaveda}\textsuperscript{4} prays to him for release from the nooses of death.

\textbf{Caṇḍāṁṣu}

We find the reference of a Sun temple in an epigraph of the 11th century A. D. Verse 17 of the undated Siyāṇ stone inscription\textsuperscript{5} of the time of Nayapāla (c. 1037-

\textsuperscript{1} S. C. Bhattacharya in \textit{J. Anc. Ind. Hist.}, Vol. XXIII, pp. 61 ff.  
\textsuperscript{2} D. C. Sircar in \textit{Ep. Ind.}, Vol. XXXVI, pp. 84 ff.  
\textsuperscript{4} XVII, 1, 30; cited by Macdonell, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 31.  
\textsuperscript{5} D. C. Sircar, \textit{Sil. Tām. Śās. Prā.}, pp. 102-121.
1043 A. D.) mentions of a chariot which was probably donated by the king to a temple of the Sun-god.

Verse 46 of this inscription again mentions of a huge temple of the Sun-god, which was like his own place in heaven and the poet imagines that instead of moving around, the Sun-god would stay here permanently. Verse 54 refers to an image of Caṇḍāmśu (i.e. Sun-god) and the next verse mentions of making a silver lotus for the Sun-god and a golden one for the nine grahas.

Bhāskara

Verse 16 of the Bāngadh Praśasti\(^{1}\) of Mūrttiśiva, cited above, describes that the lofty tops of the huge temples create disturbance for the movement of wind and the Sun's chariot (kīrti-stambhita-vāyu Bhāskara-ratha). Here the Sun is referred to as Bhāskara.

In the vedic mythology, "the Sun in the sky traversing the space, sometimes is conceived as a bird.\(^2\) The concept of his chariot drawn by seven horses may indicate the seven colours hidden within his rays.

Besides the Bāngadh prāśasti the Sun is referred to as Bhāskara in three more inscriptions. They are —

1) The Sāhitya-pariṣat copper-plate inscription\(^3\) (lines 36-37) of Viśvarūpasena (c. 1206-1225 A. D.),

2) The Madanapādā copper-plate inscription\(^4\) (lines 34-35) of Sūryasena (c. 1210-1215 A.D) and

3) The Idilpur copper-plate inscription\(^5\) (lines 41-42) of Sūryasena of regnal year 3.

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The verses describe that the Sena dynasty, the lamp of the Soma lineage, is like the Sun who expands the Sena family like a lotus, with his rays (Senakulakamala vikāśabhāskara Somavanśapradīpa).

Divasakara

Verse 6 of the three above mentioned inscriptions glorifies Vijayasena by describing him as a king whose rival could be only the Sun-god himself (āsīttejojigīṣā saha divaskareṇāiva).

Mārtanḍa

In the Rāmganj copper-plate inscription¹ of regnal year 35 of Īśvaraghoṣa (c. 1040-1080 A.D.) we find the Ghoṣa dynasty of Dhekkari as the devotees of the Sun-god.

Īśvaraghoṣa was a mahāmanḍalika or a vassal king under the suzerainty of the Pāla dynasty. Verse 2 introduces Bālaghoṣa as well-known in this world as the Sun (Mārtanḍa) himself.

Divākara

Verse 3 of the record describes that Dhaivalghoṣa, the son of Bālaghoṣa, was like a Sun to the darkness, namely the robbers and a thunderbolt to powerful enemies (divākareṇa vajrayitan pravalavairikulā-calesu).

In lines 31-33, we find that Īśvaraghoṣa made the donation to a pious Brāhmaṇa, after taking bath in the river Jatoda and consecrated his gift with holy water, holding seeds of sesamum and blades of grass in hands (Jatodaydrii snatva tiladarbha pavitra (daka) pūrvakam... pradatto smābhiḥ.) Though the donation was made in the name of Śiva (bhagavantaii Śaṅkarabhūṭāraka).

Yāska (probably the oldest commentator on the vedas according to some scholars) places Sūrya among the three major gods of early vedic period other than Vāyu or Indra and Agni.² Sūryārghadāna was a daily ritual of a pious Brāhmaṇa for worshipping the Sun-god.³

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¹ N. G. Majumdar, Ins. Beng., pp. 149 ff.
² Wilkins, op. cit., p. 9.

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Maunāditya, Vijayāditya

These two names we find in the Gayā Śītalā temple inscription1 of Yakṣapāla (c. 1075-1085 A.D.). It begins with obesiance to the Sun-god as Oṁ namah Sūryāya. Then the opening verse prays — “May the Sun protect you, he who blooms the lotus, which is the Universe, filled with a mass of honey—the object of sense, having for bees the multitude of living beings (and charming with its leaves) the eight regions.”2 Verse 12 of the record states that Yakṣapāla, (a local ruler whose Pāla overlord is not mentioned in the inscription) built a temple and installed many deities including the images of Maunāditya and Vijayāditya which refer to the Sun-god.3

PARAMA-SAURA

Some of the Sena kings have been described as Parama-Saura in three early Bengal inscriptions. Study of the inscriptions of the Sena dynasty reveals that the earlier kings of the Śenas were followers of Śaivism and afterwards Laksmaṇasena adopted the religion of Vaiṣṇavism. But his sons Sūryasena and Viśvarūpasena are found as Sun-wordshippers from their inscriptions.

i) Verse 1 of the Sāhiyā-pariṣat charter4 of Viśvarūpasena (c. 1206-1225 A. D.), Madanapāda charter5 and Idilpur charter of Sūryasena (c.1210-1215 A.D.) invoke the Sun as “the friend of lotus-beds, the source of deliverance of the three worlds withheld in the prison of darkness and the wonderful birds of the tree of the Vedas, soaring high up on his two alternately expanding wings, of which one is white and the other black.”6

5. Ibid., pp. 133 ff.
6. Ibid., p. 126.

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Visvarūpasena is described as *parama-Saura*, (devout worshipper of the Sun) in line 38 of the Sāhitya-parisat plate and in line 37 of the Madanapāḍā plate. Line 35 of the Madanapāḍā plate calls Lakṣmanasena also as *parama-Saura*.

**Mihira**

The Pālas of Bengal were followers of Buddhism. In one inscription we find mention of Solar race. In Verse 2 of the Kamauli copper-plate\(^1\) of Vaidyadeva, Vigrahapāla is described as born from the Solar race. Here the Sun is described as the right eye of Hari (*stasya daksinadrśo vaniše Mihirasya jātavān pūrva*).

It may be interesting to mention here that in one of the early Bengal inscriptions the illustrious Siddhārtha is said as born in the lusturous Solar race which we will discuss below in the Chapter relating Buddhism.

**INSCRIBED IMAGES**

A number of images of the Sun-god found from the Bengal region prove the existence of the Sun-worshippers around the region. Till now it has been noticed by us that six of the images are inscribed.

i) One image of Śūrya is found on the Bodh-Gayā stone-slab inscription\(^2\) of the 26th regnal year of Dharmapāla along with the images of Lakulīsa and Viṣṇu.

ii) An inscribed stone image of Sūrya\(^3\) found from Mahīsantoṣ of Dinajpur District belonging to the 15th regnal year of Mahendrapāla (c. 847-862 A. D.) records that the image of Lord Āditya (*Ādityabhaṭṭāraka*) was carved by one Lokanandā, grandson of Viṣṇunandī and son of Gaṅgijanandī. The engraver’s name is given as Vidyuta. Here the Sun-god is mentioned as Lord Āditya. The number of Ādityas varies in literature.

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Early portion of the Rgveda mentions the number of Adityas as only six (Mitra, Āryaman, Bhaga, Varuṇa, Dakṣa and Arīśa). Later, once it is said that Aditi presents to the gods only seven Ādityas and afterwards brings the eighth as Mārtanda. According to Macdonell, the Āditya whose name is not specified is perhaps, Sūrya1. The Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa names eight Ādityas and the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa raises the number to twelve corresponding to the twelve months.2 Muir in his Original Sānkrit Texts has cited contradictory accounts.3 But the indefinite numbers of Ādityas in the early vedic texts were later fixed as twelve.4

The Commonest designation of the Sun-god in the epic mythology is Āditya.5 Once it narrates “Āditya alone is the Sun.” Light is the goodness and the Sun is superlative goodness, as all sinners are darkness.6 The later epic and the Harivamśa include others as Ādityas. Even the good men are called as Āditya iva tejasā bhūvi i.e., 'like Suns'. Among different groupings of Ādityas, once even Manu is included.7

Worship of the Sun is mentioned by Patañjali as “Ādityam upatiṣṭhate” as an illustration of Pāṇini’s Sūtra.8 According to J. N. Banerjea, vedic prototype of later Brāhmaṇical triad, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, are included in the list of Ādityas as Dhātā, Viṣṇu and Rudra.9 Āditya gradually became a synonym for Sūrya and the name indicated that Sūrya was Aditi’s son.10

1. Macdonell, op.cit., pp. 43-44.
6. Ibid., p. 84.
7. Ibid., Ch. IV, p. 81.
8. K. G. Goswami, op.cit., p. 44.
The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* elucidates that Aditi, the daughter of Dakṣa, was married to Kaśyapa and her twelve sons were called Ādityas, who were Viṣṇu, Śakra, Āryaman, Dhūti, Tvāṣṭri, Pūṣan, Vivasvat, Savitri, Mītra, Varuṇa, Aṃśa and Bhaga.

### iii) The Rājaunā or Valgūdar stone image inscription of regnal year 5 of Śūrapāla I (c. 862-875 A.D.) presents images of twelve Ādityas (dvādaśāditya) standing on lotus pedestal arranged in a single row.

The inscription consists of two parts. The first part mentions the names of twelve Ādityas – Varuṇa, Śūrya, Vaṣuṅga (the intended reading seems to have been Vivasvān), Bhānu, Indra, Ravi, Ja (ya) ma, Padma (may be an epithet of Viṣṇu or the word Parjanya), Ta (Tvā)ṣṭā, Bha (Bhā) ska ra (the reading gives no sense), Prabhā(bha) viṣṇu and below it Pratardana (the twelvth Āditya). Inside the *prabhāvali* is written *ete. bhadrā dvādaśā Ādityaḥ* i.e. these are the twelve auspicious Ādityas.

The second part of the inscription written below the feet of the images records that the images were set up by Raṇoka, son of the merchant Śrīdhara, a resident of Kimilā (Kṛmilā).

It may be mentioned here that the figures in the panel wear boots and hold lotus in each hand.

**Damacāditya**

### iv) The Sanokhār image inscription of the time of Vallālasena (c. 1159-1179 A.D.) refers to the Sun as lord Damacāditya. A bronze or *aṣṭa-dhātu* image was found under a metal cover, shaped in the form of a Śiva-linga on a circular pedestal. Seven running horses are attached with the image of the Sun-god.

The inscription on the cover, dated in the ninth regnal year of Vallālasena,

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3. Ibid., p. 107, n. 22.
begins with the usual symbol of siddham. The first passage refers to kholi or kholikā made of copper. The second and third passages record: bhatṭāraka – 
śrī-Damacādi tadeva-padānā maṭha-patī-śrī-Cihokasya.

The translation made by D. C. Sircar is “In the year 9 of (the reign of) the illustrious Valalasena (Vallālasena) who is endowed with (the imperial titles) beginning with Pramesara (Parameśvara), a copper-cover belonging to (i.e., caused to be made by) Cihoka, chief priest of the temple, is granted in favour of the illustrious lord Damacāditya.”¹

In two image-inscriptions we find that Sūrya is described as the healer of diseases.

v) An image of the Sun-god is found in black-stone, at the village Kulkudi of the District Faridpur, belonging to the 12th regnal year of Govindacandra (c. 1020-1055 A. D.). The inscription² on the pedestal states that the image of the maker of the day, the God of the persons with skin-disease Takman was installed on the 19th Phālguna of the 12th year of the illustrious king Govindacandra-deva (Śrī Takmadinakārin-bhattachārah).

According to N. K. Bhattasali, Takman is a disease. Takman is described in the Atharvaveda³ as a type of fever accompanied by skin eruption. Sūrya is known as a healer of many diseases. A hymn in the Rgveda⁴ pleads to him to cure heart disease and place jaundice in the yellow birds. He is also said as the source of Madhuvidyā, an antidote to poison.⁵ So the god might be worshipped as healer of diseases. But according to D. C. Sircar⁶ the reading should be Lakṣmī (śmī) dinakāri (ri) ta bhattachārah(h), meaning the Sun-god caused to be made by Lakṣmīdina. The

³. I, 4-6; IX, XIX.
⁴. I, 50; II, 12.
⁵. Rgveda, I, 191.
word *dina* may be Sanskrit *dīna* or Prakrit *dinna* (Sanskrit *datta*). Thus the inscription may mean that the image was made by some person named Lakṣmīdinā.

J. N. Banerjea remarks¹ that the popularity of the Sun-cult in Bengal was not only for attainment of welfare and desire, but also for removal of all diseases. He writes about an inscription of the 11th-12th century A.D. on the pedestal of a seated Sūrya image, found from Bāirhāṭṭā (Dinājpūr) as *samasta-rogān̄h hArtā*. The image is regarded as comparatively rare².

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¹ Hist. Beng., edited by R. C. Majumdar, Ch. XIII, p. 456.
DHARMA-CULT

The contribution of epigraphs in ascertaining the influence of different religions in different parts of ancient Bengal is enormous. The Vajrayogini inscriptions are ideal examples of this fact. Here, not only the inscriptions but also the base on which the writings were inscribed, became a subject of varied discussion among scholars.

The discovery of two tortoise-shell inscriptions at Vasupāḍā in village of Vajrayogini in Vikrampur, under the Munshiganj P. S., Dacca District, definitely proves the prevalence of Dharma-cult in Bengal during the 10th and 11th century A.D. D. C. Sircar made corrections in the initial interpretation of N. K. Bhattasali and provided us with the correct reading of the epigraphs.¹

According to D. C. Sircar, the first inscription says, "[Let there be success]. May the Jina (Buddha) be for the prosperity and salvation of the people."² The translated version of the second shell text is like this:

"[Let there be success]. Śrī. Adoration to the most worshipful Vāsudeva. Adoration to Buddha. May the Jina be for the prosperity and salvation of the people. Śrī Adoration to the most worshipful one. [This is an image of] Dharma caused to be made by Manamṛṣṭarman. Śrī. Adoration to the most worshipful Vāsudeva".³

It is clear from the text of the second inscription that adoration has been paid for both Vāsudeva and Buddha (jina). But clearly Vāsudeva got much more importance than Buddha. According to D. C. Sircar, the usual practice of the Buddhists to represent the Brāhmaṇical gods and goddesses in subordinate positions, sometimes even as vāhanas, is totally absent in the inscriptions under discussion and "have nothing exceptionally and typically Buddhist in them."⁴

². Ibid., p. 108.
³. Lock, cit., p. 108.
it appears from the shape of the shells and the language of the inscriptions that the dedicator Manamrasarma caused a Dharma worship to be made on his behalf on the tortoise shells (Manamrasarma-kārīta-Dhamma) and even though he was a Buddhist (otherwise the name of Jina would not be mentioned). His belief in Vaiṣṇavism is undoubtedly supported by the present records.

But question arises regarding the Dharma he performed. Was it something related to Buddhist Trinity or the shells were worshipped as Dharma Thākur, whose worship is still in vogue in different parts of West Bengal. The works of our esteemed scholars throw valuable light on this matter, as will be seen below.

Initially N. K. Bhattasali's interpretation gave an idea about the inscription that it was a good wish for the welfare of the good Buddhists and an intention for jail or death of Manamrasarma. D. C. Sircar nullified Buddhists idea of “mantras or charms for Abhicāra or Māraṇa (i.e. killing or injuring one's foes)” and expressed his opinion in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Letters, 1949.¹ According to him the historical background of the religious sphere of the region around 1000-1100 A. D., supports his view. Originally there was a temple of the Buddhist goddess Vajrayogini in Vikrampur. But the Buddhists were in such a bad shape that after the Buddhist kings Candras were supplanted by Brāhmaṇical Varmans, the two tortoise shell inscription had little possibility to be granted as Buddhistic records.

Hence D. C. Sircar suggests² that the inscribed tortoise shells were worshipped as the Dharma Thākur.

As an emblem of a popular religion in Bengal, Dharma-cult attracted the attention of eminent scholars. M. M. Haraprasad Sastri in his papers in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal³ tried to establish the fact that the Dharma-cult had

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¹ Cf., Vol. XV, No.2, pp. 101 ff.
³ Vol. LXIV, pp. 55-61, pp. 65-68.
close connection with the latest phase of Buddhism. In support of his view, he cited the examples of Śūnyamūrti and nirañjana present in the dhyanas of Dharma-Thākur, connecting the cult with the theory of void, popular with this later Buddhists. K. P. Chattopadhyay found that most of the images of Dharma Thākur in the districts of Birbhum, Midnapur and 24 Parganas, were shaped like tortoise. He further tried to connect the origin of Dharma-cult with the Dharmacakra or the 'Wheel of Dharma' of Buddhism. But D. C. Sircar rejected the theory on the basis of the fact that Dharma as one of the jewels of Buddhist Tri-ratna or 'Three Jewels' (Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha) theory, is represented in human form and never in the shape of a tortoise. Sukumar Sen describes the tortoise as the pāda-piṭha of Dharma on which the pādukā of Dharma is placed or engraved. According to him there is a great difference between the Śūnyamūrti of Dharma and the theory of void of Buddhism. According to Asutosh Bhattacharyya, the people of lower class of Rādha region, used to worship a deity called Dharma-Ṭhākur or Dharmaṛāj-Ṭhākur. Initially no image, but a piece of crude stone symbolizing the deity was worshipped under a tree by common people. Thus it appears that Dharma cult originated from our folk culture, as A. Bhattacharyya rightly thinks. Not only the people of lower classes of Bengal, but also of neighbouring Ranchi, Singbhum, Chotanagpur area used to worship the Dharma-Ṭhākur in different manners. People believe that Dharma Thākur roams around with a white horse and therefore clay horses are offered to him. Animal sacrifice is also a part of the ritual. A. Bhattacharyya suggests that the word 'Dharma' is a sanskritized form of some Austro-Asiatic word meaning the Sun-god. It may have a connection with 'Dom' of West Bengal. As a suffix, 'ray' has been attached with Dom and Domray is

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developed into Domra>Dorma>Darma > Dharma. S. K. Chatterji thinks\(^1\) that the name ‘Dharma’ is a Sanskritized form of some old Austro-Asiatic (Kol-Mundā) word meaning tortoise. Later, in the medieval period, a rich folk-literature developed in Bengal on the Dharma-cult known as *Dharma-maṅgal-kāvyā*.\(^2\) D. C. Sircar quotes\(^3\) two lines of the ritualistic literature of Dharma-Ṭhākur as —

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hāt Pātiyā Dharma Sṛjilen sṛṣṭi,} \\
Pādukā sthāpiba lae kūrmer pṛṣṭi.
\end{align*}
\]

Here back of *Kūrma* (tortoise) is described as the place of worship of Dharma.

Generally lay people remain concerned about the practical side of life and thus people prayed to Dharma-Ṭhākur to get relief from different distresses. It is assumed by scholars\(^4\) that Dharma-Ṭhākur, Sun-god and Śiva inter-mingled with each other. In the mythology\(^5\) one of the names of Yama is Dharmarāja. In the epic Yudhīṣṭhira is called Dharmarāja and Dharmaputra also.\(^6\) In the purāṇic mythology,\(^7\) Dharma is considered as a Prajāpati, one of the mind-engendered sons of Brahmā who married thirteen daughters of Dakṣa. It is evident from their names like Śraddhā, Laksṇā, Dhṛī, Tuṣṭi, Puṣṭi, medhā etc. that they are appropriately married to the personification of righteousness. But the concept of tortoise perhaps came from the habit of worshipping animals among totemistic people of India and partly from the influence of Vaiṣṇavism where *kūrma* is regarded as the second *āvatāra* of Viṣṇu.\(^8\)

At the end of the discussion we may assume from the views of different scholars, discussed above, that the Dharma-cult has developed in a mysterious way. It

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originated from the belief of the primitive lower class people. Rituals belonging to Sun-worship has a close connection with Dharma-Thanku puja. D. C. Sircar observed that Dharma-Thanku is identified with both Viṣṇu and Śiva. Vaiṣṇavism left its strong mark on the Dharma-Cult, with the tortoise being the pādapiṭha. The great festival of Rathayātra may be presented as an example, which was previously the car festival related to the Sun-worship as well as Dharma-cult. Thus it seems that the two tortoise-shell inscriptions prove the prevalence of Dharma-cult in Bengal as early as the 10th or 11th century A. D.

(C)

SERPENT CULT

Mention of the great Nāgas as well as the Snake goddess in early Bengal epigraphs proves the importance of serpent deities in the religious life of ancient Bengal. We discuss below the Nāgas mentioned (Śeṣa-Nāga and Phani) as close associates of Viṣṇu and Śiva in early Bengal inscriptions.

NĀGAS

Śeṣa-nāga

i) Verse 1 of the Medinipur copper-plate charter of regnal year 8 of Śaśāṇka (c. 600-625 A. D.) mentions Śeṣa-nāga as the resting place of Viṣṇu (Śeṣāśeṣa-śiromaṇamadhyamadhyāsina-mahātanum).

ii) Verse 7 of the Khālimpur plate of Dharmapāla-deva (c. 775-810 A. D.) describes the marching army of the king with unbounded glee to conquer the regions and the earth along with the mountains bent down by their weight and the great nāga Śeṣa hurriedly follows with arms raised to support the circle of his heads hurt by the jewels that sink into them by that weight.

1. Ibid., p. 199.
iii) In Verse 34 of the Nalanda copper-plate inscription of Devapala (c. 810-847 A. D.), the immense nāga is described as “the immovable king of snakes, who lightly bears the heavy and extensive earth every-day.”1 In the epic mythology we find that the almighty god blesses him saying jīvatu sēṣaḥ, “let the remaining one live”.2 Sēṣa-nāga holds an important position in the Indian mythology. With thousand mouths he supports the earth like a diadem and is the foundation of the pātāla.3 The immense snake forms a bed by its coils for Viṣṇu to sleep and erect its thousand heads as canopy as a defence against any invasion of the sleeper’s repose.4 The endless serpent lying upon the waters, gets the name Ananta. The later epic5 identifies Śeṣa with Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu and even says that he is born of Śiva. But usually Śeṣa-nāga, is associated with Viṣṇu. The bhujāngamottama comes from Balarāma’s mouth and as a personification of the Śeṣa-nāga, Balarāma was probably a god of the nāga-worshippers and the image of the two brothers Balarāma-Kṛṣṇa, signifies Nāga and Kṛṣṇa cult. In his human form Śeṣa is Kṛṣṇa’s brother.6 “This multi-headed snake is an animal counterpart of the anthropomorphic sleeper himself. It is named Endless (Ananta) also the Remainder (Śeṣa)”7 The serpent deity is the end (Śeṣa) and the endless (Ananta) and thus designate abstract eternity. He formed the rope at the churning of the ocean. “Śeṣa yawns, earthquake results and by fires that issue from his body the world is destroyed at the end of each age, or kalpa.”8 Before starting another Kalpa or creation, Viṣṇu reposes himself upon the serpent Śeṣa. The purānic

8. Wilkins, op. cit., p. 221.
mythology tells about a legend regarding the dispute between Śeṣa and Vāyu, regent of the wind.¹

Close Associate of Hari

We find mention of serpents (phāṇināṁ hareḥ priyasakha) as the dear friends of Hari in the Bādāl Garuḍa-pillar inscription² of the time of Nārāyaṇapāladeva (c.876-930 A. D.). Incidentally it should also be mentioned here that the pillar was carved into the shape of Garuḍa, the enemy of serpents at the instruction of the great scholar Brāhmaṇa minister Guravamīśra who was entrusted by the king Nārāyaṇapāla. Here in Verse 28 (the last one) Garuḍa is inscribed as hṛtāhi, i.e. the serpent slayer. Here the meaning of serpent is not used in a good sense, but on the contrary as the wicked person who is jealous to accept other’s fame.

Close associate of Śiva

Verse 3 of the undated Deopāra stone inscription³ of Vijayasena describes the serpents as encircling the head of Śiva and make an umbrella over the god, by their bright expanded hood (śvetotphullaphaṇāñicalah Śivaśīrah).

Seal

It would be noteworthy to mention here that a peculiar type of seal is found with the Chittagong copper-plate⁴ of Kāntideva (c. 800-825 A. D.). According to R. C. Majumdar⁵, this combination of lion enshrined in a temple along with two serpents is not found in any other royal seal in Bengal. Usually Buddha images are found to be associated with lion symbols, where lion and serpent are the symbols of two last Jain Tīrthāṅkaras, Pārśvanātha and Mahāvīra. But Kāntideva took the opportunity of the decline of the Pālas to establish an independent territory in parts of Bengal and was actually Buddhist in faith. The serpents might have

¹. Garrett, op. cit., p. 549.
⁴. R. C. Majumdar in ibid., Vol. XXVI, pp. 313 ff.
⁵. Ibid., pp. 316-317.
been used in the seal as a symbol of Śiva. It is known from Verse 4 of the inscription that Kantideva's mother Vindurati was a devout worshipper of Śiva. So as Śiva and serpents have got close connections, the seal was perhaps a symbol of combination of the Buddhist and Śiva faith.

**INSCRIBED IMAGES**

It is evident from a large number of images of Serpent-deities found in Bengal that in this region snake-worship was very popular from the ancient time. D. C. Sircar\(^1\) has pointed out that Rājagrha and its neighbourhood was a great centre of Nāga cult in the medieval period. A few inscribed images identified as Svastika-nāga, Maṇi-nāga and Kauśika-nāga help to realise the fact.

**Svastika-Nāga, Maṇi-Nāga**

i) D. C. Sircar thinks\(^2\) that the Nāga gods — Svastika-nāga and Maṇi-nāga, described in the *Mahābhārata*, tentatively have been identified with a sculpture discovered in the ruins of Maṇiyār *Maṭha*, probably representing the old Maṇināga-*maṭha*. The *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 1905-06, reveals that excavation at the old Rājagrha unfolded a very old shrine, where in the temple, ten figures were found among which five were of Nāgas and one of a Nāgi. On the basis of the damaged inscription on the sculpture, the two Nāgas and one Nāgī were identified as Svastika-nāga, Maṇi-nāga and Sumāgadhā of the *Mahābhārata*. T. Block suggests\(^3\) that one of the nāgas named as Maṇikāra was appointed as the guardian of the treasure-house, as it is believed that the Serpent gods keep watch over wealth concealed below the earth.

From the early Kuṣāṇa character of the script of the damaged epigraph, J. H. Marshall ascertained\(^4\) the period approximately to the time of statues at Śrāvasti and Sārnath.

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2. Ibid., p. 136.
ii) The pedestal inscription\(^1\) of a metal image showing Nāgas found from Kurkihar (Gaya District, Bihar) of regnal year 28 of Rājayapāla (c. 930-967 A. D.) records\(^2\) that the image was gifted by one, who was born in a village in Kānci bearing the name, Narasimha caturvedin in a family of Brāhmaṇas, versed in the vedas and vedāṅgas. He later became a disciple of Prajñāsimha known by the name of the sthavira Vairocanasimha.

iii) Another inscription\(^3\) of a stone image of Nāga, found from the Tetrāwān or Ghorākatorā (Patna District, Bihar), possibly of the Time of Mahipāla (only the name could be read) reveals that the Nāga image seems to have been set up by one, who was associated with the Buddhist teachers.

Kauṣika-Nāga

iv) Gouriswar Bhattacharya\(^4\) cites the example of a pedestal inscription of an image of Kauṣika-nāga (preserved in the Patna Museum) of Vikrama Sambat 1452 and Śaka Sambat 1317 (=1395 A. D.), as a proof of continuity of snake-worship in the area. D. C. Sircar thinks\(^5\) that the record was originally from Biharshariff or its neighbouring area as suggested by the character of the highly damaged inscription.

Asutosh Bhattacharyya tells\(^6\) about an age old tradition of worshipping eight principal serpents (aṣṭānāga) along with king of the nāgas Vāsuki, on the day of Nāga-paṅcamī. The ancient custom is mentioned in the Gṛhya-sūtra.

The Ṛgveda mentions a formidable creature named Ahi-budhnya, which may be the first mention of a serpent having super-natural power.\(^7\) The vedic mythology\(^8\)


\(^{2}\) Huntington, *op. cit.*, No. 20, p. 213.


\(^{4}\) G. Bhattacharya, *op.cit.*, Article No. 19, p. 215.

\(^{5}\) *Stud. Rel. Li. Anc. Mod. Ind.*, pp. 140-141.

\(^{6}\) A. Bhattacharyya, *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal*, pp. 128-129.


states that Vṛtra (the drought demon with whom the storm-god Indra fought constantly to increase the fertility of the earth), is ahi, who as a formidable enemy of mankind, envelops his prey like a serpent in his coil.

In the epic mythology\(^1\) all serpents are considered as of divine origin born of Kaśyapa’s lineage, Vināta being the grand-mother of Nāgas and Serpents. Gradually distinction between the two are lost and the later epic mythology reveres the Nāgas like Śeṣa, Ananta, Vāsukī, Takṣaka as giver of boons. Ulūpī, the wife of Arjuna, is addressed as devī. A legend describes that Janamejaya tried to abolish the snake-cult, but did not succeed as a single snake escaped and became friend of the Aryan gods. Nāgarāja Takṣaka, a friend of Indra, slained Janamejaya’s father. The legend is thought to be an evidence of compromise of non-Aryan snake-cult with Aryan religion.

The Viṣṇu Purāṇa\(^2\) gives an account of the birth of serpents from Brahmā, whose hairs shrivelled up in disgust and fell to become serpents, called sarpa from their creeping and ahi, because they deserted the head.

**SNAKE-GODDESS**

It is evident from the 58 images of Snake-goddess (excluding the unimportant fragments) discovered in Bengal as listed by Enamul Haque\(^3\) that the worship of the Snake-goddess became immensely popular in this region during the period from the 8th to the 13th century A. D. (period of Pāla and Sena rulers over Bengal and Bihar).\(^4\) A few of these images bearing inscriptions are discussed below.

i) A beautiful specimen of the goddess found by S. K. Saraswati at Baṃśīhāri and Marāil in the Dinajpur District is supposed to belong to the 10th-11th century A. D., as revealed by the character of the pedestal inscription\(^5\) reading

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Bhāṭṭīnī (nī) Māṭīvā. The figure of the deity is seated in lalitāsana position under the seven cobras holding a snake in her left hand and the right hand is in Varada position.¹

ii) Another stone pillar inscription was found at Paikore in the Birbhum District of the time of Vijayasena (c. 1096-1159 A. D.)² A single line inscription³ engraved on a stone pillar surmounted by a head-less figure of the Serpent-goddess, reads as follows:

Rajena Śrīvijayase (nena) ..... 

It was found in a distorted condition and perhaps a number of letters at the beginning and at the end are missing. The other pillar belonging to the Chedi king Karnadeva, is broken and shows no trace of the image. Most probably the work of masterly art was done by some Bengali artist and the inscription engraved on the pillar is of proto-Bengali character. The six lines of the inscription⁴ on the other pillar describe — “at the order of king Karnadeva of Chedi, an image of the goddess was made by a certain sculptor.”

The problem arises here regarding the name of the serpent-goddess. The goddess is referred to as Manasa devi by various scholars. But nowhere in the epigraphs, the goddess is known to be mentioned with the name Manasa, though worship of Manasa devi is very popular in Bengal till to-day. The concept of the anthropomorphic Serpent-goddess is definitely an outcome of the ancient folk tradition of Bengal. But the name Manasa is perhaps a late entrant in the history of the region’s religion. Going by the reference of The History of Bengal, (edited by R. C. Majumdar, Vol. I, pp. 40-61) D. C. Sircar comments⁵ that the Devi, with two or four arms with a snake canopy and with or without a child on her lap, has been identified as the

Snake-goddess called Manasā. He comments “the name of Manasā (supposed to be derived from that of the South Indian Mañchamma) is, however, not found in the literature of a date earlier than the later part of the medieval period.”

According to Gouriswar Bhattacharya,1 Matṣuvā appears to be the name of the lady who donated the image and not that of the Snake-goddess. It is agreed by most of the scholars2 that the name Manasā of the Snake-goddess is first introduced in the late Sanskrit text the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa.3

The Mahābhārata4 tells the story of Nāga-rāja Vāsuki and her sister Jaratkāru, who was married to seer Jaratkāru and gave birth to Āstika who became well versed in veda and vedāṅga. Sister Jaratkāru of the Mahābhārata is identified with Manasā of the Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa.5 The purāṇa6 narrates that when men on earth were terrified of serpents, then asked by Brahmā, Kaśyapa composed hymns according to vedic formula. Then he created Manasā, presiding deity of the hymns and as she was created through penance in mind (manasa), the deity was called Manasā. She is known by twelve names, such as Jagatagauri, as a disciple of Śiva, she is Śivā and as a devotee of Viṣṇu, she is Vaiṣṇavī. She rescued her brother nāgas in the Janamejaya Sarpa-yagha, so is called Nāgeśvarī.7 As an oldest animal associate of the mother-goddess, the snake-goddess has a direct connection with Nirṛti, the fear goddess of vedic mythology.8 A motif is found in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Lothal, of Mother-goddess with snakes and dove.9 In the Manasā-maṅgala kābya, Manasā is described as Śiva’s daughter. But that she had to fight back to win her

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3. Ed. and trans. by P. Tarkaratna, Prakṛt khaṇḍam Ch. 45, pp. 172; Ch. 46, p. 173.
9. Ibid., p. 82.
position as a deity, may point towards the conflict between Dravidian and Aryan religious cults.¹

Not only the Hindus, but also the Mahāyāna school of Buddhists worshipped a certain Snake-goddess, named Jāṅgulī. According to Mahāyāna tradition, even Lord Buddha taught some of his disciples the mystical formula of the worship of this goddess. The Hindu goddess Manasā or Viṣahari has a marked resemblance to Jāṅgulī.²

According to N. K. Bhattasali, Mahāyāna school of Buddhists might have adopted the concept of Snake-goddess from the vedas.³ The Atharvaveda mentions of a daughter of a hunter, well versed in Serpent-lore. Whitney gives the meaning of the line “O snake, let thy poison come out”, as apparently a process analogous to that of extracting the poison.⁴ Ghṛtācī, the destroyer of poison, is also mentioned in this Kāṇḍa. Goddess Sarasvatī is also attributed as the destroyer of poison. Asutosh Bhattacharyya opines that, in some parts of Bengal, Manasā is addressed as Jāṅgulī. But gradually Sarasvatī discarded her non-Aryan element and Jāṅgulī lost her fame to Manasā.⁵

An inscribed stone sculpture dated in the 9th-10th century A. D., is a definite evidence of the worship of Nāgas by the Mūlasarvāstivādin Buddhists.⁶ The sculpture originally from Rājgir is now lying at the Patna Museum. Although the name of the Snake-goddess can not be ascertained from the inscription of Bengal, so far discussed, but the images of the goddess betray certain definite characteristic features, such as – five, seven or nine hooded snake canopy, two or four arms, with a snake or a child with snake-hood.⁷

¹. Asutosh Bhattacharyya, The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal, pp. 131 ff.
². Ibid., p. 135.
³. Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum, p. 222.
⁵. A. Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 138.
ii) The two-armed inscribed image of the Linden Museum, Germany, requires special mention here. G. Bhattacharya points out that the image of the Snake-goddess belonging to 11th century with a child on the lap, has an elephant mount (nāgendra-vāhini) and is enriched with an one line inscription engraved on the Prabhāmaṇḍala. The inscription reveals an astonishing fact that the bronze image belongs to the reign of Mahipāla I and in the 1st line, the goddess is called Svāṅgāi Bhattarakih, where Bhaṭṭarakih stands for Bhaṭṭārikā, an epithet given to female deities and queens of the Pāla period. The name showing mahata (syā) in the 2nd line of the inscription may be of the donor.

Enamul Haque has quoted a number of dhyānas used in worshipping the Snake-goddess, from where we can get different names by which the goddess is called like śaśadharavadanā, śīśusutā, padmā, nāgendravāhini and so on. But no where she is called as svāṅgāī. G. Bhattacharya draws our attention to the literary corroboration of the name of svāṅgāi of the Snake-goddess, found in a text called the Pratisthālakṣaṇasastrasamuccaya of Vairocana, a Śaiva compilation to be dated c. 11th-12th century A.D. Here from the two verses of a dhyāna it appears that the Snake-goddess Padmā is Svāṅgādevi or Suṅgādevi when she has a dark complexion (syamalaṁgī).

iv) Another image of the goddess (originating from Kurkihar, Gaya District) now in the Los Angeles County Museum, is described by Gouriswar Bhattacharya as comparable to the Linden Museum one, but it contains an almost blurred inscription.

4. Ibid., p. 257.
5. Ibid., p. 254.
v) G. Bhattacharya has drawn our attention\(^1\) to another damaged but inscribed stone image of the Snake-goddess, lying in the Māldā Museum. He has assigned the image to the 12th century A. D. This image has a striking resemblance with the image of Linden Museum, as both the deities has an elepland mount near right foot and both of them possess a nine-hooded snake canopy behind head.

vi) We come to know from Harekrishna Mukhopadhyay\(^2\) that an image of a Devī, local name being Akhileśvāri is worshipped in the village Āḍā and Kendulā of the Bardhamān District, of West Bengal which incidentally possesses the same characteristic features as our above mentioned sculptures of the Snake-goddess. The two armed deity had an elephant mount and nine hooded snake-canopy, besides the other features of a Snake-goddess. But the inscription is almost blurred to read anything from it. According to Sri Mukhopadhyay, the iconographic artistry displays the characteristics of the first period of the Pāla dynasty.

It thus seems apparent from the above discussion that the Serpent cult originating from our non-Aryan folk culture gradually gave rise to the concept of popular anthropomorphic form of the Serpent-goddess, accepted by all spheres of the society, lower to upper. But the name Manasā-devī, by which the goddess is worshiped to-day, does not find a mention in any of the early inscriptions of Bengal, discovered so far.

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