



Different Treatment of non-Aryan Gods and Goddesses in Bengali Mangalkavyas

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Abstract

Mangalkavyas were found in Bengal from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century. It was praises of gods and goddesses, dedicated to various deities in medieval Bengal. Mangalkavya glorifies both male and female deities, but at times, it undervalues male deities. There is a differentiation between female and male deities, women deities portrayed as evil and despicable, and men as the opposite. A dual approach is evident here: women are portrayed as ferocious, while male deities are depicted as beyond this. Surprisingly, male and female deities came from non-Aryan backgrounds, and most writers of Mangalkavyas belong to a higher social status. They should then treat both male and female deities equally. So, why was there such discrimination between them? This paper explores the reasons behind the differential treatment of female and male non-Aryan deities. Gender and Brahmanical patriarchy were the main factors behind this inequality. This paper employs textual analysis of Mangalkavya, including Manasāmanḡal and Dharmamanḡal, as well as secondary sources.

Keywords: Brahman Hierarchy, Goddesses, Hindu Pantheon, *Manḡalkavya*, Non-Aryans, Treatments

Introduction:

Manḡalkavya is a vernacular literature of Bengal. According to scholars, it was found as a rhyming verse in Bengal from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century. It was filled with the exploits of gods and goddesses. *Manḡalkavyas* were famous among lower-class women. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya¹, its earlier form, *Vrat katha*, was used in religious practices. Without recitation of the *Vrat Katha*, religious practice could not be complete.¹ Indigenous people used to recite it in their daily worship for their well-being. It was orally prevalent in society before the advent of writing traditions. After the advent of Islam, various local deities emerged in Bengal, and numerous *Manḡalkavyas* proliferated in Bengali society. During that time, non-Aryan deities gained popularity among the upper echelon of society. J. C. Ghosh assumes that the Brahmin community is aware that the lower caste would convert to Islam on a large scale, so they turned to local deities to prevent these conversions.² That's why they started worshipping them. Consequently, several shakti goddesses were seen in medieval Bengal. For example, *Manasā*, the goddess of snakes, *Caṇḍi*, the goddess of wild animals and forests, *Shitalā*, the goddess of smallpox, who

protects children from the disease, and Shasthi, the protector of newborn children, among others. They were local deities or non-Aryan or folk deities. Among them, Dharma Thakur was a famous male non-Aryan god. Later, Dakshin Raya, Kalu Raya, and Bada Khan Gazi male deities emerged in the Sunderban area. However, male gods were not as popular as female goddesses were.

Local female deities were accepted into the Hindu pantheon. But they were constantly discriminated against by Aryan or Brahmin deities. Manasā, Caṇḍi, Shitalā, and Shasthi always discriminate based on their caste and gender. However, they were accepted into the Hindu pantheon of deities. Brahmanical patriarchy always dominated them. The term 'Brahmanical Patriarchy' was coined by Uma Chakrabarty. 'It is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes.'³ But most surprisingly, the female non-Aryan goddesses were already accepted by the higher class. Danujmardandev (1380 A.D.) was a Hindu king of Bengal. They issued a coin on which was printed *Shree Chandicharanparayanasya*.⁴ This coin was found before the production of *Manṅalkavya*s. The earlier *Manṅalkavya* was Vijay Gupta's *Manasāmanṅal*. It was written in 1494 A.D.⁵ But we found goddesses were depicted as cruel in the *Manṅalkavya* texts. At the same time, non-Aryan male deities were the opposite of the female's nature. My problem is why non-Aryan goddesses in *Manṅalkavya* are often glorified and assimilated into mainstream religious practices through tales of struggle, resistance, and ultimate acceptance. In contrast, non-Aryan gods remain marginal, shadowy, and, most importantly, they do not portray female deities in the same manner. They were not depicted as selfish, scoundrels, cruel, ferocious, etc. Therefore, this paper discusses how the *Manṅalkavya* text reveals a distinct treatment of non-Aryan male and female deities by their contemporary society and the *Manṅalkavya* poets. This paper aims to highlight how gender and Brahmanical patriarchy did not want a marginal woman to achieve power in her hands.

Several scholars have studied the *Manṅalkavya* with a focus on its gender aspects. Tony K. Stewart's work, *Fantastic, Histories of the Sacred: The Puranas of Bengal*, focuses on the Shakta goddess. He shows the feminine divine as the central locus of religious imagination and local agency. June McDaniel's work, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*, focuses on Shakta goddesses, exploring folk or tribal, Tantric or Yogic, and Bhakti Shakta traditions. *The Goddess Re-Discovered Gender and Sexuality in Religious Texts of Medieval Bengal*, by Saumitra Chakrabarty, highlights the complex dynamics of power, gender roles and societal expectations. The folk goddesses are the centre of their works. However, there is a need to understand why female and male folk deities were treated differently by their contemporary poets and the people of their time.

Origin of Non-Aryan Deities:

First, we should be aware of the origin of non-Aryan deities in Bengal. The term 'Aryan' means a group or tribe that followed the Vedic rites or a member of the superior two or three varnas among the four varnas.⁶ Apart from the Aryans, the remaining indigenous people were referred to as non-Aryans. Aryan had three markers to differentiate them from non-Aryans: religion, skin colour, and language.⁷ Later, this term was synonymous with local, folk, and subaltern. If we talk about earlier Bengal, geographically, it was covered with forests, and several rivers flowed through it, with muddy areas such as mangrove swamps. The weather in Bengal is not always the same. Sometimes, heavy rains cause floods, and

many people and cattle are affected by them. Sometimes, hot weather could be caused by drought and famine. These kinds of things created many diseases and insects, and people were unaware of them. Therefore, they made their own deities to save their lives from these things.⁸ Later, these deities transformed into human form and were worshipped by local or indigenous people. Similarly, we can see Manasa, Candī, Shitalā, and Shashti emerge in the medieval period. *Manasā* was worshipped as a goddess of fertility, disease cures, wealth-giver, a tutelary goddess, a village goddess, and a protector of children, among other roles.⁹ Caṇḍi was worshipped by proto-Australoid people who lived on the plateau of Chotanagpur, known as Orano.¹⁰ Shitalā was also a non-Aryan goddess revered by both lower and higher-class people.

Interestingly, there were not only goddesses belonging to the lower class but also gods. It cannot be denied that they were no more famous than goddesses. Although the Dharma Thakur was famous among non-Aryan gods only in the Radha region. The Radha region comprised modern Hooghly, Bankura, Birbhum, and Murshidabad.¹¹ Most of the devotees of Dharma Thakur belonged to the Dom caste. Dakshin Raya and Bada Khan Gazi were famous in the Sundarban area. Because they protected people from the tigers' attacks. Dharma Thakur, Kalu Raya, Bada Khan Gazi, and Dakshin Raya were folk deities, but were not as crucial as many goddesses.

The treatment of Non-Aryan Female Deities in *Manṅalkavyas*:

Non-Aryan goddesses are always depicted as strong, assertive, and rebellious in *Manṅalkavyas*. But it cannot be denied that the *Manṅalkavya* texts portrayed them as uncivilised, ferocious, terror, destructive and so on. While talking about *Manasā*, she was portrayed as more despicable than other folk deities. Because she killed Lakhinder, the son of Chand Saudagar, killed Dhanvantari Ojha, destroyed Chand's commodity ship, and his wealth, etc. Here, it was a symbol of challenging Brahmanical patriarchy. Because the higher caste is always dominant over the lower class. High-born elites also depreciated Caṇḍi and Shitalā. Here is the question: why did they depreciate them? Although people worshipped them. Some fishermen, farmers, washermen, cowherds, and sometimes higher-born women also worship them. If we study, we find that they were female and non-Brahmins; they were called *malechha* by the elites, which means impure and untouchable. Notably, they were also worshipped by higher-class women. When goddesses demanded worship from the higher class or Brahmanical elites like Chand Saudagar, Dhanapati, they were rejected and abused by them, because a patriarchal society would not want a marginalised woman to occupy a higher position in the hierarchy.

Manasāmanṅal says that *Manasā* was Shiva's daughter. She was born on a lotus leaf by Shiva's fallen sperm. Still, she did not get the respect of being the daughter of God, because her mother was unknown.

Padampatre haiyābandī pāiyā mriṅal sandhī pātāle nāmīlo mahāras
Pāiyā pātāl purī janmilo nāginī nārī dev kanyā dekhite rupasī.¹²

She was taken care of by King Basuki Nag. Undoubtedly, *Manasā* belonged to a lower caste called *nag jati*, which is why Caṇḍi discriminated against her. She had no right to her father's property. She was married to old sage Jarutkaru, who left her alone with the blessing of a baby boy, Astik. She had to be exiled to the forest. Despite being Shiva's daughter, she did not get her rights. After a long struggle, Chand Saudagar agreed to worship her with his left hand.

Jeī hāte puji mui sānkar bhavāni sei hāte kemane pujibo re kāni.¹³

He secured his right hand for Shiva. He could worship Bhavani or Gandheswari, but could not bow down to the female, one-eyed goddess *Manasā*. He did not use the same hand for *Manasā*. Today, people criticise people who use their left hand in pious work. *Caṇḍimangal* also tells that Dhanapati did not want to worship Caṇḍi. Their refusal shows the patriarchal resistance to non-Aryan goddesses. However, they were already famous among women's society, whether it was the elites or the marginal society. It is noticeable that all *laukik* or local goddesses were lower in caste. At the same time, *Pauranic* or Aryan goddesses belonged to the high class. Another important aspect is that the *Pauranic* deities were already established in society, whereas the local deities were not. They had to struggle to establish their cults. When we compare both local and non-Aryan and Aryan goddesses, we find that non-Aryan goddesses had to demand their worship from people. People did not want to worship them very easily. That's why non-Aryan goddesses always show their destructive form. In the case of the Aryan goddesses, they did not suffer ignorance from people. They already had a mother figure. So, it can be said that non-Aryan women or goddesses have always suffered in society. Here we can see different treatments for both classes of goddesses. So, why is this kind of differentiation seen in society? When we investigated this, we found that *Manasā*, *Shitalā*, *Caṇḍi*, or *Shasthi* were solitary or independent entities. Lynne. Gatewood shows two versions of the female principal in India: one was free from divine male control, and the other was controlled by male divinity. He used the term non-Sanskritic version Devi for controlled free females and used the Sanskritic version spouse goddess. Devi is worshipped by lower castes, and Spouse goddesses are worshipped by higher castes.¹⁴ Spouse goddesses were Sarasvati, the wife of Brahma, Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, and Parvati or Durga, the wife of Shiva. They lacked their own identity. At the same time, non-Aryan goddesses want their own identity. And that patriarchal society did not want an independent woman as a leader, who belonged to the lower caste and was also disabled. Hence, non-Aryan deities were not depicted modestly.

The Treatment of Non-Aryan Male Deities in *Maṅgalkavyas*:

When we compared non-Aryan goddesses with non-Aryan gods, we found a different treatment again. Regarding Dharma Thakur and Dakshin Raya, *Maṅgalkavya* did not depict them as despicable. They didn't trick anyone into worshipping them. These gods appeared only to bless and to help the protagonist with their problem. But in the case of non-Aryan goddesses, they always tricked people into worshipping them, whether they belonged to either the lower or the higher caste. It is essential to know why non-Aryan goddesses had to trick people into worshipping them or show their destructive forms. Class, caste, and gender were the primary factors behind this. Because Indian society has two hierarchies, one based on the brahmana at the top and the untouchable at the bottom, on the other hand, according to economic and political status, landlords occupied the top position and landless labourers were at the bottom.¹⁵ In this case, it was challenging for the untouchable class to resist Brahman Shivaism, which was widely revered in society. That's why they had to use tricks on people for worship. Similarly, *Manasa*, *Candī*, *Shitalā*, and *Shasthi* often had to contend with Shaivism as well as local non-Aryan goddesses to sustain their cults. Non-Aryan goddesses also fought with Muslims. *Mansamangal* says muslims were also worshippers of *Manasā*. *Manasāmanigal* states that Hassan and Hussain, the *kazi's* sons, worship *Manasā*.¹⁶

Mahish chhāgal āni bharilek bādi nāpit aniyā kāzi muḍilek dāri

Prathame pujilo ghaṭ bhakti kari āj brahmane puje ghaṭ praṇām kare kāzi.¹⁷

On the other hand, male non-Aryan deities did not challenge the Brahmin Hierarchy. They only fought with local deities. Non-Aryan male gods were depicted as local deities who protected people from wild animals, such as tigers and crocodiles. The lower-class society worshipped Dharma Thakur and Dakshin Raya. Dharma was famous only in the Radha region, and Dakshin Raya worshipped the mangrove area of the Sunderban. *Rāyamanṅala* also depicted a fight between Dakshin Raya and Bada Khan Gazi. We can see 'Ichhai vadh pala' in *Dharmamangal*. Ichhai was a devotee of Caṇḍi, and Lausen was a devotee of Dharma. Both fought each other. When Lausen would separate Ichhai's head from his body, Caṇḍi would again join Ichhai's head to his body and bring him back to life.

jiy jiy bali māṭā padam haṭh dilo jiodān pāiyā gop uthiyā dandāilo
ichhāi uthilo chaṇḍi haila ānandite rachilo dharmer dās prabhur sangit.¹⁸

Conclusion:

Therefore, non-Aryan goddesses had more devotees and a larger territory than male gods. Another thing was that non-Aryan goddesses directly fought with the Brahmin religion or the Brahmin hierarchy. The Brahmins added them to the Hindu religion through the Aryanization process. Because female non-Aryans deities were strong, they not only fought with Brahmin hegemony but also with Muslims. Several *Mangalkavya* poets say that ordinary people and Brahmins were exhausted by the torture of Turkish officers. That's why they went for the shelter of the non-Aryan deities.¹⁹ For this reason, female deities were assimilated into mainstream religious practice despite all the obstacles. While the *Mangalkavyas* were written down, the poets glorified the non-Aryan goddesses, but they could not forget their lower-caste origin. Therefore, they portray them as inferior to the Hindu pantheon deities.

On the other hand, *Rāyamanṅal* also depicted a fight between Dakshin Raya and Bada Khan Gazi. Non-Aryan gods never challenged the Brahmin hierarchy. That's why they did not face many challenges, unlike *Manasā*, who had to face them. As a result, their lack of devotees and territory was short. Therefore, male deities were not a threat to the Brahmin hierarchy. Consequently, they always remain shadowy, and there were no such character assassinations of non-Aryan goddesses.

As a result, we saw that the contemporary society and the authors treated male gods and female goddesses differently. This difference highlights how female non-Aryan deities evolved into symbolic tools for resistance and assimilation. Non-Aryan goddesses achieve an independent identity among the Hindu pantheon deities. However, non-Aryans gods had remained a folk identity. Although Dharma was known as Vishnu, among non-Aryan gods, his worship was prevalent in the Radha region among the *dom jati*. Male deities never cross their comfort zone for their cult. They never challenged the Brahmin hierarchy. That's why they never became a threat to Brahmin hegemony.

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