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Buddhism in Agrarian Society of Rural Bengal: Perspectives of Belief Systems with a Focus on Ritual and Deities

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism was the State Religion of Bengal at least for more than four hundred years between mid of 8th century and 12th century during the Pala reign in Bengal. In the 2011 Indian census, the percentage of Buddhists in West Bengal was 0.31% while in Bangladesh less than 1% of the total population is now a follower of Buddhism. Most of the Buddhists were converted to Islam during the Sultanate rule in Bengal while Hinduism silently took over many of their shrines and deities. This paper is an attempt to revisit the cultural landscape of early Buddhism in Bengal along with a focus on the elements of Buddhist culture in folk life applying cultural geographical methodologies and examining the presence of Buddhist rituals and deities in agrarian society in sublime form. A literature review was followed by extensive fieldwork during festivities of the shrines of Hindu deities having a connection with early Buddhism of Bengal. Along with participant observation during ritualistic practices, interviews, and focus group discussion methods have been applied involving stakeholders to obtain qualitative data for analysis. The results reveal the various manifestations of the interplay between the process of universalization and parochialization in the dynamism of the evolving belief system of an apparently Non-Buddhist folk society of the present day, the root of the culture of which was exclusively Buddhist.

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Introduction

Buddhism, one of the greatest international religions of today originated in the North Indian plains in the 6th century B.C. Born at Lumbini in the Terai region of Nepal, Lord Buddha (563-483 B.C.) preached an ethical religion mostly in the upper

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and middle Ganga plain during his lifetime. He was successful in obtaining the patronage of the leaders of the *Mahajanapadas*, the city-states of that period. Despite a legend of his short visit to the Pundravardhana (situated in the northern plains of West Bengal and Bangladesh), there is no literal or archaeological evidence of the physical presence of Lord Buddha in any part of Bengal. The absence of any claim from Bengal on his mortal remains that were initially distributed for preservation in stupas of the Buddhist core areas reveals the peripheral status of Bengal in the context of Buddhism in the 5th century B.C.

Buddhism was however well established itself in the territory of Bengal during the reign of the great Indian emperor Ashoka (273-236 B.C.) when the Bodhisattva doctrine emphasizing moral Buddha flourished to make the religion much more acceptable to the public (Talim, 2015). The emperor was physically present at Tamralipta port of Bengal on the occasion of sending a branch of the sacred. Bo Tree. He sent his daughter Sanghamaitra to Ceylon with it for the diffusion of Buddhism in the island country. Ashoka further redistributed the mortal remains of Buddha among about 84000 stupas in the subcontinent and Bengal was invariably one of the recipients of Buddha relics in the 3rd century B.C. Ashoka was especially interested in Bengal because of the location of Tamralipta port which was navigable from his kingdom by waterways. This port sent a large number of Buddhist missionaries to foreign countries. A counter flow of migration of Buddhist monks in the land of Lord Buddha was significant. In the epigraph discovered in the Nagarjunaconda of Andhra Pradesh for example, it has been depicted that missionaries from Ceylon contributed a lot in converting people of Bengal to Buddhism in the 3rd and 2nd century B.C. (Sen Majumdar, 2013). It has been further assumed that the tooth relic of Buddha was shipped to Ceylon from Tamralipta by one of such monks, which is now kept at Kandy in a world-renowned temple.

Being the antithesis of the Vedic religion, Buddhism in the soil of India had to face rivalry with the Hindu religion. Shasanka (600-637 A.D.), the powerful Bengali king was a devout follower of Shaivism (a dominant Hindu sect), who attempted to burn the Bodhi Tree during his invasion of the northern plains of India against the Buddhist monarchy. However, Buddhism was very much present in Bengal during his rule as evident from the travel account of Yun Chwang, who visited the country just after the death of Shasanka in the 7th century A.D. The rise of the Pala Dynasty in the 8th century A.D. initiated the golden age of Buddhism in eastern India and the decay of the religion was due to failure to resist the Muslim invasion from the last decade of the 12th century known for the slaughtering of the Buddhist monks and mass destruction of Buddhist establishments. Who escaped from forced conversion were absorbed into folk society as lower caste Hindus from which a new dimension in the belief system came up. To strengthen such system, a deity is usually being authenticated in local tradition perpetuated through miracles, and divine interventions involving any supernatural agent (Sangren, 1984). Such transformation actually takes place under Little tradition, a term coined by Robert Redfield during his project with Milton Singer in the 1940s and 1950s (Allison, 1997) that has drawn worldwide attention among researchers. It is noteworthy that in a civilization, there is Great tradition of the 'reflective few' and Little tradition of 'unreflective many' (Redfield, 1956). Parochialization is the process by which cultural traits of Great tradition are merged within the Little tradition (Marriott &

Beals, 1955). Holistically, Buddhism is one of the Great traditions while various offshoots of Buddhism that transmit among the 'unlettered' without the contribution of specialized teachers and institutions (Singer, 1972) have developed several cults under Little tradition within which various traits of the Great tradition of Buddhism have been found survived. For rural Bengal, a popular hypothesis prevails that Dharma (Sarkar, 1917), Manasa (Maity, 2018), Sitala (Mukhopadhyay, 1994) are such deities that evolved from the Tantric Buddhist pantheon and assimilated into the belief system of Hindu folk society constituted by the farmers of the villages.

When there is no doubt about the dominance of Buddhism in the social life of Bengal up to the 12th century, cultural geographers could not avoid the duty to interpret and highlight the Buddhist legacy while dealing with the post-modern human geographies of the country. The early Buddhist texts were written in Pali, whereas Sanskrit came when the fourth Buddhist Council was held in the 1st century in Kashmir. The transfer of Buddhist text into the Bengali language could not be expected as Buddhism was almost obscure from society when the Bengali language became matured. This is why, the earliest available pieces of literature (e.g. *Doha and Caryagiti*) in the Bengali language were associated with the Buddhist Sahajiya cult (Dasgupta, 1969) that owes its origin in Sahajayana school of Buddhist philosophy.

Enlightenment was redefined under Vajrayana, Sahajayana, and Kalachakra schools that consider the human body as a microcosm (Banerjee, 2015). The Buddhist Sahajiya cult that dominated the public life of Bengal was based on the physio-psychological practices of such a belief system. The Baul sect of Bengal (Picture 1), the wandering mendicants, very popular in society as musicians had their origin in Sahajiya Buddhism and thus they are distinguishable from the Hindu Vaishnavas (Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2022). Kenduli, a small village in rural Bengal becomes an international tourist destination every year in mid-January due to the annual gathering of Bauls (Mandal & Chakrabarty, 2017).

Figure 1. A Baul in Kenduli, West Bengal where annual assembly of Bauls takes place

Basically, a lot of research has been done on Buddhism in Bengal. The results of previous studies show that there is a significant shift in the morphological character of Bengal Buddhist monasteries (Eshika, 2023). In addition, Bengal also experienced historical changes and developments, especially in the political and

economic fields (Furui, 2022). These changes produced favourable conditions for the growth of Buddhist monasteries as organisations with a strong material base (Furui, 2023). Despite the rise of Buddhism, Buddhist organisations did not pay much attention to bringing the lower classes into their fold (Barman & Sarkar, 2022).

This article attempts to complement these writings. therefore, we have focused mainly Dharma and his consort Adya. The connection between Adya and Buddhist Tara has been considered thoroughly. Special attention has been given to analyze the nature of the deity and rituals of Tarapith, a Hindu shrine in which the mother Goddess is worshipped following a number of Tantric Buddhist rituals.

The disappearance of the Buddhist religion from Bengal (only 0.31% of the total population was Buddhist according to the 2011 census) is subjected to historical and cultural geographic research because it was once the state religion. It arises a research question on the inherent strength of Buddhist culture that flourished from a number of monasteries that acted as regional hubs of Buddhism in ancient Bengal. A hypothesis has been developed that though Buddhism was smashed by force, the intangible Buddhist heritages could not be eliminated from folk-life practicing agriculture in rural Bengal. The objective of the study is to trace the Buddhist roots in the non-material culture of the agrarian society of Bengal from the perspectives of folk beliefs and ritualistic practices.

Method

Research context

This research is intended to trace the roots of Buddhism from the point of view of beliefs and ritual practices. Therefore, the research method used in this research is qualitative research method. Creswell said that what is meant by qualitative methods is a method used to explore and also understand the meaning and behaviour of an individual or group. This qualitative method is also used in order to describe social problems or humanitarian problems. As for the research process, it starts from making research questions and other procedures that are still temporary, collecting data on participant settings, analysing data inductively, building partial data into themes, and then providing interpretations of the meaning of data. The last activity is to make a report into a flexible structure (Creswell, 2009).

Instrument and data collection

This research uses triangulation data collection techniques. The triangulation data collection technique is defined as a data collection technique that combines various data collection techniques and data sources. The purpose and also the purpose of researchers using this triangulation technique is none other than in order to collect data credibly. therefore to maintain the credibility of the data, researchers use data collection techniques from various sources.

Triangulation technique, means that researchers use different data collection techniques to get data from the same source. therefore, in this case the researcher uses observation, interview and documentation techniques simultaneously. As Mathinson said that the value of data collection techniques by means of triangulation is to find out the data more broadly and not contradictory (Tramacere,

2021). Therefore, the researcher hopes that by using this triangulation technique, the data obtained will be more consistent, complete and certain. This is because through the use of triangulation techniques, the data obtained will have strength compared to using only one approach.

Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is carried out during data collection until after data collection is complete. As said by Miles and Huberman that activities in qualitative data analysis are carried out interactively and take place continuously until completion, so that the data is saturated. As for this research, the data analysis used consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Data collection in this study was filled with field observations. The data from the field was then summarised and focused on things that were considered important. After the data is summarised then the data is presented in a brief description. after that from the description a conclusion is drawn which is supported by correct data.

Findings

Ritual belief systems and deities of agrarian communities in rural Bengal

Buddhism is found present in sublime form in different perspectives of belief systems regulating the agrarian society of rural Bengal that bears a legacy of Buddhist culture. According to history, Buddhism was first introduced at Pundravardhana in the Varendra region of North Bengal. There are ample evidence of its connection with Nalanda, the center of Buddhist learning that flourished during the late Gupta period (480-535 A.D.). As there was no mention of Nalanda in the travel account of Fa Hien (405-411 A.D.), it is conceived that Nalanda was developed after 450 A.D. and the territory of Buddhist landscape in Bengal was within its hinterland (Misra, 1998). Yun Chwang (629-646 A.D.), the founder of one of the ten schools of Chinese Buddhism described Bengal as a land of assimilation and synthesis of Hindu, Jain, and Mahayana Buddhist religious culture. For Yun Chwang, Bengal was revered as the birthplace of his preceptor at Nalanda, named Shilavadra. Though the renowned Bengali monk Dipankar Srijana (980-1053 A.D.) has been credited as the founder of Lamaism in Tibet, the teaching of Shilavadra reached Tibet more than 300 years before him. A scholar contemporary to Yun Chwang was sent by the Tibetan king to Nalanda and he was also taught by Shilavadra. This Tibetan scholar after returning to his homeland made the first Tibetan translation of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit. Thus in the diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, Bengali Buddhists contributed a lot.

Tara meaning 'the savior' was originally a Tantric Buddhist deity. Tara is conceived as the primordial form of female energy and the consort of Avolokaiteswar who initially invoked in three forms, namely Ekajata, Ugratara, and Nilasaraswati (Bhattacharyya, 1999). In Mahayani Buddhism, the deity is famous as the consort of Avalokitesvara, the revered Bodhisattva who refused to attain Nirvana before addressing of miseries of common people. Dalai Lama in Tibet is conceived as the incarnation of this Boddhisattva.

Figure 2. Ritual of lighting while entering the Ekteswar Shiva shrine

According to a group of scholars, Ekteswar Shiva (Picture 2) of Bankura on the bank of Gandheswari was none but the Buddhist Avalokitesvara. The footprint worship depicts the same Buddhist past of the shrine. Tara on the other hand has been adopted as one of the ten Mahavidyas in Hindu Tantra. The inclusion of Tantra in Buddhism was particularly the result of the scholarly interaction with Tibet as well as contactism with the Sakti cult practiced by the Hindus of eastern India. Contactism is one of the driving forces in the diffusion of Buddhism Crooke (Das, 2003). Tantra leads to the worship of the Mandala, a sacred cosmogram having a center and geometric symbols on various realms of the cosmos (Santiago, 1999). With the passage of time, there arose the Adi Buddha doctrine from Mahayanism with five *Dhyani* (self-born, mediating, and symbolized by full-blown lotus) Buddha, each having a consort (*Sakti*) and a Bodhisattva (spiritual son as well as an attendant) that reoriented the focus of Buddhist mythologies. Adi Buddha (the creator) was considered as the supreme deity of Tantric doctrine and Prajnaparamita was attributed to the consort of Adi Buddha.

Tara cult was originally flourished in Tibet about the 7th century being migrated from Bengal where the deity was known as Sgrol-ma (Dol-ma). A Hindu shrine named Tarapith in rural Bengal is the manifestation of the seat of Buddhist Tara in ancient Bengal, later assimilated as a form of Hindu Tantric Vidyas and acknowledged as a Hindu deity in due course. It is also noteworthy to mention that the Blue Tara of Buddhism is the origin of Nila Saraswati. Nabadwip, one of the ancient settlements of Bengal is famous for its presiding deity Pora Ma, who might be the Buddhist Nila Saraswati in origin. As the deity was burnt in an accidental fire probably from thunder, the name Pora Ma (literally 'Burnt Mother goddess') has been derived while assimilated into folk Hinduism.

Saraswati of Hinduism and Prajnaparamita of Buddhism are not only similar in iconographic manifestation but also intimate with Tara, the Tantric mothergoddess. It is noteworthy to mention that Shaiva Gambhira, a seven days festival of agricultural communities of North Bengal plains particularly has its origin in seven days Buddhist festival centering Arya Tara, who is also known as Prajaparamita. Tantra was the driving force influencing the way of life of agrarian society in rural Bengal. The word 'tantra' is derived from the combination of two

words; *tan* meaning to spread and *tra* relates to esotericism. Animism is its origin and both Buddhism and Hinduism adopted it in Bengal through the process of universalization (Marriott & Beals, 1955) that assimilates the traits of Little tradition like the magic cult.

Tara under Tantric Buddhist doctrine is described as the mother of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Tarapith of Birbhum in West Bengal is the seat of the supreme female principle of Tara revered by both Buddhist and Hindu Tantra. The *Adirupa* (a stone piece) worshipped in the temple of Tarapith is explained as the manifestation of the goddess, engaged in feeding the male deity. The method of worshipping Tara at Tarapitha, according to a popular legend was learnt by the Puranic sage Vasistha visiting *Mahachina* (Tibet). It is noteworthy to mention that Tarapith is not conceived as one of the 51 *pithas* (meaning sacred seat) by Hindu literature. The place is regarded as Sidhhapitha i.e. the site of the salvation of sage Vasistha, who was instructed by Lord Buddha to be indulged himself in the special worship of Mahachintara (i.e. Tara of Tibet). With the decay of Buddhism in Bengal, the Tantric Buddhist shrine of Tara with its deity came into the fold of the Hindu Tantra and the deity became the Mother Goddess of the Hindus retaining the Buddhist legacy with such legend.

From literature triangulation, it has also been revealed that many of the historical Shiva shrines of Bengal, now practicing Phallism also had a Buddhist past. The shrine of Burashiva of Nabadwip (an ancient settlement, famous as Benaras of the East) is identified by eminent scholars originally as a Buddhist shrine that functioned when Buddhism prevailed in the region. It is noteworthy that the rituals followed in Tantric Shaivism and Tantric Buddhism have various similarities. Further, the Kalachakra school of Tibetan Buddhism is found associated with the Buddhist culture of Bengal. The word *Kala* (meaning eternity) has been assembled with the word *Chakra* (meaning wheel), which represents *Kalachakra,* the cycle of causation (Mitra & Bhattacharya, 1979). Mahakala resembling the image of Lord Shiva is a deity of *Kalachakra* school.

The presence of Buddhist heritage is prominent in various nearby folk Shiva shrines. The Buroraj of Jamalpur, a famous Shiva shrine in the Barddhaman district of West Bengal is an excellent example of it where not only Buddha Purnima is celebrated, but also Shiva and Dharmaraj are worshipped together. The name Buroraj is derived from Buroshiv's 'Buro', and Dharmaraj's 'Raj'. The *Gajan* (the annual worship with festivity) of Dharmaraj is held on *Boisakhi Purnima* and *Gajan* of Shiva is performed on *Chaitra Sankranti*. Shiva Lingam is worshipped as Buroraj following the rituals of Dharmaraj depicting the assembly of Buddha and Shiva in the same shrine. The main *naibedyo* (offering) of Buroraj is separated into two parts, one part is for Shiva and another belongs to Dharmaraj.

Figure 3. Phallic (Hindu) and Sandal (Buddhist origin) assimilated under agrarian belief system

Worshipping Shiva on fertility/ phallic symbol (*Lingas*) (Picture 3) is the manifestation of the connection of the deity with agriculture. Lord Shiva is worshipped for the fertility of the soil (Bhattacharya, 1961). Even there was the practice of keeping the Phallic symbol underneath the soil in expectation of better fertility (Chakraborty, 2022). Shiva is therefore not only the human fertility god but also the presiding deity of the agricultural community of Bengal. For folk Shiva, the annual celebration of *Gajan* is held every year in mid-April on the occasion of the Bengali year ending and welcoming of the new Bengali year. It is noteworthy to mention that the word *Gajan* is derived from two Bengali words, namely *Ga* depicting *Gram* (village), and *Jan* depicting the mass of people; thereby *Gajan* is the annual carnival of the agricultural community in rural Bengal centering on the supreme God of fertility, both human and soil. Several prominent links between *Gajan* and heritage of agriculture could be traced (Niẏogī, 1987).

a) Playing with burning carbon by the *Bhaktas* (devotees adopted magico-religious pursuits during the *Gajan* festival) was a practice of Austric society to obtain agricultural prosperity using magic cult.
b) *Charak* celebration represents the movement of the Sun God in the sky, worshipped for growing healthy crops on land.
c) Various rituals with water in *Gajan* are part of water-god worship. Rain is the principal source of water and is conceived as the blessing of the sky god for growing crops.

In Neel worship, during the *Gajan* festival, there is a ritual of scattering paddy and recollecting it for using them during seedlings as a magical rite for assuring better fertility. Neelsasthi is further celebrated in almost all the village temples with candlelight festival. In *Sunya Purana*, a medieval folk literature, Shiva is described as an agriculturist who invented the first paddy named '*Kamod*' from which several other paddies have been generated in due course (Thakur, 2020). This agricultural god is found worshipped with Buddhist rituals like the burning of candles or mask dance in the rural areas of different parts of West Bengal till date as revealed from field surveys. Gambhira in Lord Shiva worship is the annual mask dance festival of Varendra region of Bengal, considered as the cradle of early Buddhism. The Hinayana influence is very much prominent in the ritual of sin confession during the

Gajan celebration while Mahayana and Vajrayani influence could be traced in the character play of deities and demons with the hymns originated in Buddhist culture once prevailed in the region.

Figure 4. Bhakta in Gajan of Shiva

It is further noteworthy that rural Bengal experiences not only the *Gajan* of Shiva but also the *Gajan* of Dharma Thakur who is a folk god originated from the sun and rain as manifested from the symbol of the Tortoise. In *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a sacred literature of India, the sun is symbolized as Tortoise, while in *Brihatsanhita* of Barahamihir, the contribution of a great ancient Indian scholar, Tortoise is related to the rain charm of our ancestors. It is further noteworthy that the Hindu folk festival in *Gajan* of Shiva and also of Dharma, various painstaking rituals (e.g. thorn play for exhibition on winning over pain) have been practiced. Original Buddhism seeks solutions to eliminate mundane pain and in *Gajana*, the *bhaktas* (Picture 4) demonstrate their physio-psychic capabilities in winning against such pain.

Among the Buddhist trinity, the degraded Buddhists who intruded into the Hindu society in medieval Bengal brought Dharma with them in the disguise of the Tortoise God. As Tortoise is one of the incarnations of Hindu deity Bishnu (2nd incarnation) the worship of Dharma Thakur with its Tortoise symbol (manifesting sun God and rain God together) has been widely accepted by the agricultural community. Thus both in the *Gajan* of Shiva and Dharma, none but the deity of the agricultural field has been worshipped, which is further prominent in the recreational part of the celebration. In the content of the folk drama, we found the staging of social problems of the agricultural society in general and agrarian problems from the extremity of sun and rain in particular. Dharma Thakur is conceived as a Buddhist deity from the following contexts:

a) The date of annual worship is on the occasion of *Buddho-Purnima*.
b) The practice of Tantric Buddhist rituals.
c) Worship as a fertility God with magico-religious belief.

Figure 5. Footprint worship in Baul gatherings at Kenduli, West Bengal

The origin of the Dharma cult is disputed because of two contradicting theories. The first one claims that it has its origin in the sun worship of Jains and the other, which is more popular, identifies Dharma as Buddha in disguise. However, the cult is advanced by those Buddhists who assimilated themselves into Hindu society as the lower caste. Primarily, Dharma is considered as the deity of Doms, a lower caste in Hindu society, who was however revered in the Pala royal court, when the State religion was Buddhism. Being unable to retain their Buddhist identity in Islamic Bengal, a group of Buddhist followers who escaped from conversion to Islam was assimilated into Hindu society. Apart from worship of a peculiar stony object, (called *Dharmasila*), worship of *Dharma-paduka* (sandals of Dharma) is more symbolic, because it has been often called *Buddha Paduka*. Footprint worship (Picture 5) is an age-old Buddhist tradition from which such worship originated.

Figure 6. Dharma on throne in the shrine of Ramai Pandit

The *Sunya Purana* (12th-century text) of Ramai Pandit (Picture 6) is a folk version of void theology which is considered philosophically the pivotal idea of folk Buddhism. It is believed that Adi Buddha created Dharma out of *Sunyata* (void) and

gods like Mahadeva sprang into being as second-generation deities. Female Adya was created by Dharma who sprang up from the void and married the Hindu god Mahadeva, thereby attained the status of the consort of Lord Shiva in mainstream Hinduism. It is noteworthy to mention that Mahakala, Lokeswara, Kalachakra, etc. were well-known male Buddhist deities of Tantric school, each of whom is identical to Hindu Shiva and provided with female consort. Adya for example, as the consort of Dharma has its origin in the Buddhist deity Tara who was worshipped in Nalanda, the famous 5th-century Buddhist monastery of eastern India (Sarkar, 1917).

Figure 7. Sacrificial object as offering to folk deity

In the ritualistic process of worship, it is observed that the throne of the deity is customarily placed under a Bo tree (similar to the throne of Lord Buddha) and clay horses and elephants (Picture 7) are among the offerings to the deity by the devotees (Korom, 1999). These are actually the sacrificial objects deeply connected with the magico-religious paradigm of Tantric Buddhism. Under the Buddhist doctrine, the horse is representative of physical energy and the elephant is representative of mental strength. Philosophically, for purification as well as to get rid of sins committed, the symbols of *Mana* (mind) and *Deha* (body) are given to the control of the deity through the symbol of horse and elephant. In front of the clay dolls (Picture 7) on the floor, the spiritual drawings made are called *Alpona*, which is manifestation of desire of worshipper through motifs. The fish Picture drawn for example is the desire to catch a lot of fishes of such during fishing activities of folk worshipping the deity. Tantric Buddhism in Bengal allowed the consumption of fish and meat. *Alpona* is thus integral part of various *Bratas* practiced in rural Bengal, most having Buddhist legacy for which it had rarely a connection with temple-oriented higher caste Hindu ritualistic practices (Maity, 1989). *Bratas* are mainly rain-centric and harvest-centric rituals of the agrarian society of Bengal (Chakrabarty & Biswas, 2018), the magico-religious functionalities of which depict their connection with early Buddhism with reference to the absence of prominent Hindu gods/goddesses during worship.

Figure 8. Rituals centering Manasa Deity: (a) Hindu Iconography of Manasa (b) Buddhist mode of procession in Manasa worship (c) Symbolic Manasa worship with sacrificial objects (d) Serpent oriented festivity in Manasa worship (Photo credits: authors*)*

In the worship of folk Mother-goddess having a connection with Tantric Buddhism, fertility rituals are more prominent. In primitive mythologies, the connection between the serpent and the powers of nature, clouds, and rain has been depicted (Crooke & Enthoven, 1926). In rural Bengal, Manasa is worshipped as an agricultural fertility goddess due to such relationship between snake and agriculture. Apart from the fear of snake bites, the serpent deity is the symbol of the fertility of the soils particularly because of the association of rain/ rainy season with them. As the forest is the habitat of snakes, Janguli Tara is worshipped by Mahayani Buddhist belief system. The word Janguli literally means forest and the Janguli Tara, the deity of the shamans of Tantric Buddhism holding a snake in hand has been passed on into the Hindu folk society as Manasa (Picture 8).

The very famous Bengali folklore regarding the non-acceptance of the goddess Manasa by Chand Sadagar represents the resistance of the Great tradition of Hinduism on honouring a Buddhist deity that has already been appreciated in the folk society in the iconography/symbolization of Manasa. A similar deity named Padwabati in the Jain religion has been merged into the iconography of Manasa strengthening the perception that the deity is the daughter of Lord Shiva.

In many village shrines, Manasa is worshipped with Sitala in the same platform. Sitala is famous as the goddess of smallpox and is believed to be originated from Buddhist Hariti described as the bestower of children in Buddhist literature (Maity, 1989). Significantly, Sitala is the consort of Dharmaraj who is also a folk deity of Buddhist origin. Sasthi is another demi-goddess belonging to the same group in the beliefscape of agricultural society. The temple of Sasthithakurun, a protector

deity for the infants in Nabadwip, at the eastern bank of river Ganga, is nevertheless a significant shrine of Buddhist origin. In the mode of worship of such deities and various rituals centering on them, Buddhism is still alive in contemporary agrarian society.

Conclusion

Rural Bengal was the melting pot of Jainism, Tantric Buddhism, and Brahmanical Hinduism for which various Buddhist rituals still remain in the society along with some deities having origins in non-Hindu doctrine centering whom various folk festivals have been flourished. Buddhism in medieval Bengal experienced barbarism since the religion was identified by the Muslim rulers as the main rival of Islam. None of the Buddhist establishments had been allowed to function by the State. There are examples of a number of medieval Islamic architectures built on Buddhist shrines. Many Buddhist sculptures are found distorted especially in the face portion of the deities, scattered in different parts of Bengal. Most of such sculptures are presently worshipped as Hindu deities. According to history, it was Birchandra, the son of the great Vaishnava saint Nityananda, converted a large number of Buddhist monks in the 16th century into a public function. This historical event represents the presence of Buddhists in the social life of Bengal even not more than five hundred years before. The spread of Vaishnavism among the subalterns was responsible for the assimilation of the remaining material and non-material heritage of Buddhism in Hindu folk society. This is why the folk Hinduism of Bengal is different from orthodox Hinduism.

Finally, it may be concluded that Buddhism might be uprooted from Bengal for historical reasons, but it still persists in rituals worshipping distinctive deities of the agricultural society practicing folk Hinduism since the medieval period. From the standpoint of the belief system, rural Hindus of Bengal, particularly belonging to the lower strata of society are different from the Hindus of the rest of India because of the Buddhist base of their religious culture. Buddhist past of the cultural landscape has constituted therby a distinguishable belief system attracting heritage tourists in rural areas of Bengal, particularly during festivities and religious celebrations.

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