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From Mangalkavya to Palagaan: A Brief Overview of the Folk-theatrical Tradition of Manasa Palagaan in Dakshin Dinajpur

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Abstract

Manasa Palagaan, a form of folk-theatrical performance dedicated to serpent deity Manasa, is based on the literary texts of Manasamangal. This article argues that medieval Bengali literary culture was influenced by the sensibilities of performance embedded in various folk-theatrical genres. Consequently, the literary texts belonging to the category of Manasamangal show both literary and performative elements in them. This article further argues that the textual tradition of Manasamangal should not be decontextualized from their networks of production and circulation; instead, a systematic study of the textual genres, discursive contexts and modes of textual production could provide critical insights into the specific historical and material processes through which the contemporary folk-theatrical traditions are also embedded in it. Finally, this article highlights the need for critically evaluating the performative aspects of textuality in the folk-theatrical tradition of Manasa Palagaan.

Key Words: *Manasa Palagan, folk-theatre, literary historiography, Dakshin Dinajpur, Manasamangal.*

Introduction

Manasa is one of the most popular snake deities in South Asia (Haq, 2015). The myth of Manasa consist of a huge repertoire of vernacular oral-

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narrative poems, known as *Manasamangal*, which belong to the literary category of *Mangalkavya*. The folk-theatre of *Manasa Palagan* is ritually performed in honour of the folk Shakti-cult goddess *Manasa* (McDaniel, 2004). *Manasa Palagan* is a performance-ritual enacted in front of a temple or shrine of Manasa, which happens either on a pre-fixed day every year or as a fulfilment of *manat* (a sacred vow to the deity). On the one hand, *Manasa Palagan* is framed as a ritual performance through ceremonies of *puja* (ritual worship) and symbolic enactment of various other religious rites and on the other hand, *Manasa Palagan*, like other oral performance practices in the *Mangalkavya* traditions, could be regarded as a healing practice performed through a folk-theatrical enactment of Manasa's myth.

There are various performance traditions based on the theme of Manasa, popular in both India and Bangladesh. Prominent among them are *Behula Lachari, Manasa Palagan, Bhasan Gaan, Manasa Panchali, Oja Pali dance, Deodhani dance* etc (Ahamed, 2000). *Manasa Palagaan* is a regional variation in the folk-theatrical traditions of *Manasamangal*, which is a form of performance-ritual associated with the worship of goddess Manasa in the Dinajpur region of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh (Muniruzzaman, 2015). During the colonial period, Dinajpur was a large geographical region which comprised of the present-day districts of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur in India and Dinajpur in Bangladesh. It also included some parts of the neighbouring regions of Malda and Bihar. This article is based on a critical analysis of the literary historiography of *Manasamangal* and an ethnographic fieldwork among the itinerant performance troupes in the district of Dakshin Dinajpur in West Bengal.

Scriptural texts in the *Mangalkavya* tradition, which existed in the *puthi* (handwritten manuscript) form in various folk-theatre networks, have been collected and published as fixed literary text under the generic category of *Mangalkavya* in a de-contextualized setting (Kane, 2008; Curley, 2008). The performative aspects of oral-literate culture revolving around various expressive forms of ritualized performances on Mangal

deities have been overlooked by the academic elite in the standardized and textualized versions of *Mangalkavya*s. The handwritten manuscripts dedicated to various regional deities in medieval period contain various performative markers (words denoting melodic structure, rhythm used in performance) which points the performative aspects of those texts embedded various oral-literate traditions. The nationalist literary historians made serious attempts at textualizing the folk-theatre of *Manasamangal* by designating it as a 'medieval element' to be incorporated into the unilinear history of growth and development of Bengali literature (Curley, 2008). This has contributed towards marginalization of contemporary folk-theatrical traditions like *Manasa Palagan*. Consequently, the folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagan* has survived as a form of residual cultural expression among the lower caste Hindu communities in West Bengal and Bangladesh. In the following sections, an attempt has been made to situate the existing scholarship on the scriptural traditions of *Mangalkavya* within the broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks of literary and historical studies followed by an overview of the contemporary folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagan* Dakshin Dinajpur. Finally, this article concludes by highlighting the need for critically evaluating the performative aspects of textuality in the folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagaan*.

Mangalkavya **in the Literary Historiography of Bengal**

*Mangalkavya*s are known as long narrative verses which used to be performed in the medieval period as eulogies in honour of certain regional deities known as *mangal*-deities who bestow '*kripa'* or blessing upon their devotees (Dimock, 1962). The literary texts belonging to the category of *Mangalkavya* had circulated within various oral-performative networks. But *Mangalkavya* as a separate literary genre is a conceptual category constructed by the historians of Bengali literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. There was no mention of a separate generic category of *Mangalkavya* in the history of Bengali literature before the

publication of *Bango Bhasa O Sahityo* (Bengali Language and Literature) by Dinesh Chandra Sen in 1896. When Ramgati Nyayaratna made the first attempt at writing a book-length history of Bengali literature in 1872, he did not mention a separate category of *Mangalkavya*. The literary texts which are known as *Mangalkavya* could be found in circulation among various oral-performative traditions as early as the thirteenth century in Bengal and its surrounding regions. But putting it under the generic category of *Mangalkavya* is a recent phenomenon which has started since the later part of the nineteenth century due to the nationalistic urge, under the British colonial education policy, of constructing a literary archive for Bengali literature (Curley, 2008).

The writing of a literary history requires a principle of genre to construct a narrative of continuity and development of literary materials both synchronically and diachronically. Genre acts as one of the primary organizing principles in literary historiography. Thus, a discourse of 'genre' is already implicit in the literary discourse of *Mangalkavya* within the cultural nationalist historiography of Bengali literature. There is no generic characteristic inherent in a literary text; rather generic characteristics are emergent of reading a literary text at a particular historical moment. Consequently, a literary text is assigned to a particular genre through a series of subsequent 'readings' by the readers and the critics and the literary historians.

Genre has both constitutive and constraining force in the reception of a text. Genres, according to Hans Robert Jauss (1982), by providing a 'horizon of expectations' helps us in the 'interpretive reception of a text' (p. 23). Ralph Cohen (1986), on the other hand, has argued that there are historical and ideological considerations implicit in identifying a text as belonging to a particular genre instead of another. In other words, in literary historiography, classifying a text to a particular genre is a conscious ideological and political act.

Sudipta Chatterjee (2009) has observed that 'the native literati's negotiation with its own tradition' is fraught with the orientalist ambivalence of continuation and disjuncture with its 'own tradition' (pp. 119–20). With the emergence of Bengali literary studies as a separate discipline of knowledge at the University of Calcutta in 1919, an urgent need was felt among the nationalist literary historians to collect and archive the literary materials of the medieval period for writing the history of Bengali literature. The 'nationalist' literary historians and scholars associated with the University of Calcutta played a crucial role in constructing the hegemonic discourse of *Mangalkavya* in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The act of 'archiving' of the *Mangalkavya* in colonial Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century performed the dual function of constructing 'archive' as the 'originary' moment of both inscribing and classifying the *Mangalkavya* texts which were part of the pre-colonial scribal traditions embedded in a complex network of oral performances (Stoler, 2000, pp. 93–94). Furthermore, the historians of Bengali literary culture failed to acknowledge the performative dimensions of pre-colonial scribal networks in their works because of their scriptocentric preference for literary text over contemporary performance traditions (Conquergood, 2016).

Mangalkavya as Panchali Literature

Salim Al Deen (1996), Sukumar Sen (1940) and Thibaut d'Hubert (2016, 2018), have argued that most of the Bengali literature in the medieval period were composed in the generic form of *panchali* for the purpose of performance rather than for merely literary and theological purposes. Salim Al Deen has described *panchali* is a genre of performance and form of literary text from the middle Bengali period. According to him, the purpose of a *panchali* text is to perform it in a stylized form by *gayen, dohar* and *bayen* (the lead-singer with their choral-associates and music players) at a

performance space (Al Deen, 1996). Hence, the essential characteristics of the textual corpus of *Mangalkavya*, within the performative framework of *panchali*, have to be located and studied in the context of its performance. Thibaut d' Hubert, while discussing the medieval Bengali poet Sayyid Alaol, has identified *panchali* as an umbrella term under which diverse forms of literary texts and a wide range of performances in the medieval period could be discussed (d'Hubert, 2016).

Panchali is both a genre of performance and a particular form of literary text (long narrative verse) popular in medieval Bengal. Bengali literary cultures in the medieval period were influenced by the sensibilities of performances embedded in various oral-performative traditions (d'Hubert, 2016). Thus, the literary texts belonging to the category of *Mangalkavya* show both literary and performative elements within them. Some of the literary elements present in the *Mangalkavya* texts include (a) vernacular adaptation of the literary form of Sanskrit *puranas*, (b) presentation of vernacular literary sensibilities through didactic stories and certain moral lessons for the purpose of worshipping a particular deity, (c) vernacularization of Brahmanical social and ethical order propagated in the Hindu *puranic* literature. The major performative elements found in the *Mangalkavya* texts are: (a) the mentions of various efficacious ritual practices associated with it, (b) dramatic episodes of secular pleasure of satire, comedy etc, and (c) formal affinity with various other genres of performance including *panchali*, *bratakatha*, *palagan*, *jatra gaan, bhasan gaan, jagaran gaan* etc.

Partha Chatterjee (1993) has argued that anti-colonial nationalist histories are derivative discourses from the colonial ideologies, methodologies and technologies of knowledge production. Dwight Conquergood, on the other hand, has argued that colonial discourses, with their methodological insistence upon archival modes of documentation, are complicit in committing epistemological violence upon the colonized cultures, which primarily belong to the oral-performative traditions

(Conquergood, 2002). The identification of certain medieval Bengali texts as *Mangalkavya* by the native-elite academicians from the upper caste background, had taken place within the 'horizon of expectations' of Sanskritized literary genre of *kavya*. This has been influenced by a documentary mode of colonial epistemology which fails to acknowledge the generic markers of oral-performative form of *panchali* in the standardized history of Bengali literature.

Although Dinesh Chandra Sen, one of the most prominent Bengali literary historians of the twentieth century, was aware of the oral-performative aspects implicit in those *Mangalkavya,* he ignored them in his bid to construct a nationalist literary historiography of Bengal (Sen, 1896). In this context, Dinesh Chandra Sen followed the footsteps of the European literary historians who tried to construct a history for the 'nation' through writing the literary history of their respective cultures. The subsequent generations of literary critics and historians following Dinesh Chandra Sen have failed to historicize and critically evaluate the emergence of *Mangalkavya* as a literary genre and accepted it as a self-evident category. Consequently, most of their critical engagements with the literary history of middle Bengali language and literature were blighted by their presuppositions of the historical existence of *Mangalkavya* as a self-evident category.

Mangalkavya as a Form of Vernacular *Purana* in Medieval Bengal

T. W. Clark has pointed out the gradual process of accepting Mangal deities, including Manasa, within the fold of Brahmanical Hinduism in medieval Bengal (Clark, 1955). He has identified two distinct strata of influences in the texts belonging to *Mangalkavya*: (a) the popular folk elements and (b) the learned *puranic* elements. According to him, the popular elements were anterior to the puranic elements, and it was in a third phase of development that the scriptural elites of Bengal brought the oral and indigenous ludic elements within an orthodox Brahmanical literary

canon (Clark, 1955). Edward C. Dimock has pointed out that *Mangalkavya* belongs to an oral literate culture which simultaneously shares characteristics of the oral and the written traditions. According to him, *Mangalkavya*s were initially recited and ritually performed as a part of worshipping the Mangal deities, which belonged to an even older oral performance culture. It was only in the latter period that written manuscripts made their appearance (Dimock, 1962). W. L. Smith (1980) in his monograph on *Manasamangal The One-Eyed Goddess: A Study of the Manasā maṅgal,* has attempted a "systematic comparative study" of the various textual traditions of *Manasamangal* texts within the literary cultures of Bengal, Assam and Bihar. He has identified the reference of Manasa in the *upa-puranas* of the Bengal region (Smith, 1980). The presence of which clearly validates the points made by Clark and Dimmock, that the pre-Vedic and ludic elements of Manasa have latter been appropriated within the Brahmanical structure of Sanskritized *puranas*.

According to Kunal Chakrabarti (2018) and Kumkum Chatterjee (2013) the Sanskrit *puranas* and *upa-puranas* in the Bengal region have played a crucial role in spreading Brahmanical Hinduism in the region. Bengal, as a frontier region, has a tradition of worshipping Mother goddesses, which could be traced back to the period prior to the spread of Vedic-Brahmanical traditions in the Bengal region (Chatterjee, 2013). There has been a transformation in the forms, roles and attributes of the Mother Goddess in the Bengal region between the fifth and sixth centuries CE and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE, which coincides with the composition and spread of Sanskrit *puranas* in the Bengal region (Chatterjee, 2013). The Mother Goddesses, prior to the introduction of the Vedic-Brahmanical traditions through Sanskrit *puranas*, were fierce, violent and represented various tribal ritualistic aspects, while in the latter period these goddesses started to show softening and domesticating characteristics which could be observed in various *Mangalkavya*s (K. Chatterjee, 2009).

Kunal Chakrabarti (2018) has identified *Mangalkavya*s as specimens of vernacular *puranas* which propagated the Brahmanical socio-cultural order in medieval Bengal. According to Chakrabarti, Bengal being a frontier province, the influence of Brahmanism in Bengal was not strong enough to ignore and suppress the non-Brahmanical beliefs, ritual elements and practices. Moreover, without strong and consistent royal patronage, the Brahmin elites in Bengal were forced to undertake a conciliatory and accommodative approach toward the non-Brahmanical elements (Chakrabarti, 2018). This urge to bring the pre-Vedic indigenous religious elements into the Brahmanical fold led to the emergence of the written form of *Mangalkavya*s composed by the scribal-elites from the fifteenth century onwards. He further identified the development of *Mangalkavya*s through a process of vernacularization of Sanskrit *puranas* in medieval Bengal (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Kumkum Chatterjee (2013) has studied the literary archive of *Mangalkavya* texts as a historical source to highlight the shifting perception of socio-political and cultural implications of the Mughal rule in medieval Bengal. She has also pointed toward the gradual Brahmanization of folk deities within the tradition of *Mangalkavya*s. She has located *Mangalkavya*s within the broader category of vernacular Puranas, like the South Indian *Sthalapuranas*, and further argued that *Mangalkavya*s have descended lineally from the Sanskrit *upa-puranas* of the Bengal region. According to her, *Mangalkavya*s show some of the characteristics of the *panchalakshanam* (five characteristics of *puranas*) that define the genre of Sanskrit Puranas- for example, the birth story of a deity, the corresponding genesis story of the whole world and the glorification of particular deities (K. Chatterjee, 2009). But it would be blatantly incorrect to consider *Mangalkavya*s as an exact imitation of the Sanskrit *puranas* or *upa-puranas* of Bengal. In addition to the Brahmanical and Puranic influences, the narratives of *Mangalkavya*s 'represent creative, vernacular mediations of the Puranic traditions' (K. Chatterjee, 2009). For example, unlike the main

focus on the particular deities in the Sanskrit Puranas, there is a clear emphasis on the human characters, worldly affairs and domestic issues in *Mangalkavya*s.

***Manasa Palagan*: An Overview of Contemporary Folk-theatrical Tradition in Dakshin Dinajpur**

Manasa Palagaan is a regional performative variation in the textual tradition of *Manasamangal*, which is a form of performance-ritual representing a subaltern religio-cultural practice prevalent in West Bengal. In contrast to the literary archive of *Manasamangal* texts, folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagaan*, which is practised in Dakshin Dinajpur, has survived orally or through handwritten manuscripts in the periphery without receiving much recognition. During the colonial period, the region of Dinajpur included Dinajpur, Rangpur, and parts of Bagura in Bangladesh and both the districts of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur and parts of Purnia and Malda in India. It was a large area spanning across the states of Bihar and Bengal in India and several districts in Bangladesh. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Dakshin Dinajpur, this section provides an overview of the contemporary folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagaan*.

The word '*pala'* means a 'long narrative verse' and '*gaan'* means 'song' in Bengali. *Palagaan*, according to Yusuf Hassan, is a form of traditional narrative theatre which shares a common structure framed by song, dance, and improvised dialogues and is managed by the lead singer-performer or *mul-gayen* (Hassan, n.d.). There hardly exists any written script for *palagaan* rather, it is improvised at the time of performance. The narrative of *palagaan* is taken forward through songs and dances rather than dialogues or theatrical enactments. *Palagaan* starts with *bandana* songs which are generally sung along with a particular style of dance, locally known as *chhukri-naach* (dance of female impersonators), performed by the female impersonators or the *chhukris*. The choreography of *chhukri-naach*

shares similarities with *Khemta naach* which is a rural version of the colonial nautch performances by courtesans or *baijis*. The songs are generally interspersed with *dhua* or refrains, which are repeated by the *dohars* or co-performers. Another important element of *palagaan* is episodes of *rongo-rosh* (comic-interlude) which includes double-entendre songs, obscene double-meaning jokes, ribaldry, and bawdy performance. Thus, an element of profane entertainment bordering almost on sacrilegious erotic content could be found in *Manasa Palagaan* which is ritually performed or sung as a eulogy to the deity of Manasa to invoke her blessings.

There are generally two types of *Manasa Palagan* popular in Dakshin Dinajpur in West Bengal: *khara gan* (musical performance) and *saja gan* (dramatic performance). *Khara gan* involves musical narratives with songs and dances, and *saja gaan* is a *jatra*-style performance which includes dialogues, songs, dances and episodic enactments with performers wearing stylized costumes and make-up. *Manasa Palagan* starts in the evening and continues throughout the night. The duration of it varies from one-night, three-nights and five-nights (based on the economic capability and ritual-obligation of the sponsors). *Manasa Palagaan* is performed in front of a make-shift or permanent shrine of Manasa. It is a ritualistic semi-public performance performed by semi-professional performers on the occasions of certain religious functions and ceremonial rites.

The performers in *Manasa Palagaan*, like other traditional performance genres, are mostly men who perform both male and female characters. This has given rise to the practice of female impersonators who are called *chhukri* in the local parlance. One of the defining characteristics of *Manasa Palagaan* as folk-theatrical tradition is the presence of *chhukri* performers. The Bengali term *chhukri* refers to a category of transfeminine actors performing as 'woman' in *Manasa Palagaan* from teenage onward.

The practice of female impersonation or *chhukri-naach* in the repertoire of *Manasa Palagaan* provides an avenue for the *chhukri* performers to express their '*nari-bhav'* (an inherent sensibilities of the feminine trapped in a male body) or an 'inner' trans-feminine self through embodying the roles of goddess Manasa and other female characters in the performance repertoire of *Manasa Palagaan* (Mukherjee and Chatterjee, 2016; Khanna, 2013).

The performative practice of female impersonation in the folk-theatrical tradition of *Manasa Palagaan* often transcends their immediate aesthetic/mimetic context of performance. It reveals a vernacular logic of gender-queer identities based upon the concept of '*nari-bhav'* within a hidden homoerotic cultural economy in rural West Bengal and Bangladesh. This challenges the heteronormative construction of a binary distinction between masculinity and femininity (Mukherjee and Chatterjee, 2016).

Although Manasa has a near universal acceptance among all sections of the Hindu population in West Bengal, it is mainly among the oppressed-caste communities in Dakshin Dinajpur that goddess Manasa is considered the guardian deity. Thus, ritual enactment of the myth of Manasa - Marriage of Behula and Lakhindar, Chando's rivalry with Manasa and Behula's celestial voyage to bring back the life of her husband- has a symbolic significance which structures the belief-system of the oppressed-caste Hindu population in West Bengal. The performative frame of *Manasa Palagaan* is punctuated by a set of ritual practices which serve both the purposes of secular entertainment and sacred efficacious role.

The mythical story of Manasa in the textual tradition of *Mansamangal* represents a resolution of social conflict through a negotiation between the hegemonic religious structure of Brahmanical Hinduism and the subaltern ritualistic practices of the folk-Shakti cult of Manasa. During the expansion of Brahmanical Hinduism in the medieval

period in Bengal, the folk-theatrical tradition of *Mangalkavya* became popular as an assertion of the cultural and religious resistance of the oppressed-caste communities (Chakrabarti, 2018). In the story of *Manasa Mangalkavya*, an attempt has been made to bring about a resolution between the hegemonic religious structure of the elites represented by the Shaivite Chando and the religio-cultural resistance of the Subaltern groups represented by the oppressed-caste devotees of Manasa. In the narrative plot of *Manasa Palagaan*, Shaivite Chando's refusal to worship Manasa, a folk-Shakti cult goddess, represents a breach in the status quo which leads to Manasa's curse and Lakhindar's death that initiates the conflict in the story and leaves Behula in a liminal status of neither a married woman nor a widow. The resolution is brought about when Chando finally agrees to worship Manasa after Behula revives the life of Lakhindar who fell victim to Manasa's wrath. This transforms Behula into a chaste and ideal wife or *sati-nari* who not only restores the fortune of her family but also plays an instrumental role in bringing forth recognition for Manasa within the Brahmanical Hindu religious pantheon. Thus, a renewed social status quo is achieved within the mythical story of *Manasamangal* after Manasa's acceptance into the Brahmanical structure of socio-religious hierarchy. *Manasa Palagaan*, in the contemporary time, re-enacts this resolution of social conflict through the expressive genre of mytho-religious folk-theatrical performance.

Conclusion

The textual tradition of *Mangalkavya* should not be decontextualized from their networks of production and circulation rather, a systematic textual study of the genres, discursive contexts and modes of textual production could provide critical insights into the specific historical and material processes through which folk-theatrical performance traditions are also embedded in it. Pankaj K Jha (2008) has criticized the historians of medieval India for 'their clinical search for information' about the past in

the texts of the past, ignoring their contextual unity within the theoretical framework of postcolonialism through the analytical concepts of 'discourse' and 'text' by flattening out the questions of genre (p. 3). They have largely overlooked the issues of different modes of textual production in the context of particular networks of performance- which could be socio-textual, spiritual-social, oral-performative etc.

The scriptural traditions of *Mangalkavya*s in medieval Bengal were reproduced in the form of textual circulation and reception of *puthi* and *panchali*. *Palagan* is closely linked to the literary performance of *panchali* which is both a genre of performance and a particular form of literary text (long narrative verse) popular in medieval Bengal. In this context, it is pertinent to note that the *Khara-Gaan* type of *Manasa Palagan* in its contemporary avatar is a stylistic variation and continuation of *panchali* performance. Bengali literary cultures in the medieval period were influenced by the sensibilities of performance embedded in various oral-literate traditions which have been carried into the contemporary folk-theatre like *Manasa Palagan*. Thus, the literary texts belonging to the category of *Mangalkavya* show both literary and performative elements in it (Al Deen, 1996). Hence, it is important to situate the scriptural tradition of *Mangalkavya* within the contemporary performative context of folk-theatre like *Manasa Palagan* in order to bring out the dialectical relationship between the texts belonging to the literary category of *Mangalkavya* and the contemporary folk-theatrical performance traditions like *Manasa Palagan* in the present time.

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