

Saumitra Chakravarty

The Chandi Mangal Kavya of Mukundaram Chakraborty

Abstract I: The *Mangal Kavyas* of Medieval Bengal were generally addressed to a female deity in her benevolent form. The story of the *Chandi Mangal Kavya* is that of a female deity soliciting worship in a patriarchal society devoted to androcentric worship, particularly that of Siva. The first part of this *Kavya* shows the goddess empowering a low born tribal hunter to propagate her cultic status on earth. In the second part Chandi seeks worship from a high born woman of the powerful spice merchant community and through her, from her recalcitrant husband Chand Saudagar, irrevocably committed to Saivism (worship of Lord Siva). Despite the many trials and tribulations showered upon him by the wrath of a goddess scorned, Chand continues to slight her as unworthy of worship. The paper therefore examines the position of women, both human and divine, in a patriarchal, *kulin* society, which regularly practiced polygamy and of the conflict between the two aspects of religion, andro- and gynocentric, in a society where Brahminization had already led to the appropriation of female deities into the male Hindu pantheon. The de-mythologization of the goddess Chandi, the association of her simple wants and desires as Siva's wife with other poverty-stricken village women, is also an issue in this study.

Abstract II: I *Mangal Kavyas* nel Bengal del Medioevo erano solitamente indirizzati ad una divinità femminile nella sua forma benevola. La storia di *Chandi Mangal Kavya* è quella di una divinità femminile che cerca di sollecitare il proprio culto in una società patriarcale devota ad una divinità androcentrica, in particolare quella di Shiva. La prima parte del *Kavya* mostra la dea mentre innalza un cacciatore di

bassa estrazione per propagare il suo culto sulla terra. Nella seconda parte Chandi cerca la devozione di una donna di alta estrazione sociale appartenente alla potente comunità dei commercianti di spezie e, attraverso di lei, del suo recalcitrante marito Chan Saudagar, irrevocabilmente legato al Saivismo (il culto di Shiva). Nonostante le molteplici difficoltà e tormenti riversati su di lui dall'ira di una dea disprezzata, Chand continua a considerarla non degna di adorazione. L'articolo, quindi, esamina la posizione delle donne, sia umane che divine, nella società patriarcale *Kulin*, che regolarmente praticava la poligamia e il conflitto tra due aspetti della religiosità: andro- e gyno-centrico in una società in cui la bramizzazione aveva già portato all'appropriazione delle divinità femminili nel pantheon maschile Hindu. Oggetto di questo studio è anche la demitologicizzazione della dea Chandi, l'associazione delle sue semplici esigenze e desideri in qualità di moglie di Shiva con altre povere donne dei villaggi.

The Mangal Kavya as a literary genre

The *Mangal Kavya* appears as a distinctive feature of Medieval Bengali literature. It owes its name to the *Ashtamangala* songs sung by the rural women on Tuesdays (*Mangalvara*, associated with *Mangalgraha* or Mars) in eight *palas* throughout the day (*diva-pala*) and the night (*nishi-pala*) over a period of eight days. These songs are generally addressed to a female deity in her incarnation of Sarvamangala (*mangala* indicating her benevolent form) and worshipped by rural women in times of distress with folk rituals (1). This literary tradition is typically a folk one, even today practised among the rural women through the last vestiges of pre-Aryan rituals. It is celebrated through the chanting of rhymes, *panchalis* (2) and *vrata katha* (3), through songs, dances and play-acting during the festivals of the deities they celebrate. By the fifteenth century, all these practices had crystallized into the genre of the *Mangal Kavya*.

The *Mangal Kavyas* gained their popularity among the rural masses as a result of the social, cultural and religious turmoil brought about by the Turkish invasion of Bengal. Also due to this Muslim invasion, the stranglehold of the upper classes over religion, culture and literature was broken, leading to the proliferation of folk religion, rituals and oral traditions. The local gods and goddesses who had remained constricted within narrow boundaries now began to gain recognition among the upper classes as well. The myths and legends that had sprung up around these deities became the subject matter of these *Kavyas*. As earlier noted, many of these goddesses are of pre-Aryan origin, even today worshipped in wayside shrines. Thus Chandi was originally a hunter goddess worshipped by the pre-Aryan aborigines for protection against wild animals (4). As we see in the story of the *Chandi Mangal*, the entire gamut of the social structure from the untouchable hunter community to the prosperous and powerful spice merchant one, from the animals in the forest to royalty, embrace this worship and help establish the Devi Chandi's cultic status on earth. However, with the passage of time and the amalgamation of folk and mainstream traditions, there was an attempt to absorb these female deities into the androcentric Hindu pantheon as wife, daughter or consort of Siva, the center of Hindu cosmology.

The *Chandi Mangal* of Mukundaram Chakraborty belongs to the *Mangal Kavya* tradition, a literary genre particular to Bengal between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kavikangkan Mukundaram Chakraborty occupies a unique status in the *Bhakti* literature of Bengal owing to the folk dimension added to the images of the goddess and yet his text emerges with a modern, futuristic outlook in his de-mythologization of gods and goddesses for better connectivity with the rural masses and his democratic attitude towards religion and ritual observances (Bhattacharya, 2004: 194).

The Two Stories of the Chandi Mangal

In the two stories that make up the *Chandi Mangal*, that of Kalketu the hunter and of Dhanapati Saudagar the spice merchant, both found in the *Brahaddharma Purana*, we see the infiltration of the goddess cult into an

essentially patriarchal upper class society devoted to Siva worship. Both stories show the machinations of the goddess to have heavenly beings cursed and sent to earth to propagate her worship. In the first story, the king of gods Indra's son Nilambar is cursed and is born into the untouchable hunter community as Kalketu. His wife Chaya, is born on earth as Kalketu's wife, Phullara. Both eke out a meager subsistence by selling animal products whose demand varies with the change of seasons the Devi Chandi grants immense wealth to the couple, asks them to cut down the forest and set up a kingdom where her worship will be propagated. His mission accomplished, he returns to heaven as Nilambar, Indra's lost son.

In the second story, Chandi is seen soliciting worship from a woman of the upper classes as her principal votary. The scene therefore shifts from the untouchable hunter family to the wealthy and powerful spice-merchant community that occupied practically the highest rung of the contemporary social ladder and was inflexibly committed to Saivism. As in the earlier story, a heavenly being, this time a dancer at Indra's court, is sent to earth by virtue of a curse as the beautiful Khullana. In accordance with the social customs and taboos which circumscribed an upper class woman's life at the time, Khullana is given in a polygamous marriage to Dhanapati Saudagar and undergoes various trials and tribulations at the hands of the elder wife Lahana, to whose care she is committed in her husband's absence. The ensuing distress exposes her to the privileges of goddess worship, which can be performed by the faithful regardless of the class, caste or gender discrimination associated with the performance of Vedic rituals. It is Khullana's one invincible armour through the humiliation that follows, the public trial of her chastity and her rejection by the local spice community. However, goddess worship being unacceptable to the staunchly Saivite Dhanapati, it is rejected as sorcery and the sacred pot of the goddess desecrated. The terrible wrath of a spurned goddess leads to the drowning of Dhanapati's ships, the loss of his merchandise and his own imprisonment at the hands of King Shalaban of Lanka. It is Khullana's son Sripati, reared in the goddess tradition, who rescues his father after his own share of misfortune,

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deliverance from which consolidates his belief in the power of the Devi. Having been granted an androgynous vision of Siva and Parvati, which exposes to him his foolishness in discriminating between the two, Dhanapati reluctantly agrees to worship the goddess.

Like all myths of folk origin, the two stories of the *Chandi Mangal*, shift the focus of action from heavenly to terrestrial. Here, the goddess is not a factor of deliverance for besieged gods under threat from demons rendered invulnerable by Siva-worship. She does not spring from the *tejas* of a wrathful Hindu trinity as in the *Devi Mahatmya*, but is invited to descend to earth from her abode on Mount Kailash by the narrator for a period of eight days for the recitation of the *Mangal Kavya* to bless her earthly followers. These verses project her in an entirely humanized and localized image. She is an *Abhaya Sakti* for beleaguered mortals in difficult situations perpetrated upon them by her own machinations for establishment of her cultic status on earth. Her attempts to penetrate an invincible bastion of Saivites make her as much a victim of patriarchy as her human counterparts in the *Mangal Kavya* stories. Through his powerful *Kavya*, Mukundaram frees gender, class and caste from their pre-conceived niches in myth and ritual, removing the threat perspectives of social stratification by the universality of goddess worship.

Mukundaram's Treatment of the Chandi Mangal Stories

Mukundaram Chakroborty has been called a true humanist. Though the goddess is celebrated both in her violent and benign images in the hymnic sections of the text, the narrative sections depend on the *Abhaya* and *Varada* images reiterated at the end of each verse to popularize the cult of Chandi. As earlier mentioned, Mukundaram's Chandi is radically humanized. Her incarnations of Sati and Parvati elaborated in the earlier sections of the text may be associated with the Puranic myths, but in Mukundaram, they acquire a strong localized folk flavour. In fact, this is what distinguishes him from other exponents of this tradition. She does not breathe the rarified air of Kailash as

Siva's wife but is a rustic maiden subject to the same strictures as her human counterparts in a village of Gaur (Bengal). These rural women could identify their own poverty, their debts, their simple wants and desires, their rural environment and landscape, their seasonal variations, food items and festivals, their auspicious ritual observances, social practices like the *kulin* system, child marriages and even that of *sati*, with those surrounding the goddess in the text. Menaka, Parvati's mother toils day and night like any village matron, belying her queenly status in the myth, complains about her son-in-law's Siva's failure as a farmer and her daughter's addiction to the game of dice. The young Sati's longing for her paternal home, her isolation from the companionship of the village maidens in distant Mt Kailash, where she is surrounded only by the ghostly retinue of her elderly, ascetic husband all reflect the natural desires of any village bell.

In the myth of Parvati, quoted at the beginning of the Kalketu story, we have the threat of excommunication by the village community that hangs heavy upon her father Himalaya as his beautiful daughter oversteps the marriageable age of twelve. It is similar to that faced by Khullana's father in the wealthy spice community in the second story of Mukundaram's text. The utter destitution of Parvati, her alienation from her paternal home, the daily alms her husband Siva is dependant on, (being incapable and unwilling to till the land given to him in dowry), his daunting appearance clothed in snakes, skulls, bones and smeared with ash, his gargantuan appetite for local seasonal delicacies, his rejection by her people, are all themes familiar to a rural audience. It is treated with an inimitable rustic humour by the poet as on the occasion when the snakes dart away from the groom Shiva's body due to the herbal anti-venom offered by Menaka on the wedding platter, leaving him denuded in public much to the embarrassment of the bride's mother.

The story of Parvati in the *Chandi Mangal*, like that of Khullana, also reflects the plight of upper and middle class women caught up within the cul-de-sac of *kulin* endogamy introduced by King Ballal Sen in the twelfth century in Bengal. Under this system, young girls were often forcibly married to middle aged

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polygamous men or widowers to encourage endogamous marriages within the same *kul* or clan. Hence mother Menaka's lament over her young and beautiful daughter Parvati's marriage to Siva, the old, impoverished dweller of the burning ghat and her stormy relationship with his other wives, which is also reflected on a human level, in the second story of the text in the constant bickering between Khullana and Lahana, the two wives of Dhanapati Saudagar.

In the *Chandi Mangal*, while the elder Lahana bears the curse of childlessness and its consequent social stigma, the younger Khullana undergoes many trials and tribulations at the hands of the jealous and vengeful Lahana and is exposed to repeated ordeals by fire as a public test of chastity. The only remedy of these rural women to the social injustice being perpetrated upon them is black magic and associated folk rituals. A woman's complete dependence on her male protector and the fragility of her reputation and honour is also seen in the Kalketu story in Phullara's chastisement of the goddess Chandi disguised as a young and beautiful girl roaming the forest freely and overstepping social peripheries:

"Swami banitar pati Swami banitar gati
Swami banitar bidhata" (Chakraborty M., 1963: 53)
[The husband is a woman's lord, master and only recourse in life].

In fact in accordance with the norms of contemporary society, the poet of the *Chandi Mangal* questions the warrior image of the goddess herself, (celebrated in the *Devi Mahatmya*), which he says, is not befitting the caste status of a woman under the *kulin* system:

"Chhariya kul maryada" (Ibid.: 209)
[You have betrayed your caste status].

In the encounter with Siva's other wife Ganga, Chandi is told that while Ganga is a follower of non-violent Vaisnavism, Chandi has violated the codes of

feminine honour by waging war and drinking wine (5). In fact, throughout the course of the two stories, while Chandi does issue a challenge to the hierarchy of male gods in the establishment of her cultic status and in her threat perspectives surrounding the recalcitrant, the poet also shows her as a typical upper class Hindu housewife wary of provoking her husband Siva's wrath.

On the issue of caste, Mukundaram raises pertinent social questions through his text. He is able to project a vision of an egalitarian society, where even the lowest hunter class is given the right to worship and is chosen by the goddess to propagate her cult (6). We have Kalketu's poignant query to the goddess after he is granted wealth:

"Neech ki uttam hoi paile bahu dhan?" (Ibid.: 58)

[Can the untouchable acquire caste status merely through wealth?].

The poet debates the question of caste versus class and which of these decides eligibility for social acceptance and the right to worship. Kalketu, owing to his untouchable status, lives on the periphery of caste Hindu rural society, sells meat, skin and nails according to variable seasonal demand and is not even granted a loan by the usurer. He wonders whether any priest will agree to preside over a temple established by him in his new kingdom. The Devi's answer is that those blessed of her transcend class and caste barriers, indeed gender barriers as well, since the second story opens with the choice of a female votary to infiltrate the upper class elite:

" Striloker puja loite devi koila moti" (Ibid.: 91)

[The goddess sought worship from the womenfolk].

Having been granted wealth, Kalketu establishes a kingdom where mosque and temple, Vaisnavite and Sakta shrines exist side by side and where king and peasant alike will be engaged in goddess worship. In fact, a classless society was an important message of the cult of Sri Chaitanya's Vaisnavism in Medieval

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Bengal by which Mukundaram was deeply influenced. As the poet says of the Devi Chandi:

“ Uccha neech shoman korite jaano tumi” (Ibid.: 83)

[You who can bring high and low together].

Therefore, in her journey from pre-Aryan hunter goddess in the first story (7) to acceptance by a powerful upper class elite at the end of the second story, the goddess passes through three phases. In the first as benefactress of the animals in the forest, she is able to remove the hierarchy of predator and prey by her realization of the essential role each animal plays in the eco-system of the forest. This leads to her establishment of a non-violent Dharmic law within the forest. In the second she is able to empathize with the poverty and destitution of Kalketu and Phullara, since by the de-mythologized images of Sati and Parvati presented by the poet, the goddess herself is a victim of the same. In the third, she struggles alongside Khullana, her chosen votary to seek deliverance from the social evils of *kulin* polygamy, marital exploitation and the fragility of a woman's honour and reputation which severely impaired an upper class woman's freedom of speech, movement and right to worship her chosen deity, all of which are problems which beset both human and divine in the text. The *Devi Mahatmya* celebrates the goddess as '*Daridradukhabhayaharini*' (Jagadiswarananda, S., 1953: 13), one who removes poverty, sorrow and fear. In the *Chandi Mangal*, this ethos is part of the Devi's position and her establishment of her image as Sarvamangala is largely a struggle against the same in a patriarchal society.

Empowered Hindu Goddesses and the Politics of Patriarchy

At the same time, this establishment of goddess worship brought it into conflict with two important cults in the contemporary society of Bengal, the practice of Saivism among the upper classes and the *Chaitanya* movement sweeping Bengal at the time. Turning to the first aspect of androcentrism and its relation to

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goddess worship in the text, in composing the *Chandi Mangal*, Mukundaram Chakraborty could not escape the influence of the Chaitanya cult that had permeated even to the lower section of society of Bengal, during the *Bhakti* movement that was sweeping India. Throughout the text, the juxtaposition of androcentric and gynocentric religions is emphasized by a recurring query:

“Jei jon nai kore tomar shebon

She jon ki hoye hari-shebar bhajan?” (Chakraborty, M., 1963: 27)

[He who does not worship the goddess is unfit to worship Hari/Krishna]

In merging Sakti worship with Vaisnavism, the text repeatedly refers to the Devi Chandi as Yashodanandini and Yadavbhagini. She is the rescuer of Krsna who stilled the turbulent waters of the Yamuna and guided Basudev as a *shivaa* or female fox, to save the divine infant. She was the daughter born to Yashoda who allowed herself to be substituted for the infant Lord to face the murderous wrath of Kamsa. In the hymnic sections of Mukundaram's text, the *saktis* of Visnu and his avatars, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Narasimhi, each complete with the relevant weapons and mount, accompany her into battle.

In the context of Saivism, numerous epithets associating her with Siva are repeatedly used. It stresses those which show her as the consort of Siva/Sankar, Sivani, Sankari, Sankar-jaaya, as also those used in the *Devi Mahatmya*, like Sivaduti (8), Sivaa (9), thus showing the male appropriation of goddess cults by a patriarchal society. Indeed, her forcible entry into a male Saivite bastion in both stories of the text issues a challenge to Siva, her own consort. Dhanapati Saudagar is inflexible in his devotion to Siva in spite of Chandi's terrible revenge on him when she has his merchandise destroyed and has him imprisoned as later seen in the second story:

“Jodi bandishale mor bahirai pran

Mahesh Thakur bina anya nahi jani” (Ibid.: 165)

[Even if my life is lost in prison I shall not recognize any deity other than Mahesh/Siva].

The solution that the poets of the *Mangal Kavyas* arrive at in this clash between andro- and gynocentric religions is one of compromise. In the *Chandi Mangal*, Dhanapati is granted a vision of an androgynous Ardha-narishwara figure which he can then worship without violating his principles:

“Dui Jane ek tanu Mahesh Parvati
Na Janiya eto dukkha hoilo murhamoti” (Ibid.: 235)

[The two are of one body, Mahesh and Parvati, ignorance of this fact caused him much distress].

Thus the story line carries the endangered goddess worship to a point where she is granted equal space with androcentrism in the Hindu hierarchy through the image of androgyny repeatedly raised during the course of the text.

NOTES:

1. In Jyotish Sastra, Mangala is one of the Ashtayoginis, the eight female attendants of the goddess Durga, the others being Pingala, Dhanya, Bhramara, Bhadraka, Ulka, Siddhi, and Sankata.
2. A long drawn out record or narrative celebrating the glory of a deity.
3. Rhymes and narratives chanted on the occasion of the performance of a vow.
4. Some critics trace the origin of Chandi to ‘Chaandi’, a Proto-Australoid hunter goddess worshipped in the Chota Nagpur area, whereas others attribute the origin and propagation of the goddess to the *Devi Mahatmya*. See Bandopadhyay (1966).

5. The drinking of wine shows the Goddess in her Mahalakshmi/Rajasic form. 'Drunkenness' and 'madness' are also latent meanings of the root 'div' of the word 'Devi'. See Cleary & Sartaz (2000).
6. The *Devi Purana* shows that the Pukvasas, Chandalas and other outcaste groups were allowed to perform the rituals and sacrifices to the goddess.
7. The *Harivamsa Purana* notes that the goddess was worshipped by such aboriginal people as Sabaras, Barbaras and Pulindas who were addicted to meat and wine.
8. Sivaduti, according to Thomas B. Coburn is a sakti of the goddess herself as opposed to the Matrkas which include saktis of the gods. Sivaduti shows the subordination of even Siva to the goddess. See Coburn (1984).
9. *Sivaa* in Sanskrit, has the dual meaning of 'auspicious' and 'fox/jackal', indicating in the *Chandi Mangal* the form of the female fox in which the goddess led the way for Basudev to rescue Krsna from the murderous Kamsa across the stormy Yamuna.

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