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The Divine Marginalized: The Case of Goddess Manasa in Ketkadas Khemananda's *Manasa Mangal*¹

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Abstract:

There are many folds and forms of marginalization that dominated human society and literature across the world. Man is marginalized based on his religion, society, race, economic sufficiency, gender and son on. Needless to say that the marginalized and those who marginalize have a power politics in play. But what if a goddess is marginalized by man? What if a goddess is shamed and abused for being blind in one eye and man is trying to dominate her because of (female) sex although she is divine? The case of snake goddess Manasa is very important in Ketkadas Khemananda, the sixteenth century Bengali poet to understand the paradigms of marginalization from an alternative perspective. This paper will demonstrate that Manasa is not only acting as a goddess here and winning glory for herself but she embodies the marginalized (female) figure in Bengal who is the victim of politics of subversion through, sex, physical disability and being of low (divine) origin.

The paper will be divided into three parts while the first part will look at the (female) sex and how different characters used it to subjugate Manasa both by the divine and mortal; the second part will focus on the physical disability of Manasa which brought her much shame and subversions and the third part will look at the 'low' the origin or 'low birth' and being the patron of Snake, Manasa is subjected to marginalization.

Keywords: Politics of Marginalization, Manasa, the snake goddess, physical disability, sex, caste

Goddess Manasa, the *devi* or the patron goddess of snakes remained as one of the most indigenous worshipped deities in rural Bengal, especially in western Bengal. Scholars agree wholeheartedly that Manasa is an indigenous goddess and does not belong to the Aryan pantheon however, in the *Mangal Kavyas*², she is seen constantly fighting with the Aryan gods and people³ to find herself a place in the mainstream Hindu pantheon. In this process, Manasa is marginalized, she remained a victim of the politics of marginalization. According to Walter Leimgruber⁴, there are no particular fixed criteria upon which we can base our definition of the marginalized. One can feel marginalized in many ways---physically, financially, politically, socially, geographically and so on.

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² The *Mangal Kavyas* are a genre of literature in Bengal mainly eleventh century to eighteenth century. *Mangal* means good. The writers wrote long narrative poems on gods and goddess in Bengal

³ Such as in the case of *Mansa Mangal* in Ketkadas Khemananda

⁴ Qtd. in Chapter 2 "Marginality and Marginalization" in *Perspective on Geographical Marginality*. Eds. Walter Leimgruber, Etienne Nel and Stanko Plec, Springer International Publishing AG 2017. p. 13

The narrative of the marginalized communities are gaining importance in the modern world of discourse through many channels and a fight for equality is on. However, when a goddess is marginalized and when she is to be worshipped by certain sections people of a particular geographical location is a challenging situation. In this regard, goddess Manasa and her cult are extremely important to understand the politics of exclusion and assimilation through marginalization. Although, in the Puranic texts⁵ the name of Manasa is mentioned but she is not worshipped. In Bengali version of *Manasa Mangals* the long narrative poem on Manasa the snake goddess, she is worshipped. Whether Bengali Manasa is a truly an indigenous deity or whether the Puranas⁶ which mentioned Manasa is influenced by the indigenous worship of a cult of a snake goddess is unclear. The Bengali reception of Manasa happened with the emergence of *Mangal Kavyas* between thirteenth to the eighteenth century and before that, a long tradition of orality existed. There are several versions of *Manasa Mangals* available in Bengal among them, one by Ketkadas Khemananda is appraised by literary scholars as the best. The text gives us a deep perspective into the problems of the politics of marginalization from a completely alternative perspective. Here man is not the victim of discrimination, but a goddess. In the long narrative poem, we see a fight between goddess Manasa and her mortal counterpart Chand Saodagor, a rich merchant. Manasa wants herself to be established as a cult and to be worshipped continuously by the people, but the main obstacle is Chand. As a rich man and a devotee of Shiv, he not only refused to offer *puja* to Manasa but stopped others doing the same by using his financial and social prowess. This enraged Manasa and she killed six sons of Chand as well as submerged seven merchant ships in the water. Manasa killed his last son Lakindar too. But with the insistence of Behula, the newly wed wife of Lakindar and by other gods at the end of the narrative poem, Manasa finally returned seven sons of Chand as well as fourteen ships by doubling up the riches and Chand, reluctantly started worshipping Manasa.

Different versions of *Manasa Mangal* available in Bengal by different writers. Among them, Ketkadas Khemananda, Bipradas Pipilai, Kana Horidas, Bijon Gupta are important. For the purpose of my research, I have limited myself to the text of Ketkadas Khemananda. Here in the text of Khemananda, the worship of Manasa has to be legitimized by Chand a rich merchant and devotee of Shiv who is an obstacle to Manasa's cult. This text gives a deep perspective into the questions of power politics: Who is dominated by whom, and why. Manasa in the text had lost her fiercely divine like quality⁷, she is just like any other common girl in Bengal born with a physical disability which would continue to haunt her for the rest of her life. Kaiser Haq⁸, the famous academician and translator from Bengali to English interestingly named his book as "Triumph of the Snake Goddess"⁹ but there are some more important questions to be asked than to relish the victory of Manasa. Whether people worship her because she is the goddess of the snake, an animal which is feared by the man widely or she is worshipped because of her short-lived temper is a matter of question. However, in this particular text, we see a contrast of temper and attitude between two completely different characters. One that is patriarchal, proud and triumphant and the other also is

⁵ In *Mahapurana* for example as noted by Wendy Doniger in her introduction to Kaiser Haq's *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As noted by Wendy Doniger in her introduction to *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess Manasa*, "Manasa is the quintessential nagini or female naga Manasa has instrumentalities to destroy and revoke life" (p.2)

⁸ In the book *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* with an introduction by the famous Indologist, Wendy Doniger

⁹ Published in 2007 with an introduction by Wendy Doniger

right in its position by claiming its due godlike position and respect among the mortals and immortals. The question does not end with Manasa's triumph over Chand. The focus of the narrative is not the poetic justice took place at the end, but the whole process through which the plot develops. The story develops through subversion and marginalization by Chand Saodagor and its resistance by Manasa. Chand Saodagor¹⁰ accepts the divinity of all the gods and goddesses who perform divine feats except Mansa because she is "Chang-mudi" and "Kani" that is, a goddess with a fish-like head and blind in one eye. The hardcore masculinity of Chand is also notable in the text. Perhaps he is ready to bend down to any male god *per se* but never will bow down to a female disabled goddess be it of whatever consequence. As a result, he had lost seven sons, position, the *dhan* or riches. Whereas traditionally goddesses are seen as a mother figure, *Manasamangal*¹¹ gives completely an opposite picture where Manasa is neglected as an unwanted girl. Same as the case of Hephaestus, the crippled son of Hera, the wife of Zeus in Greek mythology, where he was unwanted and thrown away to the sea rescued by a sea nymph and was late taken to the Olympus.

Although divine, Chand Saodagor scares Manasa with this huge masculine appearance and the *henthāl* (হেঁথাল), a kind of stick made of weeds. Chand believes that he could kill Mansa with his henthāl. The henthāl symbolizes the hyper masculinity which could 'dominate' women. It will hurt his masculine ego to worship a female goddess blind in one eye. Chand used his scathing language and abuses as a powerful tool to subvert Manasa. Moreover, he used his gross masculine and white physicality to dominate Manasa and finally his henthāl stick to beat her up. When Chand's all seven ships were submerged by Manasa and the crewmen and Chand himself were struggling to get out of *Kalidoho* or deep water, at that point Chand did not forget to blame Manasa for all the miss happenings happening around. He says "Chukkhu ranga bhore pet khaiya chuboni/ Tubu bole dukkho dili chang mudi kani" (ll. 13-14, p.5) translated as 'even after getting several plunges in the water with red eyes/ still Chand says 'you have caused me all woes, fish-headed blind goddess'¹². Chand's aghast and hatred for Manasa is noteworthy. In fact, Chand hates Manasa so much that he refused to take support of the lotus which Manasa sent to rescue him in the water (*Manasa Mangal* 5), although there is no mention of caste of the lotus here, still the lotus becomes associated with low caste by touching it one may lose one's religious purity, Chand says, "If I touch it will make me impure¹³" (ll. 21-22, p. 5).

In the text we see Chand does 'Bibad' or 'fighting' with Manasa by creating an obstacle in her way to stop people worshipping her. The fight between Manasa and Chand Saodagor is very much unequal and unpredicted and this contrast reveals one side of marginalization practised by Chand. Chand is a mortal human being and a devotee of Shiv, on the other hand, Manasa is an immortal and daughter of Shiv, the most-powerful god, according to the prevailing versions of mythology available in Bengal. On the other hand, being a deity of snakes, an animal which is feared by the common man in Bengal because of a high number of deaths each year due to snake bites, Manasa is not afraid anybody else. But she is somehow scared of Chand Saodagor. Interestingly time and again, Chand invokes Manasa to confront him, but Manasa avoids. Whatever action Manasa took, she did it through some *medium* where she does not have to appear

¹⁰ Saodagor is a Bengali word meaning merchant, sometimes Chand is also referred as Bene or Odhikri both meaning merchant and owner or lord

¹¹ The Bengali word 'মানাসা মঙ্গল' Manasa Mangal could be transliterated either way: Manasa Mangal or Manasamangal.

¹² My translation

¹³ Ibid

goddess blind in one eye', she complains to Behula. Not just as a goddess but it would very difficult for a human being to bear the burden of such an abuse. Here is the text, the goddess Manasa is suffering from a physical disorder where her head is like of a fish available in Bengal popularly known as *Chang mach* (চাঁং মাছ), scientific name is *Channa punctata* and otherwise known as *spotted head* fish. According to a footnote to the book of *Manasa Mangal* by the editor Bijanbihari Bhattacharya, Chand termed Manasa as 'Changmudi' not only because her head looked like that of a Chang fish but the head of the Chang fish looks like a snake's head. According to my understanding, it is most probably the case that Manasa is suffering from a genetic disorder where the human head looks somewhat smaller than normal. Nonetheless, it is to be agreed that Manasa's physical disorder becomes an easy tool for Chand to mock and laugh at Manasa.

Chand again abused Manasa when he saw Manasa is being worshipped by Kalketu, his friend and he felt hopeless. He charged Manasa, "How my friend worships you I don't know /And you blind goddess, have your fill here?" in a way shaming Manasa for taking puja and offerings from Kalketu (ll. 47-48 p.11). In the text, the relationship between Chand and Manasa is not that of the divine and the mortal but that of a rude, dominant, father and a wild daughter, more like a stepdaughter, born not of a respected wife. The ignorance of the Manasa as a goddess is ignorance towards a daughter, not very beautiful and physically disabled. The relationship between them transcends the boundary between the divine and the mortal.

It is seen at the end of the narrative poems in the *sabha* of Indra, Manasa has less communication with the other gods. Maybe she is a subaltern goddess could not find herself a place in among the Aryan gods. Although Manasa is not an Aryan god, she continuously fights for herself to secure a position in the Aryan pantheon. Moreover, Manasa is in West Bengal worshipped by the people of the marginalized communities like Kaora, Bagdi, Dhaowa and others. It could be one of the reasons that Manasa is marginalized among other gods in Indra's *sabha* and by Chand.

In one of the statements when Behula has brought back home her husband by bringing back her life, she begged Chand, her father-in-law to worship Manasa. Chand says he cannot offer *puja* to somebody with the hands he had offered puja to "Sonar Gondheshwari" (l.17, p.112), referring to Shiv. Why Manasa is different? Why she is not treated same as other goddesses? Here Manasa as a goddess is marginalized threefold in the text because of her low birth, which is of course, related to the caste related discourses. She is not just marginalized by the gods in the Aryan pantheon she is also marginalized by the *gora tonu* or fair skinned Aryans like Chand for her low birth, being a patron of snakes an animal that is abhorred by man and because of her sex and moreover for not being beautiful and being blind in one eye. Other goddesses in other different *Mangal Kavyas* such as Chandi or Annapurna are beautiful and fair but Mansa is not. Chand disregards Manasa for being of low origin as well of by being worship of the lower class and caste. It is dishonourable to him to worship a kind of goddess like Manasa who is not Aryan and not fair and beautiful. Therefore, Manasa had to go through sufficient difficulties to make Chand start worshipping her.

In this particular text of *Manasa Mangal*, Manasa is assimilated through exclusion and her exclusion is the base for her marginalization that took place of primarily three reasons. Firstly, because of her low birth (i.e., taking birth directly from the semen of Shiv, and not having a mother, secondly, because of her physical disability such as blind in one (left) eye and for having a head like a fish or a snake, and thirdly for being worshipped by the marginalized communities in Bengal. Manasa as a goddess of the

snake was eliminated by the mainstream Aryan pantheon but at the same time, she is assimilated in the same space because of her popularity as a cult. But how far is that assimilation effective is a matter of question. In this text, the exclusion of Manasa is a constant effort and a never-ending process. Chand is only one of the medium which catalyzed her exclusion through marginalization. In this particular version of the text, Manasa is still divine, she does not lose her divinity, but she is marginalized.

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BIO-NOTE

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