

Unpacking the Manasamangal: A Study of Goddess Manasa Through the Prism of Bodily Purity and Social Location

Adrija Chakraborty

University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
E-mail address: chakrabortyadrija8@gmail.com

Abstract

The corpus of vernacular Bengali literature opens floodgates to explore plebeian beliefs, culture and social mores of the time. The mangalkavya, a distinct genre stands out in the corpus owing to the centrality it bestows on not-so-known gods/goddesses familiar to the region. This paper is a humble attempt to articulate the nexus of the female body, snake worship and fertility practices in early modern Bengal through a reading of the two available versions of the *Manasamangal*. The first section gives an overview of the Mangalkavya literature in general and locates the specificity and specialty of the *Manasamangal* in particular by offering an analysis of the intimate relations between the (female) body of the goddess, her social locus and the perception of the 'fringe' deity by the higher social classes, here, the mercantile class. The final section of the paper explores the concept of fertility cults in folk practices and locates Goddess Manasa in a multitude of those that survive till date in Bengal and its adjoining areas. The focus of my reading has been to untangle, simplify and expatiate the threads of continuity in both the versions and therefore discrepancies occurring as a result of being produced in variable settings of space and time like semantics, etc. have been ignored since the bottom line is the same all along. In short, a comparison between the versions, authorial intentionality, etc have not been death with, here

Keywords: mangalkavya; manasa; female body; fertility; purity; pollution

Mangalkavya: A bird's-eye view

Mangalkavya, in simple terms can be defined as ballads eulogizing particular Goddesses and Gods who were often associated with *mangal* or goodness, fortune. An overview of the deities to whom these *kavya* were dedicated prove the etymology of the term, in a sense that through these recitations the deities were invoked to redeem the populace from various physiological, social, economic conditions among others. Instances of deities like *Sitala*, with whom lay the cure for small pox, infertility was vindicated by Dharma Thakur, protection from snakebites, boon for prosperity came from Manasa, socio-economic emancipation through *Chandi's* worship etc. warrant these. A careful observation shows that the aforementioned goddesses and gods did not occupy a permanent, formal place in the Hindu pantheon, usually excluded from commonly adhered books on religion and were usually associated with the lower, forest-dwelling tribal classes. However, the region's growing Brahmanical rigidity made it inevitable to establish connections with the multiple forms, strands of worship and practices prevalent among the region's humble and lowly people who were beyond its fold. (Chatterjee, 38).

The *mangal kavya* literature lies on the interface between the written and the oral. Oral cultures have a different way of reproduction and accumulation of knowledge in a way where memorialization and collective impartation are distinct and knowledge transmission is centred on the body of the person aka the narrator. It was primarily performative that crystallised in written word probably much later than its multiple oral renditions contingent on space and time. As Jack Goody shows, of the multiple reasons for oral transmission, the retention of control over the material by the author, inability of the audience to read and the parallelism of perfect utterance of a material with spiritual instruction stand foremost (Goody).

Of the various *kavya* that this genre offers, I've chosen to look at the *Manasamangal*, due to the continuity and prevalence of the cult up till the present in most parts of Bengal, Jharkhand etc., although with enhanced forms of representation and stylised rituals. Alongside, the veneration of serpents out of fear/ reverence due to its life taking capacity and association with the major deities, the Goddess of whom Manasa was personified as, assumes a significant part of the psyche of the rural public life of the said regions. Snakes, exotic and venomous, have been associated with sexual reproduction, fertility and potency across South Asia from ancient times. (Arafath, 111) Art, literary compositions, etc. all of these give sufficient space to the imagery of the serpents. In the following paragraphs, I've tried to trace the snake Goddess's

lower class origin that is inextricably tied to the notions of purity and pollution which hindered her percolation into and recognition by the proponents of the primary Vedic religion.

Impure Goddess? A Peek Into the nexus of Bodily Purity and (Un)Divinity

The female body since the Vedic period had remained a critical site that birthed perceptions, laws, stereotypes and much more. These functions were primarily a product of the male gaze, primarily upper caste, *dvija* men whose judgements became the fundamental tenets to perceive women of primarily upper caste, class, region etc. This gives rise to a depiction a woman who was virtuous, submissive, affectionate as mother, comely etc. if simply put. This, however, takes a somersault when it came to describe women outside of the Brahmanical social organisation, those lying on the fringe of settled society, i.e. the tribal and forest dwellers. They were despised and ostracized to such an extent that Vatsyayana too, disapproved of sexual relations with tribal women because they could adversely affect the erotic refinement and sensibilities of the cultivated man about town (Doniger, 22).

This framework suits well to exemplify the portraiture of Manasa. Although a puranic figure, Manasa has in most later Puranas, been counted among lesser deities, ghosts, ogres and semi divine beings (Smith). The various versions that are still in circulation prove that Manasa was for the most part a product of Bengal's , fields and forests. Her possession of occult power and knowledge as the *mahajnanayuta* and the repository of sorcery due to the status of *siddha yogini*, positioned her as a fringe goddess, not an extension or incarnation of the supreme Devi. Her vital function is restricted to extending protection from snakebite, at least in the Puranas.

The centrality of the 'body', in a literal sense of the term, manifests in the person of Manasa and the physiological features defining her, which remain a critical locus of the multiple identities that the 'goddess' manifests. Here I generalise the goddess' body, in terms of it's physiology and appearance associated with that of a 'woman's body' and body, as an a marker of female agency within a particular social setting and position which in our context, implies a non-mainstream, rather marginal, location in relation to the other castes/ classes that have a higher precedence in the Varna hierarchy. Of the various identities, her sociological identity, that of a common forest-dwelling woman, the divine identity of a folk deity, and the one as a non divine ugly hag when perceived through the gaze of the entrepreneur Chand Saudagar's, are the central ones manifested in the various renditions of the manasamangal *kavya*. All these myriad forms of exhibition of selfhood are expressively delineated by the 'body' of the

woman/goddess. Ketakadas Kshemendra's version of the Manasamangal focuses almost entirely on the feud between Chand(o), the merchant and Manasa, the goddess who feels an inadequacy in her status due to the non-acceptance and recognition of her deification and divinity by the adamant Chand. I tend to inquire the basis for his reluctance to accept Manasa as a Goddess. I argue that it was a result of the upper caste notions of bodily purity and pollution that hindered the escalation of Manasa due to her lower caste social origin and in turn archetypal features associated with them. It went beyond the patriarchal notions of masculinity to bow down to any feminine deity other than the female consorts of either Shiva/Vishnu.

Kshemendra in consonance with the floating oral verses, across the length and breadth of the *kavya*, harps upon particular physical features of Manasa, that may have been a result of her fringe status, which was substantially responsible for her non recognition. A goddess of snakes in human form has very little basis in Brahmanical tradition as most of the serpents in Vedic literature are portrayed as demons, disruptors emerging from the Nether world with no trace of them being worshipped or have charms to control them. One of the foremost among these is the usage of '*chengamuri*' (kshemananda) taken to mean a crone in common parlance. The perfect explanation of the term hasn't yet been deciphered but can be taken to mean an endemic fish common in the non perennial water bodies of Bengal and characterised by ugly whiskers, dark skin and thick body. This contrasts the picture of the conventionally beautiful, fair, voluptuous goddesses who govern popular imagination. The fish faced, limping hag (Dimock, *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village*) as many renditions show, present her as a standard image of a witch, who were and continue to be associated with peripheral areas like villages, outskirts of settled regions, tribal zones etc. in states like Jharkhand, Bengal etc. She's referred to as *rakshashi*, *daini* or demon witch by cowherds when she reveals her identity in one the *kavya* versions (Vipradas).

At another instance, Chand claims Manasa to be the eater of frogs, *bengakheki*, both of which were unfit for godly consumption and for obvious reasons supposedly consumed by lower classes living away from civilised habitations, basically in the forests, low-lying marshes etc. In the 15th-16th version by Narayan Deb, such foods were considered sacrilegious by Hindus, which directly alludes to Manasa's low origins (Smith). The versions predating Kshemendra's speak of a less Brahmanically diluted and linear storyline where efforts by the goddess to

establish her cult among the common folk of Bengal was central. These depict the textualised versions of actual oral narrations wherein rural communities like those of cowherds and other pastoralists, farmers, fisherman etc were the first to encounter the goddess herself who sought reverence from them by displaying her supernatural abilities, granting of boons etc. The stories were particularly related to these communities because their work left them vulnerable to snakebites. They comprised the lower strata of the society who didn't fall within the coterie of the worshippers of the Vedic and later Vedic deities (Maity, 5).

The practice of this cult and the hustle to establish Manasa as the goddess included Muslim actors too. Bengal was well settled in by Muslims, primarily through the figure of Sufis, by 13th century (Eaton, 71) and by the time of the composition of these mangalkavya texts had become an indivisible part of the public life of Bengal. Various Eastern and Western Bengali traditions of the narrative offer evidence of Muslims worshipping Manasa. A particular episode involving Muslim chiefs Hasan and Hussain who defied the goddess and disrespected her, were forced into submission by the latter and became her regular worshippers through officiating Brahmin priests. Firstly, It hints at the unorthodox conduct of Brahmins towards Muslims and lower classes. It amply emphasises on the mutual understanding between the two religions and the set of common beliefs they shared due to the being a product of the lower strata of the society, (Maity, 183, 184, 185) lower caste Hindu converts to Islam etc. Secondly, the allusion to Hasan and Hussain shows that the Shia community was influenced by the Goddess due to their adaptation to syncretic cults than orthodox Sunnis. In response to their environment the locals have evolved a religion which is a curious mix of animism, *pirism* and Shakti cult (used here since Manasa was by the late 18th century fully brahmanised as an incarnation of Shakti) (Roy Burman, 1212). The popularization of the cult indicates the immediate concerns of human beings who lived in forest areas infested with wild animals, that led to conception of such deities, irrespective of religion (Biswas, 436).

A minor digression, in order to assess the plebeian foundations of the early *mangal kavyas* shows a humble origin with protagonists from lower caste backgrounds. Kumkum Chatterjee shows that the advent of Islam in Bengal served as a wake-up call to Brahminism to reach out and initiate strategies of accommodation with a range of religious practices and ideas prevalent among the *antyaja* or marginal population whose worship revolved around Dharma Thakur, Manasa, Chandi etc. Before the mass Brahminization drive. As Kunal Chakrabarty, Jawhar Sircar etc have shown the mangal kavya emerged as a catalyst to win over these lower castes

base (Chatterjee). With reference to Dharma *mangals*, the *sebayets* or priests included people of much lower castes like Shundis, Doms etc (Chatterjee). The cult around Manasa sank lower and lower down the social scale until it came to be associated with the most marginal groups of people, according to Chatterjee. The Chandi mangals too have the seed story that revolves around Kalketu, a low caste hunter. The Dharmamangal too has Ichai Ghosh as the protagonist who belonged to the low caste of *goala*. Having said this, it cannot but be ruled out that varying opinions exist on the origin of the goddess. Some scholars feel that she was an import from South India due to her parallels with Goddess Manchamma and has a non-Vedic, non-Aryan background but some wholesomely rebuke it (Dimock and Ramanujan, 311). The zone of Malabar offers huge instances that signify the importance of serpents in fecundity practices through snake dances, veneration of certain types of snakes for their healing powers, popular lexicons etc (Arafath, 104).

Similarly, the epithet *kani* or blind in one eye too is derogatory in the fullest sense. Such a term highlights the perception of such people as inherently evil, malevolent and sadistic owing to their disfiguration, especially women, who are said to attract ominous instances. One-eyed women are so abominated that their status was likened to those of witches by various tribes like Oraons, Lodhas etc. constituting the region in and around Sunderban. In a similar fashion, *manasa* has been brought forth as depicting a power hungry wicked woman who could stoop to any extent in order to get her desire fulfilled. The various baleful episodes from conscious killing of Chand's son to the nasty annihilation of his voyage were all brought about by Manasa for the fulfilment of her narcissistic desire. Such a representation, I feel is a consequence of her peripheral social background. Had she been a proclaimed part of the conventionally accepted Hindu pantheon, her actions would've been depicted as inevitable predestined events to regulate the cosmological order, to achieve higher ideals.

Unlike the commonplace deities, in the mangakavya poems Manasa's appearance is explained as dreadful and egregious enough to turn them into madmen and run for their lives. (kshemananda) A later version explains her physique and poison eye as capable of rendering Shiva, lifeless with the guise. Throughout the text, Manasa's body parts and original attire is said to comprise living snakes and snake ornaments unlike the Vedic and Puranic deities. Her most ardent worshippers, from the lower castes like *Bauris*, explain her as donning the red bordered white sari offered as oblation while carrying snakes. (Smith, 20) This ugliness

associated with her was considered fit and normal given the rustic background and lower class of the ambit where the goddess functioned as supremely powerful, like forests, villages and struggling to escalate in the social hierarchy by vying for the worship performed by the *vaishya* merchant. Similarly, she doesn't reside in heaven but at animistic spaces like the *sij* plant, near marshes, swamps and other water bodies. The goddess's ritual symbols include earthen pots, ketaka leaves, wild flowers, vermilion etc. without the presence of ostentatious arrangements usually accompanying the Pantheon.

Chand addresses her as a beggar (*kshemananda*), a simple, explicitly despicable reference to the lower economic class that Manasa belonged to. Alongside, Manasa's constant companion Neto, belonging to the washerwoman, Dhopani caste (Dimock, *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village*, 271), also comes across as a conniving woman helping Manasa realise and augment her destructive ideas. Manasa, portrayed as a shape shifter, donning the guise of Brahmin women, rural wives etc. at will highlights the association of the idea of shape shifting with witchcraft, sorcery, shamanistic activities etc. Although such instances pervade abundantly in Hindu mythology, the idea of shape shifting is perceived in a negative light as a prerogative of those inhabiting the Nether world, where the snake kingdom lay. The climax of Kshemendra's version is also brought by Behula, the daughter in law disguised as a *domni* through whom the culmination of the plot is reached when the merchant offers Manasa flowers and worships her with his left hand, which is usually not utilised for auspicious purposes. Yet, Manasa was contented enough to restore all that she'd taken away from her adversary.

The question of agency of the female body too gains vitality in the *kavya* since the acceptance of the status of Manasa depends upon the sanction from an upper caste male, in order to be accepted in the world of men. Moreover Ketakadas' version addresses Manasa as a virgin goddess. The invocation of Manasa via the female protagonist, the daughter in law of the merchant who resolves the feud, stresses on the relationship of Manasa with her male association like the wife of Jagatkaru, the mother of Astika etc. Manasa conforms to the role of the wife and a mother even when she doesn't exhibit either wifely or motherly qualities in her representation.

Despite Chand's relentless vows across the story to "break her head and kill her", maltreatment of Manasa's symbols like earthen pots, the ritual setting etc. the actions of the

goddess receive a negative verdict of being malevolent, merciless etc. And her powers are limitedly recognised as that of protection against snake bite and tenuously as a fertility goddess which we shall inspect in the next section. The later versions including Kshemendra's, show the side-lining of subsidiary storylines to emphasize with focus upon the spread of the cult among the upper classes of the society, primarily the merchants. The weightage on the feud between Manasa and Chand merchant hogs the entire visibility by receding mentions of the societal mores and humble beginnings of the cult in the post 15th century versions. The focus seems to have shifted to the Hindu aspects of it like the usage of Brahmin priests, a stronger emphasis on Shiva etc. to make the cult more appealing to the higher *varnas*.

Fertility Deities and the Status of Manasa

Barrenness in a woman is considered as a curse, a ramification of past sins etc. in not just in India but most parts of the world. Sterile women face enormous social stigma and even ostracism in social, religious and pious gatherings. Across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, numerous deities are worshipped, rituals performed, superstitions resorted to, in order to bear offspring, especially male. To overcome such tribulations, fertility cults and veneration of particular gods and goddesses became very commonplace. In this section we shall primarily harp upon the status of goddess Manasa in the sphere of fertility worship in comparison to the other deities, to analyse which the only source are the mangalkavya dedicated to them that are sung in community gatherings like auspicious events, fairs etc. till date.

Before we delve into the cult of the Goddess, we need to look at the other deities followed in relation to the same. The veneration of Shasthi, till date in Bengali households, can be traced back to the ancient period, as an independent figure who was later into the Hindu fold as an incarnation of Durga. She is the protecting deity of children and bestower of offsprings. Of the most common forms of revering the goddess, one is the ritual practice of celebrating motherhood by honouring the daughter and son-in-law with feasts, presents etc. The direct participation of womenfolk only and honouring of motherhood emphasises on the observance of and respect for the human fertility by adulating the goddess. The mangalkavya versions devoted to her too, revolves around a trajectory that traces establishment of Shashthi's cult as the guiding deity of new born babies. The childless Hindu women make *manats* or votive/vows and the tribals of West Bengal especially Oraons of Sundarban make offerings to her

when their babies do not survive (Maity, Historical Studies in the Cult of the Goddess Manasa). Most rural natives worship her before occasions like marriages to ward off barrenness and fulfil family life.

Similarly, the Mangalchandi kavya records tales of Goddess Mangal Chandi blessing lower caste, issueless women with children, in disguise and offers medicines against . The goddess is worshipped in different formats in various regions for various functions but her role to make barren women prolific remains common. Similarly, any form of disrespect or dishonour to Dharmaraj, to whom the Dharmamangal are devoted, might lead to infertility, sterility in males, barrenness in humans, droughts, famines, cattle epidemics along with leprosy, vitiligo etc (Ferrari, 48) . He, thus, has to be celebrated in the gajan mela festivals and prayed to for fertility. The *gajan* signifies Union of the God and the Earth. This is represented at local levels includes severe body piercings, stepping on fire, self-harming etc. Some obsolete rites include offering pieces of cloth with menstrual blood of barren women and preservation of the same as Gods grace after offering as an immunity against infertility.

Goddess Bhadu, confined to certain areas of Bengal is worshipped by the lower forest inhabiting classes. *Bhadu*, was a Sati princess who was raised to the status of Goddess by locals after barren women benefitted by making vows to her. The list is exhaustive and runs on to include various locally venerated deities and *Pirs* too. Some inevitable mentions include that of *Manik Pir* who was said to performed miraculous deeds on a barren cow and blessed her with motherhood (Maity, Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal). They are worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike especially by the womenfolk.

Now, that we have a fair idea about the prevalent fertility worshipping practices, it'd be easy to analyse the position of Manasa hereupon. The veneration of snakes has, since time immemorial, been a crucial part of Hindu folk culture that symbolically represented not only sexual reproduction and human fertility but also to enhanced yielding capacity of the soil. Multiple lexicons like in case of Malabar, abound in Bengal too. It is common in the region of Bengal and the adjoining geographical-cultural zones to associate dreaming of a snake with impending news of birth. Sigmund Freud, in his Introductory Lectures on psychoanalysis has classified the imagery of snake as a male sexual symbol owing to it's phallic representation which represents sexual drive (Freud). Although his interpretation has been countered due to the male centric approach yet popular culture supports the notion since ages.

Manasa's representation since the Puranic period made her the face of human fertility, the one whose boon would help beget children. The conception of worshipping snakes as a token of sexual reproduction in Hinduism can be traced to the standard representation of Shiva in the *linga* form accompanied by a snake. The rendition of Manasa mangal by Ketakadas makes the synonymity of Manasa with human fertility very explicit since the foundation of the tale/myth lay in the seed story of Manasa blessing the merchant's wife Sanaka, an ardent devotee of the Goddess with six children only to take them back due to his pride, arrogance and disparaging, non-acknowledgement of the Goddess' status. She was said to have taken away all his children from him through various ways like snakebite, drowning etc. which vary according to the versions only to bless them with another one. Yet, her boon to restore Chand's children and assets to life manifests her as the one embodying destructive and constructive powers simultaneously. In the Assamese version of the text, two fishermen brothers were rendered a boon by the goddess that blessed them with children, In some versions she bestows fishermen, Shepherds, Muslims with wealth, children and prosperity. Thus, the conception of Manasa as a fertility goddess cut across boundaries of caste, class and religion and gave her an escalated place in the religious life of the folk community.

Conclusions

In the preceding paragraphs I've made an attempt to extract notions of purity and pollution it's relationship with social classes and female agency through two versions of the Manasamangal. The deity's myth/origin goes back to the early medieval period of puranic literature. I believe, as specified elsewhere too, that the Puranas drew upon the oral narratives circulating in the region. Whatever it be, the necessity and popularity of the worship was tremendous enough to have helped it ossify into a cult, to which over fifty pieces of kavya were devoted. The necessity arose from the geographical location of Bengal which was thickly forested and surrounded by waterbodies, places that serve as habitation for reptiles. Through this work, I hope I've been able to substantially answer the questions that I raised on the initial questions of non-acknowledgement of the goddess, the nexus between divinity and purity, pollution and upper caste patriarchal practices which was construed and fashioned the Hindu pantheon, specifically followed of the eastern Indian region . It is much possible that some of my arguments might seem incomplete due to absence of studies from the perspectives that I've

viewed it from. It's a naïve attempt and I hope further remarks should help polish my arguments and articulation.

Works Cited

- Arafath, P. K. Yasser. "Saints, Serpents and Terrifying Goddesses: Fertility Culture on the Malabar Coast (c. 1500-1800)." *Histories of Medicine and Healing in the Indian Ocean World*. Winterbottom, Anna and Facil Tesfaye. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 99-124
- Biswas, Swarnali. "Representation of Women in Mangalkavyas." *An Earthly Paradise: Trade, Politics and Culture in Early Modern Bengal*. Aquil, Raziuddin and Tilottama Mukherjee. Oxon: Routledge, 2020. 435- 472
- Chatterjee, Kumkum. *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal culture in Bengal*. Oxford university press, 2009.
- Dimock, Edward and A.K. Ramanujan. "The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature." *History of Religions* Vol 1. No. 2 (1962) 307-321
- Dimock, Edward. *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Doniger, Wendy. *Redeeming the Kamasutra*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Eaton, Richard. *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*. University of California Press, 1996.
- Ferrari, Fabrizio M. Illness is Nothing but Injustice: The Revolutionary Element in Bengali Folk Healing. *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 128 No. 507 (2015): 46-64.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Vienna, 1916.
- Goody, Jack. *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Kshemananda, das. *Manasa Mangal: Collected and Edited by Natabar Chakraborty*. Bangabasi Electro-machine Press, 1909.
- Maity, Pradyot. *Historical Studies in the Cult of the Goddess Manasa*. Maity, Pradyot. Historical Studies in the Cult of the Goddess Manasa. Punthi Pustak, 1966.
- —. Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal. New Delhi: Abhinav Publishers, 1989.
- Roy Burman, J. Hindu- Muslim Syncretism in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 31 No. 20 (1996): 1211-1215
- Smith, William I. *One-eyed Goddess: A Study of the Manasamangal*. Akmqvist and Wiksell, 1980.
- Vipradas. *Manasa Vijaya: Edited and Translated by Sukumar Sen*. The Modern Art Press

Author's bio-note

Adrija Chakraborty graduated with a Master's degree in History from the University of Delhi. She is interested in exploring the questions of identity formation and selfhood of the non-mainstream social groups during the early modern period, literature of everyday life and folk narratives. Her works on such themes have been published in various history blogs, magazines etc and acquired top positions in paper presentations across various colleges in Delhi University. She is an avid quizzer, a self-proclaimed food critic and a wildlife enthusiast.