

The Marginal Divinity: Struggle of Goddess Manasa Against Patriarchal Power Politics

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***Abstract:** The worship of snake goddess Manasa in rural Bengal is a part of the daily struggle of the people against adversity through a plea for divine intervention. By 15th century The Manasa Mangal Kavya was composed following the typical story line that of a goddess of Pre-Aryan origin soliciting worship from the staunchly Shaivite upper classes. Here the politics of marginalization expose a new paradigm when a goddess is marginalized by man, when a goddess is shamed and abused for being blind in one eye and man is trying to dominate her because of being female sex although she is divine. The case of snake goddess Manasa in this context is very important to understand the paradigms of marginalization.*

***Key Words:** Marginalization, Patriarchal gender Politics, Manasa Mangal Kavya.*

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There are many folds and forms of marginalization that dominated human society and literature across the world. Man is marginalized on the basis of his religion, society, race, economic sufficiency, gender and so on. There is a complexity of power politics existed between the marginalized and those who marginalize. But this politics of marginalization expose a new paradigm when a goddess is marginalized by man, when a goddess is shamed and abused for being blind in one eye and man is trying to dominate her because of being female sex although she is divine. The case of snake goddess *Manasa* in this context is very important to understand the paradigms of marginalization.

Manasa is a very important goddess of the eastern part of India, particularly for the lower castes of Bengal, West Assam, some districts of Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar. She is the main goddess for the majority of Rajbansis of North Bengal. *Manasa* is both a folk goddess and a textual deity. She is worshipped by non-Hindu tribal peoples as well as by Brahmins. Some Scholars argue that *Manasa* is an indigenous goddess and does not belong to the Aryan pantheon however, in the *Mangal kavyas* (sacred text), she is seen constantly fighting with the Aryan gods and people to find a place for herself in the mainstream Hindu pantheon. In this process, *Manasa* is marginalized; she remained a victim of the politics of marginalization. According to Walter Leimgruber, 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.¹ In this regard, goddess *Manasa* and her cult are extremely important to understand the politics of exclusion and assimilation through marginalization.

Origin of the Cult of Goddess *Manasa*: Socio-Religious Background

The history of the cult of the Goddess *Manasa* is intimately associated with the serpent worship. The goddess has given birth to a larger religio-historical as well as cultural tradition. Tremendous cultural value has been added from medieval period with the publication and distribution of early Bengali literature *Manasa Mangal Kavya* (sacred text of goddess *Manasa*). Analysis of *Manasa Mangal Kavya* revealed the fact that the goddess was recognized by the upper strata of society after a gradual process of acculturation of Aryan and non-Aryan culture, between Brahmins and non-Brahmins lasting for centuries and achieved her fullest development in early medieval literature written between the 13th to 15th centuries.

Actually during the Muslims invasion the pride of the dethroned upper castes was hurt and their hold over religion, culture and literature was broken leading to

proliferation of folk religion, rituals and oral traditions.² The ignominy of their defeat brought them closer to the hitherto ignored lower class Hindus as well as Buddhists ending years of social discriminations. This led the emergence of new deities combined with the power of the Aryan deities with that of the indigenous deities and who could be implored for all sorts of material and spiritual boons. *Manasa* was a product of this cultural synthesis.

The old and medieval Bengali literature revealed this truth, reflecting the struggle between the worshippers of local, goddesses and the more orthodox Hindus.³ The defeat of the Aryan deities and the victory of the local deities depicted in the *Mangal kavyas* were in fact symbolic indication of the victory of the Bengalis over the foreign races. The dethroned Hindus found some sort of solace in these stories of victory. P.K. Maity, has rightly observed that the Turkish conquest played a decisive role in the elevation of the popular gods to respectability and their subsequent adoption by the upper castes.⁴ T.W. Clark however argues that 'the disruption caused by the invasion, attached no great importance to the indigenous population.'⁵ It is interesting to analyze why the Hindus had to abandon their patron deities like *Siva* and *Vishnu*, who had been in capable of protecting them and to turn instead to folk deities, who believed to be more powerful.⁶ Actually it is a fact that during Muslim invasion, except the upper class Hindus, the social structure as a whole was still largely tribal. J. C. Ghosh however opined that the Brahmins were very much aware about the possibilities of large scale conversion of the lower caste Hindus towards Islam and forced them to turn to popular cults, to keep the population away from Islam. Such a step was necessary for the survival of Hinduism in Bengal.⁷

The growth and development of the cult of Goddess *Manasa* should be discussed within this socio-religious panorama of Eastern India specially Bengal. The story line of *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, revealed a fight between goddess *Manasa* and her mortal counterpart *Chand Saudagor*, 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 Lord *Shiva*, 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 *Lakhindar* 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*.

Manasa: The Marginal Deity

Manasa belonged to the highly ambivalent deities who were believed to perform opposing functions. According to Fabrizio M. Ferrari *Manasa's* ambivalent character—as compared to others— was pronounced and clear.⁸ She was truly welcomed and unwanted at the same time, as was obvious from both mythological narratives and rituals. The story of *Manasa* emphasized her bad temper and unhappiness. She was kind to her devotees, but quite unpleasant to those who refused to worship her. She was a goddess who had a difficult life; she had no mother, was lusted after and then rejected by her father, hated by her stepmother, and deserted by her husband. From that point she was a truly marginal deity.

There are no particular fixed criteria upon which we can base our definition of marginalization. One can feel marginalized in many ways i.e. physically, financially, politically, socially, geographically and so on. The narratives of the marginalized communities are gaining importance in the modern world of discourse through many channels and a fight for equality is on. *Manasa Mangal Kavya* gives us a deep perspective into the problems of the politics of marginalization. Here man is not the victim of discrimination, but a goddess. This text gives a deep perspective into the questions of power politics. *Mansa* in the text had lost her fiercely divine like quality, 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. 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 *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, we see a contrast of temper and attitude between two completely different characters. One that is patriarchal, proud and triumphant and the other that also is 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 Saudagor* and its resistance by *Manasa*. *Chand Saudagor* accepted the divinity of all the gods and goddesses who perform divine feats except *Mansa*, an one eyes goddess. The hardcore masculinity of *Chand* is also notable in the text. Perhaps he is ready to bend down to any male god but never will bow down to a female disabled goddess be it of whatever consequence. As a result, he had lost his seven sons, position, power, wealth and everything. Whereas traditionally goddesses are seen as a mother figure, *Manasa Mangal* 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 later taken to the Olympus.

The fight between *Manasa* and *Chand Saudagor* was very much unequal and unpredictable and this contrast reveals one side of marginalization practised by *Chand*. *Chand* was a mortal human being and a devotee of *Shiva*, on the other hand, *Manasa* was immortal and daughter of *Shiva*, the most-powerful god of the Hindu pantheon. Despite this to worship *Manasa* was a kind of insult to *Chand*, it would hurt his male Aryan ego. In the text, *Manasa* was marginalized as a woman first of all. Then she was marginalized for her physical disability and for her 'low' birth. Although the divine supposed to possess much power than the mortal and deserve respect, *Manasa* was derived from all. The reason for this may be the low birth of *Manasa*. That's probably the reason for that *Manasa* was humiliated by even other divinities.

In *Manasa Mangal Kavyas*, *Manasa* was assimilated through exclusion and her exclusion was the base for her marginalization that took place primarily for three reasons; firstly, because of her low birth and 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 was assimilated in the same space because of her popularity as a cult. In this text, the exclusion of *Manasa* was a constant effort and a never-ending process. *Chand* was only one of the medium which catalyzed her exclusion through marginalization. Therefore at the end of the text *Manasa* had to be satisfied by receiving *Chand*'s worship by left hand as the right hand is reserved for the worship of the male god *Shiva* which was no doubt insulting but the only way for *Manasa* to be welcomed in Hindu pantheon. At the end of the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, *Manasa* merged into the archetypical figure of the feminine divine. Thus, folk and classical traditions merged at the conclusion of the text, illustrating a powerful resurgence of the cult of the Goddess over the eroding forces of patriarchy. So, *Manasa* is divine, but she is marginalized.

Manasa Mangal Kavya: An Expression of Feminist Power

Manasa expressed 'anti-establishment' feminist ambition and power. *Chand Saudagar*, *Manasa*'s chief enemy epitomized patriarchy. He was a merchant prince, who had the power of his gender, of capital and patronage from the most powerful male deity of all, Lord *Shiva*. *Manasa*, on the other hand, was a lone 'woman' who had command over the netherworld of snakes and serpents and her own unbridled ambition, and with these resources, she waged a relentless battle to gain respect and recognition from the patriarchal social structure.

Manasa as a genuine feminist icon signifies many anti-establishment profiles. She raised uncomfortable questions on the role of feminine energy when faced with male power and authority. She was a non-Aryan, lower socio-economic class cult struggling for patronage from people while up against upper caste Brahminical prejudices. Moreover she was a semi-divine female confronting the established patriarchy, be it the divine Lord Shiva or the temporal capitalist authority of *Chand Saudagar*.

Since her birth, *Manasa* has had to battle for her dues— Shiva first refused to recognize her, though she is said to have been fashioned out of his seed! She is a great source of energy, but unlike the Sanskrit Mother Goddesses, *Manasa*'s power has a sharp, vindictive edge! She does not hesitate to resort to trickery, coercion or brute strength to subvert her enemies.

The other interesting characteristic of *Manasa* is her independence. She may be born from *Shiva*'s seed but does not get any support from that illustrious divine lineage. Through out the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, *Manasa* was depicted as a 'lone warrior'. She fought for recognition from the 'Establishment', personified by *Chand Saudagar* on her own terms, with her followers (the snakes) and her own resources. She finally was impressed by the steadfastness of the mortal woman, *Behula* and expressed her power by bestowing the greatest gift of all, life to *Lakhindar*. In return, she extracted the promise that *Chand* will be persuaded to worship her (albeit with his left hand). But that's enough to win her a seat in the pantheon of deities venerated by the 'establishment'! The calculated negotiation by a determined goal-oriented 'Goddess' who used her power to extract her dues rather than gave it away in selfless benevolence that females are always expected to display.

In today's Bengal, after centuries of Sankritization, the cult of *Manasa* survives in pockets but the 'fighting spirit' and commanding authority of *Manasa* has been subsumed in a gentler and more stereotypical deity who is worshipped for childbirths and prosperity. But maybe the time is right for us to re-appraise the true significance of *Manasa*, as a fighter- a lone fighter against patriarchal gender politics of marginalization. *Manasa*'s Feminine Spirit and Energy, which is not shy of pursuing self-interest and ambition even at the risk of being deemed too aggressive or unfeminine.

Conclusion

Manasa was originally a non-Aryan goddess who was later on absorbed in to the Aryan fold. It has rightly been observed that many of the minor deities including *Manasa*, " have come down from Dravidian or aboriginal sources, but in course of their absorption in to the Aryan cult, most of them have been identified with this or

that Brahmanic deity or related to him or her by some bond of family connection.”⁹ Further, it has been observed, “when they were absorbed and widely worshipped in higher circles, literary justification, both vernacular and Sanskrit had to be found for them. In this way was necessitated the composition not only of vernacular songs and narratives, but also of some of the later Upapuranas or the interpolation or narratives concerning their deities in the later semi-classical pauranic literature.”¹⁰

Goddess *Manasa* and her fight revealed the story of a marginalized goddess who was neglected and insulted for a long time and was regarded as outcaste in main stream Hinduism. To restore her position she went out and interact in the world of humans, demanding worship and loyalty. She was depicted as jealous, vindictive and cruel. In her story, she brought rewards and punishments, revitalizing towns or destroying them, and travel from one world to another with ease. Here devotion is usually based on fear. Though she is from the divine world, she is not distant and abstract entities demanding a response from the chosen devotee, *Chand*. The proper response is worship, offerings, submission and sometimes proselytizing.

The transformation of the worship of goddess *Manasa* from a non-Aryan tribal deity to a chief deity of the Hindu pantheon was actually the reflection of the struggle of a neglected, exploited and rejected women against the established patriarchal social structure. This was also a class struggle, a struggle to achieve social prestige and honour of the so called lower castes in the contemporary society. *Manasa* was the chief of these two-way struggle through which the non-Aryan culture was assimilated with the Aryan culture and an excellent syncretism took place in the then social structure. Thus *Manasa*, the main female characters of *Manasa Mangal Kavya* successfully defeated the politics of marginalization as well as gender politics of the established patriarchal social structure and established herself with complete power and prestige in this patriarchy which was really the victory of the marginalized as well as the victory of women-hood in the patriarchal social structure.

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