
The “Dangerous” Deity Demanding Deification: A Reading of Cultural Evolution of Goddess Manasa

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Abstract

Hundreds of strategies were deployed to nullify the positive significance and annihilate potential divinity to degenerate Mona (the divine glow of Rudra), the extension of ancient Saraswati (owner of “mahagyan”/ prime knowledge) into Manasa, and the “Chengmuri kani” (the small-headed blind woman). Here is an attempt to re-read the ways the meaning is given and value is conferred to our notions and functions to legitimize the interest of mainstream at the cost of multitude margins.

Key Words: Manasa, alternative, feminism, politics of power

Foucault observes: “We are never trapped by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy” (quoted in Champagne, xxiii)

Amongst millions, some statements are of such nature that are so precious yet are so abundantly numerous in its recurrence through process of rediscovery with every new realization. The above extract well typifies the kind which acted as my motivating impulse both to fuel and provide the recipe to cook up my amateur reading of both the authorial and the readerly version of ‘Manasamangal’, especially the version of Bijoy Gupta which mirrors and gets mirrored in popular imagination of Bengali folk lore and construct of consciousness of goddess Manasa. A reading of *Padmapurana* and some of its receptions may justify how a project of demeaning and degenerating by categorizing womanhood can be fractured and blasted off through subverting the impositions of meanings on counter cultures sprouting rudimentarily. The devotion (a product of sheer fear) and disgust surrounding this controversial

goddess of Hindu pantheon enact a strategy of keeping outside the threat of the Other woman or even a possibility of matriarchy – a margin both shaping the contour really and imagined through intuition.

Reiterating the obvious, it may be said that like the images and idols of god/goddess, their self/identity represents the creator’s personal psychic construct, her experience/exposure, intellectual and emotional space occupancy, the collective conscious/unconscious as well as the life vision or *veltangschuung* of a whole culture. Farther, when s/he gets deployed as the element of literature, the mindscape of the creator attains a huge social and cultural expanse which invariably though often imperceptibly, docket the tantalizingly complex tendencies of an era.

Even a superficial reading of the popular “panchali” (recital of god’s glory through story) makes us aware of a discomfort at the overtly patriarchal bent of the whole story -- the authorial and readerly version of representation and readerly response.

The representation of the lore bears the name *Padmapurana*, the name Padma shared by both goddesses Lakshmi and the very significant river in Bengal, but while the latter ones come up with such socially valued positive implication the former (Padma of *Padmapurana*) bears the legacy of the undesirable even fearful aspects of human existence. The problem arises as the basic structure of Manasa's life and activity except for minor endowments present a powerful critique of patriarchy on behalf of even matriarchy. The very construct of Manasa's birth occasion by the fall of Lord Shiva's sperm onto the lotus leaf embodies male fantasy of reproduction outside woman's womb and thus excluding her even from an instrumentality (obviously agency and possession are mostly conferred on man in a patrilineal and patriarchal social structure). The engagement of birds and snakes, apart from hinting at the bestiality, somehow imagines the componential participation of animality in the construct of woman. Manasa becomes almost inseparably identified with sex and sexuality throughout the narrative which makes it very convenient to stamp her with feminine bawdiness.

Tremor is felt with the displacements of notions solidified through ages by practice and propagation as the Father lord Shiva proposes incest² to his own daughter. The folk imagination recreates Shiva as very distinct from Vedic Maheshwara and is presented as a patriarch with undisciplined and uncontrollable sexual urge, a womanizer with almost the inclinations of a rapist and paedophilic. Having born to materialize the obliteration of mother, she is rather nourished with love, care and respect by the Nagas in "patala", but gets

insecure at Heaven where her own father tries to seduce her even after knowing who he was. Lord Shiva is not only charmed by the youth and beauty of Manasa, he is almost paralysed with an irresistible sexual arousal ("bikal")³ which establishes the instinct, especially sexual instinct, as the overpowering force disempowering even the divine or only the divine for whom norms of control and judgement do not apply. Depicted as omniscient, Creator of the world & the liberating force, the lord mysteriously cannot recognize his own daughter. The question arises is the ignorance a cover for his uncontrollable desire or does it imply a sex/knowledge dichotomy, is it transgression or ignorance? Interestingly, his persuasion even takes recourse to imposing his own perverted greed ("lobh") on to the Other, the Asuras⁴ (non-Aryans' assault of Aryan women archetypically celebrated in Ramayana), to warn Manasa against them and come under his protective shelter of "home" established through the institution of marriage⁵.

However, the ensnaring custom appears only to be a ploy to assert the absolute right of man to appropriate women time, body, labour and identity which even leaves the Powerful goddess Chandi the helpless prey. It becomes all the more remarkable as we are dealing here with the highest & the lowest stratum of cosmos where women are not absolved from works outside home (Chandi has divine power and duties and the Domni, the rower, shoulders financial responsibilities their domestic duties apart). The goddess even cannot enjoy the privacy of a flower garden where she is pried upon by her intrusive husband who even does not have the capacity of aesthetic appreciation, and

naturally he either experiences arousal or carelessly destroys them⁶ (flowers may imply women). The woman, be she the “Devi” (goddess) , has to play different roles (disguises as sexy “Domni”) and practise various tricks to secure her position while the man only keeps on situating his gaze and desire. Hurriedly he dispenses even his bull to be alone with the woman he desires and is eager to transgress the class/cast boundary to satisfy his hunger and only gets disturbed at the possibility of being exposed that may insecure his social position. Chandi only deploys feminine trappings like expression of anger without any possibility of refusing to continue such humiliating position. Absolute helplessness leads to displacement of anger onto the weaker object with willing suspense of reason & the victim both victimizes herself & recipient of her transferred resentment. Manasa gets doubly victimized both by man & the woman-turned-into-agent of patriarchy Chandi. And thus the perpetrator of exploitation, the man, escapes attention, responsibility, stigmatization & consequence and the dream of sisterhood remain unrealized. In Greek mythology Hera is shown to behave in the same manner as she takes into task the women Zeus takes fancy for, whether the women willing or unwilling or even conscious or unconscious like Io, Echo and Semili, unable to touch a hair of her husband, lord and master. Here, however, the non-Cinderella-like step daughter hits back the approved step-mother as limit of suffering breaks bounds; Manasa takes on the venomous destructive form in self-defence, & resultantly, the powerful woman protesting & resisting torture easily gets vilified as poisonous. The protest is painted as disobedience in order

to keep up the family structure & hierarchy and the father, though absent to save his daughter from being blinded, commands to undo the act of counter attack, advised by other gods about being infamous invalidating her narrative⁷.

With a cruel irony, this dazzling beauty who has continually been identified as the femme fatale occasioning the arousal by her mere presence and being beaten up mercilessly by her step mother groundlessly alleging incest, gets married to a sage whose sexuality is aroused artificially only for a short span of time to ensure family lineage and his forefather’s licence to heaven. Expectedly, we get no clear indication of natural consummation of the bride in nuptial night, rather by a fine transference of the husband’s incapacity this self-conscious and self-confident woman is held responsible for showing unwifely arrogance leading to her desertion by the sage returning to the forest. However, before leaving he performs his duty by the boon of reproduction. This extreme social injustice and the consequent shame and starvation which could have engulfed Manasa, in its excessive exaggeration create a subversive narrative: the wife does not play Ahallya⁸. At the desertion by her husband and lives more or less contented life with her children. Moreover, these children could be “kshetrojo:” (fathered by someone other than her husband but with his full consent) or may exemplify a matriarchal practise where the woman uses man as an instrument for reproduction and afterwards leads a free self-sufficient life of her own.

This exceptionally talented lady excels in the branch of poison science along with that of speech and even preserves the life of lord Shiva, the god of gods. But unable

to find some other way when goddess Chandi, the mother of two sons, threatens to leave home, the father guiles his own daughter to leave her in forest along with another woman. However, here away from man's association and denying his domination in this lonely idyllic land of wild nature, these two women continued to live a united, self-contained life which somehow emulates a lesbian fantasy. Manasa and Neta grow intimate and complementary to each other and even hold counsel about their war strategy. On another occasion when Behula, in order to appease the goddess offers her breasts ("kartan"⁹, that is, chopping) or tears off her the piece of clothe covering her breasts, the act does not permit us to merely take it to signify the symbolic representation of lamentation. Even after being blessed with the boon of Lakshmindar's resurrection, Behula keeps hesitating to return home in empty breast "shunyabuke"¹⁰ unless her loss is repaired completely which otherwise would put question on her fidelity ("sutteetwa").

Hence, very naturally, a patriarch like Chand Sadagar refuses to offer his allegiance to such a goddess. While Sanaka, the mother, claims to be blessed by six sons at Manasa's boon, Chand easily affiliates Mahadeb with the glory. It may also be a strategy to nullify a counter fantasy as opposed to the womb envy: Sanaka gets pregnant at Manasa's blessings and Chand's "garbhapatro" (pregnancy attestation), rather his spum itself, is required merely as the stamp of social authenticity. The narrative gets fractured once more as Chand sadagar's dream of patrilineage (through marriage of his son) faces a powerful challenge by Sanaka's attempt at saving Lakshmindar's

life by retaining him a bachelor (since he was cursed to be dead in marriage night): if for the father the son remains only a means, for the mother he attains the status of the thing-in-itself and the pride of hearing the call of adventure in blood¹¹ promoted gloriously in *Chand Baniker Pala* gets destabilized. Again the efficient and attractive Manasa strategizes to steal away Chand's "mahagyan" (prime knowledge) in guise of a dancer taking advantage of his slippery morality and in this manner, the book goes on nourishing the sex-knowledge dichotomy and its patriarchal structure endorses the idea of association of the sex with woman and the knowledge with man. But according to Vedic interpretation Manasa herself was the muse of mahagyan¹². Question arises whether Chand's knowledge was originally a gift from the goddess which, gravely offended by his extreme ungratefulness and denial, Manasa decided to withdraw.

Though the 'Mangalkabya's highlight Manasa's urge to register Chand's devotion and deep desire for the affiliation of her divinity, it is highly possible, especially as the Vedas and Puranas mentioned her alternative images, she in fact was already a member of the Hindu pantheon. But consequent upon her position as independent of man and with increasing frigidity of the binary between masculinity and femininity she became the reservoir of the gender-defying qualities. The idea of this disruptive woman incurs fear in the collective subconscious and she gradually loses divine affiliation. The Greek god Dionysus deployed various exploitative and cruellest methods to get his divinity asserted, but the present goddess preserves every object she

snatches away with great care only to return them untarnished on proper time.

Even without an elaborate discussion of the space Manasa occupies in a hetero-patriarchal structure of the psychosocial milieu and the various disruptive/circumlocutory points of the narrative around her, a cursory look at some of her activities constructs an alternative narrative. The iron-built bridal chamber without the slightest opening commissioned by Chand Sadagar which symbolizes the omnipotent, self-sufficient and exclusive rationality, she manages to create a tiny hole -- through the passage sneaks into our Id/"kalnagini" (a fatal snake symbol both of death and sex) – our suppressed desire, fear and other irrational forces. The book presents another woman Behula, who in merit, tactics (cashing sexual charm) and courage almost rivals Manasa. But the former's commitment to the great cause like saving the life of her husband, aristocracy of birth, oath to fidelity, wealth ("sayer kumari"/ the daughter of a merchant showing sufficient business –mindedness) and her motivation to secure the interest of patriarchy (prioritizing her duty towards in-laws) and other ideal feminine qualities transmogrify her elements to the glorified rank of model woman and suttee. And perhaps it is this positionality which ultimately helps her succeed to transform Chand and, reluctant to accept defeat, the man identifies the desired Bhagabati in Chyangmurikani tactfully bypassing the truth.

Naturally, Padma had to pay dearly for her repeated successful and unsuccessful attempts at destabilizing the standard narrative of "womanhood" nourished down the ages. While goddess Lakshmi is cherished as the ideal of woman, Saraswati

remains outside the ambit of woman's social sphere in her capacity of the goddess of learning of men, despite being the goddess of poison science and speech, Manasa gets levelled as dangerous. Now this liberated, self-conscious and capable woman fighting independently to acquire dignity incurs terror. Goddess Chandi is of course famous for her aggressive anger, but her position as the wife of lord Shiva and the mother of gods situates her within the circumference of household and, gradually the same divine spirit gets separated into two different selves – Chandi and Manasa -- (splitting signifying a border line of normativity) confronting each other violently. Like goddess Shasthi Padma also enjoys the office of the giver and protector of children, yet instead of being identified with the archetypal maternal affection Manasa becomes emblematic of the sexual appeal of the woman body (snake is a powerful sexual trope). The divine figure of Agni and Surya described in Vedas, Saraswati, Rudra and Aswinikumardway in Rik Veda, in Atharva Veda again Saraswati are worshiped for their ability to cure diseases and their forte in medical science. But even after repeatedly surpassing all in test of talent in the branch of life-saving capacity, and curing Shiva and Chandi, Manasa is continuously stigmatized as the poison woman by the society unwilling to accept her capability.

The map of marginalization of goddess Manasa leaves us to confront some other alternative history. It is only from the "Adiporbo" (the introductory section) of *Mahabharata* onward following her assimilation with Jaratkaru that goddess Padma got acknowledged as the mother of both Astika and Nagas (according to

Puranas Nagas are also the successors of mother Kadru and father Kashyapa like gods). And perhaps from now onward commenced the process of non-Aryanization of Vedic Mona. The determination of Basuki and his sister Jaratkaru (infuriated by the Aryan callous and cruel desertion of her husband and the expanding empire of Kurupandaba) to resist farther Aryan colonization and reclaim the lost honour and land of Nagas (may be some non-Aryan tribe using snake as totem), the marginalization of gipsy culture by static civilization and of hunters by agrarian society, deepening of the root of gender binary and strengthening of patriarchy degenerated the Vedic abstract divine power into the mere poison-healer and “chyangmurikani”. Remarkably, among other allegations of Chand sadagar against Manasa is her lack of discretion as he complains the goddess receives offerings from whoever worships her. Remarkably, her rise and popularization among devotees were occasioned through her glorification among cowherds, fishermen and other low cast populace and women of upper cast, and perhaps for

these reasons the goddess had to undergo so many humiliating trials and rejections in process of her deification. Padma is represented in literature in such a manner that absents such attributes which could endow her with elite respect, gentleness or physical beauty and the rich business magnet’s hard-earned consent to offer her flower only with the left hand highlights this deep disrespect.

Thus, goddess Manasa, the female deity demanding and finally successfully securing her place, a goddess of margins challenging the business magnet and proprietor of knowledge and ultimately achieving recognition, as a symbol, a representative and an emblem develops into an extra-ordinarily potential site of subversion. Hundreds of strategies were deployed to nullify the positive significance and annihilate the potential of this divinity, but even a superficial deconstructive reading may expose the ways the meaning is given and value is conferred to our notions and functions in order to legitimize the interest of the mainstream at the cost of the multitude margins.

Notes:

1. “Kamete hoilo bhol / Shrifal gache dilo kol / Achombite khose moharas.” (Gupta, 119) “Desperate with desire / Raptures over the golden apple / The divine semen fall unguarded” (Translation mine).
2. “Kaambhabe mahadeb bole anuchit. / Laje byakul Padma shuniya kutsit” (Gupta, 23, 152). “Enamoured crazed Mahadeb proposes unfair. / Shame overcomes Padma listening to such heinous thing” (Translation mine).
3. “Padmare dekhiya Shiva hoilo bikal” (Gupta, 21, 146). “Gazing at Padma Shiva gets paralysed” (Translation mine).
4. “E bone asura chore / Nari nahi tumi pore / Heno rup besh ke na lobh kore....” (Gupta, 20, 148) “Here asuras lurk / No woman you apart / Such beauty such apparel who does not the hunger feel” (Translation mine)

5. “Koribo gondhorbo bibha loiya jabo Kashi.” (Gupta, 21, 143) “Shall arrange Gandhorbo marriage / And take you to Kashi.” (Translation mine).
6. “Joto pusper aaga bhange mochore kolika.” (Gupta, 25, 165) “Breaks so many flower stocks / Twists the buds” (Translation mine).
7. “Baap hoiya stuti kore / Uttar na dao tare / Tumi boro abodh chaoal... Apodos kolonke / Chandika jiyaiya de / koutuke rohuk debogon.” (Gupta, 439-441) “Despite being father prays / Yet nothing you say / you’re a very disobedient child ... Stigma of shamefulfulness will follow / If do not rejuvenate Chandika / Gods may live delighted” (Translation mine).
8. Ahalya is the mythic character petrified at unjustified curse of her husband sage Gautama and waited long to be redeemed with the touch of Lord Rama’s feet.
9. “Narosingha katari diya dui ston kate” (Gupta, 3039. “With Narasingha chopper severs both breasts” (Translation mine).
10. “Shunya buk dekhiya prabhu na koribo danja” (Gupta, 3054). “Seeing empty-breasted the master will not allow” (Translation mine).
11. “Amar a rakter antore je itihis jegye bosye theke amare chalona kore” (Mitra, 61). “Watching sleeplessly at the core of my blood who directs/conducts me” (Translation mine).
12. “Mahagyanajutanchoibo proborang gyaaninang sotim/ Siddhadhisthatridebincho siddhangsiddhiprodang bhoje” (Brahmaboibortyo Purana quoted in Bhattacharya). “And in possession of prime knowledge, the wisest amongst wise, the suttee / The goddess of fulfilment, the achiever and the conferrer of fulfilment, I invoke you” (Translation mine).

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