

The Divine Mother and Daughter in Bengal

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Abstract

The pervasiveness of motherhood in a generic way and that of the divine mothers in Bengal has received much attention and also has been an umbrella topic of serious research among the scholars from the twentieth century. The new genre of religious poetry known as the Śākta Padāvalī tradition that emerged in the eighteenth century and that focussed largely on goddesses Kālī and Umā had a huge role to play in endearing the fearful divine to the masses. The popularity of this genre in the said time-frame also had serious cultural significance as the common people were habituated in looking upon the divine feminine as their mother or daughter. This article is an analysis of how this genre of literature shaped the emotions of the people towards the divine feminine and its impact on the cultural life of Bengal in the next century and beyond.

Keywords: Divine mothers, Divine daughter, Śākta padāvalī, Āgamanī-Bijayā, archetypes

1. Motherhood in Bengal

The popularity of the divine feminine is quite natural in a region like Bengal that is identified with the festival dedicated to mother Durgā. A lot has been said by the scholars regarding the evolution of the mother goddesses in Bengal, the inclusion of the goddesses into the Brahminical pantheon and the excitement regarding the festivities. The two of the most significant mother goddesses of Bengal are Durgā and Kālī and the revelry and emotions of the entire community centre primarily around them. In fact, there is a tendency to identify the deities of local importance as forms of these. Kālī, one that claims so many regional variations and forms have the most integral as well as controversial relationship with what has popularly been called Tantra or what has been held as the Tāntric practices. The humanisation of such deities predominantly as mothers is possibly the product of a long process of assimilation. However, scholars agree on the fact that there was a breakthrough in the worship of Śākta goddesses during the eighteenth century not only in terms of the increase in the number of the domestic worship of Kālī but also in terms of the emergence of the new genre of Śākta padāvalī tradition.

Goddesses in Bengal must have been worshipped along with many other deities yet but it was probably the long poems or ballads of the Maṅgalkāvyas that seemed to have accomplished the task of endearing Śiva-Pārvatī among the masses. It is difficult to trace the beginning of the

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domestic worship of goddesses as Durgā and Bengal does not seem to worry much about the demon-killing martial deity. Probably, Durgā Pūjā had humble origins as a small-scale *ghate-pate* Pūjā.¹ According to Sukumar Sen, it was performed in the well-to-do households with much grandeur.² By the eighteenth century, it had probably emerged as an established religious festival of Bengal and never failed to get enough patrons among the various claimants of power in the next century as well. Today, it is one of the biggest festivals in the nation and a major marker of identity for Bengal. Nineteenth century press published information about the unique features of the Pūjā in the big houses of Kolkata. Sārbojanīn Durgā Pūjo committees of Bengal from the twentieth century began to be compete in a similar way and as it seems, festivity probably had historically formed an integral part of its history. However, at the root of all this lies the tremendous emotional appeal that the divine mother is still able to claim among the general populace of Bengal.

The trajectory of the evolution of Kālī is quite different from her sister goddess. In the context of Bengal, the worship of Durgā seem to bear the characteristics of a festival when the former is more related to the personal devotion and religiosity. However, the latter is no less popular and in fact the Śākta Pīthas or the sacred centres are all dedicated to Kālī. The origin, evolution and the time from when the goddess was worshipped in Bengal is clouded in mystery. She was still a minor deity in the PūrāGas while in Tantras with their code of secrecy to be maintained in the ritual practices, she probably might have lacked the popular appeal among the masses. Yet most of the temples in every nook and corners of the cities, towns and villages are found to be dedicated to her and claim a huge number of devotees. There was always a matter of shock, terror and disapproval attached with her and that percolated into the alleged practices or modes of worshipping her that came to be commonly defined as Tantra. The attitude seemed to reflect in the account of Professor Monier Williams.

The Puranas and Tantras are the true exponents of these two last and most corrupt phases of popular Hinduism, on which account both sets of books are sometimes called a fifth Veda especially designed for the masses of the people and for women.³

These martial goddesses who were famous for their demon-killing properties and often stood for things that is stood quite opposite to the images associated with the mothers, became the most important divine mothers of Bengal. There are various romantic explanations that have been given by the scholars. S. B. Das Gupta said,

...*Bañālī jemon koriyā Mā dākite pāriyāchhe temon ār kehoi pāre nāi.*⁴

[People from no other region have been able to call Mother like the ones in Bengal.
(Translation Mine)]

Amarendranāth Rāy, one of the editors of the Śākta padas, agreed to that and said further that probably Bengal is unique in conceiving the divine predominantly as mother.⁵

So, the worship of Kālī and the Tāntric practices associated with it predated the eighteenth century. Āgambāgīs, the most famous among the sādhakas or practitioners of sixteenth century noted in his *Bṛhat Tantrasāra* all the characteristic features (*lakṣaṇ*) in a *guru* who by all means, must be a practitioner himself.⁶ However, during the eighteenth century, the devotion towards the deity resulted into something whose fruits could not only be enjoyed by the initiates or the practitioners of the specific tradition but also by the lay or uninitiated devotees. McDermott says that three regional traditions had pre-existed before Rāmprasād's birth and the birth of the new genre of Śākta poetry. Firstly, Tantra that connoted both the Sanskrit learning and the local practices, then Vaiṣṇavism or the love for Kṛṣṇa and thirdly, the ritual worship that connoted the temples where the rich and the common people met to propitiate the deities.⁷ Although McDermott did not mention about it, even the popularity of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal definitely had implications for the local traditions. Das Gupta had noted the common undercurrent from which both the parallel traditions and the impact of *madhur-rasa* that sought to sweeten even the terrifying image of Kālī.⁸ However, it was not before the eighteenth century when Rāmprasād and his contemporaries and his followers in the upcoming decades were to blend these Tāntric, Vaiṣṇava and temple traditions in the new genre that focussed primarily on Kālī as mother thus intermingling "elite with popular, Sanskrit with Bengali and esoteric and exoteric arenas".⁹ Hence, we find a child-like surrender to the divine mother and various complaints hurled against her caprices and even against her unfeminine activities. At the same time, we find various references to the complicated practices related to *Tāntric yoga* in many of the poems. Most of the compilations available do not give any explanations or notes of the lyrics apart from the notations of the music associated with them. Das Gupta attempted to categorize the Śākta literature such *padas* as *sādhan-saṅgīt* that probably claimed inheritance from the *Caryāpadas*.¹⁰ These conveyed the abstract and deeper realizations of the practitioners other than the references to the Tāntric-yogic practices in a language that is clouded in allegories.

Mon re kṛṣi-kāj jāno nā

emon mānab-jamin roilo patit, ābād korle phalto sonā...

guru ropañ korechhen bīj, bhakti-bāri tāye shenco nā.

ore ekā jadi nā pāris mon, Rāmprasādke deke ne nā.

[My soul does not know how to cultivate

The fertile soul of the humans would have yielded a fortune yet it remained fallow...

shower your bhakti on the seed sown by the guru

take Rāmprasād, if it fails to be done alone. (Translation Mine)]¹¹

The interpretive difficulties stem from the fact despite the fact that the allegories and metaphors are very often taken from everyday lives and activities. This might have been the potent reason behind the popularity of the songs yet they also connote significant aspects of *Tāntric sādhanā*. In the above *pada*, Rāmprasād talks about the *bīj* mantra that the initiates can receive only from the gurus according to the Tantras. Āgambāgīś gives a detailed description about the qualities of a guru and that of the initiates and also about the ones who cannot initiate others into the path of *Tāntric sādhanā*. Hence, lay persons that include the researchers as well, find it very difficult to understand the deeper meanings clouded in the *padas* or the allegories related to the complex and secret practices. So, mere literal translations of the *padas* are often found to be not sufficient and what complicates the situation even more is that despite a lot of compilations that are available in the market, many of which provide some details about the compositions of the songs, there are found to be very less notes on the deeper significance of the lyrics and the allegories used in them.¹² McDermott made extensive translations of the poems and made profound analysis about the genre yet a full-fledged anthology with notes on the significance of the *padas* and information about the poets and their background in Bengal is yet to be found by the scholar.

2. Towards an Explanation

So, the *śākta padas* are prime examples of the obsession of Bengal with motherhood and the divine mothers. In this context, C. G. Jung's concept might be helpful in finding a reason behind these overwhelming emotions directed towards the figure of mother or the mother goddesses that from the turn of the century will begin to have serious implications in the

cultural and political atmosphere of Bengal. The concept of archetype might serve as a very useful analytical tool in explaining the origin of the myths that form a very significant core of ancient religion. Through comparative analysis, Jung shows the similarities among them to back his theory on the universality and the unconscious nature of the archetypes. For example, the symbols associated with motherhood and fertility like ploughed field, anything that represents *yoni* or womb.

Jung gives a genetic cum psychological explanation of the concept of anima, the feminine aspect that is present in all the males and serves the combination of good and bad, wisdom and folly and chaos and cosmos.¹³ The concept can be compared to goddess Kālī and reminds one of the devotional ecstasy of Rāmakṛṣṇa for the divine mother. Such combination of absolute opposites also can be seen in the lyrics of the devotional songs of Rāmaprasād or Kamalākānta. While explaining the mother archetypes, Jung himself referred to this ambivalence between the positive aspects as the grower, sustainer and negative aspects as the seducer, devourer and in this as he does allude to goddess Kālī.¹⁴ Similarly in the Śākta padas, there can be found a constant contrast or rather a tension between the ideal notions and behaviours attached to the mothers who are supposed to be nourishers and mothers as transgressors of all such feminine norms and morality.

Giri, kār konmhohār ānile giri-pure?

eto se Umā noye- bhayankarī he, daśabhujā meye!

Umā kon kāle trīśūle asure saChāre!

hāye, āmār shei bimalā, ati śāntaśīlā,

raEa-beše keno āsbe ghare!...

[Whom did you bring to your abode, Oh Giri?

this terrifying, ten-armed lady cannot be the same Umā

when has Umā killed demons with a trident!

Alas! why will my Bimalā, so quiet

come to her home in a martial form! (Translation Mine)]¹⁵

Jung's assertion of mother as the very 'matrix' of the archetype as the psychic and physical precondition of the child, can also be found to be very relevant.¹⁶ This might help in understanding and explaining to a certain extent, the pervasiveness of the mother trope and

longing for the divine mothers as one's personal mother that can be seen in the above mentioned devotional tradition or even in the nationalist discourse on nation as mother in Bengal.

Another very significant sub-theme of the Śākta literature is the Āgamanī and Bijayā songs, one that treats Durgā as Umā, the daughter of King Himālaya and basically narrates the longing of her mother Meñakā at the misfortune of her daughter for having been married to the poor, vagabond Śiva. Śiva's wayward nature, poverty, nakedness, aimless roaming in the funeral grounds, drug addiction all seem to picture the cause of worries for Meñakā as any other mother in Bengal during the contemporary times. The themes of these short poems had largely been drawn from the long Maṅgalkābyas and here the descriptions of Umā, the beautiful and innocent daughter of a king bear the most profound influence of *madhur-rasa* of the Vaiṣṇava padas.¹⁷ The poems thus, narrate the utter miseries of Umā in her marital home and her wayward husband and how all these have turned the beautiful princess into a terrifying creature as Kālī. Also, the pangs that mothers would feel at their daughter's departure from their natal home, something that is relevant even today, found expression in the Bijayā songs. The last day of the Durgā Pūjā the ritual of *baraṇ* is performed by married women before bidding final farewell to the divine daughters.

*Giri, ebār āmār Umā ele, ār pāthābo nā.
bole bolbe loke mondo, kāro kathā śunbo nā.
jadi ese mrityunjay, Umā nebār kathā kaye—
ebār māye-jhiye karbo jhagrā, jāmāi bole mānbo nā.
dwija Rāmprasād koye, e dukkha ki prāṇe saye,
Śiva śmaśāne maśāne phire, gharer bhābna bhābe nā.*

[I will not send my Umā back when she come this time, Giri.

I will not listen to anything that the people might say about it.

If Mrityunjay comes to take Umā back-

I will argue with Umā

Can this be borne asks dwija Rāmprasād,

Śiva has no worries for his home and only loiters around the funeral grounds. (Tranlsation Mine)]¹⁸

Amarendranāth Rāy explained this sub-genre as another region-specific dimension of Bengal.¹⁹ McDermott discussed this much-celebrated aspect yet much less discussed sub- category and explained the distinctly regional way of looking upon goddess Durgā. The preference of this vision of the goddess primarily as daughter, Umā, the darling daughter of Menakā and suffering wife of Śiva wins over the Purāṇic vision of the martial *Mahiṣamardinī* and the author tried to find out the reasons behind popularity of this trend especially in Bengal.²⁰ Elsewhere McDermott had pointed out that most of the these poets were patronised by the landholding patriarchs who popularised, if not introduced the ritual of the public worship of the Goddesses for augmenting their own socio-political status and also in the process.²¹ The eighteenth century saw a whirlwind that led to the rise and fall of many zamindari estates. The celebration of Durgā Pujā and to a lesser extent, Kālī Pūjā was very much a part of claiming power during such changing political times. Similarly, by extending patronage to all art forms, that had been the established custom among the royal families, the zamindars had probably sought to sanction their earthly power with the divine one. Thus, among the earlier poets of the Śākta padas, one can find the rājās of the zamindari estates or their dewans. Many of the families of erstwhile zamindars still worship Durgā as their daughter and treat the five-day Pūjā as essentially annual visit to her natal home along with her daughters Lakṣmī and Saraswatī and sons Gaṇeś and Kārtik. Even the standard iconography show this weird juxtaposition between the martial image and her familial image.

3. Legacies

The devotion towards Kālī attained a different dimension around the famous saint of the nineteenth century, Śrī Rāmkrṣṇa, the helper and later as the priest of the newly consecrated Kali temple at Dakṣiṇeśwar in 1855. Even after having been initiated into the practice of Śākta-Tāntric worship, Śrī Rāmkrṣṇa did not exactly subscribe to this path as his contemporary Bāmakcyapā. Scholars say that he was convinced both by the Vedantic idea of the oneness between god and man and the *Nirākar-Nirguṇa* Brahman to be the ultimate road to the realisation of god and also by the Śākta-Tāntric traditions that enabled him to worship the image of mother as the personal God. He chose *bhaktimārga*, carried the *santānbhāva* (child-like spirit) of Rāmprasād and further toned it down to a level free of all the anguishes and tensions that were often seen in the unjustness and cruelties of the mother that was a characteristic feature of the Śākta *padas* to a level of complete child-like surrender of the ego.²²

“...*brahma satya jagat mithyā ei bicār. Sab swapnabat...*”

“*tāi Īśwar abatīrṇa hoye bhaktir upodeś den- śaraṇāgata hote bolen. Bhakti theke tnār kṛpāye sab hoye-jñān, bijñān sab hoye.*”²³

Interestingly, Sister Nivedita who had belonged to a Christian background and probably never relinquished her ties with the religion, found the terrifying vision of Kālī to be a more complete one than the Christian vision of a tender, blissful and loving mother Mary.²⁴ According to her, Rāmprasād was such an unique example of ‘the radiant white-heat of child- likeness’ who was equally grave to be understood easily.²⁵

In the times of the rise of assertive and radical politics towards the turn of the century, there is too much stress on the divine mothers as the symbol of power but there is always a juxtaposition between the symbols of bounty and that of famine and destruction. In the context of Bakim’s description of the nation as the divine mother in *Ānanadamath* or the other novels, power seems to be supposed to reside with the sons while the mother’s role is probably limited to arousing the sons.²⁶ Among the various other elements in the Śākta padas, there is this continuous contrast between the two imageries.

Sadānandamayī Kālī, mahākāler monmohinī

*tumi āpan sukhe āpan nāco, āpni dāo mā kara-
tāli, ...*

asānta Kamalākānta diyā bole gālāgāli

ebār sarbanāśī dhare asi dharmādharmā dutāi khālī

[Everblissful mother Kālī, the queen of the heart of Mahākāla

you dance as per your desire while clapping with great joy...

Kamalākānta being troubled rebukes you

for having fought with a sword while caring nothing about dharma (Translation Mine)]²⁷

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, a host of others followed that include journalist-poets like Īśwar Ācandra Gupta, Harināth Majumdār, playwright like Giriś Candra Ghoc on the one hand and *sādhak* Mahendranāth Bhattācārya, who is popularly known as *Premik Mahārāj* and poets like Najrul Islam on the other. Interestingly, Premik Mahārāj founded *Kālī-kīrtan*

Samiti in Āndul and this group would perform songs in groups. The wide pervasiveness of the Śakta tradition got inherited in the writings or poems dedicated to the new divine, that is, nation as mother or mother goddess. The new tide of emotions directed to the mother donning a new garb can be found following poem of Premik Mahārāj.

*Eso bhāi sakale mile, pari ekata suhār gale
pūjiba bhārat-mātaye...
sabe hou bhāi Mā-er chhele, kāndāye śwet baṅiker dale.*²⁸

Come brothers, everyone together
with weraths around your necks
let us worship Mother India...
Brothers, sons of the Mother all-
The white merchants shall weep through our movement...²⁹

Hence, Śakta literature that evolved and flourished from the eighteenth century was able to exert tremendous influence on the literature of Bengal and its cultural milieu. One of the anonymous poems classified under the Khulna-Jessore documents in the Sedition Committee Report published in 1918 narrates the plea to offer respite from the exploitation of the robber that possibly mean the misery of India under foreign rule.

We have grown impatient at the persecution of the robbers
Merciful goddess, look at us with an eye of compassion...³⁰

Another such anonymous poem connote a sense of child-like surrender to the goddess who is supposed to be in charge of the well-being of everyone.

If the child could be refractory and foolish,
Does it not find a place in the lap of its mother?
Listen, Mother, I pray thee: -do not afflict us any longer...³¹

The popularity of Rāmprasād's songs and possible Śakta padas in general could hardly be ignored and in 1920s, a translation of his *padas* was published. Thompson and Spencer who translated the Rāmprasād's padas mentioned the latter as "better side of Saktism" that otherwise represented "the worst side of Kālī-worship".³² In the Editorial Preface of the said volume

Edward J. Thompson talked about the universal appeal of Rāmprasād's songs among both the peasants and pandits who drew solace from them during the times of despair.³³

4. A Summation

The main aim of this article is to underline the importance of the various strands of the Śākta literature that made a profound impact on the psyche and cultural life of Bengal. It is probably quite unique to the region and drew upon many of its regional precedents as could be found especially in the Āgamanī-Bijayā songs. It was one of the literary products of the rapidly changing times of the eighteenth century and such factors as the massive interest shown by the landed aristocrats or the pre-eminence of Vaicnava bhakti tradition led to its eventual emergence and popularity. As seen in the discussion above, the padas were still composed in the next two century and probably the popularity of these had a huge role to play in moulding the emotions of the people towards nation that was identified not only as the mother but as the divine mother. It was primarily the mother of the Śākta padas, the one who could kill the demons as well as rescue her children and not the deity of the Purāṇas who figured in the imagination of the national devotees. The host of poets in the next generation belonged to diverse backgrounds and their life and works with reference to time and space probably can still be a rich ground for future research. However, the huge popularity of the songs of Śākta Padāvalī that continue even to this day prove that this tradition was successful in leaving its distinctive mark in the religious and cultural heritage of Bengal.

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- 2 Sukumar Sen, *Madhyajuger Baṅglā O Bāñālī*, p. 37
- 3 Professor Monier Williams, *Non-Christian Religious Systems: Hinduism*, p. 116
- 4 Shashi Bhushan Das Gupta, *Bharater akti Sādhanā O Śākta Sāhitya*, Preface
- 5 ŚrīAmarendranath Ray, *Śākta Padāvalī*, Preface
- 6 Śrī Rasikmohan Chattopadhyay (edited) and Śrī Candrakumār Tarkālankār (translated). *Śrīmat Kṛṣṇānanda Āgambāgīś kṛta Bṛhat Tantrasārah*, pp. 1-3.
- 7 McDermott, *Mother of My Hearts, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*, p. 162
- 8 Das Gupta, *Bharater akti Sādhanā O Śākta Sāhitya*, pp. 207-208
- 9 McDermott, *Mother of My Hearts, Daughter of My Dreams*, p. 162

- 10 Das Gupta, *Bharater akti Sādhanā O Śākta Sāhitya*, pp. 231-232
- 11 Rāy, *Śākta Padāvalī*, p. 168
- 12 For example, one of the oldest compilation made by Girish Chandra Choudhury named as *Kabiranjan Rāmprasād Sen Prañīta Bahūtar Prācīn Kabigaṅkṛta Padasamūha Rāg Rāginī Sambalita Ekatre Saṅgraha* mention only the *rāg* and *tāl* for the songs.
- 13 C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and Collective Unconscious*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, pp. 28-33.
- 14 *Ibid*, p. 82
- 15 This *pada* that is composed by Rasik Candra Rāy is edited by Rāy in *Śākta Padāvalī*, p. 29
- 16 Jung, *The Archetypes and Collective Unconscious*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, pp. 101-102
- 17 Das Gupta, *Bharater akti Sādhanā O Śākta Sāhitya*, p. 297
- 18 Rāy (edited), *Śākta Padābalī*, p. 5
- 19 *Ibid*, preface
- 20 McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of the Hindu Festivals*, pp. 83-87
- 21 McDermott, *Mother of My Hearts Daughter of My Dreams*, p. 31
- 22 Sumit Sarkar discussed about the various crisis of the colonial middle class in the colonial era that Rāmkr̥ṣṇa was able to address in his chapter “Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti” in *Writing Social History*.
- 23 Śrī Ma-kathita *ŚrīŚrīRāmkr̥ṣṇa Kathāmṛta*, p. 944
- 24 Kali the Mother in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. I, p. 474-475
- 25 *Ibid*, pp. 487-488
- 26 Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, pp. 255-257
- 27 Girīs Candra Choudhury (compiled) and Rām Kānāi Das (published), *Kabiranjan Rāmprasād Sen Prañīta Bahūtar Prācīn Kabigaṅkṛta Padasamūha Rāg Rāginī Sambalita Ekatre Saṅgraha*, pp. 84-85
- 28 Pan itbar Mahendranāth Bhattācārya, *Āndul Kālī-Kīrtan O Bāul Gītābalī*, p. 106
- 29 Rachel Fell McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal*, pp. 89-90
- 30 Sedition Committee Report, 1918 Appendices p. xxxiii
- 31 *Ibid*, p. xxxiii
- 32 Edward J. Thompson and Arthur Marshman Spencer, *The Heritage of India Series: Bengali Religious Lyrics*, p. 12.
- 33 *Ibid*, p. 19