

## TRADITIONAL POETRY

### Bengali

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##### The Early Poetry

Forty-six mystic poems or songs composed by Mahayana Buddhist scholars of the period around A.D.1000 are the earliest examples available of Bengali poetry. Kanhapada or Krsnacarya, Bhusukpada, Santipada, Sarahapada, sabarapada, Kamalipada and Kukkuripada (all 10th-11th century) were some of the 22 poets who composed these poems. They lived in the monasteries of North Bengal and Bihar and were known as far as Tibet and Nepal.

These songs, symbolic and esoteric in nature, were meant primarily for the initiates of Tantric Buddhism, but fortunately they have, while illustrating those symbols, left for later generations instances of literary insight and descriptions of riverine Bengal, of rowing, hunting, love making, stage acting, marriage and of trades like boat making, spinning or the building of houses. These songs, called *caryapadas* or *caryagitis* (*carya songs*, 10th-11th century), are mostly of five couplets, each rhyming at the end. They employ a variety of the *PrakrtaMatravrttametre* in which the long and short syllables are freely placed in a line of 16 or sometimes 26 morae. Here are some examples of the poems in translation:

(i) My beloved of the doma-caste ! Your hut is in the outskirts of the town and you touch stupid Brahmins going along the streets. My desire is to be with you alone, dear one; let me ask you frankly, in whose boat do you come and go? You sell strings of entrails and slit bamboo baskets. For you have I thrown off all social vanity. ·

(ii) Lofty mountains are the abode of *sabara* girls dressed up with peacock feathers on their heads, and neck laces of *Gunja* seeds. *O Sabara*, my dear mad lover, I beseech you, make no fun. Am I not your wife, the beautiful *sahaja girl*? Look the trees are in flower, raising high their branches.

These poems are the linguistic documents of the oldest form of Bengali. They give an idea of the Tantric Buddhist or the *Sahaja* cult prevailing at the time, furnish a picture of caste-ridden Bengali society and provide clues to the symbolic expressions of the later *Sahajiya* sects. They also help trace the origin of the traditional Bengali *payar* (rhymed couplet) or *tripadi* metres.

Tantric Buddhism, however, was on its way out in the mainland and was to take shelter on the Tibetan heights.

Meanwhile; the political picture was also changing. The Sena kings who succeeded the Buddhist ones were originally Hindu chiefs of Karnataka. Ballal Sen (1158-79) encouraged Brahmin aristocracy.

Laksrnan Sen (12th century) in addition patronized Sanskrit poets, most prominent of whom was Jayadeva (12th century) of *Gita govinda* fame. Apart from composing slokas in Sanskrit, Jayadeva, with his lyrical genius, turned the tide of degenerated Buddhism and established the erotic-mystic Krishna-Radha cult as the favourite topic of lyric poets for centuries to come. *Gitagovinda* (end of 12th century) perhaps originally composed in a mixed style of Sanskrit and *Apabhramsa* with *Apabhramsa* metrics having a superb alliterative quality of the lines, is a unique production of its kind. With its romantic delineation of all aspects of love, it remains a fine lyric treasure of Bengal even in the modern period. To the Vaishnavas of the medieval period, however, *Gitagovinda* came as a new religious experience, with the prominence of Radha as the supreme worshipper of Krishna through love.

The name of Radha, Krishna's dearest Gopi, is not to be found in the *Bhagavata Purana* or in the famous Advait Bhakti lyrics. Her name appears in a few *Prakrta* and Sanskrit secular compositions and in one or two places in *Lilasuka's* (11th century) *Krsna-Karnamrta* (c. 1100) from which Jayadeva probably drew his inspiration. His occasional stay at the Jagannatha Temple at Puri might have had something to do with his novel attempt. Whatever be the source, Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* succeeded in rousing the latent romantic feelings of the people and in sustaining two great lyric poets Chandidas (Chandidas, 15th century) in Bengal and Vidyapati (Vidyapati, 15th century) in Mithila. These two poets, particularly Chandidas, were also responsible for forging a link between the upper and the lower classes.

Chandidas or rather Badu Chandidas (Badu is a young unmarried Brahmin) composed *SriKrshna-Kirtana* around 1100. This long narrative poem has abundant lyrical qualities and possesses a maturity of language and metre. This is the first *Krshna-lila* poem in Bengali. It describes the phases of Radha's love for Krishna, from primary indifference, since she was already married to Abhimanyu, through all the other stages. Badu Chandidas' plan is so original and execution so skilful that Bengal Vaishnavism after Chaitanyabegan to consider a parakiya relationship (love for an already married woman) as the most important factor in divine love.

The discovery of the manuscript of *Srikrshna-Kirtan* in 1911, by Basantaranjan Ray, created a stir in both the literary and religious circles. The poem revealed itself as a narrative with dramatic elements and lyrical qualities in it. It delineates the gradual psychological changes in Radha's heart from apathy to a fully grown love. The character of Badai, the aged go-between, is also well drawn. The lyrical quality of several poems in it reminds the reader of the poet's later *padas*, which were thought, before the discovery of the long manuscript, to be his only compositions. Chandidas is still very much a living poet in Bengal, and his ability to translate in common language the deepest pathos of woman-in-love is still considered unparalleled. Here is a dialogue in verse in which Krishna teases Radha, knowing well that she is none else but his own consort in a previous birth:

K: Your grace and beauty has made me restless ever since I met you, and my heart breaks.

R: One should drown oneself in such a plight with a stone hanging from his neck.

K: But only you are my Ganga and Baranasi where I can find rest; in you are all my shrines and holy places.

R: Shame to you that you dare talk like that to your own maternal aunt.

K: I am the lord of all the gods, and you are my spouse.

It is useless to draw other relationships.

R: Such claims make you feel good, isn't it? Only a daring burglar breaks thus into another man's home.

K: Right you are, you have exactly said what my mind desires. (tr.)

Here are some other lines that bring out Radha's pangs of *Purvaraga* (the dawning of love) after she has completely surrendered to the magic flute of Krishna:

O Badai, who is he who thus plays the flute on *Kalindi's* bank, and in the fields of *Gokula*? My body thrills, my mind is restless, my cooking goes wrong.

Tell me Badai who he is, and I could ever serve him as his bondmaid.

Blissfully he plays his flute, but what offence have I given him I do not know.

Tears roll down my eyes, I have lost my heart to that music.

Isn't he Nanda's son, but does he flute to captivate me alone?

Alas, I am no bird to fly to him.

Open up, Mother Earth, let me enter you and escape. Listen. Badai, everybody can see when a forest is on fire. But my heart burns within like a potter's closed oven.

. (tr.)

The poet's mature compositions are in a markedly different style, as the following example will show. Mere utterance of the name of Krishna by a friend affects Radha profoundly, and she laments:

Ah, who thus tells me Syama's name?

Through the ears it descends to the depth of my being, and moves my soul.

Who can measure the melody of Syama's name?

which the mouth cannot stop repeating?

The utterance of the name over and over again

benumbs my senses.

How can I ever reach him, my friend? (tr.)

Vidyapati, probably a later contemporary of Chandidas, and an equally fine lyric poet, prefers more ornate language for his *Krsna-lila* poems. If Chandidas is considered a poet of imaginative sorrow, Vidyapati is generally regarded as a poet of hope and joy. But here is a sad (*mathurar* poem by Vidyapati, who was a master of sentiment and style:

. My friend, who knows if Madhava would ever come back?

I see no hope that this gulf of separation could ever be crossed.

A whole day passed while expecting him by the hour, Months went by while I counted only the days.

The months have now yielded to years, and all desire for love and life is now gone.

Travellers return with the rains,

but my seasons come and go fruitless.

When the cold moon kills the lotus bloom,

What can the spring-time bestow?

If the sun blights the young shoots,

What can the rains redeem?

What can late love bring if youth droops in separation? (tr.)

### **Translated Poems**

Early medieval Bengali literature is rich in translations from the classical Ramayana and Bhagavata Purana. This period also witnessed the composing of the so-called *Mangala Kavyas* (Mangala poems) based on folk-worship and legends connected with the unconventional deities. During the same period were born the Gopicanand-Maynamati legends, mostly in extempore poetry, in the north-eastern and south-eastern fringes of Bengal.

It should be noted that pre-modern Bengali literature meant all poetry, most of which, again, was put to music by groups of singers who divided and subdivided the main episode of the narrative poem for convenient performance or for *rasa*. Each such episode was meant to be sung during a whole night or day, and thus the singing of an entire poem continued for days together.

When Krittibas (Krttibas, 15th century) composed his seven-canto Bengali Ramayana in traditional payar and tripadi metres, possibly he had in mind *pancali*, an old mode of song-performance by five singers. In *pancali* which became a very popular way of singing long narratives like the Ramayana or

the *Mangala* poems, the four assistants of the principal singer only repeat the refrain. Krittibas' translation is not entirely faithful to the Sanskrit original, probably because he wanted to present a Ramayana that would be joyfully accepted by one and all. His Rama is a soft and loving Bengali youth as well as an incarnation of Narayana who is bountiful even to an enemy. His Sita represents the ideal Bengali bride. As for Hanuman, he is a pure and simple *Bhakta*. Incidents can also be found in this Ramayana which are not there in the original. Krittibas' Valmiki is shown originally as a robber, Ratnakar, as one who turns into a great poet through the influence of Rama's name. Taranisen, Mahiravana and others gladly seek death from Rama's arrows. And Rama propitiates the goddess Candi before his final encounter with Ravana. It may be that some of these episodes were actually later interpolations made by other singers to please their audience. But considering the total structure of his Ramayana, it can safely be conjectured that Krittibas himself introduced some innovations in the story, as Tulasidas did in Hindi.

Krittibas treated the character of Ravana, Mandodari and Indrajit in his own way. The death of his Indrajit is intended to bring tears. His Ravana is a great king well versed in the *Nities* (Laws), so much so that before Ravana's death Rama himself goes to him for initiation in royal diplomacy. It is not unlikely that Michael Madhusudan Dutt in the 19th century was influenced by Krittibas in treating Ravana and Indrajit with great admiration. Krittibas wrote in a simple folk-style, which earned for him great popularity. Colophons in one or two manuscripts suggest that he was patronised by a Sultan whose court was adorned by highly placed Hindu officials and scholars.

The exact date of composition of the first Bengali Ramayana is difficult to decide. But we are sure of the date of the first translation of the *Krsna-lila* portion of the Bhagavata. It was called *Srikrnsa Vijay* (1480) and was by Maladhar Basu (2nd half of the 15th century). The translator's patron was RuknuddinBarbakSah, Sultan of Gaud from 1459 to 1475. *Srikrnsa Vijay* was greatly admired by Chaitanya himself.

The end of the 15th century also witnessed the spread of two full-fledged *Manasa* (the Snake Goddess) poems, which had the legend of Behula and Lakhindar integrated in them. From the beginning of the early 16th century, there were, in medieval traditional poetry, three distinct trends which continued till the end of the 18th century. These were: (i) The *Mangalkavyas*, celebrating such deities as Manasa, Dadrn (the deity presiding over wealth and kingdom, later integrated with Durga and Kalika), Dharma (or, rather, Dadm, who bestows progeny and cures leprosy), and Siva-Parvati (with both Puranic and folk legends). The songs about Maynamatt and Gopichand also fall into this category; (ii) a group of poetry that includes the Vaisnavite religious lyrics and some biographies; and (iii) a group consisting of translations either from the Sanskrit, such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavata, or from foreign sources, which had been introduced by Muslim patrons and Muslim poets. Some secular ballads formed a separate category altogether.

### **The Mangal Poems**

In a Mangal poem the poet begins with invocations, first to Ganapati, then to the Goddess of Learning, and then to the deity to be eulogized. After this follows a summary of ancient matters connected with the Puranas, mainly the Siva-Parvati episode mixed with folk traditions. The deity being eulogized then curses some young god and his wife, or a heavenly nymph, and makes them assume mortal form to help propagate worship of the particular deity being sung about. Here ends

*the Deva-khanda* (the heavenly portion) and what follows is the 'human portion' or the real poem. The cursed gods are shown leading a hard life, in both union and separation. The long poem finally ends happily with the worship of the particular deity accepted by all. As a matter of tradition, each real Mangal poem should also include a *Baramasiya* (enumeration of all the twelve months of grief of the heroine) and the *Cautisa* (adoration of the deity in thirty-four alphabets). The *Candi-Mangal* poems generally strictly adhere to this tradition. In both the *Candi* and *Manasa* poems, the hero's mother is shown as an already converted devotee of the deity concerned. The hero's father, on the other hand, owes allegiance to the older god Siva and defies the new deity. The *ManasaMangal* poets utilize this opportunity to present a brave and stubborn character, an upholder of principles, who is undaunted by pressure or calamity.

The human portion of the story in the *Manasa-Mangal* poems tells of the merchant *Cand*, who is an ardent devotee of Siva, but whose wife Sanaka worships a new goddess, *Manasa*. Before *Cand* sets out with his merchant fleet, he kicks the sacred pots of *Manasa* and shatters them to show his disrespect. *Manasa* retaliates by drowning his six sons and their merchandise in the sea. *Cand* is spared because he must be persuaded to be her first venerator, as ordained. He suffers great misery and humiliation, but remains firm in his determination not to worship the flat-headed and one-eyed hateful goddess'. Time passes and to *Cand*, another son, *Lakhai* or *Lakhindar* is born. When *Lakhai* grows up, his father arranges for his marriage with *Behula*, a good-looking dancing girl but a born devotee of *Manasa*. The scheming deity now causes *Lakhai* to die of snake-bite on the second night of his marriage. While *Cand*, the sceptic, laughs and dances with the snake-killing club on his shoulder, *Sanaka*, the boy's mother, laments loudly and accuses *Behula* of being a most unlucky girl.

Lamenting and weeping bitterly *Sanaka* started to rebuke *Behula*.

The vermilion mark is still red in the parting of your hair. Your bridal garment is still spotless.

You luckless girl with gaps in your teeth,

You have gobbled up your spouse before the wedding night has ended.

*Behula* decides to take the body to *Manasa* and get it revived. She places the body on a banana-raft and, deaf to all entreaties, sails for an unknown destination. Thus begins the greatest trial of a woman's life.

The rest of the story, known as *Bhasanpala* (The Voyage), is the best part of this *Manasa* poem. It shows the extreme limits of a woman's suffering for love. Numerous poets and singers have dwelt on the pathos of the situation. Ignoring all threats and temptations, she continues her voyage with the decomposing body of *Lakhai* on her lap, and finally reaches the city of the gods. There she enchants *Siva Parvati* and *Manasa* (who is supposed to be their daughter) with her dancing, and succeeds in getting them to bring back to life her husband. Back home, *Behula* still finds it difficult to persuade the great merchant to pay homage to the goddess *Manasa*. When *Cand* finally yields, he carelessly throws only a flower with his left hand to the deity whom he hated so much. It is made clear that *Cand* surrenders only to the entreaties of his family and not to destiny.

The earliest authors of the *Mangal* poems are VijayGupta of Barisal (now in Bangladesh) and Vipradas of West Bengal, both of whom lived towards the end of the 15th century when Hossain Shah was the Sultan of Bengal. Both wrote in elegant Bengali and while Vijay Gupta excelled in characterization, Vipradas was meticulous about details of localities and society. The *Manasa* poems were very popular in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), where worship of the snake-goddess prevailed. A large number of *Mangal* poets are from this region. The 16th century poet Narayanadev, once popular as 'Sukavi', composed in the simple dialect of East Bengal, emphasizing the sentiments. DvijaVamsidas of south-east Bengal and his daughter Candravati, who composed some portions of a Bengali Ramayana, collaborated on several *Manasa* songs in the 17th century. Among the North Bengal poets in this tradition, JagajjivanGhosal (17th century) and Jivankrishna Maitra (18th century) are noteworthy for the topographical and social accounts of the villages of North Bengal that one finds in their work. But of all the later poets, KetakadasKshernananda's compositions are perhaps the best. He was a poet of the mid-17th century and wrote in elegant and precise diction. In his poetry he describes his personal ordeals after the death of his patron Bara Khan in a quarrel with a Mughal administrator.

The *ManasaMangal* poems, incidentally, are also occasionally called *Padma-purana*.

Compared to the *Manasa* poems, those called *Candi Mangal* generally show greater literary merit and higher social value. This is due to the genius of that remarkable poet MukundaChakravarti (late 16th century, honoured by the title Kavikankan),

Unlike the *Manasa* poems, the *Candi* poems have not one but two distinct episodes in the 'human' part. The first deals with the spread of the cult among the lower caste people, the second with its spread in the higher merchant class. The wife and son of the merchant are shown as born devotees of *Candi*, while the merchant himself worships *Siva* and is opposed to the new goddess. It would appear that *Candi*, like *Manasa*, was originally a goddess of the tribal people and entered into the Hindu puranic pantheon with the Hinduization of the non-Aryans.

The legend of *Kalketu*, the hunter, as found in *Candi* poems is quite original. In their previous birth the hunter and his wife *Phullara* were gods. In their human incarnation they are humble untouchables; they remain loving and faithful to each other. *Kalketu* hunts in the forest and *Phullara* sells the meat and animal skins. *Candi*, intending to introduce herself on earth through *Kalketu*, plays a trick one day. She lies in *Kalketu*'s path in the guise of a big lizard (*godhika*). *Kalketu* takes this to be an inauspicious sign. Unable to secure any other prey, he returns home with the big lizard tied to his bow. *Candi* meanwhile changes her guise and becomes a beautiful woman. *Phullara*, when she returns from the market, is amazed to find a beautiful woman waiting in her hut. She questions *Candi*, who fond of humour and desirous of making the most of the situation, gives dubious answers. *Phullara* is astonished to learn that *Candi* wants to stay with them, as *Kalketu*'s second wife. This is the greatest ordeal of *Phullara*'s life. She first entreats *Candi* to go back to her own husband, then tries to dissuade her by quoting moral principles. Failing to move the intruder she begins a lament in which she describes the twelve-month long grief that is her lot (*Baramasiya*). The poets of *Candi-Mangal* generally exhaust their poetic skill on this topic of *Baramasiya*, as may be seen in *Mukunda's Baramasiya* of *Phullara*, from which these excerpts are taken:

*Grief of Asadh (June-July)*

Earth fills with rain water falling from fresh clouds. Even big people find their resources used up before long.

With the basket of meat, I turn from door to door, and return with some broken rice too small for a meal.

Fair lady, look where we live, look, it is flooded even with no rains around.

*Grief of Kartik (October-November)*

Cold is born with the month of *Kartik*,  
and people are busy fighting the chill.

God has granted clothes for all, luckless

Phullara can only put on a deer-skin.

What more can the body endure, O what more?

Sitting awake with nothing to cover me,

I let the night pass.

*Grief of Spring*

The wind blows soft in the sweet month of *Spring*.

The honeybees suck honey from malati flowers.

*Madan* burns the bodies of other men and women.

My body burns in the flames only of an empty belly.

Oh my grim destiny, O my grim destiny,

Full twice sixteen miles separate us though

I sleep next to my husband.

Candi remains unmoved even by this tragic narration. She continues her joke by saying, 'Your husband has brought me to this place by tying me with his *guna* (punning on a word which may mean either "quality" or a "bow string"); go and ask him if he has not done so.' Phullara, bitterly weeping all the way, goes to the market place to find Kalketu, Then follows, in Kavikankan, this dialogue in verse:

The husband begins:

Why are the eyes so scarlet, dear? With whom did you quarrel? You have no mother-in-law or sisters in-law or a second wife of your husband at home.

Replies Phullara:

It is not the question of a second wife at home, you yourself have acted like one.

The providence must have turned against me.

But ants grow wings only before their death.

May I ask, whose daughter of sixteen have you brought home?

What made you to take to vices my brave?

You are from this day the Ravana of Lanka fame.

Don't forget that Kalinga's rogue king

waits his turn.

Surely he will now strike you dead and debauch me.

And Kalketu angrily shouts:

Be precise, woman, and tell me what you mean.

Lie and I'll chip your nose with this chopper.

Phullara then weeps:

In the matter of truth or falsehood, virtue is surely on my side.

As for her, go and see her like a three-night

old crescent moon, firmly installed before our door.

Reaching his hut Kalketu is stunned by the woman he sees there and at once falls on his knees. He pleads with the strange woman to go back to her husband, puts forth reasons and cites instances of sacred love. When she refuses to move, Kalketu lifts his bow and aims an arrow at her. But, alas, his limbs become paralyzed and he can neither shoot the arrow, nor put his bow down. Phullara tries to

remove the bow and arrow from his hands, but she too fails. The goddess then reveals herself, tells them who she is and blesses the couple. Kalketu receives from her a golden ring, gems worth seven crores of rupees, and another seven pitchers full of money. Candi asks him not to kill innocent creatures of the forest any more, and commands him to set up a small kingdom called Gujarat and to initiate there the worship of Candi. This is how her cult is supposed to have spread among the lowly people.

The conversion of the upper class starts with the merchant Dhanapati who had two wives. The younger one, Khullana (heavenly nymph reborn on earth), is a devotee of Candi Lahana, the older, has kept her in misery. But her husband loves her, and when he is on a voyage, a son is born to her whom she calls Srimanta. The rest of the story describes Dhanapati's adventures in distant Simhala (Sri Lanka). He has a vision of a miracle in the ocean: it is of a goddess of surprising beauty (*KamaleKamini*) sitting on a lotus. She sucks in a whole elephant and brings it out the next moment. The King of Simhala is sceptical when the vision is described to him, and the merchant is put into prison. Srimanta, when he comes of age, goes in search of his father. He convinces the King of Simhala, through the grace of Candi, of the existence of KamaleKamini, and frees his father from bondage. Srinanta then marries the king's daughter and they return home to worship Candi. The union of father and son is depicted by the poets with deep emotion.

Poet MukundaChakravarti, the best narrative poet of medieval Bengal, is the first important poet to write of the Candi-cult. This cult, however, was old before his time and it may be surmised that earlier poets had composed poems in at least the 15th and 16th centuries about the two episodes. Mukunda himself, writing, in about 1600, refers to a poet named ManikDatta who had composed on Candi before him. But unfortunately such compositions have been lost.

Poet Mukunda is memorable for his literary skill. He also integrated in his work his full experience of the society he lived in, the caste-ridden Hindu one and the divided Muslim one. He writes of the occupations of the people, of big landlords and the conditions in small feudal states. His sympathy for the humblest and poorest is reflected in his verses. His talent for characterization is best seen in his Phullara, a model Bengali wife. His creation of a delightful rogue in Bhandudatta has been praised by all.

In his autobiography Mukunda gives his reasons for composing the *Candi-Mangal* poem. For historical reasons connected with revenue-and-land reforms during Akbar's reign, the poet had to leave his agricultural lands and homestead. With his wife and children he left his home and travelled over a hundred miles. Exhausted and hungry, they lay resting one day by the side of a large tank, when Candi in the guise of his mother, appeared to him in a dream and asked him to compose a *Mangal* poem in her honour. The result has remained a marvel of medieval poetic creation.

There were two notable poets of the Candi-cult after Kavikankan. They were DvijaMadhav and Dvija Rama dev, who lived in the south-eastern part of Bengal in the mid-17th century. They developed the episodes on slightly different lines. DvijaMadhav is merely a narrator of bare facts, while Ramadev whose poem is called *Abhaya-Mangal* has shown good lyrical ability and alliterative sweetness.

A few minor poets such as DvijaJanardan and AkincanCakrabarti composed similar poetry in the 17th and 18th centuries, but by that time the nature of Candi had been modified to some extent. Candi had turned into Annapurna, or Annada, and had a softer and more benevolent disposition. The

worship of goddess Kali side by side with Durga (i.e. Candi) had also become prevalent in the 18th century and so the name of *KalikaMangal* was also given to such poems. Later, when the secular love episode of 'Vidya and Sundar' found favour with the administrators and the big landlords, that episode too was included with the Kalika-poems and the erotic story of Vidya-Sundar was given a religious look. It is to be noted that the episodes of *AnnadaMangal*, or *KalikaMangal*, are quite different from those of *Candi Mangal*.

A mid-18th-century poet Bharatchandra Ray (Bharat candra Ray honoured as 'Gunakar'), was a composer in this tradition and is the next substantial poet of this genre after KavikankanMukunda. He is remembered as a witty stylist and one of the finest satirists of early modern times.

A third important trend in Mangal poetry is the composition about a legendary hero Lausen. Semi-historical episodes of wars and adventures are also included in these poems. During the reign of the Pala kings in Bengal, the son and wife of Karnasen, a feudal lord, were devotees of Dharrna (originally *Dadm*, a tribal and low-caste deity). Karnasen was employed by the Pala king to subdue a rebellious vassal chief, but failed in his mission and lost his six sons in the battle. Lausen, his seventh son, was born later. The child grew up, performed several miracles, all by the grace of Dharma and finally defeated his father's vanquisher. The poems about this hero are full of miraculous incidents, though wars and adventures tend to give them an epic character. A noticeable feature of these poems is the depiction of women taking active part in war and exhibiting great courage and high morals.

The Dharma-cult, as well as the composition of poems in honour of Dharrna, was confined only to the Radh region of West Bengal. The cult was connected with the lowest strata of the society. One such poem by ManikGanguli begins with the curious statement:

Jati Jay Jadiprabhuihakarigan,

(Though I may lose my caste, O Lord, I must sing of

Dharma.)

A fourth category of Mangal poems deals with the character and activities of Siva, or Siva-Parvati together. In the Bengal of these poems Siva is a near-debauchee beggar or a peasant who is intimate with low-caste women. Parvati or Durga, is a jealous wife who covets riches and quarrels with her husband. But ultimately they make their peace and live as ideal husband and wife. In these poems is found a peculiar mixture of the Puranic with the indigenous elements. The best-known composers of the Sivayans are Ramakrishna and Ramesvar, the latter being considered superior. Ramesvar, in his attempt to follow Kavikankan, has enriched his poem with pictures of the 18th-century Bengali society, but tends to exaggerate.

In addition to these branches of *Mangal* poetry, there were numerous compositions which had other cults as their background. Such poetry included *Ganga Mangal*, *SitalaMangal* (Sitala is the goddess of smallpox), *Kamala Mangal* or the panchali of Lakshmi, *Ray Mangal* (Ray, or Dakshina Ray,

is a god who presides over tigers) and *Ola-bibiMangal* (Ola is cholera). But the episodes they narrate are highly concocted and there is little poetic merit in the writing.

### More Translations

Krittibas and Maladhar Basu (Maladhar Basu alias Gunaraj Khan) have already been mentioned as the first Bengali translators of the Ramayana and Bhagavata respectively, from Sanskrit. The translator of the Ramayana in particular took considerable liberties with the original when writing his version and modified several characters. He was very likely connected with the *Ramayet* sect, a pan-Indian religious body of the time, and this may account for the dominating sentiment of *Bhakti* in his version of the Ramayana. These deviations from the original gradually became more prominent in other translations and the *KrishnaMangal* poems or the translations of the Bhagavat underwent a thorough change after Sri Chaitanya who founded *Ragamika* devotion and *Radhabhava*.

About 20 other translators of the Ramayana are known, but none rendered Valmiki faithfully. Adbhut Acharya's unorthodox narration of the Ramayana, for instance, shows the transformation of Ratnakar, a cruel bandit, into the poet Valmiki by just the repetition of Rama's name. It also includes a delightful encounter between Rama and Siva, and mentions a thousand-headed Ravana who could be killed only by Sita.

Jagatram Ray (Jagatram Ray), who lived in the 18th century, composed a very long Ramayana with two extra kandas (cantos) added to the original seven. His son Ramprasad, who later composed a *Krishna-lila* poem, assisted him. Jagatram's Ramayana is also called *AdbhutRamayan* for its novel episodes in the added *Puskara* and *RamarasKandas*. The poet wanted to establish the identity of Rama with Siva and Krishna and went so far as to imagine Ravana inviting Rama to be the priest in a sacrifice in which he wanted to offer his own life as recompense.

Another poet, RamanandaYati (18th century), composed the *RamatatvaRamyan*, combining the Hindi *TulasiRamyan* and the *AdbhutRamyan*. A second Ramananda preached Buddhist doctrines in his work, posing as an Avatara of the Buddha. *Rama-rasayan* of Raghunandan is based on *Krishna-lila* and has the added influence of Tulsidas.

Maladhar Basu (alias Gunaraj Khan), the first translator of the Bhagavata *Krishna-lila*, also adopted parts of the *Harivamso*. Later translators modified their translations according to the new approach of *Bhakti* established by Sri Chaitanya and expounded by scholars of Puri and Vrindavana. Sri Chaitanya himself met one such translator, Raghunath Acharya, and after listening to his exposition of the Bhagavata with tears in his eyes, gave him the title of 'Bhagavata Acharya'. His translation is known as *KrishnapremaTarangini*. Madhava Acharya also wrote a *SrikrishnaMangal* poem some time after Bhagavata Acharya. His poem contains 'Danalila' and 'Naukalila' sung earlier by Chandidas. The *Krishna-lila* poems, enriched by later lyrics, gave rise to the *Jatra* plays of Bengal.

The first Bengali translation of the Mahabharata was attempted towards the end of the 15th century. Paragal Khan, a commandant of the illustrious Sultan Hussain Shah, was very fond of the Pandava Katha and engaged Paramesvara Das (16th century) to translate the entire story from

Sanskrit. Paragal's son Nasrat Khan, popularly called as Chote or Chuti Khan, also encouraged the poet Srikar Nandi (16th century) to translate the Asvamedhparva of Jaimini Samhita. The poet included many novel episodes in his work with an eye to popular appeal.

Quite a number of poets from northern and western Bengal have translated on popular demand or on instructions from some chief or other, one or two parvas (cantos) either from Vyasa or Jaimini or even single episodes such as Nala-Damayanti or Srivatsakatha. In East Bengal (now Bangladesh) a Bengali version of the Mahabharata by a poet called Sanjay earned praise from both Hindus and Muslims during the early 16th century.

The Bengali Mahabharata is a poem to be recited and, unlike the Ramayana, was never put to music. As a result it is confined to a limited number of listeners who demand good composition and clear recital. It was Kasiram Das (17th century) who satisfied these conditions more than anybody else. It is a reputation he still enjoys. It is said that he translated only the Adi, Sabha, Vana and some portions of the Virataparvas, while the rest was done by Nandaram, a relation, who closely followed his elegant and precise style. Kasiram Das used a colophon at the end of each episode and this colophon is lovingly remembered even by a child in Bengal:

Mahabharater Katha amrtasaman

Kasiram Das Kahesunepunyavan.

(The tales of the Mahabharata is to be compared to the nectar of heaven. The reciter is Kasiram, the listeners are men of virtue).

### **The Secular Narratives**

The medieval secular narrations are mainly translations. Most of them are from Persian originals which circulated in Mughal court circles, but the translations have been done by Muslims as well as Hindus. The major romantic love tales which were taken up for translation include: (i) the tales of Yusuf and Zulekha, (ii) Lor and Chandrani or Sati Maynamati, (iii) Padmavati, (iv) Laila and Majnu, and (v) Vidya and Sundar.

The tragic love story of Yusuf-Zulekha was translated into Bengali directly from the Persian source (if not from Firdausi, then from verbal tradition) by, it is believed, Sah Md. Sagir, under the patronage of Sultan Giasuddin of whom Vidyapati also made some mention. The powerful poet from the group which adorned the courts of the Arakan kings from the early 17th century was DaulatKazi, who translated the love story of Prince Lor and Chandrani (or rather, the estranged love between Lor and Mayna, the first wife of Lor), from a Hindi original, which, perhaps, had its source in some folk-episode of south India. DaulatKazi's language is simple and emotional, but, unfortunately, he could not finish his work before his death. It was SaiyadAlaol (17th century), the next prolific writer connected with the Arakan court, who completed it.

Alaol is the best Bengali poet of the 17th century and a perfect master of the art of poetry. He was originally a poet of love, perhaps following the Sufi religious tradition and much influenced by the

Radha-Krishna love poems of Chandidas or Jnanadas, But he composed a few Vaishnava lyrics too. The poet experienced many ups and downs in life and even suffered a prison term. Nevertheless, he was able to compose a considerable volume of poetry, including *Padmdvati*, *SaifulMulkBadiujamal*, *HaptPaykar* and *Sekendarnama*, which are all romantic episodes couched in rich language and versification.

His *Padmavati* is a free translation of *Padumavat*, a Hindinarrative poem by Malik Muhammad Jaysi. It tells of the love and marriage of Rajput Rana, Bhimsingha of Chitaur, a historical figure, with a fictitious daughter of the King of Simhala, Padmavati. The Sultan of Delhi, AlauddinKhalji, wanted to acquire the lady by force, but he failed, as Padmavati sacrificed herself along with the other Rajput women on the burning pyre. The original semi-historical poem is claimed to be a Sufi allegory. Alaol added to the original, poetic embellishment to suit the Bengali taste. His style is ornate and musical and the composition gives evidence of his deep scholarship in Sanskrit poetics and metrics, philosophy and astronomy, as well as in the new Rasa divisions of the Bengali Vaishnavas. *SaifulMulk* is another romantic love story, based perhaps on a popular modification of an Arabian Nights story. *HaptPaykar* (Seven Portraits) contains seven stories by the famous Persian poet Nizami, and *Sekendarnama*, from the same Persian source, offers stories connected with Alexander the Great.

Another fine narrative poem of the century is *Candravati* by Magan Thakur (17th century), who was once the patron of Alaol. He refers to himself as belonging to the Quereshi sect. The poem, however, is of Hindu origin and is an allegory of love. The later centuries witnessed more compositions on themes like Yusuf-Julekha, Lor-Chandrani and Laila-Majnu, but poetically they do not rank as high as the works of Alaol or Daulat Kazi.

The most important secular love poem of the period is undoubtedly the *Vidya-Sundar*, which was received with great interest by Hindus and Muslims alike. The basis of this romantic episode is the *Caurapancasika*, the Sanskrit poem by Vilhana (10th century) which probably came to Bengal through the Muslim administrators of Arakae and south-east Bengal. It is not unlikely, however, that there was already another version of *Caurapancasika* current in Bengal. Brahmin Sridhar, a favourite of Prince FiruzSah, grandson of Hossain Sah, is known to have translated *Vidya-Sundar* around 1534. Then there is the work of Sabirid Khan, a poet of the Chittagong-Arakan area who knew Sanskrit too. He composed in an elegant, rather ornate Sanskritic Bengali and demonstrated his ability to handle character.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the 'Vidya-Sundar' tradition was carried to the courts of influential Hindu chiefs. By that time, however, the original secular love episode came to be combined with the miracles of goddess Kalika. So poets like Krishnaram Das and others who composed *Ray Mangal*, then BalaramKavisekhar and, finally, Bharatchandra Ray Gunakar and Ramprasad Sen, included the Vidya-Sundar episode in their writings.

Bharatchandra Ray ('Gunakar'), the court poet of Krishnachandra of Nadia, is greatly admired for his style of composition and power of characterization. His depiction of Hiramalini, the go-between in the Vidya-Sundar episode, is still considered unique. His brilliant handling of the language and the creation of a modern style from it has drawn much praise from modern critics. To provide an alliterative sweetness to his style, he borrowed about 1200 Persian words in common use, and for metrical novelty he used varieties of Sanskrit or Prakrit forms, but his regard for current dialect and

idiom is nevertheless evident at every step. He is also a poet of wit and powerful satire and a critic of imbalances in human character.

The popularity of the 'Vidya-Sundar' poems gave rise to musical *Jatra* plays on the topic, and these were in vogue in Calcutta even around the middle of the 19th century.

Apart from these translations, there are original compositions by village poets which are fully secular in character. At the beginning of the 20th century, these were collected for the first time from various places in East Bengal and edited by Dinesh Chandra Sen of Calcutta University. Dealing mostly with tragic love and composed in a Bengali dialect, these poems, more than ten in number, are considered as part of *Loka-Sahitya* (folk literature).

### **The Vaishnava Literature**

The Vaishnava section of Bengali literature is extensive and its influence wider and deeper than any other section. It also has its characteristic extension in the modern period of Bengali literature.

Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas were the precursors of later lyricism as well as of Vaishnavism to a certain extent. It was, however, the advent of Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533) which brought about a revolution in thought and sentiment, and which aroused the latent power of hundreds of Bengali poets by opening up the magic realm of divine love-which is called *ParakiyaRaganuga Bhakti* (devotion of a married woman for a man different from her husband).

The Vaishnava literature may be treated under three main subdivisions, viz. (1) *padas* or lyrics, (2) biographies in verse of Chaitanya and other saints and apostles, and (3) a few theological treatises written in verse. Of these, the *padas* containing exquisite poetic beauty and suggestive significances form a major part of the wealth of Bengali literature. The biographies, though they are saturated with *bhakti* and belief in the supernatural, furnish valuable information about the religious movement, and the political and social conditions of the time, apart from the realistic presentation of chosen characters as far as was possible under the circumstances. The theological treatises give readers some idea of the emotional new religion which produced such a wealth of literature.

It is to be remembered that Bengal Vaishnavism, akin to Sufism, is a religion of faith and emotion, and has no other aim except *Krsnaseva* (the worship of Krishna). The new cult is radically different from the religious cults which produced the *Mangal* poems, and even from the earlier variety of Vaishnavism which encouraged emancipation from the bondage of *Maya*. Sri Chaitanya put all the emphasis on the *nama-kirtana* (musical repetition of the 'name') and on no other practice for the common people. He decried scholasticism, even knowledge as such, and enjoyed songs and resorted to dancing in ecstasy. This explains the prevalence of lyrics and the Bengali kirtana songs in medieval literature.

The *padas*, the lyrical compositions on Chaitanya's life, first began to appear around 1510, just after his initial emotional outbursts in Nabadwip (Nadia). The composers, VasudevGhos, Narahari Sarkar, GovindaGhos, Varhstvidan, Ananta, Yadunath and others were his close associates. These poets of the first half of the 16th century, along with the most advanced religious-minded men like Advaita and Nityananda, at once accepted 'Chaitanya as Krishna himself, reincarnated to found a new

religion. Chaitanya had surprised them by his revolt against Brahminism and his close association with, and sympathy for, the low-caste people. He also did not avoid the Muslims. The religious fervour that went with these practices became the inspiration for generations to come. A poet describes Chaitanya thus:

(Behold: our Lord), He weeps for the fallen,  
and turns to them his kind eyes.

Brighter than gold, his shining, fair body  
repeatedly casting itself on the ground.

For the four castes, for the four disciplines  
of life, for the life of wealth or the life  
of penury, he admits no fault.

Making no distinctions, he bestows his priceless  
love upon the whole of mankind. (tr.)

Chaitanya's associates preferred to call him by his other name, Gora or Gouranga (the one with the fair body). Both VasudevGhos and Narahari Sarkar wrote several padas about him. Vasudev, whose poems are saturated with personal affection, is considered as having best depicted the pathos resulting from the sanyasa (renunciation of the world) of Sri Chaitanya, Narahari, on the other hand, excelled in *padas* in which Gouranga is considered as Krishna and his associates as the Gopis (milkmaids) of Vrndavana. This viewpoint of Narahari, elaborated by his disciple Lochandas, another biographer, did not, however, receive general approval. The lyrics dealing with this phase of Chaitanya's life were later called *Gauracandrikapadas* and were sung at the commencement of the singing of *Radha-Krsna Lila*.

Next come the lyrics on the Lila of Radha and Krishna. Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas were all taken as models by later poets, at least in the style of composition. Some composers came to favour the style of Chandidas and wrote in a simple and direct manner. Others preferred, and so imitated, the ornate style of Vidyapati or the alliterative music of Jayadeva. The latter group actually used a mixed form of language, which later came to be known as *Braja buli* (the language of Braja), perhaps because it was a vehicle for expressing matters of *Vraja*, with divine sentiments displayed therein. A few wrote in both styles, but for its soft and alliterative quality that went well with the *Matra-vrtta* (metre), the Brajabuli mode of expression was most attractive. Rabindranath in his early youth experimented for a while with this mode.

Among the hundreds of late 16th-century lyric poets who wrote in the spirit of *Radha-bhava* and *RaganugaParakiyaRati*, the most memorable are Sekhar (known as Kaviranjan and also Choto or younger Vidyapati for his efficiency in the Brajabuli style), Jnanadas, Balaram Das and Govinda das Kaviraj, They are first-rate composers of Vaishnava · pada literature by any standard.

Some poems of Sekhar got mixed up with those of the earlier Vidyapati, due to the similarity of style, but modern research has detected the difference. The *kirtan* singers also confused the poems of Jnanadas and Chandidas, not only due to the similarity in style, but also because of the affinity of sentiment. Balaram Das excelled in filial sentiments, though he also composed some memorable lines in the erotic mode which impressed even Rabindranath. Govindadas used *Brajabuli* as his only medium and in it he easily combined his erudition in the new *Rasa-Sastras* with an ornate and musical style of his own. He is decidedly the best of all the later Vaishnava lyricists.

Jnanadas is impressive for his striking metaphors. Although a disciple of Chandidas in thought, he easily surpassed the master since he was trained in the refined ways of the' neo-Vaishnava doctrines. His association with the divine personality of Nityananda was also responsible for his mental make-up. Here are two examples of his beautiful *Purva Raga* poems:

- (i) My eyes are drowned in the ocean of forms,  
My mind gets lost in the forest of youth,  
My homing way is unendingly long,  
My heart breaks within, and my soul  
Cries not knowing why.
- (ii) Eyes cry for form,  
Attributes overflow the mind,  
From limb to limb goes out the cry for union,  
Heart cries for a touch of heart,  
And seeking love, my soul knows no respite.

The lyrics of Sekhar have an enduring appeal for their depth of romantic feelings as well as for their brilliance of form. The following poem, describing Radha's pangs of separation during the rains, so impressed Tagore that he created music for it:

Friends, my grief knows no bound  
The rains are here, it is the month of Bhadra,  
And my home remains desolate,  
Deep clouds rumble all the time.  
Rains cover the face of the earth,  
My beloved has a heart of stone.  
When desire is keen, the winds  
Become sharper arrows.

In the context of the soul's eternal craving for what always eludes its grasp, Sekhar writes in another poems:

Aeons have I passed with my breast on his breast  
Yet the thirst remains unslaked.

The line occurs in a piece of incomparable poetry. Govindadas' Brajabuli poems also have similar qualities that have earned the praise of discerning modern critics, Abhisara (going out for a tryst) is a favourite theme of the Vaisnava poets, for in it lies the test of the true love of the heroine. Govindadas, however, was the first poet to bring out the special significance of Abhisara according to the Rasa Sastra, which meant suffering the greatest sorrow and sacrificing all, including life. Here is Radha, in a Govindadas poem, explaining to her surprised friend why she is going out for a tryst during the hazardous rain and thunder:

Kindly abandon teasing me-  
My love has been waiting for me with his  
eyes fixed on my way,  
and my heart breaks to think of it.  
Don't speak of the rain and thunder.  
Millions of arrows from Madana are tormenting me.  
What more sorrow can come from a cloud burst?  
What can the lightning do to one who carries  
The burning pangs of love in her heart?

The 17<sup>th</sup>-century composers of padas increasingly followed the doctrines of Rasa-Sastra and even took to translating the poems collected or composed by Sri Rupa Goswami (16<sup>th</sup> century), a favourite of Chaitanya. Spontaneity of composition soon gave way to formal practices. Although by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century three new apostles of the faith (Srinivas, Narottam and Syamananda), with their training from Vrindavana, gave a new fillup to the Vaishnava religion, this only encouraged the poets to stick to the niceties of the doctrines more rigorously. Even so, there were a number of poets who enriched the store of lyrics till the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They included Ghanassiyam Das (grandson of the famous Govindadas, 17<sup>th</sup> century) and Jagadananda (18<sup>th</sup> century, second half), both of whom wrote in Brajabuli; Narahari Chakravarti (alias Ghansyam – the famous biographer); Radhamohan Thakur (producer of an anthology entitled Padamrta-Samudra); Vaishnavadas (credited for the compilation Pada-kalpataru); and Sasisekhar of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Several Muslim poets also took a keen interest in the Radha-krishna Lila and composed padas as well. Recent researches enumerate more than 50 such Muslim poets, including Alaol (the famous translator of Padmavati), Saiyad Sultan, Seikh Faizullah, Saiyad Martuja, Nasir Mamud and Aliraja. All of them were adherents of Sufism and some also knew the Yoga-Sastra. The Hindu adoration for Pirs, Ghazis and Fakirs is thus paralleled by the Bengali Muslim's attraction to Vaishnava lyrics.

The advent of Sri Chaitanya was also responsible for the birth and growth, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, of Bengali biographical literature. There were also a few noteworthy theological treatises that form part of Vaishnava literature. But only Bhaktiratnakar, composed by Narahari Chakravarti in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, deserves consideration. His book describes the life and activities of the three later apostles of the faith – Srinivas, Narottam and Syamananda. It is, however, mainly a book of the Bhakti movement. There are also some theological and poetic treatises as well as anecdotes of lesser Mohantas of the sect, all in verse. These have only esoteric value, and interest only researchers and scholars.

### **Lesser Religious Poetry**

As Tantric Buddhism gradually weakened, the Tantric Saivism of the Natha-yogis grew more important. In fact, one form of Saiva Yoga was once current from Kashmir in the west of Kamarupa

in the east. This was a system of renunciation whose final goal was the attainment of freedom from bondage, particularly the erotic relationship between man and women. The leader of this movement, Gorakshanath (Gorkhanath in Bengali), is said to have lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Tradition has it that he saved his preceptor Minanath from the enticement of women. A long poem called Gorksa-vijay was composed on this theme by Sheikh Faizullah, a Muslim poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It tells a story, but is so cluttered with esoteric matters and miracles that it is devoid of much literary quality.

The loss is amply compensated by another poetical composition of this religious tradition. It is called Maynamati or GopichandPancali (The song of Maynamati or verses for recital on Gopichand) and describes Queen Maynamati, a disciple of Gorkhanath, insisting on her son taking holy orders from Hadipa (Jalandharipada of the caryas), another disciple of Gorkhanath, and leaving the kingdom and his favourite wives, Aduna and Paduna. She initially fails to persuade her son since the young queens employ all their powers to prevent such a calamity. Gopichand too is most unwilling. But Maynamati, after much persuasion and performance of miracles, ultimately convinces them and Gopichand agrees to take the vows. He leaves his beloved queens and stays away from home for 12 long years. But when he returns, he is endowed with the highest wisdom. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, such poets as Durlabh Mallick, Bhavani Das and Sukur Mahmud made use of the bare incidents of this story and by introducing minor details displayed the sentiments of love and pathos.

Islam, through Sufism, came to be integrated with Yoga and Tantra, and thus penetrated deep into the heart of Bengal, helping the growth of *Bhakti and Baul* songs. There are, however, certain compositions which remain confined mainly to the Muslim community. *Jangnama, Rasul-Vijay, Maktul Hossain, or Nabivamsa* are compositions of this nature. They describe either the victory of the Prophet, the tragedy of the Karbala or stories from old Islamic traditions. Some of them are modelled on the Bengali Ramayana or Mahabharata and, it is interesting to note, that the Muslim poets paid ample homage to Hindu deities in the introductory portions of these poems. The poets who composed these poems in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries include Sabirid Khan (composer of some Vaishnava lyrics), and Muhammad Khan, Heyat Mamud, Faizullah and Garibullah (composer also of romantic tales). Some Hindu poets also joined hands with the Muslims to create such compositions.

During the same period there appeared verses on the adventures of the Ghazis or on the miracles of the Pir Saints, written by Muslims and Hindus alike. The Pirs and Ghazis were deified human beings, but Satya-Pir is a product of the religious imagination. This deity, originating in the Muslim community, held sway among the Hindus as well, by about the 17<sup>th</sup> century and gradually took the title of *Satya-Narayana*. Offering *Sirni* (a delicious mixture of *Ata*, sweets and fruits used as oblation to Muslim deities) to Satya-Narayana on a full moon day or at the end of a month has become a common custom among Bengali Hindus. The poetry connected with the miracles of Satya-Pir resembles that of any *Mangal* poem and has been composed by several poets from all parts of Bengal. But the most popular of such *Panchali* current in West Bengal is by Fakir Ram Kavibhusan.

Among other cult songs are the Baul songs. The term *Baul* is generally applied to a variety of mystic devotees, including the *Auls* (Hindu mystic saints, generally influenced by Sufi religion), the *Kartabhajas* (a sect of mystic saints of 18<sup>th</sup> century) and the Sains (derived from Sanskrit, 'Swami', another sect of the mystics), who follow all kinds of esoteric practices. They have no caste or communal identities. Although such a devotee may lead a family life, he does not care for earthly riches and his chief occupation is composing and singing spiritual songs and dancing to the accompaniment of an *ektara* (a one-stringed instrument). The origin of these mystics might be traced

as far back as the *Sahajiva* sages and Sufis of the 12th and 13th centuries. Their religious doctrines, however, radically changed through the impact of Bengal Vaishnavism.

The singers of this group, like the Vaishnava lyricists, have left a rich store of songs, either esoteric or devotional, protesting against all idol-worship and casteism. Some of these songs are indeed excellent poetry. Rabindranath Tagore was greatly impressed by many of them, particularly those composed by Lalan-Fakir who is held as the Kabir of Bengal.

The *Syama-Sangit* songs are connected with Kalika, Parvati or Durga. The *Vatsalaya Bhakti* sentiments (devotion in the guise of affection for the child) of the Vaishnavas dominate many songs of this genre, perhaps all such compositions are after the 17th century. The tradition of looking upon Parvati and Siva as the daughter and her husband belonging to a Hindu home. is very old in Bengal, they are also considered an impoverished though ideal conjugal pair. The *Candi Mangal* and *Siviiyan* poems probably encouraged this sentiment.

An early marriage was a firmly established social norm since the 17th century, causing much pain to mothers. The worship of Durga in autumn, traditionally brings deep feelings of joy in Bengali homes, as married daughters return to their parents' homes for a quick visit of four days after the lapse of a whole year. This all too human sentiment mixed with religious fervour inspired poets and singers of the 18th century to compose songs celebrating the home-coming (*Agamani*) of Durga, the daughter, and her taking leave again (*Vijaya*). These songs are full of profound sadness and contain a moving poetic quality.

The *Tatva* songs, on the other hand, appeal to Syama (Kaji) to grant the supplicant release from birth and existence. Ramprasad Sen ('Kaviranjan') is the finest composer of such songs, and his songs are still sung in Bengal. He was a contemporary of Raygunakar Bharatchandra, but while Raygunakar is colourful and gay, "Kaviranjan" is sad and complaining.

## Other Poetry

Although some incidental details of history may be found in the *Mangal* poems, in the biographies of Chaitanya and even in some Vaishnava *Padas*, a whole poem treating an historical incident exclusively is rare in medieval Bengali. A poem of about 200 lines was written in the middle of the 18th century by Gangaram who took the *Bargi* (Maratha) incursions into Bengal, which he witnessed, as his subject. Unfortunately the poem contains little good poetry.

The last of the great traditional poets was Bharatchandra ('Raygunakar'), a man of refined literary talents, who died in 1760. For another century no gifted poet was born in Bengal. Neither was the period favourable for literary activities. Although the East India Company took over Bengal in 1765, it did not govern. It was the age of new landholders and landlords, whose literary tastes ran to parodies and limericks or, at best, extempore poetic debates and competitions on the theme of love. A serious poet could hardly flourish under such circumstances; instead, a band of extempore composers arrived on the scene to cater to the needs of the time. They were called *Kaviwalas* or dealers in poetry. To please their patrons, two bands of *Kaviwalas* would often compete in public,

the whole affair usually culminating in the exchange of choice vulgar abuse. The tradition of this vulgarity had its origin in the erotic *Kheud* songs prevalent even at the time of Bharatchandra.

Amidst such degeneration there was, however, still a ray of hope. A few cultured singers like Ramnidhi Gupta and Sri Dhar Pathak struck a different note by composing secular and pure love lyrics, perhaps influenced by such songs of Hindi. The close of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th was a period of experiment in music-patterns which indirectly enriched the store of lyrics in the modern tradition. This was the prelude to the early modern period, which was much influenced by the west. (All translations in this article are by Naresh Guha.)

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