

**Kaiser Haq, *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-674-36529-2.**

A *mangalkavya* is a Bengali verse narrative that celebrates the deeds of deities in order to win their blessings. The *mangalkavyas* which paid a lot of attention to social reality emerged in Bengal at a time of dramatic socio-political change. As poetic record of the compromise or synthesis of opposed cultural formations, they emerged from the indigenous religious cult of the Bengalis as these engage in a double dialectics, with Brahminism on the one hand, and with the politically dominant Muslims on the other. Scholars can cite various examples of *mangalkavyas* but the most popular among them belong to the canon of goddess Manasa. Beginning from the fifteenth century version written by one Kana Haridatta of Barisal, to Vijaya Gupta's *Manasamangal*, also known as *Padmapuran* (1494), and Vipradasa's *Manasa-vijaya* (1495), we find several seventeenth century texts written by poets like Vishnu Pala, Tantrabibhuti and Jagatjivana Ghoshal. In more recent times scholars collated all the extant versions available and brought out newer versions of the same and it seems to be an ongoing process.

The portrayal of Manasa's character is of paramount importance in establishing her cult. As Shiva's daughter (but only *his* daughter, being born out of his seed but not in anyone's womb), and brought up by Vasuki and Kasyapa, she is the goddess of all snakes and serpents, and matriarch of the whole world. Padmavati – Padma in short – or Manasa or Visahari, the mistress of poison, as she is commonly called, can grant liberation at will, dispel darkness and gloom with the light of her radiant countenance, and satisfy mortal desires with nod of her head. This goddess of snakes, who is not revered as much as the other goddesses and considered to reside in a lower hierarchy has held her sway over Eastern India, particularly West Bengal and Bangladesh, for several centuries in the domestic sphere through the various texts known as the *mangalkavyas* and the *puranas*. Interestingly, it is in erstwhile East Bengal or present Bangladesh that the Manasa cult and its accompanying texts have enjoyed the greatest popularity. But unlike the god Shiva or his consort Chandi, Manasa had a tougher time finding a place for herself and her sister Neta than her rival Chandi, and remained more of a subaltern deity. Till date, there isn't any single text that can be mentioned to give an authentic or complete version of her story.

The present volume under review is a composite prose retelling of the Manasa legends rather than a complete rendering of a single text, which is the more common scholarly practice. Drawing upon a number of the major versions in Bengali, the author has tried to produce a narrative incorporating all

the key episodes found in several extant versions, namely those written by Tantrabibhuti, Vipradasa, Ketakdas-Ksemananda, Vijaya Gupta, Narayan Dev, Ray Binod, and also the “modern” version of Radhanath Raychaudhuri. Besides his attempt at stringing together a consistent narrative, Haq admits that he has taken certain liberties in using these sources, as all *Manasamangal* authors have done, “adding a flourish here and a flourish there and leaving out bits, but keeping narrative consistency in view” (38). He has also taken recourse to indigenous theatre performances related to Manasa that are still widely popular in parts of Bangladesh. For instance, taking a cue from Syed Jamil Ahmed he mentions five performances that were based on unpublished local versions of the *mangalkanya* that included elements not found elsewhere. As is common with the living tradition of oral poetry and folk theatre, nowhere was a script rigidly adhered to, and in every performance there was scope for improvised interpolations. He has also kept literary interest and comprehensiveness of treatment in mind in deciding which source or sources to use for a particular chapter. The Bengali Manasa tales are divided into episodes called *palas* where the whole story unfolded over the days like a soap opera but Haq found it convenient to split the story into chapters as in a novel.

The preliminary episodes that feature in many East Bengal versions begin with a creation myth and move on to Puranic tales of gods, goddesses, asuras (or demons), wars between gods and demons, touchy sages and their curses, the birth of Manasa, her exploits in the celestial sphere and also in the mundane realm. Thus comprehensiveness and continuity is achieved and the narrative progresses smoothly from mythic time to earthly time and acquire earthly resonances. The inclusion of the preliminary episodes turns a drama into an epic and Haq has tried to follow the epic course while highlighting the dramatic elements at the same time. So along with lesser-known facts, we get the more well-known episodes of how Manasa easily wins the allegiance of everyone except the wealthy merchant Chand, who holds fast in his devotion to Shiva despite seeing his sons massacred. Then a celestial couple is incarnated on earth to fulfil Manasa’s design: Behula, wife to Lakshmindar, one of Chands’s slain sons, undertakes a harrowing odyssey to restore him to life with Manasa’s help, ultimately persuading Chand to bow to the snake goddess. Throughout the narrative we find Padma repeatedly making efforts to become established as a significant deity on earth, sometimes taking recourse to wily machinations not quite expected from a goddess.

An interesting section in Haq’s narrative includes a chapter entitled “The Battle with Hassan and Hossain,” and in it, these two Muslim brothers are part of the game plan in Padma’s aim not merely to strike terror but to win converts. As the story goes, they were actually Chandi’s sons who were conceived when she had surrendered to Shiva one day when he was disguised as a Muslim soldier. So, after an easy winning over a community of cowherds, when Padma

and Neta come against a formidable enemy who are the Muslim rulers of a kingdom, the brothers Hassan and Hossein, the conflict is of epic dimension and ends in the comprehensive destruction of the Muslim forces and the surrender of their king, Hassan (though it was expected that through their divine clairvoyance, Padma and Neta would long before have recognised their half-brothers). Some scholars have dismissed this inclusion as not simply a part of the syncretic cult prevalent in Bengal like the other prevailing cult of worshipping Bonbibi. According to Haq, instead of simply seeing this episode as a dramatic rendering of the social evolutionary process whereby Bengali Muslims accommodated themselves to an indigenous cult like that of Manasa, it is better we see this as a premodern phenomenon when the rigid religious differences between Hinduism and Islam did not become so marked as it did in the colonial nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A Professor of English in Dhaka, Kaiser Haq has been known primarily as a wonderful poet from the subcontinent. So without the burden of glossary and critical notes, he manages to tell us the tale of Manasa in a mellifluous prose style which at times reminds us of the carnivalesque. The ease with which he delivers the tale from the puranic to the folk tradition in a consistently contemporary colloquial style (with a smatter of American usages here and there too) is noteworthy. Let us savour the miraculous birth of Manasa, who did not emerge naturally from a maternal womb:

Shiva walked into the park one day and reposed on a flowery couch in a bower. As wild birds and animals copulated with abandon all around, he was pierced by the invisible arrows of Kama and lay roasting in the fires of lust.... He transferred his semen to a lotus leaf and returned to his bower... a huge egg took shape from it.

He [sage Kasyapa] went into yogic meditation to learn more about it. He decided to hatch a daughter for the great god out of it. So he placed it in a golden bowl and invited all the gods to witness the divine birth.... Presently there emerged from the gigantic egg a ravishing maiden whose beauty would charm all three realms – earth, underworld, and the heavens. She stood, radiantly fair in complexion, triple-eyed, and four armed, casting an everlasting spell on all who saw her. The Gandharvas sang, the *vidyadhari* demigoddesses danced, the apsaras cavorted to celebrate the arrival of the new goddess. (115)

In the 28-page long Introduction titled “Sympathy for the Devi: Snakes and Snake Goddesses in Hinduism,” Wendy Doniger begins by mentioning how snakes are a sacred and sinister presence throughout the history of Hinduism, and ideas about them and images of them that appear in many early texts resurface later in the tale of Manasa. Her erudition definitely adds to the Unique Selling Point (USP) of the book but the layman might get a bit confused while

reading about all the snakes that appear in the Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, the stories of Krishna and Kaliya, Nagas in early Indian Buddhism, and so on; and just when she starts wondering how far these are directly related to the actual Manasa text, she reaches the end of her introduction with a couple of pages on the ambivalent goddess. However, Doniger draws our attention to one significant aspect. Since there are several oral and written narratives that have existed in Bengal over the centuries, she rightly feels that Kaiser Haq needs to be congratulated for creating “the permeable boundaries between the various retellings of the story, picking one piece from here, another from there,” resulting in what one might call it “an uncritical edition” (27).

At the end of his Prologue Haq asserts that he has produced a version that will appeal to all age groups: “it will interest students of literature, myth, culture studies, and anybody who enjoys a chronicle of deaths foretold that ends in happy resuscitation, a rollicking, violent, emotionally charged tale full of utterly unbelievable things and yet making complete sense” (56). It is needless to add that this book is recommended for all readers, irrespective of whether they have any fancy for religion or religious texts or not. Like a popular novel the “what-happened-nextism” and light-hearted appeal is so strongly felt throughout the narrative that one would be tempted to finish reading it at one or two sittings. It can be simply read as tales of demons, battles and metamorphoses of gods and goddesses as and when it suited them to retain their supremacy over demons and petty mortals. Also human vices of jealousy and inferiority do not spare the gods. The manner in which the businessman Chand went on resisting his conversion to the Padma cult and the manner in which Manasa took it as a challenge to make him pay obeisance would put ordinary mortals to shame. The final surprise of all surprises is of course the beautiful cover image of Manasa that adorns the book, which had to be sourced from no other place but the British Museum!

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