

SHIB, DHARMA AND RAM IN CHAITRA

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(English Version)

In an unprecedented display of aggression that we witnessed in the name of Ram, we seem to be forgetting our good old Bangali deities of Chaitra. This has been the month of Shib, Shitala, Annapurana or Basanti and Dharma-Thakur and Bengalis were very clear that Durga came home in Ashwin, whether the bodhan is akal or not. What lent most colour to this month was Gajan , in the run up to which, several groups dressed up as Shib-Parvati, and wandered around singing, dancing and invoking Baba's name. It was our way of taking a religion to the streets, with devotion and pantomime, not with swords and threats. 19th ethnographers mention Rama Navami celebrated in north India, but do not mention Bengal, and we need to be very clear that there is a big difference between celebrating Durga's victory and Ram's birth. The two traditions are distinct that cross each other at the junction of Akal Bodhan in Ashwin. This is celebrated by Bengalis in Durga's name, while others observe Ashwin Navaratri and Dusshera in the name of lord Ram.

We have so many Manasa-talas, Shasti-talas, Chandi-talas, Dhrama-talas and even Rath-talas, but do we come across Hanuman-talas or too many Ram-mandirs? Exceptions like the Ramarajatala Rama Mandir are very few, and even this was reportedly set up by the Chowdhury family who came from north India. Bengalis have always chosen to differ, not only in politics, but in many other aspects of religion and culture: one of which is to fly kites on Biswakarma puja and not on Poush Sankranti like allotherIndiansIn fact, we accepted Shib only after he came came down from Kailash and became a poor peasant with a tattered gamchha, who is chased around with a jhaantaa by an exasperated Durga. Even the Bengali Durga differs from the standard image, as nowhere else in India does she appear with her full family, even though all her children look the other way as she fights Mahishashura in a desperate battle.

But, let us remember that Krittibas's Ramayan of the 15th century is an expression of the beautiful plurality and diversity of India that such regional traditions brought out, long before the Tulsidas swept north India. It began with the 12th century Tamil Kamba-Ramayanam, after which we have the Telugu SriRanganathaRamayanam, the Assamese KothaRamayana, as well as a Jaina version in Kannada in the 14th century. Tulsidas's sweet Awadhi Rmcharitamanas of the 16th century became immensely popular and

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since then "Rama worship has been very widespread in north India and the places associated with his life are great places of pilgrimage, while his birthday is a day of great rejoicing". As this report of 1921 reveals, we may have missed out on this festival of fasting and reciting sacred texts because Ramchandra did not pass through this state. In any case, all the different Ram-traditions are excellent examples of our 'unity in diversity'. India has skilfully combined local cultural preferences and legends within a broad national framework initiated by the Sanskrit Ramayana, as a part of the great plural tradition of this subcontinent.

In 1904, John Murdoch's well known Hindu and Muhammedan Festivals reported that Basanti was worshipped in Bengal from the 7th day of Chaitra Shukla Paksha and "this yellow goddess was the third of the seven Shitala sisters invoked during dreadful diseases". She was Sanskritised later as Durga and worshipped in Chaitra, but as the report says, "not with such pomp and universality" as Sharadiya Durga. Incidentally, Shasthi who was worshipped on the 12th of Chaitra on Ashok Shasthi lost popularity once better medical care ensured that infant mortality was not a major worry and now family planning has dictated couples produce just one child or two, who has to be trained to stand first in everything.

What about Shib who reigns during Chaitra and Dharma the folk god Rarh Bangla who he has almost unseated? Their relation is indeed complex, as Brahmanism in Bengal had a very difficult task. Vedic gods were hardly known except in pandit-sabhas and the Pauranik deities that they introduced could not stop Buddhism from ruling Bengal for four centuries at the time of the Pal-rajahs. They were not attractive enough to compete with the charismatic Pirs who came up after Islam stepped in. At the mass level, the mighty Shib and his wife were continuously beaten by the oneupmanship of the ugly, local snake deity Manasa, while Kalketu and Phullara represented the rise of the hunter-turned-farmer, blessed by the Bengali folk goddess Chandi. This autochthonous deity took care to retain her original name through a prefix like Betai, Pagla, Shibai, Khyepa, Olai, etc, to distinguish herself from the Brahmanical Chandi. Dharma or Dhammaraj ruled supreme in the western tract and ensured that his follower, the local folk hero, Lausen defeated Durga's upashak, Ichai Ghosh. When learned Brahmans could not win over the masses with their Sanskrit Purans and later the Upa-Purans, the rural purohits took up the challenge in middle Bangla, with the Chakraborty brigade leading with their Mangal Kavyas: Mukundaram, Rupram, Ghanaram and Khelaram. There was, of course, a Bijay Gupta or a Piplai, and some Dwijas, but the point is that almost all kabis were from the upper castes. As they absorbed the deities of the nimna barga, the worship of stones in sacred groves was as legitimate as praying to images in temples. Incidentally,

the tradition of placing terracotta hathi-ghora under trees, as manat, can be traced through the entire Deccan right upto the East, which thus represents a common cultural sub-strata. It was often retained by many who took to Islam: as as pirer ghora.

This is where we see how Shib comes in through the Shibayan poem as a peasant form who could be closer to the new agriculturalists: Byadhey, Gopey, Jeley, Teen Hoilo Heley! The Naths and Yogis had also tried for a breakthrough in Bengal with their brand of mass-level Shaibism and it is fascinating to note that the main intersection in old Kolkata was between Chowringhee, named after a Nath-guru, and Dharmatala where the ancient shrine of Dhramathakur stood: now shifted to near the Lotus cinema-hall. It was this Shib who finally appropriated a lot from the popular folk rituals of Dharma, including Gajan and Charak, but while Dharma's rituals are mainly in Jaishtha, Shib's are in Chaitra, meeting again on Chaitra Sankranti. Ralph Nicholas, who spent many years in a village in Medinipur, was among the earliest to note the striking similarities in the worship and rituals of the two. The main attraction of charak was to see devotees swing high in the air with ropes that had big hooks inserted into their backs, and though this is officially banned, some Dharma's worshippers risk the law and their lives, even at present. The rites of self torture are still gruesome with devotees pushing sharp big needles into their tongues, cheeks and bodies or rolling over thick prickly bushes or dancing on fires. But, they do not bring out weapons to intimidate others, in the name of god.