

SHIB, DHARMA AND RAM IN CHAITRA

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(English Version)

The unprecedented display of aggression that we witnessed in Bengal in April, all in the name of Rama Navami, has perhaps distracted attention of Bengalis who almost forgot their good old traditional deities of Chaitra. This month, from mid-March to mid-April, has always belonged to Shiva, Shitala, Annapurana or Basanti and the very indigenous Dharma-Thakur. Bengalis were very clear that Durga came home only in Ashwin and reserved ten full holidays to rejoice in her name. What lent most colour to this month was *Gajan*, which is so similar to Taai-pusam in Tamil country. Throughout the month, several people dressed up as Shiva-Parvati, and wandered around streets and localities: singing, dancing and invoking Mahadev. It was the Bengali way of taking a religion to the streets, with devotion and pantomime, not with swords and threats.

From the reports of 19th century British and Indian ethnographers, we read a lot about Rama Navami being celebrated in north India, and also from other pockets, but do not find any mention of it in Bengal. There are countless *mahallas* or localities in the State that proudly carry the names of so many deities, Manasa, Shasti, Chandi, Dhrama-thakur, Shitala: all of who from the pre-Brahmin folk pantheon, and even many named after Jagannath's *Rathas*, but we hardly ever come across Hanuman-localities or many Rama-mandirs. Exceptions do exist, like the Ramarajatala Rama Mandir of Howrah but they are very few, and even this temple **this** was set up by a north Indian family.

In any case, we need to be very clear about the big difference in celebrating Durga's victory and the nine days leading to Rama's birth. The two traditions are quite distinct and they cross each other primarily at the junction of *Akal Bodhan* in

Ashwin. This was when Rama is said to have prayed to Durga for her blessings: the twain do come face to face briefly, but say goodbye to each other immediately thereafter. **While most Indians celebrate others observe Ashwin Navaratri and Dusshera in the name of lord Rama, Bengalis worship not Rama but Durga, Durga and only Durga.** Bengalis have this strange trait of always choosing to differ in every possible domain. In politics, for instance, they have created a Guinness record by electing different parties to power for forty unbroken years, who were invariably opposed to those who seized power at the Centre. Even, when all Indians actually "go and fly kites" on Makar Sankranti day in mid-January, no self respecting Bengali would ever do so, even if he had woollen mufflers and caps that were better suited to Iceland. Instead, Bengalis fly kites in September in honour of their mutant of Vishwakarma, who becomes a post-industrial god of machines. And they fly kites with **with** the full gusto of football matches, as if East Bengal and Mohun Bagan were fighting with little flimsy coloured paper, high in the skies. We shall soon see more.

But, let us remember that the *Ramayana* was not the property of any particular region or language. In fact, the Tamils were the first to celebrate it in their own style and profusion of expressions, with their *Kamba-Ramayana* that was created in the 12th century, full four hundred years before Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* swept the Ganga-Yamuna belt. There are other versions who also precede Tulsidas, like the Telugu *Sri Ranganatha Ramayana*, the Assamese *Kotha Ramayana* and even a Jaina *Ramayana* in Kannada. These regional traditions underline the beautiful plurality of India and are excellent examples of our 'unity in diversity'. They combined, quite adroitly, local cultural preferences and legends within a broad national framework that was initiated by the Sanskrit *Ramayana*: and none was more 'national' than the other. Tulsidas's *Rmcharitmanas* of the 16th century was not in Hindi, but in a very sweet Avadhi dialect and it swept the northern belt. Its immense popularity created an ambience for "Rama worship" to be "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, the East and the North East may have missed out on the *Rama Navami* tradition of fasting and reciting sacred texts, because Ramchandra did not pass through their lands.

It is time now to return to our theme on what exactly did the Bengalis worship in Chaitra. Well, it was Shiva and not Rama who loomed larger than life here, for it was primarily his month. But this Shiva was not the all powerful and often-fearsome Rudra of Kailash; the Bengali Shiva was a jolly, ganja-loving, pot-bellied, playful leader of mischievous *ganas*: a very peasantised mutant who ruled Bengal. From medieval Bengali literature, *Mangal Kavyas* folk balladic poems that were immense popular from the 15th to the 17th centuries, we find that the 'high god' version Shiva kept losing to the 'ugly' indigenous deities at the box offices of religion in Bengal. It was only when Shiva discarded his regal demeanour and transformed himself into a poor rice cultivating peasant, that he won Bengal. People simply loved his mingling with the masses, dressed in a tattered *gamchha*, chased around with a *jhaaru* quite often by an exasperated Durga. It is the same Bengal that lionised of Singur who shooed away the mighty Tatas, and even punished their own indulgent Communist comrades after three decades, for dreaming of industries! By the way, even the Bengali Durga is quite different as nowhere else in India does she appear with her full family, even though all her children look the other way as the *devi* fights the terrible demon, in a desperate battle.

Let us now return to the other folk deities that the Bengalis have worshipped in Chaitra, for centuries. From John Murdoch's well-known *Hindu and Muhammedan Festivals* of 1904 we learn that Basanti was worshipped in Bengal from the 7th day of Chaitra Shukla Paksha and that "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, her celebration was "not with such pomp and universality" as the 'real Durga' of autumn. Incidentally, another goddess, Shasthi, was also worshipped on the 12th of Chaitra on 'A-shoka Shasthi'

though she lost her popularity once better medical care ensured greater chances of infants surviving that dreaded 'post-natal mortality' phase. And then came family planning that propagated the two-child norm while hard economics ensured one single child. Being Bengalis, they are trained from birth to stand first in everything, from studies to music, but avoid physical stress like the plague. Unlike the South where one *Mariamman* takes care of several diseases like a 'general physician', finicky Bengalis require a whole pantheon of choices of deities who were single-relief specialists, much like the annoying narrow expertise that modern doctors flaunt.

But the ancient folk **god western Bengal**, Dharma-thakur, was the one who reigned supreme during Chaitra before being unseated by a more strategic Shiva. Their *inter serelations* are rather complex and difficult to understand. Let us remember, Brahmanism in Bengal had a very uphill task for several centuries as did the tribe in most of India that lies beyond 'Aryavart'. Vedic gods were hardly known in this State except in *pandit-sabhas* and the *Puranic* deities that Brahmans introduced could not stop Buddhism from ruling Bengal for four centuries, at the time of the Palas. Their repertoire was just not attractive enough to compete with the charismatic *Pirs* who came up after Islam stepped in. We need to recall that ultimately two-thirds of the Bengali-speaking people voted for Islam. As hinted, the mighty Shiva and his wife were continuously beaten in the game of **one upmanship** by Dharma-Thakur as well as by the local snake deity, *Manasa*. The medieval ballads of Kalketu and Phullara actually represented the rise of the darker people, the hunters and herdsmen who turned to farming, blessed as they were by another Bengali folk goddess Chondi. 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 ensured that his devotee, the local folk hero, defeated a mighty chieftain, who had made the **mostake** of choosing an 'up-country' goddess.

When learned Brahmans could not win over the masses with their Sanskrit *Puranas* and later the *Upa-Puranas*, the rural *purohits* took up the challenge by switching deities and singing in praise of local gods and goddesses. Medieval Bangla literature reveals that almost all *kavis* were from the upper castes. As they absorbed "the gods of small men", the worship of 'crude stones' and sacred groves was considered as legitimate as praying to Brahmanic images in temples. Incidentally, the tradition of placing terracotta *hathi-ghora* under trees, as *mannat*, 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 their 'the horse of the Pir saheb'.

Before concluding, we need to unravel how the 'peasant god' could make the breakthrough in Bengal with a new brand of mass-level Shaivism that the Naths of the Gorakshanath cult inspired by the *Go-kshetra* had tried earlier, with their Yogis and mendicants, but could not win. 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 Dhrama-thakur stood: now shifted to a site a kilometre away. The *Bom-Bhola* Shiva did the trick in Bengal by subsuming large doses of the autochthonous Dharma cult. For instance, the popular folk rituals of Dharma, including the festival of *Gajan* and the ritual of *Charak* were associated with Dharma that were carried out during this period of blazing summer, praying to sun to move on and crack the clayey soil with so many cracks that the plough **snd** dragged ladder could break down with lesser effort. Ralph Nicholas, who spent many years in a village in Medinipur, was among the earliest to notice the striking similarities in the worship and rituals of the earlier Dharma deity and the peasantised Shiva. The main attraction of *Charak* for the crowds was to see how devotees swung high in the air with ropes that were tied to big hooks inserted into their backs. Though this was officially banned for a century, some of Dharma's worshippers **as also** Shiva's still risk the law and their lives, in the name of god. The rites of self torture are still quite gruesome, as devotees push sharp big needles into their tongues, cheeks and bodies or rollover thick prickly bushes or dancing on burning flames and red-hot coal for

never-ending periods. But, all said and done, they do inflict a lot of pain but on themselves. They **not** bring out weapons to intimidate others, for none will believe that Bhagawan Ramchandra ever did so.