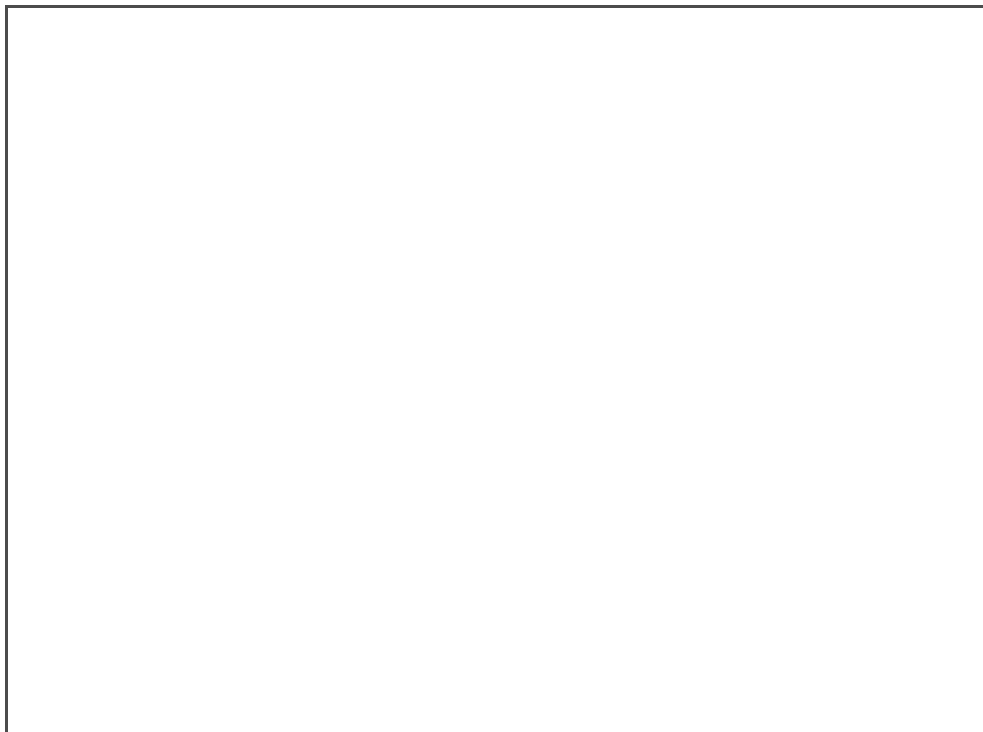


# The Story of the Gods

*ANASUYA BASU*



The Olaibibi shrine in Shibpur and (below) Jawhar Sircar delivering a lecture at South Howrah Citizens' Forum. Pictures by Anup Bhattacharya



The public lecture of South Howrah Citizens' Forum on a wet August evening was aptly chosen. Amader Deb Debi: Pouranic o Loukik dealt with the story of how Hindu gods and goddesses found their way into the pantheon. It was less than a month to Bengal's biggest festival, the Durga Puja. Former government of India culture secretary and present chief of Prasar Bharati, Jawhar Sircar, spoke at length on the evolution of the Hindu deities of Bengal and their origins, both classical and folk.

Sircar says that the "gods of Vedic age hardly survived: all our deities emerged much later". He buttresses his point saying "we do not worship or find any temples of Agni or Barun or Indra". Vedic gods are practically non-existent except for Brahma, who has just one temple in Pushkar. He also mentioned Surya, who is always seen with seven horses, but the high boots on his feet reveal the foreign origins of the image.

Sircar talked of Saraswati, both as a mythical river, and as a goddess, that captured the imagination of the Bengali middle-class only in the 19th century, when they realised that education meant prosperity. As a Vedic goddess, Sara-swati is seen in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings.

The decline of the Vedic gods began with the advent of Buddhism, which started first as a truly 'atheist religion'. The popularity of Buddhism and Jainism was countered with the two very colourful epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. "They were produced by hundreds of scholars over several centuries, who worked like two parallel universities, absorbing different, fascinating legends, dynastic tales, characters and injecting moral codes, in their numerous plots and sub-plots," he said. The two epics took almost 500 years to reach their final state, between the 3rd century BC and 3rd century AD.

From the Mahabharata we get the most popular god, Krishna and the other gives us another Vishnu option, Ram. Both the Ramayana and Mahabharata are more than religion, they are like complete entertaining, didactic human dramas. The unity of India emanates from these epics.

After the epics, came the Puranas that gave us our present gods and goddesses. There are 18 Maha Puranas that were written between the 3rd and 12th centuries AD, and interpolated in later periods, and their royal patronage is evident from the detailed description of rulers and their genealogies. "We also got new gods and goddesses. We get a brand new Vishnu. There are six main Puranas on Vishnu and in him we find the image of India," said Sircar.

"India survives because of its plurality and the Puranas give us a lot of diversity, choices and plurality. Puranas give us alternate set of deities, and they are crafted from and intertwined with the lives of the mortals," he said.

Siva, Balagopala, Durga, Kali are, for instance, contributions of the Puranas and each has multiple names, as many as 108 going up to a thousand, as in Ashottara Satanam or Sahasranaman. This helped Brahmans identify local gods and goddesses with the main deities and thereby link different worships into three broad streams: Saiva, Vaisnava and Sakta.

Siva is the most popular of them who is also a challenger of the Vedic culture. To match Siva's popularity, Vaishnavites produced characters like Rama and then Krishna. "Shakti has 52 pithasthans or holy sites that is based on the story of Dakshya Yagna where Sati jumped into the sacrificial fire and Shiva took her charred corpse and started his tandav that shook the universe. Visnu's sudarshan-chakra cut pieces off from Sati's body and wherever they fell was deemed to be a holy pithastan. There are 52 pithastans," he said.

In Bengal, however, nearly two-thirds of the Bengali speaking people took to a different religion. This proves that these Puranic gods were not popular with them. It was only when the local folk gods and goddesses, like Manasa, Chandi, Dharmaraj, Itu, Sasthi, entered Hinduism through the Mangal Kavyas that this religion could get the support of one-third of Bengalis. The process began from the 15th or 16th centuries Bengal, with the Dharma Mangal, the Manasa Mangal and the Chandi Mangal.

Both the poor among Hindus and Muslims believed in local deities like Satya Pir or Satya Narayan, Olai Bibi or Olai Chandi, Bon Bibi and Dakshin Rai and masses kept votive terracotta horses and elephants in sacred groves or at the mazhars of Pirs or Chanditola, Sasthitala, Dharmatala.

But while over 90 per cent of the writers of Mangal Kavya were Brahmins, Baidyas or Kayasthas, they wrote about how the snake-deity Manasa defeated the mighty Puranic Siva or how the worshippers of the crude Dhamma-thakur defeated devotees of Puranic deities. Puranic Durga also lost to the local folk Chandi goddess and the non-Aryan Chandis are still called Betai Chandi, Olai Chandi, Pagla Chandi, to distinguish them from the Sanskritised devi Chandi.

This is what Sircar calls 'the local magna cartas or the great stories of compromise' that brought

about a refreshing, accommodative Hinduism in post-Chaitanya Bengal, which placed local folk deities in the same pantheon as the Puranic ones. Non-Brahmin purohits perform the pujas in their temples or sthans in many places, even now and these deities are slowly being brought into mainstream. So strong is their worship that decades after small pox has been completely eradicated, the goddess of small pox, Shitala is still worshipped, said Sircar.