



Religious Endemic: Problematising Theology and Marginality in Bengal's Hinduism

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Abstract

Ever since the Vedic period, the land of Bengal was considered outside the ambit of Vedic Culture. This provides the basis for the distinctiveness of the Bengali pantheon. Bengal was also considered a land of fever and endemics. Atharva Veda, from where Ayurveda takes its roots, holds a subsidiary position among the corpus of Vedic Literature. This paper is an attempt to trace the trajectory between the marginalized land and its marginalized deities. It aims at picking up selective incidents and examples within Ayurvedic and Hindu traditions to portray how endemic had been instrumental in some watershed movements in Hinduism and its offshoots in folk theology. With several examples ranging from Kali to Sitala, and from Manik Pir to Jwarasura, the paper relocates the caste question and the question of marginality in the light of iconographic and ritualistic observations.

Keywords: Endemic, Bengal, Ayurveda, Marginality, Sitala, Jwarasur, Kali.

Satyendranath Dutta, a popular Bengali poet and Tagore's contemporary, had written "Monwontore Morini Amra, Mari Niye Ghor Kori" (We did not die in the epidemic, we have domesticated the epidemic instead) while introducing the Bengalis in a poem called "Amra" ('We') (Dutta, n.d.). Clearly, the titular role played by epidemics in Bengali life was such a commonplace that it had entered into the Racial identity by the nineteenth century. Endemics, epidemics, and several diseases played an important role in building up religious tensions and shaped some of the watershed moments in the theological history of Bengal. Before getting into the paper, it is necessary to spare a few words on terminologies. 'Pandemics' are a global phenomenon whereas; 'epidemic' is a local outbreak of a certain disease. Apart from these, there is something called 'endemic', which is the primary concern of this paper. It describes a disease that is permanently present in a region or population ("Endemics, Epidemics and Pandemics", n.d.). Colonial Bengal was hit by so many bouts of epidemics that perhaps it will be appropriate to identify those maladies as endemic. The whole array of diseases that occurred throughout the years can be collated under four major categories, namely: Malaria, Cholera, Smallpox and Plague (Samanta, 2021, p. Index). This paper will flout the specificities and symptoms of each of them and consider them under the clustered monolithic term 'endemic'.

The caste question in Bengal has multifarious entanglements. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have opined that the Leftist politics of Bengal (which did set the dominant political discourse for 34 years) have failed to distinguish caste from class (Bagchi, 2014). Thus, there is a lack of testimonies regarding the Caste question in Bengal. If one studies from the contemporary Dalit scholarship, caste can be classified under two sections: Savarnas and Avarnas. Savarnas are all those Hindus who fall under the ambit of four categories of Varnashrama dharma or Chaturvarna. Avarna castes are "the Ati-Shudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own- the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables-

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whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus” (Roy, 2017, p. 12). Now, keeping this definition in mind, if we revisit R.C. Majumdar's *The History of Bengal* to locate Bengal's theological identity during the Vedic period, we will find the whole region of Bengal falling under the 'Avarna' category. Majumdar writes that the compiler of Aitareya Brahmana had referred to peoples who lived in beyond the frontiers of Aryandom as 'dasyus' (Majumdar, 1943, p. 8). Among those areas were Pundranagar, the habitat of Pundras. Epigraphic evidence has situated this area as the Bogra district of Northern Bengal. Aitareya Aranyaka has named Vangas, another early Bengal tribe as folks who were guilty of transgression. Vangas prominently feature in the Dharmasutras for the first time. The Bodhayana Dharmasutra divides the land into three categories depending upon their importance. Aryavarta, being the holiest among the three, commanded the greatest respect, while “Arattas of Punjab, the Pundras of North Bengal, the Sauvira occupying parts of Southern Punjab and Sindh, the Vangas of Central and Eastern Bengal and the Kalingas of Orissa” fell in the lowest rung of the three categories (Majumdar, 1943, p. 8). Majumdar concludes,

The regions inhabited by these peoples were regarded altogether outside the pale of Vedic culture. Persons who lived amidst these folks even for a temporary period were required to go through expiatory rites. (p. 8)

Although back in the Vedic days, 'Dasyu' did not mean 'bandit', as Romila Thapar cites the usage of 'Avesta', which refers to 'daha' and 'dahyu' (the dasa and the dasyu of the Rig-Veda) to be the other people (Thapar, 2003, p. 112). However, the conspicuous reference to the ostracisation was ingrained in the formulation of the expiatory rites for people who came in touch with the 'other'. Unsurprisingly, in no time, Dasa's meaning transposed from being 'other' to 'one who laboured for others', when Varnashrama was introduced (Thapar, 2003, p. 112). In the *Mahabharata*, R.C. Majumdar cites, Bhishma conquered all the kings who ruled in these parts, inhabited by “mlechchhas” (i.e. untouchables) (Majumdar, 1943, p. 9). His triumph included larger Bengal. This particular word (i.e. 'mlechchhas') was revived once again during the rise of 'Kulin pratha' (a very reductive caste system, popularized by Ballal Sen much later during the 12th Century A.D.) retaining the notion of untouchability. Earlier, during the Mauryan and Palan empires, Mahayana and Vajrayana, two schools of Buddhism had flourished in this land. After a vigorous Buddhist period, Ballal Sen vehemently revived Hinduism once again. Legends note that a king, named Adisura, had invited five brahmins to revive Hinduism in Bengal around the 8th Century (“Adi Sura,” 2021). In some accounts, Adisura and Ballal Sen are the same person (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 22). Then a revival of Nyaya philosophy, known as Navya Nyaya, made Nawadeep famous, before Vaisnavite, a strain of the Bhakti movement, took over. During the reformist movement of the 19th century, thanks to colonialism and the advent of print culture, the present discourse of Hinduism got established in Bengal after the intervention of Brahma Movement and Ramakrishna Mission Movement in the epistemic space of Bengali intelligentsia.

Theoretically put, these several theological canons can be viewed as a palimpsest, to borrow the idea from textual studies. Julia Kristeva had referred to 'palimpsest' as “permutation of texts, an intertextuality,” and “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva & Roudiez, 1980, p. 36). She had located these 'utterances' vis a vis “the productive violence of the involvement, entanglement, interruption and inhibition of disciplines (and texts) in and on each other” ('Palimpsest'). With several major political events, at the micro-level, endemics had contributed too, to this 'productive violence'. Diseases got a detailed mention in Atharva Veda for the first time. But, as many historians believe, the Atharva Veda was added much later to the Vedic Canon (Olson, 2007, pp. 13-14; Patton, 1994, p. 57; Bloomfield, 1899, pp. 1-2). Interestingly, Atharva Veda was not counted among the trayi-vidya (Doniger, 1998) ('threefold knowledge', supposedly having more spiritual value) and during the revival of Hinduism in the Colonial period, Atharva

Veda was again looked down upon, largely because religious reformists, under the tutelage of Western empiricism, came to view it as too much mumbo jumbo than the Neo Hinduism could digest. A similar fate has been bestowed upon deities like Jwarasur as well, who were exiled from the classical references of the 19th Century to fashion 'Ayurveda' as more rational (Mukharji, 2013, p. 266). 'Ayurveda' was deemed to be an offshoot of Atharva Veda, and comprehensive evidence suggests that Atharva Veda had significant nuggets of wisdom from Non- Aryan indigenous communities (Thapar, 2003, p. 122). But since the colonial period, Ayurveda started gaining momentum as it distanced itself from the common masses. With the Post-liberalisation, came the Indian state's enthusiastic support towards the elite medical knowledge, collectively known as AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy). Earlier Historians like K.N. Panikkar, Brahmananda Gupta, Poonam Bala, and Kavita Sivaramakrishnan did not mention folk deities like Jwarasur while discussing the history of Ayurveda. It is only in the past few years, the rigid binary of 'Sanskrita' (which is equated with the 'classical') and 'Prakrita' (equated with the 'folk') counterposed each other in myriad forms (Mukharji, 2013, p. 263). One recently published book called *Shitala: How India enabled vaccination* invokes hitherto forlorn figures like Jwarasura, mythological characters like Putana to frame a speculative history. It claims that 'pu' refers to 'pus', 'tana' refers to the 'body' and the demoness coming through a flight meaning airborne disease (Desai, 2021, p. 49). Evidently, the concept of 'Dasyu' which emerged in the Vedic imagination, continued through Jwarasur or Shitala or Putana, indigenous communities and people from lower castes are often deemed as diseases personified. The paper will shed light on this later.

The first prominent mention of an epidemic in Bengal was around 1575. Gaur, the medieval capital city of Bengal perhaps got devastated by an outbreak of Malaria (Ray, 1999, p. 144; Samanta, 2021, p. 48). Within 1896 and 1914, 8 million people were killed in Bubonic plague. More than twice of those people were killed by Malaria and tuberculosis. Just within four months, the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 took lives of twice as many; smallpox and cholera were sole reasons for the death toll in millions (Chandavarkar, 1992, p. 203). But deadliest of all was the plague. Kolkata (then Calcutta) was officially declared infected by the plague in 1898. But there was a strong suspicion that the disease had been transmitted to Bengal as early as 1896 or even before that date. By 1898 the reports on plague made it clear that most of the victims were people of low socioeconomic status and poor living standards. In this early stage, the deaths that were reported came mainly from among the poorer section of both Hindus and Muslims (Chatterjee, 2005, p. 1197). Many Indians saw the plague as one of the many myriads of divine punishment, a visitation. The use of Western medicine against that was bound to be either impious or ineffective (Samanta, 2021, p. 31). Hence, an interesting situation gradually took place. On the one hand, presiding deities of diseases emerged like Jwarasura, Shitala, Olaibibi/Olai Chandi, Manikpir etc (many of whom were already in circulation before the watershed Colonial period) and, on the other hand, came several Kavirajas, indigenous physicians with 'scientifically prepared' Ayurveda medicine.

Advertisements and correspondences of these Ayurvedic practices used to fill up the periodicals and Panjikas of colonial Bengal. Panjikas were special Bengali almanacs that informed regular households about the auspicious moments to perform Hindu rites and rituals. With the growing demand for Panjikas, also grew the propensity of advertisements. These religious almanacs mostly contained advertisements on several remedies of diseases. From Malaria's quinine to several placebos to develop natural immunity, from Ayurvedic aphrodisiacs to Kaviraji 'mystery drugs', Panjika had it all. The advertisements often began with religious salutations, like 'Om Ganapataye', invoked Vedas or claimed to be recognized by British Sahibs. The anxiety of Brahminical Hinduism to be ratified by the ruling class was evidently expressed in these early attempts of commodifying diseases. In the highly competitive world of Kaviraj, two rivals often got engaged in mudslinging by invoking the

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gentry, caste and validation. In 1914, two kavirajas are seen slandering each other publicly on whether the surname 'Sengupta' authentically belongs to a Vaidya's (Physician) caste (Pal, 2018, pp. 59-60). If Vedic literature is to be followed, none among the two will receive the glory, since in the late Samhitas and early Brahmanas (ca 900-500 BCE) the physician was actually denigrated from the status enjoyed by other Brahmins, largely because he had a plebeian, shamanic roving background and he mixed with all sorts of people ("Ayurveda," n.d.). Occasionally, the Kabirajas received a rebuke from the colonial government. In one such notice, published under the title of "Loot by Advertisement", 'Rais and Royyet' denied government validation to such activities and warned the general populace to refrain from believing them (Pal, 2018, p. 55).

Diseases were often associated with sin, like the rest of the world. Mighty Mughal commanders are thought to have disliked postings to the fever-infested Subah Bangla and the Akbarnama made repeated references to the pathogenic climate of the region that bred rebellion (Mukharji, 2013, p. 261). During the early Colonial period, scholars like Shivnath Shastri had complained about the terrible hygiene of Kolkata (Shastri, 1955, p. 36). Bengal, located in a complex mytho-historical relation vis a vis Vedic culture, therefore gave birth to an exclusive narrative, which not only overruled the allegation of sin (already since Vedic period, Bengal had suffered enough ostracization) but also helped to refute the presumed effeminacy of the colonized Indian men (this idea was proposed by Ashish Nandy) (Nandy, 2021, p. 110) vis a vis their English counterparts. This resulted in a refashioning of goddess Kali, an extremely popular deity in Bengal, who is often associated in religious texts with death, pestilence, warfare and other destructive forces. Swami Vivekananda's poem 'Kali the Mother', had immortalized the frenzy of destruction embodied in the image of Kali during the plague epidemic of Kolkata (the poem was actually written in Kashmir, on a houseboat) ("Kali the Mother (Poem)" 2021):

"Of Death begrimed and black-
Scattering plagues and sorrows,
Dancing mad with joy,
Come, Mother, come!"

("The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 4/Writings: Poems/Kali the Mother - Wikisource, the Free Online Library", 2021, p. 1576)

The word 'Kali' too made its first appearance in Atharva Veda ("Kali," 2021). Not only is she considered to have a non-Aryan origin by many, but a few Kalis of Bengal had also played significant roles during pandemics. Firingi Kali Mandir is a popular temple in Kolkata. Local legends claim that some 'Firingi' (British) from the East India Company had recovered from pox after worshipping here. Since then, several other British have visited it ("Antony Kobiyaler Smriti Joriye, Sei Theke Naam Firingi Kalibari," 2020). Another Kali situated in Bhabanipur Shaktipeeth (now in Bangladesh), is associated with Rani Bhabani ("Bhabanipur Shaktipith," 2021). Though this Kali has no direct relation with endemic, Bhabani herself was a remarkable figure during the Great Bengal Famine of 1770. As among the rare few women who used to run an estate at that time, she deserves a mention. During the famine and endemic, she is said to have spent all her wealth to rescue her subjects with a religious Hindu zeal (Kumar, 1930, p. 134). Endemic played a huge role behind the emergence of Baul philosophy during this time. Baul is a native religion of Bengali bards which amalgamates Sufism and Bhakti philosophy. Lalon Fakir, the most illustrious Baul of all time, is said to be a victim of smallpox while on a journey to visit the places of pilgrimage. He was abandoned by his companions on the way. A Muslim fakir (saint), Siraj Sanyi rescued him in a dying condition and nursed and cured him from the disease. After his recovery, Lalon returned to his house only to be ousted by his wife and the relatives on the ground of taking shelter to the Muslims. Disappointed and disheartened, Lalon returned to Siraj Sanyi who had initiated him in Baul

doctrine and Lalon devoted himself in austere ascetic practice (“Lalon Shah - Banglapedia,” n.d.).

Among the regional forms of Kali, Olaichandi is associated with cholera. In Bengal, she is generally worshipped on Tuesdays and Saturdays throughout the whole cholera season. She is more popular in Nadia and 24-Parganas where she is worshipped along with Raksha Kali. In Tamil Nadu, the cholera deity is known as Mariamma or Ankamma, while in Orissa she is worshipped as Jogini Devi. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that such deities as Ola Bibi or Mariamma are invoked to protect a small geographical area, and therefore the rituals associated with their worship help convey a sense of ‘locality’ (Samanta, 2021, p. 72). This deity is popularly worshipped in a proselytized Muslim form as ‘Olabibi’ in Muslim areas. ‘Olabibi’ is actually considered as one of the seven sisters. They are: Olabibi, Jholabibi, Ajoibibi, Chandbibi, Bahorbibi, Jhetunebibi and Asanbibi. Jholabibi is believed to be the presiding deity of pox (Basu, 1978, p. 25).

There are a few other Muslim deities worshipped in Bengal. One among them is Manik Pir. A popular legend goes like this: Manik Pir once asked a milkmaid for some milk. She denied it. Manik caught her lie and immediately all her cows died. After recognizing the Pir, she ran after him to the river bank. Upon seeing this, Manik Pir became happy and the cows returned to their lives. Popular lore circulates on Manik Pir which says:

“Mathay Rongin Tupi, Byader Jambil
Hate loye asabari fere Manik Pir.”

(Wearing a colourful cap on his head, Manik Pir has got a handful of diseases. He roams with a wand in hand) (Basu, 1978, p. 25).

Like popular folklore Manasamangal, here too, vengeance (in the form of the disease) became an explicit weapon to proselytize the renegade.

The most important among all such deities is Shitala. Largely associated with poxes, sores, ghouls, pustules and diseases, she has been extensively researched upon. The iconographic similarity between Sitala and the Buddhist goddess ‘Parnashavari’ sheds some light on the Non- Brahmanical origin of the goddess. Miranda Shaw (2015) had associated the ritual of fanning a fever or pox victim with margosa leaves with the presence of leaves or a leaf wand in Parnashavari’s iconography. Talking about dance, she writes,

Moreover, dance figures in contemporary worship of Sitala in Bengal and presumably played a role in centuries past as well. Subrata Mukhopadhyay describes several such ritual dances, including the communal nocturnal Changu dance performed in the forest to drive away smallpox. The fact that these dances are current among Savara groups draws an ever richer network of associations between the two goddesses. (p. 196)

Jwar (Fever), Jwarasur (Fever-Demon) or, in some cases, Birbhadra is another deity of mass repute. He is said to be born out of Shiva's sweat on his forehead (Jvarasura). Projit Bihari Mukharji’s (2013) observation,

...an iconographic, rather than purely textual, analysis might suggest an even deeper past of Jwarasur that connects it to deities of the Vajrayana Buddhist pantheon that had thrived in eastern South Asia. Kenneth Zysk has pointed out that the Atharva Veda speaks of fever as a demon called Takman. The text had also posited an implicit connection between Takman and Rudra—a deity who would later come to be identified with Siva. (p. 267)

These kinds of metamorphoses of deities, especially of Shiva, from the pre-Vedic period have been observed by D.D. Kosambi as well (Kosambi, 2016, p. 7). Ayurveda, however, has incorporated local inflexions and interpolations. “The Haritsamhita believed to have been written around the eighth century, for instance, saw fever as an ‘anthropomorphic figure’ which could manifest itself in four different forms, each belonging to different varna. Thus, we find

a Raudra-Jwar who is a Brahmin, a Maharaudra or Mahendra-Jwar who is a Kshatriya, a Vaishya named Jwareswara and Sudra, Kal-Jwar” (Mukharji, 2013, p. 268). It is remarkable how this caste-based segregation of fever correlates to the time (i.e. 8th Century) when Adisura brought five Brahmins to Bengal for the first time. Thus, it can be concluded, Bengal’s infamy as a febrile land stands as a testimony to the subaltern position of both the land and its people. Mythologically and historically, Bengal stood on the margins of Vedic Culture and the religious legacy that stemmed from it. Thus, its pathogenic divinities too are largely marginalized to ‘folk deities’ vis a vis the Hindu pantheon.

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