

A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY OF TWO SYLVAN GODS OF SOUTH BENGAL : BANABIBI, DAKSHIN RAY

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Abstract : This study is based on two folk godlings of Sundarban region i.e. Banabibi and Dakshin Ray, two major sylvan god and goddess of this area and different myths and legends associated to them. In this article an attempt has been made to find out their characteristic features and stories related to them as well as to analyse them from socio-cultural perspective to get a continued history of the region's culture and society, from the primitive period to the modern times.

Key Words : folk-godlings, sylvan-dwelling, Sundarban, folktales, myths, legends

Introduction

This is quite interesting and unique feature of some of the folk godlings that they often retained their jungle-dwelling background to a certain extent, despite the fact that they are usually worshipped in the localities. Thus come the snake goddess Manasa, crocodile god Kalu Ray and of course a number of Tiger gods prevailing from Terai in the north to the Sundarbans in the south, such as Bhandarni, Sona Ray-Rupa Ray, Dakshin Ray and Banabibi. In this treatise I shall deal with the characteristic features of two of such godlings and the myths and legends connected to them.

Story of Banabibi

One of the major goddesses of the Sundarban region is Banabibi. She is also known as Bibima. The myth which had been developed in this area based on the cycle of stories related to Bibima – Dakshin Ray – Shah Jangli and Barakhan Ghazi is absolutely of the Sundarbans. A number of folktales and legends have been interspersed with this main mythic structure. The stories of Banabibi are found in various names such as *Banabibi Jahuranama* (Glory to Banabibi), *Banabibir Keramati* (The magical deeds of Banbibi), *Dhana Moule-o-Dukhe Sahar Kahini* (The story of Dhana, the honey-gatherer and Dukhe). We could find many such stories narrated by the rural bards of Atharobhati area. One such story has been published from Madina Book Depot of Chitpur area in Kolkata. The editor or poet of this book is Marhum Munshi Khater. The name of this book is *Banabibi Jahuranama* (Glory to Banabibi). Though a semblance of Islamic influence could be traced in it, still it is the most authentic version of the entire story gamut.

The people of Atharobhati area of Sundarban region irrespective of their religious faith considered this goddess as the daughter of a pious Muslim fakir named Berahim

Sahab. The beginning of the story is like a folk tale. Berahim Fakir's wife Phulbibibi was childless, so Fakir Sahab married Gulalbibibi. Phulbibibi allowed him to marry only on condition that whenever in future she would request him in any matter Fakir Sahab had to keep her words. A twin was born to Gulalbibibi: Banabibi, a girl child and Shah Jangli, her brother. Being infuriated with jealousy Phulbibibi compelled Berahim Fakir to abandon his second wife with her children in a dense forest taking advantage of the promise made by the Fakir. After that somehow Banabibi got separated from her mother and brother by the act of providence and was reared up by a deer couple of the forest.

In course of time they all reunited in famous Medina town in Saudi Arabia. Banabibi and Shah Jangli went to Atharobhati, their birthplace from Medina to meet their hapless father. After reaching there she came to know about the tyrant ruler Dakshin Ray, king of south Bengal and the son of ogre Dandabaksha and Narayani Thakurani. Dakshin Ray wandered in the jungle sometimes in zoomorphic shape and sometimes in anthropomorphic form. He used to kill and eat cow, deer and even human beings. He used to take four buffaloes and 120-kilogram rice as morning breakfast and evening tiffin!

Banabibi took initiative to free people of entire region from this tyrant ruler. On the eve of the ensuing battle, Narayani, the mother of Dakshin Ray advised his son not to fight with a woman. On the contrary, she suggested that it would be better if the battle took place between two women. Banabibi defeated Narayani in the battle. Narayani asked for mercy, fell on her feet and prayed to be forgiven. Banabibi allowed Dakshin Ray to continue his rule only on condition that henceforth he would not torture and terrorize the people of the area i.e. the vast region ranging from Kodakhali to Bay of Bengal.

The concluding part of the story is more attractive. Dhana Saha and Mana Saha were two famous merchants who used to trade with wax and honey. Once when they were sailing with their cargo boats, an additional crewmember for the vessel was required. The two brothers began to search for a young boy who could meet the bill. In this process they managed to allure Dukhiram, alias Dukhe, son of a poor widow and a distant relation of them. After few days when the boats were floating on the river inside the deep dense zones of Sundarbans, they anchored at a very lonely and fearsome spot. At this point they asked Dukhe to get down from the boat and survey nearby area to collect woods. The moment Dukhe went beyond their sight Dhana ordered other crewmembers to take off the anchor and sail afresh leaving Dukhe in the jungle. This mischief was performed by Dhana and Mana as a sequel of what the elder brother had dreamt in previous night, where Dakshin Ray ordered him to supply a human being for his meal.

Dukhe thus being abandoned by his masters became terribly afraid and just then Dakshin Ray appeared in front of him in the shape of a ferocious and hungry Royal Bengal Tiger. Dukhe started chanting prayers to Banabibi for his life. The poor boy's plight was felt by the goddess and she along with her brother Shah Jangli appeared

immediately. Shah Jangli jumped upon the tiger-morphed Dakshin Ray and slammed a heavy and tight slap on his cheek. It is locally believed in Sundarban area that since then the necks of all Royal Bengal Tigers are slightly tilted towards right! Being thus mercilessly beaten Dakshin Ray fled to Barakhan Ghazi alias Ghazi Pir for shelter. Bibima in no time reached the place with Dukhe on her lap. At the behest of Barakhan Ghazi Banabibi controlled her temper and agreed to grant Dakshin Ray another chance and forgave him.

Afterwards Kalu Ray, the Crocodile God and a friend of Dakshin Ray was ordered by Bibima to return Dukhe to his mother's lap. To save themselves from the predicament as a consequence of their misdeeds what they had done to Dukhe, Dhana and Mana fell on *devi's* feet. She however had forgiven them only after Dhana agreed to give his daughter Champavati to Dukhe for marriage. Later Dukhe became a wealthy *Choudhury* in the Atharobhati region. Since then people of entire area began worshipping of the Goddess.

Socio-cultural importance of Banabibi

That Banabibi is predominantly a forest godling – requires no further elucidation. Even in her dresses as those are found on her image – leaves and creepers are painted with bright green, yellow and red colours. In Muslim areas her dress is *salwar-kameez*, *dupatta*, *fez*, and *nagrai*, on which floral designs are present. In Hindu areas her usual dress is *sari* and she is bare-footed but the floral designs are not wanting. Everywhere she rides upon a tiger and a little boy sits on her lap. These two images are considered as of Dakshin Ray and Dukhe respectively. It must also be noted in the final sequence of the myth concerned, Banabibi totally subjugated Dakshin Ray. The composite image where the goddess sits upon the tiger indicates the subjugation of Dakshin Ray. A terracotta figurine of a human figure sitting upon a tiger found in Chandraketurgarh (ca. 2nd–1st century B.C.), is usually considered by the experts as the archetypal relic of the composite image of Banabibi and Dakshin Ray as that prevails presently. The image of Banabibi with Dukhe on her lap is quite cohesive with the universal idea of the Mother Goddess.

Comparable manifestations are Isis and Horus in Egyptian mythology, Ganesh-Janani and Jashoda-Gopal in Hindu mythic cycles and Madonna and child Jesus in Christian myths. The primitive practice of worshipping could be found in case of Banabibi as well, for in certain areas *Hajot* i.e. votive offerings are placed upon a medium-sized mound that is considered as the symbolic representations of the goddess. In southern Bengal, a sort of ritualistic pottery includes the head of Banabibi, which are made by inverting the pot showing a face on it and its base functioning as neck. Mould made terracotta head of Banabibi usually painted with red, deep green, chrome and black on a white ground is shown wearing an elaborate *mukuta*(crown). The painted head of Banabibi made as a doll surmounting a leaf-like crown looks charming and beautiful due to unique sense of colour-harmony. Again, the story of Banabibi and Shah Jangli being reared up by a deer couple in their childhood suggests a sort of totemic belief.

Dakshin Ray: in various forms

Dakshin Ray has been contemplated in different morphic shapes. In his temple at Dhapdhapi near Baruipur, (South 24 Parganas) he appears in anthropomorphic features, sits on a throne, wears a pair of boots and holds a riffle in his hand! Surely the last two items are latter interpolations. In southern Bengal, the ritualistic potteries also include the head of Dakshin Ray which are made by inverting the pot showing a face on it and its base functioning as neck. But his image in the form of a guillotined human head is perhaps a mark of primitive ritualistic practice of head hunting. It may be noted that this beheaded image of Dakshin Ray usually called as Bara Thakur or Baro Thakur. Mould-made terracotta head of Bara Thakur is painted with red, deep green, yellow-ochre and black. He wears an elaborate crown, which signifies his royal character. The painted head of Dakshin Ray though could be used as a play thing or a decorative object, but as soon as it is consecrated it becomes a cult object.

Myths on Dakshin Ray

A couple of local myths are available about the origin of this beheaded godling. One of the story runs in this manner that when the fearful god Shani came to his sister (!) Parvati's house and glanced at his newly born nephew Ganesha, with the touch of his devastating look the human-like head of the baby fell down from its body. Later this chopped-off human head came to be known as Bara Thakur. Of course this story does not explain the existence of a second chopped-off head, which too is unfailingly worshipped along with Bara Thakur. This second head is believed to be of Narayani, though on the cheeks of this head too, there is beard. But here arises a question whether this head with beard on the cheeks and clean-shaven upper-lip could be of a woman? Presumably this second head might be considered a Muslim male. Some people are of the opinion that it might be the head of Barakhan Ghazi as well.

The second story which is comparatively less known: when Shah Jangli attacked Dakshin Ray, he fled in fear to the *mokam*(place of worship) of Bara Khan Ghazi for shelter. But angry Ghazi Sahab chopped off his head with his sword. Immediately a new head grew up on the beheaded torso (because Dakshin Ray was the progeny of a *rakshasi* i.e. ogre) and consequently this chopped off head came to be known as Bara Thakur alias Dakshin Ray.

Analysis

Both the stories bear the marks of a much later period. One was created to magnify the power of Hindu mythic gods while the other was originated to strengthen the glory of Islam. Though this sort of worship of chopped-off head is usually related to primitive

rituals yet we don't have full-proof evidence to connect this to establish the fact that the practice of headhunting had been prevailing in the Sundarban area in the hoary past.

It may be suggested that the culture of primitive chopped-off head worship did mix up with the myth of Dakshin Ray and Barakhan Ghazi. It may be noted that there is a close similarity between Dakshin Ray and Kuttan Devar, the god of the fishermen of Tamil Nadu, in South India. It is not impossible that Kuttan Devar worshippers of South India had brought his chopped-off head-image to southern Bengal in course of their business sojourn over there and subsequently the head of Kuttan Devar was attributed with a new nomenclature i.e. Bara Thakur alias Dakshin Ray. It is more interesting that there is a similarity between the headgear of Bara Thakur / Kuttan Devar and that of ancient Egyptian gods and Pharaohs. In this connection it may be recollected that a possible link might have existed between ancient Egypt and Southern Bengal in the pre-Christian era.

Both Banabibi and Dakshin Ray are worshipped in the Sundarban regions universally by the Hindus, Muslims, Christians and tribal people. Whenever a Sundarbanite enters into the forest in course of the professional pursuit they chant a *mantra*:

ma banbibi ei kathati thake jeno mone
tomar ballak elo bane

(Oh Banbibi my mother don't forget that your son has entered into the forest.)

-the inherent urge is obvious. The cult of Banabibi is thus cutting across the religious boundaries has become the most powerful emotional spirit for the majority of the sylvan-dwelling population of Sundarban and Atharobhati. This mythic cycle and the related images of the godlings give a continued history of the region's culture and society, dating from the pre-Christian era to the present age.

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