



Library

IAS, Shimla

PH 294 D 26



00015583



THE CULT OF MAGDESVARI

BY

S. B. DASGUPTA, M.Sc.

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhists and Hindus of Chittagong worship the deity Magdesvari with some peculiar rites. Among the Hindus it is mostly the non-Brahmin castes that worship this goddess, and in the regular rites a Brahmin priest is not employed. No image of the goddess is made at the time of the worship, neither can any be found in the area where this cult is prevalent. In a few rare cases Brahmins are also found to offer worship to Magdesvari, but this practice is of comparatively recent origin.

Of late rapid changes appear to have occurred in the rites and beliefs of this cult, both among the Hindus and the Buddhists. The former are bent upon linking this deity with the regular deities of the Hindu pantheon, and the latter, with advance of education and culture, show a distinct tendency to be more true to the tenets of Buddhism and hence are giving up some of the most interesting traits of the worship which involve animal sacrifice.

The magico-religious rites and practices associated with the worship of Magdesvari have been termed, in this article, a cult in so far as they touch more fields than the mere worship of Magdesvari.

As a native of Chittagong I have been familiar with the peculiar rites of the Magdesvari Cult from my boyhood. I have personally witnessed the worship of Magdesvari from beginning to end on many occasions and have seen a Magdesvari Hât being conducted in a neighbouring house in my village. Of late I have supplemented my earlier memories by scientific observation.

During the months of September and October, 1938, I carried out some investigations about this cult in the villages Guzara-Noapara, Fatehabad, Sikarpur and Saroatali to subject my knowledge to test and also to supplement it with further details. Of the Hindus among many male and female informants my chief informant was one Romesh Chandra De, who has, as he said, so far officiated as the chief Sevait in no less than sixty Magdesvari Sevās while my important Buddhist informant was Ram Chandra Barua of the village Noapara. Many facts with regard to the traditions, beliefs and customs were obtained from elderly women folk of the villages.

DESCRIPTION

The cult of Magdesvari may be divided into :—

- (a) worship of Magdesvari or Magdesvari Sevā as it is called, and
- (b) Magdesvari Hāt.

MAGDESVARI SEVĀ

(As practised by the Hindus)

Magdesvari Sevā is held at midday on a Saturday or a Tuesday of any month; but the Bengalee month *Bhādra* is held as the most proper for the purpose. It should be remembered that this *Sevā* is not a periodical function but an occasional one. No special stress is laid whether it is to be held in the darker or the lighter half of the month. Sevā cannot, however, be performed if the family is suffering from ceremonial uncleanness from death or child-birth.

As a rule offerings are made when a woman becomes pregnant and the time preferred is the fifth, sixth or the seventh month of pregnancy. At the time of the birth of the first child a *Sevā* is deemed very

essential. A Magdesvari Sevā can also be held when the housewife of the family takes a vow to that effect, for propitiating the goddess when any member of the family, especially any of her children or grandchildren suffers from any trouble such as a serious disease. When such a vow is taken five cowrie shells are kept separate in the name of the goddess Magdesvari. These are required at the time of the actual *Sevā* on a subsequent day.

The offerings are made at a place called *Sevā Kholā* which is generally situated by the roadside on the outskirts of the village or hamlet. Usually every hamlet has its own *Sevā-Kholā* and some times even more than one. A *Sevā-Kholā* is never situated within the precincts of the residential quarters. Generally a family makes its offerings at a particular *Sevā-Kholā* which may be situated at a greater distance than another which may be quite near the house. But they cannot change the place linked up with the family traditions for fear that the goddess may not accept the offering made at a new place. The *Sevā-Kholā* is a small spot about six feet square, which is cleansed at the time of the *Sevā* by clearing the grass with a hoe. It is an open spot which may be recognised by the remnants of any previous *Sevā* performed there.

As stated before no Brāhmin is required to officiate at such a performance. The officiants are usually three men, hailing, generally from the lower ranks of Hindu society, one of whom must be a person who has undergone his initiation (*Dīksā*) ceremony from the family preceptor (*Kula Guru*). The initiated one acts as the chief priest and the other two act as his helpers. Sometimes, in the case of certain families, the number of these assistants increase up to as many as ten.

A black she-goat, a newly made basket made of bamboo strips, a new earthen pot, an old used basket, a bundle of dry bamboo sticks, a *dāh*, a broken piece of pottery for burning incense, a stone muller, a stone plate containing raw (green) turmeric, cumin seed,

coriander seed, pepper, chilli, onion, salt, a small packet of vermilion powder, mustard oil, two bamboo pieces chiselled in the shape of darts, each gradually ending in a sharp end; four small posts of *Keran* branches, five cowrie shells; five *Poās* (poā—about half pound) of uncooked *Atap* rice, three plaintain leaves and several red *Jaba* (*Hibiscus*) flowers and *Tulsi* (*ocimum sanctum*) leaves, are the articles needed for the worship.

The three men to officiate as priests in the performance of the *Sevā* have to fast from the morning of the day of worship. Other taboos such as those on sex relations have not been found to exist. At about noon the priests assemble at the house of the person for whose sake the *Sevā* is to be performed. One of them begins to make a basket, from bamboo strips, of size, roughly one and half feet square, with four loops, to act as hand-holds, on the edges of the four sides of the basket. A spot in the courtyard is previously cleansed with cowdung and mud for the animal sacrifice and other initial work connected with the worship to be carried out there. The black she-goat, which is previously purchased for the purpose,—an all black one is preferred,—is then taken by the three priests or *Sevāits*, as they are locally called, to the nearest pond or river. They all bathe there and make the goat also bathe with them. The goat is then carried in the arms of one of the *Sevāits*, all in wet cloths, and kept in the cleansed portion of the courtyard. Next the person for whose sake the offerings are to be made is seated in the courtyard facing south and water is poured on his head by one of the *Sevāits* from a pot. The drained water from the head is allowed to fall on the four feet of the goat which are held together by another *Sevāit* raising the goat in his arms. Vermilion marks are then put on the forehead, spine and ears of the goat and it is then garlanded with *Jabā* flowers.

The next item consists in the arrangement of the offerings in the newly made basket. Three plaintain leaves are placed on the basket covering its base as also to some extent its sides. Five *Poās* of washed *Ātap* rice are then heaped carefully in the

middle; and round the heap *Jabā* flowers are placed encircling and almost covering the heap of rice, the top being exempt. The five cowrie shells, which have been kept apart at the time of taking the vow for offering worship to Magdesvari, as noted before, are then taken out and put in a corner of the basket.

When the sun is just overhead the basket containing the offerings is placed at a convenient spot in the cleansed portion of the courtyard. The goat is held upside down by the four legs, two in each hand, over the basket, by one of the *Sevāits*. The head of the goat is directed southwards. The chief *Sevāit* next takes three *Tulsi* leaves drenched in water and drops them one by one on the goat muttering each time *Magdesvari Devyāya Nama*, salutations to the goddess Magdesvari, (reproduced as actually muttered by my informant). Then facing west he takes hold of the face of the goat with his left hand and holding a sharp *dāh* by his right severs off the head of the goat by rubbing the sharp edge of the *dāh* several times against the throat of the goat. The blood that oozes out at the time of cutting off the head is let fall on the heap of rice in the basket; and then after separating the head the streaming blood is collected in a new earthen pot. The severed head is then placed on the top of the heap of rice which was not covered with *Jabā* flowers. The skin is next opened transversely at the middle of the spine with the *dāh* and pulled apart from front and back. Each part of the skin is then left attached to a pair of legs on its side. The legs are now cut off from the rest of the body. The entrails are collected in an old used basket. Turmeric and other spices are then made into a rough paste on a stone plate (and not on a metate) with the help of a muller. It is interesting to note that a metate is not used by the Buddhists of Chittagong in their household affairs; they use the pestle and mortar in its stead.

Pieces of flesh are cut off from all parts of the skinned carcass, such as thigh, flanks, etc.; the lung and the heart are specially included; and they are pierced with the two bamboo darts. These

bits of flesh, on the two sticks are then treated with the paste of the spices and mustard oil and roasted on a fire made by burning a bundle of dry bamboo sticks, until the meat nearly turns black. The darts with the roasted meat are placed in the basket on the two opposite sides of the rice heap. A wick of cotton is then soaked in mustard oil, lit and placed on the head between the horns of the slaughtered animal in the basket. The two pieces of skin with a pair of legs attached to each, are placed in the basket on two opposite sides of the rice heap so that the parts of the legs attached to the skin hang over the outer side of the basket. The entrails are taken in the old basket. Sometimes the skins also are taken in the same basket along with the entrails. After this every one present on the spot, (that is in the courtyard) bows down on the ground facing the basket and then turns his back towards the basket for a few seconds. This is done as the goddess Magdesvari is believed to appear at the spot in spirit that moment to accept the offerings.

The next step is to carry these things to the *Sevā Kholā*. The chief priest carries the basket containing rice, roasted meat and the head of the goat on his head and his associates help in carrying the basket holding the entrails, the earthen pot containing blood, a bundle of dry bamboo sticks and the other things that are needed at the *Sevā Kholā*. These have been enumerated before. On reaching the sacred spot one of the *Sevāits* fixes four posts of *Keran* branches on the ground each of which has a fork from which the basket containing rice, the head of the goat and other offerings is hung by the four loops described before. The basket is so placed that the head of the sacrificed goat faces South. The basket containing the entrails and the pot containing blood are then placed on the ground below the hanging basket. The dry bamboo sticks are then burned. Sometimes an earthen lamp filled with mustard oil is lit and placed by the side of the basket and incense burnt on burning charcoal in a broken piece of

pottery. The chief *Sevāit* then takes three *Tulsi* leaves drenched in water and drops them one after another on the back edge, *i.e.*, the northern rim, of the basket, himself standing immediately to the north of the basket, facing south with the basket just in front, muttering each time *Maddesari Debyāya Nama*, (salutations to goddess Maddesari). The party then bows at the *Sevā Kholā* and moves to a little distance and waits. There is no rule that the person for whose sake the offerings are made or any of his family must accompany the party to the *Sevā Kholā*. Women folk are not generally allowed to join the party on such occasions.

It is the belief of the people of Chittagong that at such time goddess Magdesvari enters in spirit into some creature such as a vulture, a crow, a dog, or a fox, which then appears and eats the offerings. Unless and until some one of the aforesaid creatures comes and begins to partake of the offered articles the *Sevāits* cannot return home. If there be any delay in any such living being eating the offerings it is taken to be a bad omen. It may be that there might have been something wrong in the procedure or that some one of the family was not agreeable to incur so much expenses for the worship. In the last case, and this happens in a very few cases among lower class people, the crime of such sacrilege falls generally on the son's wife of the head of the family, and she is given a good thrashing whereupon it is expected that the goddess will be pleased and will accept offerings through the agency of one of the aforesaid creatures. As soon as some such being begins to eat the offered food the party heralds the news by shouting to the members of the family who have been anxiously waiting so long to hear the good tidings. The latter then remove all the articles from the courtyard and cleanse the place so that the party of *Sevāit* may not see any thing left at the place when they return. Unless the news is heralded that the offerings are being eaten by some creature mentioned above nothing can be touched or removed from the

courtyard. It is taken to be a happy sign if a vulture or a fox eats the offerings.

The remaining flesh of the sacrificed animal is then cooked and feasted upon, the three *Sevāits* being essential members of that party. None, especially none of the *Sevāits*, can take any food until the meat is cooked. It is also a rule that the whole of the meat must be eaten at the same meal and that no portion of it can be saved for the next meal.

There are some changes and variations in the rites of the worship. In some families it is customary that the sacrifices and offerings should be made twice: once at midday as described above and again at dead of night. The creature sacrificed at night is usually a duck. The other features are almost similar to those that are followed at the offerings at midday. Everything connected with the worship in this case must be finished before day-break.

Different Forms

Again there are families which have to do everything connected with the worship, at the *Sevā Kholā*. The *Sevāits* bathe and sacrifice the goat, offer worship to the goddess and after the same is accepted by Magdesvari the remaining portion of the sacrificed animal is cooked and eaten also at the *Sevā Kholā*. Nothing is done within the precincts of the family quarters.

One family has a tradition that all the people that happen to pass by the *Sevā Kholā* at the time of offering the *Pujā* have to be invited and fed on the cooked meat at the *Sevā Kholā*.

In some cases duck-eggs usually 21 in number, are arranged in a circle on the heap of rice in addition to the *Jabā* flowers.

Some families again offer cooked rice instead of uncooked *Ātap* rice in the basket. All these differences are accounted for by the people simply by the argument that they are done in accordance with the family traditions. But they are apparently not of much importance as the essential rites are the same.

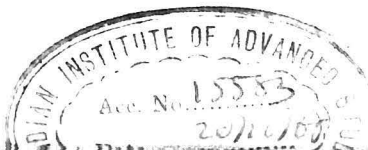
A very strange type of Magdesvari Sevā is known as Kāl Sevā. This Sevā is to be performed not in the day-time but at dead of night. The particular name has been derived from *Kal*, a small female effigy of plantain shoot made to human form with the help of a knife and by wrapping rags and jute, dyed black, on the body and head to represent cloth and hair respectively. This is done by a medicine man who is known as *Baidya*. This man may hail either from the Buddhist or the Hindu community. He plays an important part, as will be found later, in the other part of the Magdesvari cult—the Magdesvari Hāt.

This man, the *Baidya* as he is called, comes in the evening and prepares the effigy muttering incantations all the while. At about mid-night the offerings are made at the *Sevā Kholā*, the details concurring with those described in the usual practice at the midday performances, with this exception that everything is done at the *Sevā Kholā*; and that the effigy is fixed immediately to the north of the basket containing the offered articles and facing south. As can quite well be conceived the creatures that are supposed to be possessed by the spirit of Magdesvari for eating the offerings are in this case nocturnal animals such as jackals.

A Kāl Sevā is taken recourse to generally when a woman in her pregnancy is thought to be possessed by an evil spirit such as *Kālmir*. Evidence of such spirit possession is given out by many abnormal symptoms such as suffering from hallucination or becoming morose and muttering to herself.

Some families have Hinduised the deity Magdesvari to a great degree. They now call in a Brahmin, the usual family priest, who does not mind officiating in a ceremony which increases his income to a little extent. But he is careful to make the necessary additions and alterations to the usual rites in this worship to give the deity and the cult a more Hindu appearance. Thus the *Sālgrām* is worshipped at first, as is customary in all the Hindu *Pujās* and

Modern Trends



then begins the worship of Magdesvari. The mantras that are uttered at this time are very interesting as they clearly make one understand that a *Kālī*, Magdesvari by name, is being worshipped. A passage copied by me from a manuscript text in corrupt Sanskrit detailing the rules and mantras of Magdesvari *Pujā*, written by an ingenious Brahmin in 1343 B.S., (=1936 A.D.) reads “*Magadhantu samudbhūtām bhuvalakṣaṇadehajām atṭāṭṭahāsavadanām jihvālalanabhīṣaṇām pralayānanadhūmrākṛtām gabhīrodaranābhikām sūrpākṛti-padadvayām salākāṅgulī śobhitām dhyāyenmagadhatām devīm varam trailokyamātaram...*” According to the above text, one should meditate upon the great goddess Magdesvari, the mother of the three worlds who had her origin in the country of Magadha, born of the body of signs of the Universe(?), having a terrifying laugh in her great and horrifying face with the tongue lolling out, of the colour of smoke, having a deep navel and having the two feet of the shape of the winnowing fan, and slender fingers of the shape of skewers. As is quite evident this would better fit a description of one of the varied forms of the Hindu goddess *Kālī*.

After finishing this worship comes the sacrifice of the animal. Here, in place of a she-goat a black he-goat is substituted and the same is slaughtered with the Hindu sacrificial knife (*Khaḍga*) on the sacrificial sticks (*hārkaṭh*) by a single blow in the ordinary Hindu form. So far the Brahmin performs the worship in accordance with the usual Hindu practice ; but after this step the three *Sevāits* come on the stage and skin the slaughtered beast, prepare the offerings in the newly made basket, as is the case with the regular Magdesvari *Sevā* and offer the same at the *Sevā Kholā*. Thus the Brahmin is deprived of one thing—the head of the sacrificed animal which is, at least in Chittagong to my knowledge, the perquisite of the officiating Brahmin in all Hindu worship. When the offerings are arranged in the basket and are about to be carried to the *Sevā Kholā*, the Brahmin gives his final Hindu touch to the performance by chanting the following mantra (noted from the

manuscript text already referred to)—“*Idaṃ pakvamāṣyā māsakaṇḍarudhirasiddhataṇḍula-sameta-sapradīpaśirovalim magdheśvāyai devyai namaḥ.*” “These Pakvamāṣyā (?) and pieces of meat and blood with cooked rice, and (sacrificed) head with light (on the head) are offered to goddess Magdesvari; salutations to the Goddess.”

In the above two mantra-passages there are grammatical mistakes which show the lack of scholarship of the author who has sought to fit the mantras of a purely Hindu worship into an unorthodox rite.

That there has been a tendency to turn this strange deity into a new form of the Hindu goddess *Kālī* or some such goddess, is shown further by the fact that a temple has been erected adjoining a *Sevā Kholā* in the village Fatehabad which contains the image of a *Kālī* and has been given the name of Magdesvari *Kālī*. Regular worship on the lines of the Hindu rites is done to this Magdesvari *Kālī* and this is followed by the offering of roasted meat etc., at the *Sevā Kholā*. If the last part of the rites are totally dropped in time, only a regular *Kālī* worship will remain and the deity will be completely Hinduised.

The Buddhists worship Magdesvari in almost the same way as the Hindus according to the regular older practice and not according to the modern changed methods. But there are certain differences. Thus the number of *Sevāits* is generally not less than seven and everything is done at the *Sevā Kholā*. The *Sevāits* do not chant any *mantra*. They simply bow down at the place after having done everything at the *Sevā Kholā* as noted before, in order that the goddess may appear through the agency of the creatures mentioned before and partake of the offering; they then go away to a little distance. In the spices ginger is specially avoided and “ghee” is not used. The spices are made into a paste in a metal cup with the help of a small pestle.

In recent times there has been a move among these people that they as followers of Lord Buddha should give up animal

killing especially at a sacred performance. Hence at present if anybody takes a vow of offering Pujā to Magdesvari the person bathes at midday of a Tuesday or a Saturday, goes to the *Sevā Khola* and marks a spot with mustard oil and vermilion powder and bows down facing South. This finishes the business. But still in the less sophisticated areas the full rites with animal sacrifice are performed.

Summary—Before passing to the next part of the cult, the following notable features of the worship of Magdesvari may be summed up :—

1. Absence of Brahmin in the regular *Sevā*,
2. Sacrifice of a female animal.
3. Instead of chopping off the head of the animal by a single blow it is cut off by rubbing the sharp edge of the *dah* against the throat.
4. Offering of roasted meat, skin and entrails and blood of the animal to the goddess.
5. All the important acts in the course of the worship are done facing South.
6. Buddhists and Hindus both worship the deity in almost identically the same way.

MAGDESVARĪ HĀṬ

Another phase of the Cult is Magdesvari Hāṭ which is practised to ward off evil spirits. The main features of this ceremony lie in the medicine man or *Baidya* bringing about possession by the goddess Magdesvari of a person who is termed *Gāchā*. Hāṭs are usually arranged for when some woman, generally a pregnant young woman of the family, is believed to be possessed of some evil spirit. The most notorious of such spirits is the one *Kālmir*, mentioned before; he is said to have a very dark complexion. There are also others in the list such as Birsingha, the white friend, who is said to be quite a gentle fellow.

A Hāṭ may be of many kinds, but generally two varieties are common ; the *Chitā* or scattered Hāṭ which is concluded in a single day, and the more continuous type which unless a specific result is obtained is continued indefinitely.

A Hāṭ may be arranged for at any time of the year, on a Tuesday or a Saturday. In the case of the second type of Hāṭ, which also has to be started on a Saturday or Tuesday, if the desired results are not obtained on the first day, the ceremonies may be continued on the following days. No Hāṭ is continued for the whole day. It is held at four times during the day (a) at the very early dawn, (b) at midday, (c) at dusk and (d) at mid-night for approximately an hour each time.

The *Chitā* Hāṭ is arranged within some room of the dwelling house ; whereas the other type of Hāṭ is almost always held in the courtyard and rarely (when it fails in its object at first) at the *Seva Khoḷā*.

The Hāṭ is arranged by heaping uncooked *Ātap* rice on plantain leaves around which, in a rectangular form, duck-eggs (seven, nine, eleven, sixteen or twenty-one as the case may be), are placed and red *Jabā* flowers added in good numbers. In front two plantain shoots are fixed in the ground on the two sides. In the *Chitā* Hāṭ the *Gāchā* usually sits facing east confronting the rice heap etc., while in the other type of Hāṭ the *Gāchā* sits facing south confronting the rice heap and other ceremonial objects.

As the *Gāchā* sits kneeling down and clasping the hands together, the *Baidya* puts a red *Jabā* flower on the clasped hands ; this is to be held by the *Gāchā*. The *Baidya* then sits by the side of the *Gāchā* and begins to beat a plate of bell-metal with two sticks which he holds in his hands, resting one side of the plate on his toes and the other side on the ground. Incantations are also uttered by him and are to the effect that Magdesvari is sometimes coaxed and sometimes vilified to appear before the *Gāchā*. Some of the words are

very significant as, "Come, Come, Mother! Oh Mother Maghini (a female Magh)!" and "Oh, the daughter of Sona the Magh! Come, come, appear Thou before the *Gāchā*." These expressions give clear indications of the real origin of the goddess.

The *Gāchā* begins shaking his head from side to side and occasionally exclaims, "I see the Mother Magdesvari but she is very far away," or "She refuses to come to the Hāt as such and such are the defects," or again "The Mother is hanging her red feet sitting on the branch of a *Shāro* tree at the *Sevā Kholā* and chewing betel leaves." The ordinary causes that prevent the goddess to appear at the Hāt are that the premises or the residential quarters of the family are under some magical influence of some *Baidya* and that some amulets may be found embedded in the ground at the south-east (*Agni Kon*) corner of the residential quarters. These have to be taken out so that the goddess may come. If this be not possible the Hāt should be transferred to the *Sevā Kholā* where the results of the performance are expected to be evident. At such time Magdesvari is said to speak through the mouth of the *Gāchā* that such and such spirit or *Pari* has got possession of the person suffering, and that such and such are the remedies. Sometimes the *Gāchā* gets an amulet in the hand given by Magdesvari. I was informed that a *Gāchā*, who was an illiterate person wrote pages in good English when provided with ink, pen and paper when so possessed. This was held to be proof positive that Magdesvari had really come. It was not, however, clear why the goddess wrote in English. All the people of the village muster strong on such occasions making good use of the tobacco and betel leaves hospitably offered by the affected family.

In a case noticed by me, a young married woman in a family was said to become frequently possessed by the spirit of Magdesvari at midday or dusk or sometimes in the early dawn when she used to dance and shake her head. Often taking a red *Jabā* flower in her hand she used to proceed to the *Scra Kholā* dancing all the while. People from far and near thronged round her and

brought with them milk and fruits to offer at the *Sevā Kholā* as that particular spot was deemed very sacred and dynamic owing to the frequent presence of the goddess. The woman held to be possessed by Magdesvari was looked upon with veneration and awe.

CONCLUSION

The name Magdēsvārī suggests that it is a Sanskritic name derived from the roots "Magadha" and "Isvari." Magadha is the ancient name of South Behar. The pronunciation is, however, Magdesvari and not Māgadhesvari. The suggestion that the goddess is of Hindu origin, is belied by the rites in all their features.

The Buddhists of Chittagong are locally termed Mags; and "Mag" may have some connection with "Magadha."¹ In the census of 1931² there is a reference to the claim by the Buddhists of Chittagong that they are the descendants of people who originally came from Magadha hundreds of years ago. It may, however, be also a purely tribal name which has survived.

Whether Magh is the original tribal name of the Chittagong Buddhists or whether it is derived from Magadha, it will not be wrong to associate this goddess with the primitive customs of non-Hindu and non-Buddhist people considering all the features of the Cult.

¹ H. H. Risley—The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol. II, 1891, (pp. 28-29).....Concerning the use and derivation of the name Magh there has been much discussion, and the question cannot be considered as having been finally settled. Wilson, followed by Ritter, Fr. Muller, and Colonel Yule, defines it as "a name commonly applied to the natives of Arakan particularly those bordering on Bengal or residing near the sea,—the people of Chittagong." Sir Arthur Phayre, quoted by Colonel Yule, derives the name from "Maga" the name of the ruling race for many centuries in Magadha (Modern Behar). See also the brief notes on the worship of Magdesvari in the District Gazetteer for Chittagong by L. S. S. O'Malley (Calcutta, 1908). The deity is suggested by Rai Bahadur Saratchandra Das to be a variant of the Mahāyana deity Arya Tārā.

² J. H. Hutton—Census of India, Vol. I, Part I, p. 389 :—

"A colony of Buddhists in Chittagong, however, claims to represent the ancient Buddhist population of Magadha....."

As noted earlier the chief *Sevāit* in muttering the saluting mantras pronounced Maddesari in place of Magdesvari. This becomes more significant when we note that the Buddhists also call the deity Maddesari and not Magdesvari. Whether it is just a matter of simplified or crooked pronunciation and is not really a different name is not very easy to judge. Small hill streams are, however, called "*Chari*" in Chittagong, from which sometimes villages are named after adding the suffix "*Chari*." The Bengali 'Chh' is generally pronounced in Chittagong as a sibilant and sounds as 's.' So it may also be the name of a place where this cult may have originated or whence it has come to Chittagong proper. But it may also be argued that the "*Chari*" or "*Sari*" has been derived from "*Isvari*."

The non-Hindu character of the goddess becomes more and more pronounced when the peculiar features are taken one by one into consideration. Firstly in a regular Magdesvari *Sevā* a Brahmin priest is not required, and the Brahmin caste seldom shows any allegiance to this goddess. This could not have occurred if the deity had been originally a Hindu one.

Next the features that (1) a female animal is required to be sacrificed, (2) that this is done by rubbing the *dāh* against the throat, and (3) roasted meat, skin and entrails are given as offerings to a goddess are quite foreign to Hindu sentiment. A Hindu does not sacrifice a she-goat or any female animal to any deity. The slaughtering of the animal by rubbing a *dah* against the throat reminds one of the method by which the Mahomedans slaughter animals. As Chittagong has a predominating Muslim population one may naturally think of ascribing the origin of this practice to the Mahomedan custom. But the Mahomedans are stout non-believers of Magdesvari and hence it is not likely that a custom of a non-believing people would be borrowed specially in a religious rite.

There is a belief among the people that Magdesvari was the daughter of a Magh chief Sona by name, who had his dominion somewhere in Arakan in Burma. This lady later became

deified and was worshipped by the people. References based on this belief are made in the invocations at a *bāt* as noted before.

There is a minor fact which throws some light on the question. A metate is not taken help of for making a paste of the spices at the time of the *Sevā*. The Buddhists of Chittagong are characterised by the absence of the metate in their material culture. The Hindus, however, use it invariably. The exclusion of the metate for crushing the spices at the time of the *Seva* probably indicates its absence in the culture from which this religious rite has been borrowed by the Hindus in Chittagong.

From the discussions it is clear that a non-Hindu deity is in the process of being Hinduised. It is perhaps in some such ways that so many different female deities have got their way into the regular list of the Hindu deities.¹

¹ I have to thank the Anthropology Department of the Calcutta University for encouragement in investigating this subject and help in bringing out this article.

