

The Ideology of a Peripheral Religious Cult and the Subaltern Quest for Identity

A Study of the Rites of Dharmathakur in West Bengal

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Worshipped in many districts of Bengal, for example, Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore, Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, and the Twenty-four Parganas,¹ the deity Dharma or Dharmathakur, as he is called, comes down to us supposedly from pre-Vedic times. Niharranjan Ray claims that Dharmathakur was originally a pre-Aryan or non-Aryan deity who gradually "merged with Varuṇa, the chariot-borne Sūrya, Kūrma, the Puranic tortoise *avatāra*, and Kalki, the last incarnation of Viṣṇu, eventually achieving transformation as Dharmathakur".² However, despite later accretions and amalgamations Dharmathakur retains a non-Brahmanical, pre-Vedic character in many ways.³

The early Bengalis were proto-Australoid. They were predominantly cultivators by occupation. Bengal had significantly lesser contact with the Vedic civilization than the northern states. According to R. C. Majumdar, Bengal was outside the pale of Vedic civilization, as is shown by the absence of all references to Bengal in the *R̥k-Saṃhitā*: He says:

We cannot but attach due significance to the absence of all references to Bengal in the *R̥k-Saṃhitā* and in later *Saṃhitas* and *Brahmanas*, barring a few casual notices in the *Aitareya Brahmana*, and possibly the *Aitareya Aranyaka*, all of which reveal an attitude towards the country and its people which is not one of approbation.³

The Aryan people had come from outside India, and although their material conditions were not very advanced, their superiority, claims Suniti K. Chatterji, "lay in the superiority of their language".⁴ The Aryan language made the Dravidian and Austric languages appear relatively dull. Moreover, the religion of the immigrants—the Vedic religion with its ritual and sacrifices—seemed superior to that of the

indigenous, native population. At the time of the later *Samhitās*, the Vedic Aryans were gradually coming into contact with Bengal. Aryan infiltration began around 1000 BC.

Ray contends, "Aryanization began the history of caste in Bengal."⁵ Before the incursion of the Aryans, although various prescriptions regarding eating, marriage, religion, etc. had prevailed among the Austric-speaking people, Brahmanical caste patterns, customs and hierarchy were not prevalent in Bengal. An important stage in the development of Aryanization as well as caste development began with the advent of the Gupta rule in northern Vaṅga and elsewhere in Bengal. From the Gupta times Vedic and Puranic Brahmanism and its culture started flowing into Bengal. Eventually, the Varman-Sena period, *i.e.*, the period from the eighth to the twelfth century AD saw the spread and consolidation of Brahmanical rule in Bengal. During this period one notices a conscious effort towards the superimposition of Brahmanical ideas, laws, and rule in Bengal. The Brahmanical *Smṛti* and *Vyavahāra* edicts and law in accord with Puranic Brahmanism were established throughout Bengal during the Varman-Sena regime. As Ray says,

The desired intention of the age was the autocratic supremacy of one caste, one religion, one social ideology. That caste was the Brahmans, the religion was Brahmanism and the ideology was that of the Puranic Brahmanical society.⁶

Unlike North India, Bengal is characterized by the virtual absence of the Kṣatriya and Vaiśya castes. While the Brahmanas placed themselves at the top of the hierarchy, the Śūdras stood between them and the community of the assimilated, untouchable, lowborn outcastes without any rights. Intermarriages between the Brahmanas and Śūdras eventually led to the rise of intermediate subcastes like the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas. At the bottom of the social scale were the Vyadhas, Haddis, Doms, Jolas, Bagatitas, Candalas, Mallas, etc. who were probably indigenous aboriginal communities.

The dominant religion in Bengal was Brahmanism. The indigenous religion of the proto-Australoids after a losing battle became totally subservient to the dominant religion although the native cults sometimes succeeded in modifying the content of the codified, 'higher' religions. These subaltern cults practiced by many of the indigenous, low-caste or untouchable people could neither enter into the mainstream nor gain any recognition. Yet, as Ray emphasizes, the vitality of such ancient and popular religious practices was

considerable even as they differed from the dominant Aryan, He says,

Concealed behind the Aryan exterior in the practices of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism, there is a religious and cultural life extending to the depths of the Bengali people and into every corner of the village cottages, the householders' courtyards, the peasants' plots, the fields of harvest, and the temple pavilions and the public meeting places of the rural communities.⁷

The history of these indigenous cults in Bengal shows an interesting combination of two contrary tendencies—on the one hand, an attempt to surrender and assimilate into the Hindu fold and, on the other to preserve their distinctive identity. That they continue to survive today evinces their enduring power.

The Dharma cult is one such popular, indigenous cult practiced by a number of low castes but chiefly by the Doms in some districts. Like many other popular cults, the practice of the Dharma cult produced a sense of solidarity among the worshippers and helped them in maintaining their distinctive identity within the Hindu fold. Emile Durkheim's views are quite pertinent in this context. He states:

... religious beliefs are always common to a determined group which makes a profession of adhering to them and practicing the rites connected with them ... they are something belonging to the group and they make its unity."⁸

From the time of the inception of the cult, the Dharmites were perhaps aware of their exclusive identity. In pursuing their beliefs in a non-Brahmanical god they suffered persecution, and the trial ultimately bred solidarity among them. A manuscript entitled, *Dharmer Bandana* contains the narrative of such a persecution and its resolution. We are told, "when the Brahminic people of Maldah began to tax the Saddharmis (i.e., the Dharmites), to persecute them and kill them, Lord Niranjana got very angry in Vaikuntha and revealed himself as the Khoda (God) of the Muslima in the village of Jaipura".⁹ The narrative demonstrates that the Dharmites not only felt a sense of alienation from the dominant, hierarchical Hindu religion but also, at times in facing it, they identified with the devotees of an egalitarian religion like Islam. Thus, with Brahmanical religious culture picturing them as the 'other', they sought to create their own identity as members of an exclusive sect.

The Aryan-Brahmanical society often sought to incorporate and integrate the outsiders within a socio-economic system that would suit its own interests. Nirmal K. Bose writes in *Hindu Samajer Garan:*

According to Indian social theorists, the caste system is suitable for every society. Wherever many races come together, by placing them in four castes and incorporating them in the social structure, it is possible to build up a larger society. It would be in the interests of society if a person who is engaged in a particular work according to his ability and talent continues to do the same work. And if the society can also ensure that such a person and anyone who follows the same occupation after him/her will not starve to death, and everyone will cooperate actively with others, then the society that grows up through their cooperation will become firmer and stronger.¹⁰

The 'outsiders' in Bengal belonged to several indigenous tribes. According to Ray, before the beginnings of Aryanization in Bengal, the native inhabitants, the majority of whom spoke Austric languages, were "divided into numerous tribes and dwelled in caves and forests."¹¹ With the incursion and predominance of the Aryan-Brahmanical culture, gradually, the indigenous tribal societies were incorporated into the larger caste society although the process was marked by struggles and conflicts while remnants of the native culture survived in popular religions and customs.

The process of transformation from tribe to caste involved changes, institutional as well as those specific to identity. Dev Nathan designates the transition from tribe to caste as an epochal change and argues, "... the result of this process was the formation of institutions like private property, the caste system, the state and patriarchal family."¹² These institutions differ substantially from tribal institutions. Moreover, incorporation into the caste system involves the acceptance of one's identity as a member of a caste with a specific role and a specific place in the hierarchy. But despite the compulsion of the caste hierarchy, many of these people, who were relegated to the positions of the low castes and untouchables, retained a sense of their erstwhile tribal identity, and their religious practices derive, to a large extent, from these indigenous tribal religions.

Thus, the rites of the Dharma cult, like those of other such cults, differ materially from that of Hindu Brahmanical practices and ideologically align the cult with tribal religious practices. The ideology of the Dharma cult shows its potential for subversion of the dominant, authoritarian religion and, through their adherence to the worship of a non-Brahmanic god, the worshippers retain their distinctive identity, thus resolving the conflict in their favour. Partha Chatterjee's views are relevant here. He says, "We see the history of religion too as constituted by two opposed tendencies—one the attempt to articulate a universal code for society as a whole, and the

other the struggle by the subordinated to resist the dominating implications of this code."¹³

The practices of the Dharma cult vary to a certain extent from district to district, and the differences are often due to varying degrees of 'sanskritization.'¹⁴ Yet, despite assimilation through this process of 'sanskritization', the distinctive identity of the cult and the commonness of the religious tradition persist, the differences as preserved in different districts notwithstanding. These issues may be examined in some details below on the basis of the case studies that we have made in the districts of the Twenty-four Parganas and Howrah.

Rajpur, Twenty-four Parganas

In the Dharma temple at Rajpur, Dharmathakur appears as an anthropomorphic deity, moustached, possessing thick black hair, sitting upright with a mace in hand and with the upper part of his body uncovered. A stone-shaped tortoise is placed by the side of three such clay and wooden images, and the Dom priest claims precedence for the *kūrma*, saying that it is the oldest figure recovered from the river in accordance with a divine dictum. Although the anthropomorphic image suggests a departure from the cult practices found in Birbhum and Howrah, the priest's assertion shows his knowledge of the original practices of the Dharma cult. Suniti K. Chatterji argues that the use of the tortoise as a symbol must have arisen among sea-people or fisher folk.¹⁵ In the worshippers' affirmation of Dharma as synonymous with the *kūrma*, the cult's association with tribes stands confirmed.

Many worshippers including the Brahmanas and upper caste inhabitants of the area told the author that Dharma here is recognized as synonymous with Yama (the god of death). The upper castes, however, largely associate him with the Dom community. In the rural and suburban areas of Twenty-four Parganas, Dharma worship, on the whole, seems restricted to the lower castes. In our survey, some upper-caste devotees were also encountered. The family of the priest as well as the families related to them acknowledged that they considered Dharma as *their* god and that all the Doms participated in his worship in a way the other castes did not. The Doms in the multicasite Rajpur village (there are residential divisions in the village along the caste lines, for example, Kaibartapara, Dompara, Ghoshpara, Chakravartypara, etc.) consisted of about

fourteen families and about a hundred people. All of them are devotees of Dharma and his worship produces a sense of group identity among the members of the caste.

The Dharma temple at Rajpur is built partly of clay and partly of cement. It has a tiled roof and is situated in the ground adjacent to a sprawling bazaar, which sells fish and vegetables. The location of the temple indicates the deity's marginalized status even as it asserts an unabashed connection between the deity and the material fulfilment of daily needs which pragmatism may demand. According to Durkheim, every religion maintains a distinction between the sacred and the profane:

Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the profane in the thought of men, and since we picture a logical chasm between the two, the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be confounded, or even to be merely put in contact with each other.¹⁶

A fish market and a temple are recognized as clear opposites in Brahmanical religion, and their conjunction is scarcely conceivable. A Śiva temple could not be located even on the outskirts of a fish market. The closeness of the Dharma temple to the fish market, therefore, subversively confounds the distinction between the sacred and the profane as maintained in Brahmanical religion.

The duties and assumptions of priesthood in Dharma worship demonstrate a desire to conform to the religious codes of the Brahmanical tradition, while, as we hope to show, it simultaneously challenges certain doctrines of the Brahmanical religion. The Doms manifest a desire to establish that Dharma is also the god of the upper castes and by virtue of their being priests of Dharma, they get elevated to the status of Brahmana priests. Certain rituals seem significant in this regard. The ritual of purification (a day before this annual *pūjā*, the priest would make the bare ground his bed, fast, and keep himself *śuddha*) and the practice of wearing a sacred thread during the ceremony, which apparently enables the Dharma priest to rise to the status of Brahmana priests, align the cult to Brahmanism. During our survey we came across the claim that the Dharma priests occasionally get calls to perform the Durga *pūjā*, Kali *pūjā* etc. when there is a dearth of Brahmana priests. But, as members of the upper castes told us later, the claim has no basis in reality. More importantly, the priests of Dharma seemed to lack knowledge of the relevant *mantras* of these *pūjās*. The claim however, contains an implicit challenge.

By officiating as priests and wearing the sacred thread even for a limited period of time, the Doms of Rajpur assume prerogatives not assigned to their caste. In that they transgress the boundaries and challenge the institution of hierarchy based on division of labour as determined by birth. Kumkum Roy argues, "... the creation of alternative power relations is embedded in attempts to contest *varṇa* identities through the appropriation of specific *varṇa* attributes by the inappropriate (for instance a *sūdra* staking claim to the privileges of priesthood) or through the explicit questioning of the validity of *varṇa* identities."¹⁷

A Dom officiating as a priest of a non-Brahmanical god poses a challenge to Brahmanical religion as well as to the institution of the caste. The practice would negate the sense of fixity and absolutism as regards the pantheon, values, and caste positions, and suggest relativity in the status of gods as well as in the positions of priests and devotees. To a certain extent, this effort on the part of the Dom priest, to elevate him to Brahmanical status by following essentially the precepts of the Brahmanical culture with a tacit approval of the upper castes (a few upper caste devotees acknowledge him as the priest) suggests the process of 'sanskritization.' However, the assumption of the rights of priesthood would be construed as a form of challenge since the adoption of certain restricted Vedic rites still kept them away from the general Brahmanical way of life that remained with the twice-born castes only. There are several such cases where we see the co-existence of a dual tendency on the part of the followers of the cult, on the one hand, of trying to raise themselves within the hierarchy by imitating the ways of the Brahmanas, and, on the other hand, of asserting their distinctive identity by proclaiming their loyalty to a god not recognized by the Brahmanical pantheon and departing from the prescribed Brahmanical ritual practices. The ambiguity that characterizes the subaltern search for identity is reflected in this dual tendency.

The question of identity is closely linked not only to the prerogatives of priesthood but also to the rituals they practice. In a manifest desire to conform to Brahmanical rituals, some Dom priests have omitted *bali* or animal sacrifice. In the Twenty-four Parganas, on the whole, Dharma worship does not require *bali*. Instead of this, the offering includes fruits, sweets, milk, rice, etc. But the dual tendency to conform and deviate is here shown in the significant departures from the Brahmanical tradition in some other respects. The *nitya* or everyday *pūjā* consists of oiling the tortoise-shaped

stone or Dharma and bathing it. The bathing of the deity is the main ritual associated with Dharma worship here. The *nitya pūjā* requires only a simplified version of an invocation to a deity: the ritual of bath is performed while chanting the solitary phrase "*Ong Dharmaraja nama*". Dharma worship does not require *arti*, which to the contrary, is important in the *pūjā* of Brahmanical deities. Bathing suggests a very human, everyday activity, bringing the deity close to the daily life. Use of water in Dharmathakur's worship may have other implications too. For instance, Dharma's association with fertility makes his connection with water imperative. In Rajpur, a family legend has it that the founder-priest in the family had retrieved the image from the river that flowed by the village, the river supposedly being a tributary or a channel of the holy Ganga. As in many other cases, so also in this instance, the founder, it is claimed, received the information of the *Dharma-śilā* in a 'divinely inspired' dream. The connection between the discovery of the *Dharma-śilā* in the water and the emphasis placed on bath (both in *nitya pūjā* and in the annual *pūjā*), as stated above, define Dharma's 'sanskritized' links. So do the association with Yama, the god of death and the cremation ground which is adjacent to the river and only a short distance away from the site of the *pūjā*. The god of death can also hold death in abeyance. So, the worshippers look at Dharma as a curer of diseases and also as one who ensures material well being.

The Dharma cult has several such deviations and departures from the practices that obtain in Brahmanical religions. The absence of *mantra-s* in *nitya pūjā* and the relative brevity of the chanted '*mantra-s*' in general, align the Dharma cult with tribal religion. The lack of *mantra-s* also suggests a lack of formulaic codes, which otherwise dominate in the codified religions like Vedic religion, for instance.

Women's position in the cult practices also needs some explanation here. We have the instance of a woman member of the priestly family, the sixty-five year old Chitubala, performing the '*nitya pūjā*' although her brother Sona Pandit holds the honourable and official position of the *Dharma-purohit*. The right of presiding over the annual *pūjā* belongs to him. In many places of Dharma worship there is no restriction on women officiating as priests. Nanigopal Bandyopadhyay speaks of a Dharmaraj temple in Bodojan (Bardhaman district) near Balluka River where the *pūjā* seems to have originated. The temple Bodojan has broken down, but Dharmathakur has been placed in a building nearby.

Bandyopadhyay say that Mukhi Thakurani or Mokshada Pandit, a Dom priestess had the prerogative of performing the *nitya pūjā* there.¹⁸ By contrast, in upper-caste Brahmana, Kayastha, or Vaidya families, when the older members of the families are absent, often the rite of '*nitya pūjā*' of Narayana has to be performed by a younger son, or even a dependent of the family who has had his '*upanayana*'. And this is ritually significant for, according to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*:

The Upanayana, involving the investiture of boys of the upper three social Classes (*varṇas*) with a sacred thread, conferred on them the status of the 'twice-born' (*dvija*, a term first used in the *Atharvaveda*) and their 'second birth' permitted them to hear the Veda and thereby participate in the *śrauta* rites that, according to the emerging Brahmanic orthodoxy, would make it possible to obtain immortality.¹⁹

The right of women to officiate as priest in the cases that we have mentioned suggests the origin of the practice in a relatively non-patriarchal society. The higher position of women is a distinguishing feature of tribal society.²⁰ The persistence of such egalitarian practices among the untouchable Dharmites suggests their closeness to tribal practices. According to Nathan, "The dalits have the greatest extent of gender equality and come closest to the gender situation among the hunter-gatherers".²¹

Likewise, the annual fair, associated with Dharma-*pūjā* in Rajpur as in many other places similarly aligns the Dharma cult with tribal cults and, also, as we would argue, with the carnivals. During the month of Vaiśākha, on the Buddha Purnima day, when the Dharma *mela* or fair is held in Rajpur, hundreds or even thousands come to participate in the *mela*. About a week before the auspicious full moon night, the drummers set out to announce the occasion, and word is sent to all the "*swajātī*" (people of the same caste) in various villages. The annual *mela* attracts a large number of participants. Upper caste worshippers also visit the fair, but it is of special significance for the community of Dharma worshippers. The *mela* also serves as a temporary marketplace for exchange of goods and merchandise. These fairs, often associated with Dharma worship, suggest that he is an everyday god, connected to the daily needs of the people. The *lokāyata* tradition is based on the material needs of the people, their problems, their fears, and their aspirations. Therefore, worship of Dharma remains connected with the collective material needs of the people, of trade, exchange of goods, of buying and selling, much in conformity with the popular tenets of the *lokāyata* tradition.

As the Dharma cult centres on the *mela*, the latter aligns it with the carnivals and distances it from the strict decorum and order of a codified religion even as it emphasizes the material aspect over the spiritual nature of worship. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "liberties were fully revealed in the festive square when all hierarchic barriers were lifted and a true familiar contact was established".²²

The 'liberties' extend a Dharma worshipper to reach out to other more egalitarian religions. Chitubala, mentioned earlier, talked of the similarity between Ratan Gaji's *mela* and the Dharmathakur *mela* and the participation of both communities (the Dharmites and Muslims) in each other's festivals. Dharma *pūjā* in many places witnesses the free and friendly participation of both Hindus and Muslims. For instance, in Jamalpur, Katwa, we heard of the symbolic sacrifice of a cow (without actually killing the cow the worshippers just offer it to the deity in a prayer and release it afterwards) by Muslim worshippers. The solidarity of class, over communalism or religious divide displayed in such cases takes us back to the references in the *Dharmer Bandana*, cited earlier, where, in order to stop the exploitation and ill-treatment of the lower castes by Brahmanas, Dharma Niranjana took the form of *Khoda* and punished the tyrannical Brahmanas.

The Rajpur *pūjā* suggests that Dharmathakur is associated chiefly with the material welfare of his devotees. He has curative properties and ensures fertility. Although one perceives in 'sanskritization' a desire towards acceptance by caste Hindus, the simplified rituals, the absence or the relative brevity and simplification of *mantra*-s and the relative equality of women as far as rights of worship are concerned, the emphatic association of the spiritual with the material and the celebrations in the carnivals—all point to the predominance of elements of the tribal religion from which it derives. On the one hand, the worshippers show their desire to belong and to be accepted by the larger society; on the other, they tend to assert their independence by reverting to their tribal identity.

Burrogachi

In Burrogachi (Howrah), about thirty-five kilometres from Calcutta, there is a *pukka* Dharma temple, where Bagdis or Barga *Ṛatriyas* perform Dharma *pūjā*. In the Dharma temple, there is a tortoise-shaped stone or *kūrma mūrti* at the centre, flanked by images, icons, and pictures of *Ṣaṣṭhī*, *Ṣītalā*, *Olabibi*. The rites of worship, like *nityapūjā*, *snāna*, annual *pūjā* are very similar to those practiced in Rajpur.

However, in certain respects, we noticed the prevalence of a higher degree of 'sanskritization' in Burrogachi. The priest here is male and his full-time occupation seems to be priesthood. He performs both the everyday rites and the more elaborate rituals of the annual *pūjā*. In what seems to be a gesture of conformity with the patriarchal ideals of the Hindu religion, the women of the household, on enquiry, professed ignorance about *mantra*-s and rituals. The annual *pūjā*, here, seems to involve a more elaborate chanting of *mantra*-s, with some borrowings from Śiva *mantra*-s. It seems, therefore, that at different places, Dharma worship presents varying degrees of 'sanskritization' as regards the practice of rituals.

However, in a significant manifestation of the dual tendency already noticed, despite the prevalence of a higher degree of 'sanskritization', Dharma worship also reaches out to popular cults and establishes Dharma's fraternity with goddesses of the *lokāyata* tradition. The goddesses who are placed by Dharma's side in the Burrogachi temple are all goddesses belonging to the popular tradition, associated with diseases common in rural Bengal—*Ṣaṣṭhī*, goddess of childbirth or children's well-being, *Śitalā*, goddess of small pox, measles and their prevention, *Olabibi*, goddess of cholera and its prevention. Placing Dharma by the side of these goddesses suggests the similar character of all these popular deities. Like his sister goddesses, Dharma is assigned curative functions, and like *Ṣaṣṭhī*, he is associated with fertility as he is supposed to cure sterility. He is, therefore, credited with procuring material well rather than aiding in any spiritual insight. This is as it should be because popular religion does not conform to the abstract concepts of codified religions and evolves its own religious practices in response to people's needs.

Significantly, *Olabibi* and her sisters are worshipped by Muslims as well as by the lower classes of the Hindus. In the Hindu dominated areas, they look more like *Laxmi* and *Saraswati* even as their headdresses and ornaments show some Islamic influence. However, in Muslim-majority areas, they wear *salwar*, *kameez*, etc., and look more like Muslim girls. But, they are called by the same names everywhere, both by Hindus and Muslims. Such practices suggest that the deprived sections of the two communities have similar needs and attitudes towards popular religion. That Dharma is aligned with such goddesses suggests, again, a reaching out towards egalitarian religions on the part of the Dharma worshippers.

Mahishagoat, Domjur

About thirty kilometres from Calcutta, in the Bagdi-dominated village of Mahishagoat, Dharmathakur is worshipped at the house of Safal Pandit, who presides over the *pūjā*. The deities are housed in a semi-*pukka* building, in front of which is a *natmandir*, or a square, open space, covered with a tin roof. Inside the temple, there are a number of tortoise images in stone—all of them manifestations of Dharma in various capacities, e.g., Dhairya Narayan Dharma, Kalu Ray Dharma, Yatra Siddhi Dharma, Swarup Narayan Dharma. The images of Śiva (the *lingam*), Panchanan *śilā* and the goddess Śitalā also occur there. Numerous clay horses or pictures of horses, including their embroidered representations, lie around. On the left side of the temple is a Śiva *lingam* of white marble. The connection between Śiva and Dharma is close and both are worshipped in the same temple in many places. Significantly, wherever Brahmana priests and worshippers prevail, the *mantra* and rites of Śiva *pūjā* seem to be superseding the rites of Dharma *pūjā*. For example, the Śiva *mantra* is chanted during Dharmapuja at the temple in Jamalpur, Katwa, where the priest is from a Brahmana family. However, in places like Mahishagoat, Dharma worship takes precedence over Śiva as the officiating priest is Bagdi.

The rites of the *pūjā* and the attendant practices—feats of endurance, dancing and singing—are, on the whole, similar, with minor variations, to those observed in other places of Dharma worship, although such feats are more elaborate and lengthier here than what is practiced in Rajpur (Twenty-Parganas). Daily *pūjā* as well as the annual celebration are also held here. For the annual *pūjā*, from the first Tuesday of the month of Falguna, the *śilā* would be bathed in the pond of the village regularly for eleven days. The various tests of endurance that the worshippers undergo include *dandi kata*, (also called *astanga* in some places), which would mean covering a considerable distance by alternately lying down and then, getting up and standing on the spot where one's head was, and lying down again. Sessions of recitation of the *Dharma Mangal* tales accompanied by singing and dancing continue for twelve days. The feats of endurance, story-telling and dancing, etc. take place in the adjoining covered space in front of the temple. There is a small tank at a corner of the *natmandir*, and wooden planks are placed on either side of it. Two people stand on each side and tap the planks with their feet to keep time, while others recite tales from the *Dharma*

Mangal, in the manner of tales told of Ranjabati, Harish Chandra, etc. They also improvise a makeshift stage on one side from which they jump over, in imitation of Ranjabati's 'sale bhar deoa,' an act of penance to procure Dharma's blessing to attain her wish. The tests of physical prowess of skill and dancing are all associated with bodily activities and have affiliations with the *lokāyata* tradition. Even the practice of reading from the *Dharma Mangal*, in which the audience and the speaker share a common enjoyment of adventurous and romantic narratives in the vernacular, belongs to the popular religious tradition. Such narratives differ significantly from esoteric, Sanskrit religious texts.

As in the other places, 'sanskritizing' gestures and practices co-exist with elements of tribal cults. The priest here displayed an intimate knowledge of the *Dharma Mangal* and sought to justify the prevalence of religious rites by drawing parallels from the text and associated the animal sacrifices, which took place during the twelve days of the annual *pūjā*, with mutilation and deaths that the *Dharma Mangal* tells us about. His desire to show that the actual rites derive from written literature is perhaps in keeping with the Brahmanical tradition, but, interestingly, he seeks to defend animal sacrifice, which, on the whole, is restricted in the Brahmanical culture. Sacrifice of goats, pigeons, and ducks takes place, one on each of these twelve days. Although *nitya pūjā* involves the offering of non-boiled rice and sugar cubes (*batasa*) to the deity, animal sacrifices are indispensable during the annual function of twelve days. The choice of ducks and pigeons for sacrifice suggests an affinity between tribal religions and the Dharma cult.

In a curious instance of 'sanskritization,' the priest appeared reluctant to mention the sacrifice of any animal other than goats, but other sources mention that Dharma *pūjā* involves sacrifices of birds and other animals. If we go back to the practices of the Brahmanical religion, we see that animal sacrifices entailed primarily the sacrifice of a goat. Non-animal sacrifices involved offerings of milk and vegetable substances or even of *mantra*-s. In Brahmanical culture, sacrifice has a complex symbolic value. The *śrauta* rituals require that as *dikṣita* (one undergoing *dikṣa*), an individual must make an offering of himself (*ātman*). In *dikṣā*, through acts of asceticism (*tapas*), the *dikṣita* "takes on the aspect of an embryo to be reborn through the rite. This then prepares him to make the sacrificial offering proper (the *yajña* "sacrifice") as a means to redeem or ransom this self by the substance (animal or otherwise) offered".²³

By contrast, animal sacrifice seems to take the form of a gesture of appeasement of the deity in less sophisticated tribal religions, and sacrifice in Dharma worship carries predominantly the overtones of appeasement or propitiation. Even the tales of *Dharma Mangal*, on which the priests generally draw as justification for the practice, have this significance.

The status and duties of priesthood in Dharma worship evince a mixture of Brahmanical practices and indigenous rites. Although the Bagdi priest does not wear the sacred thread common to Brahmanas, he and others intimately associated with the performance of the rites are supposed to attain some special status during the twelve days of the annual *pūjā*. The priest's wearing of a symbolic copper ring or bangle *tamra dharan* indicates that ritual status. He also has to observe a fast. Śiva-, Kālī- and Mansa *pūjā*-s are performed in the Mahishagoat village with a population of two hundred Bagdis. Earlier, even Durga *pūjā* used to be performed there. Brahmana priests officiate in all the *pūjā*-s except in that of Mansa, in which generally Bagdi priests preside. Dharma *pūjā*, is of course, the most important *pūjā* in the village. Significantly, the Bagdi priest performs the *pūjā*-s of the relatively marginalized non-Vedic deities like Dharma and Mansa. By contrast, Śiva and Kālī, although not necessarily Vedic (because Kālī is non-Vedic, and Śiva, in his popular form, is not quite Vedic), are deities of the orthodox system. The status-divide between mainstream Vedic and marginalized non-Vedic deities prevails, and the Dharma worshippers remain as the 'other' in Hindu society.

Again, as an indication of the difference between the Brahmanical religion and the Dharma cult, we see that women, if they choose to wear the copper ring like men, acquire the rights accorded to a priest. This concession points to the contrast between the relatively egalitarian attitude towards women among the worshippers of Dharma and the extremely subordinated position of women among the upper caste Hindus as far as rites of worship are concerned. Only a male Brahmana is entitled to wear the sacred thread and undergo the *upanayana* ceremony in Hindu religious systems.

Religion reflects the attitude prevalent in social practices. As such, if we analyse the reasons for the egalitarian status of men and women among the low castes and outcastes, mentioned earlier, it may take us back to the cult of "mother right" current among the indigenous population in non-Vedic Indian society. The Vedic society was pastoral in nature, while the non-Vedic indigenous societies of India

were, by and large, agricultural. By comparing different societies at their earliest stages, Debiprasad Chattopadhyay proves that "agriculture was the invention of women. Therefore, the initial phase of agricultural economy witnessed the social superiority of the female."²⁴ According to Thomson, "shifting tensions in the relations of the sexes to the mode of production explain the rise of patrilineal descent. The process began with hunting, and was intensified by cattle-raising, but in the initial phase of agriculture it was reversed".²⁵ There are some differences between this theory and the theory of Dalit alignment with the hunter-gatherer tribes that Nathan has suggested (see above). However, since the tribes in Bengal were mostly cultivators, the contention regarding gender-equality among the proto-Australoid tribes as opposed to the more patriarchal nature of Vedic society remains valid. It is possible to argue that the shift from a predominantly agricultural to a pastoral economy led, to a large extent, to the degradation and subordination of women in Vedic societies

These case studies show that the Dharma cult has elements of Brahmanical religion as well as of tribal religion. The two imply two different worldviews. The first is hierarchical, doctrinaire, esoteric, inaccessible, characterized by complex and sophisticated rituals. The second is egalitarian, spontaneous, accessible, characterized by the popular logic of simplicity and unabashed materialism. The subaltern search for identity in a society which incorporates the indigenous tribes into its fold while relegating them to a position of perpetual dependence and inferiority is characterized by two conflicting inclinations—one, to conform to the accepted mores and to win approval by the larger society, and two, to assert their deviant yet distinctive identity, the sense of which they have retained. The contradictory tendencies in the Dharma cult that they practice symbolize the divisive nature of their identity appropriately.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Dharmathakur is generally regarded as the deity of the Rarh region. Asutosh Bhattacharya demarcates the area where Dharmathakur is worshipped as bounded in the north by Birbhum district's northern side, in the west by the Bhagirathi River, in the south by the Twenty-four Parganas and Midnapore, and in the east by Santal Pargana's eastern boundary. Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Banglar Lokshruti*, Calcutta: Amartya Prakash, 1985, p. 79.

2. Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People (Ancient Period)*, trans. John W. Hood, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994.
3. R. C Majumdar, *History of Bengal (Rep.)*, Patna: N. V. Publications, 1971, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 35, quoting Suniti K. Chatterji.
5. Niharranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 161.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 388.
8. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1915, p. 43.
9. Sashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1962, p.305.
10. Nirmal K. Bose, *Hindu Samajer Garan*, Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1356 BS, pp.148-49. The translation of the text is ours.
11. Niharranjan Ray, op. cit., p. 167.
12. Dev Nathan, *From Tribe to Caste*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997, p. 2.
13. Partha Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness", *Subaltern Studies*, VI, p.174.
14. M. N. Srinivas, in *The Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, has referred to 'sanskritization', in the following way:
A low caste was able in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called sanskritization in this book, in preference to Brahminization, as certain Vedic rites are confined to Brahmins and the two other twice-born castes.
Cited in Gaganendranath Dash, "Tribal Absorption and Jati Mobility," *Hindus and Tribals: Quest for a Co-existence*, New Delhi: Decent Books, 1998, p. 2.
15. Cited in Akshay K. Koyal and Chitra Dev, Eds. *Mayur Bhatta-Dharma Mangal*, Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj, 1974, p. 9.
16. Emile Durkheim, op. cit., p. 40.
17. Kumkum Roy, "Some Problems in Constructing Varna Identities in Early North India" in Dev Nathan, Ed., Op. cit., 177.
18. Nanigopal Bandyopadhyay, Ed. *Dharmapuja Bidhan: Ramai Pandit Birachita*, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1323 B.S, p. 3. The translation of the text is ours.
19. Mercia Eliade, Ed. *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 339, s.v. "Hinduism".
20. Dev Nathan, Ed., op. cit., p. 23.
21. *Ibid.* p. 14.

22. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984, p. 188.
23. Mercia Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 340.
24. Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Materialism*, Calcutta: People's Publishing, 1959; Rep. 1968, p. 252.
25. Quoted in Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 241.