

CHAPTER 8

Faith, Ritual and Feudal Order: World of Early Medieval Women in Lower Ganga Valley

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The study of early medieval eastern India hinges on the debate relating to the concept of Indian feudalism. The entire discourse becomes crucial in the sense that most of the informed writings on the area have joined issue with this concept. The paradigm of Indian feudalism has become so dominant in current Indian historiography that successive writers seek either to strengthen or demolish it. As far as the early medieval politico-economic formation is concerned, the entire eastern India was a cultural region in the making. The shift in centrality from the core area of the middle Gangetic valley to the erstwhile peripheries does have a relationship with the structure of feudalism that took shape during this period. The current historiography has failed to focus on eastern India as of a cultural unit or socio-economic entity, the only exception being the study of art and characterization of Eastern School of Architecture/Sculpture. While doing this again the sub regional variations of styles in making of sculptures, their socio-economic and political implications were either ignored or not taken into consideration by the historians. In this chapter I shall endeavor to discuss the aspect, stated above, that has hitherto been overlooked.

The early medieval social formation was marked by the emergence of regional identities. Right from the time of Guptas, and more so during the post-Gupta times, the process of the origin and evolution of states, which was till then confined to the upper and middle Gangetic valley with some activities on this front also going on in some other parts of the subcontinent, came to acquire a regional dimension. This was preceded by a large scale agrarianisation of the erstwhile peripheral areas and this, in turn, inaugurated the beginning of differing patterns of regional economies during the period. In the case of eastern India, despite sub regional variations, one encounters the emergence of a cultural idiom that can be said to have assumed an identity of its own.

While talking about eastern India, one needs to take into consideration the differing conjunction of forces that operated in its three sub-regions – Mithila, Anga and Bengal. While a large part of Mithila constituting the mid-Gangetic valley had hitherto been the core area of economic developments, the areas of Anga and Bengal were yet to undergo that process of the exploitation of natural resources. Despite of Magadhan intrusions into these two regions and the emergence of localized state systems, the developed elements of material culture had, at best, made only a nominal presence with their major segments still remaining in the backwaters of economic development.

It is true that the mechanism of trade did seek to link these sub – regions, yet the variations remained. It is a common knowledge that by the early medieval times the value of trade had diminished and therefore, unlike the earlier periods it had only a limited role to play in homogenizing the economy of the region. Despite these constraints one does come across a historical formation admitting of broad pattern of uniformity in eastern India. The obvious manifestations of this development are the system of a genealogical system for marriage over a large area, similarity in the Maithili, Bangla and Angika languages and even scripts, the emergence of a school of sculpture and architecture, namely the Eastern school in the region.

Further in the post-Gupta era urban economy deteriorated, trade and currency network were marginalized in the newly emerging structure of society. In this period we have enough evidence to prove the emergence of feudalism. Land grants were gifted to the Brahmins and many restrictions were imposed on the peasantry. We have definitive evidence of extensive royal grants to Nalanda monastic establishment both by the later kings of the Gupta dynasty and Harsha. It is also claimed that the later Gupta King, Damodara Gupta who ruled in the 6th century, created 100 *agraharas*. Similarly, a prosperous village was given to Goddess Bhavani, another village was granted to some priests. The number of land grants apparently proliferated by the end of the 8th century due to the extension of Pala rule in Bihar. Many villages were granted according to the *Bhumichidranayaya*, which has been suggested as tenure of bringing virgin land under cultivation. The overall pattern of agrarian economy did affect the nature of contemporary urban economy as well. The existence of towns in early medieval eastern India seems to have been well rooted in the contemporary milieu. Towns being a super structural manifestation of the techno-economic base underwent a decisive transformation in their prime features, a development which was in consonance with the new economic pattern. Earlier urban centres of this region declined or disappeared by the beginning of the 7th century Pataliputra started losing its importance during the Gupta period primarily due to its disassociation from mercantile

activities. The new towns that emerged during the period had a distinctive nature compared to earlier urban centres. These transformed towns now revolved round two functions, political and religio-educational

Trade, primarily due to the new social context, was sought to be localized, a development well-articulated with the popularity of *hattas* (local market). They were periodical in nature and near the religious centres. An inscription on a bronze image from Nalanda refers to 'Devapaladevahatta' near Nalanda and another seal from Nalanda refers to 'Sri Nalanda Sri Dharmahatta'. An inscription on the image of Avalokitesvara found in the Sun temple at Bargaon near Nalanda refers to another *hatta* named 'Talahatta' (*Tal* is referred to the region where Nalanda is situated) in Nalanda.

In these economic and social circumstances religious centres developed, which further led to the construction of temples by the rulers, as well as by the locally powerful communities. It may be noted that these temples were not as gigantic or of great artistic value either as compared to the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary eastern India. The reason behind this was probably the fact that the Buddhist monasteries were built by the state or supported directly by them as well as patronized by the rich business community. On the contrary, few of the Brahminical structures were getting these advantages and they were having support of the local followers. From the various excavation and exploration reports by archaeologists temple structures of this period have been reported very often. But the ancient historiography of eastern India obsessed with the Buddhist, Jaina and other heterodox monuments, has tended to just ignore it. The question "why such a large number of temples came up during this period which is spread over the whole of modern Mithila, Anga and Bengal particularly near the important Buddhist sites?" was never posed. Moreover, the query that the Pala rulers who were well known for their Buddhist inclination later extended critical support to Brahmins has also remained unaddressed.

Decline of trade and other economic activities provided common people the situation of stagnation and immobility in the society. In these circumstances people of this region were left with sufficient surplus produced in the fertile Gangetic plains, sufficient time for intellectual as well as religious activities. The horizon of Buddhism was widened by the philosophical ideas of Aryadeva (3rd century Mahayana Madhyamaka Buddhist scholar), Vasubandhu (4th century Mahayana Yogacara Buddhist scholar), Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa (5th century Theravadin Buddhist commentator and scholar) and Dinnaga (early 6th century Buddhist Epistemologist). Inscriptions and seals found in various places of this region testify to the phenomenal growth of Vaisnavism, Saktism and Saivism during the post-Gupta age. In the period under review there was

also a restatement of the values of life and affirmation of the Puranic values, which never denied the authority of the Vedas and held the Sruti as the infallible source of religion. An outcome of the greater intellectual activity was the controversies between the rival religious movements and philosophical schools. Steps taken by the Gupta Kings strengthened the growth and spread of Brahmanical religion among the masses. Inscriptions of the Gupta period suggest that people of lower Gangetic valley during this age were well acquainted with Vedic and Puranic myths. The powers and qualities of the king have been expressed through Puranic analogies. In one of the inscriptions Samudra Gupta has been described as equal to the Gods Dhanda, Varuna, Indra and Antaka and who was the very axe of the God Krtanta. The inscriptions of the Maukharis, who ruled in the Gaya region in the first half of the sixth century, frequently alluded to the Puranic deities. The personal religion of Gupta rulers i.e. Budha Gupta, Narasimha Gupta, Kumara Gupta III and Vinaya Gupta, whose royal seals have been found at Nalanda, must have helped to increase the influence of Vaisnavism in Bihar. The Basarh seals prove the popularity of Vaisnavism in North Bihar. Popular during the period was the *avatara* concept of Vaisnavism. This *avataravada* may be taken as an example of religious conflict and accommodation, because believers in this theory were trying to incorporate Buddha into their own faith. Whether it was the Buddhist *dharmachakra* or the debate over the worship of the footprint of the deity, the believers of Brahmanical religion have their argument that these forms of worship were adopted by Buddhism from Vaisnavism. The practice of worshipping foot print first started with the worship of the foot print of Vishnu at Vishnupada temple of Gaya since the 4th century. Not only Vaisnavism but other branches of Brahmanical religion were equally popular in contemporary Bihar. Aniconic and iconic forms and representations of Siva have been found in a number of places like Basarh, Bhagalpur, Nalanda and Gaya. Other than these Saktism is known from the inscriptions and images in Barabar hills. There are clear evidences for Sun worship from various places i.e. two seals from Basarh, image of Surya from Barauni, etc. The existence of the votaries of the Sun in Gaya, Shahabad and Bhagalpur, a temple of the Sun at Deo-Barunanak and Nalanda are enough to prove the popularity of Sun God among the masses.

Besides these forms of worship by the common people, the idea of *bhakti* was also prevalent among them. Reference to the veneration of the foot-prints of Vishnu and Siva at Gaya, Basarh and Baiskaran are available. Ridge from Baiskaran, a place near Bhagalpur, show the influence of the doctrine of *bhakti*. The cult of *bhakti* meant that the universe was a fraction of God and human beings should earn His grace by complete surrender. References opposing this concept are also available during this period as Buddhist scholars like Aryadeva, Bhavaviveka (early 6th century – the

founder of the *Svatantrika* tradition of the *Mādhyamaka* school of Buddhism) and Chandrakirti (early 6th century – a Mahayana *Madhyamaka* Buddhist and a *khenpo* of Nālandā Mahāvihāra) and who flourished in Bihar during the Gupta age have criticized the Sankhya, Vaisesika and Mimamsa schools. Hsuan Tsang's account reveals that Brahmanical temples were more numerous in Vrji (Vaisali) and Kajangala (Rajmahal) areas. He found nearly fifty Buddhist monasteries as compared to some tens of temples in Magadh. From these two references by Hsuan-Tsang it is clear that temple construction in eastern India started during the Gupta period. Hsuan-Tsang's account could be taken as attestation for the idea of sectarian rivalry between the followers of these two popular religions of the period. Involvement of state in this religious rivalry is not found. Rather being believers of the Brahmanical faith Sunga rulers were responsible for the erection of railings at Sanchi and Gupta rulers donated lands to the Nalanda Monastery. It was the common people and intellectuals who were responsible for the competitiveness although it did not give place to intolerance.

In the early medieval period Buddhism and Brahmanism, both the religions with their local customs and regional variations prevailed in eastern India. The Palas, Chandras, and other contemporary dynasties of eastern India were followers of Buddhist philosophies and with their active support and patronage Buddhism in this region gained popularity and prestige. Buddhist *viharas* such as Nalanda, Vikramsila, Odvantapuri, Sompuri, Tarikakutaka, Devikota, Pandita, Vikrampur, Jagaddala, Pattikeraka, Sannagara were important centres of Buddhist religion and learning. These centres were the place where celebrated Buddhist *acharyas* who wrote numerous works on Buddhist religion. These *viharas* received patronage from royalty and *viharas* like Vikramsila, Sompuri and Jagaddala were founded by Dharmapal and Rampal respectively. According to Taranath, Dharmapal founded fifty *viharas* in his territory.

It appears from the available sources that of the two religions, i.e. Buddhism and Brahmanism, the position of the former was dominant between 9th to 12th century, when the Palas and Chandras rule eastern India. But this general view is not accepted by P.C. Bagchi, who believes that “the patronage of Palas no doubt gave an impetus to Buddhism and saved the religion from the fate which overtook it in the rest of India, but does not seem to have materially affected the dominant position of Brahmanical religion.”¹ For it is worth noting that by the large majority of images and inscriptions, which may be assigned to the period of 7th century to 13th century, are Brahmanical. But N.R. Ray² points out that the way of worship followed by the Vajrayana Buddhists was mystical one, involving the concept of worship of a deity without the use of an image. This is shown and explained by the different findings of that region, which even included

the number of the various images of Buddhist Gods and Goddesses found in comparison with those of Brahmanical deities, though the Buddhist works of that period are full of descriptions of Buddhist deities some of whose images are still not found in Bengal.

In their official records Palas styled themselves *paramasaugatas*, and we find regular invocation of Buddha at the beginning of these records. In most of the Pala inscriptions we come across the following invocatory verse at the very beginning.³ In the Chandra records also we find first verse invokes the Buddha in the following words, "May that lord Jina (i.e. Buddha) who is unique receptacle of mercy, be venerated; and triumphant also be *Dharma*, the lamp of the worlds – in consequence whose worship the entire noble minded *sangha* of monks transcends the series of continuous existence."⁴

But, though the Pala and other contemporary royal dynasties of eastern India were all Buddhists, they had a very catholic attitude towards other religions and they were liberal in their social behaviour. Most of the Pala rulers married their daughters to Brahmanic royal dynasties.⁵ Palas also granted land to Brahmanic temples.⁶ Citramatika, the chief queen of Madanpal, regarded it as meritorious to hear the recital of *Mahabharata* and Madanpal gave the reader Brahmana Vatesvarasvami Sarama a land grant as fees.⁷ In the official records of Dharmapal and Vigrhapal III it is mentioned that these two maintained the orthodox social order of castes.⁸ Chandras also gave land to Brahmins.⁹

Though the Palas and other contemporary royal dynasties were Mahayanists, the Buddhism of Pala period was not pure Mahayana Buddhism but was clearly influenced by Tantricism. As a result "the original ethical and philosophical principles were superimposed in such a way by an esoteric yogic system, combined with endless rituals and forms of worship, that it could hardly be called Buddhism any longerThe religion lost itself in the maze of mysticism and was engulfed by a host of *mudras*, *mandals*, *krias* and *charyas*."¹⁰ From 8th to 11th century *tantric* Mahayana Buddhism developed into Mantrayana, Vajrayana Sahajyana and Kalacakrayana and most of these later form of Buddhism began in the Pala empire.¹¹

The Mantrayana was the first stage in the evolution of the Mahayana into *tantric* Buddhism, where *mantras*, *mudras* and *mandalas* were given the greatest prominence for the attainment of perfection or omniscience. The next stage is *vajrayana*, which is the most general name denoting *tantric* Buddhism as a whole. Buddhist *tantrism* laid emphasis upon "the theological principal of duality in non-duality, and hold that the ultimate non-dual reality possesses in its nature the potency of two aspects of attributes, viz. the negative and the positive, the static and the dynamic, the principal of pure consciousness and the reality are conceived as Siva and

Sakti in Brahmanical *tantrism*, and *Pranja* and *Upaya* in Buddhist *tantrism*.”¹² According to the *vajrayanists* and all other *tantric* Buddhists truth is a matter for inner realization which is not to be found flowing free in a world of which man is essentially a part, but by comprehending it in its true condition and by continuing to live in it. The means of realization of this state involved a ritual, an expression of the idea, which is, therefore, itself symbolic in the two fold unity, for it is the expression and idea, action and realization, *samsara* and *nirvana*. As such the rite of the union of the *yogin* and *yogini* was conceived.¹³ But *yogin* and *yogini* should experience their union as the union of Wisdom (*pranja*) conceived as female and Means (*upaya*) conceived as males.¹⁴ The *tantric* Buddhism also believes in the indulgence of senses. One can attain Buddhahood not by austere penances and vows but “by the enjoyment of all desires, to which one devotes oneself just as one pleases. It is by such practices that one may speedily gain Buddhahood”¹⁵ and “Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, followers of the *mantra* practice have attained to the supreme place of the *Dharma* by devoting themselves to all desires.”¹⁶

Vajrayana Buddhism developed not only secret yogic practices, but also numerous *mantras*, descriptions of *mandalas*, divinities and rituals and ceremonies. As a protest against this arose the *Sahajayana* Buddhism, which criticized all formalities and ceremonials of religion, and stressed esoteric yogic as the only method for realizing the highest truth for attaining the perfection.

The *Kalchakrayana*, according to the Tibetan sources, was developed outside India, and was introduced into Bengal during the Pala rule. There seems to be no fundamental difference between the tenets of *Vajrayana* Buddhism and those of *Kalchakrayana* Buddhism. “*Kalchakrayana*” attached a great importance in the practice of *yoga*, to the time factor, the *muhuratas* and *tithes* etc. Hence, astronomy and astrology came to play an important part in this system. But so far as the achievement of the goal is concerned it was same as those of the other system.

In the plaques and sculptures of the period we find representations of Buddhist divinities such as the Buddha, Vajrasattva, Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, of different varieties such as Khasrapana, Sugati Sandarsana, Lokesvara, Padmapani, and other Bodhisattvas such as Manjuvara, and Jembhala, the Buddhist counterpart of Brahmanic Kuvera. Images depicting Hevraja with his *sakti* are also found. Images of Buddhist female deities are also many. We have images of Tara of different varieties, Prajnaparamita, Marichi, Parnasavari, Cunda, Hariti and Vagesvari. Most of the sculptures depicting Buddhist divinities belonging to a period extending from 8th to 11th century. This period could be considered as most important period of Buddhism in eastern India.

We have seen that *tantric* Buddhism in its later stage began to give less

and less importance to the ceremonial aspect of religion and gave more importance to esoteric yogic practices. The fundamental basis of this new Buddhism was *hathyoga*. The Brahmanical *tantric* system of eastern India had during this period attained a similar form and there was a fusion of Brahmanic Saktism with mystic Buddhism. Before the end of Palas this fusion and assimilation had clearly begun and was completed before the 14th century. This gave rise to a new school of Saktism known as *Kaula*, which accepted the *varnasrama* and identified itself with Brahmanical Saktism. The fusion of Brahmanic Saktism and Buddhist mysticism also gave rise to certain other religious groups such as Nathas, Avadhutas, Sahajyas, Bauls etc. in this period.

Apart from this fusion of Buddhist mysticism and *tantric* Brahmanism that Buddhism was influenced by Brahmanism is also evidenced by the findings from Paharpur which represent the ruins of the Dharmapala Vihara at Sompura. The Paharpur sculptures and also terracotta plaques not only depict scenes from the Krishna legend, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, but also Brahmanical deities such as Siva, Brahma, Visnu, Yama, Indra, Agni, Kubera and Ganesha. Brahmanical sculptures are also found in the Buddhist sites of Mainamati and Nalanda. Evidences of the Buddhist sculptures found from this region also prove that the attempt of *tantric* Buddhism to exhibit the superiority of their Gods over those of the Brahmanical faith. A terracotta plaque from Mainamati depicts Trailokyavijaya, but unfortunately it is mutilated.¹⁷ In the Nalanda Vihara itself we find images such as Trailokyavijaya trampling upon Siva and Gauri.

But the lay follower of Buddhism seemed to have been very catholic in their attitude towards other religions and there are also evidences of their gradual merger into the Hindu community. In a tortoise shell inscription of about 11th century, from Bajrayogini in the Dacca district Vasudeva and Buddha are adored and the person responsible for this inscription was most probably a Buddhist.¹⁸ Besides, a couple of inscriptions found in the Coomilla district record the erection of an image of Vinayaka Ganesha by a merchant family which was Buddhist or the members of which were originally followers of Buddhism but were gradually merging themselves in the Brahmanical Hindu community.¹⁹

Buddhism, though a catholic religion, initially did not place men and women equal level. According to Buddhist traditions, Buddha taught his followers to look on women with great suspicion and to put no trust in them: and his preaching encouraged all married men to abandon their wives and children for the religious life, in order to become monk. This attitude of the Buddha is quite inconsistent with the picture we are getting elsewhere of the wise leader of the order, who had completely transcended all sentimental and emotional ties. Nevertheless, this approach of early

Buddhist philosophy toward women provides us ample scope for constructing the historicity of women followers of this philosophy. Buddha made many strict rules regarding the conduct of *bhikus* and *bhikhunis* towards each other. A *bhikhu* could not give instructions to a *bhikhuni* without the permission of the *sangha*. Even with the permission *bhikhu* could not give instructions to her after sunset. There are similar rules infringement of which would have entailed penance for the *bhikhus*.²⁰

Even after women got permission to enter the Order, the rules made the nuns rank lower than the monks. Even 100 years' old nun is to worship a new monk and a nun is to receive instructions from a monk twice a month.²¹ There are other similar rules. The rules for the guidance of the *bhikhuni sangha* are also very strict. However, the Order of Nuns never became very popular and the number of nuns was always small.²²

During the early medieval period women of this region sometimes renounced worldly life and became nuns is also evidenced by the records left by the Chinese traveler I-tsing, who came to Tamralipti in 673 A.D. I-tsing stayed in a *vihara* at Tamralipti for sometime and has left an account of the life of the residents of that *vihara*.²³

Buddhism of this period in area was largely *tantric* in character. According to *tantric* Buddhism, *prajna* or supernatural wisdom resides in every woman and, hence, participation of woman is required in the *tantric* rites for emancipation or attainment of *siddhi* by *sadhakas*. In choosing female partner the *tantric* Buddhism are enjoined not to make any distinction between women of higher and lower castes and there can be no doubt that some Buddhist women of early medieval eastern India took part in these *tantric* rites.²⁴

Apart from participating in the *tantric* Buddhism rites and some times becoming nuns the women of early medieval eastern India presumably also participated in the worship of Buddhist divinities.²⁵

Though Buddhism was dominant religion during Pala period the Brahmanical religion had also great following and it became dominant during Sena period when there was a revival of orthodox Brahmanical religion. Among the cults of Brahmanical religion Saivism and Vaisnavism seem to have been most important. Many images related to these two cults have been discovered from this region. One of the most important aspects of Vaisnavism in eastern India was the divine love of Radha and Krishna. The wide popularity of the cult is evidenced from the sculptures and terracotta plaques belonging to this period found from different sub regions of eastern India. The love of Radha-Krishana also finds place in these two anthologies, (a) *Subhasitratnakosa* and (b) *Gita Govinda*. During the Sena period Vishnu was also worshiped in Laxmi Narayan form.

Saivism was also not less popular during this period. Epigraphic as well as literary evidences and large number of Saivite images found from

eastern India prove the wide popularity of this cult. Saivism in this region was of the Pasupata sect. other forms of Saivism were also popular.

Ganesha, Kartekeya, Sun, and other popular Brahmanical deities were also worshipped during this period in this region. *Tantricism*, which had profound influence on the Buddhism of this period, also made it felt in the Brahmanical religion. Though, none of *tantras* were written before 12th century, the orthodox traditions of Saktism, by which the *tantra* aspect of the Brahmanical religion is known, seem to have been prevalent in Bengal in the later Gupta and Pala period.²⁶ Definitely the traces of *tantricism* are not to be found in the inscriptions of the Palas and Senas. But Saktism can be traced in some of the images of the early medieval period. Uma Maheswari, Hara Gauri, Siva Durga, and Ardhanarisvara images no doubt reflect the *tantric* tendencies of the period.

We find independent *sakti* images mythologically principally connected with Siva, though some of them were associated with Vaisnavism. Some of these *devis* are Bhadra Durga, or Bhadra Kali, Durga, Chandi, Gauri, Parvati, Sarvangla, Bhuvanesvari, and Mahalaxmi.²⁷ Durga is also depicted in her *ugra* aspect as Mahisasurmadini, Nava Durga and Ugra Tara.²⁸

Some Matraka images are also found in this region. Composite reliefs, depicting the Matrakas flanked on either side by Virabhadra and Ganesha, have been discovered. Separate images of Camunda, Varahi, and Indrani are also found and Camunda seems to have a very popular Goddesses.²⁹

The religious rites of women in the Brahmanical religion were curtailed by certain limitations. No *upanayana*, no sacramental rites with sacred text. They could not offer sacrifice and Vedic ceremonies including Vedic *Sandruti* were banned for them. In spite of these limitations women participated in the religious activities along with their husbands. Therefore, no independent rites were given to women in Brahmanism during this period.³⁰ A wife could not perform any type of religious acts independently i.e. without her husband or without his consent. Kulluka, commentator on Manu, belonging to this period, agrees with these ideas and laid further restrictions on women. "No sacrifice, no vows, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husband); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that reason be exalted in heaven."³¹

The Brahmanical religion which prevailed in this region during this period was *Puranic* in character. This is evident from inscriptions and images discovered belonging to this period. In the *Dharma* preached by the *Puranas* *Vratas* or vows occupy a very important role. The *vratas* seem originally to have been non Aryan religious practices but later on were incorporated in the *Puranic* Brahmanical religion.³² In the *Kasviveka* of Jimutvahana we find mention of numerous *vratas* i.e. *Sukraharati*, *Kojagra*, *Pasanachaturdasi*, *Asokastmi*, *Bhratrdvitiya*, *Tradasi*, *Kartikasanana*, *Vidhanasaptami*, *Nagapanchmi*, *Ekadasi*, *Vasachaturthi*

etc. But it is difficult to determine which among these were practiced in Bengal during this period. Although, all the *Puranas* allowed women to perform *vratas*, but due to lack of evidence we cannot determine that how many *vratas* were performed by the women during this period.

We have seen that *tantricism* influenced the Brahmanical religion during this period. The *tantra* exalts women as form of Mother Goddess.³³ The *tantras* also speak highly of the worship of maiden.³⁴ The *Vamachara Sakta* practice *yoga* together with women. Their ritual requires five *tatvas* or elements of *madya*, *mamsa*, *matsva*, *madra* (parched cereal) and *maithuna*. The *Devi Purana* composed about the end of the 7th century gives evidence of the existence of *Vamachakra Sakta* during this period in different places in Radha and Varendri.³⁵

There are epigraphic as well as archaeological evidences of the religious zeal of the women of early medieval Bengal. A piece of land was granted by Vijayasena to a Brahman Udayakaradeva Sarma for conducting *homa* for his chief queen.³⁶ During the period of Ballalsena his wife Vilasadevi donated golden horse on the bank of Ganga to a Brahman.³⁷ On the occasion of lunar eclipse observed by the Queen mother, Visvarupsena granted three plots of land to *pandita* Halayuddha Sarmman.³⁸ Sometimes images of deities were also made by the munificence of the pious ladies. An image was made to the order of Vikramdevi, the chief queen of Ranaka Yasapala.³⁹ Sometimes both the husband and wife are mentioned in the inscribed line at the base of a sculpture⁴⁰ which seems to indicate that both were its donor.

Some cult of non Aryan origin, which was later on accepted by the orthodox Brahmanical, religion were also practiced by the women of early medieval Bengal. These are the cults of Goddesses Mansa and Sasthi. Literary evidences of this period show that the early medieval lower Ganga valley women practiced the cult of snake Goddess Mansa, and they had a great part in the spread of this cult. Sasthi, the giver and guardian of children, who assists women in child birth, also seem to have been worshipped by women.⁴¹

The cult of *Dharma* or *Dharma Thakur*, a cult of non Aryan origin, was also popular with the women of lower Ganga valley during this period and in the development and practice of it they seem to have had a special role. *Dharma* is a giver of the boon of sons and we can easily presume that, like Queen Madana and Queen Ranjavati of the *Dharma Mangla* poems, some women of early medieval Bengal sometimes worshipped this deity for the boon of sons.⁴²

From what we have discussed above we may arrive at some general conclusion that the study of *Vedas* and *Smritis* was banned for women during this period. Moreover, child marriage was in vogue which provided little opportunity for getting education. But in spite of these handicaps some

of them seem to have been educated especially those who belong to upper strata of the society. In the anthologies compiled in Bengal we find verses of poetesses such as Vijja, Vikatanikatamba, Lakshmi, Jaghanacupala, and Bhavadevi etc. We have also the names of Lakshminkara and Sabajayogini Cinta, who occupy a prominent place in the doctrine of *tantric* Buddhism. The Buddhist *viharas* were centres of learning and culture during this period and tradition gives us the names of *bhikhuni* Mekhla and Lilavajra as connected respectively with Devikota *vihara* of north Bengal and Vikrampuri *vihara* of East Bengal.

Except these few prominent names of the women of early medieval eastern India hardly we get any reference of learned women belonging to middle or lower class during this period. Majority of people during this period were living in villages and their primary occupation was agriculture. Expansion of agrarian economy was the primary feature of early medieval society and economy, which led to assimilation and integration of local deities and customs into Buddhism and Brahmanism. Development of self-sufficient villages and closed economic activities provided space for spread of religious activities during this period. *Smriti* ideas of Brahmanism became popular among the masses. The moral ideals preached by Brahmanism seem to have had better effects in the rural areas where, as it is even now a days, the standard of morality seem to have been stricter and there was a dislike for all customs of the town which is evident from following verses of poet Govardhana: "Oh *sakhi*, walk straight steps, and give up all the customs of the town. Here the village headman gives punishment as a witch if one castes a side look."⁴³

NOTES

1. S. Hussain, *The Social Life of Women in Early Medieval Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1985, pp.63-65.
2. N.R. Ray, *Bangalir Itihasa, Adi Parva*, Bengali text, Calcutta, 1359 (BS), 1952, p.633.
3. *Epigraphia Indica*, 1896-97, Vol. IV, pp.326, 328.
4. Ray, p. 649.
5. Ray, p. 630.
6. "Khalimpur cp. of Dharmapal", *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. IV, p.254.
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