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Aniket Tathagata Chettry

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Islam and Brahmanism in medieval Bengal through the Mangalkavya texts. Mangalkavyas were narrative poems that were dedicated to specific deities and had a performative dimension. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, these texts combined piety and leisure, and enjoyed immense popularity across rural Bengal. The establishment of Islamic political rule in 1204 in Bengal brought about momentous changes in the social, economic, and political landscape of Bengal. However, one of the most important developments that took place in this period was the arrival of Islam into the region. The liberal and egalitarian rhetoric of Islam meant that it soon emerged as a challenge to the Brahmanical order in Bengal. It is at this crucial juncture that Mangalkavyas make their appearance in the Bengali countryside. This article analyses several Mangalkavya texts to find answers to the following two questions: firstly, did Islam play any role in stimulating the production of these texts, and secondly how did these texts respond to and engage with Islam? Answering these questions helps in understanding the rationale behind the composition of Mangalkavyas while providing an insight into the dynamic engagements between Brahmanism and Islam in Medieval Bengal.

introduction

Introduction

The history of medieval Bengal has been the focus of attention of several historians for many years. There have been numerous works that have attempted to explore the social, political, and economic history of medieval Bengal. Most of these works have considered the establishment of Islamic political rule in Bengal as the event that marks the beginning of ‘medieval’ in Bengali history. While there is a significant problem in such a periodization of history based on religion, this article does not concern itself with the merits or demerits of such ideas of periodization. Instead, this article asserts that the establishment of Islamic political rule over Bengal did bring about monumental changes to the socio-political and economic landscape of the region. Importantly, this event also marked the beginning of a dynamic relationship between Islam and the traditional Brahmanical order, traces of which are present in the vast corpus of texts composed in Bengal from the thirteenth century onwards. This

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article attempts to examine the evolving relation between Islam and the Brahmanical order in medieval Bengal through the lens of a specific vernacular textual tradition known as the *Mangalkavya*. The Mangalkavyas were performative narratives dedicated to specific deities and composed in Bengal between the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The first part of this article will examine the assimilative character of the Mangalkavya texts. Subsequently, the article will explore the question surrounding the origin of the Mangalkavyas and try to determine if the production of these narratives was in any way linked to the arrival of Islam into the region of Bengal. In the final sections of this paper, several Mangalkavya texts will be analysed so as to gain a better understanding of the way in which Brahmanism represented and responded to Islam. A systematic study of these texts will be helpful in throwing light on the diverse strategies through which the Brahmanical 'self' constantly negotiated and engaged with Islam in their attempts to appropriate and domesticate the Islamic other. Such a study will hopefully be able to prove that the ideological landscape of pre-modern Bengal was much more complex than previously assumed.

decoding-the-source-material-what-are-the-mangalkavyas

Decoding the source material: what are the Mangalkavyas?

Pre-colonial Bengal produced an extraordinary corpus of narrative poetry, composed in a form of Bengali that has been termed as 'Middle Bengali' by modern-day language scholars.[1] The Mangalkavya textual tradition remained popular for more than three centuries across the Bengali countryside and much of this popularity stemmed from its performative aspect. Mangalkavya recitations often accompanied the performance of *vratta* rituals.[2] However, separate gatherings were also held in villages during which Mangalkavya narratives were sung and recited in front of an entire village audience.[3] These performances could carry on for as long as eight nights, earning them the sobriquet *ashta-mangala* (where *ashta* means 'eight'). The term *Mangal* in Bengali conveys the idea of auspiciousness, and well-being. It is often used to signify something positive or beneficial. It was generally believed that listening to these narratives was auspicious for the listener and hence this textual tradition was also referred to as *Mangalkavya*s.[4] Mangalkavyas, therefore, had a textual as well as a performative dimension to them. The most popular Mangalkavyas of Bengal were primarily *Chandimangal*, *Annadamangal*, and *Manasamangal*. Barring these, there was what Asit Bandopadhyay and Ashutosh Bhattacharya have called the 'minor kavyas' like *Sitalamangal*,

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[1] Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay used the term 'Middle Bengali' to categorize the language used in the Mangalkavyas. Some of the salient features of this form of Bengali were the presence of phonological characteristics like epenthesis and umlaut, introduction of post-position within sentence formation and the increasing presence of Perso-Arabic loan words with '*tatsam*' words within its vocabulary. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay,*Origin and Development of Bengali Language* (Kolkata: Rupa and Company, 1979), pp. 50–51.

[2] *Vratta* is a Sanskrit word that means a vow. *Vrattas* involved acts of devotion and austerity undertaken for the fulfilment of specific desires. These *vratta* rituals were often accompanied by the recitation of Mangalkavyas.

[3] Mangalkavyas are even performed to this day in many villages across modern West Bengal. The author witnessed a *Manasamangal* recitation in the village of Chipra in the Alipurduar district of North Bengal. The performance was a lyrical recitation of the text written by Jagjibban Ghoshal and accompanied with music and songs. A team of four performers performed in the village for six nights between 11pm and 2am, at the end of which the team was given an amount of Rs 10,000 by the Organizing Committee along with grains, vegetables, and fish supplied by individual households. The performance concluded on the last day of the Bengali month of *Shravana*, which is also the day when the goddess is worshipped across North Bengal.

[4] It has also been surmised that the narratives had sections which were sung and these sections were sung using the *Mangal Raga*, hence the term *Mangalkavya*.

Kalikamangal, *Abhayamangal*, and *Gaurimangal*, to name a few. Most of the Mangalkavyas are dedicated to female deities like Chandi, Manasa, Sitala, Gauri, and Abhaya, albeit there are a few Mangalkavya texts dedicated to the two male deities Dharma and Shiva. Within the Mangalkavya textual tradition, all these female divinities were seen as manifestations of the Great Goddess-Durga.[5] Therefore, Mangalkavyas have often been associated with the Sakta cult, or the worship of Sakti. Sakti was the primordial power underlying the universe, the supreme being who was conceived of as a female entity and regarded as the totality of all existence. Sakti, also seen as the Great Goddess, could take on different forms, with Durga-Kali being the prototypical image of this feminine power.[6] With the identification of deities like Chandi, Gauri Kalika, Annada, and Shashti as manifestations of Durga, a vast majority of the Mangalkavyas were regarded as being part of a Sakta literary corpus.

Mangalkavyas in the pre-print era existed in the form of manuscripts. The copying of the manuscripts of one author by several copyists was therefore a common phenomenon and contributed to the dissemination of these texts beyond their immediate locale linking them to a wider reading and listening audience. The role played by these copyists in the transmission of the Mangalkavya tradition throughout the various parts of Bengal cannot be denied. However, the copying of manuscripts was a dynamic process in itself. In many manuscripts, the copyists added their own verses as proof of their literary creativity while at times entire paragraphs were altered based on the understanding of the individual copyists, leading to variations within the different manuscripts of the same text. While these variations can be seen as corruption of authorial texts, these omissions and commissions constitute interesting creative acts in their own right, an area that needs to be looked into with greater alacrity by scholars of Middle Bengali literature.[7]

mangalkavyas-and-the-writing-of-history-in-pre-colonial-india

Mangalkavyas and the writing of history in pre-colonial India

Amongst the various Mangalkavyas, the *Manasamangal* of Vijaygupta, also known as the *Padmapuran*, is viewed as the oldest Mangalkavya, written towards the end of the fifteenth century. Mangalkavyas continued to be written by the likes of Lala Joy Narayan Sen, Manik Ganguly, and Akinchan Chakraborty even towards the end of the eighteenth century. This shows that the Mangalkavya tradition was one of the dominant and popular literary genres of Bengal, whose textual production and performances continued for around three centuries and more. Despite the popular nature of Mangalkavyas, the early British colonial scholar-administrators regarded this literature, along with all other vernacular pre-colonial literary traditions, to be Puranic and mythic. The colonial scholars believed that history and historical consciousness did not exist in India before the arrival of the British. Such a view seemed to assert that India prior to the colonial experience was indifferent to the empirical character of its past. History was celebrated as a rational, positivist discipline whose introduction into the Indian milieu was attributed to the British presence. Other than Kalhana's 'Rajatarangini', and the Persian court chronicles being composed by the rulers of Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal emperors, none of the texts produced throughout pre-colonial India in the many vernacular languages was even considered close to being historical narratives. The large bulk of pre-colonial vernacular textual tradition of India, including the popular Mangalkavyas, with their indifference towards chronology, factuality, and a co-mingling of the supernatural with the temporal, was dismissed as mythic and ahistorical.[8] The influence of the colonial view was clear on Indian scholars as well. Writers such as R. C. Mazumdar and R. D. Banerjee felt history had to adhere to the methodological standards prescribed by the British and thought that there was no tradition of history writing in pre-colonial India. These scholars emphasized 'hard evidence' like archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic sources over literary sources to reconstruct the history of pre-colonial India.[9] They felt that coins and inscriptions did not aggrandize facts while literary sources were vulnerable to exaggerations and misrepresentations.[10]

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[5] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangalkavyer Itihas* (Kolkata: Bhattacharjee, 1970).

[6] Charles Wendell Beane, *Myth, Cult and Symbols in Sakta Hinduism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manohar, 2001), p. 56.

[7] For more on such acts of creativity it might be worthwhile to read Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

However, the idea of history being a Western import and the tradition of decrying a significant part of pre-colonial literature as ahistorical began to be challenged by a group of historians in the latter half of the twentieth century who argued that the Western conceptions of history as a formal, specialized genre should not be treated as uniform. Kumkum Chatterjee was of the view that India had a distinct tradition of history writing prior to the arrival of the British. For her, the pre-colonial vernacular literary traditions followed definite methodological principles and protocols of authority though these concepts were not identical to the modern Western European notions of history.[11] In their very influential work *Textures of Time*, Sanjay Subramanyam, David Shulman, and Velcheru Narayan Rao argued that history writing was not confined to any one genre in pre-colonial India. History was written in diverse literary forms ranging from purana to kavya to prose. They argued in favour of the historicity of the pre-colonial literary tradition, pointing out that 'textural considerations like syntax, lexical choices, structured gaps and silences, metrical devices and various phono-aesthetic indicators within these texts allowed the contemporaneous audiences to distinguish historical matter from the non-historical'.[12] As a result of this new historical discourse, a significant body of texts, composed throughout pre-colonial India in many vernacular languages, was recovered by historians as valid sources for historical investigation — including the Mangalkavya literature.[13] New scholarly efforts were made to interpret the myths and

[8] For the colonialist view see Henry Elliot and John Dawson, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, 8 vols (London: Trubner, 1867–77); James Mill, *The History of British India*, 2 vols (London: Chelsea House, 1968); William Ward, *A View of The History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindus* (Serampore: Mission Press, 1877).

[9] The term *hard evidence* is used based on the usage by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[10] For the perspective of such Indian scholars see Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal* (Kolkata: Bharadwaj, 1973) and *Bangiya Kulashastra* (Kolkata: Bharati Book Stall, 1979); Rakhal Das Bandopadhyay, *Banglar Itihas*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Gurudas Chattopadhyay, 1915).

[11] Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 9–11.

[12] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 5–6.

[13] For instance, the *bakhar* literature of Maharashtra has been explored by Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007). Interesting work on *buranji* literature has been done by Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai-Ahom Struggle* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005). An interesting work on Braj literature is Allison Busch, *The Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011). For similar works on vernacular culture see Michael Katen, 'From *Jati* to Caste in Nineteenth-Century India: Vellama identity and the Telling of the Bobbilli Katha', *South Asia*, 22 (1999), 1–35; Aditya Malik, *Divine Testimony: The Rajasthani Oral Narrative of Dev-Narayan* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 1996); Norman Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of

legends in the Mangalkavya as keys through which the cultural expression of collective entities or the socio-cultural mindset of an indigenous population could be explored.[14] Influenced by this new turn of examining vernacular sources of pre-colonial India, the current article will be relying on the Mangalkavya textual tradition to highlight certain aspects of the religious history of Bengal following the arrival of Bakhtiyar Khilji into the region in 1204. The arrival of Bakhtiyar Khilji marked the end of the Sena rule and inaugurated Muslim political rule in Bengal. The next section of this article will explore the role of Islam in the production of the Mangalkavyas, while also throwing some light on the way these texts represented and responded to the Islamic challenge.

mangalkavyas-and-the-assimilative-strategies-of-brahmanism-in-bengal

Mangalkavyas and the assimilative strategies of Brahmanism in Bengal

One of the most popular Mangalkavyas from medieval Bengal is the *Chandimangal* of Mukunda Chakraborty. Composed towards the end of the sixteenth century, it was dedicated to the goddess Mangalchandi, also popularly known as *Chandi*. No reference to any such goddess is found in the Vedas, or in the two epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. A cursory reference to a goddess named *Mangalchandi* is found in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, considered to be a part of the Bengal Puranas, but the most important depiction of this deity comes from the *Chandimangal* texts. In Mukunda's *Chandimangal*, Mangalchandi is portrayed as the goddess of animals who dwells in the forests. She is also represented as the tutelary deity of hunters without whose blessing a good hunt is next to impossible.[15] The kind of goddess conceived within the *Chandimangal* closely resembled the deity worshipped by many non-Brahmanical communities of Bengal. For instance, the Munda and the Oraon tribes residing in the Bengal-Chottanagpur tract are known for worshipping a goddess by the name *Chandibonga*, whose blessings are essential for a hunt. She is propitiated through pork-meat and blood. In the *Chandimangal* text meat, blood and wine were associated with the worship of Mangalchandi. In fact boar meat is described as an essential ingredient in worshipping Mangalchandi.[16] Kunal Chakrabarti argues that animal sacrifices were forbidden

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Rajasthan', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13 (1976), 219–50; Tony Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). For some of the works which tapped into the rich genre of Mangalkavyas for exploring the history of Bengal see Kumkum Chatterjee, 'The Persianisation of Itihasa: Performance Narratives and Mughal Political Culture in Eighteenth-Century Bengal', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 67 (2008), 513–43; Frederick Miller and Clinton Seely, 'Secular and Sacred Legitimisation in Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*', *Archiv Orientalni*, 68 (2000), 327–58; Ralph Nicholas, *Rites of Spring: Gajan in Village Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008); June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Saumitra Chakroborty, 'Defeating Patriarchal Politics: The Snake Women as Goddess', *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and Pacific*, 30 (2012), 1–15; Edward Dimock, 'The Goddess of Snakes in Bengali Literature', *History of Religions*, 1 (1962), 316–48; Sandra Robinson, 'The Dharmapuja: A Study of Rites and Symbols Associated with the Bengal Deity *Dharmaraj*' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1980); Rahul Peter Das, 'Some Comments on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study', *Anthropros*, 78 (1983), 679–710; France Bhattacharya, 'The Poet and his Patron: Bharat Chandra Ray (1712–60) and Raja Krishna Chandra Ray of Nadia (1728–82)', in *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray*, ed. by Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (New Delhi: Primus, 2011), pp. 215–29; Nupur Dasgupta, 'Evidence of Words: In Search of the Popular in Medieval Bengali Literature', in *Varied Facets*, pp. 71–105.

[14] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–25. See also Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[15] Mukunda Chakraborty, *Chandimangal*, ed. by Sukumar Sen (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2007), pp. 49–52. Henceforth this text will be referred to as *CM*.

[16] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangalkavyer Itihas* (Kolkata: Mukherjee, 1970), pp. 459–61.

for the benign spouse goddesses of Brahmanical origin and hence argues that traces of non-Brahmanical influences are evident in the scenes of offering the goddess wine and flesh.[17] Moreover, boar meat is prohibited in Brahmanical religion and offering this to the goddess reveals her non-Brahmanical antecedents. All this seems to point firmly to the non-Brahmanical antecedents of the goddess depicted in the *Chandimangal*.

However, in Mukunda's narrative Mangalchandi was not simply a deity of the wild. Rather, she came to be regarded as a manifestation of the Goddess Durga herself. At one point in the narrative, Mangalchandi reveals herself to her devotee Kalketu as the Goddess Durga in her 'Mahishasuramardini' *avatar*.[18] Thus, the figure of Mangalchandi as seen within the *Chandimangal* was a composite deity, blending within herself both Brahmanical as well as non-Brahmanical features. The presence of such a deity in the Mangalkavyas makes us wonder and think as to why the authors of the *Chandimangal* glorified a composite deity like Mangalchandi? The answer to this question perhaps lies in understanding how Brahmanism expanded across Bengal.

Bengal was not one of the core areas of Brahmanism. The diffusion of Brahmanical culture into Bengal only occurred as late as the fifth century CE. By then, Bengal had emerged as a strong centre of Buddhism and of other non-Brahmanical local cults. It was only from the fifth century that many Brahmin priests, despite taboos against residing in the unclean lands, took the initiative and settled down amidst the indigenous populace of Bengal. The Brahmanisation of Bengal then gained momentum under the Pala and Chandra rulers, who were instrumental in donating lands to Brahmins and settling them across Bengal. Despite such favourable developments, the fact that Brahmanism entered Bengal relatively late meant that it had to encounter strong non-Brahmanical forces. In such a situation, attempts were made by the Brahmanical community to assimilate the varied non-Brahmanical groups within its framework. This process of assimilation, though complex, was seen as the best way in which Brahmanism could counter these non-Brahmanical forces and expand its influence across Bengal. The assimilative strategies Brahmanism adopted succeeded in creating a Brahmanical social order in Bengal.[19] It is this very process of assimilation with its inherent complexities and contradictions that came to be reflected in the Mangalkavya texts. Thus, the figure of Mangalchandi was not simply the literary invention of an individual: rather she was the perfect example of the assimilative strategies adopted by Brahmanism to survive and expand in Bengal.

As part of the Brahmanical mission to appropriate, cults and ritual practices of non-Brahmanical origin were incorporated within the Brahmanical world by equating them with some of the central deities of the Brahmanical pantheon. Thus, in the case of Mangalchandi, an autochthonous goddess was identified with the Goddess Durga, ensuring that the former was no longer an obscure indigenous deity, but rather a manifestation of the Supreme Goddess, attributed with absolute power and visualized as omniscient. This process allowed Brahmanism to subsume within itself many local deities and thereby integrate large sections of the non-Brahmanical population who followed such cults. Such techniques of appropriation allowed Brahmanism to thrive and prosper. However, despite her elevation, Mangalchandi continued to retain in her literature and worship many of the non-Brahmanical ritual practices which were superimposed over Brahmanical qualities, indicating that the process of assimilation was never a simple one-way process.

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[17] Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 178.

[18] This is the most popular form in which the goddess is worshipped, where she is portrayed as slaying the buffalo-demon Mahisasur. See Mukunda Chakraborty, *CM*, p. 64.

[19] Kunal Chakrabarti, 'Religious Processes', pp. 122–25. Also see Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, A History of Indian Literature, 2 (Epics and Sanskrit Religious Literature, fasc. 3) (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1986), pp. 100–1.

Another goddess around whom numerous Mangalkavyas have been composed in Bengal is Manasa. In the numerous Mangalkavyas that eulogize her, also known as the *Manasamangal*, she is seen as the goddess of snakes. There is no reference to a goddess of snakes within the Brahmanical tradition. In the *Rigveda*, there are references to serpents like the demon Vritra, who is slain by Indra, but there are no substantial indications that serpents were worshipped. In the Atharva and Yajur Vedas, there are *mantra*s for controlling snakes and curing snake bites but there is no reference to any goddess of snakes.[20] In the *Mahabharata*, there is a reference to the king of Nagas, named Basuki, and his sister Jaratkaru. She was later married to a namesake saint and gave birth to a son known as Astika. So, while there was a reference to a king of snakes, Jaratkaru was never ascribed any regnal or divine position.

However, a snake goddess cult was popular amongst the various non-Brahmanical communities of Bengal and its surrounding regions. Ethnographic works on tribal groups like Santhals and Hos reveal that they worshipped a snake goddess by sacrificing hens for her. Several *mantras* were read while the goddess was being worshipped and these were considered useful for curing snake bites. Similarly, amongst the many tribal communities of South India, one comes across references to snake goddesses like 'Mud-amma' and 'Manch-amma'. Even among the Buddhists there is reference to a goddess known as Jangulitara who is portrayed as the goddess of snakes and curer of snake-bites.[21] Thus, the central deity of the *Manasamangal* texts also seems to have been a product of the assimilative process adopted by Brahmanism in Bengal. In the case of Manasa, a snake-goddess of non-Brahmanical origin was appropriated within the Brahmanical fold through her identification as the daughter of the Great Brahmanical God Shiva, enabling Manasa to occupy an elevated position in the Brahmanical divine hierarchy.[22] Thus, it can be argued that Mangalkavyas reflected a Brahmanical strategy of appropriation that allowed Brahmanism to integrate many local non-Brahmanical cults, deities, and rituals within its framework and thereby expand its sway over a bulk of the non-Brahmanical populace.[23]

islam-and-the-production-of-mangalkavyas

Islam and the production of Mangalkavyas

What makes the production of Mangalkavyas even more interesting is the simple fact that the earliest Mangalkavya, the *Padmapuran* of Vijaygupta, dates from the late fifteenth century. Vijaygupta referred to an earlier poet of *Manasamangal* named Kana Haridatta, but no manuscript of the latter has been found that inescapably proves that his text predated the *Padmapuran*. Thus, according to most scholars of Bengali literature, the Mangalkavyas occupied a temporal frame between the late fifteenth and the mid eighteenth centuries. Interestingly, there did exist a genre of texts known as the *Upapuranas*, mostly composed in Bengal and Eastern India between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, that reflected the earliest Brahmanical attempts made in these regions to absorb local deities. These Upapuranas served as instruments of propagation of Brahmanical ideals while also articulating the essential Brahmanical need for appropriation/assimilation. The Upapuranas predated the Mangalkavya textual tradition, thus begetting a fundamental question: why was it necessary to produce the Mangalkavyas and build an elaborate cosmology of new deities like Chandi, Manasa, Dharma, thereby reemphasizing the assimilative strategies of Brahmanism, when this was something that the Upapuranas had already explored, centuries earlier? In my opinion, the answer to this question lies in one extremely important event that altered the course of the history of Bengal — the arrival of Ikhtiyar-ud-din Bakhtiyar Khilji in the region. His arrival marked the end of Sena dynasty and the beginning of Islamic political rule over Bengal, with Lakshman Sena, the last Sena ruler fleeing from Nadia, the then capital of Bengal. It is in the context of the establishment of Islamic political rule in Bengal that the production of Mangalkavyas must be viewed.

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[20] Edward Dimock, 'The Goddess of Snakes', pp. 316–48.

[21] William L. Smith, *The One-Eyed Goddess: A Study of the Manasā Maṅgal* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1980), p. 134.

[22] For more on the goddess' origins see P. K. Maity, *Historical Studies in the Cult of Goddess Manasa* (Kolkata: Puthipustak, 1966).

[23] Though the paper talks of Manasa and Chandi, the same hypothesis can be applied to all the deities eulogized in the Mangalkavyas. For instance: Dharma Thakur, referred to in the *Dharmamangal* texts, is also a composite deity with syncretic amalgamations. It is opined that the appropriation of the non-Brahmanical cult of the Sun-God into the Brahmanical framework resulted in the growth of the Dharma cult. As part of this assimilatory process, Dharma was often identified with the Vedic God Varuna, but he was most popularly seen as a manifestation of lord Shiva as well. For more see Ashutosh Bhattacharya, 'The Dharma Cult', *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology*, 1 (1952), pp. 117–51; T. C. Das, 'Sun Worship Amongst the Aboriginal Tribes of Eastern India', *Journal of the Department of Letters*, 11 (1924), 93–118.

Bakhtiyar Khilji only lived for two years after his famed conquest; his death, following a disastrous attempt to conquer Tibet, led to a tussle between three of his governors, whom he had deputed to take care of his domain of Bengal in his absence. In the ensuing conflict, it was Husam-ud-din who emerged victorious and became the first Muslim ruler of Bengal under the title Ghiyath-ud-din Iwad Khilji. He refused to accept the authority of the Delhi Sultan Iltutmish and even got a letter of investiture from the Abbasid Caliph legitimizing his status as an independent ruler. However, Iltutmish dispatched a huge army to defeat Ghiyath-ud-din and it is during this conflict that the latter was defeated and killed. This brought Bengal under the ambit of the Delhi Sultanate. However, Bengal's distance from the imperial centre meant that those who were deputed to govern the region often unfurled the flag of sedition against the centre and asserted their independence, making Bengal a hotbed of disturbance and strife. In 1342, Shams-ud-din Ilyas Shah wrested Bengal from Delhi, beginning an independent dynasty in Bengal, the Ilyas-Shahis. The Ilyas-Shahi dynasty ended with a military coup that led to the establishment of the Husain Shahi dynasty in Bengal. The Husain Shahi dynasty was defeated by Shershah, who later became the ruler of Delhi after defeating the Mughal emperor Humayun. It was only after Shershah's death in 1545 that Humayun could recapture Delhi from his successors. Upon Humayun's accession to the Mughal throne in 1555, the Afghan relatives of Shershah fell back into Bengal. The Afghan control over Bengal continued under the Karranis, and it was only when Daud Khan Karrani was defeated by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1575 that Bengal was brought under the control of Mughal rulers. Though, it did take the Mughals another forty years before they could consolidate their authority over western and Eastern Bengal. Thus, from the time of Bakhtiyar Khilji onwards, Bengal remained under Islamic political control until the mid-eighteenth century when the last Nawabs of Bengal were replaced by the English East India Company.[24]

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[24] For more on the history of Bengal see Mahmadur Rehman, *The Political History of Muslim Bengal: An Unfinished Battle of Faith* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019); Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007); Eijaz Hussain, *Bengal Sultanate: Politics, Economy, and*

While Muslims may not have been alien to Bengal, with references to Arab traders in Bengal being found from the early medieval period onwards, the establishment of Muslim political control over Bengal did create a lot of insecurity amongst the Brahmanical community. Part of this insecurity stemmed from the way Muslim rulers responded to the local communities in Bengal. The sultans of Bengal adopted liberal policies encouraging people of different religions to comfortably live together in peace. Thus, one finds Ala-ud-din Husain Shah, the first ruler of the Husain Shahi dynasty (1494–1519) dropping the title 'Ghaus-ul-Islam wal Muslimin' (helper of Islam and Muslims) from his coins and inscriptions to indicate that his kingship stressed welfare for all, not just of any one group. He gave complete freedom to his subjects to practice their own religion while instructions were issued to all officials of the state to not interfere in the religious practices of any individual. In their administration, Sultans appointed non-Muslims to high positions throughout their period. Rukn-ud-din Barabak Shah had Biswas Rai as his *Wazir*, and Bhanddasi Rai as the fort superintendent at Golaghat. Likewise, Gopinath Basu was appointed as the *Wazir*, Anoop Mallick, the superintendent of mint, Sanatana and Rup, chief secretary, and private secretary respectively of Ala-ud-din Husain Shah.[25] The Sultans smoothly adopted local language and culture and patronized local scholarship.[26]

The liberal attitude of the Muslim rulers of Bengal was complemented by the Sufi saints who entered Bengal from the mid-eleventh century. Many prominent Sufi saints made Bengal their domain, enabling the proliferation of Sufism into the interior parts of medieval Bengal. Wherever there were Sufi saints, there would be a *khanqah* or hospice and people from all religions and sects would visit these *khanqahs* for spiritual solace. Many Sufi saints even opened *langarkhanas* which served as a free kitchen, providing food to all in need irrespective of their caste and religious identity.[27] The *khanqah* and the *langar* served as institutions that enabled the Sufis to reach out to the ordinary people of Bengal with their ideas of esoteric mysticism and win their trust. During the Mughal period, the Sufi *pir*s also served as agents of agrarian expansion in Eastern Bengal, cutting down forests and establishing settled agrarian communities.[28] Such activities not only linked charismatic *pir*s to the centres of power but also brought them closer to the local communities. Additionally, most of the Sufi orders that gained popularity across Bengal spoke unequivocally against religious intolerance, opposed the tyrannical structure of Brahmanical *varna* order and advocated the unity of all. These

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Coins (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2003); Atul Chandra Roy, *History of Bengal: Mughal Period* (Kolkata: Navbharat Publishers, 1968); Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[25] Eijaz Hussain, *Bengal Sultanate*, pp. 122–30. For the liberal response of the Bengal Sultanate towards other religions see K. M. Mohsin, 'Muslim Conquest: Bengal Sultanate', in *Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage: An Introductory Reader*, ed. by Salahauddin Ahmed and A. F. Chowdhury (Dhaka: Independent University Press, 2004), pp. 95–107; S. Islam, 'State, Religion and Culture: Medieval Period', in *State and Culture: Cultural Survey of Bangladesh*, ed. by E. Rashid and Harun Ahmed (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), pp. 370–82; A. Dasgupta, 'Islam in Bengal: Formative period', *Social Scientist*, 32.3/4 (2004), 30–41.

[26] The acceptance of Muslim rulers by largely Hindu subjects is also documented by Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and the Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Albany: Harvard University Press, 2016), which shows how the Arab rulers of Sindh won over the local populace through their accommodative and liberal policies. In return for the liberal policies of the ruler, subjects offer him their allegiance, thereby bringing stability to the state. This is similar to what is being seen in the Bengal Sultanate.

[27] A. B. Siddiq and A. Habib, 'The Formation of Bengal Civilisation: A Glimpse on the Socio-Cultural Assimilations through Political Progressions in Bengal Delta', *Artuklu Human and Social Science Journal*, 2 (2017), 1–12.

[28] Richard Eaton, 'Rise of Islam, and the Bengal Frontier', pp. 198–99.

ideas of brotherhood, love and equality also attracted the masses.[29] Thus, the Sufi saints and the Sultans of Bengal, with their ideas of liberality and equality, made Islam a lucrative alternative for the common people of Bengal, especially those who were oppressed by the *varna*-based hierarchical structures of Brahmanical faith. Here, it might be interesting to note that though Brahmanism did incorporate non-Brahmanical groups within its fold, these newly integrated groups were often placed at the bottom of the Brahmanical *varna* structure so that the Brahmins could dominate and exploit them for their own benefit.

The growing popularity of Islam coupled with the oppressive character of the Brahmanical order stoked genuine fears within Brahmanism that an increasing number of people might alienate themselves from the Brahmanical community. The very fact that medieval Bengal did witness people accepting Islam did not help allay such fears. Thus, to preserve their dominance and maintain their subject base across Bengal, the Brahmanical order resorted to the production of the Mangalkavyas. Through these Mangalkavya texts, which were centred around deities like Chandi, Manasa and Dharma, to name a few, the Brahmanical order attempted to assimilate those communities of non-Brahmins that had not yet been integrated into its framework. Furthermore, Mangalkavyas were regularly performed across rural Bengal, and the public nature of these performances enabled these texts to reach out to a diverse population, making them a perfect vehicle for disseminating the Brahmanical message of assimilation. Thus, the Brahmanical order hoped that these performative narratives would play a vital role in reminding people of the accommodative and embracive character of Brahmanism itself, thereby counteracting Islam while allowing Brahmanism to maintain its hegemony over the ideological landscape of Bengal. Based on the socio-political developments that were unfolding in Bengal, coupled with the very nature of the Mangalkavya texts, it does seem reasonable to argue that Islamic influences stimulated the production of the Mangalkavya textual tradition in Bengal.

representation-of-the-islamic-other-in-the-mangalkavyas

Representation of the Islamic other in the Mangalkavyas

The previous section has shown the plausibility of the influence of Islam as a driver for the production of Mangalkavyas. In this section, an attempt will be made to look at how Islam has been represented in the Mangalkavyas. The most elaborate representation of Islam is found in the *Manasamangal* narrative. The story of the *Manasamangal* revolves around Manasa's attempt to establish her worship on Earth. The central plot of the narrative involves the conflict between Manasa and the protagonist Chand Saudagar, the latter being an ardent devotee of Shiva who refuses to worship Manasa, forcing the snake goddess to unleash her wrath upon him. The rest of the narrative is about the tussle between the two. However, there are many subplots within this narrative and one of them involves Manasa's encounter with Hasan and Hussain, both of whom are presented as Qazis in the narrative.[30] The Qazi in the Mangalkavya texts was more of a symbol through which the otherness of the Muslim community was depicted. This assertion of mine will become clearer with a detailed description of the conflict between Manasa and the Qazi brethren Hassan-Hussain as seen in the *Manasamangal*.

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[29] Wahyuddin Halim, 'The Sufi Sheikhs and their Socio-cultural Roles in the Islamisation of Bengal During the Mughal Period (1526–1858)', *Journal of Islamic Civilisation in Southeast Asia*, 7 (2018), 175–94. Also see Enamul Haque, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975); S. M. Hasan, 'Religious Pluralism in Sultanate Bengal', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, 23 (2014), 29–50.

[30] The Qazi belonged to the community of Islamic religious scholars but was a figure invested with the majesty of law. They were seen as functionaries of state rather than simply as scholars of jurisprudence and served as judges from the Islamic community. The Qazi was often responsible for deciding the veracity of conflicting evidence and for this he relied upon his implicit understanding of the community of which he was a part, its hierarchies,

For our analysis, let us take the elaborate conflict between the goddess Manasa and Hasan-Hussain, as found in one of the earliest *Manasamangal* narratives, that of Vijaygupta. In this section, there are some interesting observations regarding the Muslim community which is useful in analysing how the Mangalkavyas responded to and represented the Muslim ‘other’. At the very outset, the two brothers are introduced in the following manner:

> hāsan hosen tārā dui bhāiẏer nām, duijone kare tārā biparīt kām
> kājiẏāli kare tārā jāne biparīt, tāder sammukhe nāhi hinduẏālīr rīt
>
> Hasan and Hosen are two brothers of contrasting dispositions.
> Both are Qazis and do not like to see hinduali traditions in front of them.[31]

The same paragraph goes on to highlight the anti-Brahmanical stance of the Qazi brothers, their family members, and subordinate officers. There is a reference to one ‘Dula Haldar’, who is the brother-in-law of Hussain. The paragraph mentions:

> sarbakṣaṇ hosener āge āge āse, tāhār bhaẏe hindu sab galāẏ tarāse
> brāhmaṇ pāile lāg param kautuke, tār paitā chiṛi thuthu deẏ mukhe
> brāhmaṇ sujan tathāẏ base atiśaẏ, gṛhaghar tolāẏ nā durjaner bhaẏ
>
> He (Dula) is always seen walking ahead of Hosen and hindus are afraid of him.
> He is overjoyed when he gets hold of a Brahmin, (he) tears their sacred thread and spits on them.
> Many meritorious Brahmins stay in the region, but they do not build houses, fearing his evil deeds.[32]

One day the Qazi’s right-hand man, a certain Mullah Takai, finds a group of cowherds worshipping Manasa with great fanfare in a hut inside the forest. This scene disturbs Takai, and he enters the room intending to destroy the pot used to worship the goddess. However, the cowherds catch him before this misdeed and beat him. They only leave him after Takai is made to swear an oath that he will not tell the Qazi about the cowherds’ act of worshipping Manasa. Unfortunately for the cowherds, the moment Takai reaches the two brothers, he laments about the growing popularity of Hindu customs in their domain. He informs the Qazis about the cowherds worshipping a Hindu ‘bhoot’.[33] The term *bhoot* was clearly used to indicate Takai’s derogatory attitude towards Hindu deities. On hearing this, the response from one of the Qazis is as follows:

> śuniẏā kupita kāji cāridike cāẏ, aphiṅer lāẏeke betā ākāśer dike cāẏ
> hārāmjāt hindur æto baṛa prāṇ, āmār grāmete betā kare hinduẏān
> gote gote dhariba giẏā jateka chemrā, eṛāruti khāoẏāiẏā kariba jāti mārā
>
> The Qazi was furious and stared everywhere, in his opium-induced stupor looked at the sky and growled,

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and intimate practices. See Sudipta Sen, ‘Retribution in the Subaltern Mirror: Popular Reckonings of Justice, and the Figure of the Qazi in Medieval and Pre-colonial Bengal’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 8 (2005), 439–58.

[31] Vijaygupta, *Manasamangal*, ed. by Achintya Biswas (Kolkata: Anjali, 2009), p. 137, lines 2–3. Henceforth this text shall be cited as *MM*.

[32] *MM*, p. 137, lines 5, 10–11.

[33] The term *bhoot* in Bengali is used to mean spirits and apparitions. The usage of the term here shows how Takai ridicules Manasa as nothing more than an apparition, not willing to grant her the status of a divine figure.

> ‘How dare these hindus be so courageous as to practice hinduani rites in my village?
> I will grab those ruffians by their necks and feed them cow meat to take away their *jati*’.[34]

Thus, from these descriptions it seems that the *Manasamangal* of Vijaygupta had a distinct way of representing the Muslims. The Muslims, through the figure of the Qazi, were represented in a negative manner. To portray them as wicked, the Qazi brethren and their subordinates were shown in the text as persecuting innocent Brahmins, desecrating Hindu rites and attempting to feed prohibited food-items like cow meat to Hindus to deprive them of their *jati* status. Such a representation seems to be a deliberate attempt on Vijaygupta’s part to demonize the Muslims and present them as wicked, thereby highlighting their ‘otherness’ *vis-à-vis* the morally upright Brahmanical order.

A similar description is found in Ketakadas Kshemananda’s *Manasamangal* as well.[35] Here too, in the Hasan-Hussain saga, Hasan sends his envoy to investigate the news that had been brought in by his spies about the worship of Hindu deities in his domain. The envoy, on finding Manasa being worshipped, eats all the food items that were being offered to the goddess and deliberately touches the earthenware pot used to worship the goddess, thereby defiling it. After disrupting the ritual, he goes on to say:

> lakṣa-lakṣa pīr āche, lakṣeka pīrānī āche, tār sebā kena nāi kara
> korāṇe kājīr pāś, śuna tār itihās, khodār japan baṛa dhan
> keha kahe bhagabān, keha kahe rahamān, kebal ekalā seijan
> tor dhaṇprāṇ labek hāsān
> māriẏā chāmer daṛā, gilābe garur heṛā, khur diẏā karibe jaban
>
> There are hundreds and thousands of Pirs and Piranis, why do you not worship them?
> Go to the Qazi and listen to the Quran, chanting the name of Khuda is the greatest wealth.
> Some call him Bhagwan, some refer to him as Rehman—He is the only One.
> Hasan will deprive you of your life and riches.
> He will lash you with a leather whip, make you eat beef and circumcise you.[36]

Here too, the Qazi and his officials typified the evil Muslim, portrayed as disrespecting Hindu ritual practices, oppressing Hindu subjects, polluting their varna status through acts of force-feeding them prohibited meat, and circumcising them. The very reference to the act of circumcision, also known as *khatna*, shows that the authors of these texts were aware of Islamic religious and cultural practices. However, by representing the Muslims in a negative light these Mangalkavyas wanted to accentuate the threat from the Muslim ‘other’ and create a sense of insecurity among the Brahmanical subjects regarding Islam and their adherents, especially among those who saw Islam as saviours from the oppressive Brahmanical order. Therefore, the negative representation of the Muslim as seen in the Mangalkavyas may have been part of a deliberate literary ploy for countering the growing influence of Islam and preserving the subject base of the Brahmanical order.

The representation of Muslim alterity presupposes an existing sense of ‘self-identity’ among the composers of the Mangalkavyas. It should be clear from the discussion so far that a Brahmanical consciousness or what has been referred to as *Brahmanism* through the course of this article predated the Muslim entry into Bengal. Upholding the pre-eminence of Brahmins by instituting a hierarchical society where all other social groups were subservient to them was one fundamental ethos of this consciousness.[37] The expansion of the Brahmanical consciousness across Bengal required the assimilation of non-Brahmanical deities and ritual practices within the Brahmanical framework, a process that has been reflected within the Mangalkavya texts. With the arrival of the Islamic rule in the Indian subcontinent and in Bengal, a broader and more inclusive Indic identity began to develop. It is this identity that has been described by Vijaygupta and other Mangalkavya authors through the terms *Hindu*, *Hinduani*, and *Hinduali* in their works. The term *Hindu* was originally a Persian word that was used to denote the river Indus. Subsequently Arabs used the term *al-hind* to refer to the entire subcontinent. By the early eleventh century, the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent were referred to as *Hindu* in Persian.[38] When Vijaygupta uses words like *Hindu*, *Hinduani*, or *Hinduali*, he does not imply a homogenous religious identity. For Vijaygupta and other Mangalkavya authors like him, these terms were markers of an Indic identity used to denote a group of people having common religious beliefs/affiliations, territorial associations, and shared socio-cultural codes. Thus, the term *Hindu* as seen in the *Manasamangal* of Vijaygupta was used to refer to a common Indic identity of the 'self' based on shared socio-cultural and religious experiences. In medieval Bengal as in the rest of pre-colonial India, the idea of Brahmanism, however, did not disappear, and continued to exercise its authority as one of the dominant modes of social organization within the Indic self.[39]

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[34] Vijaygupta, *MM*, p. 139, lines 9–11.

[35] Like other Mangalkavyas, there are numerous views regarding the dating of this text. The chronogram in the text has been interpreted differently by various scholars: some suggest 1638 as the possible date while others suggest end of the seventeenth century as the probable date. However, most scholars believe this to be a mid-seventeenth century text.

[36] Ketakadas Kshemananda, *Manasamangal*, ed. by Akshay Kumar Kayal and Chitra Deb (Kolkata: Lekhapada

While Muslims were cast as the Other within the discursive tradition of the *Manasamangal*, it should be kept in mind that this did not mean a general hatred for Islam or the Muslim populace.[40] Islam was seen as a threat to Brahmanism and, to thwart it, there was an attempt to vilify Islam with the expectation that such representation might be instrumental in maintaining the hegemony of Brahmanism, a process aptly depicted within the *Manasamangal* narratives. However, the pejorative language used for Islam did not reflect any hatred for Muslim religion or people, much less proof of Muslim atrocities. In fact, the Muslim rulers had come to be accepted as an integral part of the political order in medieval Bengal and there were even hopes of accommodating Islam within the Brahmanical order. A nuanced look into some of the Mangalkavya narratives will make this point clearer.

To start with, let us again look at the introductory part of Vijaygupta's text which refers to one Sultan Hussain in the following manner:

Publisher, 1978), p. 107, lines 1–5.

[37] Cynthia Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (1995), 692–722.

[38] Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 22–23.

[39] Wendy Doniger, 'Hinduism by Any Other Name', *Wilson Quarterly*, 15 (1991), 35–41.

[40] For more on ideas of self and other see Romila Thapar, 'The Tyranny of Labels', *Social Scientist*, 24 (1996), 3–23; B. D. Chattopadhyay, *Representing the Other: Sanskrit Sources and Muslims from the Eighth to Fourteenth Centuries* (Delhi: Manohar, 1998); Sheldon Pollock, 'Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52 (1993), 261–97; H. K. Sherwani, 'Cultural Synthesis in Medieval India', *Journal of Indian History*, 41 (1963), 239–59; Philip Wagoner, 'Sultan among Hindu Kings: Dress, Titles and Islamisation of Hindu Culture at Vijaynagar', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55 (1996), pp. 851–80; Aziz Ahmed, 'Epic and Counter-epic in Medieval India', *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 83 (1963), 470–76; Sanjay Subramanyam, 'Violence and Identities in South Asia: Grievance and Memory in Community Formation', *Purusartha*, 22 (2001), 47–72.

sultān hosen śā nṛpati tilak
saṅgrāme arjun, rājā prabhāter rabi
nija bāhubale rājā śāsila pṛthibī
rājār pālane prajā, sukh bhuje nita

Sultan Hosen Shah, the jewel of kings.
In battle he is Arjun, bright like the morning sun.
He rules over the earth with his strength.
In the king's reign, the subjects happily spend their days.[41]

A chronogram within the text has been used to date it to 1484 AD. Sukumar Sen, the noted Bengali scholar, however, did not agree with this date. He believed the reference to Sultan Hussain Shah was a nod to Ala-ud-din Husain Shah, the first ruler of the independent Husain Shahi dynasty of Bengal, who ruled from 1494 AD, and argued that the text was composed towards the end of the fifteenth century.[42] On the other hand, Achintya Biswas argues that the date provided in the chronogram is correct, with the Sultan Hussain Shah referred to being none other than Jalal-ud-din Fateh Shah, the last ruler of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty who ruled Bengal from 1481 to 1487.[43] While debate may continue about the identity of the actual king who was referred to in these lines, what cannot be denied is that the author had eulogized a Muslim ruler for ensuring the well-being and happiness of his subjects and even compared him to the mythic hero Arjun. Moreover, he was not the only Mangalkavya author to heap such encomiums upon a Muslim ruler.

One of the earliest Mangalkavyas to bear a reference to Mughal rule was Dwija Madhab's *Mangalchandir Gan*. This text was dedicated to the goddess Chandi and was composed in the middle of the sixteenth century, when Akbar had just sent his troops into Bengal.[44] In this text, Akbar was referred to as 'Ekabar Badshah' and was regarded as an *avatar* of Arjun.[45] The author did not stop there, and also compared Akbar with some of the other legendary heroes of the Brahmanical pantheon, like Ram and Brhaspati. The most famous of the Mangalkavyas, the *Chandimangal* of Mukunda Chakraborty, composed towards the end of the sixteenth century, also made an indirect reference to Akbar in its narrative. In this text, Man Singh was referred to as 'Bishnupadambuj-bhringa'.[46] This term means 'a devoted servant in the feet of Lord Vishnu'. While this can be a reference to Man Singh's Vaishnav fervour, it can also be seen as a means of comparing Man Singh's overlord Akbar to the Hindu God Vishnu.

Evidence from these textual traditions show that the authors of these Mangalkavyas often eulogized the Muslim rulers of Bengal, even comparing them to the legendary figures of the Brahmanical pantheon. Thus, while the Muslim 'otherness' was juxtaposed against the Hindu/Brahmanical self, this seems to have been a strategy primarily aimed at keeping the Brahmanical hold over the people while countering the growing influence of Islam. However, this did not imply any revulsion towards Islamic religion or its adherents. Rather, a close examination of different Mangalkavyas clearly reveals that the Muslim rulers had been accepted as an intrinsic natural part of the political order of Bengal and were often described in the same lofty eulogistic manner as their non-Muslim counterparts were.

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[41] Vijaygupta, *MM*, p. 81, lines 10–12.

[42] Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1999), p. 818.

[43] Vijaygupta, *MM*, p. 11.

[44] Sukumar Sen, 'Bangla Sahityer Itihas', pp. 858–59.

[45] Dwija Madhab, *Mangalchandir Gan*, ed. by Sudhi Ranjan Bhattacharya (Kolkata: Calcutta University Press, 1965), pp. 7–8.

[46] Mukunda Chakraborty, *CM*, p. 3.

The resolution of the Hasan-Hussain episode in the *Manasamangal* texts also allows us to gain some interesting insights into the way Brahmanism looked to engage with Islam going ahead. In the Padmapuran, following Mulla Takai's complaint, the Qazi brothers imprisoned the cowherds and destroyed the earthenware pot through which Manasa was worshipped. This enraged Manasa, who declared war on the brothers. Her snakes went on a rampage and killed all the *juluhas* (Muslim weavers), *mullahs*, concubines and the family members of Hasan and Hussain. Finally, the two brothers surrendered to the goddess and asked for her forgiveness. In Vijaygupta's narrative, the resolution to the conflict between Manasa and Hasan-Hussain took the form of the two brothers accepting Manasa and worshipping her with utmost devotion. To quote a part of the passage from Vijaygupta regarding Hasan-Hussain's worship of Manasa:

> bicitra maṇḍap ghar dekhite sundar, bāchiẏā bāchiẏā āne anek dwijabar
> khaidai racanā ānila ṭħāi ṭħāi, bhaktibhābe pūjā kare biṣhari āi
> prathame pūjĩla ghat bhakti kare āji ,brāhmaṇe pūje ghat pranām kare kāji
>
> A wonderful temple was built, wherein many Brahmins were called.
> Tons of popped rice and curd were obtained, with great fanfare the snake goddess was worshipped.
> At first a Brahmin worshipped her pot while the Qazi folded his hands in front of her.[47]

In yet another *Manasamangal* narrative, composed by Bipradas Pipilai, the Hasan-Hussain episode is dealt with in a similar way.[48] Here too, the conflict between the goddess and Hasan-Hussain leads to the destruction of everyone around the two brothers. In Pipilai's work, Hussain himself is killed by the snakes sent by the goddess. Finally, the lone survivor Hasan realizes his mistake and worships Manasa. In this text, the Hasan-Hussain episode ends with Manasa pleased with Hasan's devotion and reviving all those who were slain by her. In fact, so moved is Manasa by Hasan's piety that she blesses him, and the section ends with the following words from the goddess:

> dine dine baṅśabṛdhi haba cirańjībi, bāṛir amūlya ratna rājya dhan ādi
> āẏu yāś bṛdhi haba dharme śudhamati, henna mate bara dila hāsaner prati
>
> Your family shall thrive and live long, while your precious jewels and wealth shall be in abundance.
> You shall live a long life; your fame shall grow exponentially, and you shall always be right minded in your religious pursuits, such were the goddess' boons to Hasan.[49]

The ending of the conflict between Hasan-Hussain and the Goddess Manasa as shown in the *Manasamangal* texts is extremely interesting. Through their portrayal of Hasan worshipping Manasa, the authors of the *Manasamangal* seem to be hinting towards a radical possibility of Muslims ultimately accepting Brahmanical deities and being assimilated within the Brahmanical framework.

This idea of assimilation is not solely seen in the *Mansamangal* narrative. This rhetoric becomes clearer in the Shunyapuran of Ramai Pandit. This is a text dedicated to the Lord

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[47] Vijaygupta, *MM*, p. 147, lines 12–15.

[48] Bipradas' text is contemporaneous with Vijaygupta's work.

[49] Bipradas Pipilai, *Manasamangal*, ed. by Achintya Biswas (Kolkata: Ratnabali Press, 2015), pp. 335–36, lines 38–39.

Dharma, also referred to as Dharma Thakur, and belongs to the genre of Mangalkavyas known as *Dharmamangal*. According to the Bengali scholar Bhakti Madhab Chattopadhyay, this poem can be dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, but most other scholars argue that the extant structure of the poem is not older than the sixteenth century. This poem has a canto called *Sri Niranjaner Rushma*. In this part, the author describes a town called Jajpur, which is shown to be reeling under the tyranny of some Brahmins. The Brahmins are presented as wicked men who go about demanding monetary gifts. They curse anyone who refuses to provide them with alms or gifts. The Brahmins are powerful and often do not mind destroying a coreligionist. Everyone in the town fears them and prays to Dharma Thakur to save them from these Brahmins. Dharma is infuriated on hearing the wicked and oppressive activities of the Brahmins and comes down to Earth. He assumes the form of a Muslim, a black cap covering his head and a gun in his hand. The rest of the gods also take the guise of Muslims to rid the town of Brahmins. Brahma becomes Muhammad and Vishnu the *paigambar*. Ganesh appears as a *ghazi* while Karthik takes the appearance of a Qazi. Narada changes his dress and becomes a *sheikh* and Indra turns into a *maulana*. Goddess Chandi becomes Bibi Haya while Padmabati becomes Bibi Nur. Together, they enter Jajpur and smash temples.[50] Interesting events take place in this narrative. In the passage described above, an equivalence between Islamic and Brahmanical divinities was being posited. By equating Islamic figures with some of the central deities of Brahmanism, the text reveals a conscious effort made by sections of the Brahmanical community to develop a strategy aimed at integrating Muslims into their fold.[51]

In another Mangalkavya, known as the *Raymangal*, there is yet another interesting depiction of 'Hindu-Muslim' relations. This text was dedicated to Dakshin Ray, the tiger-god who was popular across the Sunderbans.[52] In a seventeenth-century *Raymangal*, composed by Krishnaram Das, there is a sequence where a Muslim holy warrior named Bada Ghazi Khan enters a conflict with Dakshin Ray. To restore unity between them, God himself descends to Earth. Interestingly God appears in front of them in a strange composite form:[53]

[50] Ramai Pandit, *Shunyapuran*, ed. by Bhakti Madhab Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Mukhopadhyay, 1977), pp. 159–60.

[51] Such literary strategies are also seen in the Anatolian frontier where Christianity and Islam interact with each other. See Mario Apostolov, *The Christian-Muslim Frontier: A Zone of Contact, Conflict, or Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2004); Zeynep Aydogan, 'Changing Perceptions along the Frontiers: The Moving Frontier with Rum in Late Medieval Anatolian Frontier Narratives', in *Living in the Ottoman Realm: Empire and Identity, 13th to 20th Centuries*, ed. by Kent Schull and Christine Verhaaren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 29–41; *Images of the Other: Europe and the Muslim World Before 1700*, ed. by R. David Blanks (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996); Vassilios Christides, 'An Arabo-Byzantine Novel: ʿUmar b. al-Nuʿmān compared with *Digenēs Akritas*', *Byzantion*, 32 (1962), 549–604; Daniel Norman, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1960).

[52] Many scholars believe that there was a tradition of worshipping tigers in anthropomorphic form amongst the Austric and Mongoloid groups. Dakshin Rai is believed to have an indigenous origin who was later incorporated within Brahmanism and imagined as a warrior and the God of tigers, worshipping who kept people safe from tigers in the Sundarbans. The myth around Dakshin Ray states that his father was Danda Baksha, ruler of the 'Atharo Vatir Desh' while his mother was Narayani. For more on Dakshin Ray see Sujit Mondal, 'Was Dakshin Ray a True God or a Representative of a Particular Class of the Sundarbans Society?', *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5 (2018), 446–48.

[53] The figure who appears to reconcile the two warring entities is described as *akhilnath*, which when translated means 'the Lord of the World/Universe'. Here there is an idea of a Supreme God who is omniscient and all powerful, but this belief does not deny the presence of all other divinities that are viewed as emanating from him or as his manifestations. See Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

ardhek māthāy kālā, ekbhāge cuṛā ṭānā
banamālā chilimili hāthe
dhabal ardhek kāẏ, ardhanīl megh prāẏ
Korāṇ Purāṇ dui hāthe
eirūp darśan pāiẏāche duijane, dhariẏā paṛil dui pāẏ
tuliẏā akhilnāthe bujhāẏā hāthe hāthe duijane dostāni pātāẏ

Half his head was covered in black hair while a topknot adorned the other half,
holding a glittery garland in his hand.
Half his body was white and the other had a darkish blue hue,
he came holding the Quran and the Puran in his two hands.
Witnessing him in this form, both lay at his feet.
The Lord of the Earth raised them and persuaded them to be friends again.[54]

Here again, the conflict between a Muslim (Bara Ghazi Khan) and a Brahmanical deity is resolved through the appearance of God, who appears holding both the Quran and the Puran, and restores friendship between the two warring parties. Thus, the final resolution relies on presenting the two conflicting parties as analogous figures. This also seems to be aimed at assimilating and domesticating the Islamic 'other', thereby creating stable alliances between these two competing ideologies within medieval Bengal.[55]

Thus, the discussion so far shows that a sense of insecurity within the Brahmanical community did lead to the Muslims being depicted as the 'other' in the Mangalkavyas, but this did not extend to reflect any deep-seated hatred for Islam or its followers. There was a general acceptance of Islamic rule and even of Muslims in medieval Bengali society. The conclusion to the Hasan-Hussain episode pointed to the possibility of incorporating the Muslims within the Brahmanical society through their acceptance of local Brahmanical deities. Subsequently texts like *Dharmamangal* and *Raymangal* went a step further and tried to posit equivalence between Islamic and Brahmanic figures in the hopes of assimilating Islam within a Brahmanical framework and thereby strengthening Brahmanical authority.

conclusion

Conclusion

This article focuses on Mangalkavya texts to examine the diverse aspects of the history of medieval Bengal. The first part of this article argues that Mangalkavyas were composed in response to the growing popularity of Islam in Bengal. This article analyses the assimilative strategies of Brahmanism as reflected within the Mangalkavya texts to argue that this textual tradition was produced by Brahmanism with two clear objectives. Firstly, it aspired to use the Mangalkavyas to assimilate those communities that had not yet been integrated into the Brahmanical fold. Secondly, the dominant rhetoric of assimilation was meant to highlight the embracive and accommodative character of Brahmanism. Thus, through the production of this specific genre Brahmanism attempted to counter the appeal that Islam held among large sections of the Bengali populace. The next section of this article dealt with the representation of Islam within the Mangalkavya texts. In this section, the Hasan-Hussain episode of the *Manasamangal* texts was taken up for discussion. An analysis of this episode in different Mangalkavya narratives reveal that the figure of the Qazi was used as an epitome of the evil Muslim who was portrayed as persecuting Hindu subjects and disrespecting Hindu rites or customs. Such vilification of Islam as seen in the Mangalkavya texts was a deliberate literary ploy to accentuate the threat from the Muslim 'other' and thereby counter the growing influence of Islam. While a growing sense of insecurity within the Brahmanical order did lead to Muslims being depicted in a negative light, it is the contention of this article that such pejorative language did not reflect any deep-seated aversion towards Islamic religion or Muslim populace in medieval Bengal. In fact, this article has carefully assessed several Mangalkavyas to argue that not only were Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal accepted as a natural part of the political order, but attempts were also made by the authors of these texts to suggest innovative ways to assimilate and domesticate Islam within the Brahmanical framework so as to strengthen Brahmanism within Bengal.

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[54] *Kabi Krishnaram Daser Granthabali*, ed. by Satyanarayan Bhattacharya (Kolkata: University of Calcutta Press, 1958), p. 201, lines 1–8.

[55] For more on the relations between 'Islam' and 'Hinduism' in medieval Bengal see Tony Stewart, 'Alternate Structure of Authority: Satya Pir on the Frontiers of Bengal', in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. by David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 21–55; Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Soumya Dey, *Becoming Hindus and Muslims: Reading the Cultural Encounter in Bengal* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2015); Sushil Chowdhury, 'Identity and Composite Culture: The Bengal Case', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, 58 (2013), 1–25; Ayesha Irani, 'Prophetic Principle of Light and Love: Nur Muhammad in Early Modern Bengali Literature', *History of Religions*, 55 (2016), 391–429; Thibaut d'Hubert, *Meaningful Rituals: Persian, Arabic, and Bengali in the Nurnama Tradition of Eastern Bengal* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022); Debojyoti Das, 'Vernacular Traditions, Dalits and Connected Social History in the Littoral Bay of Bengal', *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 14 (2022), 177–88.