

## **Chapter-VII Manasapuja among the lower castes**

In this chapter, we shall discuss a ritual of serpent worship called "Manasapuja", which is one of the famous folk cults in rural Bengal. Manasapuja is usually observed on the last day of the lunar month of Bhadra (*bhadra-sankranti*). But, the series of the ritual complex with regard to the goddess Manasa actually starts on the day of the tenth of bright fortnight in the lunar month of Asar. Some parts it continues until on the day of *bisarjan* in Durgapuja in the village. Manasapuja is the biggest ritual occasion for the lower castes in the village. The priest of the Bagdi (*deyasin*) performs the most important role in the ritual course. The analysis on this ritual will, therefore, bring us a perspective to see the village social structure from the stand point of the lower castes. To use the phrase adopted by Menchar [1974], we can see the village structure by the view of "bottom up" of the village.

### **1. The composition of the cult of the goddess Manasa**

The Manasa temple is situated in the locality of Manasa-para at the north eastern side of the village. It is the main place for worship of the goddess Manasa in the village. The majority of this locality is Kusmethi-Bagdi who worship the goddess. In the country of Rarh (roughly corresponds to the present districts of Birbhum, Bankra, Purulia, and Bardhaman), the cult of the goddess Manasa enjoys great popularity in the rural area. The main worshippers belong to the lower castes such as the Bagdi, the Bauri, and the Muci. The snake goddess has always the ambiguous meanings in the sphere of the folk culture. Because, the goddess Manasa always makes her appearance as the highly poisonous snake and at the same time she would become the benevolent goddess to protect the people from the danger

of snake bite. It is the deadly poison of the snake that the people fear, when they move along the fields, in the rainy season. The people pray to the goddess Manasa for their protection and cure from the poisoning.

At the Manasa temple in the village the people of Manasa-para perform the worship. At the time of periodical rituals such as Manasapuja, they dedicate many offerings to the goddess. The priest of the temple is called "*deyasin*" who belongs to the Kusmethi-Bagdi caste. He performs the daily service at the temple and leads the other service castes and the worshippers in the special ritual occasions. He took initiation as priest of the goddess Manasa from a spiritual master (*diksha-guru*) of another village and can recite the sacred verses of the goddess. He is usually called "*ojha*" in the village who has the special skill for handling snake. *Ojha* is usually a kind of medicine man and a snake charmer in rural area. However, at the Manasa temple, the priest of the Kusmethi-Bagdi has not only the knowledge on the herbs as an *ojha*, but he also was given the special authority by the Maharaja of Bardhaman as a *deyasin* of the Manasa temple in the village. The family of *deyasin* is endowed with the tax-exempt lands for his duty of the daily service and the ritual performance in the Manasapuja. Except for the *deyasin* of the family, nobody can perform the rituals at the temple. Even the Brahman priest in the village has no right to receive the offerings during the rituals. The ritual organization for the Manasapuja is as follows:

*Deyasin*; a member of the Kusmethi-Bagdi lineage which was endowed with land by the Maharaja

Drummer; a member of the lineage who plays drum in the Jogadya temple  
Malakar; a member of the lineage who works in the Jogadya temple

The lineages of the Drummer and the Malakar are the same in the ritual of the Jogadya temple. These three members are given the posts by the Maharaja and have

the duty for the occasional rituals in the Manasa temple. Moreover, they have equal right to share the offerings after the ritual.

Although the Manasa temple is the most influential place of the cult of Manasa in the village, there are many other places to worship the goddess such as the small shrines (*manasa-tala*), the small altars in the gardens, and the wild trees of Manasa (*manasa-gac*). The following is the list of the places to worship the goddess in the village:

- 1) The Manasa temple
- 2) *Manasa-tala* (eight places)
- 3) The courtyards of the Brahman
- 4) The courtyards of the Muci
- 5) The kitchens of the Ugra-Kshatriya

The *manasa-tala* means the small shrine for the goddess under the Manasa plant. There are eight places for the goddess Manasa in the village, namely the locality of the Dom (Bagal-para), the locality of the Muci (Das-para), the Kusmethi-Bagdi in the eastern side of the village (Purba-para), the Bauri in the south fringe of the village (Damacipukuru-para), the Tetuliya-Bagdi in the western side of the village (Kshirdighi-para), the household of a Caudhuri family (Uttar-para), the household of Gyan Kundu, and the household of a Bauri family. The shrines managed by the localities belong to the lower castes in the village. Only two families, a Caudhuri and Gyan Kundu, belong to the Ugra-Kshatriya. They founded the shrines privately. There are many small altars even in the courtyards as kitchens of the households of the Brahman, the Muci, and the Ugra-Kshatriya in the village. These are temporary altars under a small plants of Manasa. Nevertheless, they observe rituals for the goddess seriously. In the households of the Brahman and the Muci, they perform the rituals at their courtyards during the periods from

Table-20 Sequences of Manasapuja by locations

Location	<i>Dasahara</i>	<i>Panchami</i>	<i>Sesipanch.</i>	<i>Bhadra.</i>	<i>Aswin.</i>
Manasa temple	◎	○	○	◎	
Bauri-para	○	○	○	◎	
Das-para	○	○	○	◎	
Purba-para	○	○	○	◎	
Kshirdighi	○	○	○	◎	
Gyan Kundu	○	○	○	◎	
Caudhuri	○	○	◎		
Bagal-para	○	○	◎		
Muci H. H.	○	○	◎		○
Brahman H. H.	○	○	○		○
Ugra-Kshatriya H. H.			○		

Abbreviation:

- a) *panchami*; *Panchamis* in every lunar month(*pratan-sesh*)
- b) *Sesipanch.* ; *Sesi-panchami*
- c) *Bhadra.* ; *Bhadra-sankranti*
- d) *Aswin*; *Bisarjan* in Durgapuja
- e) *Puja* ; ○
- f) *Sacrifice* ; ◎
- g) *Offering* ; △

the day of *dasahara* to the day of *bisarjan* in the Durgapuja. Only the households of the Ugra-Kshatriya put their altars near the hearth at their kitchens in the day of *sesi-panchami*. The main occasions to perform the rituals for the goddess are shown in Table-20.

The day of *dasahara* related to Manasapuja means the 10th day of the bright fortnight in the lunar month of Asar. The ritual of the goddess Manasa begins that day at every altar of the Manasa without in the kitchens of the Ugra-Kshatriya. The days of *panchami* mean the fifth day of the bright and the dark fort night in the month of Asar and Sraban after the day of *dasahara*. It is called *sesi-panchami* in particular that is the last day of the *panchami*, which means the last *panchami* in the bright or dark fortnight before the day of *srbhan-sankranti*. The most important day for the Manasapuja is *bhadra-sankranti*, which is the end of the month of Bhadra, though the rituals in the temple of Manasa starts two days before *bhadra-sankranti*. In cities like Calcutta, the day of *bhadra-sankranti* falls on the day of Vishwakarma-puja. But, in the rural area of Bengal, it is still very popular as the day for the Manasapuja in many villages.

The *bisarjan* of Durgapuja means the tenth bright fortnight in the month of Aswin. In this day, twigs of the Manasa plants also join the procession to the pond of Kshirdighi along with the processions of the *nabapatrikas* to be thrown into the pond. The following cases will supply further information in this respect.

## 2. Manasa temple

### a) *dasahara*

On the tenth day of the lunar month of Asar, the people of the locality of the Manasa temple worship to the earthen pot enshrined in the temple Manasa. In the morning, people come to the Manasa temple and dedicate offerings at the altar. The Malakar prepares a basket of flowers to dedicate to the goddess. The Baiti comes to play his drum telling the time of the beginning of the Manasapuja in the

morning of *dasahara*. The Malakar and the Baiti are of the same lineages who have duties for the rituals at the Jogadya temple. At the altar of the temple Manasa, the Bagdi priest prepares for offerings, water of the Ganga, and the ritual utensils for the goddess. He belongs to the lineage of Kusmethi-Bagdi, to whom the Maharaja of Bardhaman endowed tax exempt lands. He lives in the house next to the temple in the locality of Manasa-para.

The Bagdi priest at the Manasa temple prepares the votive lights and incenses. First, he purifies himself with sacred water of the Ganga, and he sprinkles the water and the flowers over the altar. The next step in the ritual is *sankalpa*. The priest proclaims the beginning of Manasapuja at the altar in the name of the Maharaja Bardhaman. Then, he invokes the goddess Manasa at the altar. He dedicates through sacred verses various offerings to the earthen pot of the goddess (*Manasa-ghat*). In the same way as the Brahman priest in the temple, he holds lights, flowers, and offerings in his hand, and performs *arati*, and reception to the goddess. After the ritual reception to the goddess, he leads the procession of the pot of the goddess to the bank of a pond called Natun-pukur.

With the sound of the drum, the Bagdi priest holds the pot of the goddess in his hand, and brings it to the bank next to their locality. At first, he himself bathes in waste-deep pond and then get the pot an ablution. He puts the pot down on the ground, and performs the ritual with flowers and sacred water with recitation of sacred verses. The Baiti stands beside him and plays the drum in a specified rhythm for the goddess Manasa. Then they return to the temple and the priest enshrines the pot at the altar of the temple again. Next is the sacrifice to the goddess Manasa. They prepare for an uncastrated goat and a few geese at the square in front of the temple. People of the locality gather around the square of the temple. The goat is donated by the Bagdi priest and the geese are the personal offerings. After purification of the animals and birds with sacred verses, they set up a block for sacrifices in front of the temple, and hold down the body of the goat. With the sounds of the drum, a Bagdi youth cuts down the head of the goat with a sword. They pour the blood from the beheaded body to the wall of the Manasa

temple and the head is dedicated on the altar. Then, they sacrifice the geese to the goddess. Finally, the Baiti plays the drum announcing the end of the ritual.

After a series of rituals, the Bagdi priest prepares a big earthenware pot on the exterior of his house. Before ten days, he prepared local liquor fermented from rice in the pot. This liquor is commonly called *pacui* in Bengali. This pot is called *bharar*, and the ritual associated with the pot is called *bharar-puja*. He also performs same ritual associated with the pot on the veranda in the afternoon and then treats the men of the locality with drinks. The priest, the participants in the ritual of the day, and the women who dedicated offerings to the goddess are required to observe a fast (*upas*) from the morning until the end of the ritual. After that, they can eat *cire* soaked in the water, but do not allow to eat boiled rice and food made from flour that day.

#### b) The distribution of the offerings

There are two occasions to dedicate offerings to the Manasa temple, namely the direct dedication and through making collection by the wife of the Bagdi priest. The first is the dedication by the worshippers who came to the temple from the locality of Manasa-para and the neighboring localities such as Caudhuri, Samant, and Brahman. Most of the worshippers are housewives of each locality. From the morning until the start of the ritual, they bring the plates of offerings to the temple on behalf of their family. The main items to offer to the goddess are fruits, vegetables, rice, *gur*, *sarsa-teil*, milk, and *sindur*. They hand over the plates to the Bagdi priest of the temple and make a deep bow to the goddess. The priest adds the offerings to those already in a basket on the altar. Then, he picks up a little amount of them from the basket as *prasad* and returns the plates to the dedicators with the *prasad* of the goddess. The major part of the offerings is left in the basket on the altar. The piles of the offerings are then shared equally among the Malakar, the Baiti, and the Bagdi priest once the ritual is over.

The second occasion to dedicate the offerings is making a collection from every house in the village by the wife of the Bagdi priest (*deyasini*). It is

called "bari-adaye" in Bengali. She visits mainly the households of the upper castes of the village (*bara-lok*) such as the localities of Samant-para, Datta-para, Josh-para, and Gosh-para. The circuit which she makes around the village covers nearly the whole area of the upper class localities except for the locality of the Caudhuri. The main items of offerings are more or less the same as in the temple. She goes round every house of the localities carrying a big basket under her arm. In the houses of *bara-lok*, she sits down on the ground of the courtyards. The housewife puts the offerings into her basket. Usually, it is prepared in their household altars in the early morning.

The wife of the priest only receives the offerings but does not return anything as *prasad*. Her basket gets heaped up high with offerings soon. The total amount of offerings after the making collection of the village is equivalent to several baskets. These offerings are dedicated to the temple Manasa once and become their share afterwards. Like the Bagdi priest, his wife also got initiation with the sacred verses for the goddess Manasa from their spiritual master (*dikshaguru*) from a remote village. She also could perform the ritual service on behalf of her husband at the Manasa temple.

b) The ritual in each day of *panchami*

The rituals in each day of *panchami* are performed in the fifth of both the bright fortnight and the dark fortnight in the lunar month of Asar and Sraban. It counts, therefore, four or five times according to the almanac of the year. It is called "*panchamipuja*" generally in the village. The ritual sequence is almost the same as the ritual in the day of *dasahara* in the month of Asar. But, in these *pujas*, they have no performances for ablution of the pot, sacrifices, or *bhararpuja*. The villagers only visit the temple to dedicate their offerings for the goddess Manasa. The quantity of the offerings is not much on the day of *dasahara*. The Malakar, the Baiti, and the Bagdi priest share them equally after the *puja*. The wife of the Bagdi priest goes round the village to collect the offerings from among the households as usual.

c) *Bhadra-sankranti*

The rituals in the Manasa temple are performed for three days, beginning from two days before the end of the lunar month of Bhadra. During the three days, the Bagdi priest of the Manasa temple carries the pot of the goddess Manasa in his arms and makes a round of the village. On the final day, he calls at the Jogadya temple and on the *Rajkachari* at the temple who makes a bow to the pot of the goddess Manasa.

During the two days before the day of *bhadra-sankranti*, the Baiti plays his drum in front of the temple of Manasa once in the morning announcing the beginning of the first day of the Manasapuja. In the evening, the Bagdi priest starts his ritual in the name of the Maharaja of Bardhamna at the altar of the temple and performs the ritual reception to the pot of the goddess Manasa. He carries the pot in his arms and goes round the temple once and then he starts to go round the village accompanying the Baiti. This procession of the pot of the goddess Manasa proceeds to a small altar at the foot of the Manasa (*Manasa-tala*) plant in the locality of Kshirdighi-para in the western side of the village. The villagers at the both sides of the streets hold flaming torches in their hands to illuminate the path of the procession. At each lane in the village, they make a bonfire and light torches over them, particularly in the localities of the lower castes. In the light and deep smoke of the fire, the pot of the goddess in the arms of the Bagdi priest moves. This procession of the pot repeats three times during the three days. Especially, in the end of the lunar month of Bhadra, they have more elaborated sequence of rituals than in the other days including the sacrifice. Let us now examine in detail the process of the ritual on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*.

The Baiti plays his drum five times in the end of the month of Bhadra. After the first play in the early morning announcing the beginning of the ritual, the people of the locality come to the Manasa temple to dedicate the offerings. At the signal of the drum for the second time in the early afternoon, the people of every locality of the village gather around the temple carrying the goose severally in their hands. The Bagdi priest begins his ritual at the temple altar in the same

way as in *dasahara*. The youth in the locality of Manasa-para set up for block of sacrifice at the square of the temple. The priest purifies the sword at the altar. The square is filled with a large crowd surrounding the temple. The villagers bring the goose to the altar of the temple for purification. The priest dedicates every geese once in the altar. He sprinkles sacred water over them and chants sacred verses.

The ritual of sacrifice begins after the purification by the priest all goose brought there. At first, they sacrifice an uncastrated male goat dedicated by the family of the Bagdi priest with drum beats by the Baiti. The youth of the lineage of the Bagdi *paiks* hold down the body of the goat to the block and hold up the sword. After sacrifice, the blood of the goat is poured to the wall of the temple. The body and the head are then dedicated at the altar. The next sacrifice is of rams, which are offered by the some private worshippers. The way of the sacrifice is the same as the goat. Finally, they sacrifice the goose. The people bring the goose to the block in front of the temple one after another. The youth of the locality sacrifice them successively. At the altar of the temple, the priest performs the ritual to dedicate the heads of the goose bringing them from the block immediately after their sacrifice. As the number of the goose is very large, it takes time to complete dedication of all the goose. The donators receive the beheaded bodies of the goose and carry them home as *mahaprasad* of the goddess Manasa.

After the sacrifice of all goose brought there, they perform the ritual sacrifice to a few wax gourds and sugar canes in the ends. They put a wax gourd on a sheaf of straw on the ground. Just the same way as the sacrifice to the animals, they hold up the sword and cut down the gourd into two pieces. Immediately after that, the pieces of the gourd are thrown over the head of the sacrificer to the people gathering around. They rush to catch and scramble for a piece. After the sacrifice of wax gourds, they put a trunk of sugar cane on the straw. After its sacrifice, the people scramble for pieces again. It repeats four or five times in case of sugar canes. People bring pieces of wax gourds and

sugar canes to their respective house and put them into the manure pit. After all the sacrifices, the people around receive some offerings from the hand of the Bagdi priest as *prasad*.

The Baiti plays his drum for the fourth time in the day a little while after the sacrifice. With the sound of the drum, the priest carries the pot in his arms and goes round the temple building once. He makes a temporary altar for the pot outside veranda of his house. It is situated next to the temple. He dedicates a basket piled up with the offerings and places the ritual utensils aside. He enshrines the pot at the centre of the altar. Many floral garlands dedicated by the villagers are put on the pot. Besides, three flat baskets with covers are dedicated beside the pot. Inside of these baskets, three poisonous snakes are put severally. The *ojha* in the locality caught these snakes alive. He extracted the venoms of the snakes and kept them inside the baskets. These snakes are necessary for the ritual songs called *jhapan-gan*. These songs are performed the day after the *bhadra-sankranti*. Nobady is allowed to open the baskets with snakes inside to the public before the day of *jhapan-gan*.

In the evening of the day, people of the locality gather in the square of the Manasa temple. When it gets dark, they light the torches of straw and the leaves of palmyra in their hands and make bonfires in the square. Being thick with the white smoke of the fires in the square, the Baiti plays his drum for the fifth time in the day. This notifies the hour to start the procession of the goddess Manasa. The Bagdi priest carries the pot to the veranda in his arms and sets out for the procession of the goddess. The priest is attended by many followers such as persons sprinkling the sacred water over the pot, making the smoke by the incense burner, holding the ritual utensils in their hands, playing the drum and so forth. All members of the procession get illuminated by the fire of the torches of the people in each locality. The procession proceeds through the dense smoke of the torches, the bonfires, and the incense.

At first, they pass through the locality of the Caudhuri and turns to toward left to the Jogadya temple. The people on both sides of the streets lit fire to

watch the procession passing off. They go through the locality of the Brahman and enter into the ground of the Jogadya temple at the gate of *kachari-bari* in the north eastern side of the temple. Many villagers already assembled there for arrival of the procession. They also hold torches in their hands. At the center portion of the square in front of *kachari-bari*, they set up a small altar to enshrine the pot of the goddess Manasa for a while. The *Rajkachari* who supervises the organization of the temple Jogadya stands at the middle of a row in front of the altar. The Bagdi priest carrying the pot in his arms proceeds to the *Rajkachari* and puts it down at the altar. The *Rajkachari* lights a flaming torch in his hand over the pot and offers his reception. The Bagdi priest sits down there and begins his *puja* to the pot. Afterwards, he gives a *phonta* of *sindur* on the forehead of the *Rajkachari*. The priest picks up one of the floral garlands put on the pot and puts it around the neck of the *Rajkachari*. The *Rajkachari* makes a deep bow to the ground in front of the pot of the goddess where the priest is sitting before it. Then, the priest carries the pot again in his arms and leads the procession to the locality of Kshirdighi-para. The route of the procession is from the gate of *kachari-hari* of the Jogadya temple where they entered, through the locality of the Brahman, the branch street beside the temple of Kshideshwari, the locality of Josh-para, and again through the main street of the village to the small altar of Manasa in the locality of Kshirdighi-para. On either side of the street and corners of the village, the people throng to see the procession and hold up the torches in their hands over them. Everybody surrounding there are almost chocked by the smoke of the fire and the congestion.

At the altar of the Manasa tree in the locality of Kshirdighi-para, the people of the locality gather and dedicate offerings in front of the Manasa plant. The priest in this locality (*deyasin*) already prepared for the ritual. They all belong to the sub-caste of *ictuliya-Bagdi*. The people in the locality of Manasa-para belong to the *Kshmethi-Bagdi* sub-caste. When the procession arrives at the altar, the priest of Manasa-para puts down the pot at the middle of the altar and sits down. The priest of Kshirdighi-para also sits down aside him. They make ritual

offerings to the pot and dedicate the offerings on the altar. The priest of Manasa-para picks up one of the garlands on the pot, and puts it around the neck of the priest beside him. He also gives a *phonta* of *sindur* on the forehead of the priest of Kshirdighi-para and then to the forehead of every member of the locality surrounding there one after another.

After the ritual at the altar of Kshirdighi-para, they go to another altar of Manasa at the neighboring house of a family of the Bauri caste in the locality of Pashcim-para. The priest performs the ritual to the pot again in the same way as in the locality of Kshirdighi-para. He offers a garland and a *phonta* to the head of the family of the Bauri sitting beside him. Then, the procession returns to the streets inside the village by way of the locality of Datta-para and the main street facing the Jogadya temple. They pass along the locality of Samant-para, and returns to the Manasa temple in the locality of Manasa-para. It is customary for the villagers who see the procession off on the streets to say the following phrase to their family at the gate of the house when they enter:

*"Ghare Kena Alo?"*

(Why is a light burning in the house?)

The family answer:

*"Ginni Gechen Ban Berate. Sabai Ache Bhalo."*

(The housewife has gone out to the woods. Everybody is fine.)

After recitation of these phrases, they enter the house. It is said that the housewife (*ginni*) in this sentence means the goddess Manasa and her going out to the woods means the procession of the goddess going round the village. The ritual of Manasapuja comes to an end at this point. The villagers add the ashes of the

torches and the bonfires to their manures for their agricultural fields.

### 3. The small altars of Manasa (*manasa-tala*)

At the temples, small shrines, or the altars of the goddess Manasa, there is always an association of Manasa (*manasa-gac*) plant. It is believed that the Manasa plant is the abode of the goddess and in many cases, the plant itself symbolise the goddess. In the village, there are the eight shrines with Manasa plants to worship the goddess. They have a small altar to perform the ritual in front of the plants, but most of them are only a bush tree without a paling except for the days of the Manasapuja. During the days of the ritual, they decorate the bush with garlands, enshrine a pot for rituals, and dedicate many plates of offerings. In many altars of the plants, they invite the Brahman-priest of the village to perform the ritual, instead of the *deyasil*s or the women of the locality who usually worship trees. The following descriptions will outline in brief the rituals observed at each altar of the Manasa in the village.

#### a) The locality of Dom

The biggest Manasa bush in the village is in the locality of the Dom at the eastern fringe of the village. This locality is called Bagal-para. Many villagers even from the locality of the Brahman and the Ugra-Kshatriya come to fetch the twigs from the thickly grown branches of Manasa in case of need for their rituals. The households of the Dom caste have the title Pandit. Some other families belonging to the Kusmethi-Bagdi section came afterward into the locality and made up now a mixed community with them.

At the foot of the Manasa tree, they have the ritual for the goddess in the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhadra-sankranti*. The ritual process is not so complicated as in the Manasa temple. Except for the day of the last *panchami*

(*sesi-panchami*), a priest of the locality performs a ritual which consists of dedications of flowers, sweets, fruits, and the sacred water to the foot of the bush. The people of the locality prepare for these offerings to the goddess. None of the priests of the Brahman caste come to perform the ritual to the tree. The Bagdi priest of the Manasa temple and the Baiti playing the drum drop in the place at the time of their procession in *dasahara* but never perform the ritual there. They have their own priest who succeeds the ritual night for generations within the lineage of the Dom. At present, an old widow of the locality (*deyasini*) takes it over and continues to perform the ritual. She performs the daily service for the goddess in the morning and the evening and in rituals on special occasions.

The most important occasion of rituals of the year is on the last day of *panchami* (*sesi-panchami*). Only this time every household of the locality offers goose for sacrifice to the goddess Manasa at the foot of the tree. They can also offer to the goddess something else for fulfillment of some personal prayers but it is the only day to perform the sacrifice by all the households in the locality. They prepare some special dishes for the goddess and for themselves. Nowadays, they arrange loud speakers for music like a function in the marriage ceremony. They can enjoy it for a whole day. In other localities, the rituals of the last *panchami* are almost the same as in other days of *panchami*. Hence, only this locality has a special arrangement to enjoy the festivity in the village on this day.

#### b) The locality of Das-para

The locality of Das-para is a large one situated in the northern fringe of the village. The people here belong to the Muci caste. The priest of the altar of Manasa planted a bush by the side of the neighboring road a few years ago. He is called *ojha* by the villagers. He brought a branch of the plant from the yard of the house of Gyan Kundu. The people in the locality of Das-para used to come to worship goddess Manasa at the place of Gyan Kundu. The late Gyan Kundu was known

for his expertise in the ritual of the goddess Manasa and as *ojha*. He brought the bush of Manasa for the Manasa temple and planted it in his own house.

The *ojha* in Das-para belonging to the Muci caste assisted Gyan Kundu. On occasion of Manasapuja at his altar. He learned much of the skills as *ojha* from Gyan Kundu and took even an initiation of the sacred verses from him. Then he became an *ojha* in Das-para. Now he performs daily service to the goddess Manasa at the altar of the Manasa bush planted by himself.

The rituals of Manasapuja, as already indicated, are performed on the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhadra-sankranti* in the locality. In all these days the *ojha* of Das-para himself performs the ritual at the altar. Only on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*, the Brahman priest of the village is invited to perform the ritual. On this day, they dedicate the snakes to the goddess at the altar. These snakes are used in the ritual songs called *jhapan-gan* held after the day of *bhadra-sankranti*. The *ojha* performs his ritual by purification and the ritual reception of the goddess in the same way as the Brahman priests do in other rituals. On each day of the rituals people of the locality dedicate offerings such as sweets, flowers, and fruits to the goddess from early in the morning. Many of the housewives observe fast until the end of the ritual in the afternoon. They can, however, eat soaked *cire* and *muri* afterwards, but not eat boiled rice and preparation of flour. They have no sacrifice at the altar. They only dedicate the goose to the goddess on the day of the last *panchami* at their yard of the house.

#### c) The locality of Purba-para

The locality of Purba-para situated in the south eastern fringe of the village, is inhabited by the Kusmethi-Bagdi. The locality of Manasa-para is also inhabited by the Kusmethi-Bagdi. It is said that the people in Purba-para actually migrated from Manasa-para. They used to come to the temple Manasa in the locality of Manasa-para so as to dedicate offerings to the goddess on the days of Manasapuja. Nowadays, they perform their ritual at the own altar at the foot of

a small bush of Manasa in the corner of the locality. After some disputes with the people of Manasa-para, they planted the Manasa bush and built as altar a few years ago. They have no priest of their own so far. Usually, the women in the locality come to worship and dedicate some offerings to the altar in the morning and evening. On special occasions, they invite a Brahman priest in the village in order to perform the ritual. On the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhadra-sankranti* the Brahman priest visits to the altar and performs the *puja*.

d) The locality of Damacipukur-para

The locality of Damacipukuru-para is situated at the outskirt of the village toward south. There the people have an altar of Manasa beside an altar of goddess Kali. The inhabitants belong to the Bauri caste. The *ojha* of the locality of Das-para used come to perform the ritual of Manasapuja to the altar. After foundation of their own altar at Das-para, he transferred his right to perform the ritual to a man of the Bauri caste of this locality. The house of his family is located in front of the altar of the Manasa tree. He is a head of the family. In the rituals of Manasapuja, he performs in the name of this locality. He is, therefore, called the *deyasin* in this locality.

He performs the rituals at the foot of the bush in the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhadra-sankranti*. Usually he dedicates the sacred water, *sindur*, and flowers to the tree and performs the ritual with the sacred verses. Only on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*, every family of the locality dedicates a goose to sacrifice to the goddess along with many other offerings. They have no Brahman priest so far.

e) The altar of Gyan Kundu in his yard

Gyan Kundu was a well known person about his experiences in the skill as *ojha* in the village. It is well known too that he trained many disciples and made them *ojhas*. After his death, there are three other who are considered experts in the

technique of *ojha* in the village. All of them learned it from him. The villagers believe that an *ojha* can cure snake bite and other diseases by supplying various herbs and amulets. Especially, he can counteract the venomous snake bites, which otherwise may cause death in many cases. In the folk-belief, the Manasa tree regarded as an effective antidote to venomous snake bite. The *ojha*, sometimes the ordinary villagers also, plant Manasa trees in their garden for use in treatment in case of snake bites. It is necessary to make ritual services to the Manasa tree in their garden as an incarnation of the goddess Manasa.

In the garden of the house of Gyan Kundu, he planted a fine tree of Manasa for the purpose of his works as an *ojha*. At that time, it is said that he offered a prayer to the goddess Manasa in the Manasa temple and brought the spirit of the deity to the tree so as to build the Manasa altar newly in his garden. Then, he started to perform the ritual to the Manasa tree. After the migration of his family outside the village, the ritual to the Manasa tree has been continued by the *ojha* of Das-para. The neighboring people dedicate offerings to propitiate the deity. They perform special ritual on the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhdra-sankranti*. On these occasions, a priest of the lineage of Bhattacharyya comes to perform the ritual to the tree. He was the family priest (*kula-purohit*) of Gyan Kundu.

#### f) The household altar of the family of Caudhuri

In the locality of the Caudhuri (Uttar-para) in the village, there is a small altar of Manasa by the side of the street. It is said that at the time of marriage of the former head of the family, the bride brought a branch of Manasa tree along with her trousseau from her native house in the village Kaicaur. She planted the tree at this place and this is the origin of their Manasapuja at this altar. The ritual at the foot of the tree is, therefore, connected with the ritual in the village Kaicaur. The Brahman priest who comes to the altar to perform the ritual for the goddess is the *kula-purohit* of the family. He performs rituals on the days of *dasahara* and each *panchami*. The day of the last *panchami* (sesi-

*panchami*) is the biggest occasion for them to offer sacrifice of an uncastrated goat for the goddess. But, they have no rituals on the day of *bhadra-sankranti* within the family. This reflects the same pattern as in the village Kaicaur.

g) The household altar of the Bauri caste in the locality of Pashcim-para

In the yard of a house of the Bauri caste in the eastern side of the village, that is called Pashcin-para, they have an altar beside their household of *tulsi-gac*. Usually, the housewife of the family make offerings to the altars every day. Only on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*, they invite a Brahman priest who is their *kula-purohit* to perform the ritual of the goddess Manasa. They have to sacrifice an uncastrated goat for the goddess and the neighboring people dedicate the goose. In the evening of *bhadra-sankranti* the Bagdi priest of the Manasa temple visits to the altar on their way back to the Manasa temple carrying the pot of the goddess in his arms. He performs the ritual at the altar in company with the head of the family.

h) The locality of Tetuliya-Bagdi (Kshirdighi-para)

Beside the square of the Kshirdighi-para, they have an altar of Manasa. This is the dwelling of the Tetuliya-Bagdi. Usually, women of the locality make offerings to the goddess Manasa at the altar every day. The head of the family, that is, the lineage of Bhuniya located in front of the altar, succeeds the position of *deyasin* of the goddess for generations. He performs the ritual in the days of *dasahara*, each *panchami*, and *bhadra-sankranti* at the altar. The family of Bhuniya performs a sacrifice of an uncastrated goat on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*. The Brahman priest, who is the *kula-purohit* of the family, comes to perform the ritual. Each household of the locality dedicate a goose for sacrifice to the goddess. In the evening, the people in the locality with flaming torches in their hands await arrival of the procession of the pot from the Manasa temple. The Bagdi priest who

belongs to the Kusmethi-Bagdi section of Manasa-para sits down and performs the ritual in front of the altar. The *deyasin* of the locality of Kshirdighi-para sits beside him. As a representative of the locality, the *deyasin* puts a garland for the goddess on the pot.

Table-21 and 22 show the caste affiliation of each priest at the Manasa altars, distribution of main worshippers of the Manasa rituals, and genealogical relations centering around each altar.

Table-21 Caste affiliation of priests of Manasa

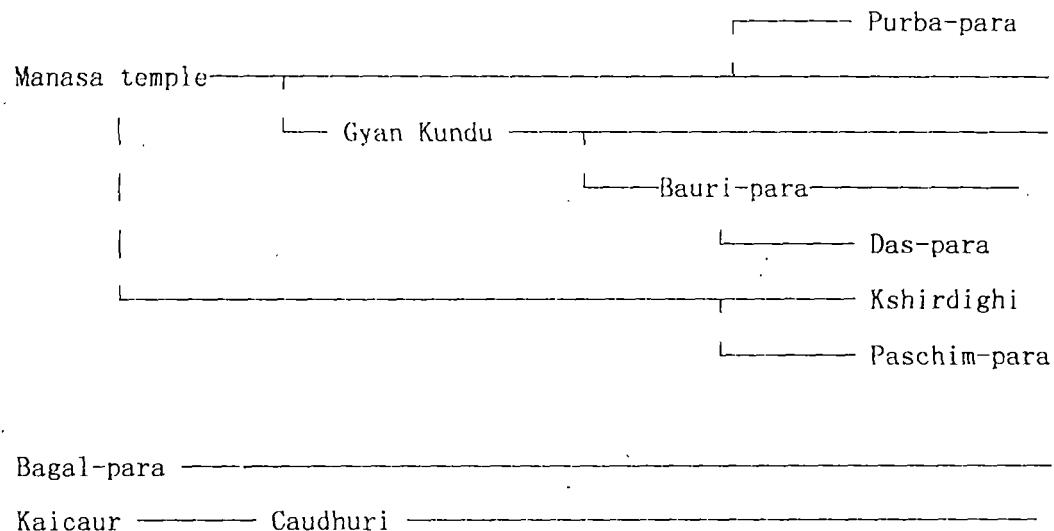
(*Deyasin*; ◎, *Purohit*; ○, other; △)

	Bagdi	Bauri	Muci	Dom	Brahman	Ugra-Kshatriya
Manasa temple	◎					
Bagal-para				◎		
Bauri-para		◎	△			
Das-para			◎		○	
Kshirdighi	◎				○	
Gyan Kundu					○	(◎)
Purba-para	△				○	
Caudhuri					○	

Table-22 Distribution of worshippers of Manasa  
(total participation ; ◎、 partial participation ; ○)

	Brah.	UKY	Bagdi	Muci	Bauri	Dom	Other
Manasa temple	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
Bagal-para						◎	
Bauri-para					◎		
Das-para				◎			
Kshirdighi			○				
Purba-para			○				
Gyan Kundu	○	○	○				○
Caudhuri		○					

Diagram-3 Distribution of *manasa-talas*



#### 4. At the altars in the households

##### a) The households of the Brahman

On the day before *dasahara*, every household of the Brahman caste in the village fetch a twig of Manasa tree from the field and plant at the courtyard of their own houses. They ordinarily plant the twig beside the household shrine of *tulasi-gac*. On the day of *dasahara*, they invite the Brahman priest of their family (*kula-purohit*) to perform the ritual to the goddess Manasa in their yards.

At the beginning, the housewives prepare for the ritual utensils and dedicate offerings such as *manda*, *caul*, *cire*, flowers, *sindur*, *sarsa-teil*, turmeric, milk, and a little money (*visva*) on the plates in front of the Manasa tree. The priest lights incense and dedicates a votive light. After purification of his body and the ritual place with the sacred water, he puts *sarsa-teil*, turmeric, and *sindur* on the tree and offers *cire* soaked in milk. With chanting the sacred verses, he pours sacred water to the tree. He sprinkles milk, flowers, and *caul* to the tree, blows a conch-shell, and makes a deep bow to the tree in the end. From in the morning, the housewives in the Brahman family observe fast. After the end of the ritual, they can have *cire* soaked in water, milk, *gur*, sweets, and fruits as *prasad* of the goddess once a day. They would not eat boiled rice or products of flour for the whole day.

After making a small altar of Manasa tree in their courtyards, they continue to perform the daily service in the morning and evening in the same way as to the altar of *tulasi-gac*. On each day of *panchami*, they invite the priest to perform ritual to the goddess Manasa almost in the same way as on the day of *dasahara*. But, the day of the last *panchami* (*sesi-panchami*) is the final day to invite the Brahman priest to their house and they have no ritual on the day of *bhadra-sankranti*. In case of some diseases and accidents by the snakes, they would make use of the leaves of the tree for treatments. On the day of *Vijay-dasami* in Durgapuja in the lunar month of Aswin, they pick it up from their courtyard. Along with the

procession of the *nabapatrika* at the time of *bisarjan*, which is the ritual fare well to the goddess Durga, they put the plant of Manasa on the bundle of the *nabapatrika*, and throw into the pond of Kshirdighi.

b) The households of the Muci

On the day of *dasahara*, the people of the locality of Das-para (they are belonging to the Muci caste) fetch a twig of Manasa from the fields and plant it beside the altar of *tulasi-gac* in the courtyard of their own houses. The housewives perform the daily service to the altar from this day. On special occasions such as *dasahara* and each *panchami*, they never invite the priest of the Brahman or the *deyasin* of their locality. Each head of the household performs the ritual at the altar for the goddess Manasa by himself. They dedicate to the goddess *sindur*, turmeric, *sarsa-teil* and other items as the offerings. It is nearly the same things as dedicated in the households of the Brahman by the Brahman priest. They repeat the ritual to the altar on the days of each *panchami*. On the day of the last *panchami*, it is the most pompous festivity. They dedicate and sacrifice a goose per household. This then become the main dish in the evening as *mahaprasa* of the goddess. At the time of *bisarjan* on the last day of Durgapuja, they pick up the plant of Manasa and throw into the pond along with the *nabapatrika*. In these rituals, they have no relation with the temple Manasa in the locality of Manasa-para.

c) At the kitchens of the Ugra-Kshatriya

In the localities of *jana-agruri* (they are the village Ugra-Kshatriya having the titles of Samant and Datta), they have the ritual for the goddess Manasa at the hearths of their households only once in a year. On the day of the last *panchami* (*sesi-panchami*) in the lunar month of Srabana, they perform the ritual.

The day before the last *panchami*, they prepare the twigs of Manasa in their

kitchens. They perform the ritual at the hearths made of soil on the earthen floor of their kitchen. In the early morning, housewives cleanse the kitchen and draw various kinds of auspicious designs with powder of rice on the hearth and the ground. It is well known as "alpana" (a Bengali traditional folk art by the women). They put a twig of Manasa into the hearth. It looks like a twig grown up through the opening of the hearth. They dedicate various kinds of offerings on a few plates in front of the hearth. Someone puts paste of *sindur* on the twig, and waits for arrival of the Brahman priest. The housewives must keep fast for the day. After the end of the ritual, they can eat *cire* soaked in water and *muri* but not boiled rice and flour for the whole day.

In the morning, the Brahman priests visit each family of their *jajmans*. They sit down in the kitchen, and perform ritual to the twig in the hearth just the same way as the ritual at the altar of Manasa tree. They bring offerings back to their house and leave a little bit for the family of the *jajman* as *prasad*. Some priests in the village perform the ritual for the goddess in small temples in the locality where he is in charge of the services. After this ritual is over, they keep the twig in the hearth for the whole day. Throughout the day, they are forbidden to fire the hearth for cooking. Thus, nobody eats food cooked with fire such as boiled rice and *ruti* of flour that day. The next morning, the housewives go to the ablution bank along with the twig and throw it into the pond while bathing.