

CONCLUSION

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The entire exercise so far made in the preceding chapters has provided a scope to understand the uniqueness of Sun worship in ancient Bengal in the backdrop of general ambience. Such an attempt has definitely helped to understand the history of an important cult in India in general and in Bengal in particular. To put in a different way, the study of the solar cult in Bengal enables us to appreciate the religious culture of early Bengal through evaluating the complex undercurrent behind its gradual rise and decline against a wider landscape.

The worship of the Sun as the Supreme reality existed in Bengal at least since the later Vedic period among a few of her dominant tribes like the Pundras and Suhmas. It was no less popular in the pre-Gupta period as well. Profound knowledge of the Vedic Brāhmaṇism was not altogether lacking in ancient Vanga. Of the Brāhmaṇical gods and goddesses widely worshipped there, Sūrya happened to be one of them. It seems that the Irānian Magas were not responsible for the introduction of the Sun images in India because there was an indigenous tradition of showing the Sun-deity riding on a chariot drawn by horses. The early indigenous tradition of anthropomorphic Sūrya may be traced in some terracotta plaques of the Suṅga- Kuṣāṇa period found in different parts of Bengal. A terracotta from Tamluk (2nd century B.C.) represents a standing winged figure with full-blossomed lotus in hands and cluster of plantains on either side of the stela and a pitcher-like object with ears of corn. The association of wings with Sūrya originally occurs in the *Rgveda*. Lotus standing for the creative force symbolized the Sun since early times. The plantain tree is also traditionally connected with the Sun worship. No

doubt, the winged figure depicts the Vedic Sun god at its embryonic stage of iconic development. A good number of such winged figures have been discovered in different parts of ancient Vaṅga. Thus, Sun worship was not only introduced in early Vaṅga during the post-Maurya and pre-Gupta period under strong Brāhmaṇical influence but was also quite prominent. Further, the worship of the Sun god developed in ancient Vaṅga along an indigenous line in which the solar deity appeared in the form of a winged divinity.

Another terracotta of the first century B.C. / A.D. from Chandraketugarh (24-Parganas) shows the Sun god seated on the four-horsed chariot driven by Aurṇa and flanked by Ūṣā and Pratyūṣā. According to Cunningham, the four horses resemble the representation of Helios – the Greek Sun god. The Greek influence in the Sun image of Bengal does not seem to be unexpected in view of the discovery of the images of foreign deities like the Roman god Janus and Athena in early Vaṅga in the pre-Gupta era. This resemblance is, however, superficial because the features of the Sun god along with Ūṣā and Pratyūṣā and the chariot are very much Indian. Though largely resembling with many features of the Bodh-Gayā, Bhājā, Lālā Bhagat or Anantagumphā Sun images, the Chandraketugarh terracotta Sūrya figures as an independent deity along with attendants and thus seems to have been object of worship with utmost devotion. On the contrary, those four images of Sūrya are accessory decorative figures in the religious architecture of the heterodox or other Brāhmaṇical sects. In addition, the relief in question reveals the element of the *bhakti* cult that was very much present in the country in the pre-Gupta period.

The northerner's dress - tunic and boots - first occur in solar iconography in ancient Vaṅga in a beautiful terracotta seal of 1st century A.D. from Hadipur (North 24

Parganas). In this dress, we can visualize the advent of the Irānian Sūrya in early Vaṅga. The new re-orientation could take place only when the northerner type of Sun icons was introduced in Bengal by its new settlers who had brought the Maga priests and when the vigorous participation and assistance of these Brahamanas was available. Interestingly, the Magian tradition in making Sun images in ancient Vaṅga continued to be the major guiding force in its later representations. The aniconic representation of the Sun god and its worship probably prevailed in this age as well. The concept of Sūrya pillar does not seem to have been unknown to Bengal artists in the 3rd/ 4th century A.D. The Sun god seems to have been immensely popular like Indra and Agni in ancient Vaṅga, possibly among the various strata of the society during the post-Mauryan and pre-Gupta period, as contemporary images of the god, though in terracotta, are widely available in lower West Bengal. In an agrarian society, Sun worship could not have been of lesser importance.

During the Gupta rule in Bengal, the image-worship of the deity in ancient Vaṅga was further spread in Greater Bengal and consolidated on a firm foundation. With the new settlement of Brāhmaṇas, the cult of Vedic Sun god Savitā was brought in along with their daily programme of rituals and prayers. The earliest epigraphic reference to Sun worship in Bengal and that too in a temple occurs in the Jagadishpur (Rajshahi) copper plate (447 A.D.). Here the temple construction and the solar worship by means of the oblations of rice, milk, sugar, perfume, incense, lamp etc. is done by the native peoples – probably the Vaiśyas. Besides the Irānian Magas, the Indians of even orthodox tradition also followed the practices of the anthropomorphic and temple worship of the Sun. Thus, by the middle of the fifth century A.D. there came into existence a developed Sun-sect with all the paraphernalia of a shrine, icons, priesthood, rites and procedures. It

is of utmost significance that among the inscriptions referring to Sun worship in India, the Jagadishpur copper plate (447 A.D.) happens to be the earliest one. This is a clear indication of immense popularity of Sun worship in ancient Bengal along with a deep root of the tradition of Sun image and temple in the religious concept of the people.

From the Gupta period, the worship of the Sun of a purely northern culture became very widespread in Bengal. By this time, the Śākadvīpi Brāhmaṇas seem to have spread all over this region. The earliest Sun images in India belonging to the Gupta period hail from Kumarpur and Niyamatpur, both in the Rajshahi district. The wheel of the chariot, the two female attendants of the god and his consorts are not found in both the images. Most probably, these images were meant for worship of the god. Wide prevalence of the Sun cult all over Bengal from the late Gupta period is evidenced by a number of inscriptions and numerous stone sculptures. The Sun image from Deorā (Bogra) shows some development in the iconic type of Sūrya. While the contemporary Sūrya image in a Śiva temple at Bhumārā (Madhya Pradesh) was an accessory figure, the Sun image from Deorā appears to have been an object of worship in a temple. The full-fledged image of the god with all his attendants might have been imported in Bengal in the Gupta age. Greater number of lotuses found in the contemporary Kashipur image was perhaps meant to highlight the predominance of the native element in the solar iconography. However, the Sun-images from Deorā or Kashipur had undoubtedly, been the products of the continuing art-tradition introduced in ancient Vaṅga by the Maga Brāhmaṇas. People in early Bengal also represented the solar deity in seated posture, though it is very rare. From the Deulbāḍī icon, we learn that the god Sūrya was also worshipped by the Buddhists, sometimes simultaneously with Brāhmaṇical deities; in

addition to worship in temple, the Sun god was also worshipped by individuals in their houses in image form. As regards the followers, the orthodox Brāhmaṇas, the Vaiśyas etc. were also connected with the solar cult in addition to the Irānian Magas.

Like *Puṇḍravardhana* or *Vaṅga*, Sun worship was equally prevalent in *Vardhamāna-bhukti*. However, here the Sun god is identified with *Lokanātha-dharma* as referred to in the Mallasārul Copper Plate inscription (543 A.D.). The tradition of Sāmba's cure by Sun worship is found to have influenced Śaśāṅka. In order to cure himself of a serious disease, he is said to have brought 12 *Graha-vipras* from the banks of Sarayū to officiate in the *grahayajña* and offered sacrifices to nine planets. Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇas occasionally came to Bengal from Upper India and popularized Sun worship and *grahayajña* by utilizing the people's belief in the curative aspect of the Sun god. In addition to the worship of the nine planets, the Sun god continued to receive adoration in the form of *Dharma* as well.

Vedic religion became increasingly stronger during the Pāla-Candra-Kambojas. In fact, all the Pāla kings were patrons of Brāhmaṇas. Brāhmaṇical images and temples and therefore, granted lands for them to enhance their own virtue and renown. The soar deity was regularly worshipped by these large numbers of orthodox Brāhmaṇas by means of *Sandhyopāsanā*. Sūrya and his worship are frequently mentioned in the contemporary inscriptions and the atmospheric aspect of the Sun becomes prominent here. It appears from the Sian (Birbhum) inscription that probably king Vigrahapāla made a gift of a chariot for a big Sun-temple for the annual *Rathayātrā*. The reference to a gift of golden lotus for Navagrahas and that of silver for the images of Sūrya, no doubt, speaks of intense devotion for the Sun among a section of wealthy people. Towards the end of the

Pāla period, Sun worship became very popular among the Brāhmaṇa rulers of Gayā. The *Gayā Gadādhara Temple Inscription* of the time of Nayapāla and the *Gayā Śitalā Temple Inscription* of Yakṣapāla of the time of Govindapāla begin with adoration to Sūrya and the first verse is dedicated to the Sun god. *Surya-praṇāma* was also a popular form of the worship of the Sun in this age.

In the 11th - 12th centuries A.D., the Vedic Brāhmaṇism made a great progress with the support of the Varman-Sena kings. With the gradual extension of the Brāhmaṇical settlements in Bengal, the solar cult continued vigorously in its Vedic form. The Sun god was worshipped by the orthodox Brāhmaṇas through *Sandhyopāsanā* along with the Gāyatrī hymn. Viśvarūpasena and his son Sūryasena were staunch followers of the Sun god and it was in this period that the solar cult was further enhanced. Perhaps the contributory factor was the belief that the god was supposed to cure all types of diseases ("samasta-rogānām harttā"). In the Madanapādā and the Calcutta Sāhitya Parisat Copper-plate of Viśvarūpasena as well as the Edilpur inscription of Sūryasena, the Sun god figures as the reliever of the world from the clutches of darkness, as the friend of lotus flowers and as a wonderful bird having two wings of the two fortnights of the month. This demonstrates the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa concept of the Sun that was in vogue along his worship in image. The kings' inclination for this form of solar worship shows a strong undercurrent flowing against the popular practice of the image worship of the Sun god. Kings Viśvarūpasena and Sūryasena call themselves *Paramasaura*, which indicates the existence of a separate sect of Sun worshippers.

Sun worship is amply referred to in the religious and secular literary texts of the Varman-Sena period such as *Subhāṣita-ratnakosa* of Vidyākara. By the time of

Vidyākara, the Vedic worship of the Sun had grown into an important cult strengthened by impact of the Sun worship of Persia. Vidyākara considered the Sun to be one of the chief divinities of Hinduism. From all the four verses in the *Subhāṣita-ratnakoṣa* centering the Sun at Sunrise, it appears that many Hindus addressed their prayers to the heavenly body in the morning. The *Sadukti-karṇāmṛta* of Śrīdharaḍāsa also quotes a number of verses of different poets on the Sun, which is indicative of an important position of the Sun god among the Hindus. The same text makes a clear reference to *Sūrya-praṇāma* by referring to salutation to the east filled with fragrance. Dhoyī in his *Pavana-dūta* refers to the Sun temple at Triveṇī, Hooghly. Halāyudha has liberally eulogized the Sun god in the *Maṅgalācarana* of his *Brāhmaṇasarvasya*. The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* states that the worshippers of the god Sūrya gain recovery from different kinds of illness. According to the *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa*, "He who worships the Sun would be healthy, wealthy and prosperous and repair to the holy immortal feet". The same Purāṇa gives us some important information about the priests who were responsible for the spread of Sun cult in India. A reference to these Brāhmaṇas is also found in the *Āryasaptashati* where the *grahaśānti* (propitiation of planets by sacrifices etc.) has been beautifully described.

In addition to the epigraphic evidences, there are several images of the Sun god that speaks much more about the Sun-cult from the eighth to the 12th century A. D. and even later. The number of Sun-images from the Pāla and Sena periods is very large. It appears from the find spots of the 8th century images that the anthropomorphic worship of the Sun was prevailing largely in *Varendri* and some parts of *Uttar Rādhā*. The terracotta Sūrya from Pāhārpur portrays the deity with a halo, seated as cross-legged and holding

lotuses into the uplifted hands, which reminds us of the divinity on the Bodh-Gayā railings. The temple design in a few Sun-icon points to the popularity of Sun worship in temples. Sūrya and his two attendants Dandī and Piṅgala are represented as wearing a pair of pointed boots, as is seen in the Sun icons of the Pāla Bengal. Discovery of only three Sun images in 8th century A.D. leads us to presume that the image worship of the god had yet not developed on an organized and widespread scale. The non-representation of the female attendants in the solar reliefs also points to its distance from Tāntric philosophy. Out of the 26, 9th century images noticed hitherto, all the 25 hail from Puṇḍravardhana – four from Rajshahi, one from Bogra, three from Dinajpur and 16 from Malda. Therefore, it can be said that image-worship of the solar deity became more popular not only in the district of Rajshahi but also arrived at new areas like the districts of Dinajpur and Malda. Remarkable growth of Sun images in comparision to the preceding century and greater extension of their find spots might have been due to the spread of the icon-worshippers in different areas and increased belief in the *rogahartī* concept of the Sun god. The tradition of Sun worship among the Puṇḍras as referred to in the *Ārṣeya Upaniṣad* probably played a prominent role in the ever-increasing popularity of the image worship of Sūrya in the Puṇḍravardhana. Interestingly, three images from Gāzole (Māldā) represent the Sun god and his attendants without any boots – a feature that is extremely rare in the whole of India excepting the South. It is not unlikely that the artists who might have emigrated from South India in the trail of advancing forces from the south, brought the tradition with them. It is true, however, that the Bengali artists sometimes did not follow in all respects the iconological arrangement of any existing text in fashioning the Sun images. High boots occurs in most of the images of Sūrya as well

as his attendants though they are mostly clad in *dhoti*. Samjñā and Chāyā, two wives of the Sun god, enter the iconographic scene, though in a very few images. Sūrya's ornaments consist of necklace, bangles, earrings and a jeweled girdle. The Bogra sculpture of the god endows him with a circular *tilaka* on the forehead. Pundravardhana emerged as the centre of Sun worship in the 9th century too.

Sun images of the 10th century A.D. found in Bengal appears to be less in number than in the earlier century but its worship was extended in new areas such as Rangpur in north Bengal, Faridpur in Vaṅga and Bankura in *Rādhā*. Most probably, some of the Sun worshipping people of Rajshahi district were shifting to different places under some professional or commercial compulsion and the arrival of the popular belief in the curative aspect of Sūrya in new areas impelled the people to worship the Sun-deity in image form. The only Sūrya image in Bengal standing in *tribhaṅga* (Pl. 6b) is a product of this century. Piṅgala, Daṇḍī, Aruṇa and *Mahāśvetā* accompany the Sun god in most of his representations. The arrow-shooting Uṣā and Pratyūṣā also appear in a number of Sun-icons while Samjñā and Chāyā are very seldom represented. *upavīta* and *uttariya* very often adorn the god.

Sun worship gained much more popularity in the 11th century A.D., because of which more number of images have been discovered. Rajshahi again maintained its position as the main centre of Sun worship followed by Dinajpur and Malda. Some new areas also came under the sphere of the solar cult. Vikrampur was an important centre of Sun worship in the Vaṅga region. The representation of *agni-kuṇḍa* in a Sun-icon probably points to growing importance of sacrificial element in the religious ceremony. The image of the Sun god is usually carved partly in the round. The god and his

attendants wear *dhoti* and high boots. In two sculptures, the Sun god is seen as wearing *vanamālā*, which as a characteristic attribute of Viṣṇu marks the beginning of Sūrya's assimilation with Viṣṇu. In a number of solar images, eight planets are also engraved, which undoubtedly highlights the planetary aspect of the god. In the Sun-icon from Joypurhat (Bogra), the god is represented within a temple suggested by a three-lobed arch resting on a pair of pillars.

The frequent endowing of sword or dagger to the Sun god jointly or in greater number is quite in keeping with the current political situation of early Bengal. A good number of Sun images from Vaṅga illustrate eleven Ādityas engraved in them. From the regional point of view, the cult was more popular in Puṇdravardhana than in its other three counterparts: *Rādhā*, Vaṅga and Samataṭa. Rajshahi again emerged as an important centre of Sun-cult in Bengal. The worship of the god in Vaṅga mainly revolved round Dacca and its adjoining area. The solar cult was not that unpopular in the *Rādhā-janapada* but here the Sun god was quickly being assimilated into the concept of a popular folk-deity *Dharmathākur*.

The iconographic features of Sūrya in the 12th century are not that different from those of the preceding century. The god continues to appear in a *kirīṭamukuta* topped by an *āmlaka*. The endowing of the Sun god or his attendant with *karandamukuta* or allotment of *jaṭāmukuta* for Piṅgala probably indicates the downward course of the Sun cult. In the Sun-image from Badhair (Rajshahi), we find on the forehead of the divinity a lozenge-shaped *tilaka*, which is characteristic of Buddha signifying 'nobility'. In the Sun images of the Pāla and Sena times, the religious outlook of the northern and Irānian

regions is retained, but in the meditation and interpretation of the Sun god, the Vedic and Brāhmaical religious concepts appears to have merged.

Features of the Sun god are traceable in the images of various cult deities. A sculpture shows the fourhanded Sun god in *padmāsana*. In his upper hands, the deity holds a pair of lotuses and the lower right and left hands carry the Śaṅkha and cakra respectively. The example appears to be a syncretic icon of Sūrya and Viṣṇu. The composite icons of Sūrya and Śiva are comparatively few except the *Mārttānda Bhairava* from Manda (Rajshahi). Apart from Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, reconciliation and rapprochement between rival gods and their creeds is also found in the direct connection of *Bodhisattva Lokeśvara* with Hindu cult deities including Sūrya. A fragmentary sculpture of a 10-armed Sūrya-Lokeśvara with *jaṭamukuta* in one head is said to be a striking combination of Sūrya and Lokeśvara (Pl. 22a). The worship of images in-group of gods belonging to rival sects was also prevalent in Bengal probably in an attempt to promote the religious tolerance.

Navagrahas also received worship as a part of the solar cult. Their worship became prevalent in the post-Gupta period, gaining immense popularity in the medieval time. *Grahayajña* was performed for peace, prosperity, ample rains, long life, nourishment, destruction of enemies and success in a military campaign. Navagraha images were made of different materials. Besides accompanying the Sun god, the Navagrahas are also depicted on the *prabhāvalī* of the *Kalyāna-Sundara* and the 'Mother and Child' images. Śaśāṅka was cured by performing *grahayajña*. Planets like *Ravi*, *Candra*, *Budha* etc. are indirectly referred to in many inscriptions from Bengal. The Sian inscription refers to the gift of golden lotus for the image of the *Navagrahas*. The

introduction of the *Grahapūjā* everywhere in India is attributed to the Śākadvīpi Brāhmaṇas. All the *graha* images in panels and separate representations are from North and West Bengal and none from the East. Therefore, we can safely say that the worship of Navagraha images was more popular in North and West Bengal.

As regards the method of worship, the Vedic way of Sun worship through the recitation of the hymns and the offerings was very probably prevalent among the orthodox section of the Brāhmaṇas and other higher classes. *Sandhyopāsanā* as a form of Sun worship must have been practiced by the conservative Brāhmaṇas. *Sūrya-namaskāra* was also in vogue. It was at the dawn that many Hindus, irrespective of sect, addressed their prayers to the Sun. Image worship of the Sun god at home and in temple was undoubtedly popular. Sun cult was also influenced by the Tāntric cult, though outwardly. The Sun was worshipped at dawn, noon and sunset. From the reference to the Puṇḍras and Suhmas as the Sun worshipping tribes in the Ārṣeya Upaniṣad, land-donation for Sun-temple by three residents in the Jagadishpur inscription and Viśvarūpasena and Sūryasena as *Parama-Saura* as well as from the discovery of large number of images from Puṇḍravardhana, it appears that there existed a Sun-sect in Bengal throughout the early period. There might have developed the centers of Sun worship in Puṇḍravardhana, especially in Mandāra and at the *Gangāsagara-saṅgama*.

The popularity of the Sun worship in Bengal continued down to the end of the Hindu rule. However, distinct worship of Sun-images is not noticeable from the medieval times because of various reasons. No backing of high philosophy so essential for greatness in religious matters was available to Sūrya because of his daily visibility to the naked eye. The Maga Brāhmaṇas who were responsible for the popularity of Sun worship

in image and in the temples were degraded in the society because of their study of astrology, giving up of Vedic religion, their association with the lower untouchable classes and their hypocritical nature. The Sun was reduced from an exalted position to the status of a *graha* because of the extreme fondness of the Maga Brāhmaṇas for astrology and *grahayajña*. The solar cult could not assimilate some of the fundamental principles of Tāntricism because of which no concept of *Saura-Śakti* developed around the wives of Samjñā or Chāyā. The emergence of *Pañcopāsanā* also left no scope of exclusive worship of the Sun god. Royal patronage was almost not available for the solar cult. With the rise of Vaiṣṇavism, Viṣṇu, originally a solar deity, absorbed in himself much of the solar elements. The preponderance of *Vaiṣṇavism* and *Śaivism* over-shadowed the cult of the Sun god. To revive the waning popularity of the Sun-cult, the Sun-deity even began to be called Hari as well as Śiva. Due to preponderance of the Vedicism in the Varman-Sena age, the indigenous form of Sun worship without image and temple was gaining ground. It is not unlikely that the place of the Sun god was gradually occupied by *Dharmathākur* in some parts of Bengal.

Exclusive worshippers of the Sun are hardly traceable in the present day. However, every Hindu irrespective of sects does pay his respect to the rising and setting Sun. Ramification of Sun worship is confined nowadays among the Hindu women of Bengal who still observe a number of Sūrya-vratas such the *Māghamāndal*, *Itupūjā* etc. The question naturally arises as to what led to the decline of the solar cult in subsequent centuries. It is true that the absence of royal patronage afterwards played a significant role in the process, but the position of the Maga Brāhmaṇas (Devala-Brāhmaṇas) who were singularly known for their lesser avocations (like those of astrology, casting of

horoscope and association with the lower strata of the society as priests) and who were associated with the worship of the Sun, played a distinct role in the decline of sun-worship in general. There may be some other contributing factors. Anyway, the Sun worship was relegated to a cult of the sub-altern section of the community and the womenfolk in general.

Lastly, a few more words relevant to this kind of research need to be said. In course of our study, we have experienced that in many cases, due attention has not been given in best possible dating of the Sun images, while discussing about them in books or journals. Sometimes, the descriptions of the images are not only meager but also full of secondary things at the cost of the fundamental ones, which actually speak about the true nature and evolution of a particular cult. In most of the catalogues of different museums, images of the deities have been presented together and described without any chronological sequence. Comparative study of different cults and study thereof from the socio-economic point of view, which gives a better understanding of their real position in the past, is not also sufficiently found. Further, many museums in India and Bangladesh, though having a priceless collection of sculptures in their possession, have no catalogues published thereof. Therefore, there may even be the chance of those precious antiques not being made use of in study in spite of the best efforts of the researcher. It is also a matter of great regret that even today large numbers of images are found lying carelessly in the stores of different museums or in the police stations or under trees in the villages. To make proper historical judgments of the subjects under review and to preserve our glorious heritage, it is of utmost importance to give proper attention to all these matters.