

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The cultural life of India through the ages has been dominated by its preoccupation with the pursuit of religious values. The earliest inhabitants of India might have had their own religious system. The advent of the Āryans brought new streams of religious thought. Thereafter the Brāhmaṇical religion had taken deep roots in the minds of the Indian people. Many and various forces of nature were duly personified as gods and goddesses and their worship formed an important aspect of the Vedic or Brāhmaṇical religion. Centering round the Brāhmaṇical deities, there developed different cults at different times. Sun worship is one of such cults. The fundamental facts that the Sun is the creator of day and night, and by being the source of light and heat on the earth, is the creator of life, and producer of food and vegetation, must have impressed the human mind from very early times.

A. S. Geden has rightly pointed out in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*¹ that Solar worship has been described as the real religion of India. Sun worship in India can be traced as early as the Neolithic period with the dawn of the farming economy. The deep sense of reverence for the beneficial qualities of the Sun led to its representation in symbolic forms on prehistoric and protohistoric (Indus Valley Culture) objects.

In the Vedic tradition, the Sun was worshipped under various forms and names such as Sūrya, Savitṛ, Mitra, Viṣṇu, Pūṣan, Vivasvat, Bhaga and Aryaman. Most of these deities along with a few others came to form a group of divinities under the name of Ādityas. Some gods and goddesses of the solar family were invoked in the *Rgveda* and

worshipped either in natural form or by means of symbols and fetishes or by meditation. The Later Vedic age continued the worship of the atmospheric Sun under various names and aspects. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* also inform about the growing popularity of Sun worship in the period of their composition. The geographical extension of the Sun-cult appears to have been the whole of northern India. The Sun was generally being represented, as noted earlier, by means of various symbols before the development of the solar cult. Sūrya, however, appeared in human form from an early period in Indian history. From the early centuries of the Christian era, the north Indian form of the Sun-Cult was greatly oriented by the Irānian Sun-worshippers - Magi. In course of time, these Maga Brāhmaṇas spread in large numbers from northwestern India to eastern India as is known from Govindapur (Bihar) Inscription dated 1137 A.D.². It was mainly in the efforts of these Sun-priests known here as *Ācāryas* that Sun worship came to be highly popular in eastern India. The early Sūrya -images seldom fail to show the alien features like long tunic, waist-girdle and boots. However, gradual Indianisation of these traits and emphasis on Indian elements like lotus appear to have begun from the Gupta period. The beautifully-carved images of the Sun were dedicated and installed in temples. The late Purāṇas, specially the upa-Purāṇas³, shed much light on the Sun-cult of the early medieval period. After the Guptas, many dynasties of different parts of India patronized the Sun-cult, perhaps for the kingly role of the Sun in heaven. Even the officers, merchants, scholars, fighters, cloth-weavers etc. became the votaries of the solar cult⁴.

It is evident that Sun worship began in India from a very early time and continued to gain popularity in different parts of India at different times. However, it is remarkable that in the eastern part of India, especially in Bengal and its adjoining areas, it became

highly popular. In the *Ārṣeya Upaniṣad* (4th Century B.C.), the Puṇḍras and Suhmas who were undoubtedly the inhabitants of Bengal, have been described as the Sun worshipping tribes. Quite a number of terracotta Sun-images in the pre-Gupta times, even as early as the Maurya-Suṅga period, have been found from lower Bengal. Numerous icons of the divinity belonging to the Gupta period have also been procured from various parts of the province. The Vardhana dynasty of Thāneśvar was a great devotee of the Sun as is evident by the epithet *Paramādityabhaktaḥ* applied to three ancestors of Harṣa – Rājyavardhan, Ādityavardhana and Prabhākaravardhana- in the Sonepat copper plate inscription⁵. References to the worship of the god in the inscriptions of the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries A.D. are numerous. According to a tradition preserved among a section of the *Grahavipras* (Śākadvīpī), Śaśāṅka brought twelve Brāhmaṇas living on the bank of the Sarayū for worshipping the Sun in order to treat an incurable disease which was, however, cured.⁶ The Pāla kings, though Buddhists, were not hostile to Brāhmaṇical religion in any way; rather, they encouraged it in various ways. Dharmapāla is said to have claimed their descent from the solar race.⁷ Sun-images of the Pāla period have also been found in large numbers. The Sena kings were strong advocates of the orthodox Brāhmaṇical faith and helped it to attain the position of supremacy in Bengal. Sun worship continued in this period too. Number of the Sūrya-images belonging to the Sena period is considerably large. Viśvarūpasena and Sūryasena of the Sena dynasty were devout Sun-worshippers. They call themselves *Paramasaura*, indicating the existence of a separate Sun-sect.

A number of contributions have been made by the eminent scholars to the isolated problems relating to Sun-images. Among some earlier works, which are general in nature, the following deserve special mention : K.K. Ganguli, *Some Aspects of Sun Worship in*

Ancient India, Calcutta,1965; L. P. Pandey, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*, Delhi,1971; V. C. Srivastava, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*, Allahabad,1972; Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal*, Calcutta,1977; A. C. Dass, *Sun-worship in Indo-Āryan Religion and Mythology*, Delhi,1984; D. P. Pandey, *Sūrya: Iconographical Study of the Indian Sun god*, Delhi,1989; A.B. Saran & Gyan Pandey, *Sun-worship in India*, New Delhi, 1992. Sun worship and Sun images have also been discussed to some extent in a number of scholarly works such as: R. D. Banerji, *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, Delhi ,1933; S. K. Saraswati, *Early Sculpture of Bengal*, University of Calcutta, 1937; R.C. Majumdar (Ed.), *The History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Dacca, 1943; J. N. Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Calcutta, 1956; T. N. Chakraborty, *Some Aspects of Religious Life in Bengal*, Calcutta University, 1957; K.C. Sarkar, *The Sculpture of Ancient Varendra*. Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, 1963; J. N. Banerjea, *Pañcopāsanā*. Calcutta, 1970; R. C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*. Calcutta, 1971; Rajatbaran Dattaray: *Vedicism in Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta, 1974; Nihar Ranjan, Ray, *Bāṅgālīr Itihās (Ādiparva)*, Reprinted, Calcutta, 1359 B.S.; P.K. Bhattacharya, *Iconography of Sculptures*, Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum, Darjeeling, 1983; Rama Chatterjee, *Religion in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1985; A. K. M. S. Alam, *Sculptural Art of Bangladesh*. Dhaka,1985; R. K. Tripathi, *Social and Religious Aspects in Bengal Inscription*, Calcutta,1987; Enamul Hoque, *Bengal Sculpture, Hindu Iconography up to C. 1250 A.D.*, Dhaka,1992; S. N. Kundu, *Prācīn Vaṅge Paurāṇik Dharma O Devabhāvanā* (in Bengali), Burdwan University, Burdwan , 1996; Sakti Kali Basu *Development of Iconography in Pre-Gupta Vaṅga*, Calcutta, 2004. In this connection, it may be mentioned here that there

is hardly any attempt so far made of a comprehensive work delineating different aspects of the Sun-worship in the area under study and its related problems.

We are, however, fortunate enough to have a large number of original sources for our study. Among these we may, at first, mention the Vedas like *Ṛgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* and other Saṁhitās like *Vājasaneyi*, *Maitrāyaṇi*, *Taittirīya* etc.; Brāhmaṇas like *Aitareya*, *Gopatha*, *Kauśītaki*, *Śatapatha*, *Pañcaviṁśa*, *Sāmavidhāna*, *Taittirīya* etc.; Upaniṣads such as *Taittirīya*, *Maitrī*, *Chāndogya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Kauśītaki*, *Śvetāśvatara*; *Gṛhyasūtras* like *Āpastamba*, *Āśvalāyana*, *Gobhila*, *Khādīra*, *Hiraṇyakeśin*, *Mānava*, *Pāraskara*, *Sāṅkhāyana* etc; Dharmasūtras like *Baudhayāna*, *Gautama* etc ; Two Epics - *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*; Purāṇas like *Vāyu*, *Viṣṇu*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Brahmāṇḍa*, *Matsya*, *Bhaviṣya*, *Skanda*, *Sāmba*, *Agni*, *Saura*, *Bṛhadharma*, *Brahmavaivarta*. *Viṣṇudharmottara*; Tantras such as *Guhya Samāja Tantra*. *Sāradātilaka*. *Sādhanamālā*, *Saundarya-mālā* etc; Smṛtis like *Manu* and *Yājñavalkya*; different *Śilpaśāstras* and works like *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*, *Āryāsaptasatī*, *Dharma Pūjā Vidhāna*, *Kṛyākāṇḍavaridhi*, *Pavana-dūta*, *Rāmacarita*, *Sadukti-karṇāmṛta*, *Subhāṣita-ratnaśoṣa* and the *Kulaji* texts. The archeological sources like inscriptions, coins, amulets, seals and sculptural pieces that are discovered from different parts of Bengal again supply us information, which are no less important.

It is interesting to notice in this connection that the worship of the Sun became popular in early centuries in the territory of Kāmarūpa Prāgyjyotiṣa. In the Gauhati Grant of Indrapāla, we have an expression *Āditya-bhaṭṭāraka*, which Hoernle takes to mean 'Holy Ādityas' (i.e. Sun god).⁸ Among the ruins of Tezpur (6th century A.D.) are remnants, according to R. D. Banerjee, 'of a gigantic temple dedicated to Sun god'.⁹ The prevalence

of the Sun-cult in the Prāgjyotiṣa can be noticed in the Kālikā-Purāṇa and also in other texts. In connection with the Sākkara vrata, the Sāṅkhāyana Gṛhya Saṁgraha¹⁰ ordains that the students should visit the sacred country of Prāgjyotiṣa before sunrise: *tato niskramya Prāgjyotiṣam pūnyadeśam = upagamyā anudita Āditye*. The *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*¹¹ also refers to the Sun-temple of Kāmarūpa. It is said that king Rājyavardhana, in order to have youthful vigour, was advised by the seers to propitiate the sun in a forest named Guru-viśāla frequented by Siddhas, in the very mountain – Kāmarūpa.

Tāranātha also mentions Sun worship in Assam. He refers to the fact that the people of Kāmarūpa were worshippers of the Sun prior to the advent of Buddhist monk Dhitika, who came there to convert them from Sun worship to Buddhism. In order to persuade the Sun worshippers to listen to him, Dhitika started to pretend that he was an envoy of Sun god.¹² The Kālikā-Purāṇa mentions the Śrī Sūrya Mountain, which was the perpetual abode of the Sun god (*yatra deva Āditya satatam sthitaḥ*) and refers to the *Citaraśaila* or *Arvāk* hill where the Navagrahas were worshipped.¹³ The *Arvāk* hill may stand for Sūrya Pāhār of Goalpara. The presence of a large number of Sun-worshippers in the territory of Kāmarūpa in early centuries is interesting. It is likely that the Maga Brāhmaṇas who in the meantime introduced the solar cult in north India including Bengal might have migrated farther east and took active part in propagating the sun-cult in the territory of ancient Assam.

The popularity of Sun worship in early Bengal led to the proliferation of different types of Sun-images. Temples were also dedicated to the Sun god. Inscriptions were carved with respectful reference to the divinity. Then these phenomena naturally pose certain questions. What is the secret of the continued popularity of Sun worship in ancient

Bengal? Is it the fact that out of the three Saura-centres of India as referred to by the late Purāṇas, Muṇḍira that is believed to be the same as *Gaṅgāsāgara-saṅgama* (Southern Deltaic region) and Mandāra, one of all the important images of Sūrya in India in Puṅyavardhan (Puṇḍra-varḍhana)¹⁴ played a significant role in spreading and popularizing the Sun-cult all over the province? Sun-god was regarded not only as the bestower of welfare and fulfiller of desire but also as *Samasta-roḡānām harttā* (healer of all diseases).¹⁵ How far did the episode of Śaśāṅka, the first historical ruler of Bengal, as mentioned earlier, create a congenial atmosphere for popularization of the Solar-cult in Bengal? To what extent did the tolerant policy of the Buddhist Pāla rulers towards the Brāhmaṇical religion help the Sun worship along with other principal cults like Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktaism in enjoying traditional supremacy? As said earlier, Sūryasena and Viśvarūpasena call themselves *Paramasaura* while *Paramamaheśvara* is applied to both Vijayasena and Vallālasena and *Paramavaiṣṇava* to Lakṣaṇasena. This poses a very pertinent question as to why the later Sena Kings made such a remarkable departure from the religious affiliation of their predecessors.

A thorough investigation of all these questions will necessitate the proper understanding of the sociological significance of the proliferation of Sun-images and Sun worship in this part of India. Besides the Sun-temples at Muṇḍira, it is not unlikely to locate some areas of ancient *Saura-maṇḍala* in Varendra, which have yielded perhaps the largest number of Sun-images. This again is possibly due to the presence of a sun-sect, the existence of which can be traced from the time of the *Mahābhārata*, as postulated by Hopkins.¹⁶ Again, it is no less interesting to notice that notwithstanding the immense popularity of the Sun-cult in the early medieval Bengal, it steadily receded to the

background with the passage of time, leaving room to the other important Brāhmaṇical cults. Ultimately, it was relegated to the position of just one of the deities of the *Pañcopāsanā*, a *graha* of the Navagrahas and also to a folk religion. The medieval folk-literatures of Bengal like *Maṅgala-Kāvya*s also depict both Sūrya and Śiva as symbols of fertility cult. It is well known that Sun is very much connected with the productive system. At the same time, it is also associated with the fertility cult along with Śiva, as mentioned earlier. The idea can be understood properly since the days when the sculptural representation like *Mārttaṇḍa-Bhairava*, the syncretistic form of Sūrya and Śiva, was visualized. It is interesting to note again in this connection that when the popularity of the Sun-worship was on the wane perhaps since the last important ruler of the Sena dynasty known as Sūryasena and the ultimate dissolution of the Sena power in Bengal, Sun-worship became the exclusive preserve of the peasantry and the womenfolk at large as the folk cult.

Hence, keeping in mind the problems related to the worship of Sun in early Bengal, we would like to discuss the subject comprehensively under several chapters. Besides the introduction, we have dealt with the problem of the worship of the Sun in the Vedic literature in the second chapter. Next, we have discussed the Sun worship in the Epic and Purāṇic literature. The worship of the Sun is closely related to a legend of the Sāmba Purāṇa, and the role of the Irānian Sun-worshippers (Maga Brāhmaṇas) has also been investigated in this context. The fourth chapter deals with the growth and popularity of Sun worship in early Bengal, while in the fifth we have made a thorough probe into the different types of Sun-images discovered in various parts of Bengal and preserved either in the museums or in the private collections. In the last chapter, we have taken notice of the

factors responsible for the subsequent decline in the popularity of Sun worship. In the concluding chapter, an attempt has been made to evaluate the findings of the preceding ones.

In the appendices, we have included some interesting matters about the Sun worship in early Bengal. These are (a) Sun temples in Bengal; (b) Sun worship in folk-tradition and (c) inscriptions (with proper translation) appearing on the Sun-images discovered in Bengal.

Notes and References:

1. XII, p. 83.
2. *EI*, II, 1893, p. 330.
3. SWAI-S, p. 232. Relevant upa-purāṇas are *Sāmba-*, *Sūrya-*, *Kālikā-*, etc.
4. Srivastava, V.C., 'The Solar Cult as revealed by the Gupta and post-Gupta Inscriptions', *Bhāratīya Vidyā*, vol. XXVII, Nos. 1 to 4, 1967 (1969), pp. 41-48.
5. Fleet, J.F. (Ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*. Vol. III, London, 1888, pp. 219-221.
6. cf. *Mahādevakarika Kulapañji* by Rāmadeva.
7. cf. "Samudrakula-dīpa"- *Rāmacarita*, 1.4.
8. *JASB*, vol. XLII, pp. 240ff.8.
9. *A.R.*, A.S.I., 1925.
10. Chap. II, p. 38.
11. Chap. 109; Barua, K. L., 'Kāmarūpa in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*', *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, Vol. V, pp. 8-14.

12. Schiefner, *Tāranāthe de Doctrine Buddhicae in India propagatlione*, p. 24, quoted by B. K. Barua in *A Cultural History of Assam*, Vol. I, Gauhati, 1969, p. 175.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Skanda Purāṇa, Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa*, Ch. 133, p. 508 ff.
15. Bairhaṭṭā Sūrya-image Inscription, *ASLAR*, 1930-34, p. 257.
16. *Epic Mythology*, p. 88.