

CHAPTER - VI

**DECLINE IN THE
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The popularity of the Sun worship in Bengal down to the end of Hindu rule is indicated by the opening verse in the Copperplates of Visvarupasena and Suryasena in praise of the Sun god. The extant remains of the icons of Surya, dated or undated, also suggest the continuity of Sun worship until at least the early mediaeval period. Perhaps, this popularity was partly the cause as well as effect of the deep-rooted belief recorded on the pedestal of a Surya image from Bairhatta (Dinajpur District) that the god was the healer of all diseases (*samasta-roganam hartta*). However, since the early part of the 13th century A.D. things began to change in the disfavour of the Sun-cult. In actuality, the process started long back, specifically since the Sena Period. The northern style Surya and his worship probably did not last long after the Varman-Sena era; at least there is no intimation of him in the prolific medieval literature. There is no evidence in modern Bengal or from medieval Bengal either, to suggest the distinct worship of Surya images.

There could be various reasons for the subsequent decline in the importance and anthropomorphic worship of the Sun in early Bengal. However, it is also to be kept in mind that the solar worship in the forms stated above did not only disappear from this part of Eastern India, but also from the rest of the Indian sub-continent. Naturally, the factors responsible for the decline elsewhere are also to be taken note of in the present discussion. Therefore, the contributory factors deserving investigation could be of both general as well as local types.

No mysticism, symbolism or high philosophy around Surya:

The daily visibility of the Sun to naked eye prevented the sectarians to develop any mysticism, symbolism or high philosophy centering round him. Consequently, though he became popular universally due to simplicity of concept and beneficence, highest devotion could not be given to a phenomenon that was visible to the naked eye. No distinct school or schools of philosophy did ever grow up around the Sun god, as they developed round the two major *Puranic* systems. We find extensive religious literature in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D around Vaisnavism and Saivism¹ but almost nothing about Surya. As a result, no backing of high philosophy² was available to him - a fact that is so essential for greatness in religious matters.

Popularity of *ekantika* worship:

In the early mediaeval period, the emphasis was given upon the '*ekantika*' worship of the '*Istadeva*' due to monotheistic ideas reaching north from the South. The *ekāntika* worship became more popular than the *smārta* type, of which the syncretic icons and *Pancyāyatana* temples were the products. It may be that the *ekāntika* attitude was regarded as better fitted to meet the challenge of Islam. No one who believed in his *Istadeva* could not give an important position to a god (i.e. Sūrya) liable to be identified with rival gods - Brahma, Visnu or Siva.³ Therefore, while some Sun-temples were destroyed; others were either deserted or converted into the fanes of other gods.

Degradation of Sun worshipping Maga Brahmanas:

The immense popularity of Sun worship in anthropomorphic form as well as in the temples was a direct contribution of the Iranian Maga Brahmanas. We have already seen that after their advent in India in the fifth century B.C., they remained neglected for long in the orthodox Hindu society, as their customs varied with those of the Indians in many fundamental points and they indulged into many obnoxious practices according to the norms of Indian culture.⁴ However, they were somehow accepted in the 4th -5th cent. A.D. because of their popularity among the unorthodox Hindus.⁵ In reality, on account of their peculiar customs, these Brahmanas remained distinct and separate from the great mass of the Indian Brahmana community from the very earliest times."⁶ During the period of the revival of Hindu supremacy, they were found to observe not only a number of distinct rites and customs of their own with which the Vedic Hindus had no ritualistic or cultural affinity, but also to get indulged into many objectionable practices.

In the opinion of the orthodox Brahmanas, the study of astrology and practice of medicine were some of the condemned vocations and very much reprehensible on the part of the Brahmanas.⁷ On the contrary, the Sakadvipi or Devala Brahmanas used to cultivate astrology, palmistry and the casting of horoscope etc. They also officiated in the *grahayajna* as priests with a view to propitiating the planets, prescribed amulets and practiced treatment of smallpox etc.⁸ Pursuit of these censurable arts and sciences reduced them to an extremely degraded position.

It has been suggested⁹ that in course of time the Sun worshipping Magas were divided into two groups – of the Magas and the Bhojakas later on degraded as the Yajakas. Bhojakas or Yajakas or the Sevakas appear to have been indigenous priests of

the Sun-cult as they are described as chanting Vedic *mantras* etc.¹⁰ Most probably the Bhojakas followed this injunction at the beginning but deviated from it later on. In addition, they indulged into obnoxious practices and entered into matrimonial alliances with foreigners like the Magas. According to Monier Williams,¹¹ the Bhojakas themselves were the descendants of the Magas through the women of the *Bhoja* race. The Ganakas (astrologer, also called Graha-vipra) are said to be the issues of Devala (Sakadvipi Brahmana) father and Vaisya mother.¹² Because of this prohibited inter-caste marriage or origin from unwanted matrimony, the Bhojakas came to be degraded as low or *apāñkteya*¹³ or Devalaka-Brahmins¹⁴ (temple-priests). It may be derived specifically from the Deo-Baranark (Shahabad, Bihar) inscription that with the temple of the Sun god were associated the Bhojakas.¹⁵ The service of a *pujari* or priest of a popular god, who officiates at smaller shrines and lives upon the offerings made to the idol has always been held to be degrading and is never performed by any higher class Brahmanas.¹⁶ The name *Bhojaka* is taken to have originated from their function of eating first on *Śrāddha*-ceremony. Varāhamihira¹⁷ informs us, "the Brāhmaṇa who knows very well the (astronomical and astrological) works and their meaning, is the first to eat the food (*Agrabhuk*) offered to the manes". It is but natural to presume that an *agrabhuk* Brahmana would be looked upon as fallen in the higher circle of the Hindu society.

It is said in the *Brahmajalalasutta*¹⁸ that cannot be dated later than the fourth cent. B.C. that the magic priest were held in disrepute in the time of Buddha. It is well known that the Magas were famous for their magic and occult power. It is quite probable that the Buddhist text had Magas in mind while referring to the magic priests in the time of

Buddha. The Magas were in disrepute too in India because of their objectionable practices.

The Graha-vipras are said to have been hypocrite and even described as 'Kaitavabid' (Master fraud).¹⁹ They were well known in the society for their fraudulence. That they were not respectable everywhere in the society and looked down upon as fallen has been indicated in the *Brihaddharma Purana*. It is attributable to the fact that by giving up the Vedic religion they got excessively attracted to astrology. A section of these Brahmanas called *Agradani Brahmana* were also considered as fallen because of their practice to receive the first gift in the funeral ceremony from the Sudras.²⁰

The Maga Brahmanas, since the very beginning, extended religious privileges to women and men of lower class.²¹ The priests of the castes belonging to *Madhyama* (intermediate) and *Adhama* (low) *Samkaras* are said to be degraded (*patita*) Brahmanas, who attain the status of the castes they serve. The idea gradually grew that the Brahmanas serving the lower castes attained their rank.²² Therefore, it can be said safely that because of their association with the people of lower strata the position of the Sakadvipi Brahmanas was lowered beyond measure in the eye of the higher society,

Most of the *pujari* Brahmanas are illiterate²³ that might have been true of most of the Sun-worshipping Sakadvipi Brahmanas in early Bengal too. The view seems to be reasonable if we take into account the scantiest literature of the Sun-cult authored in Bengal against the Himalayan volume of literature that grew up around Vaisnavism and Saivism. It is an established fact that in early medieval period, Bengal was the home of a body of learned Brahmanas whose livelihood was made easy and secure by private or royal charity, and who dedicated their lives to the highest ideals laid down for them in the

holy scriptures.²⁴ Both Vaisnavism and Saivism derived their strength and inspiration from the great community of Brahmanas distinguished for their religious zeal, knowledge and scholarship as well as from the magnificent temples. Most probably, most of the *Saura Devala Brahmanas* or the *Graha-vipras* were extremely bereft of equal learning, erudition and highest biblical principles. Therefore, they remained deprived of private or royal help, resulting in difficult livelihood and consequent adaptation of blameworthy vocations on the part of a Brahmana. In an environment fraught with rivalry among different cults or religions from within and outside, worshippers with little education, poor earnings and insufficient state or private support can never infuse so much of vitality to their cult.

The descendants of the early Maga immigrants finally lost their position in the society, if they ever at all enjoyed any high position there. Deprived and excommunicated of the association of the higher Hindu society, these Brahmins sought to establish supremacy over the low-class untouchables of society and it was from then that solar worship became almost extinct in higher Hindu society.²⁵ The indigenous *Surya-puja* and its alien form were mixed up and its separate existence as a cult for the exclusive worship of the deity was obliterated.²⁶

The Brahmanas and the Ksatriyas who traditionally enjoyed vast powers and privileges in India for a long time could not tolerate that a new class of people like the Maga Brahmanas should usurp their supremacy. The Magas were originally the priests of the foreign people who exercised political authority in India for short periods over portions of the county, but ultimately were defeated and absorbed in the Hindu fold. The priests of the defeated and assimilated people could not hope to exert much influence.

The people of India had become used to the supremacy of the Brahmanas from Vedic times. Their custom, ceremonies, rites etc. had been evolved and propagated by themselves. The people had full faith in them. They had no liking for the new foreign priests, and did not, therefore, follow them unless the latter brought their sectarian religious views in line with the religious prosperities of the time.²⁷

No development of Saura-Sakti:

Bengal became one of the leading centers of the *Sakta* cult during the last two or three centuries of her ancient period. Even as early as 7th-8th century A.D. *Sakta* goddess was worshipped in *Radha* and *Varendri* with Tantric rites by a man in collaboration with a woman, as found in the *Devi Purana*.²⁸ Most of the Tantric books were not only written in Bengal, but also the full burgeoning of Tantricism took place here.

The major mental focus of the Sena-Varman-Deva ages was the meditation and concepts entrenched in astrology, the *Agamas*, *Nigamas* and *Tantra*. Saivism, one of the major sects in Bengal, had been influenced by Tantrik concepts and practices. It would seem that during the Pala period, the figures of the divine couple, *Uma* and *Mahesvara*, had captivated the Bengali mind. The coupled form of the embracing figures of Siva and *Uma* came to be a concept of Bengali Tantrik Saktism. Sitting comfortably in the lap of Siva, bound in embrace and smiling joyously, *Uma* was indeed the *Tripurasundari* of the power of Siva, of the Tantrik devotees, the meditation of which was the highest form of *dhyanyoga*. In a few images of *Laksmi-Narayana* from Eastern and Northern Bengal, Laksmi appears seated on the left knee of Visnu, which readily reminds one of the contemporary images of Siva and *Uma-Mahesvara*. The development of *Vaisnavism* in

Bengal in the Sena-Varman period was largely enhanced because of the evolution of the *Radha-Krisna* concept and the concept of *Radha* very likely developed under the influence of Saktism.²⁹

Sun worship also adopted Tantrik practices but remaining free from some fundamental concepts of Tantricism such as the conception of a female principle who in association with a male principle is responsible for the evolution of the universe.³⁰ No such concept as of *Prajñā* of Tantric Buddhism and *Umā* of Tantric Hinduism could be developed round the name of *Samjñā* or *Chāyā* - wives of the Sun god - by the solar sectarians. His consorts were never given any separate worship in Bengal, which is psychologically a matriarchal region under a tremendous impact of Tantricism, not to speak of according as much high position as that of *Laksmi*, *Uma* or *Radha*. Naturally, the Bengalis did not keep on feeling attracted in the sect or the cult, which is devoid of matriarchal element, which does not believe in the independent entity of *Sakti* and engage in her worship. It is significant to note that no image of the Sun with the female consort in Tantric sense has been found so far. The solar sectarians did not popularize this concept and convert it into Tantric doctrine of a *Saura-Sakti* particularly when other sectarians were adopting it.³¹

No single deity had ever been able to reach the core of the Bengali heart. It was the divinities in company with the dominant *saktis* that have always occupied the highest position in their mind. Therefore, the deities like *Lakshi-Narayana*, *Uma-Mahesvara* and *Radha-Krisna* reign supreme here. Conversely, Brahma, one of the most important divinities of the Hindu Trinity, is given a secondary position in the religious pantheon and invoked only during the offering of oblation along with the *Kusandika* hymn of

marriage. Similarly, Ganesa also could not gain much influence in the psyche of the Bengal people. He receives worship from the mercantile community only as a giver of success and at the beginning of occasional religious ceremonies in the houses of the *smarta*-people. The same thing happened also in case of Surya.

Inclusion of Surya in *Pancopasana*:

Another factor of importance, which might have halted the march of the Sun worship, was the inclusion of the Sun god in the system of *Pancopasana*. Sun god was considered the cause of everything of the world. He was responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction. Thus, gradually developed the philosophic view that all deities being his manifestations, his worship can, without any philosophic contradiction, be combined with the worship of other deities.³² It also seems that the groupings of five principal deities at one place came into existence out of keen rivalry and competition among the respective sects. It must have resulted in mutual understanding among them and harmonious relation with one another. Alternatively, this keen rivalry and competition among the various sects might have infused a fear of curse in their minds in the event of not worshipping the other equally benevolent or harmful gods. This sort of thinking resulted in the worship of chief deities in a group. In view of the Muslim aggression and danger from Islam, a pressing necessity of unity among the followers of different sects might have also impelled them to think of worship of five main deities in a group. Thus originated the syncretic images, *Pancopasana* and *Pancayatana* temples. Whatever may be the case, it has been enjoined by the *Smritikaras* that in the daily worship, one has to pay one's obeisance to the five deities namely, *Ganesa*, *Narayana*,

Surya, Siva and Sakti. A Brahmin, officiating as a priest for the worship of any god or goddess, is found to perform initially *Pancopasana* or the worship of five-deities.³³ 'Suryaya namah' is the usual mantra used by the priests for performing the worship of the Sun god. Significantly enough, the utterance of the mantra '*Adityadi Navagrahebhyah nama*' is the usual practice of the priests. It accommodates the name of Aditya (Sun god) along with those of the nine planets. The system of worship (*Puja-vidhana*), as approved by the *Puranas* and the *Smriti-nibandhakaras* of Bengal, has left no scope of exclusive worship of the Sun god.

Non-availability of royal patronage:

The royal patronage of a religion is not only a good index of its general influence and popularity, but also an important factor for its prolonged and dominant survival. In Bengal, the Pre-Pala dynasties of the Khadgas in Samatata and Kantideva in Chattagram, as well as the Pala, Candra and Kamboja dynasties and individual rulers like Ranavankamalla of Pattikera were all Buddhists. Vainyagupta (*Mahādeva-pādānudhāya*), Sasanka,³⁴ Lokanatha, Dommanapala and the early Sena rulers like *Parama-Saiva* Vijayasena and *Parama-Saiva* Vallalasena were all Saivas. The Varmans of East Bengal, the later Sena kings like *Parama-Vaisnava* Vijayasena and the Deva family of Tripura-Noakhali-Chattagram region were *Vaisnavas*. No royal Saura family is known in Bengal. In fact, Sun worship was not the official religion in India. Only the Sena kings Visvarupa and Suryasena, who most probably ruled from 1206 – 1225 A.D. styled themselves *Parama-Saura* i.e. devout worshippers of the Sun, but that too after professing the two great faiths (i.e. Saivism and Vaisnavism) followed by their ancestors.³⁵ Lack of royal

patronage not only prevented the Sun-cult from enjoying added popularity among a large body of people but also disabled its counsels to be influential with the rulers. Thus deprived of easy and secure livelihood through private or royal charity, they could not devote themselves with full time, attention and enthusiasm to the all-round advancement of the Sun cult.

Eclipse of Surya by Visnu:

Assimilation of some features belonging to two Hindu cult gods became a common factor in the religious arena, which is clearly visible between Surya and Visnu too. Mention may be made of *Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa* that acquired great circulation in medieval time. *Surya-Narayana* is actually regarded as a form of Visnu, which points to merger of Sun worship in the Visnu cult.³⁶ Equal faith of a devotee to both Viṣṇu and Sūrya is indicated by the two halves of his name, viz. *Viśvāditya* and *Viśvarūpa* recorded in *Akṣayavata Praśasti* of Yakṣapāla's father Viśvāditya-Viśvarūpa.³⁷ Fusion of these two gods seems not to be uncommon. Both the divinities had originally the same common source of Vedic Surya. Puranas also show their identical relation. The *Agni Purāṇa* states that the Sun-god is another manifestation of the god Viṣṇu who is extolled and glorified in the hymns of the *Rigveda* and is the source of all good and evil.³⁸ In the *Samba Purana*, it is said that the Sun was worshipped as Visnu in *Svetadvipa*.³⁹

With the rise of Vaisnivism, the Sun god gradually began to loose much of his importance, as Visnu, originally a solar deity, absorbed in himself much of the elements that had been attributed to Surya in the earlier days.⁴⁰ Even in iconography, there also occurs no special distinction between the concepts of the image of Visnu and that of the

standing, four-armed Surya upon a lotus with the two wives, Samjna and Chaya, on either side, and before him the charioteer of the Sun. Thus, it was not difficult for Visnu to eclipse Surya, at least in Bengal.⁴¹ As there was already a popular sect round Visnu – a form of the Sun,⁴² the question of a Saura sect could not possibly have arisen in the people's mind. Because of prolonged royal patronage, missionary zeal of a large body of distinguished and dedicated Brahmanas and adaptation with the prevailing Tantricism, *Vaisnavism* became so dominant and aggressive a religion as to turn the Sun god of whom he was just an insignificant aspect in the Vedas, into a part of his body. This finds an excellent reflection in verse 1 of the Sian Stone Inscription⁴³ (approx. 1043 A.D.) and in verse 2 of the Kamauli Copper Plate⁴⁴ (1132 A.D.) of Vaidyadeva, where Surya, 'borne on a seven-horse chariot', has been described as the right eye of Hari (Visnu). Visnu's superiority over Surya is noticeable even in the solar *vrata*. In the *Surya-Vrata* performed by the people of Chittagong, one set of food-offerings is presented by the priest to Visnu, the Preserver of the world, who is, at first, propitiated and another set to the Sun-deity.⁴⁵

Identification of Surya with Siva:

Besides Vaisnavism, Saivism was also a great sect in the Brahmanical religion in early Bengal. Like the former, it had also enjoyed state support from some of the Gupta and Sena rulers in addition to that of Sasanka, Lokanatha, Dommanapala etc. and intense devotion of a large number of Brahmanas besides enormous strength flowing from the Tantrik cult. For reasons stated above, Sun-cult was not in a position to cope with Saivism and preferred to link the Sun-deity with *Mahesvara*. The composite image of

Marttanda Bhairava serves as an excellent illustration of this tendency, which is also but a pointer to the weakened position of the Sun god. Scale turned in disfavour of Surya to such an extent that he came to be identified with Siva in the *Matsya Purana*. Hence, in the *Adityasayana Vrata* it is enjoined that the worship of *Uma-Mahesvara* be done with the recitation of the names of Surya and *Sūryācā* should be done on the *Sivalinga* (55-56). Both the deities occur in the *Matsya Purana* (68-35) in a compound viz. *Ravisankarau*. In the *Samba Purana*, the Sun is said to have been worshipped as *Mahesvara* in Kusadvipa.⁴⁶ In the Saiva system, the Sun is not a mere votary of Siva, but also one of his *astamurtis* (*Malavikagnimitra*, I, 1). The identity of Surya with Siva may be traced back as early as the *Rigveda*. In some passages of the *Rigveda*, *Agni* is identified with the Sun.⁴⁷ Moreover, Śākapūṇi, a predecessor of Yaska, expounded a theory of three-fold existence of *Agni*, viz. terrestrial, aerial and heavenly based on the *Rigveda*-10.88.10 (Nirukta 7.28). Moreover, Rudra is closely connected with *Agni* in the *Rigveda*.⁴⁸ This easily explains the above injunction and the identity of Siva and Surya.⁴⁹

Over-shadowing by Vaisnavism and Saivism:

It appears from the available evidence that the preponderance of *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* over-shadowed the cult of the Sun god, which consequently further declined. Royal patronage secured by these two sects from the Senas, no doubt, added much to their strength and popularity. The worst position of the Sun god may be gleaned from a stone image of *Harihara* (Pl. 22b) belonging to the 12th -13th century A.D. The central figure represents Siva in the right half and Vishnu in the left half and both the gods are provided with respective *ayudhas*, *vahanas* and *saktis*. In the background at the extreme

right appears a standing Buddha in *abhayamudra* and in the corresponding position to the left is Surya with his usual attributes, attendants, charioteer and chariot-horses.⁵⁰ Here the Sun god is shown not only as inferior to Brahmanical gods like Visnu and Siva but also to Buddha because the latter, though placed in the background, has been given the right side,⁵¹ which is traditionally regarded as more important than the left one. The composition of *Hari-Hara* standing between the two wives reminds us of the verse describing *Pradyumnesvara* in the Deopara *prasasti* of Vijayasena. Similar verses in praise of *Hari-Hara* are also quoted in Sridhardasa's *Saduktikarnamrita*. Repeated occurrence of such description in the epigraphy, literature and real art clearly demonstrates to what a low position was reduced the Sun god under the aggressive ascendancy of the two great cults. It is as if the two dominant cults of Bengal have vehemently avenged for the insignificant representation of their respective deities in the *prabhavali* of a few Sun images.⁵²

Failing to maintain an exalted position in the society by successful competition, the Sun-cult probably made an endeavor to depict its deity as the god of the rival cults to sustain his popularity in orthodox institution. In the folk songs around the Sun god discovered from the district of Barisal in Eastern Bengal,⁵³ he has been called Hari as well as Siva. In the same folk ballads, Gauri is stated to be the Sun god's bride and a legend about Sri Krishna has also been interpolated. We find it stated that the god Siva (i.e. the Sun god) adorned with flowers of *Dhutura* plant in his two ears, has started on his journey, and is going to Mathura accompanied by sixteen hundred milk-maids ("*Śibāi thākur yātrā kalle dui kāne dhuturo / ṣolaśata gopinī laye chaliche mathurā*").⁵⁴ The reason for thus identifying the Sun-deity with *Hari* (or Vishnu) and *Siva* and connecting

him with *Gauri* and *Gopinis* is not far to seek. It seems that the worship of the Sun god was waning in popularity. To revive the waning popularity of the Sun-cult and enhance its value in the popular estimation, this deity has been represented as three deities rolled into one and the name of the wife of the well-known and popular deity Siva has been assigned to the Sun god's wife.

Rivalry and reverses of Surya:

There existed many a religious sect, major or minor, in Bengal and rivalry among them was not quite unnatural. The enmity revealed itself mainly by way of representing other dominant god or gods as attendant or accessory figures of another ambitious cult-god or replacing some opponent deity from the Trinity. The Sun-cult, especially spearheaded by the Maga Brahmanas of foreign origin, could not have been an exception. In *Trimurtis*, Surya as the principal god is not unknown as it is found in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Surya replaces Brahma in the trinity in an inscribed sculpture of Bengal. There are many composite images at Ranapur, which may be taken⁵⁵ as of Brahma, Visnu and Surya thus showing that Siva has been replaced by Surya. Surya replaces Visnu in the door lintel of the tenth century A.D. Siva-temple at Tejpur in Assam with Brahma and Siva on two sides. Samkaracharya had to face the Sun-worshippers in the Deccan, whom he found as divided into six sub-sects.

Enmity of the Saivas, especially the *Pasupatas* has been suggested⁵⁶ as one of the causes for the decline of the Sun-cult under discussion. Even the Mahabharata⁵⁷ goes to state: - "Meanwhile, *Rudra* of terrible prowess rushed against the celestials. Filled with anger he tore out the eyes of *Bhaga*" (i.e. Surya). "Excited with anger, he attacked *Pusan*

(Surya) with his foot. He tore out the teeth of the god as he sat employed in eating the large sacrificial cake". It is not unnatural for the god Pasupati, the lord of beasts, to have fallen into conflict with *Pusan* who is intimately connected with cattle and pastoral life in the Rigveda,⁵⁸ with the prosperity of cattle in the later Vedic literature⁵⁹ and with the *Panis*⁶⁰ who were traders and most probably non-Aryans.⁶¹ It is equally not unexpected of the god of the *Vratyas* (outcastes) to have been angry with *Bhaga*, 'a distributor of wealth', usually the gift of Indra and Agni, and the chief leader of rites⁶² and the sustainer of the world.⁶³

The Saivas, particularly the *Pasupatas*, were opposed to the solar cult and this must have checked its progress largely. The *Pāsupata* was the oldest form of Saivism prevalent in North India. Varahamihira refers to the *Pasupatas*, while prescribing the installation of images of different deities. He states, "The priests who install the image of Visnu, should be *Bhagavatas*; of Sun, *Magas*; of Siva, the *Pasupatas* (Ash-armed one)....". Saivism in Bengal was of the *Pasupata* sect, as is evident from the Bhagalpur grant of Narayanapala.⁶⁴ It is deserving of note that emanating from the South, the kings of the Sena dynasty were prominent devotees of Sadasiva the concept of which, having been accepted in South India, in course of time spread to Bengal with the Southern dynasty and its army.⁶⁵ With the decline of Buddhism in the 12th century A.D. Saivism became predominant in Bengal. As a historical process, a highly antagonistic attitude of the *Pasupatas* of Bengal against the Maga Brahmanas whose sphere of influence also included a large body of the *Vratyas* is easily comprehensible.

Surya reduced to the status of a *graha*:

It has already been seen that the worship of the *Navagrahas* became immensely popular in medieval time mainly among the Hindus, as a means to secure peace, prosperity and long life, avert misfortune and harm enemies. Constant fear of growing foreign invasion and prevailing socio-economic tensions might have contributed to this new phenomenon. The Sun worshipping Maga Brahmanas who took to the profession of astrology upheld *Grahayāga* or *Svastyāyana* as a sole, infallible panacea for the problems confronting the society. In astrology, *Ravi* (Surya) is considered as one of the leading planets, determining the fortune of humankind. Introduction and popularization of Navagraha worship in such an energetic way, in reality, brought the Sun god down to the position of one of the planets only, though a central figure among them, from the loftiest seat of a great benevolent deity and the 'soul of all movable and immovable things'.⁶⁶ Independent worship of the Sun as a god naturally lost its rationale in the society. In absence of images of the nine planets in a single stone slab, they could be worshipped by drawing their figures on canvas in their respective colour or in *mandalas* made of scented paste (Sandal-wood-paste). The present practice of *grahayajna* with no requirement of icon in any form, in all probability, was prevalent in the last phase of our period under discussion. Under the changed situation, there was left no urge before the people to do the individual and anthropomorphic worship of the once-great god Surya in temples, big or small. Therefore, majority of the Sun-temples were either deserted or converted into the fanes of other gods, while some others were destroyed out of iconoclastic zeal. Anyway, the *Maga-dvijas* who introduced, popularized and took to the greatest height, the anthropomorphic and temple-worship of the Sun god under a strong religious zeal,

hankering for elevated social status and pressing need for a better economic pursuit, had to reduce their dear deity for more or less the same reasons to such a precarious position, loosing the game for 'survival of the fittest'.

Assimilation into Brahmanical religion and solar deity:

The whole question concerning the decline of Sun worship in the so-called post-Hindu period originates from the occurrence of large number of Sun-images and references to Sun temples belonging to the Pala-Sena period against their conspicuous absence in the succeeding age. It is well known that the practice of Sun worship in anthropomorphic form and in temple was not at all an indigenous one, rather very much alien to the mainstream tradition. A critical study of the practices of the primitive tribes of India that may be resorted to know about the initial form of Sun worship in this country clearly shows the general absence of any material representation of the deity and offering of sacrifices to him in an open space cleared of jungle on a raised altar.⁶⁷ Even in different *Surya-vratas*, which have been performed by the womenfolk from time immemorial, the god is worshipped with the aid of symbolic representation. In the *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanisadas*, the *Sutras* and the Epics we notice the worship of the Sun god in both atmospheric and symbolic forms, especially among the orthodox section of the society.

Coming to the Puranic age, we are amazed to find that many Puranas⁶⁸ even do not mention the role of the Magian priests at all and continue the indigenous and national tradition of Sun-worship as found in the *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanisadas*, the *Sutras*, and the Epics. In the *Visnu*, *Vayu*, *Brahmanda*, *Markandeya* and *Matsya* Puranas,

which were thoroughly imbued with the orthodox spirit of the Sun-cult, the Vedic tradition⁶⁹ of Sun worship is found to have been carried on. They reveal that the orthodox tradition of Sun worship actually developed on the lines of the *Satapatha Brahmana's*⁷⁰ prescription of a golden disc to represent the solar orb and the Upanisadic⁷¹ doctrine of the golden *Purusa* in the Sun who was identified with the Ultimate Being. The prevalence of this tradition even after the spread of the Magian custom is attested by the *Kurma Purana* which describes the Sun as the heavenly body in regulating time and seasons, in maintaining the planets in their position and in fostering the life of the plants and animals. This description is in conformity with the Vedic account of the Sun god. Even in the *Samba Purana*,⁷² which symbolizes the climax of the Magian belief, the Vedic tradition has not been forgotten. The *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, describing the various sects of Hinduism, states that some persons who knew the Vedas worshipped the Sun everyday in the morning, midday and in the evening with various hymns.⁷³ This shows that among the Sauras was also a section, which continued worshipping him in the old Vedic way. Even a group of the Sun worshipping Magas⁷⁴ called Bhojakas (later on degraded as the Yajakas) who appear to have been indigenous priests of the Sun-cult, are described as chanting Vedic *mantras* etc.⁷⁵ In view of the above, it is evident that even after the flood of Magian Sun worship in Northern India, the indigenous form of Sun worship without image and temple had simultaneously been going on.

It is beyond doubt that in the field of iconography and temples, the Maga priests exerted powerful influence and this new tradition was materially helpful in propagating and diffusing the sectarian form of Sun worship. They gave material and lithic representation to the imaginary and atmospheric conception of the Sun as

found in the *Vedas*, the *Epics* and the *Puranas*. However, as far as the mythology, theology and philosophy of the Sun-cult were concerned, the Maga-influence was negligible.⁷⁶ As a means to wipe out the Magian element even in solar iconography, a constant, conscious and vigorous attempt was also being made in the form of hiding or idealizing the alien traits (northerner dress, waist-girdle and high boots) in the Sun images. This is evident from steady shedding off the Northerner's dress by keeping the upper body of the divinity open (Harinarayanpur image) or covering it with a diaphanous garment, threatening instruction for not making the god's feet⁷⁷ and endowing him with Indian attributes such as *Yajnopavita*, *tilaka* etc.

The endeavour to merge the Sun-cult back with the Brahmanical stream was slow but steady until the rule of the Buddhist Palas because of their eclectic policy, though they were also the upholders of the Brahmanical religion and social system. However, in the Sena period the wheels of the religion and society turned in the one direction; in this era the all-pervading and all-embracing religion of Bengal was Brahmanism, governed by the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, the *Sruti* and the *Smriti*, and affected by the *Tantras*. Further, from the second half of the eleventh century the descendants of the Buddhist kings also gradually took to Brahmanism. By the end of the ancient period, the Brahmanism of the *Vedas*, *Smriti* and the *Puranas* had triumphed and the Sun god was ultimately assimilated into the Brahmanical religion losing his identity in the Brahmanical solar deity. This may find corroboration in Verse 1 of the Edilpur Copperplate of the Sena king *Kesavasena* (1206-1210 A.D.) where the Sun is described as "the friend of lotus beds, the source of deliverance of the three worlds withheld in the prison of darkness, and the wonderful bird

of the tree of the *Vedas*, soaring high up on his two alternately expanding wings (i.e. the two fortnights), of which one is white and the other is black".⁷⁸

***Dharmathakur* replaces *Surya* in *Radha*:**

In ancient *Radha* or modern West Bengal, we find the immense popularity of the worship of *Dharmaraj* or *Dharmathakur* who has been identified in the *Sunya Purana*⁷⁹ and the *Dharmapujavidhana*⁸⁰ with the Sun god. Some solar attributes had definitely been absorbed in the personality of the *Dharmathakur*. He is also conceived as the remover of diseases like *Surya*. It is not unlikely that the place of the Brahmanical god *Surya* was gradually occupied by this folk-god *Dharmathakur* at least in some parts of Bengal. Given the authenticity of the *Sunya Purana* of Rāmāi Pandit, it can be accepted that *Dharma* festival was current in Sena times prior to the Turkish conquest. It seems that the local tradition of adoring the Sun god as *Dharma* was so widely accepted in western part of Bengal that it did not leave any opportunity for the *Udicyavesi Surya* in Puranic garb to gain popularity.⁸¹ It also appears that after the rule of *Parama-Saura* Visvarupasena and Kesavasena, the solar devotees of the South-West Bengal, being deprived of state support, gradually assimilated themselves into other religious communities of acceptable nature.⁸² Quite logically, this draws our attention to the growth and development of the cult of *Dharmathakur*, who best represents the Sun god in terms of characteristic features.

Thus, the predominance of *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* over-shadowed the cult of the Sun god. *Surya* even began to be called *Hari* as well as *Siva* in an attempt to revive his waning popularity. Further, there was no scope of exclusive worship of the solar deity

because of the development of *Pancopasana*. The inclination for the Vedic form of Sun worship under the Varian-Sena regime and the popularity of 'ekantika' worship of the 'Istadeva' due to the advent of monotheistic ideas from the South gave the final blow to the Sun-cult.

Notes and References

1. *HB-I*, p. 428.
2. Sharma, D., *Rajasthan through the Ages*, vol. I, Bikaner, 1966, p.720.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 385, 721.
4. Herodotus, *The Historians* (Tr. By Aubrey De Selincourt), p. 71; Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, London, 1926, p. 57.
5. The Maga priests, though merged in the indigenous population, were traditionally held as an outlandish element. This fact must have given rise to the question of their social status especially in relation to the indigenous priestly class of the Brahmanas.
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7. *HB-I*, p. 585.
8. Bhattacharyya, Ashutosh, *op. cit.*, p.165.
9. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 30.
10. According to Varahamihira, the Sun-images should be invoked with auspicious Vedic hymns before they are installed (*Brihatasamhita*, Ch. LVIII Verses 49-52).
11. Williams, Monier, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1951.
12. *HB-I*, p. 570.
13. *Bhaviṣya P.*, I.140, 141, 146.

14. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 40.
15. *MRCBS*, p. 44.
16. Gosta Liebert, *Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions: Hinduism-Buddhism-Jainism*, Delhi, 1986. p. 229.
17. H. Kern (Eugtran), *Bṛihat Samhitā*, Ch. II, verse 13, *J.R.A.S*, 1870-75.F.
18. Quoted by N. N. Vasu, *Archaeological Survey of Mayurabhanja*.
19. Chakravarty, Jahnvi Kumar, *Aryasaptasati O Gaudavanga* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1378 B.S., p. 57.
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21. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 40.
22. *Brihaddharma Purana*, II, XIV.75.
23. Gosta, *op. cit.*, p.229.
24. *HB- I*, p. 427.
25. Bhattacharyya, Ashutosh, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
26. Banerjea, J.N., *Pauranic and Tantrik Religion*, Calcutta, 1994, pp. 145-6.
27. *Historical and Cultural Data from Bhavisya Purana*, p. 40.
28. *HBP*, p. 422.
29. *Ibid*, p. 450.
30. Majumdar, R.C. (Ed.), *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, Bombay, 1955, p.314 ff.
31. *Ibid*, pp. 262, 323.
32. *SWAI-P*, p. 189.
33. Monier, Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India*, London, 1883, p. 412.

34. Depicted on the coins of Sasanka were Siva and Nandi, the bull. Allan, J., *Catalogue of Indian Coins in the British Museum, Coins of Ancient India*, London, 1936, pp. 147-48.
35. *HB-I*, p. 427.
36. Fergusson, James, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, Kol. II, Delhi, 1972, p.106.
37. Sircar, D. C., *EI*, Vol. XXXVI, p. 88.
38. *Agni P.*, Tr. by Manmath Nath Dutta, Vol. I. 120-33.
39. *Samba P.*, pp. 26; 37; 38.
40. Chattopadhyay, S., *The Evolution of Theistic Sects in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1962, p. 58.
41. *HBP*, p. 452.
42. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaisnavism, Saivism and other Minor Sects*, (Rep.) Varanasi, 1965; Hopkins, E.W., *Religions of India*, Boston, 1895, pp. 377-78.
43. 'pravodhanidre jagatām yasyonmīlan-mīlane' - Sircar, D.C., *Śilālekh Tāmraśāsanādir Prasaṅge*, Calcutta, 1387 B.S., pp. 85-101.
44. "etasya dakṣiṇādriśo Vamśe Mihrasya jātavān pūrvam Vighrahapāla": *E.I.*, II, p. 350; *Gaudalekhamala*, p.128; *C.B.I.*, p. 370.
45. Bhattacharyya, R.K., & Mitra, S.C., 'On the Worship of the Sun-deity in Bihar, Western and Eastern Bengal', *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. XIII, 1927, pp. 316-316.
46. *Samba P.*, p. 26; 37; 38.
47. MacDonnell, p. 93.

48. Ibid, p. 77.
49. Kantawala, S.G., *Cultural History from the Matsya Purana*, Baroda, 1964, p. 185.
50. *ASIAR*, Part II, 1930-34, pp. 256-257.
51. Incidentally, it deserves to be mentioned that much earlier Lord Buddha had been accepted as one of the incarnations of Visnu, and it did not take very long for the acceptance to develop into affection.
52. In the Surya image from Banshihari (West Dinajpur) in SAGC shows the miniature figure of Visnu on the left side of the *prabhavali* and two defaced figures on the right. Two identical Surya images *(*BSHI*, p.189, pl. 162) from Vikrampur (Dhaka) in the BNM (N0.61 & 66.31) show Brahma, Mahesvara and Visnu seated on the top of the *prabhavali*.
53. *Typical Selections from Old Bengali Literature*, Part I, published by the University of Calcutta, 1914, pp. 164,171.
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56. Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
57. XII.160.18-19.
58. *RV*, I.5.1, 2; VI.54.5; VI.53.9.
59. *MS*, 4.3.7; *TB*, I.7.24; *SGS.*, 3.9.
60. *RV*, VI.53.3, 5, 6, 7.
61. *Vedic Index*, vol. I, p. 472.
62. *RV*, VII.3.8.3.

63. *RV*, VII.3.8.2.
64. *JA*, XV, p. 304; *Gaudalekhamala*, p. 55.
65. *HBP*, p. 420.
66. *RV*, I.115.1.
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69. Roy, S.N., 'Early Puranic Account of Sun and Solar Cult', *University of Allahabad Studies*, 1963, pp. 41-45.
70. *SB*, VII.4.1.10.
71. *BAU*, II.5.5.
72. Hazra, *Studies*, p. 63. cf. *Samba P.*, 6.15; 12.8; 12.13; 24.7; 29.15; 30.18.
73. *Srimad Devi Bhagavata P.* Ch. VIII. Book I, p. 27, Tr. by Swami, Vijayananda, alias Hari Prasanna Chatterji, Panini Office, Allahabad.
74. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 30.
75. *Samba P.*, 27.
76. *SWAI-S*, p. 258.
77. Change in religious outlook against top boots and *Aavyaṅga* is met with in the injunctions led by *Matsya*, *Padma* and *Agni Purāṅgas* where the sculptor is warned against covering the feet of the god if he does not intend to be inflicted by leprosy. *Padma.P. Sriṣṭi.Khaṇḍa*, Vaṅg. Edition. Chap. VIII, Sl. No. 42; *Matsya Purana*, CCLXI, 1-7; XCIV.1. Such scriptural prohibition provided sentiment to the sculptors of later ages to insert or submerge the feet of the god below the knees in the chariot-

pedestal or to put them inside the chariot.

78. *IB*, p. 126.

79. Sen, Sukumar, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol. 1, *Aparardha*, Calcutta, 1975; p. 147 ff.

80. Mandal, Panchanan & Sen, S. (ed.), *Rūprāmer Dharmamaṅgal*, Introduction, Burdwan, B. S. 1351.

81. *MRCSE*, p.70.

82. Tarafdar, Mamtajur Rahaman, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas* (in Bengali), Dhaka, 1987.