

# CONCLUSION

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 Pandas and Sumas. It was no less popular in the pre-Gupta period as well. Profound knowledge of the Vedic Brahmanism was not lacking in ancient Vanga. Of the Brahmanical gods and goddesses widely worshipped there, Surya happened to be one of them. It seems that the Iranian Mages 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 Surya may be traced in some terracotta plaques of the Sunga-Kusana period found in different parts of Bengal. Second century B.C. terracotta from Tamluk 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 Surya originally occurs in the *Rigveda*. 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 Vanga. Thus, Sun worship was not only introduced in early Vanga during the Post-Maurya and Pre-Gupta period under strong Brahmanical influence but was also quite prominent. Further, the worship of the Sun god developed in ancient Vanga 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 Chandraketurarh (24-Parganas) shows the Sun god seated on the four-horsed chariot driven by Aurna and flanked by Usa and Pratyusa. 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 olden Vanga in the Pre-Gupta era. This resemblance is, however, superficial because the features of the Sun god along with Usa and Pratyusa and the chariot are very Indian. Though largely resembling with many features of the Bodh-Gaya, Bhaja, Lala Bhagat or Anantagumpha Sun images, the Chandraketurarh terracotta Surya 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 Surya are accessory decorative figures in the religious architecture of the heterodox or other Brahmanical 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 Vanga 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 Iranian Surya in early Vanga. The new re-orientation could take place only when the *Northerner* type of solar icons was introduced in Bengal by its new settlers who had brought the Maga priests and when the vigorous participation and assistance of these Brahmanas was available. Interestingly, the Magian tradition in making Sun images in ancient Vanga 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 Surya 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 Vanga, 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.

Sun worship did not disappear with the passage of time. During the Gupta rule in Bengal, the image-worship of the deity in ancient Vanga was further spread in Greater Bengal and consolidated on a firm foundation. With the new settlement of Brahmanas, 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 Vaisyas. Besides the Iranian 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 Sakadvipi Brahmanas 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 Deora (Bogra) shows some development in the iconic type of Surya. While the contemporary Surya in a Siva temple at Bhumara (Madhya Pradesh) was an accessory figure, the Sun image from Deora 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 Kashipur image was perhaps meant to highlight the predominance of the native element in the solar iconography. However, the Sun-images from Deora or Kashipur had undoubtedly, been the products of the continuing art-tradition introduced in ancient Vanga by the Maga Brahmanas. People in early Bengal also represented the solar deity in seated posture, though it is very rare. From the Deulbadi icon, we learn that the god Surya was also worshipped by the

Buddhists, sometimes simultaneously with Brahmanical 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 Brahmanas, the Vaisyas etc. were also connected with the solar cult in addition to the Iranian Magas.

Like *Pundravardhana* or *Vanga*, Sun worship was equally prevalent in *Vardhamana-bhukti*. However, here the Sun god is identified with *Lokanatha Dharma* as referred to in the Mallasarul Copper Plate inscription (543 A.D.). The tradition of Samba's cure by Sun worship is found to have influenced Sasanka. In order to cure himself of a serious disease, he is said to have brought 12 Graha-vipras from the banks of Sarayu to officiate in the *grahayajna* and offered sacrifices to nine planets. Sakadvipi Brahmanas occasionally came to Bengal from Upper India and popularized Sun worship and *grahayajna* 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 Pala-Candra-Kambojas. In fact, all the Pala kings were patrons of Brahmanas, Brahmanical images and temples and therefore, granted lands for them to enhance their own virtue and renown. The solar deity was regularly worshipped by these large numbers of orthodox Brahmanas by means of *Samdhyopasana*. Surya 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 Vighrahapala made a gift of a chariot for a big Sun-temple for the annual *rathayatra*. The reference to a gift of golden lotus for the silver images of Surya and Navagrahas, no doubt, speaks of intense devotion

for the Sun among a section of wealthy people. Towards the end of the Pala period, Sun worship became very popular among the Brahmana rulers of Gaya. The Gayā Gadādhara Temple Inscription of the time of Nayapāla and the Gayā Sitalā Temple Inscription of Yakṣapala of the time of Govindapāla begin with adoration to Surya and the first verse is dedicated to the Sun god. *Surya-pranama* was also a popular form of the worship of the Sun in this age.

In the 11th - 12th centuries A.D., the Vedic Brahmanism 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 Brahmanas through *Samdhyopasana* along with the Gayatri hymn. Visvarupasena and his son Suryasena 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-roganam hartta*"). In the Madanapada and the Calcutta Sahitya Parisat Copper-plate of Visvarupasena as well as the Edilpur inscription of Suryasena, 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 *Satapatha Brahmana* 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 Visvarupasena and Surya call themselves *Parama-saura*, 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 *Subhasita-ratnakosa* of Vidyakara. By the time of Vidyakara, the Vedic worship of the Sun had grown into an important cult strengthened by impact of the Sun worship of Persia. Vidyakara considered the Sun to be one of the chief divinities of Hinduism. From all the four verses in the *Subhasita-ratnakosa* centering the Sun at Sunrise, it appears that many Hindus addressed their prayers to the heavenly body in the morning. The *Sadukti-karnamrita* of Sridharadasa 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 *Surya-pranama* by referring to salutation to the east filled with fragrance. Dhoyi in his *Pavana-Duta* refers in to the Sun temple at Triveni, Hooghly. Halayudha has liberally eulogized the Sun god in the *Mangalacharana* of his *Brahmanasarvasya*. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* states that the worshippers of the god Surya gain recovery from different kinds of illness. According to the *Brihadharma Purana*, "He who worships the Sun would be healthy, wealthy and prosperous and repair to the holy immortal feet". The same Purana gives us some important information about the priests who were responsible for the spread of Sun cult in India. A reference to these Brahmans is also found in the *Aryasaptasati* where the *grahasanti* (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 Pala and Sena periods is very large. It appears from the find spots of the 8<sup>th</sup> century images that the anthropomorphic worship of

the Sun was prevailing largely in *Varendri* and some parts of *Uttar Radha*. The terracotta Surya from Paharpur 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-Gaya railings. The temple design in a few Sun-icon points to the popularity of Sun worship in temples. Surya and his two attendants Dandi and Pingala are represented as wearing a pair of pointed boots, as is seen in the Sun icons of the Pala Bengal. Discovery of only three Sun images in 8<sup>th</sup> 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 relieves also points to its distance from Tantrik philosophy. Out of the 26 ninth century images noticed hitherto, all the 25 hail from Pundravardhana – 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 comparison 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 *rogahartta* concept of the Sun god. The tradition of Sun worship among the Pundras as referred to in the *Arseya Upanisad* probably played a prominent role in the ever-increasing popularity of the image worship of Surya in the Pundravardhana. Interestingly, three images from Gazole (Malda) 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 evident that the Bengali artists and the devotees did not follow in all respect the iconological arrangement of any existing text in fashioning the Sun images. High boots occurs in most of the

images of Surya as well as his attendants though they are mostly clad in *dhoti*. Samjna and Chaya, two wives of the Sun god, enter the iconographic scene, though in a very few images. Surya'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 in the 9th century also emerged as the centre of Sun worship.

Sun images of the 10<sup>th</sup> cent. 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 Vanga and Bankura in Radha. 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 Surya in new areas impelled the people to worship the Sun-deity in image form. The only Surya image in Bengal standing in *tribhanga* (Pl. 6b) is a product of this century. Pingala, Dandi, Aruna and Mahasveta accompany the Sun god in most of his representations. The arrow-shooting Usa and Pratyusa also appear in a number of Sun-icons while Samjna and Chaya are very seldom represented. *Upavita* 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 Vanga region. The representation of *agni-kunda* 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 *vanamala*, which as a characteristic attribute of Visnu marks the beginning of Surya's assimilation with Visnu. 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 Vanga illustrate eleven Adityas engraved in them. From the regional point of view, the cult was more popular in Pundravardhana than in its other three counterparts: Radha, Vanga and Samatata. Rajshahi again emerged as an important centre of Sun-cult in Bengal. The worship of the god in Vanga mainly revolved round Dacca and its adjoining area. The solar cult was not that unpopular in the *Radha-janapada* but here the Sun god was quickly being assimilated into the concept of a popular folk-deity *Dharmathakur*.

The iconographic features of Surya in the 12<sup>th</sup> century are not that different from those of the preceding century. The god continues to appear in a *kiritamukuta* topped by an *amlaka*. The endowing of the Sun god or his attendant with *Karandamukuta* or allotment of *Jatamukuta* for Pingala 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 Pala and Sena times, the religious outlook of the northern and Iranian

regions is retained, but in the meditation and interpretation of the Sun god, the Vedic and Brahmanical 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 *padmasana*. In his upper hands, the deity holds a pair of lotuses and the lower right and left hands carry the *Sankha* and *cakra* respectively. The example appears to be a syncretic icon of Surya and Visnu. The composite icons of Surya and Siva are comparatively few except the *Marttanda Bhairava* from Manda (Rajshahi). Apart from Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, reconciliation and rapprochement between rival gods and their creeds is also found in the direct connection of *Bodhisattva Lokesvara* with Hindu cult deities including Surya. A fragmentary sculpture a 10-armed Surya-Lokesvara with *jatamukuta* in one head. 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. *Grahayajna* was performed for peace, prosperity, ample rains, long life, nourishment, destruction of enemies and success in a military campaign. Navagrahas images were made of different materials. Besides accompanying the Sun god, the Navagrahas are also depicted on the *prabhavali* of the *Kalyana-Sundara* and the 'Mother and Child' images. Sasanka was cured by performing *grahayajna*. 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 silver image of the *Navagrahas*. The introduction of the *Grahapuja* everywhere in India is attributed to the Sakadvipi

Brahmanas. 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 Brahmanas and other higher classes. *Samdhyopasana* as a form of Sun worship must have been practiced by the conservative Brahmanas. *Surya-namaskara* 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 Tantric cult, though outwardly. The Sun was worshipped at dawn, noon and Sunset. From the reference to the Pundras and Suhmas as the Sun-worshipping tribes in the *Arseya Upanisad*, land-donation for Sun-temple by three residents in the Jagadishpur inscription and Visvarupasena and Suryasena as *Parama-Saura* as well as from the discovery of large number of images from Pundravardhana, it appears that there existed a Sun-sect in Bengal throughout the early period. There might have developed the centers of Sun worship in Pundravardhana, especially in Mandara and at the *Gangasagara-samgama*.

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 Surya because of his daily visibility to the naked eye. The Maga Brahmanas 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 Brahmanas for astrology and *grahayajna*. The solar cult could not assimilate some of the fundamental principles of Tantricism because of which no concept of *Saura-Sakti* developed around the wives of Samjna or Chaya. The emergence of *Pancopasana* also left no scope of exclusive worship of the Sun god. Royal patronage was almost not nil for the solar cult. With the rise of Vaisnavism, Visnu, originally a solar deity, absorbed in himself much of the solar elements. The preponderance of *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* 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 Siva. 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 *Dharmathakur* in some parts of Bengal.

Exclusive worshippers of the Sun are hardly traceable in the present day. However, every Hindu irrespective of sects does 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 Surya-vratas such the *Maghamandal*, *Itupuja* etc.

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 also 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.