

APPENDIX - A

SUN TEMPLES IN
EARLY BENGAL

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Architecture is intimately connected with sculpture. While a piece of sculpture might be the creation of an individual's taste and interest, the temple demonstrates the will of the community thereby showing the religious condition of the period. The temples represent in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people¹.

Aims of Building Temples:

Temples are considered as the symbolic representation of God. It is believed to help in promoting devotion and concentrating innate faith in the divine being. The building of a temple was regarded as a sacred act. It was meant to enhance one's fame and renown in this world and one's eligibility for a place in Heaven. The rewards gained by the performance of sacrifices and public works were equal to the rewards which one attain by building a temple. "One wishing to enter the world attained by performing sacrifices and sinking wells and the like, should build a temple, whereby one should get the fruit of both."² "Throughout the ages, the Hindu temple has been built with fervour of devotion - the *bhakti* - as a work of offering and pious liberality in order to secure for the builder a place in Heaven. The Hindu temple is a *tirtha* made by art."³

Antiquity of Sun-temples:

There was no scope for a temple in the solar religion of the Vedic tradition as it centered round the worship of the atmospheric form of the Sun by means of oblations and

libations in the sacred fire. Naturally, the Vedic literature is conspicuous by the absence of references to any temple in the proper sense of the term. However, terms indicative of the temple start occurring in the *Grihyasutras*⁴, which shows that by the 5th-4th centuries B.C. the tradition of temples had been evolved in the Hindu society. The cult of *bhakti*, which inundated India after the 5th-4th centuries B.C., was responsible for the adoption of the temple-tradition.⁵

As regards the Sun-cult, we do not find any reference to a temple of the Sun in the orthodox literature before the 5th-6th cent. A.D. For the first time, there are references to a Sun-temple established by *Samba* at *Mulasthana* (modern Multan) in the *Samba*, *Bhavisya* and many other later Puranas.⁶ The Magas are said in this legend to have built a city known as *Mulasthana* on the banks of Candrbhaga in Punjab and a Sun-temple there containing image of that deity. The tradition of public worship of the Sun in temples was introduced in India by the Magas as is attested by the literary evidences.⁷ From the archaeological evidences, it is clear that many temples with the Sun-icons may have been constructed in India under the influence of the Magi Priests.⁸ The Puranas mentioned above also refer to other temples at Konark and Kalapriya established by the Magas.⁹ The temple of Multan may have been built in the Saka-Kusana period (2nd cent. B.C.-2nd cent. A.D.). If the testimony of Philostratos and Plutarch is to be believed, there may have been Sun-temples in the kingdom of Porus¹⁰ on the eve of Alexander's invasion (4th cent. B.C.). In view of these evidences, it may be suggested that the tradition of temple for the Sun god may be as old as the fourth cent. B.C. and like other temples, they were made of perishable materials in the Maurya-Sunga period.

Many Gupta inscriptions also refer to Sun-temples.¹¹ Thus, by the Gupta period the temple tradition came to be incorporated in the Sun-cult by the orthodox Hindus also. However, it appears that the tradition of temple for the Sun god had come into existence much earlier among the masses under the combined impact of the Hellenized Mithraism and indigenous traditions. From the Gupta period onwards, the Sun-temples also came to be built in bricks and stones. That is why we start getting archaeological evidences of Sun-temples from the Gupta period onwards.¹²

Scarcity of materials:

In dealing with the Sun temple, nay with any type of architecture of early Bengal, one is at the very outset confronted with an utter scarcity of material all through the period. Almost none of these early monuments now exist. The fact is rather intriguing because numerous inscriptions of the province, dating from the Gupta period, refer to temples and monasteries. Fa-hien in the 5th century A.D. and Hiuen Tsang in the seventh saw a large number of temples and *stupas* in different parts of Bengal. Dhoyi, author of *Pavanaduta*, mentions many temples in Suhma dedicated to gods namely *Visnu* (V. 28), *Siva* (V. 29), Sun (V. 30) and *Ardhanarisvara* (V. 30).¹³ Innumerable images found in Bengal are in them sufficient evidences that in ancient Bengal there were temples for their proper enshrinement. However, the very few standing edifices and the ruined vestiges, brought to light in explorations, are too fragmentary to be of much real use for a detailed account of Sun temple, properly so called. All that is possible to do is to piece together every bit of information from such other sources as inscriptions, literary works,

sculpture and extant monuments elsewhere, in order to reconstruct the history of the Sun temples of the province.

A cause for this almost obliteration may be sought for not only in the soft alluvial formation of the land and its damp climate, but also in the building materials. These last were usually mud, bamboo, reeds, wood and fragile but indigenous products. In Bengal, as in the rest of India, there was, no doubt, always a tendency to use permanent materials for religious edifices. However, even in the more pretentious buildings, the usual medium was brick, certainly a much less durable material than stone.¹⁴ A brick structure, not to speak of the buildings in more perishable materials, cannot be expected to resist for long the effects of damp and relaxing climate, the excessive rainfall, and the luxuriant vegetation of the country. Stone was always very difficult to obtain in Bengal and had to be imported at great expenses from the quarry of Rajmahal Hills. Therefore, Bengal temples were almost entirely made of bricks and when left in neglect, their destruction was only a question.

Along with this natural cause, there was also the human element. Many temples that might have escaped decay because of the more durable nature of their materials were deliberately razed to the ground by foreign invaders because of their iconoclastic zeal. A few were converted by them into mosques or Dargahs.¹⁵ Quite a large number of temples were demolished by the iconoclasts to secure building materials for constructing or decorating their own structures. Instances are not rare where earlier structures were thus utilized with but little transformations, as we have an example in the tomb of Jafar Khan Ghazi at Triveni in Hooghly.¹⁶

Distribution of Sun-temples in early Bengal:

Sun images have been discovered more or less from most of the districts of early Bengal. Presumably, majority of these icons used to receive worship in temples, big or small. However, we have very scanty references to the shrines of the Sun god, and that too in favour of a few districts only.

Rajshahi: The temple of the thousand-rayed god Surya referred to in the Jagadishpur copper plate (A.D.447 A.D.) from Rajshahi District was established in the village named Gulmagandhika adjacent to the Jaina Vihara area included within *Pundravardhanabhukti*.¹⁷

Malda: At a place called Madhaipur in the district of Malda, an image of the Sun god is found in a temple of goddess Kali, which lies at a short distance from the present Malda Court Railway Station across the Mahananda River. It is believed that an exclusive temple for the Sun existed here in olden days.¹⁸ According to local scholars, there was a city named Suryapur situated in the forest of Kaṭhāl in earlier times. At a place called Yogibhavan of this Suryapur, is found a big Sun image in a temple. Madhaipur is known to have been once a Brahman-dominated area. Ramapala is also referred to have established at Ramavati (Ramauti) a temple for the Sun god in addition to those for a few other Brahmanical deities.¹⁹

Murshidabad: There is a Sun temple in the old settlement of Amritakunda or Amarkunda under Navagram Police Station, three miles from Ranidā, in the district of Murshidabad. This temple is popularly known as the '*Gaṅgādityer Mandir*'.²⁰ The god came to be known as *Gangaditya* because of being installed in a temple on the bank of

the River Ganges. He is the presiding deity of the Amarkunda village. It is learnt that the temple was built in 1307 - 1308 B.S. (1900-01) on an earlier temple-foundation.

Birbhum: There was probably a big temple of the Sun god in the *Rādha* region, which is indirectly referred to in the Sian (Birbhum) Stone Inscription²¹ (of approximately 1043 A.D. and belonging to the reign of Nayapala). Grant of a *ratha* by the king for the Sun temple is indicated in Verse 17. Here we find a reference to something similar to a moving victory-pillar given by the king (“*Viśrāmārthamivaīṣa jamgam-jayastambho babhou yo’rpitah*”). The term ‘*Viśrāmārtham*’ probably indicates that when tired, the horses of the Sun’s chariot would rest for a while at the peak of the temple. Indirect reference is made to a big Sun-temple in another verse (No.46) because the shrine is thought to be the palace of the Sun god where he would stay by giving up the way to the heaven (“*yaḍīya ruchi lobhitah sa bhagavannābhah pānthatām tyājediti vichintayanniyatamāhi...*”).

Bankura: On the bank of a small river Kumari in the extreme southwestern corner of Bankura district²² lies a temple for the Sun god, which has a standing figure of the Sun god carved on a large pedestal. There is also a Sun-temple at Sonatapal (Onda) in the same district. This *rekha deul* {i.e. temple with curvilinear *sikhara* (tower)} made of brick is one of excellent architectural heritage of the district. It is believed to have been established in the 11th century A.D. The place where the temple is located was known as Hamirdanga in earlier times and still has a large number of the Sakadvipi Brahmanas living nearby.²³

Hooghly: There are many references to Sun-temples in the District of Hooghly. Panduya (Saptagram) situated thirty-eight miles from Calcutta and now commonly

known as Pedo, probably had a Sun-Temple.²⁴ Every year in the month of January and April fairs are held here in the honour of the Sun god. When Samsuddin Isuf Shah, a king of Gauda, conquered this place in the 15th Century A.D., the temple was converted into a mosque.²⁵ An Islamic inscription is found engraved in the lower portion of the backside of a stone slab containing a Sun-image.²⁶ Tribeni, situated at eight miles to the east of Mahanadi and at the short distance from Hooghly, was another place where probably a temple dedicated to the Sun god existed in ancient period. Dhoyi, the author of Pavana-duta, also refers to the same temple, while directing the messenger wind to salute the Sun-god ('*Raghukulaguru*') and offer water to him on the bank of the river Ganges before departing from there.²⁷ Twelve figures of the god representing probably twelve different Adityas have also been discovered from Tribeni.²⁸ Probably, there was a splendid temple dedicated to them, which, later on, was destroyed by the Mohammedan invaders in the 13th or 14th C.A.D.²⁹

Midnapore: No Sun-temple is found in the Midnapore District. Nor any evidence that there existed any temple for this god ever in any parts of the district has been discovered so far.³⁰ The Pala-Sena tradition had no abiding influence on temple architecture in this district almost the whole of which was under the territorial jurisdiction of ancient Orissa since the early medieval period.³¹

A Sun-temple is also found close to the *Visnupada* at Gaya, housing a Sun-image with four hands.³²

Navagraha-shrines, though rare, have been discovered in other parts of India. Whether any temple for the nine planets had ever come up in early Bengal, especially in

North and South-Western Bengal, which has presented us all the Navagraha images, is not certain.

Patrons of Sun-temples:

The *Brahma Purana* prescribes Sun worship for all the castes - *Brahmanas*, *Ksatriyas*, *Visyas* and *Sudras* - to get all the worldly and non-worldly pleasures.³³ No restriction on account of caste is imposed on Sun-worship in the *Brihaddharma Purana* too.³⁴ *Religious* privileges were extended to women and men of lower castes by the Magas as well.³⁵ Deprived of the association of the higher Hindu society, these Scythian Brahmins sought to establish supremacy over the low-class untouchables.³⁶

As is well known, Sun worship did not receive royal patronage in Bengal as elsewhere. Therefore, it is quite natural to presume that the kings had played no important role in the establishment of solar shrine in this territory. In keeping with our presumption, we have hitherto only two references to royal endeavour in the matter under discussion. In one case, the Pala king Ramapala, son of Vigrahapala III, is found to have established a temple for the Sun-deity at Ramavati (Ramauti) along with those of Siva, eleventh Rudra, Skanda and Ganapati.³⁷ The urge on the part of the king to please the people of different dominating cults in view of the recent Kaivarta rebellion, which led to the seizure of the Pala throne by the Kaivarta chief Divya followed by recovery under Ramapala, probably inspired him to take such a laudable eclectic step. In the other case, an indication is made of the grant of a *ratha* by a king for the Sun-temple, which presupposes the building of the solar shrine by the king.³⁸ Large number of Sun-images in stone from different parts of early Bengal speak in favour of the existence of a good

number of temple for the divinity. Perhaps most of these temples were built by the rich people³⁹ as well as the residents. The Jagdishpur copper plate (A.D.447 A.D.) from Rajshahi District refers to the permanent donation of land by three residents - Kshemarka, Bhoyila and Mahidasa - for the construction of a Sun-temple in the village named Gulmagandhika (Pundravardhana- bhukti).⁴⁰ Lands were also granted to the Brāhmaṇas to enable them to build up temples for different gods, as is revealed by several Gupta Inscriptions.⁴¹

Priests of the Sun-temples:

The information about the priests of the Sun-temples comes from both the literary as well as the epigraphic sources. It is learnt from the *Bhavisya* and some other *Puranas* that *Samba*, a son of *Krisna*, brought the Magas from Sakadvipa to appoint them as the priests of Sun-temples. This is also corroborated by the Govindapur (Navada, Gaya) Stone Inscription⁴² of A.D. 1137-38, composed by the poet Gaṅgādhara who belonged to a line of Maga Brāhmaṇa. Further, it is expressly laid down in the *Brihat-samhita* (Ch. 59, V.19) that it was the Magas (the Indianized form of the Magi, the Sun-worshipping priests of Iran) who were entitled to install ceremonially the images of Surya in temples.⁴³ Varahamihira who lived in the Gupta period categorically says that when a king would construct a temple of the Sun, he would appoint Magi Brahmanas for the worship of the deity.

It may be derived specifically from the Deo-Baranark (Shahabad district, Bihar) inscription that with the temple of the Sun god were associated the *Bhojakas* named Sūryamitra, Hamsamitra, Rishimitra and Durdharamitra. As suggested by Monier

Williams,⁴⁴ the Bhojakas were the descendants of the Magas through the women of the *Bhoja* race. Varāhamihira⁴⁵ 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". The name *Bhojaka* seems to have been derived from their function of eating first on *Śrāddha*-ceremony.

Bengal abounds in images of Surya belonging to the mediaeval and earlier periods. It is presumable that the descendants of Maga Brahmanas settled in large numbers in this tract. The Brahmanas who came to be known as Acaryas in Bengal and were the main section of the Sauras, had images made for their use, which was worshipped by the general people for averting diseases and other evils.⁴⁶ Usually, they looked after the solar temples as priests and also actively pursued the profession of astrologers and averter of astral influences (*grahasanti*), which is referred to in the *Matsya Purana*.⁴⁷

General features of the Sun-temples:

Although no Sun-temples of great antiquity exist in Bengal, we get some idea about their general features from the close examination of some extant temples of the Sun god in other parts of India as well as several stone reliefs, for in many cases the deity is shown as installed in temples whose outlines are carved round the divine figure. By a close study and analysis of these, the Sun-temples of ancient Bengal, which all naturally belonged to the northern style of Indian architecture, may be divided into not more than two distinct types according to the form of the roof over the sanctum. However, for a

better understanding, it may not out of point to add just a few words about all the distinct types of Bengal temples.

Ancient temples of Bengal have been classified into four distinct types. (i) The *bhadra*, *pida* or tiered type, in which the roof over the sanctum consists of a series of gradually receding tiered stages crowned by the usual finials including the *amalaka*. (ii) The *rekha* or the *sikhara* type is characterized by a high curvilinear tower and the usual crowning elements; (iii) the tiered type is surmounted by a *stupa*. (iv) The tiered type is surmounted by a *sikhara*. It should be noted, however, that structural examples of these different types, except those of the second, are very rare, if not unknown, especially so far as the last two are concerned. The first type may be seen as fully devolved in several images such as the images of Surya from Kuldia (24-Parganas), Surya from Baria (Rajshahi; Pl. 18b) etc. Here we find temples with trefoil arches supported on richly decorated pillars, the roofs being composed of an odd number of *pidas* (here sloping tiers), three or five, and the whole surmounted by the *amalaka* and the usual finials. The last tier occasionally shows rampant lions at the course. It may be safely presumed that the Sun-temples in which the above and other Surya images were enshrined might have had forms and features as carved around the celestial figure.

A thorough inspection of a few existing Sun-temples in other parts of India⁴⁸ also enlightens us about some other common characteristics of the Sun-temples with minor variations in details. The Sun-temples face towards east. According to the *Bhavisya Purana*, the entrance of a Sun-temple should face the east;⁴⁹ if not possible, it should face the west. The *agnihotragriha* (the house for the oblations to the fire) is an integral part of the Sun-temples.⁵⁰ The *sikhara* is generally found. They have usually *pradakṣinā-mārga*.

They give an impression of massiveness and largeness, though are of moderate dimensions. The Sūrya figures are generally standing along with other figures such as of Visṇu etc. It is interesting to note that in spite of the Magian influence on the Sun-cult there is no Iranian influence visible in any of the Sun-temples. However, generally they are in perfect keeping with the art traditions of India. The Magian tradition failed to exert any influence on the technique and tradition of the Sun-temples in India. These characteristics, at least a few if not all, might have been present in the Sun-temples of early Bengal.

Sometimes the image of the Sun god was installed in a temple along with those of other Brahmanical deities as well. It is not also rare that the shrine of other divinity, even belonging to heterodox cult, had been built up just beside or very close to the temple of Surya.⁵¹ The temple of the god *Sahasrarasmi* was established at Gulmagandhika adjacent to the Jaina Vihara area in *Pundravardhana-bhukti*. In close proximity of the extant temple of the Sun god and the lost shrines of Visṇu and Siva on the bank of the Kumari River (Bankura)⁵² is found a huge 10th cent. A.D. standing image of the 23rd *Tirthanikara Parsvanatha* with the figures of 24 *Tirthankaras* carved on the background. These developments came to take place in early and particularly in late medieval Bengal either out of the growth of the *Panchayatana Puja* or of the social compulsion of harmonious co-existence for a better survival of the cults at stake.

As already seen, stone slabs with *Navagraha* images were used in the medieval temples as architectural pieces (e.g. in a panel on a doorframe, on lintels over the entrance doorway and sometimes on the *torana* of a Surya temple) allegedly to ensure prosperity to their founders and to prevent any evil happening to the temples themselves.

Whether they were placed in the Sun-temples of Bengal, and if so, how - is not definitely known as there is no old temple in this province with such a sculpture fixed in situ.

It is deserving of note that near the Sun-temples⁵³ at Madhaipur (Malda) and Sonatapal (Bankura) Brahmana settlements, especially of Sakadvipis, are found to have existed, which seems to be quite natural in view of the Maga Brahmanas forming the main section of the Sun-worshippers. This sort of settlement might have been present in the neighborhood of a few other solar shrines as well.

Sun-temple complex:

The Sun-temple of Panduya or Pedo (Hooghly), now destroyed, has still two tanks, named Jarapukar and Pirpukar.⁵⁴ These two tanks are undoubtedly *Surya-kundas*, which are sacred to the Sun god. The Sun temple of Modhera (Gujrat), one of the most splendid of the Solar shrines of India, also has a *Surya-kunda* very near, which is now called Rama-kunda.⁵⁵ According to *Vāyu Purāṇa*, Yājñavalkya and his pupils, having been inflicted with the sin of *Brahmahatyā* and advised by Brahmā, had their bath in the tanks including the *Sūryakuṇḍa*, worshipped the god *Vālukeśvara* (Surya) of twelve beams in the city of Vāyupur and merged themselves into the world of Sūrya (*Sūrya-maṇḍalam*).⁵⁶ The presence of a *Sūrya-kuṇḍa* became quite common in classical and mediaeval Hindu India⁵⁷ and was an integral part of the Sun-temple complex. The *Rigveda* (10.142.8) emphasizes the need of digging ponds or tanks for having full-blown lotuses (i.e. a sun-symbol standing for the creative force) besides for the supply of pure drinking water (*RV*, 9.110.5). It is said in the Great Epic that the digging of tanks is very agreeable and beneficial and is “gratifying” to Surya himself and rewarded are those who

dig tanks.⁵⁸ In view of these facts, it is presumable that the Sun-temples which were not situated on some riverbank, were, in all likelihood, endowed with *Surya-kundas*. Perhaps at least a few of the Sun-temples were provided with *rathas* (Chariot) for the journey of the Sun god installed in the temple – a fact which may be surmised from the reference to grant of a *ratha* by the king for the god in Verse 17 of the Sian Stone Inscription⁵⁹

We have already seen that most of the Sun-temples in Bengal were built up on the bank of some or other river (Ganges, Mahananda, Kumari etc.) and at least one has been provided with *Surya-kundas*. The presence of big and deep-water source like river or pond is quite significant. It has already been noticed in the legend of *Brahma-hatya* and consequent Sun worship by Yajnavalka and his pupils that it was enjoined for those guilty of sin to have a bath before going to worship the solar divinity. Surya has been worshipped from time immemorial for removal of diseases, especially leprosy inflicted because of some heinous act committed (cf. Samba and Mayura legends). How could a bath be possible as a precondition of Sun worship in absence of sufficient water available nearby? There is also a long established custom to see the reflected image of the Sun in the water. Even at the folk level, a miniature pond is dug in the yard to have reflected image of the Sun in the water, on which the solar worship is to be performed.⁶⁰ In Sun worship by the Mal-Paharia tribe,⁶¹ a brass pot of water with a mango-twigg placed on it is thought to represent the seat of the Sun god. It, therefore, appears that the miniature pond or the brass-pot of water is nothing but an available substitute of *Surya-kunda*, which is very sacred to the Sun god. In addition, water happens to be the most important of the eight offerings to god Surya, others being *Kusa-grass*, clarified butter, curd, honey, red *Karabi* flower and red sandal. Dhоти in his *Pavana-duta* (V. 30), directs the messenger

wind to salute the solar divinity ('*Raghukulaguru*') in the temple of Tribeni on the bank of the river Ganges and offer water to him before departing from there. Water is also very much needed to quench the thirst caused by the heat of the Sun, a fact which probably became very much prominent in the minds of the builders of the Sun-temples. Such a pressing necessity of water in Sun worship explains the location of the solar shrines on the riverbank or the digging of tanks very close to the temple of the Sun god. The coming up of stone Sun-temples mostly on the riverbank is attributable to the advantage of importing thousands of stone blocks from the distant quarries, either by some vessel or by floating them down the river. In this land of alluvial soil, there was no ample scope to make use of stone for the construction of temples.

Thus, large number of Sun images discovered from different parts of Bengal presupposes the existence of several Sun-temples in her ancient period, though no solar shrine of great antiquity is found today and references to them occur scantily in different sources. Temple came to be an important feature of Sun worship from the Gupta period, which witnessed the increased use of stone and preferably brick in the construction. The roof of the Sun-temple was generally of the shape of stepped pyramids crowned by an *amalaka*. The solar shrines with *agnihotragriha* faced towards east. They were mostly built up on the bank of rivers or elsewhere with a pond (*Surya-kunda*) in front.

Notes and References

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13. Chakraverti, M. M., 'Pavana-duta', *JASB*, Vol. I (1905), p. 45; *SWAI-P*, p. 225.
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27. Dhoyi, *Pavana-duta*, Verse 30.
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29. This conclusion is made likely by the fact that the slab, on which these figures are carved, was re-used by masons when the Hindu temple was converted into a Muslim structure. Later on, a tomb of Zafar Khan Ghazi was built with materials from the same temple. *ASIAR*, 1930-34, p. 37; *SWAI-P*, p. 225.
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47. *Age of Imperial Kanauj*, p.334; *JISOA*, XVI, p. 77.
48. *SWAI-S*, pp. 325-339.
49. The theory of orientation of buildings...consist in setting them in plan in such a way that they may secure the maximum of benefit from the solar radiation automatically and irrespective of the fact, whether occupants will it or not. Temples, living places, assembly halls, audience rooms and a host of structures to meet the needs of men of all grades, are thus so adjusted in plan as to secure an eastern frontage." Shukla, D. N., *Hindu Science of Architecture*, Vol. 1 ed. 1958. p. 183.
50. *Samba P.*, 29.15.
51. Das, S. R., *Archaeological Discoveries from Murshidabad*, Part I, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1971, p.21; Banerji, R. D., *ASIAR*, 1925-26, p. 115; *SWAI-P*, p. 225-6.
52. Banerji, R. D., *ASIAR*, 1925-26, p. 115.
53. Lahiri, *op. cit.*, pp.22, 247; Bhattacharya, Tarundeve, *op. cit.*, p. 388.
54. Law, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

55. *SWAI-P*, p. 247-8.
56. *SWAI-S*, p. 220-21.
57. Sankalia, H.D., *Archaeology of Gujrat and Kathiawar*, Bombay. 1948, pp. 212.
58. *MBH, Anusasanaparva*, Section LVIII.
59. Sircar, *Śilālekh Tāmrasāsanādir Prasānge*, pp. 85-101.
60. Bhattacharya, Padmanath, 'Folk-custom and Folk-lore of the Sylhet district in India',
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APPENDIX - B

**SUN WORSHIP IN
FOLK TRADITION**

SUN WORSHIP IN FOLK TRADITION

During the period of the revival of Hindu supremacy when the Sun-worshipping scythic people were found to observe several distinct rites and customs of their own with which the Vedic Hindus had no ritualistic or cultural affinity, they became excommunicated from the higher Hindu society. Deprived of the association of this society, these Scythian Brahmins sought to establish supremacy over the low-class untouchables of society and it was from then that the solar worship became almost extinct in higher Hindu society.¹ Though solar worship has outwardly disappeared from the social rites of the Hindus, yet it has not clean gone out of the heart of society. The popular *vratas* such as *Maghamandal Vrata*, etc. are nothing but a popular phase of solar worship.

I

Sun worship by womenfolk

The *Vrata* literally means 'a vow to be observed by undergoing solemnly certain physical and mental discipline for attaining a desired result or object'. Women-folk in India were deprived for a long time of their religious rights and privileges as per injunctions of the *Smritis* or *Dharmasastras*. As a result, they used to satisfy their earnest desire for performing religious rites and rituals by taking part in the *Vratas*, which are folk-rituals unrecognized in the sacred texts (*sastras*).

It is difficult to determine the antiquity of this form of folk-ritual that are practiced by women folk at different stages of their life. The *Vratas* in their primitive form seem to have been known to the aboriginal tribes and were later adopted in their sophisticated form by the women of the upper classes of the society. The process of extending recognition to the *Vratas* by the priestly class seems to have been long-drawn in character. However, in the *Matsya Purana* Siva is said to have explained the efficacy of some *Saura Vratas*, that is, rituals to be performed invoking the god Surya. An emphasis has been laid upon the performance of such rituals on the seventh day of the bright fortnight, especially in the Bengali month of *Magha*. In the *Matsya Purana*, description has been given of the *Vratas* like *Kalyan Saptami*, *Visoka saptami*, *Phala Saptami*, *Sarkara Saptami*, *Kamal Saptami*, *Mandar Saptami* and *Subha Saptami*.² The term *Saptami* seems to have signified the auspicious seventh day in the bright fortnight of a month, especially of *Magha*. It may be considered in this connection that the first four and the last one of the *Vratas* mentioned above are prescribed for those who desire to be free from all diseases by an invocation to god *Surya* and a prayer for his beneficent favour. As in the early Puranas, so also in the later Puranas *Vratas* find mention for the worship of *Surya*. In the *Brihaddharmma Purana* (14th century A. D.), for example, we find specific reference to the *Suryavrata*. It would not be unreasonable to hold that the said *Purana* has recorded the tradition of *Vrata* that had been in vogue for a long time. The *Puranas* also recommend the observance of vows or *Vratas* in honour of the Sun with such objectives as obtaining cure from disease, attainment of wealth etc.³ It is noteworthy that no restriction on account of caste is imposed on Sun-worship.⁴ In addition to Puranic references, we may also take into our consideration the results

achieved by socio-cultural anthropologists through their researches. Their findings give us to understand different forms of *Vratas* prevalent in different parts of Bengal. The *Vratas* hardly required the use of any *mantra* or a disciplined way of worship. Those were mostly performed by the devotees with the aid of symbolic representation of the deity concerned and the traditional ballads and folklore handed down from generation to generation.

Magha-Mandala Vrata: Among the *Surya-vratas*, the *Magha-Mandala Vrata* is the most popular one, which the girls of East Bengal, Sylhet and Cachar districts observe for years together before their marriage. The detailed description of this *vrata*, which has been given by Dr. N.K. Bhattashali, deserves to be cited in this connection:

“The *Magha-Mandala Vrata* is performed by the Hindu girls from their early childhood. It often begins when they are as young as 3 or 4 years of age. It has to be continued for five years in succession and is performed every year in winter throughout the month of *Magha*. The girls rise before the Sun appears on the horizon and repair to the *ghat* of the nearest tank. They sit by the water’s edge with flowers in their hands and begin to chant hymns in vernacular under the guidance of an elderly girl or woman. The hymns are mostly childish doggerel, but not devoid of beautiful sentiments. They describe the childhood of the Sun, his coming of age, his marriage, the birth of his son, & c., and in them are skillfully interwoven the childish hopes and fears of the girl regarding her future wifhood and home, her fears of rivals and her hankering to be the centre of a prosperous household.

The hymns (a dialogue supposed to take place between the girl and the Sun) begin

thus:-

Arise, arise, Sun-nie dear, sparkling and fresh;

Alas, I cannot, I cannot, the mists will not let me.

On the inner courtyard of the home, a shallow circle is dug on the ground with a smaller circle to indicate the Sun to the east, and a semi-circle for the moon to the west. After the chants are finished, the girl returns home and completes observance by the chant of a short hymn, sung while sitting on the edge of the circle. A new circle has to be added each year and each has to be coloured differently by different tinted powders. When the five circles are at last completed, the final observance of eating certain forms of sweetmeat by the girl while sitting on the edge of the circles is performed. The residue of sweetmeat is thrown over her head to be scrambled for by the other girls present. Thus, the five years' observance comes to a close".⁵ The *vrata* is usually found to begin on and from the very day, when the Sun passes into the summer solstice after the period of its passage from Sagittarius to Capricorn.⁶ If one studies a bit closely the rites and rituals connected with the *Magha-mandal Vrata* it will be quite clear that it is merely a popular female edition of the solar worship of older days. The *vrata* appears to be designed mainly as a discipline in early rising in defiance of the cold weather, which is at its height in *Magha*.

Itu-puja: Among instances of folk-worship of the Sun in the Brahmanical society in Bengal, mention should also be made of the *Itu Puja*.⁷ Dr. J. N. Banerjea⁸ thinks that in the worship of *Itu* lies hidden the Sun worship of the earlier period. In West Bengal, *Itu-puja* is performed by the women of every Hindu family on every Sunday beginning

from the last day of the month of *Karttika* to the last day of the month of *Agrahayana* (November-December) according to the sanctions of Hindu *sastras*. It has been pointed out by Chintaharan Chakraborty⁹ that *Itu-puja* is more prevalent in West Bengal than *Magha-mandal*.

It has been suggested that *Itu* has to be derived from *Mitu* that is Mitra or the Sun. That the Sun was not unknown by the name of *Mitra* is thought by some scholars to be evident from the performance of the *Vrata Mitra Saptami* in some parts of Bengal in the month of *Agrahayana*. However, no tradition of Mitra-worship has been preserved and there is no evidence that the Mitra-cult did, at any time, become a popular form of religion.¹⁰ On the other hand, both in the folk legends connected with worship of *Itu* and the Brahmanic form given to this folk worship the deity is definitely mentioned as *Surya*.¹¹

Four small earthen pots are placed on a big earthen cup filled with earth in which seeds of paddy, barley, wheat and cereals are put. These seeds germinate and shoot up in the course of the month as a small quantity of water is poured every Sunday on the earth. The four earthen pots are symbolical of the four seasons of which the Sun is the lord; the earthen cup filled with earth symbolizes the earth ruled over by the Sun. Devotees should forego hair oil, fish and meat on the day of worship. Flowers, *durba*-grass, sandalwood paste, sesame, sun-dried rice, myrobolam and so forth are presented for the rites of worship. Bunches of paddy-crops and some bulbs of arum (*colocasia*) are inserted into the earthen pot filled-up with water. When the officiating Brahmin priest begins to perform the rite and offers the *puja*-offerings to the said pot, the females, maiden or married, recite some rhymed verses and legend connected with the Sun-deity. These

verses and legend describe how this worship came to be adopted by some persons in an extremely miserable plight and how they came to attain prosperity and happiness through it. When the period of worship ends, *sādh* (rice boiled in milk and cakes) is given to *Itu*. *Sadh* is a feminine term meaning *simantonayana*, one of the twelve purificatory rites prescribed in the *Grihyasutras* and its use in this connection is characteristic. When the females have finished the recital of the legend, they chant a verse, which embodies the boons, and merits which they desire to obtain. The English rendering of the verse is as follows:

"While I went to gather faggots, I heard the story (connected with the worship) of "Itu" the Sun-deity and returned home. If one hears it, what merits does one acquire thereby? A man who has got no wealth, gets wealth; a man who is sonless, is blest with son; the unmarried soon gets married, the helpless gets help from God; the blind man gets back his eyesight, and after death, the hearer of this legend goes to heaven. "

The boons asked for by the observers of the *Itu-puja* are sufficiently and distinctly set forth in the verse, which is recited in connection therewith. The object of the *Itu-puja* is undoubtedly the attainment of domestic happiness. Important facts in connection with this worship are that it is confined to women and requires no priest except on the last day of the worship and that it is performed only on Sundays in the month of *Agrahayana*. The last fact is easily explained by the circumstance that Sunday is especially sacred to the Sun while the two other facts would clearly indicate that the worship is of folk origin. The worship of *Itu* is really in the nature of a *Vrata* and synchronizes with time when the winter paddy crop is harvested and seeds of cereals are sown. The manner of worship in which seeds of grains and cereals are put in a cup filled with earth and watered for a

month and small pots placed on it as symbols of four seasons ruled over by the Sun, would indicate that the worship was, perhaps, in its origin a fertility rite based on the idea of mimetic magic.¹²

Suryer Vrata: Besides the *Magha-mandal Vrata*, Sun worship is still extant in East Bengal in a different form performed by the female-folk. It is known as *Suryer Vrata*.¹³ The rituals associated with this *Vrata* are as follows: On a certain Sunday of the light fortnight in the month of *Magha*, an earthen altar is to be built in the courtyard on which *ghrita-pradips* (lamps whose wicks are besmeared with clarified butter), whose number must correspond to that of the *Vrata* performers, should be lighted as soon as the Sun rises. After ablutions even before sunrise, the female worshippers stand facing the east with lighted lamps in their hands. They will then make obeisance to the Sun and commence singing songs in honour of the Sun with sounds of *Ulu, Ulu*. The worshippers are not permitted to sit down from sunrise to sunset; they may not partake of anything, not braid their hair or ease themselves. Those who will perform their *Vrata* in a sitting posture will not be allowed to stand up. At noon, the priest performs the worship of the Sun at the foot of the altar. The worshippers will finish their songs after sunset and break their fasts. They will then be allowed to put out the lights and sit down.

The people of Chittagong also perform the *Surya-Vrata*¹⁴ on the last Sunday of the light lunar fortnight of the Bengali month of *Magha* (January-February). The officiating Brahmin priest is engaged to perform this rite of worship. It takes place on an elevated spot where the public fair is held every year on that fixed date. On the day of the

worship, all the devotees, especially females, rise very early in the morning, go to an adjoining tank with brass water-pot and take baths therein. Each devotee fills up this pot with water and inserts a mango twig into it, and all utter cries of "*Ulu* " in a chorus. No such legend and verses as in the case of *Itu-puja* are recited in this Chittagong form of Sun worship. Returning home with those pots in their hands, they keep them in such a place where the sunrays must fall upon the pots throughout the whole day to dry up gradually the water within the pot.¹⁵ The gradual drying-up of water by the Sunrays prognosticates the fulfillment of their heart's desires. If the sunrays do not fall upon the pots all the daylong and dry up the water therein, the observers think that their cherished desires will not be fulfilled.

All the devotees fast whole day and go to the aforesaid fair where each purchases a big funnel-shaped incense-pot, two sets of small earthen pots, saucers and lamps with lamp-stands. They take all those things and other *puja*-offerings to the officiating priests who sit in a row. Flowers, *durba*-grass, sandalwood paste, sesame, Sun-dried rice, myrobolam and so forth are presented for the rites of worship. The provision of water pot, which, with a mango twig, some ears of paddy and bulbs of arum inserted there into, is placed upon an earthen saucer and to which the *Puja* offerings are presented, is not indispensably necessary in the Chittagong forms of worship. Each priest prepares those *puja* offerings, arranges them upon those earthen plates, burns incense, lights lamps and performs the rite. He presents one set of food-offerings to *Vishnu*, the preserver of the world, who is at first propitiated and another set to the Sun-deity.

Throughout the day of the *puja*, a sacrificial fire is kept burning before which the *puja*-offerings brought by the devotees for dedication to the Sun-deity, are placed. The

site on which the *puja* as also the fair is held is called by the people "*Surya-Khala*", the place for the worship of the Sun god. The great fair begins from the morning and closes with the sunset.

The only boon, which is prayed for by the worshippers, is that they might be cured of all ailments they might be suffering from at the time. This they do under the belief that the Sun god will cure them of their ailments. Quite analogous to this folk-rite of Eastern Bengal is that which is performed in Bihar by persons who suffer from chronic diseases. They worship the Sun daily after taking their morning bath and read the *Surya-Purana*.

Surya Vrata is also enjoined in the *Brihadharma Purana*¹⁶ for those who desire to get rid of all diseases and to acquire good health. It has been prescribed for the people belonging to all castes. There are different methods of observing the *Vrata*. According to a method prescribed, the worship of the Sun god is to be performed on the seventh day of the bright fortnight by the devotee who observes restraint in her taking food on the sixth day and fasting on the seventh day and is allowed to take usual food on the eighth day. According to another method, the devotee may worship *Marttanda* on Sundays, observing fast at night. Again, a devotee may also worship god *Bhaskara* on the day of *Samkranti*-cum-Sunday uttering the name of *Aditya* and taking food once only at night. It is further prescribed that a devotee may concentrate upon the setting Sun and later feed the *Brahmanas* with sweets for their satisfaction, herself taking only rice boiled in milk with sweet. The devotees of the Sun god are advised to repeat the *Adityahridaya-mantra* on the seventh day of the bright fortnight in *Magha*. The day should, of course, be a

Sunday. After the repetition of the *mantra*, the devotee has to take holy bath, give donation, practice penance, perform sacrifice and observe fasting. The eight offerings to god Surya are said to be water with *Kusa-grass*, clarified butter, curd, honey, red *Karabi* flower and red sandal. The offerings are to be made in pots made of clay or gold. In some places, the priests are found to officiate in the *Surya Vrata*, preparing an offering on earthen plates, burning incense, lighting lamps and performing the rite on behalf of the *Vrata*-observers. The description of the *Vratas*, as given in different texts, seems to suggest that not only cure of diseases but also all possible desirable things in woman's life are prayed for after an invocation to the Sun god at the time of observing the *Vratas*.

Surya-Vrata in Sylhet: An instance of folk worship of the Sun is reported from Sylhet, Assam.¹⁷ On a Sunday on the 7th day of the moon and on the last day of the month, worship of the Sun is performed on the reflected image of the Sun in the water in a miniature pond dug in the yard for the occasion. On Sundays in the month of *Magha*, the worship is performed with great pomp. At that, the devotees remain standing the whole day and enjoy neither meal nor protection from sunshine. In the past, devotees would take lamp in the hand and plunge themselves into water at sunrise. Standing in water naval deep, they would look towards the Sun, shifting the direction of their faces from east to west, as the Sun would move in its diurnal course until it set down when the devotees would come out of the water to take their food. Only very lately, the custom was to remain standing on the land at spot, looking towards the Sun with a lamp in a hand. Nowadays, however, the worshippers only abstain from sitting down and enjoying their meals and taking shelter in their house, and those who feel difficulty even in this much,

observe fasting only. However, even now the position of the wick-end of the lamp is shifted from east to southeast, south to south-west and west according to the course of the Sun in winter. The lamp is not kept now in the hands, but is placed near the pond in the yard for the *puja* purposes. Formerly both males and females would observe the solemn rite, but nowadays the males seldom do it. The Sun is believed to have no teeth. Therefore, his meal consists of rice and milk. After sunset, the females walk round the pond and sing songs until it is dark when they go and break fast. In almost every rite and worship, an 'arghya' to the Sun is a sine qua non. 'Arghya' is an offering of a mixture of grass, rice and water. It would appear, however that two kinds of observances, one *Puranic* in origin and the other of folk origin should be distinguished. In Bankura and other parts of Western Bengal, offerings are made to Dharam to obtain his blessings for the crop of the season.¹⁸

The *Chungir Vrata*¹⁹ is observed by the homemakers in East Bengal. On Sunday in the Bengali month of *Agrahayana*, 21 *durba*-grasses put in a tube (*chonga*) of *nala* tree and bathed with milk are offered to the Sun god. The legend recited in this *vrata* is similar to that of the *Itu-puja* of West Bengal. Chintaharan Chakravarty²⁰ has referred to another *Surya Vrata* known as *Dhākarī Vrata* performed by the aged women. Sun worship by the *Griha-laksmis* (homemakers) through recital of small legends is widely prevalent in the district of Midnapore as well.²¹

Raldurgar Vrata: The survival of the pre-Aryan Sun worship is also found in the folk ritual of the *Raldurgar Vrata*.²² In addition, there are many folk rites prevailing, in which the tradition of popular solar worship may be traced.

Rathayatra: Among the festivals connected with the worship of the Sun, *Rathayatra* i. e. the procession of the chariots of the Sun-deity is described in the *Bhavisya Purana*.²³ It originated with the aboriginal tribes, and in course of time came to be Aryanised.²⁴ The concept of the *Rathayatra* as a solar festival was also held by the people of our country in earlier times. According to the geographers, an intimate connection could be traced between the *Rathayatra* and the Diurnal rotation of the Sun. The later *purāṇas* describe the method of performing annual worship (*samvatsarī pūjā*) and annual car-festival (*Rathayātrā*) of the Sun with the use of Vedic and Purāṇic mantras well as methods for the use of incense and other materials in *pūjā*.²⁵

Saura literature of Bengal:

In the folk literature that was current during the middle ages in Eastern Bengal, there is ample evidence to show that the cult of the Sun god was widely and strongly prevalent in that part of the country during this period. A very realistic picture of the domestic life of Bengal has been portrayed through the ballad sung in honour of the Sun on the *Magha-mandal Vrata*. Of religious association, there is little in it. The story is rather loose-strung and lyrical in character. However, the solar ballad of the *Magha-mandal Vrata* is not the only evidence of solar literature of Bengal. In accordance with the conventional mode of the composition of *Mangal Kavyas*, one or two *Surya Mangals*

containing coherent and compact stories were also composed in the name of the *Surya Thakur*. The stories narrated in them differ altogether from the story of the *Maghamandal* legend.

The name of the earliest Bengali poet of *Surya Mangal* is Ramjivan Bhattacharyya Vidyabhushana. He composed *Suryer Panchali* (or the legend connected with the ceremonial worship of the Sun god), in the Saka year 1611 or 1709 A.D. This poem throws a flood of light on the cult of the Sun god in medieval Eastern Bengal.²⁶ It concludes with the instructions: Whoever would worship the Sun god in this way would be always preserved by his deityship (from all harm). The foregoing medieval Bengali legend bears a striking similarity to the one that is recited in connection with the ceremonial worship of the deity *Itu-Ra'la*, which is performed in Eastern Bengal on Sunday following the day in the month of *Agrahayana* (November-December).²⁷ From the *Suryer Panchali* we learn: (a) that the worship of the Sun god was very popular in Eastern Bengal during the 17th and the preceding centuries of the Christian Era; (b) that the people of the countryside worshipped this deity for obtaining the boons of happiness and prosperity; and (c) that it was further believed that, if the consecrated water used in the worship of this god were sprinkled upon the bodies of dead men, they would come to life again. In addition to *Suryer Panchali*, a little altered form of the story therein can be seen in another *Vrata* namely, *Karamadi Vrata* performed by the female folk of Eastern Bengal. Hence, the story as written by Ramjivan is not also original. Its style and conception are vitiated by the conventionalism of later *Mangal Kavyas*. Besides Ramjivan, another poet Kalidas by name is known to have composed *Surya Mangal* or

Surya's Panchali. He has spoken of himself as 'Dvija' or Brahmin; nothing more can be known about him. He is supposed to have flourished in the 18th century A.D.

13 interesting folk-songs describing a few of the leading incidents in the career of the Sun-god have been discovered in the district of Barisal in Eastern Bengal.²⁸ From the number of archaic Bengali words and phrases that have been used in these folk-ballads, it would appear that they are very old. Some scholars are of opinion that they were composed before the Puranic Age.²⁹ From an examination of these folk-ballads, it appears that during the Middle Ages, the cult of the Sun-god was very popular in the district of Barisal in Eastern Bengal and that there songs or hymns used to be chanted in every Hindu household in connection with the ceremonial worship of this deity. It would appear from a few lines³⁰ that they are charms whereby the Sun is caused (160) to come out of the sky and shine upon the earth below. A folk-ballad (No. V) proves, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the popularity and the widespread character of the cult of the Sun god, during the middle ages in Eastern Bengal.³¹ From the study of this song, we learn that the sun-deity was prayed to and propitiated by his votaries with the presentation of various kinds of offerings in order to make him shine forth upon this earth, for men cannot live without his life-giving beams. The deity accedes to their prayers, accepts their offerings, and, being propitiated thereby, he pours forth his beams upon the world below, as will appear from line 14 of this song that says, "Having received the worship (from his worshippers,) the boy Sun-god looked all around (him)".

Sun worship still survives in several nursery-rhymes in Bengal.³² In lower Bengal, there are many nursery-rhymes in vogue that are chanted by little on foggy or cloudy morning without knowing that they are thereby praying to the Sun god and imploring him

to come out of the sky and shine upon the earth below as they are very much in need of the Sun's vivifying influences. Mention may be made of the nursery rhymes no. 52 of Sarkar's collection,³³ which shows how the moon is represented therein as going to the Sun's place describing to the latter the miseries from which men and beast of mundane world are suffering for want of sunshine, and therefore, imploring him to come out of the sky and shine upon the earth below. Again in Nursery-rhyme no. 324 of the same collection, the Sun is prayed to shine upon the earth as well as upon the forest of plantain trees for the ripening of the bunches of plantains and is promised an umbrella to be erected over his head by way of thanks-giving for this boon conferred upon mankind. Again, in Nursery rhyme No. 216 the Sun god is addressed as a 'maternal uncle' and prayed to shine upon the earth.

Worship of the Sun as *Dharmathakur*: In Bankura and other parts of Western Bengal, offerings are made to *Dharma Thakur* with the object of obtaining his blessings for the crop of the season.³⁴ It appears that Sun was identified to some extent with the Dharma and worshipped as a folk god in rural Bengal in the Middle Ages.³⁵ Whether this identification was responsible in some way for the alleged popularity of the Sun as a folk god in rural Bengal in the middle ages is not known, although there is little doubt that a large bulk of the rural population of Bengal at the time was Buddhist.

Ramai Pundit, the author of the famous Buddhist work *Sunya Purana*, laid down form and formulae of the worship of Dharma. According to him, Surya is to be mediated on as follows:-

Mandalam vartulakaram suunyadeham mahabalam

*Ekcakradharam devam tam Suryam pranamyaham*³⁶

That Surya drives in one-wheeled chariot is a Puranic Concept but *mandalam*, *vartulakaram*, *Sunyadeham* are epithets, which belong to the god Dharma who is often worshipped in a tortoise-shaped stone image. Such an image of Dharma is actually worshipped at the *Sarvamangala* temple at Burdwan town as Surya. It is reported that this worship has continued for the last 250 years.³⁷ Investigation into cases of Sun worship among Hinduised tribes and tribal peoples reveal interesting facts. A number of tribes identify the Sun with Dharma and offer him unorthodox sacrifices. If it is assumed that these tribes are remnants of the Buddhist population the source of this particular worship may be traced back to the Middle Ages.³⁸ The object of worship is mainly agricultural, in some cases it is offspring.

II

Sun in the Beliefs and Practices of the Tribes of Bengal

A critical study of the practices of the primitive tribes of Bengal may also throw valuable light on the Sun worship in Bengal. Tylor³⁹ has shown that Sun worship had been a very widely prevalent phenomenon among the primitive tribes of the world and such instances are not absent in India too. The great, radiant and jubilant deity of the firmament, who makes his appearance daily at the appointed hour and returns back to his

mansion on the other side of the western hills, is the greatest object of reverence and worship for a number of tribes inhabiting this eastern portion of this vast sub-continent of India. Generally, it is not the *physical* Sun who is so much adored and worshipped but it is the *indwelling spirit* of this bright orbit, which is the object of so much regard and adoration.⁴⁰

Santals are the majority among the *Adivasis* of Bengal. Their religious system is headed by the great Sun-god *Sing Bonga*⁴¹ or *Chando*. They worship the Sun as the highest spirit who has his allotted place in the *Jahirthan* or sacred grove.⁴² *Chando* or *Sing Bonga* eats chickens and once in four or five years a feast in his honour is held. He protects from all dangers and never harasses anyone. He is worshipped at the '*Jom Sim*' festival. '*Monreko Turuiko*' is invoked in plural number, but actually he is a single God. He is worshipped to have good rain, good harvest and good health. Among the Santals, the sacrifice is placed on an open space where the rays of the rising Sun may fall upon the offerings. The Santals sometime swear in the name of '*Sing Bonga*'. In a paper,⁴³ Rev. P. O. Bodding provides us with an instance of the Santal belief. Says he, "A common practice for all three sects (of the Kharwar Santals) is that they worship Ram Chando. *Ram* is a Hindu deity; *Chando* is Santali for Sun, but used about the God of the Universe, who is confounded with the Sun". It is a case of mere confusion. There are sufficient evidences to prove the existence of a wide spread idea among the primitive tribes of Eastern India that the Sun is the supreme god of the universe. Referring again to the Kharwar Santals Rev. Bodding writes, "Their women every morning plaster a small circular spot with cow dung in the middle of the courtyard and at the entrance from the

village street. They take care not to be seen during this operation. This plastered bit symbolizes the Sun. Some of their women have taken up the habit of lighting a lamp every evening after sunset, and they worship with this in their hand turning to the four corners of the world."

The *Oraons* form the second largest of the tribal communities in Bengal. According to Father Dehon,⁴⁴ the Oraons worship a supreme god who is known as *Dharmesh*. A white cock is offered to him in times of calamity when prayers to other gods have failed. This *Dharmesh* is no other than the Sun god⁴⁵ - "*Sing Bonga*" of the Santals and the Mundas and "*Boram*" of the Bhuiyas and the Kharias. Curiously, Hopkins and others⁴⁶ writes that the Oraons, though recognizing a supreme deity in the Sun, do not pray him because he does no harm.

The *Bhumij* people mostly follow the Hindu religion. It has been noticed that they were attracted towards Hindu Gods and Goddesses because of their long association with the Hindus. However, there are many⁴⁷ who still worship the Sun under the name of *Sing-Bonga* and *Dharam* "as the giver of harvests to men and the cause of all changes of seasons affecting their agricultural fortunes".⁴⁸ *Sing Bonga* is the chief deity of most Austric tribes.

The *Mundas*⁴⁹ also place the Sun-god *Sing Bonga* at the head of their pantheon. In every occasion, they worship him. They believe that *Sing Bonga* created this world, and he only can save them from all dangers. Generally, white goats and white cocks are

sacrificed in his name. The priest '*Pahan*' generally offers worship in the name of different deities.

The *Mahalis* are the worshippers of *Surji Devi. Sing Bonga* or the Sun God⁵⁰ is their '*Surji Devi*'. In *Baisakh* (April-May), they worship '*Surji Devi*'. At that time, they sacrifice kids, chickens and pigeons in the name of '*Surji Devi*' in '*Jaherthan*' or the shrine. The Mahali priest does all the rituals. After the worship is over, they cook the offered meat and take the meal together. The females also can eat that meat; they take equal part in the arrangements. Generally, after every 12 years the Mahalis worship '*Surji Devi*' for the welfare of the village.

The *Mal-Paharias*⁵¹ has the Sun as their supreme god. They name him as *Gosain*. He is worshipped on occasional Sundays "by the head of the family who must prepare himself for the special rite by eating no salt on the previous day and fasting all Saturdays. Before Sunrise on Sunday morning, a new earthen vessel, a new basket, some rice, oil, areca nuts and vermilion and a brass *lota* (pot) of water with a mango-twig placed on it⁵² are laid out on a clean space of ground in front of the house. The worshipper shows these offerings to the rising Sun and prays addressing him as '*Gosain*'. This rice is then given to a goat, which is decapitated while eating, by a single blow from behind.

The *Kharias*⁵³ worship the Sun god as creator and preserver. An anthill⁵⁴ in an open space is the altar on which the Kharias place their offerings for the solar deity.

Passing on to the **Gonds**,⁵⁵ we find the names *Bura Deo*, *Bada Deo*, *Suraj Deo* or *Badial pen* used to indicate their supreme deity, the Sun-god. In the hilly tracts, he is worshipped under the name of Rayatal.⁵⁶ On a special day, all the male adults proceed to the forest and set up the altar of *Bura Deo* underneath an *Asan* tree. Next, a symbol of the god is placed on it before which sacrifices take place. The Gonds⁵⁷ used to worship a representation of the Sun by means of human sacrifices. It used to be in the nature of a feast in which are combined fertility rites as well.

The **Asuras**⁵⁸ also pay their reverence to the Sun as their chief god. The **Hos** regard *Sing Bonga*⁵⁹ otherwise known as "*Ote Boram*" as the chief god of their tribe, who created the earth and filled it with all sorts of life. Many compare Him with the Sun. In every celebration, *Sing Bonga* is worshipped. Just after the baby is born, the father sacrifices a chicken in the name of *Sing Bonga*. The **Garos**⁶⁰ also pay reverence to the Sun-deity. However, the nature of the god shows a good deal of difference. The Sun deity is no longer a *supreme god* and has lost his dignified position. The **Korwas**⁶¹ and some other smaller tribes worship the Sun as their chief god. An anthill in an open space is the altar on which the Korwas place their offerings for the solar deity. The Chief God of the **Birhors** is *Sing Bonga* or the Sun God.⁶² They believe that *Sing Bonga* created this earth and he punishes the bad. He is compared to the bright rays of the Sun. *Sing Bonga* protects from all dangers. They offer white chicken and white goat facing eastward, while worshipping *Sing Bonga*.

The *Khonds*⁶³ worship the Sun as their supreme god under the name of *Penu* (the god of light) or *Bella Penu* (the Sun god). They had a belief in one supreme God, 'a theism embracing polytheism' and other notions, which have been abstracted from their worship of the Sun as the great god. The light or the Sun god created a wife – Tari, the goddess of earth, the originator of all the ills that befell humanity⁶⁴ while the Sun god is a good god. Tari tried to prevent *Bella Pennu* - the Sun god from creating man. However, he created man. The dark-goddess Tari sowed the seed of sin in man. Death came to men. The Sun god was victorious while others say that Tari continues the struggle. There are four kinds of fate of man after death. One of this is that the soul goes to the Sun. It is similar to the belief of the Aryans that the Sun is the home of the dead. The chief feast to the Sun god is *Salo-Katho*, which is something like the *Soma*-feast. Since it is held at harvest time, Sun worship appears to have been connected with harvest and fertility. It is something like the *Pongal* festival of south India.

The names, by which the Sun god is addressed amongst the tribe described above, may be classified into two groups, viz., *Sing Bonga* and *Boram*. The group of tribes which uses the former name i.e., *Sing Bonga* has no other variant for it. However, the name *Boram* has a good number of variants, all of which can be recognised as derived from it. The variants generally are *Bero*, *Bedo*, *Buda*, *Biru*, *Bella*, *Bada*, *Badial*, etc.

Amongst all the tribes named above, there is one common feature of the concept of the Sun god. It is the beneficent but innocuous nature of this supreme god - the Sun-deity. The deity who is the chief of all the gods or spirits and who is always beneficently disposed towards his devotees is completely helpless in the hands of the mischievous minor god lings (which are in most cases his own creations) in matters of defending his

poor worshippers on the earth. Another common feature, which looms large before our eyes about the place of worship most suitable to the Sun god according to the unwritten *Sastras* of these aboriginal tribes, is the supreme necessity of a *clear open space* on which the Sun may shine freely without any obstruction. The usefulness of this custom is apparent from the Mal-Paharia system where the falling of the Sun's rays on the articles offered is a necessity. This also perhaps explains similar customs of making offerings to the Sun in the open-air by the rural people of Bengal in many of their *vratas* performed for the blessings of the Sun god (e.g., *Suryavrata*, *Tapavrata*, *Itu-pua*). A peculiar feature of Sun worship among all these tribes is the general absence of any material representation of the deity. The sacrifices are offered to him in an open space cleared of jungle where an altar is raised.

Coming to the articles⁶⁵ offered to the Sun, we find very important and interesting characteristics. As a rule, all the tribes mentioned above offer animal sacrifices to the Sun, which consist of fowls, goats, pigs, buffaloes and others. The most important fact about this is the wide prevalence of offering *white coloured animals or birds* to the Sun god. In the month of August when the *Gora* rice ripens, the first fruits of the year are offered to *Sing Bonga* by the Hos. The offering remains to be incomplete without the sacrifice of a white cock, which is offered at the same time. The Mundas worship *Sing Bonga* in times of great distress with the sacrifice of a white fowl. According to Father Dehon, a white cock is offered to *Dharmesh*, the Sun god, in times of misfortune when prayers to other gods have been fruitless.

The facts mentioned above clearly indicate that at some remote past there had been a group of people living in this part of Eastern India, who were ardent worshippers

of the Sun god. With them the Sun-deity was a powerful god, the distributor of good and evil, the source of life and prosperity, the bestower of happiness and misery both in this and in the next world. This once active and powerful god has now, in a new environment, lost his former power, though retaining the prestige.

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50. Baskey, *op. cit.*, p. 177.
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52. This is thought to represent the seat of the Sun god. This may be a rude imitation of the Hindu *purna-kumbha* required in all sorts of sacred ceremonies, religious or social.
53. Das, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 91.
54. Risley, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 468f. Some of the Dravidian tribes swear by the anthill (Dalton, E.T., *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, pp. 158, 223). Anthill was believed to possess curative properties (*Atharvaveda* II, 3.4, 5; VI.100.2).
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APPENDIX - C

EXTRACTS FROM
INSCRIPTIONS ON
SUN IMAGES

EXTRACTS FROM INSCRIPTIONS ON SUN IMAGES

1. Mahisantosh Surya-image inscription of the 15th regnal year (=899 A.D. of Mahendrapala (Pratihara),

Text: Line 1: *Om (I) Samvat 15 Mārgga-śukla-saptamyāh śrī Mahendra pāladeva-vījayarājye Viṣṇu na-*

Line 2: *ndi-naptā Gaṅgānandi-sunū Lokanandinā Āditya-bhaṭṭārahah kārīta (I)*

Iti Khanaka Vīdu (dyu) ta (II)

Eng. Trans: - Hail (Ye Lord). On the seventh day of the bright half of the month of *Margasirsa*, i.e. Agrahayana, (appertaining to) the fifteenth victorious regnal year of (king) Sri Mahendrapaladeva, (an) image of Lord Aditya (Surya) was carved or done by one Loka Nandi, grandson of Visnu Nandi and son of Ganga Nandi. Thus, (says) the engraver Vidyuta.

Ref.: Sircar, D.C., 'Mahisantosh Image inscription of Mahendrapala (Pratihara), Year 15', *EI*, Vol. XXXVII, 1968, pp. 204-208; Mukherjee, S.C., *Indian Museum Bulletin*, January 1967, pp. 44-45 and plates.

2. Inscription (C. 10th cent. A.D.) on a Surya-image (British Museum)

"Om Indranīlamanīśiśvhyah śilāya

buddhiśālināh, ghaṭitāya kritajaena amṛiteṇa susilpinā"

Eng. Trans.:- The image has been carved in stone by the wise, grateful, and good artist 'Amṛita', pupil of Indranīlamaṇi

Ref.: Chanda, R. P., *Medieval Indian Sculpture in the British Museum*, London, 1934, p. 66.

3. Kulkudi (P.S. Gosānihāt, Dt. Faridpur) Sun god Image Inscription of
Govindachandra – year 12 (C. 1032 A.D.)

1. *Śrī Lakṣmīdīna-kārita-Bhaṭṭārahah*

2. *Śrī Śrī Govindachandradeva pādīya*

3. *samvat 12 phālguna*

4. *dine 19*

Eng. Trans.:- (This is the image of) of the Sun god, caused to be made by the illustrious Lakṣmīdīna. The year 12 is of the exalted Govindacandradeva. The 19th day of Phālguna.

Ref.: Bhattashali, N. K., *EI*, Vol. 27, 1947-48, pp. 25-26, plate opposite p. 25;
Sircar, D. C., *Bhāratavarṣa*, Chaitra, 1348 B. S., p. 397.

4. Bairhāṭṭā Sūrya image inscription (C. 11th/12th Cent. A.D)

"Om Śrīmad Vaktraśiv=āchārya kārita bhāti kāmadah

Sūryah samasta-rogaṅām harttā Viśva-prakāśakah"

Eng. Trans.: (This image of) the Sun, who bestows splendour and fulfils desires, removes all diseases and illumines the universe, has been made by the Master the Vaktrśiva".

Ref.: Majumdar, N. G., *ASIAR*, 1930-34, p. 257 (Pl. CXXVII, C); *HB-I*, p. 456; *DHI*, p. 440; *SWAI-P*, p. 293, No. 16.

5. Nahapara (Dacca) Surya Image Inscription (C. 12th Cent. A.D.)

“Subhachittadāsasya”

Eng. Trans.: (The image was dedicated by) Subhachitta Dasa.

Ref.: *IBBS*, p. 170.

6. Fragmentary record of Viśvarūpa

*Jāgartti vasminudite prayāti
chātantu śete janatā samastā I
Trailokyadīpam tamanantamūrttim.
abhyāhatābham śaraṇam prayāti’//*

Eng. Trans.: “I take shelter to this all pervading image who is the lamp of this universe (*anantamūrtti*) who having risen rouses the whole world from slumber and having taking adieu keeps them to their bed”

Ref.: *El*, Vol. XXXVI, p. 88; Chatterjee, Rama, *Religion of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1985, p. 213.

7. Rajganj (district Jalpaiguri) Sun god Image Inscription (C. 12th century)

“Om Svasti śrī-Śiva-devādityah”

Eng. Trans.:- (This image of) Aditya was dedicated by Sivadeva.

Ref.: Bhattacharya, P.K., Indian History Congress, *Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Session*, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 1977, pp. 790-791

8. Rajshahi Surya Image Inscription (C. 12th Cent. A.D.)

“*Om Amitas (s) ilpīkena pratimā ghaṭitah Om Taraṇīsammya (Taraṇīsasya)*”

Eng. Trans.:- “This image was made by the craftsman Amita of Taraṇśa” (?)

Ref.: *SVRM*, p. 241/605 (VRM no. 177).