

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

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

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

In the Vedic tradition, the Sun was worshipped under various forms and names such as Surya, Savitri, Mitra, Visnu, Pusan, Vivasvat, Bhaga and Aryaman. Most of these deities along with a few others came to form a group of divinities under the name of the Adityas. Some gods and goddesses of the solar family were invoked in the *Rigveda* and

worshipped either in natural form or by means of symbols and fetishes or by meditation. The Later Vedic age continued the worship of the atmospheric Sun under various names and aspects. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* also inform about the growing popularity of Sun worship in the period of their composition. The geographical extension of the Sun-cult appears to have been the whole of Northern India. The Sun was generally being represented, as noted earlier, by means of various symbols before the development of the solar cult. Surya, however, appeared in human form from an early period in Indian history. From the early centuries of the Christian era, the North Indian form of the Sun-Cult was greatly oriented by the Iranian Sun-worshippers - Magi. In course of time, these Maga Brahmanas spread in large numbers from Northwestern India to Eastern India as is known from Govindapur (Bihar) Inscription dated 1137 A.D.² and it was mainly in the efforts of these Sun-priests known here as Acaryas that Sun-worship came to be highly popular in Eastern India. The early Surya-images seldom fail to show the alien features like long tunic, waist- girdle and boots. However, gradual Indianisation of these traits and emphasis on Indian elements like lotus appear to have begun from the Gupta period. The beautifully carved images of the Sun were dedicated and installed in temples. The late Puranas, specially the Upa-puranas, shed much light on the Sun-cult of the early medieval period. After the Guptas, many dynasties of different parts of India patronized the Sun-cult, perhaps for the kingly role of the Sun in heaven. Backed by them and by public men - officers, merchants, scholars, fighters, cloth-weavers etc., the solar cult met with wonderful success.

It is clear to us that Sun worship began in India from a very early time and continued to gain popularity in different parts of India at different times. However, it is

emarkable that in the Eastern part of India, especially in Bengal and its adjoining areas, it became highly popular. In the *Arseya Upanisad* (4th Century B.C.), the Pundras and Suhmas who were undoubtedly the inhabitants of Bengal, have been described as the Sun worshipping tribes. Quite a number of terracotta Sun-images in the pre-Gupta times, even as early as the Maurya-Sunga period, have been found from lower Bengal. Numerous icons of the divinity belonging to the Gupta period have also been procured from various parts of the province. References to the worship of the god in the inscriptions of the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries A.D. are numerous. According to a tradition preserved among a section of the Grahavipras (Sakadvipi), Sasanka brought twelve Brahmanas living on the bank of the Sarayu for worshipping the Sun in order to treat an incurable disease which was, however, cured.³ The Pala kings, though Buddhists, were not hostile to Brahmanical religion in any way; rather, they encouraged it in various ways. Dharmapala is said to have claimed their descent from the solar race.⁴ Sun-images of the Pala period have also been found in large numbers. The Sena kings were strong advocates of the orthodox Brahmanical faith and helped it to attain the position of supremacy in Bengal. Sun worship continued in this period too. Number of the Surya-images belonging to the Sena period is considerably large. Visvarupasena and Suryasena of the Sena dynasty were devout Sun-worshippers. They call themselves *Parama-saura*, indicating the existence of a separate Sun-sect.

A number of contributions have been made by the eminent scholars to the isolated problems relating to Sun-images. Among some earlier works, which are general in nature, the following deserve special mention : K. K. Ganguli, *Some Aspects of Sun Worship in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1965; L. P. Pandey, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*,

lhi,1971; V.C. Srivastava, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*, Allahabad, 1972; Ashutosh
 nattacharya, *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal*, Calcutta,1977; A. C. Dass, *Sun-
 orship in Indo-Aryan Religion and Mythology*, Delhi, 198; D. P. Pandey, *Surya:
 onographical Study of the Indian Sungod*, Delhi,1989. Sun worship and Sun images
 ave also been discussed to some extent in a number of scholarly works such as: R. D.
 anerji, *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, Delhi, 1933; S. K. Saraswati,
Early Sculpture of Bengal, University of Calcutta, 1937; R.C. Majumdar (Ed.), *The
 History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Dacca, 1943; J. N. Banerjea, *Development of Hindu
 onography*, Calcutta, 1956; T. N. Chakraborty, *Some Aspects of Religious Life in
 Bengal*, Calcutta University, 1957; K. C. Sarkar, *The Sculpture of Ancient Varendra*,
 Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, 1963; J. N. Bnerjea, *Panchopasana*, Calcutta,
 1970; R. C.Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta, 1971; Rajatbaran Dattaray:
Vedicism in Ancient Bengal, Calcutta, 1974; Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas
 (Adiparva)*, Reprinted, Calcutta, 1359 B.S.; P. K. Bhattacharya, *Iconography of
 Sculptures*, Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum, Darjeeling, 1983; Rama Chatterjee,
Religion in Bengal, Calcutta, 1985; A. K. M. S. Alam, *Sculptural Art of Bangladesh*,
 Dhaka,1985; R. K. Tripathi, *Social and Religious Aspects in Bengal Inscriptions*,
 Calcutta,1987; Enamul Hoque, *Bengal Sculpture: Hindu Iconography up to C. 1250
 A.D.*, Dhaka,1992; S.N. Kundu, *Prachin Vange Pauranik Dharma O Devabhavana* (in
 Bengali), Burdwan University, Burdwan, 1996; Sakti Kali Basu *Development of
 Iconography in Pre-Gupta Vanga*, Calcutta, 2004 In this connection, it may be
 mentioned here that there is hardly any attempt so far made of a comprehensive work

delineating different aspects of the Sun worship in the area under study and its related problems.

We are, however, fortunate enough to have a large number of original sources for our study. Among these we may, at first, mention the Vedas like *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* and other Samhitas like *Vajasaneyi*, *Maitrayani*, *Taittiriya* etc.; Brahmanas like *Aitareya*, *Gopatha*, *Kausitaki*, *Satapatha*, *Pancavimsa*, *Sāmavidhāna*, *Taittiriya* etc; Upanisads such as *Taittiriya*, *Maitri*, *Candogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Kausitaki*, *Svetasvatara*; Grihyasutras like *Apastamba*, *Asvalayana*, *Gobhila*, *Khadira*, *Hiranyakesin*, *Mānava*, *Paraskara*, *Sankhayana* etc; Dharma Sutras like *Baudhayana* *Gautama* etc ; Two Epics - *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; Puranas like *Vayu*, *Visnu*, *Markandeya*, *Brahmanda*, *Matsya*, *Bhavisya*, *Skanda*, *Samba*, *Agni*, *Saura*, *Brihaddharma*, *Brahmavaivarta*, *Visnudharmottara*; Tantras such as *Guhya Samaja* *Tantra*, *Saradatilaka*, *Sadhanamala*, *Saundarya-mala* etc; Smritis like *Manu* and *Yajnavalka*; different *Silpasastras* and works like *Brihat Samhitā*, *Āryāsaptasatī*, *Dharma Puja Vidhana* *Kriyakandavaridhi*, *Pavana-Duta*, *Ramacharita* *Sadukti-karnamrita*, *Subhasita-ratnakosa* and the *Kulaji* texts. The archeological sources like inscriptions, coins, amulets, seals and sculptural pieces that are discovered from different parts of Bengal again supply us information, which are no less important.

The popularity of Sun worship in early Bengal led to the proliferation of different types of Sun-images. Temples were also dedicated to the Sun god. Inscriptions were carved with respectful reference to the divinity. Then these phenomena naturally pose certain questions. What is the secret of the continued popularity of Sun worship in ancient Bengal? Is it the fact that out of the three Saura-centres of India as referred to by

the late Puranas, Mundira that is believed to be the same as *Gangasagara-samgama* (Southern Deltaic region) and Mandāra, one of all the important images of Surya in India in Punyavardhan (Puṇdravardhana)⁵ played a significant role in spreading and popularizing the Sun-cult all over the province? Sun-god was regarded not only as the bestower of welfare and fulfiller of desire but also as *Samasta-roganam hartta* (healer of all diseases).⁶ How far did the episode of Sasanka, the first historical ruler of Bengal, as mentioned earlier, create a congenial atmosphere for popularization of the Solar-cult in Bengal? To what extent did the tolerant policy of the Buddhist Pala rulers towards the Brahmanical religion help the Sun worship along with other principal cults like Vaisnavism and Saktatism in enjoying traditional supremacy? As said earlier, Suryasena and Visvarupasena call themselves *Parama-Saura* while *Parama-Mahesvara* is applied to both Vijayasena and Vallalasena and *Parama-Vaisnava* to Laksmanasena. This poses a very pertinent question as to why the later Sena Kings made such a remarkable departure from the religious affiliation of their predecessors.

A thorough investigation of all these questions will necessitate the proper understanding of the sociological significance of the proliferation of Sun-images and Sun worship in this part of India. Besides the Sun-temples at Mundira, it is not unlikely to locate some areas of ancient *Saura-Mandala* in Varendra, which have yielded perhaps the largest number of Sun-images. This again is possibly due to the presence of a Sun-sect, the existence of which can be traced from the time of the Mahabharata, as postulated by Hopkins.⁷ Again, it is no less interesting to notice that notwithstanding the immense popularity of the Sun-cult in the early medieval Bengal, it steadily receded to the background with the passage of time, leaving room to the other important Brahmanical

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

Lastly, we would like to have a proper understanding of the different aspects of Sun worship under several chapters. The introduction is followed by discussion of the worship of the Sun in the Vedic literature. Next, we propose to deal with the Sun worship in the Epic and Puranic literature. The worship of the Sun is closely related to a legend of the Samba Purana and the role of the Iranian Sun-worshippers (Maga Brahmanas) is also required to be investigated in this context. The fourth chapter deals with the growth and popularity of Sun worship in early Bengal, while in the fifth chapter we are inclined to make a thorough probe into the different types of Sun-images discovered in various parts of Bengal and preserved either in the museums or in the private collections. In the last chapter, we have taken notice of the factors responsible for the subsequent decline in the popularity of Sun worship. The conclusion deals with the findings of the study.

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

Notes and References

1. XII, p. 83.
2. *EI*, II, 1893, p. 330.
3. cf. *Mahadevakarika Kulapanji* by Ramadeva.
4. cf. “*Samudrakula-dvipa*”- *Ramacharita*, 1.4.
5. *Skanda Purāṇa, Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa*, Ch. 133, p. 508 ff.
6. Bairhatta Surya-image Inscription, *ASIAR*, 1930-34, p. 257.
7. *Epic Mythology*, p. 88.