Historicizing the *Shibsankirtankavya*: Conceptualising the Brahmanical Socio-Moral Order of Early Modern Bengal

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The Shibsankirtankavya is a mangalkavya that is also part of a larger corpus of popular 'loukik' (folk) poems composed about the deity Shiva. The kavya doesn't include an account of any politically relevant contemporary event, which is the primary reason why it has been neglected by historians to a great extent as a source of Bengal's history. However, it is replete with an in-depth understanding of the contemporary social and economic conditions of the region of Rarh or western Bengal in the early eighteenth century. The descriptions of an intoxicated and beggarly Shiva's transition into the role of an agrarian householder; the skirmishes within the God's household, between the spouses (Shiva and Parvati), reflect a very crude description of early modern rural life. Such humanised depictions of the deities highlight the interdependence of the agrarian and fishing economies within the region. Set in the rural backdrop of 18th century Rarh, the primary theme recognized in this paper is that of agrarian expansion, and its consequences on the Brahmanical religion. Apart from official records, contemporary anthropological surveys too serve as a useful source for understanding both the nature and purpose of the verse narrative. The patron of the text, a zamindar, utilises the didactic nature of the performative mangalkavyas to communicate with his subjects, his source of revenue, in prioritising the aim of maximising revenue-extraction and the setting up of a social and moral order that is conducive for the expansion and effective fruition of the agrarian process within the ambit of a Brahmanical socio-moral order.

Keywords: *Shibsankirtankavya*, Brahmanical order, agrarianisation, gender norms, early modern Bengal

The *Shibsankirtankavya* is a work of fiction. Despite sounding like a disclaimer before the start of a movie, one needs to be mindful of this fact before delving into the translations and analyses that unfold in this paper.[1] This particular

[1] This article includes excerpts from the primary source of this study—*Shibsankirtan ba Shibayan* (Rameswara, *Shibsankirtan ba Shibayan*, edited by Jogilal Haldar. Kolkata: University of Calcutta Press, 2012)—which have been translated and transliterated by the author. The translations aim to be as literal as possible. To ensure accuracy, lexicographical resources such

mangalkavya is rooted in the rural tracts of the region of Rarh (western) Bengal.[2] Several popular '*loukik*' (folk) poems praising Shiva had already been in circulation within the region by the 17th century.[3] The spread of agricultural expansion had further led to the production of popular Shakta and Shaivite literary trends.[4] The popularity of these poems is evident in their production in huge numbers throughout the 17th as well as early 18th centuries.[5] This paper attempts to conceptualise the nature of Bengal's Brahmanical socio-moral order[6] in the early modern period through a close reading of the

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as a Bengali–English dictionary (Sailendra Biswas, *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan (Dictionary of the Bengali Language)*, 4th ed. Kolkata: Shishu Sahitya Samsad Pvt. Ltd., 1984, ISBN 81-85626-05-7) and a thesaurus (Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, *Samsad Samarthasabda Kosh (Bengali Thesaurus)*, 3rd ed. Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, April 2013) have been consulted. These tools were also used to determine the specific meanings of Bengali words within their original context. As the *kavya* was composed in Middle Bengali, it contains several archaic terms that require careful attention during translation. Where necessary, explanatory material has been added within brackets to convey meaning as clearly as possible.

[2] *Mangalkavyas* are narrative verses written in the *pancali* style of poetry in Bengali that are associated with a particular deity. They are part of a rich performative as well as oral tradition of the region. These verses are devotional in nature. However, they have been used as sources for historical reconstruction by scholars studying the early modern period in history. See: David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal*, (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008). For a deeper understanding of the nature of the Rarh- western part of the region of Bengal- in the early modern period, see: Geddes, Arthur, 'The Regions of Bengal', *Geography 15, no. 3*, 1929, pp. 186–98.

[3] Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla sahityer itivrtta* (Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 1981).

[4] Richard Eaton has succinctly argued that the spread of agriculture is directly related to the establishment of Sufi *khanqahs* in the region. This relationship between popular religious trends and the entrenchment of notions relating to the materiality of the region has been inspired by his work. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[5] Rameswara, "Introduction," in *Shib-sankirtan ba Shibayan*, ed. Jogilal Haldar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2012),1-58. This version of the *mangalkavya* dates to the early-mid eighteenth century.

[6] The Brahmanical socio-moral order is the system by which upper caste Hindus, the Brahmans, maintain their control over religious authority as well as over literature, whether scriptural or normative. This control establishes caste-based, gender-based as well as class-based stratification in society. In order to maintain and extend this authority of the upper-class and caste male, it was essential for the political authorities (also upper caste) of the region to capitalise on literature as an ideological instrument to reiterate these norms and values on which the entire structure of a Brahmanical society is based. The stratification must be maintained while allowing for the increase in the popularity of the belief system. Uma

Shibsankirtankavya, composed in the early eighteenth century. The poem has eight *palas* or divisions. From the fourth part onwards, the poem contains descriptions from the popular oral traditions centred on Shiva and his household, along with Puranic plots and references.

The descriptions of an intoxicated, beggarly Shiva and the skirmishes within God's household—between the spouses (Shiva and Parvati)—reflect a very crude description of rural life. These realistic depictions highlight the dependence of the rural population on agricultural produce as well as the fishing economy. Based on this larger socio-economic context, it is possible to explore other themes such as the gendering of society and the moral norms and proprieties expected of a woman belonging to a higher socio-economic background. The comparison between such ideal upper caste women and the lower-caste women of the agrarian society provides a richer understanding of the contemporary Brahmanical social order. The diverse audience of this *kavya* reflects the social diversity within the region. The narrative further reflects the familiarity of the poet with the nature of agricultural production in the western parts of the region. This awareness translates into the didactic message of the *mangalkavya*s that attempted to reshape the norms of an agrarian society.

Methodological Framework

Velcheru Narayan Rao, David Dean Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have proposed that "history is written in the dominant literary genre of a particular community, located in space, at a given moment in time."[7] Their argument rests on the idea that early modern texts consisted of both 'fictional' as well as 'factual' narratives within the same genre. This distinction could be made by the readers or the recipients of such literature. Newly ascendant groups of political authority often attempt to dominate such local versions of the past by denying them historical legitimacy. The textual tradition has textures that the reader is able to identify within a specific social context.

Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14, (1993): 579–85.

[7] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Dean Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (India: Other Press, 2003), 1-19.

Changes over time in such contexts have led to such a connection between the literature and the people of its locality being disrupted.[8]

The *mangalkavya*s being looked at here were not produced by the semi-literate sections of society, like the *Kumara-ramuni katha* studied by Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, but by individuals who represented the clerical class of the powerful landholding groups of the region – the *zamindars*. The receptors of these texts, therefore, were able to identify the textures due to their relatability to the social and economic themes addressed in them. Scholars have suggested the necessity of critical and appropriate methods to interpret historical texts of the early modern period in order to identify the genres of literature that may be viewed as "distinctly historical narratives."[9] The most important marker of the historicity of such texts is the awareness of the community of receptors of these texts especially regarding their historical nature. Not only were vernacular traditions more widely circulated and received, but they were also required to include themes that could be identified by the readers and listeners of the texts as representative of the cultural identity of the region.

Partha Chatterjee has rightly cautioned against presumptions based on the Rao-Shulman-Subrahmanyan analysis regarding the identification of early modern historical literature. The variation in the nature of such literary traditions across early modern India and its diverse linguistic regions must be taken into account while arguing for the historicity of such texts. He has recognised an "amoral realism" in the *mangalkavya* literature of early modern Bengal in its representations of even the divine world as one marked by mundane human sentiments and aspirations.[10] The *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative is replete with such depictions. Bandhyopadhyay argues that, apart from Mukundaram, no other poet portrays God in this manner.[11] Sometimes

[8] Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, 1-11.

[9] Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, eds., 'Introduction,' in *History in the Vernacular*, 2008, 4.

[10] Ibid., 6.

[11] Mukundaram Chakraborty composed the *Chandimangalkavya; see* Asit Kumar Bandhyopadhyay, *Bangla sahityer itivrtta*, 225.

Shiva, Parvati, and other lesser deities, like *Narada* and *Vishwakarma*, are humanised to such an extent that they are no longer depicted as deities.[12]

The colonial classification of historical time has been challenged by Romila Thapar as she explores the understanding of time in the subcontinent. Time was no longer seen as represented by a linear series of politically motivated events.[13] With respect to this reorganisation of temporal frames in Indian history, one can identify two recently established categories: the 'early medieval' and the 'early modern.' While separated by centuries, these periods shared a lot in terms of the shifts and adjustments experienced by various regions during this transition period.[14] Such shifts were motivated by

[12] For instance, the nickname '*Bishai*' has been used for the deity *Vishwakarma*, who is called on by Shiva first during the preparation for agrarian production, and later during the manufacturing of the *'shankha'* or conch-shell bangle demanded by Parvati.

[13] The concept of time as being cyclic in nature rather than linear within Indian historiography has been looked at using ancient Puranic, as well as Jain and Buddhist materials by Thapar. She has associated the conceptualisation of historical time within Indigenous literary sources with the cosmological concepts around time. The creation of the Universe is often considered to be a starting point in these sources and time is measured in cycles of destruction and reincarnation thereafter. Notwithstanding the mythological nature of such ideas around time, Thapar clearly argues for the representation of historical change in such textual materials. Thereby, she staunchly argues against the claims of 'ahistoricity' attributed by colonial historians to the ancient and early modern pasts of the subcontinent. See Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Also see, Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*.

[14] The controversies surrounding the early medieval period are like those associated with the periodization of the early modern period, both being marked by political disruptions in various regions across the subcontinent. These periods have long been associated with debates regarding change or continuity, rather than being studied for their specificities. Each of these periods has been looked at by historians, in recent decades as separate periods marked by historical transformations unique to them. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has attributed many of these changes, specifically with reference to the 'early modern' as a period, to human agency. The wide scope of sources available on this period has been enriched in terms of the textures of multilingual and multicultural inclusions made by historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam, John F. Richards, Partha Chatterjee, Tilottama Mukherjee, and Raziuddin Aquil, among others, in their writings and edited volumes on the period, See: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750." *Daedalus, Volume 127, no. 3, (*1998): 75–104; John F. Richards, "Early Modern India and World History", *Journal of World History,* Vol. 8.2, 1997, and, Partha Chatterjee and Raziuddin Aquil edited, *History in the Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, and, Raziuddin Aquil, and Tilottama

economic growth and expansion, among other factors. The shaping of society and economy in the post-Gupta period was marked by political decentralisation and the emergence of regional nexuses of power. Notwithstanding the scholarly debates around the identification of European constructs of 'feudalism' in society, the increasing number of land grants and emerging groups of landed proprietors of *samantas* in the early medieval period were a direct consequence of the agricultural expansion taking place during this period. Along with the inclusion of previously uncultivated land into the agrarian frame, these land grants depict a reordering of local and regional political organisations of power.

Accompanying such studies on the changing economy and society of the period, attention was paid to the impact that such changes had on the moral ordering of society. The study of the various origin myths of the regional ruling groups, such as the Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas, reflects such a socio-political reordering of the religious moral order.[15] The study of history using literature, especially religious as well as mythological narratives, is incomplete without anthropological and archaeological fieldwork due to the interpretative nature of such literary traditions. Often, such literary works are used as ideological tools for coercion as well as the assimilation of competing religious and cultural traditions.[16] Kosambi's analysis of the transition from

Mukherjee, eds., *An Earthly Paradise: Trade, Politics and Culture in Early Modern Bengal*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2020).

[15] Notwithstanding the debate between the scholars regarding the presence of a feudal order in the subcontinent, the historians agree on the growth of regional polities that capitalised on the expansion of agriculture. In order to expand agriculture, these emerging polities employed the system of granting rent-free lands (*Brahmadeya* grants) to people of religious significance. This was intended to utilise religion as a tool to establish a social and moral order favourable to the ruling groups as well as the established Brahmanical religious elites. The various myths that were formulated by the court poets of these polities regarding the origin of relatively new groups drew inspiration as well as added to the Puranic literature of the times. See, R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society (*New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001); B.D. Chattopadhyay, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford Paperbacks, 1994) 28-34.

[16] D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962).

tribe to caste and the transition from clan-based society to state, using religious texts to understand such processes, provides a useful model for this study.[17]

The various regions that were brought under the plough in the early medieval period consisted of groups of tribal populations who had to be incorporated into the larger political setup of the sedentary populations of the regions. The examples of such assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation found in early modern religious texts brought about a significant shift in Hindu religious practices, as a more inclusive and popular form of Hinduism—Puranic Hinduism—came into existence with the help of religious didactic literature like the Puranas.[18] The rules guiding moral conduct in society were simultaneously framed in such Puranic literature, which was established in the regions as a valid source of religious legitimacy.

The early modern period was representative of similar shifts in society. Like the early medieval period, it was marked by a need to focus on the study of specific regions rather than the entire subcontinent. B.P. Sahu's study of regions in the early medieval past formulated methodologies to study regions despite the paucity of adequate official historical documentation of the ancient and early medieval past of the region. The epigraphical evidence, as well as the contemporary literature of the time, has the potential to serve as legitimate historical sources for reconstructing this period. The 18th century witnessed the production of state-sponsored literary works, especially those belonging to the Mughal *Tarikh* tradition of history writing.[19] Despite the availability of such Persian court chronicles, many of which were written in the region by

[17] Romila Thapar, 'Early Indian History and the Legacy of D D Kosambi,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 30 (Jul. 26-August 1, 2008): 43-51.

[18] The studies focus on the religious acculturation of lower-caste and tribal groups in society into the Brahmanic pantheon. They highlight the system of *'Dana'* as instrumental in such a change. The ritual gift-giving of lands was accompanied by the production of literature that helped in the assimilation of groups that were situated on the margins of society. It is through the critical study of such works that the argument regarding Puranic Hinduism is formulated. see, Vijay Nath, *Purāṇas and Acculturation: A Historico-Anthropological Perspective* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001); Vijay Nath, *Dynamics of the Ritual Gift System: Some Unexplored Dimensions* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012).

[19] Syed Ejaz Hussain, 'Political History and Historiography of Bengal Subah, 1700–1757,' in *A Comprehensive History of Modern Bengal, 1700-1950*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2020), 2-8.

scribal classes, the religious literary traditions of the period depict a less biased and more inclusive depiction of the region's social, political, and economic conditions. Therefore, Puranic literary traditions like the *mangalkavya*s serve as an effective source for reconstructing the regional history of early modern Bengal.

The methodological framework, therefore, combines the study of languages and literature with that of historians who have worked on various facets of the history of the early modern past of this region using a diverse range of source materials. This particular study, however, recognises the *Shibsankirtankavya* as a work of literature that also serves as an insightful source of history. The study of the process of literary production has merged the disciplines of history, sociology, and literature within the same fold. This process looks at the functionality of works of literature as a whole.[20] The literature has distinctive elements reflective of the contemporary region, rather than being limited to the courts. Despite being heavily influenced by other popular narratives around the God Shiva, the *kavya* abides by the format of the *mangalkavya*s recognised by scholars of Bengali literature, which are defined as religious, didactic narrative poems written for the primary purpose of popularising and establishing the worship and religious authority of a particular deity belonging to the Hindu, Brahmanical religious pantheon. Their commonality with other early modern devotional literature also lies in their circulation, reception, and broader socio-economic functions.

Contextualising the *Mangalkavya*

The poet of the *kavya*, Rameshwar Bhattacharya (also known as Rameshwar Chakraborty), was from Jadupur village, Baroda pargana, Medinipur district. Born roughly in the year 1677, he relocated to Karnagarh village and continued to write the *Shibsankirtankavya* under the patronage of a *zamindar*—Jaswant Singh, son of Ram Singh. The *Shibsankirtankavya* itself has no details regarding the relationship between the *zamindar* and the reigning Nawab during the composition of the text. However, Jadunath Sarkar has mentioned the *zamindar* in the second volume of his extensive '*History of Bengal*' as Jaswant Ray, a munshi working under the governorship of Murshid Quli Khan, who

[20] Manfred Naumann and Peter Heath, "Literary Production and Reception," *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (1976): 107–26.

had been well-trained in administrative duties. Jaswant Ray had patronised the composition of the *Shibsankirtankavya* after he had returned to Karnagarh.

The manuscript of the *Shibsankirtankavya* may be roughly dated between 1735 and 1750. Bengali litterateurs have often situated the *Shibsankirtankavya* within a longer tradition of popular Shaivite compositions. Dinesh Chandra Sen mentions two other manuscripts of the '*Shibayan*' written by two other poets—Rameshwar and Ram Krishna—which have been dated to around 1763 and the early 17th century, respectively. However, not only was the *Shibayan* composed nearly a century before the *Shibsankirtankavya*, its main plot greatly deviated from it. The *mangalkavya* begins with the praise and devotion to a group of locally established Puranic deities, along with a poem praising the Bhakti saint Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.[21] The *mangalkavya*s are part of a rich vernacular tradition of the region that the people of the region were not only accustomed to but could also easily understand when compared to expository literature produced in Sanskrit philosophy. The inclusion of various gods that were already well-established in the region was not to popularise them but to legitimise the narrative of the texts by making them relatable to the audience.

The *Shibsankirtankavya*, motivated by the popular Vaisnava bhakti tradition, includes the story of Krishna and Rukmini. It also narrates the mythological love story of Usha and Aniruddha. Looking at *'danava'* and *'asura'* (demon) kings in the rich mythological history of Assam, K.N. Dutt has noted the myth around an *asura* king—referred to as Bana—who ruled from his capital at Sonitpur (believed by Dutt to be the same as modern-day Tezpur). This genealogical, as well as mythological account, included the love story between Bana's daughter Usha and Shri Krishna's ancestor, Aniruddha.[22] The presence of similar love stories represents an existing pan-regional Bhakti ideology of devotional love, in both its Vaisnava and Sufi forms. A study by Aditya Behl, of the prologues of the Hindavi Sufi *premakhyans* or romances, which were composed between the 14th and 16th centuries, has emphasised such poetic

[21] Tony K. Stewart has extensively studied the shaping of the devotional Vaisnava Gaudiya tradition over centuries using hagiographical materials on the bhakti saint Sri Chaitanya Dev. see, Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritamrita and the Grammar of Religious Tradition (*United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[22] K.N. Dutt, "Problems in the History of Assam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 23* (1960): 164–69.

inaugurations. Similarly, the *Shibsankirtankavya* and other completed *mangalkavya*s began with a series of poems that were not as relevant to the main plot of the poem but were crucial in introducing and contextualising these works within a specific socio-historical context.[23]

The study of middle Bengali narrative literature was spearheaded by David Curley and Kumkum Chatterjee.[24] The most recent contributions in this space have been by Thibaut d'Hubert and Ayesha Irani.[25] While Chatterjee looked for a Persianate cultural influence, Thibaut articulated a political and literary culture, deeply rooted in the Arakan region of Bengal. Regardless of their focus of study, their research has paved the way for the use of such literature in recovering vernacular records of the region's past society, economy, and political culture. Such forms of literature, unlike other works of popular fiction, were composed in order to fulfil a range of functions motivated by the larger political and socio-economic contexts of the early modern past of Bengal. This process begins with the act of patronage being provided and the *mangalkavya* being composed by the author but is only complete with the consumption of such literary products by its distribution amidst rural audiences. The dialectical relationship between the production and consumption of literature allows a historian to critically read the text as a whole rather than in parts.[26]

Parvati's Desire for Economic Prosperity

A shift in the delta and agrarian expansion eastwards were hardly an indicator of agricultural decline in the already cultivated western parts of the region. Rajat Datta's studies on the commercially vibrant rice-based economy of the

[23] Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31.

[24] Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal (*New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) and, David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008).

[25] Thibaut D'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan (*United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018) and, Ayesha A. Irani, *The Muhammad Avatāra: Salvation History, Translation, and the Making of Bengali Islam* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[26] Naumann and Heath, "Literary Production and Reception," 118.

region reinforce the success in attempts by the political and religious authorities within the region in actualising the aspirations of a growing agrarian economic order.[27] The task at hand, therefore, for the landed authorities—the *zamindars* and *qanungos* of Rarh Bengal—was to ensure agrarian prosperity and proper revenue collection in these areas. The *Shibsankirtankavya* was a part of this larger process.

As a process in itself, the *mangalkavya* addresses the changes required within the households of an economically rising group of people, and society at large, in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. The choice of Shiva as the main deity of the poem is based on the significance of the deity in the region's popular religious and cultural practices. Scholars have traced the origins of Shiva and the widely popular cult that has been shaped around him to 'primitive and aniconic cult-stones.'[28] Bengal's Shaivite faith has been shaped by the socio-economic needs of the region. The role of a householder played by the deity in Bengali peasant society is unique to the region according to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, and therefore a reflection of the region's cultural imagination.[29] Such a positioning of the deity is part of the larger process of tribalisation of the Brahmanic religion, and in some of its stages, Shiva came into violent conflict with the various mother-goddesses who had previously been senior deities. Therefore, if one compares the two deities —Shiva and Parvati—in the region, then their characterisation, as well as origins, are not only different but also often conflictual in terms of the values they represent. The opposition in their characterisation goes beyond the obvious gendered differences. Parvati's character in the *Shibsankirtankavya*, as an ideal wife of a peasant household is more aligned with the norms of the Brahmanical society while Shiva is portrayed as the deity catering to a wider audience, belonging to the lower classes and castes as well, for whom he is a well-established and more relatable religious figure.

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[27] Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, 1760-1880* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000).

[28] D.D. Kosambi, Introduction, in *Myth and Reality*, 3.

[29] Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangal Kabyer Itihas (*Kolkata: Modern Book Agency, reprint, 2006), 177.

The narrative of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, in many ways, 'peasantises'[30] the deity by turning him into a cultivator, and the driving force behind this process is the character of Parvati. While describing the life of Shiva as a beggar, he is shown as incapable of providing for a growing household consisting of children and a retinue of servants. The main topic of contention between Shiva and Parvati within the narrative was the lack of food and nourishment for such a large household. Acting in accordance with the role of the ideal wife, Parvati is not a meek and subservient wife. The ideal wife is also portrayed as being a source of wisdom and practical know-how, viewed as necessary for the economic growth of the family as a unit of the larger agrarian society. While delving into these excerpts, one must again be mindful of the narrative being composed by an upper-caste man for a predominantly female audience. There is an attempt by the poet to ingrain positive values around cultivation within the rural population through his narrative. This is evident in the following lines of the poem, which serve as a direct message to women as vehicles for the spread of such didactic messages:

> গৃহস্থের গৃহ চলে গৃহিনীর গুণে।
> ফেল্যা দিয়া পুরুষ পাসরে সে কি জানে।।[31]
>
> *Grihosther griho choley grihinir guney* ।
> *Phelya diya purush pashorey shey ki jaane* ।।
>
> A householder's home functions based on the qualities of the woman of the house,

[30] The term refers to the conversion of people's profession from tribal professions to agrarian activities, that are relatively sedentary in nature. In defining the early medieval period, scholars have argued that the period not only experienced agrarian expansion across various regions of the subcontinent and the spread of state societies through local state formation, but also the 'peasantization' of tribes and their incorporation within the 'varna-jati' framework. The dominant form of sustenance among the tribal communities was pastoralism. There was a subtle movement of the tribals towards sedentarisation. This process of sedentarisation of the pastoralists continued unabated throughout the medieval period. B. D. Chattopadhyaya argues that the commercialization of agriculture and the increase in the extent of cultivation were the two crucial factors behind this transformation; B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[31] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 218.

Forgetting about these mundane necessities, men fail to understand their importance.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The descriptions of the farming process, and the various measures to be taken up before the actual agricultural production takes place, are instructed by Parvati to Shiva. Rather than focusing on the detailed descriptions of the farming process, the initial exchange between the couple highlights the psychological barriers that an individual has to overcome in order to begin agrarian expansion. This reflects a dilemma that agrarian society faces, wherein agrarian production is crucial to its survival, but it also becomes a source of great torment in practice. At the end of this discussion, Shiva accepts that he must engage in agricultural expansion in order to feed his thriving household.

চষ ত্রিলোচন চাষ চষ ত্রিলোচন ।
নহে দাসদাসী আদি ছাড় পরিজন ।।
চরণে ধরিয়া চন্ডী চন্দ্রচুড়ে সাধে ।
নরমে গরমে কয় ভয় নাই বাধে ।।
বিপরীত নিত্য প্রতি শুনিয়া বিস্তর ।
বিশদ বিশদ ভাব্যা দিলেন উত্তর ।।
বলি বিলক্ষণ কিছু শুন শৈলসুতা ।
দেবতার পোত-বৃত্তি বড়ই লঘুতা ।।
ভিক্ষে দুঃখে আছি ভাল অকিঞ্চন পণে ।
চাষ চষ্যা বিস্তর উদ্বেগ পাব মনে ।।
শুনিতে সুন্দর চাষ শুনিতে সুন্দর ।
সকল সম্পূর্ণ যার তার নাই ডর ।।
চাষ বলে ওরে চাষী তোরে আগে খাব ।
মোরে খাবে পশ্চাতে যদ্যপি ক্ষেতে হব ।।
অনেক যতনে ক্ষেতে শস্য উপস্থিত ।
সুখা হাজা পড়িলে পশ্চাতে বিপরীত ।।
গরীবের ভাগ্যে যদি শস্য হয় তাজা ।
বার কর্যা সকল আনয়ে লয় রাজা ।।
ক্ষেতে দেখ্যা খন্দ যদি খাত্যে নাই পায় ।
কুতকাতে কায়েত কিফাত করে তায় ।।
কাদা পানি খায়্যা ক্ষেতে কর্যা চাষিপনা ।
নরোত্তম ছাড়্যা নরাধম উপাসনা ।।

চাষ অভিলাষ ক্ষমা কর ক্ষেমঙ্করী ।
আর কিছু ব্যাবসায় বল তাহা করি ।।[32]

Chosho Trilochan chaash chosho Trilochan ।
Nohey dash dashi aadi chaaro porijon ।।
Chorone dhoriya chondi chondrochurey shaadhey ।
Norome gorome koy bhoy nahi baadhey ।।
Biporit nrityo poti shuniya bistor ।
Bishod bishod Bhabya dilen uttor ।।
Boli bilokkhon kintu shuno shoiloshuta ।
Debotaar potobritti boroi loghuta ।।
Bhikkhe dukkha achi bhalo okinchon poney ।
Chaash choshya bistor udbeg paabo money ।।
Shunite shundor chaash shunite shundor ।
Shokol shompurno jaar taar naahi dor ।।
Chaash boley orey chaashi torey aage khabo ।
Morey khabey poshchatey jodyapi khetey hobo ।।
Onek jotoney khetey shoshyo uposthit ।
Shukha haaja poriley poshchatey biporit ।।
Goriber bhagye jodi shoshyo hoy taajaa ।
Baar koriya shokol aanoye loy raja ।।
Khetey dakhya khondo jodi khatye nayi pay ।
Kutkaate kaayet kifaat korey taaye ।।
Kaada paani khaiya khete korya chaashipona ।
Norottom chaarya noraadhom upashonaa ।।
Chaash obhilaash khoma koro khemonkori ।
Aar kichu babshyaye bolo taha kori ।।

Parvati appeals to Shiva to cultivate the agricultural field,
Otherwise, he should forget all the servants employed in his household.
Parvati begs at Shiva's feet in persuading him,
Using various strict as well as cajoling tactics, asking him to not be hindered by fear.
After listening to all Parvati had to say,

[32] Ibid.

Shiva contemplated it for a long time and then responded.
(Shiva says) "I am saying negative things but listen to me Parvati,
A God's lifestyle is supposed to be frugal.
I beg and I am poor, but I am also carefree.
Engaging in agricultural activities will create anxiety in my mind.
Farming sounds easy,
Agriculture says to the farmer that it will consume the cultivator first,
Only then can you obtain food from the profession, provided the fields are successfully cultivated.
One needs to be very meticulous in cultivating crops in a field,
Famine and disease can easily lead to crop failure.
If the poor farmer is able to harvest good crops,
The king extracts all of it from the farmer through taxation.
When one can see the fields filled with crops but still have to remain hungry,
They express their despair and helplessness.
After surviving on mud and water, by toiling in the fields as a farmer,
My position as one of the most revered Gods will be upturned.
The initiative of farming is something that I cannot take up Parvati
Suggest any other profession and I will engage in it.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The poet seems to be describing the struggles of the average cultivator in the region. The popularity of the narrative could only be achieved by being as sympathetic to the audience as possible, while also acting as a gentle reminder of the importance of agricultural production for the survival of the rural household in the early modern economy of Bengal. The maximisation of revenue and its collection was rooted in the continuance and growth of agricultural production within the region.

The problems faced by agriculturists are highlighted in detail, further strengthening the argument for the instructive nature of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, when Parvati, on *Narada's* advice, sends several hurdles to bring back her absentee, beggar-turned-farmer husband. The way in which these problems, namely the *daash-maachi* (poisonous flies), *mosha* (mosquito), and *jok* (leech), were dealt with by Shiva, successfully overcoming all the

hindrances to the agrarian process, is all instructive in nature rather than simply adding to the dramatisation of the narrative.[33]

The *shankha* is a conch-shell bangle that is associated with the Hindu married woman as a mark of auspiciousness to date.[34] Even though a detailed study into the evolution and association of religio-cultural symbolism with the object is beyond the scope of this study, it is relevant for understanding the economic aspirations of an early modern Bengali society. Tilottama Mukherjee's study of the nature of commodity consumption within early modern Bengal's urban milieu has identified in the eastern parts of the region names of localities that to date reflect the specialised crafts produced in them. One such locality, still known as *'Shankhabazar'* (shell-workers locality), is especially relevant to this section as it denotes the persistence of guild-like artisanal localities of non-agricultural commodities endemic to the region.[35] The *mangalkavya,* incorporating the object at the heart of the climax of its narrative, shows how the *Shibsankirtankavya* was written for a rural society wherein such cultural values were well-entrenched, and non-agricultural commodity-production was gaining ground within the rural landscape of *Rarh* Bengal.

The *shankha* episode describes such a non-agricultural transaction taking place in the paternal home of Parvati. Parvati's desire is expressed keeping in mind the way she is perceived in society. She rationalises her desire by directly claiming a better position in society having her wrists adorned by the conch-shell bangle.

> লজ্জায় লোকের কাছে দন্ডাইয়া রই ।
> হাত নাড়া দিয়া বাড়া কথা নাই কই ।।
> তুল ডাটি পারা দুটী হস্ত দেখ মোর ।
> শঙ্খ দিলে প্রভুর পুণ্যের নাহি ওর ।।[36]

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[33] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 248-255.

[34] Partho Burman, "Sankha Conch Bangles: How Bengal's Sankhari Community is Fighting All Odds to Keep the Craft Alive", *30 Stades*, April 23, 2021, https://30stades.com/2021/04/23/sankha-conch-bangles-bengals-sankhari-fighting-odds-to-keep-craft-alive-sankha-pola/.

[35] Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013), 66.

[36] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 279-280.

Lojja-ey loker kaachey dondaiya roi ।
Haat naara diya baara kotha nayi koi ।।
Tulo daati paara duti hosto dekho mor ।
Shonkho diley probhur punyer naahi or ।।

She (Parvati) highlights the shame she feels to face people in society.
She is unable to talk to people without using hand gestures.
She shows him her wrists, as soft as the stem of the cotton plant.
If he gifts her the conch-shell bangles, his generosity will have no limits.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

This transaction that takes place between Shiva, disguised as a craftsman, and the women of Himalaya's household, primarily Parvati and her female companions, is symbolic of such transactions taking place in the early modern past of the region. In this section, the disguised Shiva recites a poem titled *Shankar-i-Shotidhormo Bornon* (The description of Sati's dharma), which is in the form of a direct message to all respectable women in contemporary society. The poem sheds light on the patriarchal norms prevalent in society.

নারীর কৌমারে পিতা রক্ষা করে যৌবনে রক্ষিতা প্রভু।
বৃদ্ধে পুত্র পাল্যে নারী তিনকালে স্বতন্তরা নহে কভু।।

Naari-r koumarey pita rokhha korey Joubone rokhhita probhu ।
Briddhe-y putro paaley Naari tinkaley Shotontora nohey kobhu ।।[37]

A father protects a woman in her childhood, Her youth is preserved by her husband,
During old-age her son nurtures her, A woman -through the three life stages- can never be independent.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

It is noteworthy that neither the above excerpt nor the other socio-moral instructions contained in the *kavya,* are exclusive to it. The norms on morality

[37] Ibid., 314.

and gender are a continuation of a temporally and spatially wider tradition of Brahmanical literature. The *Manusmriti* contains the following lines:

> बालया वा युवत्या वा वृद्धया वापि योषिता।
> न स्वातन्त्र्येण कर्तव्यं किंचित्कार्यं गृहेष्वपि॥१४७॥
> बाल्ये पितुर्वशे तिष्ठेत् पाणिग्राहस्य यौवने।
> पुत्राणां भर्तरि प्रेते न भजेत स्वातन्त्र्यताम्॥१४८॥[38]

The translation for the same excerpt is as follows:

> "Even in their own homes, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an
> old lady—should never carry out any task independently.
> As a child, she must remain under her father's control;
> as a young woman, under her husband's;
> and when her husband is dead, under her sons'.
> She must never seek to live independently."[39]

Gendered by Caste and Class

The production of such *mangalkavya* narratives may be viewed as part of the larger social process that has shaped men, women, and social institutions in early India. Admitting that the subordination of women is common to all stages of the early Indian past, Uma Chakravarti has argued that the extent and form of that subordination have been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed.[40] The nature and extent of subordination are better understood using such popular narratives that women across society were listening to as part of their daily activities. The way in which an upper-caste woman is conditioned in society by the Brahmanical order varies largely from the norms put in place for women belonging to agrarian and menial castes that are lower in terms of caste status.

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[38] Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's code of law: A critical edition and translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 588.

[39] Olivelle and Olivelle, *Manu's code of law*, 146.

[40] Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14, (1993): 579–85.

An attempt to understand the intersectionality between caste and gender hierarchy has been made using *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative.

The descriptions of the *'Kocch'* women, and Parvati disguised as a *'Bagdini'* woman, provide a sharp contrast to such idealistic patriarchal depictions of women in the *Shibsankirtankavya*. The first ethnographic survey of the region conducted by H.H. Risley sheds light on the nature of the evolution of such lower castes and their representations in popular literature. Shiva's venture into the neighborhood of the *Kocch* is associated with the normality of having multiple sexual partners for men in the early 18th century. An acknowledgement of this fact is necessary in order to understand the portrayal of the *Kocch* as well as Bagdini woman in the narrative and contrast it with the characterisation of the Brahmanical ideals for the role of upper-caste women associated with the goddess Parvati's role throughout the narrative.

Risley emphasises the position of these castes at the lowest rungs of society by associating the *Kocch* community with "a Dravidian tribe of North-eastern and Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood."[41]The *Bagdini* woman, whom the character of Parvati disguises herself as, in order to keep an eye on her unfaithful farmer husband, has its economic roots in the professions of cultivation, fishing, and other menial activities.[42]

The association of the origin of both these castes has been made with the adulterous form of a householder Shiva. The "*Rajbansi*" sub-caste of the *Kochh* community also referred to themselves as "Shivbansi". In explaining the origins of such endogamous sub-categories of the caste, Risley recounts the legend of Lord Shiva's liaison with the daughter of a *Kocch* tribal chief known as *Hira*.[43]

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[41] H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol 1* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 491. Historians have identified this dichotomy between 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' in the works of Oriental scholarship. Thapar has argued that "The suggested social bifurcation is also remarkably similar; the upper castes were the Aryans and the lower castes were the non-Aryans", See, Romila Thapar, "Ideology and Interpretation of Early Indian History", in *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[42] Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 37.

[43] Ibid., 37.

মুখবিধু দেখ্যা বিধি কর্‍্যা ক্ষয় ।
পুনঃ পুনঃ গঠে তবু তনু নাই হয় ।।
এমত যুবতিগণ পাইয়া চন্দ্রচুড় ।
বেড়িয়া বিহার করে পরম নিগুঢ় ।।
কেহ নাচে কেহ গায় কেহ বায় যন্ত্র ।
কেহ করতালি দেই সবে এক তন্ত্র ।।
কোঁচিনী সকল হইল কুসুম উদ্যান ।
শঙ্কর ভ্রমর তায় মধু করে পান ।।

Mukhobidhu dakhya bidhi koriya khoy ।
Puno puno gothey tobu tonu nayi hoy ।।
Emot jubotigon paiya Chandrachur ।
Beriya bihaar kore porom nigur ।।
Keho naachey keho gaye keho baye jontro ।
Keho korotalin deyi shobe ek tontro ।।
Kochhni shokol hoilo kushum udyan ।
Shonkor bhromor taye modhu korey paan ।।[44]

Looking at his disposition the women gave up all proprieties,
Despite making repeated advances they were not successful in physically attracting Shiva.
On getting the attention of such young and attractive women, Shiva
Engaged in intense lovemaking with them.
Some of them danced while others sang and others played instruments,
Some of them clapped but they were all enchanted in the same way.
The Kochh women were like a flower garden,
Shiva was like a bee consuming their nectar.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The depiction of the *Kochh* women is highly sexualised in the above excerpt. The contrast is stark when compared to the way in which Rameshwar depicts the upper-caste women, or women belonging to a higher, more socially respectable caste, as being dutiful and remaining within the confines of the household, through Parvati's character. It would be problematic to project modern categories of 'patriarchy' and 'objectification' onto a period much older than these terms, but it is possible to argue for the sexual vulnerability

[44] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 15-16.

of women belonging to lower castes and classes in society on the basis of the *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative. The legends surrounding the origins of the *Bagdi* caste are more insightful from this study's perspective, as their storyline is extremely similar to the part of the *Bagdini* woman included in the *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative. The first story is of Parvati disguising herself as a lower-caste fisherwoman in order to seduce Shiva to test his fidelity to herself. Shiva, conforming to the gender role of a typical early modern man, gives in to his temptations.[45]

The narrative of the *Shibsankirtankavya* is the same as Risley's accounts up to this point, after which it takes a completely different direction in order to stick to the larger purpose of the *mangalkavya,* which focuses on agrarian expansion.[46] Parvati's character, disguised as a *Bagdini* in the *Shibsankirtankavya,* refrains from indulging in any sexual activities. In contrast, in Risley's popular legend, Parvati reveals her identity to Shiva who, being piqued by her plan's ingenuity, ordains that the child to be born of their union while Parvati was disguised as a *Badgini* would be the first of a line of *Bagdis*. The normalisation of such instances using the example of a popular and influential deity, such as Shiva, is an indication of the increasing control of upper-caste men over the sexuality of women and thereby the perpetuation of the patrilineality on which the entire Brahmanical socio-moral order was based.

The Hunter's Story: The Assimilation of the Unsettled Groups into a Settled Brahmanical Socio-Moral Order

Several realistic social and moral dilemmas are addressed in these narrative poems through didactic stories that are narrated by Shiva to his wife Parvati during the initial period of their marriage. These stories were individually narrated in order to establish the influence of the worship of Gods—Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti—which represented the popular bhakti traditions prevalent

[45] Ibid., 37.

[46] Parvati, on *Narada's* advice disguises herself as a *Bagdini* woman in order to test her husband's loyalty. Shiva gives in to his temptations and gifts the woman a ring which Parvati later uses to confront her husband's infidelity. Parvati however escapes Shiva's agricultural field and returns to *Kailasha* in the Shibsankirtan's narrative. She doesn't engage in any sexual activities while in disguise. See, Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 259-72.

in Bengal. Not only were these stories confirming the power that these deities had over the events taking place in the human world, but also demonstrated how easy it was for ordinary subjects of the region to worship these deities. The story of the Hunter is one such selection that clearly highlights how the *Shibsankirtankavya* deals with a contemporary social and moral dilemma in the region regarding the administration of the unsettled and hunting-gathering populations within the region. Studies based on the landscape of early modern Rarh Bengal have identified villages and towns interspersed by inland water bodies and forests.[47] Forests were never cut down in their entirety for agrarian expansion, meaning that an entire district often consisted of a diverse population that included agrarian, craft-producing, and hunting-gathering groups.

The production of such literature was also meant to assimilate such a socially diverse population under a common moral order dictated by the Brahmanical authorities. The authority of the *zamindars* over the forested areas was weaker, as it was difficult to regulate such landscapes. The hunter, hailing from the pilgrim centre of Varanasi, is described as a violent, malevolent, and sinful character. The following section highlights this description:

সর্ব্বদা হিংসক হন দুর্জ্জন দুষ্কৃতি ।।
খর্ব্ব খল কৃষ্ণবর্ণ তপ্ত তাম্র কেশ ।
পিঙ্গললোচন পাপী পিশাচের বেশ ।।
পশুহিংসা সজ্জা তার পরিণপূর্ণ ধাম ।
বগুরা সল্ল্যাদি কর্য্যা কত লব নাম।।

Shorboda hingshok hon durjon dushkriti ।।
Khorbo khol krishnoborno tapto tamro kesh ।
Pingollochon paapi pishacher besh ।।
Poshu hingsha shojja tar poripurno dhaam ।
Bagura Sholladi korya koto lobo naam ।।[48]

There resided a Hunter,
Always violent, and a malevolent person,
Short, shrewd, dark-skinned, dry red hair,

[47] Arthur Geddes, 'The Regions of Bengal', *Geography* 15, no. 3 (1929): 186–98.
[48] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 202.

Blood-shot eyes, sinful, demon-like.
Surviving by violently killing animals, he sleeps in a fulfilled pilgrimage city,
He has many malevolent names.
[Translation and transliteration by the author]

One can conclude, then, that the hunters, during the composition of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, could also be part of an urban, non-agricultural milieu. The profession required the hunter to travel extensively, and it was during one such journey that the Hunter accidentally ended up following the norms of the *'Shibratri-pratha'* or the festival of *Shivratri*.

The story, which was being narrated by Shiva to Parvati in the narrative, was preceded by a description of the rituals. The hunter, on his way back from a hunt, was fatigued and fell asleep in a forest. On waking up he realised that the sun had already set and it was difficult for him to find his way back home due to the fear of attacks from wild animals. Seeking refuge, he climbed on a Bael tree after hanging his kill on one of the branches of the same tree. The tree was surrounded by wild animals, and the hunter, plagued by fear and hunger, shivered throughout the night without any sleep. Coincidentally, it was the auspicious night of *Shivratri* and the story was an example used by Shiva to emphasise the significance of the '*tithi*', which is a way of measuring time according to the lunar cycle in Brahmanical traditions. The hunter was fasting the entire night, and most conveniently, there was a *'Shiva-linga'* (a phallic representation of Shiva) situated beneath the tree. The severe cold led to frost melting and falling on the linga while the shivering hunter made the tree shake so violently that the fruits fell as offerings to God Shiva. The poem further states:

স্নান নাই পূজা নাই উপহার শূন্য ।
তবু তিথি মাহাত্ম্যে বহুল হইল পুণ্য ।।

Snaan nai puja nai upohar shunyo ।
Tobu Tithi Mahatye bohul hoilo punyo ।।[49]

Neither bath nor gifts were offered,

[49] Ibid., 203.

> Still, due to the auspiciousness of the tithi more than enough was accomplished.
>
> [Translation and transliteration by the author]

The story continues as the Hunter returns to Varanasi, the imaginary city, and after living a long, healthy life, at the time of his death when '*Yamraj*' (the God of death) sends his henchmen to collect him, Shiva is suddenly reminded of the way the man had worshipped him and kept a fast on one *Shivratri* night. He sends his soldiers to fight the agents of Yama and rescue the hunter and transport him to his heavenly abode, *Kailasha*. Yama's men are astounded and laugh at hearing that the soldiers had appeared to rescue the hunter. They highlight an important socio-moral dilemma faced by the region in this section by questioning Shiva's soldiers:

> জানে নাই জপ পূজা যজ্ঞ দান ব্রত ।
> সর্ব্বদা হিংসক সর্ব্বধর্ম্ম বহির্ভূত ।।
> এমন অধমে যদি ঈশ্বর উদ্ধারে ।
> তবে আর শমন দমন দিবে কারে ।।
>
> *Jane nai jop puja jogyo daan broto ।*
> *Shorboda hingshok shorbodhormo bohirbhuto ।।*
> *Emon odhome jodi Ishwar udhhare ।*
> *Tobey ar shomon domon dibey karey ।।*[50]
>
> He doesn't know meditation, ritual-worship, offerings, asceticism,
> (He is) Forever violent and exempted from all religious faiths.
> If Shiva saves such an inferior person,
> Then who will the God of death punish?
>
> [Translation and transliteration by the author]

From a historian's perspective, the story reveals two things. First, it shows how accessible religious practices were to all the inhabitants of the region, and the narrative acts as an instructional tool in the same direction. Second, the hunter's story reveals the intention to communicate such socio-moral dilemmas already existing in society. Having to manage and maximise revenue in a space inhabited by a diverse population in terms of class and caste

[50] Ibid., 205.

affiliations, the attempt of the *Shibsankirtankavya* to reach out to the entire population is evident from such texts. The structure of local political settings required it to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the entirety of the region's population.

The study of the narrative verse is incomplete without contextualising it in the space and time that it was produced in. Such an inquiry into the process of the production and circulation of such literature reveals more about the region's social and economic past than what research based solely on official records has already revealed. The didactic nature of such compositions allows one to look beyond the political events and economic growth of the region, into the shaping of a rural landscape, the demarcation of spaces, and the mundane practices prevalent in society. The *mangalkavya* has been composed in the western part of early modern Bengal, but is clearly a part of a larger corpus of literature, both in terms of time and space, that seeks to perpetuate and validate a distinctly Brahmanical socio-moral order. These *kavya*s were not meant for solely ritualistic purposes, and hence one can find the convergence of varying themes of society, economy, and religion within their narrative. The methodology of this study has attempted to fill some of these gaps while keeping in mind the limitations of using fictional narrative poetry as a source for this purpose. The only way forward, therefore, is the corroboration of the data available in terms of facts relating to economic growth, ecological transformations, as well as political changes within the literary traditions that were not only in circulation across the region but also immensely popular, in order to reveal a holistic picture of the region's past.

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