

AIBS Conference on Bengali Maṅgalakāvya
and Related Literature



Photo by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, Extrait de Manasa Mangal de Mayna Chitrakal (Naya / Bengale)

October 22, 2015

AIBS Conference on Bengali Literature

October 22, 2015

Pyle Room 112

The Pyle Center

University of Wisconsin-Extension

702 Langdon Street

Madison, WI 53706-1420

Sponsored by:

American Institute of Bangladesh Studies with
funding from the Council of American Overseas
Research Centers (CAORC)

Table of Contents

Coffee and Pastries

9:00 – 9:30 a.m. 2

Welcome Remarks by AIBS President Dr. Golam Mathbor

9:30 – 10:00 a.m. 2

Double Meanings and the Multiplicity of Identity

10:00 – 11:00 a.m. 2

Serving the Son

11:00 – 12:00 p.m. 4

Lunch

12:00 – 1:30 p.m. 5

Maṅgalakāvya East and West

1:45 – 2:45 p.m. 5

Popular Muslim Literary Forms in Early Modern Bengal: Premākhyān, Pāñcālī, and Pīr Kathā

2:45 – 4:00 p.m. 6

Keynote by Dr. Richard M. Eaton

4:00 – 5:00 p.m. 7

AIBS/AIPS Joint Reception

5:30 – 6:30 p.m. 7

About AIBS. 8

Overview:

Bengali maṅgalakāvya present us with a rich vision of the premodern era and life at all strata of society in the region. The tales cover generations and feature the amazing adventures of wise women, valiant warriors, hard-working merchants, and people from both urban and rural communities.

Coffee and Pastries

9:00 a.m.–9:30 a.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Welcome Remarks by AIBS President

Dr. Golam M. Mathbor, Ph.D.

Chair, Department of Philosophy, Religion, and
Interdisciplinary Studies

Professor, School of Social Work

Monmouth University

9:30 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Double Meanings and the Multiplicity of Identity

10:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Chair: Dr. Rebecca Manring

Topic 1: Devotion Through Double Entendre:

Bilingual Poetry and Bitextual Commentary in Colonial Bengal

Dr. Joel Bordeaux, Colgate University

The texts I would like to discuss offer a unique perspective on the relationships between commentary and narrative, Sanskrit and Bengali, the sensual and the sacred. There is in early modern Bengal a commentarial tradition that regards the famous Sanskrit love poem Fifty Stanzas By a Thief (Caura-pancashika) as an extensive, systematic pun yielding a hymn to the goddess Kali. While bitextual poetry (slesha) of this sort is well attested in Sanskrit, the commentaries are unusual in that they draw their primary inspiration not from the Sanskrit text itself, but from popular vernacular narratives. Indeed most of the commentaries in question appear to have been written in response to Bharatcandra Ray's 1753 Annada-mangal.

Conference on Bengali Literature

Thursday, October 22, 2015

(continued) Although our commentaries may concern themselves directly with an eleventh century Sanskrit poem, their fates are intertwined with Bharatcandra and his reception during the nineteenth century.

In most of India, the Fifty Stanzas are attributed to Bilhana. He composed the poem, according to legend, on the occasion of having been discovered in an illicit relationship with a Kashmiri princess he was tutoring. He was sentenced to death, but charmed by the beauty of Bilhana's verses, her father the king relented and allowed the couple to marry. By the seventeenth century the backstory for the poem has been more thoroughly developed in Bengali into a popular romance in which a prince named Sundar ('Beauty') wins the love of the princess Vidya ('Knowledge').

Bharatcandra's courtly take on the Vidya-Sundar story as part of his opus Annada-mangal is by far the best known. This poem, or at least the Vidya-Sundar part of it, became the most published Bengali work of the nineteenth century, and it is here, apparently, that the idea of Bilhana's Fifty Stanzas as a collection of hymns to Kali, and of a commentary demonstrating this position, makes its grand debut. Although in the critical edition of Bharatcandra's work includes just three verses from the Fifty Stanzas translated in the usual way, the poet follows with a crucial intervention. He writes that on hearing Sundar's recitation, "The king understood 'he is describing my Vidya.' [Bharatcandra] says he praises the Mahavidya. If I tell both meanings, my book will grow huge. Pundits will understand with the Cora-pancasi-tika."

Ironically, despite the poet's expressed interest in concision, many editions of Bharatcandra's Vidya-Sundar do include the Fifty Stanzas in their entirety, some with a Bengali translation / word commentary they attribute to Bharatcandra himself. In these, and in at least two stand-alone commentaries on Bilhana produced around the turn of the nineteenth century, the Sanskrit verses are rendered as bitextual poetry where one reading refers to the princess Vidya and the other to Kali as foremost of the group of tantric goddesses known as the Ten Mahavidyas. These commentaries bear traces of how a vernacular narrative inspired colonial-era Bengali literati to radically reinterpret classic Sanskrit love lyrics in esoteric Shakta terms.

Topic 2: Erotic Play, Devotion, and 'Cords of Righteousness': Plural Social Bonds in Tales of Love and Heroism from Eastern Bengal

Dr. David L. Curley, Professor Emeritus

This essay will treat 'romances' or tales of love and heroism in Bengali literature, and will focus on narratives written by Muslims in eastern Bengal. Bengali romances commonly treat themes of erotic attraction and sensual play, devotion, and mental discipline. I will be interested in their cultivation of aesthetic and moral sentiments as described in the lives of their characters. I will be concerned with how Bengali romances represented plural social bonds and relations, and multiple and conflicting social roles and identities.

For Bengali Muslim authors I will consider first an early rendition of Madhumālātī in Bamla, written by Muhammad Kabir, apparently in 1588 and Alaol's seventeenth century Padmāvātī. I also will briefly contrast do-bhāshi or more properly 'mixed-language' romances (using Bengali, Farsi, and Urdu), of two authors who composed in the second half of the eighteenth century: Fakir Garibullah, and Amir Hamza (Anisuzzaman 1365a, 1365b). For Bengali Hindu authors of romances, we usefully can compare Vidyā-Sundar narratives. I will examine the versions of Bharatchandra and Ramprasad, and the 'Chittagong' version of Balarām Chakrabartī, all probably eighteenth century texts.

Following the argument of Thomas de Bruijn about the genre of medieval Awadhi epics shared by Hindu and Muslim authors (2010), I will argue that Bengali romances comprised a single genre created by Hindu and Muslim authors using a shared idiom of moral and aesthetic sentiments. I suggest that through this common genre their narratives articulated and consciously contrasted Bengali Muslim and Bengali Hindu ideas about individuals and families, erotic desire and marriage, and proper political order.



Conference on Bengali Literature

Thursday, October 22, 2015

Serving the Son

11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Chair: Dr. Rachel McDermott

Topic 1: Child Sacrifice in Rūparāma's Dharmamaṅgala

Dr. Rebecca Manning, Indiana University Bloomington

In Rūparāma's mid-seventeenth century epic poem, the Dharmamaṅgala, we find a particularly gruesome account of human sacrifice and cannibalism in service of the deity Dharma. The account comes in a parenthetical chapter, a chapter devoted to the heroine's explanation to her brother-in-law of why she is willing, indeed obligated, to take such drastic measures to conceive a son. Why does Rūparāma, like other authors of the Dharmamaṅgalas, interpolate the story of Hariścandra, when Rañjāvati is not only being asked to sacrifice her son, but first, herself, for the sake of her husband's lineage?

Stories of sacrifice are nothing unusual in any religion, though in recent religious history we read less of animal sacrifice, and tales of human sacrifice are even more unusual. In the Hebrew Bible tale of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, God intervenes at the last minute to stay Abraham's hand, pleased with the strength of the father's faith and devotion. God is merely testing the strength of his devotion. In many of the Indian tales of child sacrifice, there is a different primary reason, that of obtaining a child: the couple promises to sacrifice their first-born if only Dharma will grant them a son.

But in Rūparāma's tale no joy attaches to the sacrifice of the child, and only disgust and repulsion to the preparation of a feast from his flesh. The actions are the same in the Tamil and Bengali stories, but the deities and the reasons they demand the sacrifice and the attitudes of the parents are quite different. What purpose does the cannibalism serve, then, in this tale?

Topic 2: Cannibalising the Eucharist: Catholics, Mughals and Roopram's Dharmamaṅgal

Dr. Projit Mukharji, University of Pennsylvania

This presentation will focus on the Luichandra-pala of Roopram Chakrabarti's seventeenth century text, the Dharmamaṅgal. Whilst following Sukumar Sen we know that the basic plot of this chapter was adopted from the Pauranic narrative of Sunahsnepa, little attention has been paid to the ways in which Roopram reworked this Pauranic narrative. Probably the most striking feature of this reworking are the elaborate scenes of parental cannibalism. Roopram goes to great lengths to describe the ways in which Raja Harichandra and Rani Madna are forced by Dharma to butcher their only son, cook his flesh and then partake of that meat. None of this is to be found in the Sunahsnepa narrative.

The usual and perfunctory explanation for such grisly scenes embedded in mangalkabyas have been to appeal to the colonial era paradigms of 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' influences. The cannibalism is simply dismissed as a testament to the non-Aryan influences on the cult. Such frameworks, I would argue, do not pay attention to the actual historical context in which these narratives were produced. Following the work of scholars like Kunal Chakrabarti and Kumkum Chatterjee, I will argue that we need to read Roopram's text within its own historical context and not seek to fit it into some pre-existing format of Aryan/non-Aryan or Great/ Little Tradition Hinduism. Yet, following David Curley, I will also argue that any historical reading of the text cannot be based on an assumption that the Dharmamaṅgal text is a simple repository of 'facts'. We must situate the text both within its socio-historical and its devotional/ theological contexts.

To do this, I will argue we need to take seriously both the Mughal administration of south Bengal and the presence of Catholic missionaries in the region in the seventeenth century. Once we do this, an entirely new and unexpected reading of the Luichandra-pala becomes available to us. In such a reading as I will propose, the grisly cannibalism of the chapter, instead of being a non-Aryan imprint of a pre-Brahminic cult, will emerge as an inverted version of the Catholic Eucharist further exalted in a specific political milieu. My reading will also challenge the binarism between 'folk' and 'world' religions that continues to structure much of the work on deities like Dharma Thakur.

Conference on Bengali Literature

Thursday, October 22, 2015

Lunch Break

AT&T Lounge

Room 106

(all participants are invited)

12:00–1:30 p.m.

Maṅgalakāvya East and West

1:45 – 2:45 p.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Chair: Dr. Pika Ghosh

Topic 1: Self-Reflexivity in Bhāratchandra's Maṅgalkāvya the "Annadāmaṅgal"

PhD Candidate Sutopa Dasgupta, Harvard University

My paper for this conference will discuss Bharatchandra's seminal eighteenth century work, the Annadāmaṅgal. The premise of the Annadāmaṅgal, with its highly conventionalized epic form, its poetic virtuosity and linguistic breadth, is to praise the goddess Annadā by arguing for her primacy and giving an account of her blessings to the larger cosmopolitan world of the Mughal imperium, but— significantly— not without the intercession of Nadia's royal dynasty, in whose court the poem was composed. Many of the literary conceits of the poem, (it's genre play, inversions, irony and invective, to name only a few), critically reflect on the Nadia court's reputation as a center of religious piety and extravagance incongruously positioned on the periphery of a declining Mughal empire. Here, at the fringes of the Mughal cultural milieu, amidst ongoing local tensions between competing ruling factions of Bengal, the Annadāmaṅgal depicts a vibrant efflorescence of regional patronage that appears to be, simultaneously, defensive posture on the one hand, and prestige mongering on the other. My paper on the Annadāmaṅgal explores these characteristics through the text's deep self-reflexivity about its patron and court's royal status at the juncture

of significant historical transitions: the eve of British colonialism, local political contestations, sectarian debates and the disassembling of Mughal imperial rule. I argue that the text, written amidst these seminal events, is produced at a critical formative period in the making of the region's modern cultural identity.

The text itself is a three-volume epic poem written in Bangla, Sanskrit, Persian and Braj by the court poet Bhāratchandra Ray and commissioned by the vassal king Krishnachandra of Nadia, Bengal—a court municipality under the waning governance of the Mughal empire in the mid-eighteenth century. The poet deliberately classifies the poem as a maṅgalkāvya—citing its concern with the religious convention of maṅgal (blessing) and the literary convention of kāvya (ornate courtly poetry)—while also contesting that classification. From the beginning Bharatchandra announces the standards by which the poem should be judged and the expectations its audience should have. The poem enjoyed great success in its time and the later reception of the text as a major influence on Bengali cultural patrimony led the esteemed linguist Sukumar Sen to describe it as a literary landmark of Bengal. The eminent scholar of South Asia E.C. Dimock describes the Annadāmaṅgal as the greatest poetic work of early modern Bengal.

My analysis of the Annadāmaṅgal aims to account for the poem's aesthetic achievements as well as its religious arguments, through its self-reflexivity. I explore the relationships the text presents between these two arenas of culture, and the role this plays in shaping the poem's courtly concerns. My study suggests that the text's religious motifs, and themes, taken from established traditions of sectarian temple culture, are re-purposed to serve the courtly aspirations of the poem. Such an assessment may indicate that temple culture and courtly culture were not necessarily at a divide during this period, as has been commonly thought in recent scholarship. It could also reveal shared traditions in the society, as imagined by the poem, with its depictions of a royal coterie including Islamic members of the Mughal imperial administration, British officials from company colonial posts in the region, and experts of various Hindu sectarian interests, constituting a more complex dynamic within religious cultures of this court, poised as it is on the eve of colonialism, than hitherto understood. My aim is to

Conference on Bengali Literature

Thursday, October 22, 2015

(continued) address these issues through textual analysis of the poem's self-reflexivity, and note the markers the text uses to indicate its double-consciousness in each of these mixed and various contexts. In doing so, I hope to bring much needed exposure to this important text of Bengal that has received, to date, little scholarly attention.

Topic 2: Chandimangal East and West

Dr. Ed Yazijian, Furman University

The Chandimangal is a work written in the latter part of the sixteenth century CE and belongs to the mangal-kavya genre, texts which glorify a god or goddess and establish its cult in the region, and which flourished from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries CE. The Chandimangal of Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti is generally recognized as particularly unique and valuable among works of this genre. However, even though Kavikankan's work is widely regarded as the most popular Chandi mangal-kavya text among many others, it seems not to have gained much popularity in eastern Bengal (current-day Bangladesh). Instead, scholars have found many more handwritten manuscripts of Dvija Madhava's Mangalachandir Gita, especially in the district of Chittagong. On the other hand, manuscripts of Kavikankan's Chandimangal are found in abundance in what is now West Bengal. Both authors were born in West Bengal, were contemporaries, and lived fairly close to one another. For this paper, I propose to explore some of the reasons for why the two texts are popular in different regions. Are there textual reasons for regional popularity, or are there other factors? Can we interpret any significance in the different levels of regional popularity of these two texts?

Popular Muslim Literary Forms in Early Modern Bengal: Premākhyān, Pāñcālī, and Pīr Kathā

2:45 p.m.–4:00 p.m.

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Chair: Dr. Tony K. Stewart, Vanderbilt University

Topic 1: Śāhā Mohāmmad Chagīr's Retelling of Jāmī's Yūsuf va Zulaykhā in Premodern Bengal

Dr. Ayesha A. Irani, University of Toronto

This paper investigates the reception of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's celebrated Yūsuf va Zulaykhā (1483) in Islamic East Bengal through an examination of Ichuph-Jalikhā by Śāhā Mohāmmad Chagīr (Shāh Muḥammad Saghīr). This translation of Jāmī's tale was composed some time between the mid-sixteenth to the first two decades of the seventeenth century. I examine the differences in the literary landscapes and structures of the two texts, through a comparison of Chagīr's representation of Jalikhā and Ichuph in two key episodes, which concern the construction of two pavilions. Each of these is built at different points in the narrative by each of the two protagonists. I show how Chagīr's otherwise faithful translation of Jāmī begins to unravel along the narrative seam of Ichuph's construction of the second pavilion. The Sufi message of the text, thus far suitably expanded within the parameters of the sung pāñcālī form through the idiom of bhakti, takes an abrupt turn towards a conservative reading of gender and agency. In doing so, Chagīr's composition at once elides Jāmī's original message, abrogates his own multivalent discourse on bhakti, and telescopes the text back into a Qur'ānic and patriarchal structuring of the tale. In this paper, I delineate some of the possible reasons that compelled the author to make such a radical shift in structure and register that reflects a telling that is uniquely Bengali.

Conference on Bengali Literature

Thursday, October 22, 2015

Topic 2: Śāh Garibullāh and the Beginnings of the Dobhāṣī Pācālī

Dr. Thibaut d'Hubert, The University of Chicago

Dobhāṣī literature has a rather clearly defined starting point in the history of Bengali literature and it is associated with one author in particular Śāh Garibullāh (fl. 1770, Hafizpur). In this presentation, I propose to study the earliest pācālīs written in Dobhāṣī—also called Musalmani Bengali, it is a literary idiom that combines a Bengali grammatical and prosodic frame with Persian and Hindustani lexical items—and to observe the interventions made by Garibullāh on this very flexible poetic form that prevailed for the composition of narrative texts in Bengal since the 15th CE. On the one hand, I will focus on the framing elements of the poems and their paratextual features (such as signature lines, and so forth). On the other hand, I will engage a reflection on the relationship between the generic code of the maṅgal-kāvya and that of the Sufi Romance—two major genres that stand prominently in the background of Garibullāh's texts.

Topic 3: Bangla Pīr Kathā: A Parodic Bridge between traditional Hindu Maṅgal Kāvya and Muslim Premākhyān

Dr. Tony K. Stewart, Vanderbilt University

As early as the sixteenth century, a special genre of popular oral tales regarding the exploits of musalmāni holy men and women—pīrs, fakīrs, and bibīs—were captured in written form and continue to circulate today. While sharing some of the characteristics of the traditional Sufi tazkirah and malfūzāt—hagiography and religious biography, respectively—the subjects of these narratives are fictional. Figures such as Baḍa Khān Gājī, Satya Pīr, Bonbībī, and others have no historical basis; the only history is the narratives themselves which have circulated now for more than five centuries. The structures of their narratives are, not surprisingly, romances, analogues to the highly allegorical premākhyāns deployed by Sufis to convey esoteric teachings, but with little or no discernible esoteric content. In their heroes' and heroines' acts—often understood to be domesticating the wilds of the jungle for human habitation in an ideal Islamic religious form—these characters mimic the powers and activities of the gods and goddesses captured in the narratives of the maṅgal kāvya genre, which were circulating concurrently. Indeed the narratives of these pīr kathā are routinely populated by traditional Indic

forms of divinity, from rākṣasas and apsarās to gods and goddesses, such as Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu, Kālī, Durgā, and Śītālā. Their narratives easily accommodate a traditional Bengali Hindu cosmology into an Islamic framework so much so that an exchange equivalence seems to operate: pīrs are the equivalent of both devs or in other contexts of sādhus and nāths, while bibīs are the equivalent of goddesses, and so forth. Conservative Muslims and reformers have denounced this literature as un-Islamic, while Orientalists dismissed the genre as a misguided syncretism at worst, or simplistic entertainment for the masses at best. Authors of Bangla literary histories have even gone so far as to declare the tales invalid as literature by declaring musalmāni bāṅglā not to be 'real' or 'authentic' bāṅglā, after which they downgrade them to folktales that are not worthy of inclusion. Contrary to these assessments, I wish to argue that these widespread tales play an important function in the making of Bengali literature and Bengali Islam, and they do so by straddling the traditions of the high literary genres of Sufi premākhyān and Hindu maṅgal kāvya by mimicking and mocking their forms for their own purposes. As parody, these pīr kathā assume a metafictional role, critiquing not only the genres they draw upon, but the ostensible goals of those genres. While not in the least concerned with doctrine per se, the effect of their intervention in the discourse of religion is to confirm that the land of Bengal had become a thoroughly Islamic world.

“Doing Historical Research in Bengal: A Memoir”

Keynote 4:00 - 5:00PM

Pyle Room 112, The Pyle Center

Dr. Richard M. Eaton, Professor of History at the University of Arizona

AIBS/AIPS Reception

Lee Lounge

All participants and the general public
are invited to attend.

5:30–6:30 p.m.

About AIBS:

Executive Committee:

President:

Golam M. Mathbor, PhD

Monmouth University

Vice President:

Michael Bowler, PhD

Winona State University

Treasurer:

Sanchita Saxena, PhD

University of California, Berkeley

Secretary:

Rebecca Manring, PhD

Indiana University

AIBS Staff:

U.S. Director:

Laura Hammond

B488 Medical Science Center

1300 University Avenue

Madison, WI 53706

Website/Email:

www.aibs.net

ljammond@southasia.wisc.edu

AIBS Member Institutes:

Boston University

Columbia University

Cornell University

Indiana University

Johns Hopkins University

Monmouth University

North Carolina State University

Syracuse University

The University of Chicago

Tufts University

University of California, Berkeley

University of Hawaii at Manoa

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

University of Oregon

University of Pennsylvania

University of Texas at Austin

University of Washington

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Winona State University