

Sculptures of the Goddesses *Manasā* Discovered from Dakshin Dinajpur District of West Bengal: An Iconographic Study

Dr Rajeswar Roy

Assistant Professor of History

M.U.C. Women's College (Affiliated to The University of Burdwan)

Rajbati, Purba-Bardhaman-713104

West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT: The images of various sculptures of the goddess *Manasā* as soumya aspects of the mother goddess have been unearthed from various parts of Dakshin Dinajpur District of West Bengal during the early medieval period. Different types of sculptural forms of the goddess *Manasā* are seen sitting postures have been discovered from Dakshin Dinajpur District during the period of our study. The sculptors or the artists of Bengal skillfully sculpted to represent the images of the goddess *Manasā* as snake goddess, sometimes as *Viśahari*, sometimes as *Jagatgaurī*, sometimes as *Nāgeśvarī*, or sometimes as *Siddhayoginī*. These artistic activities are considered as valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire world.

KEYWORDS: Folk deity, *Manasā*, Sculptures, Snake goddess, Snake-hooded

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I. INTRODUCTION

Dakshin Dinajpur or South Dinajpur is a district in the state of West Bengal, India. It was created on 1st April 1992 by the division of the erstwhile West Dinajpur District and finally, the district was bifurcated into Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. Dakshin Dinajpur came into existence after the division of old West Dinajpur into North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur on 1st April, 1992. Its history dates back to the Pāla and Sena dynasties of Bengal and shares a rich cultural heritage. Archaeological excavations have revealed that a highly developed civilization flourished here in ancient past. From ancient manuscripts and inscriptions, we came to know that Dinajpur was known as *Kotivarsha* under *Punḍravardhanabhukti* with its capital at *Devīkot* near Gangarampur Town which was known as *Bāngarh* during the ancient and early medieval period (Ray, 1400(B.S): 301). The ruins of *Bāngarh*, its capital town of *Devīkot*, discovered large number of inscriptions dating from Asokan age, and excavated lots of sculptural and architectural remnants belonging to the pre-medieval period speak volumes about the rich cultural importance of this area.

The images of the goddess *Manasā* have been discovered from different parts of Dakshin Dinajpur district especially from the place of Bangarh, Sivbari, Patiram, Gangarampur, Harirampur, Banshihari, Tapan, Bandalahar, etc and few from in the bank of the river *Atreyee* and *Punarvabā*. These images are preserved in the various museums of West Bengal and Bangladesh and few are preserved in personal collections, some images under the open sky or tree. Few images installed in local temples are worshipped by the people. We have recorded fifteen (15) images of the goddess *Manasā* during our investigation. These are found mainly in different villages of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In the present study, entitled '**Sculptures of the Goddesses *Manasā* Discovered from Dakshin Dinajpur District of West Bengal: An Iconographic Study**', the author wants to undertake a critical study of the sculptural art of the snake goddesses *Manasā* found from Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal during the early medieval period. The study deals with analytical studies of iconographic and epigraphic features of the images of the goddess *Manasā* of Brāhmanical Hinduism in different parts of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed for the study was historical, based on both library works and field study. The author has depended on in-depth study of the epigraphic and iconographic records of Bengal from c.7th century CE to the c.13th century CE. In this regard, the author has visited different archeological sites, museums and various important places of West Bengal (India) and closely observed the images of female representations of snake goddess *Manasā* with own eyes to obtain a first-hand view as well as to take photographs of those

articles and to make use of questionnaire at the time of field study for a vivid presentation of the whole matter of the research work.

IV. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ICONOGRAPHY OF THE GODDESS MANASĀ

The snake goddess *Manasā* is an important popular cult, being worshipped as a folk deity in the Hindu pantheon. Various scholars like N. K. Bhattasali (1929: 212-227), P.S. Rawson (1975-76:151-158), P. K. Maity (1966), E. Haque (1991-92:135-144) have detail studied regarding the origin and development of the goddess *Manasā*. P. K. Maity opined the identity and validity of the images of snake goddess and stated that *Manasā* was never iconically worshipped before the advent of Muslims in Bengal and after the Muslim invasion in Bengal in the c.13th-14th century CE onwards, the Buddhist and Hindu joined with the faith of Islam, a new culture expression in all walks of life. The upper Hindu communities express more tolerance and turned their attention to local deities. As a result, *Manasā* acquired a new position and status in society. But N. K. Bhattasali and P.S. Rawson do not agree with the view of P. K. Maity and they concluded that the anthropomorphic form of the goddess *Manasā* ultimately gained a definite form in between c.10th-11th centuries CE.

We agreed with the view of P. S. Rawson who suggested that the traditional northern Indian concept of *Nāga* has supplied the prototype of the images of the goddess *Manasā*, although such an idea was precluded earlier by N. K. Bhattasali. It is also suggested by T.W. Clerk (1966: 504) that '*Manasā* is a Bengali deity'. It is also true that not a single sculpture of goddess *Manasā* had been discovered earlier. All the extant images of the goddess belong to the c.10th century to the c.13th century CE. This hitherto unnoticed fact indicates that the cult of the goddess *Manasā* did not originate or even became popular in the iconic form before Pāla period in this area. This is the problem to accept the view of all great scholars like D. C. Sen (1935), Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1989), T.W. Clark, Benoy Ghosh (1976), and P. K. Maity (1966) suggested that the cult had its origin in the Western part of the Bengal or *Rāḍha* region of Bengal.

On the other hand, Bhattasali and N. R. Ray suggested a South Indian origin for *Manasā* cult. Bhattasali rightly observed and reported that some pots and utensils with figures of snakes used in the worship of *Manasā* and this practice of *Manasā* worship are still going on in different parts of Bengal especially in *Rāḍha* Bengal (Bhattasali, 1929: 225). From the above discussion, it is clear that like many other Hindu deities, *Manasā* had a non-Aryan background and incorporated some iconic features such as *ghaṭa* (small jar or water pot) in the pedestal, branches of *Sij* trees in her one or both hands. *Manasā*, once the deity worshipped by lower-class people, gradually became popular and accepted by the upper-class people and the orthodox section of the society (1932:181).

According to *Puranic* tradition, *Manasā* is the spiritual daughter of the saint *Kāshyapa*, wife of *Jaratakāru* and mother of *Āstika*. She is well known as '*Jagatgaurī*' for her beauty; '*Śaivi*', for being the disciple or devotee of Lord *Śiva*; '*Vaiṣṇavī*', for her devotion to lord *Viṣṇu*. She is also called '*Nāgeśvarī*' as she saved the life of the *Nāgas* (Serpents) from the sacrifice or oblation (*Yajna*) of *Janmejaya*. She is well known as '*Viśahari*' for taking out of poison or venom from the lives of the ill-fated people. She is also known as '*Siddhayoginī*' for grand success or prosperity from *Sahadeva* (*Prakritikhaṇḍam*-45|10-11).

The popular goddess of West Bengal is also *Manasā*. The popularity of the cult *Manasā* in Bengal may be traced from time to time of the advent of the Senas from South India. She might have imported and popularized the worship of the South India Snake-Goddess *Mancā*. The prevalence of the worship of Snake goddesses *Mancāmmā* or mother *Mancā* in South India and she obtained the semi-Sanskritized name of *Manasā* in Bengal (Sen, 1939:218). Some have tried to delineate her Vedic or *Purānic* origin, while some others have identified her with Vedic *Sarasvatī* or *Brāhmanī* with a swan as her *vāhana*. Some researchers have tried to relate her with Buddhist goddess *Jāngulī* (Bhattacharya, 1989: 155; Bhattasali, 1929: 218-222).

V. DISCUSSION

The sculptural representation of the goddess *Manasā* is widely distributed in overall Bengal. A large number of *Manasā* images have been found from Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal during our investigation and research work. The author has noticed and recorded fifteen (15) images of the snake goddess *Manasā*, discovered from Dakshin Dinajpur district, mostly in stone and a few in bronzes belonging to the c.10th century CE to the c.13th century CE.

Most of the images of *Manasā* show two-handed or four-handed and generally, the goddesses are shown sitting in *lalitāsana* pose with right leg pendant, except the specimen found from Khidrapally (Rajshahi, Bangladesh) which is seated in *baddhapadmāsana*. Generally, seven snakes spreading their hoods, in some cases five or nine hooded snakes create a canopy-like structure over her head. She is always adorned, suitable for her role as *nāgeśvarī* (savior of the serpents) and her bosom always held by a *sarpa-kucabandha* (breast-band made of snakes). The presence of a lotus instead of *kīrtimukha* at the top of the upper back slab is a remarkable and significant feature in almost all cases. Perhaps it represents one of the *nāgas* (snake), name *Padmā*. The goddess is also known as *Padmā* or *Padmāvātī* (Banerjea, 1956:563).

Except in a few cases, anthropomorphic *nāgas* one at each top corner is usually seen with garlands instead of *vidyādhara* or *vidyādhari* (flying celestial male or female figure). *Ṛṣi* (sage) *Jaratkāru*, consort of *Manasā*, emaciated body with the beard and unique type crown on head, is seen seated to the right. Sometimes, *Āstika*, the son of *Manasā*, with a single snake-hood is shown seated in *mahārājālāsana* pose to the left. In a few cases, *Āstika* is seen seated on the lap of her mother, *Manasā*. In such cases, *Jaratkāru* is not observed in the sculptures of Bengal.

We may generally divide the extant images of *Manasā* discovered from Dakshin Dinajpur district into two groups based on their number of hands: i) Two-handed and ii) Four-handed. Most of the images are two-handed, not a single image of four-handed images of the goddess *Manasā* found from Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal.

All the stone sculptures of the goddess *Manasā* show holding a fruit in their right hand in the *varada* gesture and a snake in her left hand. Each snake-goddess is accompanied by eight snakes (mythologically, eight *nāgas* are associated with the deity) and perhaps this is the most popular *dhyānas* in Bengal for the worship of *Manasā*. The *prabhāvalī* (upper back slab) is adorned with a *Śiva-linga*, probably indicating *Śiva* heredity of the goddess.

A notable inscribed image of snake goddess *Manasā* (Figure 1) is well preserved at Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum (hereinafter, AKMM) in North Bengal University and the image is discovered from Bandalahar of Dakshin Dinajpur district of North Bengal. Interestingly, the donor couple is carved on either side of the *ghaṭa* (jar) with inclined folded hands. The pointed stele shows a floral design instead of the usual *kīrtimukha* with a flying *Nāga* (serpent) on either side. The image bears an inscription on the pedestal and the text is ‘*Om Śri Navakāh*’. Paleographically, the inscription may be assigned to the c.12th century CE (Bhattacharya, 1983: 35, pl. XI, fig.24).

An interesting and peculiar image of the goddess *Manasā* (Figure 2) discovered from Bangarh of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal, now it is safely preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, sits on a double-petalled lotus pedestal with right leg pendant placed on the lotus pedestal instead of *sarpaghaṭa* (pitcher of snakes) and left leg is on the pedestal. Two hands, leg, face, bosoms etc of the image are partially damaged. A seven-hooded snake canopy is clearly seen behind her crowned head. It is interesting to note that there is no figure engraved on the stela or in the pedestal or at the apex. The goddess is adorned with coronet head, beautiful necklace, armlets, anklets and a waist-band. From iconographical point of view, it may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.10th century CE (Sengupta et al, 2015: 151).

An interesting and unpublished two-handed black basalt image of the goddess *Manasā* (Figure 3) found from Bairhatta of Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal, now the preserved specimen of Ananda Niketan Kristishala, Behala, is partially damaged. The upper and left portion of the image is broken. She sits in *lalitāsana* pose on a *pañcaratha* pedestal with right leg pendant along with a male devotee with folded hands to the proper right and a *sarpaghaṭa* (pitcher of serpent) at the centre. She is adorned with a beautiful necklace, armlets, and anklets and wears a folded *sāree*. The goddess *Manasā* possesses well developed bosoms and a navel coup is seen clearly in her belly. *Jaratkāru* as her consort is seen seated on the right side of the stela but the figure of *Āstika* is not visible due to its eroded condition. From its iconographic features, it may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.12th century CE.

Another inscribed image of the snake goddess *Manasā* (Fig. 4) excavated from Bangarh of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal, now a preserved specimen of SAMK, is seen sitting in a *lalitāsana* pose on a full blown lotus pedestal adorned with two male devotees and two *naivedyas* (offerings) to the proper right and left side respectively. Her pendant right leg is on a *sarpaghaṭa* (pitcher adorned with snake) bedecked with two snakes peeping out. The snake goddess has a seven-hooded snake canopy just behind her coronet head and she holds a snake (*Padmā* ?) in her left hand and right hand is in *varada* gesture. She is accompanied by sage *Jaratkāru* as her consort to the right and *Astika* as her son to the left but not clearly visible due to its damaged condition. The goddess is bejeweled with a beautiful coronet on head, a necklace, earrings, armlets, anklets, bracelets and a waist-band and she possesses well-developed bosoms. Left portion of the *prabhāvalī* (upper back slab) is damaged and the right side of the upper back slab is adorned with a *kīrtimukha* at the apex a *vidyādhara* to the right. A line of inscription is engraved on the pedestal and the text is *śrīkrīṣṇakāyāh* || (Sengupta et al, 2015: 152).

Another important and notable image of the goddess *Manasā* (Figure 5) is also found from Bangarh of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal and the black stone image is now preserved in SAMK. The image is very much in eroded condition and she sits in an *ardhaparyankasāna* pose on a full-blown lotus pedestal. The two-handed goddess holds a snake in her left hand and a fruit (?) in her right hand. The canopy made of seven snake-hooded covers her head. The small size (size: 33 *18 cm) image belongs to the c.11th century CE.

S. K. Saraswati (1932: 181), D. C. Sircar (1957:139), and Gauriswar Bhattacharya (2000:260, fig. 43) have already mentioned an inscribed image of the snake goddess *Manasā* found from Marail of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal and discussed in details regarding the image with epigraphic records. The

inscriptional text of the image is ‘*Battani Matura*’ which indicates the donor of the image. According to G. Bhattacharya, ‘*Matura*’ is the name of a lady donor who helped to install the image and *Battani* refers to a noble lady or a woman who holds a very high position or rank in society (Williams, 1991: 745).

List of sculptures of the goddess *Manasā* found from Dakshin Dinajpur district are as follows in details:

Sl. No.	Name of the Images	Find-Spot	Present Location	Iconographical features	Dated
1.	<i>Manasā</i> (Figure 6)	Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum, Balurghat (<i>hereinafter</i> , DDDMB)	The seven-hooded and two-armed goddess is attended by <i>Jaratkāru</i> (husband of <i>Manasā</i>) and <i>Āstika</i> (son of <i>Manasā</i>). The black basalt image is partially damaged and the right portion of the image is broken.	c.12 th century CE
2.	<i>Manasā</i>	Badarpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	AKMM, Acc. No. 24	The image is made of sandstone and badly affected.	c.10 th -11 th century CE
3.	<i>Manasā</i> (Figure 7)	Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	AKMM, Acc. No. 94	Grayish sandstone image.	c.11 th century CE
4.	<i>Manasā</i>	Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Ananda Niketan Kristishala, Behala	The two-handed black basalt image is partially damaged. The upper and left portion of the image is broken.	c.12 th century CE
5.	<i>Manasā</i>	Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Asutosh Museum, Kolkata (<i>hereinafter</i> , AMK) No.664	The image is made of grayish sand-stone and the goddess is two-armed, seven-hooded and bejeweled with usual ornaments.	c.10 th century CE
6.	<i>Manasā</i>	Salas, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	AMK, No.909	The image is small in size and made of light-grayish sandstone.	c.11 th century CE
7.	<i>Manasā</i> (Figure 8)	Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Balurghat College Museum, Balurghat (<i>hereinafter</i> , BCMB)	Made of grayish sandstone and the goddess is seven-hooded two-armed deity. The image is very much effaced.	c.12 th century CE
8.	<i>Manasā</i>	Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	BCMB	The black basalt image is broken. The lower portion of the image is damaged. From the remaining portion, it appears that the image is in standing posture with seven hoods.	c.11 th century CE
9.	<i>Manasā</i> (Figure 9)	Sivbari village near Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	In a personal collection under Asok Nandi	The image is made of grayish sand-stone and small in size. The number of hands, attributes, pose and posture and other iconographic features of the image are not properly understood due to its eroded condition.	c.11 th century CE
10.	<i>Manasā</i>	Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, Acc. No.05.247	Very much corroded condition of the image.	c.10 th century CE
11.	<i>Manasā</i>	Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	SAMK, Acc. No.05.244	The two-handed goddess sits in <i>ardhaparyānkāsana</i> on a full-blown lotus pedestal. An abraded seven hooded snake canopy covers the head of the goddess.	c.11 th century CE
12.	<i>Manasā</i>	Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	SAMK, Acc. No.05.53	This is an inscribed image and the text is <i>śrīkṛṣṇakāyāh</i>	c.11 th century CE
13.	<i>Manasā</i> (Rahman, 1998 :312, pl.292)	Tapan, Dakshin Dinajpur district, WB	Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, no.284	Two-armed goddess is in <i>lalitāsana</i> pose. She is adorned with usual ornaments and another iconographical feature is more or less similar to the other images of the snake goddess.	c.11 th century CE
14.	<i>Manasā</i>	Banshihara, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	unknown	Black basalt two-handed image.	c.11 th century CE
15.	<i>Manasā</i>	Dakhin Dinajpur, WB	AMK, Acc no. not available	The inscribed image and the letters of the inscriptions are poorly illegible to read.	c.12 th century CE



Figure 1: Manasā, Bandalahar



Figure 2: Manasā, Bangarh



Figure 3: Manasā, Bairhatta



Figure 4: Manasā, Bangarh



Figure 5: Manasā, Bangarh



Figure 6: Manasā, Balurghat



Fig.7. Manasā, Gangarampur



Fig.8: Manasā, Balurghat



Fig.9: Manasā, Sivbari village

V. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that the number of the images of the goddess *Manasā* is the highest among the sculptures found from Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal and in Bangladesh. Out of fifty five (55) images of the goddess *Manasā* found from all over Bengal including Bangladesh, fifteen (15) images were found from Dakshin Dinajpur district. All the images are made of black basalts and belong to the c.10th to the c.13th century CE. Moreover, the images of the goddess *Manasā* are maximum in numbers compared to the other images of gods and goddesses. The large number of images of the goddess *Manasā* proves her great influences and importance and also popularity in the society. During the ancient and early medieval period, this region was full of dense forests and had widespread of worship of the goddess *Manasā*. So, the artists or the sculptors of Bengal skillfully sculpted to represent the images of the goddess *Manasā*. These artistic activities are considered as valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire world.

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