

CHAPTER - VI

DECLINE IN THE
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The popularity of the Sun worship in Bengal down to the end of Hindu rule is indicated by the opening verse in the copperplates of Viśvarūpasena and Sūryasena in praise of the Sun god. The extant remains of the icons of Sūrya, dated or undated, also suggest the continuity of Sun worship until at least the early mediaeval period. Perhaps, this popularity was partly the cause as well as effect of the deep-rooted belief recorded on the pedestal of a Sūrya image from Bairhaṭṭā (Dinajpur District) that the god was the healer of all diseases (*'samasta-roḡānām harttā'*). However, since the early part of the 13th century A.D. things began to change in the disfavour of the Sun-cult. In actuality, the process started long back, specifically since the Sena Period. The northern style Sūrya and his worship probably did not last long after the Varman-Sena period; at least we hardly come across any such images afterwards.

There could be various reasons for the subsequent decline in the importance and anthropomorphic worship of the Sun in early Bengal. However, it is also to be kept in mind that the solar worship in the forms stated above did not only disappear from this part of eastern India, but also from the rest of the Indian sub-continent. Naturally, the question rises as to what led to the decline of the solar-cult.

No mysticism, symbolism or high philosophy around Sūrya:

The daily visibility of the Sun to naked eye prevented the sectarians to develop any mysticism, symbolism or high philosophy centering round him. Consequently,

though he became popular universally due to simplicity of concept and beneficence, highest devotion could not be given to a phenomenon that was visible to the naked eye. No distinct school or schools of philosophy did ever grow up around the Sun god, as they developed round the two major Purāṇic systems. We find extensive religious literature in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D around Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism¹ but almost nothing about Sūrya. As a result, no backing of high philosophy² was available to him - a fact that is so essential for greatness in religious matters.

Popularity of ekāntikā worship:

In the early mediaeval period, the emphasis was given upon the 'ekāntikā' worship of the 'Iṣṭadeva' due to monotheistic ideas reaching north from the South. The ekāntikā worship became more popular than the smārta type, of which the syncretic icons and Pañcāyatana temples were the products. It may be that the ekāntikā attitude was regarded as better fitted to meet the challenge of Islam. Someone who believed in his Iṣṭadeva could not give an important position to a god (i.e. Sūrya) liable to be identified with rival gods - Brahmā, Viṣṇu or Śiva.³

Degradation of Sun worshipping Maga Brāhmaṇas:

The immense popularity of Sun worship in anthropomorphic form as well as in the temples was a direct contribution of the Irānian Maga Brāhmaṇas. We have already seen that after their advent in India in the fifth century B.C., they remained neglected for long in the orthodox Hindu society, as their customs varied with those of the Indians in many fundamental points. Their position, however, distinctly improved later on. Still, on

account of their peculiar customs, these Brāhmaṇas remained distinct and separate from the majority of the Indian Brāhmaṇa community from an early time."⁴

In the opinion of the orthodox Brāhmaṇas, the study of astrology and practice of medicine were some of the condemned vocations and very much reprehensible on the part of the Brāhmaṇas.⁵ On the contrary, the Śākadvīpī or Devala Brāhmaṇas used to cultivate astrology, palmistry and the casting of horoscope etc. They also officiated in the *grahayajña* as priests with a view to propitiating the planets, prescribed amulets and practiced treatment of smallpox etc.⁶ Pursuit of these censurable arts and sciences reduced them to an extremely degraded position.

It has been suggested⁷ that in course of time the Sun worshipping Magas were divided into two groups – of the Magas and the Bhojakas later on degraded as the Yājakas. Bhojakas or Yājakas or the Sevakas appear to have been indigenous priests of the Sun-cult as they are described as chanting Vedic *mantras* etc.⁸ Most probably, the Bhojakas followed this injunction at the beginning but deviated from it later on. In addition, they entered into matrimonial alliances with foreigners like the Magas. According to Monier Williams,⁹ the Bhojakas themselves were the descendants of the Magas through the women of the *Bhoja* race. The Gaṇakas (astrologer, also called Graha-vīpra) are said to be the issues of Devala (Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇa) father and Vaiśya mother.¹⁰ Because of this prohibited inter-caste marriage or origin from unwanted matrimony, the Bhojakas came to be degraded as low or *apāñkteya*¹¹ or Devalaka-Brāhmaṇas¹² (temple-priests). It may be derived specifically from the Deo-Baranark (Shahabad, Bihar) inscription that with the temple of the Sun god were associated the Bhojakas.¹³ The service of a *pūjārī* or priest of a popular god, who officiates at smaller

shrines and lives upon the offerings made to the idol has always been held to be degrading and is never performed by any higher class Brāhmaṇas.¹⁴ The name *Bhojaka* is taken to have originated from their function of eating first on *Śrāddha*-ceremony. Varāhamihira¹⁵ informs us, "the Brāhmaṇa who knows very well the (astronomical and astrological) works and their meaning, is the first to eat the food (*Agrabhuk*) offered to the manes". It is but natural to presume that an *agrabhuk* Brāhmaṇa would be looked upon as fallen in the higher circle of the Hindu society.

N. N. Vasu, based on an early text *Brahmajālasutta*¹⁶ held that the magic priest were held in disrepute since the days of Buddha. It is well known that the Magas were famous for their magic and occult power. It is quite probable that the Buddhist text had Magas in mind while referring to the magic priests in the time of Buddha. The Magas were in disrepute too in India because of their objectionable practices.

The Graha-vipras are said to have been hypocrite and even described as 'Kaitavabid' (Master fraud).¹⁷ They were well known in the society for their fraudulence. That they were not respectable everywhere in the society and looked down upon as fallen has been indicated in the *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa* because of their dependence on astrology. A section of these Brāhmaṇas called *Agradāṇī* Brāhmaṇa were also considered as fallen because of their practice to receive the first gift in the funeral ceremony from the *Śūdras*.¹⁸

The Maga Brāhmaṇas, since the very beginning, extended religious privileges to women and men of lower class.¹⁹ The priests of the castes belonging to *Madhyama* (intermediate) and *Adhama* (low) *Samkaras* are said to be degraded (*patita*) Brāhmaṇas, who attain the status of the castes they serve. The idea gradually grew that the Brāhmaṇas

serving the lower castes attained their rank.²⁰ Therefore, it can be said safely that because of their association with the people of lower strata, the position of the Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇas was lowered beyond measure in the eye of the higher society. In this connection it is possible, as it has been suggested, that the Sun-worshipping Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇas including the *pūjārī* were illiterate.²¹ In contrast with erudition of the scholars belonging to the Vaisnavite and Saivite order, it is apparent that the Saura Devala Brāhmaṇas could hardly expect any royal patronage from the kings other than those who did not profess Saura religion.

The descendants of the early Maga immigrants finally lost their position in the society, if they ever at all enjoyed any high position there. Being deprived of their status, these Brāhmaṇas sought to establish supremacy over the low-class untouchables and it was from then that solar worship became almost extinct in higher Hindu society.²² The indigenous *Sūrya-pūjā* and its alien form were mixed up and its separate existence as a cult for the exclusive worship of the deity was obliterated.²³

The Brāhmaṇas and the Kṣatriyas who traditionally enjoyed vast powers and privileges in India for a long time could not tolerate that a new class of people like the Maga Brāhmaṇas should usurp their supremacy. The Magas were originally the priests of the foreign people who exercised influence temporarily over portions of the country, but were ultimately absorbed in the Hindu fold.

No development of Saura- Śakti:

Bengal became one of the leading centers of the Śākta cult during the last two or three centuries of her ancient period. Even as early as 7th-8th century A.D. Śākta goddess

was worshipped in *Rādhā* and *Varendrī* with Tāntric rites by a man in collaboration with a woman, as found in the *Devī Purāṇa*.²⁴ Most of the Tāntric books were not only written in Bengal, but also the full burgeoning of Tāntricism took place here.

The major mental focus of the Sena-Varman-Deva ages was the meditation and concepts entrenched in astrology, the *Āgamas*, *Nigamas* and *Tantra*. Śaivism, one of the major sects in Bengal, had been influenced by Tāntric concepts and practices. It would seem that during the Pāla period, the figures of the divine couple, *Umā* and *Maheśvara*, had captivated the Bengali mind. The embracing figures of Śiva and *Umā* came to be a concept of Bengali Tāntric Śāktaism. Sitting comfortably in the lap of Śiva, bound in embrace and smiling joyously, *Umā* was indeed the *Tripurasundarī* of the power of Śiva, of the Tāntric devotees, the meditation of which was the highest form of *dhyānayoga*. In a few images of *Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa* from eastern and northern Bengal, Lakṣmī appears seated on the left knee of Viṣṇu, which readily reminds one of the contemporary images of Śiva and *Umā-Maheśvara*. The development of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal in the Sena-Varman period was largely enhanced because of the evolution of the *Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa* concept and the concept of *Rādhā* very likely developed under the influence of Śāktaism.²⁵

Sun worship also adopted Tāntric practices but remaining free from some fundamental concepts of Tāntricism such as the conception of a female principle who in association with a male principle is responsible for the evolution of the universe.²⁶ No such concept as of *Prajñā* of Tāntric Buddhism and *Umā* of Tāntric Hinduism could be developed round the name of *Samjñā* or *Chāyā* - wives of the Sun god - by the solar sectarians. His consorts were never given any separate worship in Bengal, which is

psychologically a matriarchal region under a tremendous impact of Tāntricism, not to speak of according as much high position as that of *Lakṣmī*, *Umā* or *Rādhā*. Naturally, the Bengalis did not keep on feeling attracted in the sect or the cult, which is devoid of matriarchal element, which does not believe in the independent entity of *Śakti* and engage in her worship. It is significant to note that no image of the Sun with the female consort in Tāntric sense has been found so far. The solar sectarians did not popularize this concept and convert it into Tāntric doctrine of a *Saura-Śakti* particularly when other sectarians were adopting it.²⁷

No single deity had ever been able to reach the core of the Bengali heart. It was the divinities in company with the dominant *śaktis* that have always occupied the highest position in their mind. Therefore, the deities like *Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa*, *Umā-Maheśvara* and *Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa* reign supreme here. Conversely, Brahmā, one of the most important divinities of the Hindu Trinity, is given a secondary position in the religious pantheon and invoked only during the offering of oblation along with the *Kusaṇḍikā* hymn of marriage. Similarly, Gaṇeśa also could not gain much influence in the psyche of the Bengal people. He receives worship from the mercantile community only as a giver of success and at the beginning of occasional religious ceremonies in the houses of the *smārta*-people. The same thing happened also in case of Sūrya.

Inclusion of Sūrya in Pañcopāsanā:

Another factor of importance, which might have halted the march of the Sun worship, was the inclusion of the Sun god in the system of *Pañcopāsanā*. Sun god was considered the cause of everything of the world. He was responsible for the creation,

preservation and destruction. Thus, gradually developed the philosophic view that all deities being his manifestations, his worship can, without any philosophic contradiction, be combined with the worship of other deities.²⁸ It also seems that the groupings of five principal deities at one place came into existence out of keen rivalry and competition among the respective sects. It must have resulted in mutual understanding among them and harmonious relation with one another. Alternatively, this keen rivalry and competition among the various sects might have infused a fear of curse in their minds in the event of not worshipping the other equally benevolent or harmful gods. This sort of thinking resulted in the worship of chief deities in a group. In view of the Muslim aggression and danger from Islam, a pressing necessity of unity among the followers of different sects might have also impelled them to think of worship of five main deities in a group. Thus originated the syncretic images, *Pañcopāsanā* and *Pañcāyatana* temples. Whatever may be the case, it has been enjoined by the *Smṛtikāras* that in the daily worship, one has to pay one's obeisance to the five deities namely, Gaṇeśa, Nārāyaṇa, Sūrya, Śiva and Śakti. A Brāhmaṇa, officiating as a priest for the worship of any god or goddess, is found to perform initially *Pañcopāsanā* or the worship of five-deities.²⁹ 'Sūryaya namaḥ' is the usual mantra used by the priests for performing the worship of the Sun god. Significantly enough, the utterance of the mantra 'Ādityādi Navagrahebhyaḥ namaḥ' is the usual practice of the priests. It accommodates the name of Āditya (Sun god) along with those of the nine planets. The system of worship (*Pūjā-Vidhāna*), as approved by the *Purāṇas* and the *Smṛti-nibandhakāras* of Bengal, has left no scope of exclusive worship of the Sun god.

Non-availability of royal patronage:

The royal patronage of a religion is not only a good index of its general influence and popularity, but also an important factor for its prolonged and dominant survival. In Bengal, the Pre-Pāla dynasties of the Khadgas in Samatāṭa and Kāntideva in Chāṭṭagrām, as well as the Pāla, Candra and Kamboja dynasties and individual rulers like Raṇavaṅka-malla of Paṭṭikera were all Buddhists. Vainyagupta (*Mahādeva-pādānudhāya*), Śaśāṅka,³⁰ Lokanātha, Dommanapāla and the early Sena rulers like *Parama-Śaiva* Vijayasena and *Parama-Śaiva* Vallālasena were all Śaivas. The Varmans of East Bengal, the later Sena kings like *Parama-Vaiṣṇava* Vijayasena and the Deva family of Tripura-Noakhali- Chāṭṭagrām region were *Vaiṣṇavas*. No royal Saura family is known in Bengal. In fact, Sun worship was not the official religion in India. Only the Sena kings Viśvarūpa and Sūryasena, who most probably ruled from 1206 – 1225 A.D. styled themselves *Parama-Saura* i.e. devout worshippers of the Sun, but that too after professing the two great faiths (i.e. Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism) followed by their ancestors.³¹ Lack of royal patronage not only prevented the Sun-cult from enjoying added popularity among a large body of people but also disabled its counsels to be influential with the rulers. Thus deprived of easy and secure livelihood through private or royal charity, they could not devote themselves with full time, attention and enthusiasm to the all-round advancement of the Sun cult.

Eclipse of Sūrya by Viṣṇu:

Assimilation of some features belonging to two Hindu cult gods became a common factor in the religious arena, which is clearly visible between Sūrya and Viṣṇu

too. Mention may be made of *Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa* that acquired great circulation in medieval time. *Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa* is actually regarded as a form of Viṣṇu, which points to merger of Sun worship in the Viṣṇu cult.³² Equal faith of a devotee to both Viṣṇu and Sūrya is indicated by the two halves of his name, viz, *Viśvāditya* and *Viśvarūpa* recorded in *Akṣayaṇa Praśasti* of Yakṣapāla's father Viśvāditya-Viśvarūpa.³³ Fusion of these two gods seems not to be uncommon. Both the divinities had originally the same common source of Vedic Sūrya. Purāṇas also show their identical relation. The *Agni Purāṇa* states that the Sun-god is another manifestation of the god Viṣṇu who is extolled and glorified in the hymns of the *Rgveda* and is the source of all good and evil.³⁴ In the *Sāmba Purāṇa*, it is said that the Sun was worshipped as Viṣṇu in *Śvetadvīpa*.³⁵

With the rise of Vaiṣṇvism, the Sun god gradually began to lose much of his importance, as Viṣṇu, originally a solar deity, absorbed in himself much of the elements that had been attributed to Sūrya in the earlier days.³⁶ Even in iconography, there also occurs no special distinction between the concepts of the image of Viṣṇu and that of the standing, four-armed Sūrya upon a lotus with the two wives, Saṁjñā and Chāyā, on either side, and before him the charioteer of the Sun. Thus, it was not difficult for Viṣṇu to eclipse Sūrya, at least in Bengal.³⁷ As there was already a popular sect round Viṣṇu - a form of the Sun,³⁸ the question of a Saura sect could not possibly have arisen in the people's mind. Because of prolonged royal patronage, missionary zeal of a large body of distinguished and dedicated Brāhmaṇas and adaptation with the prevailing Tāntricism, Vaiṣṇavism became so dominant and aggressive a religion as to turn the Sun god of whom he was just an insignificant aspect in the Vedas, into a part of his body. This finds an excellent reflection in verse 1 of the Sian Stone Inscription³⁹ (approx. 1043 A.D.) and

in verse 2 of the Kamauli Copper Plate⁴⁰ (1132 A.D.) of Vaidyadeva, where Sūrya, 'borne on a seven-horse chariot', has been described as the right eye of Hari (Viṣṇu). Viṣṇu's superiority over Sūrya is noticeable even in the solar *vrata*. In the *Sūrya-Vrata* performed by the people of Chittagong, one set of food-offerings is presented by the priest to Viṣṇu, the Preserver of the world, who is, at first, propitiated and another set to the Sun-deity.⁴¹

Identification of Sūrya with Śiva:

Besides Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism was also a great sect in the Brāhmaṇical religion in early Bengal. Like the former, it had also enjoyed state support from some of the Gupta and Sena rulers in addition to that of Śaśāṅka, Lokanātha, Dommanapāla etc. and intense devotion of a large number of Brāhmaṇas besides enormous strength flowing from the Tāntric cult. For reasons stated above, Sun-cult was not in a position to cope with Śaivism and preferred to link the Sun-deity with *Maheśvara*. The composite image of *Mārtaṇḍa Bhairava* serves as an excellent illustration of this tendency, which is also but a pointer to the weakened position of the Sun god. Scale turned in disfavour of Sūrya to such an extent that he came to be identified with Śiva in the *Matsya Purāṇa*. Hence, in the *Ādityaśayana Vrata* it is enjoined that the worship of *Umā-Maheśvara* be done with the recitation of the names of Sūrya and *Sūryācā* should be done on the *Śivaliṅga* (55-56). Both the deities occur in the *Matsya Purāṇa* (68-35) in a compound viz. *Raviśaṅkarau*. In the *Sāmba Purāṇa*, the Sun is said to have been worshipped as *Maheśvara* in Kuśadvīpa.⁴² In the Śaiva system, the Sun is not a mere votary of Śiva, but also one of his *aṣṭamūrtis* (*Mālavikāgnimitra*, I, 1). The identity of Sūrya with Śiva may

be traced back as early as the *Ṛgveda*. In some passages of the *Ṛgveda*, *Agni* is identified with the Sun.⁴³ Moreover, Śākapūṇi, a predecessor of Yāska, expounded a theory of three-fold existence of *Agni*, viz. terrestrial, aerial and heavenly based on the *Ṛgveda* - 10.88.10 (Nirukta 7.28). Moreover, Rudra is closely connected with *Agni* in the *Ṛgveda*.⁴⁴ This easily explains the above injunction and the identity of Śiva and Sūrya.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note here that this tradition continued in an altered forms as folk gods of Bengal, where both of them stood for gods of fertility cult.

It appears from the available evidence that the preponderance of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism over-shadowed the cult of the Sun god, which consequently further declined. Royal patronage secured by these two sects from the Senas, no doubt, added much to their strength and popularity. The worst position of the Sun god may be gleaned from a stone image of *Harihara* (Pl. 22b) belonging to the 12th -13th century A.D. The central figure represents Śiva in the right half and Viṣṇu in the left half and both the gods are provided with respective *āyudhas*, *vāhanas* and *śaktis*. In the background at the extreme right appears a standing Buddha in *abhayamudrā* and in the corresponding position to the left is Sūrya with his usual attributes, attendants, charioteer and chariot-horses.⁴⁶ Here the Sun god is shown not only as inferior to Brāhmaṇical gods like Viṣṇu and Śiva but also to Buddha because the latter, though placed in the background, has been given the right side,⁴⁷ which is traditionally regarded as more important than the left one. The composition of *Hari-Hara* standing between the two wives reminds us of the verse describing *Pradyumneśvara* in the Deopara *praśasti* of Vijayasena. Similar verses in praise of *Hari-Hara* are also quoted in Śrīdhardāsa's *Sadukti-karṇāmṛta*. Repeated occurrence of such description in the epigraphy, literature and real art clearly

demonstrates to what a low position was reduced the Sun god under the aggressive ascendancy of the two great cults.⁴⁸

In the folk songs around the Sun god discovered from the district of Barisal in eastern Bengal,⁴⁹ he has been called Hari as well as Śiva. In the same folk ballads, Gauri is stated to be the Sun god's bride and a legend about Śrī Kṛṣṇa has also been interpolated. We find it stated that the god Śiva (i.e. the Sun god) adorned with flowers of *Dhutura* plant in his two ears, has started on his journey, and is going to Mathura accompanied by sixteen hundred milk-maids ("*Śibāi ṭhākur yātrā kalle dui kāne dhuturo / ṣolaśata gopinī laye chaliche mathurā*").⁵⁰ The reason for thus identifying the Sun-deity with *Hari* (or Viṣṇu) and Śiva and connecting him with *Gauri* and *Gopīnīs* is not far to seek. It seems that the position of the Sun was gradually being usurped by the more dominant Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva cult.

Rivalry and reverses of Sūrya:

There existed many a religious sect, major or minor, in Bengal and rivalry among them was not quite unnatural. The enmity revealed itself mainly by way of representing other dominant god or gods as attendant or accessory figures of another ambitious cult-god or replacing some opponent deity from the Trinity. The Sun-cult, especially spearheaded by the Maga Brāhmaṇas of foreign origin, could not have been an exception. In *Trimūrtis*, Sūrya as the principal god is not unknown as it is found in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Sūrya replaces Brahmā in the trinity in an inscribed sculpture of Bengal. There are many composite images at Ranapur, which may be taken⁵¹ as of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Sūrya thus showing that Śiva has been replaced by Sūrya. Sūrya replaces Viṣṇu in the

door lintel of the tenth century A.D. Śiva-temple at Tejpur in Assam with Brahmā and Śiva on two sides. Saṁkarācārya had to face the Sun-worshippers in the Deccan, whom he found as divided into six sub-sects.

Enmity of the Śaivas, especially the *Pāśupatas* has been suggested⁵² as one of the causes for the decline of the Sun-cult under discussion. Even the *Mahābhārata*⁵³ goes to state: - “Meanwhile, *Rudra* of terrible prowess rushed against the celestials. Filled with anger he tore out the eyes of *Bhaga*” (i.e. Sūrya). “Excited with anger, he attacked *Pūṣan* (Sūrya) with his foot. He tore out the teeth of the god as he sat employed in eating the large sacrificial cake”. It is not unnatural for the god Paśupati, the lord of beasts, to have fallen into conflict with *Pūṣan* who is intimately connected with cattle and pastoral life in the *Ṛgveda*,⁵⁴ with the prosperity of cattle in the later Vedic literature⁵⁵ and with the *Paṇis*⁵⁶ who were traders and most probably non-Āryans.⁵⁷ It is equally not unexpected of the god of the *Vrātyas* (outcastes) to have been angry with *Bhaga*, ‘a distributor of wealth’, usually the gift of Indra and Agni, and the chief leader of rites⁵⁸ and the sustainer of the world.⁵⁹

The Śaivas, particularly the *Pāśupatas*, were opposed to the solar cult and this must have checked its progress largely. The Pāśupata was the oldest form of Śaivism prevalent in north India. Varāhamihira refers to the *Pāśupata*, while prescribing the installation of images of different deities. He states, “The priests who install the image of Viṣṇu, should be *Bhāgavatas*; of Sun, *Magas*; of Śiva, the *Pāśupatas* (Ash-armed one)...”. Śaivism in Bengal was of the *Pāśupata* sect, as is evident from the Bhagalpur grant of Nārāyaṇa pāla.⁶⁰ It is deserving of note that emanating from the South, the kings of the Sena dynasty were prominent devotees of Sadāśiva the concept of which, having

been accepted in South India, in course of time spread to Bengal with the Southern dynasty and its army.⁶¹ With the decline of Buddhism in the 12th century A.D. Śaivism became predominant in Bengal. As a historical process, a highly antagonistic attitude of the *Pāśupatas* of Bengal against the Maga Brāhmaṇas whose sphere of influence also included a large body of the *Vrātyas* is easily comprehensible.

Sūrya reduced to the status of a *graha*:

It has already been seen that the worship of the *Navagrahas* became immensely popular in medieval time mainly among the Hindus, as a means to secure peace, prosperity and long life, avert misfortune and harm enemies. Constant fear of growing foreign invasion and prevailing socio-economic tensions might have contributed to this new phenomenon. The Sun worshipping Maga Brāhmaṇas who took to the profession of astrology upheld *Grahayāga* or *Svastyāyana* as a sole, infallible panacea for the problems confronting the society. In astrology, *Ravi* (Sūrya) is considered as one of the leading planets, determining the fortune of humankind. Introduction and popularization of Navagraha worship in such an energetic way, in reality, brought the Sun god down to the position of one of the planets only, though a central figure among them, from the loftiest seat of a great benevolent deity and the 'soul of all movable and immovable things'.⁶² Independent worship of the Sun as a god naturally lost its rationale in the society. In absence of images of the nine planets in a single stone slab, they could be worshipped by drawing their figures on canvas in their respective colour or in *maṇḍalas* made of scented paste (Sandal-wood-paste). The present practice of *grahayajña* with no requirement of icon in any form, in all probability, was prevalent in the last phase of our period under

discussion. Under the changed situation, there was left no urge before the people to do the individual and anthropomorphic worship of the once-great god Sūrya in temples, big or small. Anyway, the *Maga-dvijas* who introduced, popularized and took to the greatest height, the anthropomorphic and temple-worship of the Sun god under a strong religious zeal, possibly under economic compulsion never hesitated to reduce the status of their deity.

Assimilation of Brāhmaṇical religion and solar deity:

The whole question concerning the decline of Sun worship in the so-called post-Hindu period originates from the occurrence of large number of Sun-images and references to Sun temples belonging to the Pāla-Sena period against their conspicuous absence in the succeeding age. It is well known that the practice of Sun worship in anthropomorphic form and in temple was not at all an indigenous one, rather very much alien to the mainstream tradition. A critical study of the practices of the primitive tribes of India clearly shows the general absence of any material representation of the solar deity while the deity are being offered sacrifices in an open space cleared of jungle on a raised altar.⁶³ Even in different *Sūrya-vratas*, which have been performed by the womenfolk from time immemorial, the god is worshipped with the aid of symbolic representation. In the *Vedas*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Upaniṣadas*, the *Sūtras* and the Epics, we notice the worship of the Sun god in both atmospheric and symbolic forms, especially among the orthodox section of the society.

Coming to the Purāṇic age, we are amazed to find that many Purāṇas⁶⁴ even do not mention the role of the Magian priests at all and continue the indigenous and national

tradition of Sun-worship as found in the *Vedas*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Sūtras*, and the Epics. In the *Viṣṇu*, *Vāyu*, *Brahmānda*, *Mārkaṇḍeya* and *Matsya Purāṇas*, which were thoroughly imbued with the orthodox spirit of the Sun-cult, the Vedic tradition⁶⁵ of Sun worship is found to have been carried on. They reveal that the orthodox tradition of Sun worship actually developed on the lines of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa's⁶⁶ prescription of a golden disc to represent the solar orb and the Upaniṣadic⁶⁷ doctrine of the golden *Puruṣa* in the Sun who was identified with the Ultimate Being. The prevalence of this tradition even after the spread of the Magian custom is attested by the *Kūrma Purāṇa* which describes the Sun as the heavenly body in regulating time and seasons, in maintaining the planets in their position and in fostering the life of the plants and animals. This description is in conformity with the Vedic account of the Sun god. Even in the *Sāmba Purāṇa*,⁶⁸ which symbolizes the climax of the Magian belief, the Vedic tradition has not been forgotten. The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, describing the various sects of Hinduism, states that some persons who knew the Vedas worshipped the Sun everyday in the morning, midday and in the evening with various hymns.⁶⁹ This shows that among the Sauras was also a section, which continued worshipping him in the old Vedic way. Even a group of the Sun worshipping Magas⁷⁰ called Bhojakas (later on degraded as the Yājakas) who appear to have been indigenous priests of the Sun-cult, are described as chanting Vedic *mantras* etc.⁷¹ In view of the above, it is evident that even after the flood of Magian Sun worship in northern India, the indigenous form of Sun worship without image and temple had simultaneously been going on.

It is beyond doubt that in the field of iconography and temples, the Maga priests exerted powerful influence and this new tradition was materially helpful

in propagating and diffusing the sectarian form of Sun worship. They gave material and lithic representation to the imaginary and atmospheric conception of the Sun as found in the *Vedas*, the Epics and the *Purāṇas*. However, as far as the mythology, theology and philosophy of the Sun-cult were concerned, the Maga-influence was negligible.⁷² As a means to wipe out the Magian element even in solar iconography, a constant, conscious and vigorous attempt was also being made in the form of hiding or idealizing the alien traits (northerner dress, waist-girdle and high boots) in the Sun images. This is evident from steady shedding off the northerner's dress by keeping the upper body of the divinity open (Harinarayanpur image) or covering it with a diaphanous garment, threatening instruction for not making the god's feet⁷³ and endowing him with Indian attributes such as *yajñopavīta*, *tilaka* etc.

The endeavour to merge the Sun-cult with the Brāhmaṇical stream was slow but steady until the rule of the Buddhist Pālas because of their eclectic policy, though they were also the upholders of the Brāhmaṇical religion and social system. However, in the Sena period the wheels of the religion and society turned in the one direction; in this era the all-pervading and all-embracing religion of Bengal was Brāhmaṇism, governed by the *Vedas* and the *Purāṇas*, the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti*, and affected by the *Tantras*. Further, from the second half of the eleventh century the descendants of the Buddhist kings also gradually took to Brāhmaṇism. By the end of the ancient period, the Brāhmaṇism of the *Vedas*, *Smṛti* and the *Purāṇas* had triumphed and the Sun god was ultimately assimilated into the Brāhmaṇical religion losing his identity in the Brāhmaṇical solar deity. This may find corroboration in Verse 1 of the Edilpur Copperplate of the Sena king *Sūryasena* (1206-1210 A.D.) where the Sun is described as "the friend of lotus beds, the source of

deliverance of the three worlds withheld in the prison of darkness, and the wonderful bird of the tree of the *Vedas*, soaring high up on his two alternately expanding wings (i.e. the two fortnights), of which one is white and the other is black".⁷⁴

***Dharmathākur* replaces *Sūrya* in *Rādhā*:**

In ancient *Rādhā* or modern West Bengal, we find the immense popularity of the worship of *Dharmarāj* or *Dharmathākur* who has been identified in the *Śūnya Purāṇa*⁷⁵ and the *Dharmapūjā-vidhāna*⁷⁶ with the Sun god. It is interesting to note in this connection that from the late Mm. Haraprasad Sastri down to Ashutosh Bhattacharyya, it took us three generations to know finally that Dharma-pūjā belongs to the Sun-cult.^{76a} Some solar attributes had definitely been absorbed in the personality of the *Dharmathākur*. He is also conceived as the remover of diseases like *Sūrya*. It is not unlikely that the place of the Brāhmaṇical god *Sūrya* was gradually occupied by this folk-god *Dharmathākur* at least in some parts of Bengal. Given the authenticity of the *Śūnya Purāṇa* of Rāmāi Paṇḍit, it can be accepted that Dharma festival was current in Sena times prior to the Turkish conquest. The local tradition of adoring the Sun god as *Dharma* was so widely accepted in western part of Bengal that it did not leave any opportunity for the *Udīcyveśī* *Sūrya* in Purāṇic garb to gain popularity.⁷⁷ It also appears that after the rule of *Parama-Saura* Viśvarūpasena and *Sūryasena*, the solar devotees of the South-West Bengal, being deprived of state support, gradually assimilated themselves into other religious communities.⁸²

Notes and References

1. *HB-I*, p. 428.
2. Sharma, D., *Rajasthan through the Ages*, vol. I, Bikaner, 1966, p.720.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 385, 721.
4. Bhattacharyya, Ashutosh, 'The Popular Sun Cult of Bengal', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Annual Pūjā Number, 1945, p. 165.
5. *HB-I*, p. 585.
6. Bhattacharyya, Ashutosh, *op. cit.*, p.165.
7. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 30.
8. According to Varāhamihira, the Sun-images should be invoked with auspicious Vedic hymns before they are installed (*Bṛhat Saṁhitā*, Ch. LVIII Verses 49-52).
9. Williams Monier, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1951.
10. *HB-I*, p. 570.
11. *Bhaviṣya P.*, I.140. 141, 146.
12. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 40.
13. *MRC'SB*, p. 44.
14. Gosta. Liebert. *Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions: Hinduism-Buddhism-Jainism*, Delhi, 1986, p. 229.
15. H. Kern (Eugrtam), *Bṛhat Saṁhitā*. Ch. II, verse 13. *J.R.A.S.*, 1870-75f.
16. Quoted by N.N. Vasu, *Archaeological Survey of Mayurbhanja*.
17. Chakravarty, Jahnvi Kumar, *Āryasaptaśaṭī O Gauḍ Vaṅga* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1378 B.S., p.57.
18. Tarkaratna, Panchanan (Ed.), *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa, Brahma khaṇḍa*, Ch. X, Calcutta, 1399 B.S., p. 2.

19. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 40.
20. *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa*, II, XIV.75.
21. Gosta, *op. cit.*, p.229.
22. Bhattacharyya, Ashutosh, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
23. Banerjea, J.N., *Paurāṇic and Tāntrik Religion*, Calcutta, 1994, pp. 145-6.
24. *HBP*, p. 422.
25. *Ibid*, p. 450.
26. Majumdar, R.C. (Ed.), *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, Bombay, 1955, p.314 ff.
27. *Ibid*, pp. 262, 323.
28. *SWAI-P*, p. 189.
29. Monier, Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India*, London. 1883. p. 412.
30. Depicted on the coins of Śaśāṅka were Śiva and Nandī, the bull. Allan, J., *Catalogue of Indian Coins in the British Museum, Coins of Ancient India*, London. 1936. pp. 147-48.
31. *HB-I*, p. 427.
32. Fergusson, James, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, Kol. II, Delhi, 1972, p.106.
33. Sircar, D. C., *EI*, Vol. XXXVI, p. 88.
34. *Agni P.*, Tr. by Manmath Nath Dutta, Vol. I. 120-33.
35. *Sāmba P.*, pp. 26; 37; 38.
36. Chattopadhyay, S., *The Evolution of Theistic Sects in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1962, p. 58; Ganguli, K. K. *Some Aspects of Sun- worship in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1965, p. .

37. *HBP*, p. 452.
38. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and other Minor Sects*, (Rep.) Varanasi, 1965; Hopkins, E.W., *Religions of India*, Boston, 1895, pp. 377-78.
39. 'pravodhanidre jagatām yasyonmīlan-mīlane' - Sircar, D.C., *Śilālekh Tāmraśāsanādir Prasaṅge*, Calcutta, 1387 B.S., pp. 85-101.
40. "etasya dakṣiṇadṛiṣo Vamśe Mihrasya jātavān pūrvam Vighrahapāla": *E.I.*, II, p. 350; *Gaudalekhamālā*, p.128; *C.B.I.*, p. 370.
41. Bhattacharyya, R.K., & Mitra, S.C., 'On the Worship of the Sun-deity in Bihar, Western and Eastern Bengal', *The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. XIII, 1927, pp. 316-316.
42. *Sāmba P.*, p. 26; 37; 38.
43. MacDonnell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 93.
44. *Ibid.* p. 77.
45. Kantawala, S.G., *Cultural History from the Matsya Purāṇa*, Baroda, 1964, p. 185.
46. *ASI- AR*. Part II. 1930-34, pp. 256-257.
47. Incidentally, it deserves to be mentioned that much earlier Lord Buddha had been accepted as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu, and it did not take very long for the acceptance to develop into affection.
48. In the Sūrya image from Bansihari (West Dinajpur) in SAGC shows the miniature figure of Viṣṇu on the left side of the *prabhāvalī* and two defaced figures on the right. Two identical Sūrya images (*BSHI*, p.189, pl. 162) from Vikrampur (Dhaka) in the BNM (N0.61 & 66.31) show Brahmā, Maheśvara and Viṣṇu seated on the top of the *prabhāvalī*.

49. *Typical Selections from Old Bengali Literature*, Part I, published by the University of Calcutta, 1914, pp. 164,171.
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51. Ojha, G.H., *History of Jodhpur*, I, 1938, p. 66.
52. Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
53. XII.160.18-19.
54. *RV*, I.5.1, 2; VI.54.5; VI.53.9.
55. *MS*, 4.3.7; *TB*, 1.7.24; *SGS.*, 3.9.
56. *RV*, VI.53.3, 5, 6, 7.
57. *Vedic Index*, vol. I, p. 472.
58. *RV*, VII.3.8.3.
59. *RV*, VII.3.8.2.
60. *IA*, XV, p. 304; *Gauḍalekhamālā*, p. 55.
61. *HBP*, p. 420.
62. *RV*, I.115.1.
63. Das, Tarak Candra, 'Sun-worship amongst the aboriginal tribes of eastern India', *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Vol. II, 1924, p. 90.
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65. Roy, S.N., 'Early Purāṇic Account of Sun and Solar Cult', *University of Allahabad Studies*, 1963, pp. 41-45.
66. *SB*, VII.4.1.10.
67. *BAU*, II.5.5.

68. Hazra, *Studies*, p. 63. cf. *Sāmba P.*, 6.15; 12.8; 12.13; 24.7; 29.15; 30.18.
69. *Śrīmad Devī Bhāgavata P.* Ch. VIII. Book I, p. 27, Tr. by Swami, Vijayananda, alias Hari Prasanna Chatterji, Panini Office, Allahabad.
70. Hazra, *Studies*, Vol. I, p. 30.
71. *Sāmba P.*, 27.
72. *SWAI-S*, p. 258.
73. Change in religious outlook against top boots and *Anyaṅga* is met with in the injunctions led by *Matsya*, *Padma* and *Agni Purāṇas* where the sculptor is warned against covering the feet of the god if he does not intend to be inflicted by leprosy. *Padma Purana*, *Śr. ṣṭi. Khaṇḍa*, Vaṅg. Edition. Chap. VIII, Sl. No. 42; *Matsya Purāṇa*, CCLXI. 1-7; XCIV.1. Such scriptural prohibition provided sentiment to the sculptors of later ages to insert or submerge the feet of the god below the knees in the chariot- pedestal or to put them inside the chariot.
74. *IB*, p. 126.
75. Sen, Sukumar, *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās*, Vol. 1, *Aparārdha*, Calcutta, 1975; p. 147 ff.
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78. Tarafdar, Mamtajur Rahaman, *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās* (in Bengali), Dhaka, 1987.