

Tracing the Historical Trajectory of Ghentu Worship in the Context of Science and Society in Bengal

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Abstract: *In Bengal's religious culture a significant feature is a unique assimilation of Brahmnical religious culture with the non-Brahmnical faith. Through the process of assimilation of religion, the canonic god and goddess has been transformed into a mundane deities. Besides the transformed canonized status the mundane deities of Vedic, Buddhist and Jain religious are also surviving as demigods. One such Jain and Hindu demigod is Ghantakarna, widely worshipped in the Southern part of West Bengal. It is difficult to ascertain how the Jain god Ghantakarna had been transformed into a demigod Ghentu. This paper narrates that Ghentu is considered as a presiding demigod of several skin diseases like Itches, Psoriasis etc. and Ghentu is generally worshipped during the spring season in West Bengal. This paper seeks to delve deeper into this unique matrix, emphasizing upon the less known aspects of the worship of Ghentu veneration in the context of Science & Society, based on written sources.*

Keywords: Canonical Gods, Mundane Gods, Ghantakarna, Ghentu, Worship etc.

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Introduction

In the religious daily chores of Bengalis the presence of mundane and mythical deities remain very palpable. Along with the pre-eminence of canonical gods and goddesses like Shiva, Vishnu, Shree Krishna (Narayana), the worship of the mundane deities like Dakshina Ray, the god of the crocodile Kalu Ray, Tina Nath Thakur, Olai Chandi, Pundasur are also replete in the religious culture in Bengal. Through a process of unique assimilation sometimes a canonical god has been transformed into a mundane deity and also the religious status of a mundane deity has been elevated to a canonical height. One such example is Bansli Devi, a

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mundane goddess is worshipped as another form of the canonical goddess Bishalakshi. Rankini, the tutelary or household goddess of the ancient royal family of Ghatshila is worshipped in a classical manner, while she is by origin a mundane goddess. Likewise in some places Dharmathakur is also revered as a classical god. It is a significant pointer in Bengali religious culture that apart from the classical Brahminical deities, in so many ways even the classical gods in the canonical Buddhism and Jainism appeared in popular mundane form to be worshipped by subaltern Hindu society, leaving an indelible trace of these non-Brahminical religious practice influencing the rural populace. In spite of their transformed canonized status as gods and goddesses these mundane deities of Vaidic, Buddhist and Jain religions are also surviving as demigods, demons or the presiding deities of several endemic diseases. One such Jain and Hindu demigod is **Ghantakarna**, who is widely worshipped in South Bengal.

Ghantakarna is essentially a Jain deity who is widely worshipped with due reverence in Western India as well as in so many other countries. It is believed that Ghantakarna has the divine power to satisfy people's mundane desires, yet can lead them on the spiritual path. Perhaps the advent of this demigod in Bengal happened through the ways of Jainism. It is not a travesty of truth that Jainism was adopted widely in Bengali society. Bengali masses had become familiar with Aryan religion through the gateways of Buddhism, Jainism and Ajeebik religions.

The principal proof of the spread of Jainism in Bengal remains in the name of places or regions. The names of regions like Manbhum, Singbhum, Birbhum, Bardhaman have Jain origin. Despite the initial apathy shown to Jainism here, had been erased in time due to its popular appeal. But it is difficult to ascertain how the Jain god Ghantakarna had been transformed into a demigod Ghentu. It may only be conjectured that the initial resentment against Jainism might have acted as a catalyst behind this change.

In Bengal Ghentu is considered as a presiding demigod of several skin diseases like Itches, Psoriasis etc. Ghentu is generally worshipped during the spring season in Bengal. The wee hours of the first day of the month of Falgun remains the auspicious moment for the worship of Ghentu. Boiled rice and red lentil, usually considered forbidden in religious rituals, are offered before the idol of Ghentu. Because of the significant climatic change that happens in Spring season, the infestation of skin diseases recur. Hence Ghentu worship has a pragmatic purpose too. There are several anecdotes and popular rhymes about Ghentu regarding his remedial capacity of all sorts of skin lesions. One such popular rhyme is, '**Ghentu Jaay, Khos Palay**' (Psoriasis vanishes when Ghentu appears). Ghentu is mainly the demigod of Boil or Carbuncle. That is why specific incantation praising Ghentu is uttered to scare away the menace of such skin diseases. For complete recovery from Carbuncle offerings are placed at the roots of Manasa (cactus) plants on the last date of the month of Chaitra. Medical science in ancient India relied heavily on wide range of plants herbs and shrubs. Even today in rural Bengal people use the juice of **Hantishura plant** (scientific name *Heliotropium Indicum*) as a remedy for Conjunctivitis. The roots of **Panchmukhi Jaba** (*Hibiscus Sinensis*) dipped in water can cure Diabetes. Likewise the plant commonly known as Ghentu or Vaat is used as the remedy for Fever, Tumour, Malaria, Tuberculosis, Scorpion

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bite, Snake bite, healing of wounds or abrasions. The scientific name of Ghentu plant is *Clorendum Infortunatum*. Ghentu plant is called Bhandira in Sanskrit, Titavaat in Hindi and Rajbeli in Nepali languages.

Excepting in some rural areas of Malda district, there happened to be no evidence of the worship in North Bengal. Ghentu is rather worshipped mostly as a mundane demigod in the southern part of West Bengal. This ritual remains a reality check even during the autumnal festive days. The materials needed for the worship of this deity are pretty much available in the rural bases. These are a black earthen cookware, cow dung and Ghentu flower. The idol of Ghentu is as weird as his name. A much used broken black earthen cookware provides the altar. A lump of cow dung is placed on top of the handi, two cowries make the eyes, and the top of it is smeared in vermilion marking a coloured spot. During worship the earthenware is placed upside down on a broken sink. This worship is not done inside a temple. Usually the place of worship of Ghentu is either on the bank of a water body or at some crossing of three roads. There is no set mantra (incantation) for the worship; at times few popular rhymes are recited. At the conclusion of the worship the blackened earthen cookware is smashed to smithereens and the lamp back is used as kohl. In some other part the puja gets over with the breaking of the cookware.

In common parlance ghentu flower is called **Vaat** flower. In the south western part of Bengal Ghentu worship a traditional festival. One may see small kids light up incandescent sticks, collect **Vaat** flowers and go from house to house begging alms and arrange the worship on the day of Ghentu Sankranti, spending the collection of previous days. Ghentu worship is observed for consecutive last three days of the month of Falgun. The main ingredient of this religious festival is ghentu flower. On the third day, people gather before the icon of the deity praying for the absence of diseases for the society in general and for the area in particular. But even the most celebrated researchers and historians of Bengal still remain completely clueless regarding the enigma why **Vaat** flower had got the elevated status of ghentu flower. Some folk culture researchers opine that probably the unkempt profusion of the flagrant **Vaat** flower during the Spring season has earned this epithet for it.

Easy availability of this flower might have influenced the children and young boys of Bengal to choose this flower for the worship. Another remarkable side of it is the fact that the same flower is required for the worship of Lord Shiva in Springtime. Shiva or Mahadeva is the god of gods and Ghentakarna or Ghentu is one of his favourite attendants. Ghentu is a medicinal plant providing relief from so many seasonal diseases, at the same time the flower is held as an offering to the god of all gods Mahadeva. On top of that since ages a sea of Ghentu flower decks the surface of earth making it beautiful during Spring season. For the above reasons perhaps the masses tried to give the flower a religious status. Hence, the beginning of the tradition of Ghentu worship in Bengal. Children participate in large number in the festivity. This worship marks the undeterred joyous participation of the young minds. That's why Ghentu became the venerable deity of the children of Bengal. We find plenty of references of Ghentu in the writings of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. Earlier even the young cowherds used to worship their deity Ghentu in the open fields. At times a black earthen cookware is placed inside the village market and the

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function of kicking it and breaking it signifies the warding off of an evil god. This act resembles the worship of **Alakshmi** (Goddess of misfortune and misery) in the new moon of the Bengali month of Kartick.

In Egypt and in India, there remains a very old tradition of plant worship. Even at the beginning of Indus Valley civilization evinced plant worship. **Madankaam** festivity is observed in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar in North Bengal on the 13th and 14th days of the bright fortnight in the Bengali month of Chaitra. This is basically the worship festival of **Kamdeva** (the god of love). During this festival a bamboo pole is decorated to look like a woman. This plant worship presupposes exorcism of an evil spirit or god resting on a plant. On the other hand, a plant is believed / imagined to be a prototype of a god / goddess or an actual deity. As **Banadurga** is one of many types of Devi Durga and the symbolic plant is **Shyaora** (Siamese Bush). This bush is believed to be the abode of ghosts, hungry ghost, a ghost of a married woman. Such belief system projecting the worship of localized god and goddesses, evil gods and demigods was pretty common among the people belonging to the lower rungs of the society.

As per the mythical tales of Shivapurana, Ghantakarna is a worshipper of Vishnu and vehemently opposed to Shiva. Lord Vishnu tried hard to convince Ghantakarna that Vishnu and Shiva are different manifestations of a single god. But despite Vishnu's repeated persuasions Ghantakarna remained adamant on not showing respect to Lord Shiva. In order to keeping himself deaf to the name of Shiva or Shiva Vandana, he wore two earrings in the shape of big bells and always shook his head vigorously. Hence he had gotten the name Ghantakarna. He is essentially a devout saint worshipper of Hari (Vishnu). On the contrary, another opinion is that this Ghentu was opposed to Vishnu and was born in **Pishacha** (devilish) dynasty. Some Scholars say that Ghentu was by origin a son of god in paradise, but he was severely punished by Vishnu for committing a serious offence. Then he was made to be born in a devilish lineage. But Ghantakarna had lost this devilish association while being worshipped in Bengal. It is quite relevant to mention that few Scholars also said that Ghentu is actually a mundane version of **Surya** and **Dharma Thakur**, both are regarded as the gods who could eradicate leprosy or other kinds of skin diseases. Perhaps this god of healing emerged and evolved in the pre-Aryan society.

The Aryans had borrowed lots of healing methods from the non-Aryans in the pre-Vedic era and also had accepted the superior status of healing gods like Shiva and others. There may have remained other non-canonical healing gods who had not been recognized by the Aryans, but survived from the ancient times till today in some corners with self-esteem. Perhaps Ghentu is one of such a healing god. Like Bengal, Ghantakarna is also regarded a symbol of evil and destructive force in Nepal. To decimate such evil spirits huge effigies are burnt in Nepal. This ritual is held in the middle of the month of Shravana. To save the children and the womenfolk of Nepal from the influence of evils such events are organized. But we wonder why Ghantakarna had been acknowledged in the old communitarian society as an opponent of Lord Vishnu.

In spite of all these negative connotations around Ghantakarna, we get a glimpse of the mundane world view reflecting the material life culture of Bengal and the Bengalese. At

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the same time we see this worship evinces a deep seated anathema against itching and other kinds of skin diseases. Such assimilation into material life cultures had produced Bengali **Ghentur gaan**. Through its lyrics the everyday problems of Bengali community life get an exposition. And the enigmatic linguistic expressions in such songs have a great archival importance in the annals of popular religious songs. In the evolutionary stages of the rural Bengal society from the ancient times down to the modern age, those Ghentu songs had imparted immense importance. Convention in Bengal has it that **Harinaam Sankirtan** (chanting the name of God Hari i.e. Vishnu) is rendered after the exit of Ghentu Raja. This sankirtan is known as **Hariyash** and this musical chanting happens after Ghentu's exit. This is perhaps the reason why there happens to be a galore of such **Astaprahar** (throughout the day and night) **Harinaam Sankirtan** both in the rural and urban bases of Bengal during the Spring season.

Conclusion

One such Jain and Hindu demigod is Ghentakarna, widely worshipped in the Southern part of West Bengal. It is difficult to ascertain how the Jain god Ghentakarna had been transformed into a demigod Ghentu. This paper narrates that Ghentu is considered as a presiding demigod of several skin diseases like Itches, Psoriasis etc. and Ghentu is generally worshipped during the spring season in West Bengal. This paper seeks to delve deeper into this unique matrix, emphasizing upon the less known aspects of the worship of Ghentu veneration in the context of Science & Society, based on written source.

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