

## VAISHNAVISM IN BISHNUPUR: MATERIALITY AND PRACTICES

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Madan Mohan temple in Bishnupur, built around 1643 CE is the most venerated temple in the town because it enshrines the deity Madan Mohan, the principal deity of the Mallas. The priest of the temple narrates stories and heroic deeds of the God emphasising that Madan Mohan is all pervading... he is Krishna, he is Madhab, he is Vishnu, he is Narayana, he is Rama; Madan Mohan embodies every form associated with Vishnu, the preserver, because he is the chosen deity of the Mallas. Gripping stories of the God in the hallowed landscape provides a backdrop to look for the antecedents and trajectories of Vaishnavism that formed a regional identity during the medieval period amidst the western uplands of Bengal. Bishnupur was the capital of Mallabhum that emerged as one of the major semi-independent principalities of medieval Bengal with the Mallas as rulers who were supposedly the *Bagdi Rajas*. Mallabhum was accommodated within the Mughal system of administration as a vassal principality paying a fixed tribute or *peshkash*. Pika Ghosh in her study vividly describes this sacred landscape and the inseparable ties of the deity Madan Mohan with the topography and the people (Ghosh 2002). Was this religion introduced by the Mallas in the medieval period? How was the deity imagined? The Malla rulers, as known from the textual records, were also the worshippers of *Mrinmoyee*, a form of *Durga*. How did Gaudiya Vaishnavism replace the *Sakta* tradition? Was it replaced at all? The present paper seeks to locate these missing links and delve deeper by taking into consideration the socio-political and religious processes from 4<sup>th</sup> century CE till the medieval period (16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), when Bishnupur was established as the Malla capital and a flourishing centre of Gaudiya Viashnavism. The sources of study are multifarious including archaeological evidences, textual and epigraphic sources, art, architecture and Museum collections. The discussion has been envisaged in three sections. The first section refers to the epigraphic evidence in connection to the worship of Vishnu. In this section, the authors refer to the archaeological sites and the associated landscape features; the second section highlights the sculptural evidences pertaining to the period from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and hence draws evidences from the archaeological sites as well as the Museum collections. The last section relies on the architectural evidences, mostly temples, textual sources and oral narratives that put forth a vivid picture of the medieval Vaishnavite traditions in Bishnupur and the adjacent region.

*Vishnu*, the foremost member of the later Brahmanical triad, appears to have evolved from the symbolism of three God concepts: The Man God *Vasudeva- Krishna*, the Vedic sun God

*Vishnu* and the cosmic God *Narayana* of the *Brahmans* (Banerjea 1956). At the root of the evolving Bhakti cult, was *Vasudeva Krishna*, a *Ksatriya* chief who along with *Samkarsana*, *Pradyumna*, and *Aniruddha* came to be deified as hero Gods, the holy *pancaviras* of the *Vrisni* clan. During the period of the *Puranas*, the supremacy of Vishnu is clearly established where he has already acquired his place in the Hindu trinity as the supreme protective God. The systemisers of the cult tenets then transformed the *Vira* concept into the *Vyuha* or ‘emanation’ to which was added the incarnation concept (Banerjea 1956). The Vaishnavas thus are the devotees of Vishnu in his various forms and his incarnations.

Inscriptions from Bengal also speak of the various manifestations of Vishnu, such as *Cakrapurusa*, *Govindasvamin*, *Pradyumnesvara*, *Kokamukhasvamin* which were in vogue, during the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century CE (Picron 1986, Chattopadhyay 2010). The cult of *Avataras* of Vishnu prevailed in Bengal during the Gupta and post-Gupta period onwards. By the early medieval period, these forms with a multitude of representations spread over almost all parts of Bengal. It is known from epigraphic records that the tutelary deity of the Vaishnavas was known by various names such as Vishnu, Hari, Govindasvamin, Narayana, Janardana and Gopal (Picron 1986). Consequently the production of icons was also available in large numbers. Later, the Radha-Krishna cult eventually gained prominence due to the emanating concept of *purusa-prakriti*, in virtue of which the cult of Sri was engrafted on Vaishnavism.

## I

The Susunia hill inscription provides the earliest known epigraphic record indicating the worship of Vishnu in Bengal. Susunia hills (district Bankura, 443 m in height and 3.2 km in stretch) are located to the north west of Bishnupur (62 km). *Cakrasvamin*, Lord of the Wheel, Vishnu is symbolically represented here on the rock with his attribute *cakra* (wheel) that bears close resemblance to the solar symbol. There are two inscriptions, one of which is engraved on the face of the rock and the other to right of the wheel. The first records that the cave was excavated under the patronage of king Candravarman, the Lord of Pushkarana. Pushkarana in this context has been identified with the excavated early historic site Pokhanna (Vasu 1303 BS, Sastri 1915-16). The second inscription refers to the dedication of the cave to *Cakrasvamin*, which literally means the wielder of the discus i.e., Vishnu. It may reasonably be inferred that the excavated cave on the wall on which the inscription was engraved, was intended to be an abode or temple of Vishnu (Sastri 1915-16). The engraving of the inscription on the highest point of the hill leaves a ground for imagination that the secluded location for the worship of Vishnu would have added to the reverence. The authority too would have the privilege to view the extent of his territory from this vantage point. This locale with epigraphic evidences and through subsequent explorations and excavations at Pokhanna points to the archaeological potential with diagnostic early historic artefacts like beads, coins, potteries (NBPW and Black Slipped),



**Plate 18.1:** The earliest low carved image of Vishnu (Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).



**Plate 18.2:** The earliest low carved image of Vishnu (Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).

terracotta plaques, toy objects and likewise (Datta 2008: 102-110). That this area was gaining importance from the early historic period and continued to be in occupation till the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE is well evident from the present evidences. We can surmise that there might have been a considerable base for the worship of Vishnu which is substantiated by the inscription referring to *Cakrasvamin* depicted with a wheel symbol, and also through donation of the cave by the ruling authority having said that, it seems difficult to trace the trajectory of worship and the associated forms of Vishnu ahead of 4<sup>th</sup> century CE other than a group of small images of *Vishnu* currently housed in the Asutosh Museum of the University of Calcutta and the Acharya Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhavan, Bishnupur (henceforth AJCPB Bishnupur Museum). Amita Ray suggests that these low carved images could be assigned to a period between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. She observes that these images mostly follow the style of the Narhatta sandstone image of Bogra which are depicted as standing images with the usual attributes in downward positions. According to Ray, placed against a flat background, the stockily built figures exhibiting an open-eyed countenance, seems to present a local quite prevalent in Bengal (Ray 1991). These could have been at the threshold of an emergent form somewhere to be outlined between the



**Plate 18.3:** The *sthanaka* image with pointed base  
(Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).

adjoining villages of Bishnupur. One of the specimens falling in the same category is from Ban Asuria, Bankura and is reserved in the display in the Asutosh Museum, University of Calcutta. Ray (1991) also mentions one image from the site Pokhanna discussed above. Though it is difficult to denote the exact use of these images, it can be conjectured that these might have been used for '*nitya puja*' or as a protective amulet.

## II

The early medieval phase (9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) gives evidences of a number of early medieval sites in the study area with habitation and sculptural remains. The iconographic representations of *Vishnu* are varied and have been elaborately discussed by Chattopadhyay (2010) with emphasis on the various forms and features. The study of these iconographic representations along with the archaeological sites allows us to have a coherent picture of the

diagnostic early historic terracotta plaques of Chandraketugarh and the early medieval Pala-Sena iconographic presentations. The length of these images varies between 7 and 9 cm and the breadth around 6 cm (approximately). Enamul Haque (1992) and Gouriswar Bhattacharya (2009) enlighten us with the detailed styles and chronology of these images found from Bengal. Bhattacharya observes the stages of development in the iconographic improvisations and cites the instances of Hankrail and Narhatta to be the earliest representations of the same. He adds that the early *Visnu* images from Bengal do not hold a lotus (*padma*); therefore it is not always proper to arrange the *Vishnu* images from Bengal following the twenty-four (*chaturvingsati*) forms of the texts, making different arrangements according to the four attributes, *sankha* (conch), *cakra* (disc), *gada* (mace) and *padma* (lotus). There are three images of the same group now reserved in the AJCPB Bishnupur Museum (**Plates 18.1 & 18.2**). The exact provenance of both is unknown but according to the Museum register, they were collected from the



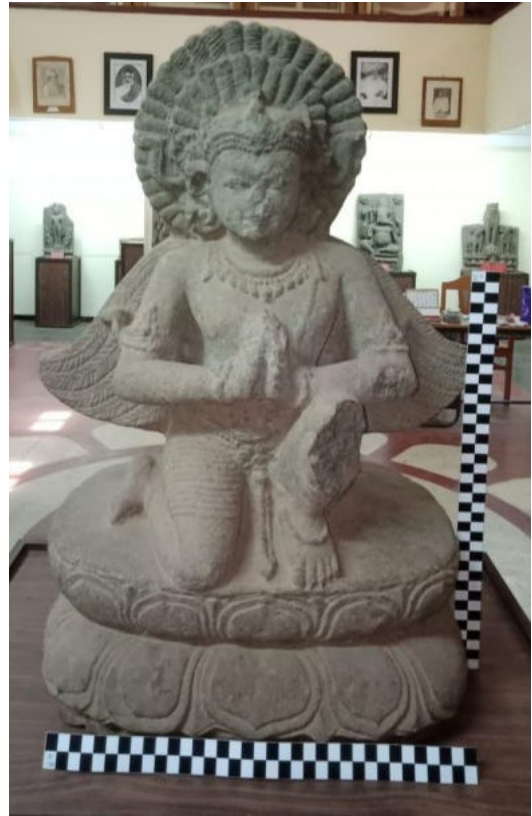
**Plate 18.4:** The *sayana* image from Salda-Joypur area (Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).



**Plate 18.5:** Varaha *avatara*.



**Plate 18.6:** The *Trivikrama* form (Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).



**Plate 18.7:** Garuda representation (Courtesy AJCPB Bishnupur).



**Plate 18.8:** The Madan Mohan temple (Courtesy First author).



**Plate 18.9:** Madan Mohan temple facade with terracotta depictions (Courtesy First author).

early medieval archaeological record. Sengupta (2001) in the study of artistic traditions of the region underlines that south-western Bengal was the principal resource bearing zone throughout the early historic and early medieval periods of Bengal's history. With its tribal milieu, arid landscape interspersed by forest tracts, persistence of hunting-gathering tradition and marginal agriculture, the region seemed to have maintained a number of amorphous pre-state organisations. The penetration of Jainism and Brahmanical Hinduism is well recorded in the region (Banerjee 1933). Tribal polities were gradually absorbed into the ruling lineages and though largely unrecorded in the epigraphic and textual sources the remains are evident in the form of habitation remains, sculptural and architectural ruins. In this connection, the Salda-Gokulnagar (Joypur) group of sites deserve a special mention. These sites at a distance of 20 km from Bishnupur present substantial remains of habitation and structural activities during the early medieval period (Chatterjee et.al. 2019). The cluster of sites is surrounded by tanks and sculptural-architectural remains across a large area. These sites abound in the iconographic representations of *Vishnu* in different forms which could be largely studied under the broader divisions of *sthanaka*, *sayana* and *avatara* forms. The museum collection at the AJCPB, Bishnupur comprises mostly these representations collected from Salda-Gokulnagar at various points of time. It must be mentioned that in the absence of a regular series of dated pieces, chronological and stylistic attributes stand out to be the essential markers in identifying the

images and placing them into a chronological bracket. Though these sculptural renderings were mostly the illustrations of Pala-Sena style, they have to be revised according to the influences from Bihar, north Bengal and particularly from Orissa. Secondly, from the south western tracts of Bengal which coincides with the present study area, we have an epigraphic document dated around 12<sup>th</sup> century CE stating the installation of an image of Narayan within a newly constructed temple amidst the arid tracts of Radha. Vishnu in his various forms find mention in this inscription with forms like *Narayana*, *Ananta* and *Narasimha* which were placed within the temple and a tank was constructed with a garden outside the temple premises (Majumdar 1929). This further confirms that the worship of Vishnu was prevalent in this part of Bengal during the early medieval times.

The *sthanka* representations of *Vishnu* in the AJCPB Bishnupur Museum are in conformity with the ones at Ambikanagar, Sarengarh (Indian Musuem collection), Basubati and Brahmandiha (Chattopadhyay 2010). These are mostly in chlorite or sandstone executed in a standing posture (*sampadasthanaka* or *dvi-bhanga*), with four hands and the usual attributes along with the *vanamala*. These images are mostly found to be flanked by two associated deities. One of the *sthanka* images presently housed in the AJCPB measuring 19.7 × 10.7 × 4.5 cm with the usual attributes mentioned above has a pointed base indicating that it was probably fixed within a temple niche (**Plate 18.3**). The image being badly effaced makes the identification of the associated figures quite difficult. Of the *Sayana* images housed in the Museum one is from the Salda-Gokulnagar (Joypur) area. The image measuring 91.5 × 45 × 18 cm is found recumbent on the folds of *Adi* or *Anantanga*, the five hoods of the later serving as a canopy over its head. *Vishnu* reclines on his left side and the head is supported by his upper left hand. The lower left hand holds *sankha*. Nine other figures are seen in a row, around the principal deity. *Lakshmi* is noted sitting near his left foot. According to J. C. French, 10<sup>th</sup> century CE can be attributed as the date according to the style of the carving that bears resemblances to the Pala specimens (French 1924, **Plate 18.4**). The other image of the *Sayana* variety in the museum is of a smaller dimension with a cruder execution. The provenance of this image remains unknown.

The *avatara* forms of *Vishnu* are well prevalent in the area. In Bengal the forms mentioned in the *Varaha Purana* and *Agni Purana* are particularly important (Banerjea 1956). *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, and *Vamana* incarnations are reported from the present study area. Gokulnagar specimen of the *Varaha* stands out to be important specimen but is badly damaged and the arms are almost broken; the lower part is buried under the earth. The figure appears with the face of a boar and the body of a man (**Plate 18.5**). The God is seen striding to the left and adorned with ornaments and *vanamla*. The image is of chlorite stone, measuring 68 × 53 cm (Chattopadhyay 2010, Chatterjee et.al. 2019). An image of *Varahi* from the same area is a noteworthy mention. It essentially has the head of a boar and can be considered in the category of the *Matrika* images along with the *Chamunda* image housed within the same shrine at the site Salda-Gokulnagar. These are worshipped to ward off the epidemics. Sengupta (2001) observes



that the shining texture of the black stone in which these images are carved are distinctively in Bengal style, but a number of visual elements like the semi-circular hair arrangement of the *Varahi* stands in close comparison with those of *Matrika* from Puri and Jajpur in Orissa. The image of *Trivikrama* form of Vishnu from Salda-Gokulnagar is exceptional and happens to be the only narrative sculpture in the AJCPB Bishnupur Museum. The extant image measures 55 × 46 × 17 cm where Vishnu in the *Trivikrama* form is depicted as the primary deity along with the narrative depicted at the base of the sculptural piece. The upper part of the image is lost. The base towards right shows the depiction of the *Vamana*, *Bali* and his own representation paying obeisance to the God; the *Naga* image representing the *Sesha Naga* is seen in a seated posture in the left. The *vanamala* of the primary image is retained (**Plate 18.6**). This image executed in sandstone can be placed between 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. A singular image of *Sankhapurusa* (53.5 × 21 × 20.5 cm) also housed in the Museum is carved in sandstone and can be placed between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This piece has the carving of a small devotee at the base with an effaced inscription. *Vamana* and *Narasimha* incarnations are also recorded from the adjoining archaeological sites of which Radhanagar and Brahmandiha deserves a mention. These are damaged to a large extent but on stylistic grounds could be roughly dated between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Chattopadhyay 2010). The AJCPB Bishnupur Museum houses an image of a *Vishnu vahana* represented in the form of a Garuda capital (61 × 38.5 × 33.7 cm). The image was found from the site Joykrishnapur, 8 km from Bishnupur. The image in sandstone is carved as a bird-man form to be positioned on the capital of a column, customarily placed in front of a Vaishnava shrine. The image is adorned with jewels and is seen in a kneeling posture on a lotus pedestal with the two hands folded in *namaskara mudra* (**Plate 18.7**). This image can be roughly placed between 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

Other than these representations of *Vishnu*, Chattopadhyay (2010) draws our attention to the syncretistic icons found throughout the district during the same period of time. Banerjee (1956) describes *Lokesvara Vishnu*, a syncretistic form, to be the combined features of Vaishnava and *Mahayana* forms of Buddhism. In the present study, the *Lokesvara Vishnu* sculptures from Ekteswar, Deulbhira, Thumkara and Salda deserves a mention. The image from Salda is damaged but the canopy of snakes over the head is visible along with the intricate carvings. Interestingly in this specimen Buddha in *dhyana* posture is carved on the upper corner of the stele. This is exceptionally noted in this image from Salda.

The period therefore witnesses the prolific presence of sculptures from the adjacent sites and villages of Bishnupur that conform to the iconographic prescriptions mentioned in the Puranic texts. It can be conjectured that the sculptures along with architectural establishments and Brahmins were a significant part of the socio-cultural matrix of the time concerned and the local farming settlements were ultimately integrated with the temple establishments. Sengupta (2001) significantly comments on the two massive *Matrikas* from Salda-Gokulnagar which correspond closely to the prescriptions mentioned in the *Agni Purana*. The second author

suggests a chronological timeline for the *Vishnu* sculptures presently housed in the collection of the AJCPB Museum and from the explored sites in the region. He prefers arranging them in three broad phases starting with the Narhatta style low relief carvings dated between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, the second phase being characterised by the high relief carvings with surface details characteristic of the Pala period (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) and the third phase giving an impression of depth, a three dimensional aspect (11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). Within this framework with certain influences from Bihar and Orissa it is also important to critically analyse the local art and architectural traditions that influenced south-western Bengal at large, mostly due to the presence of folk elements.

### III

Vishnu emerged in a different form in Bishnupur during the medieval period with the introduction of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*. The Mallas are known to have indulged in prolific temple building activities and associated undertakings for introducing Madan Mohan, a form of *Krishna*, as the principal deity of Bishnupur (**Plate 18.8**). There are narratives about the introduction of the *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* in the town through *Srinivasa Acharya*. The *Rajas*, initially followers of *Mrinmoyee*, were supposedly converted into Vaishnavites by *Srinivasa Acharya*, the spiritual leader of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*. There are other as well of how Madan Mohan was introduced in Bishnupur. The Malla king is said to have retrieved it out of waters of the Damodar River while fishing along with implements for his worship and gold bricks to sustain the public performance of rituals (*Bishnupurer Madanmohaner Adimahatmya*, Ghosh 2002). Another story relates to the Malla ruler Bir Hambir who is said to have robbed the image from one of the Brahmins of Birbhum (Malley 1995). The Vaishnava appropriation of the territory is thus comparable to Vrindavan in north India, which was already established by this time as a *Vaishanava* religious center. Pika Ghosh (2002) observes that the analogy between Bishnupur's founding and Vrindavan's rediscovery in the uplands of Bengal becomes even more powerful when it is recalled that *Srinivasa* was himself regarded as an incarnation of *Chaitanya* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Texts from this period such as the *Bhaktiratnakar*, *Prem Vilas*, and *Karnananda* present his spiritual experiences as comparable to those of *Chaitanya*. Whatever might be the real story, it is evident that the secluded topography guarded by rivers, hills and forests provided an ideal connect for a natural *tirtha*. Eventually narratives and compositions came up on the 'sacred topography' of Bishnupur. These referred to a sanctified devotional place in the western uplands of Bengal and also served as landmarks for the travellers or *tirtha yatris* due to the temples adorning the landscape.

*Vaishnavism* became more inclusive as the members of every community were drawn into the process through a series of improvisations and negotiations undertaken by the Mallas. The temples were introduced with a new form of architectural style marking a departure from the north India *Nagara* style. The forms largely relied on the local Bengal hut styles and Sultanate

styles of architecture. These temples were also the places of congregation with the large courtyards and additional structures like the Bhogamandapa and the Natamandir. The temples with dual axis of worship were double storied with a *Ratna* (pinnacle structure) or a tower on the top. Ghosh (2002) observes them to be the pleasure houses of *Radha-Krishna* similar to the ones at Vrindavan, but tied to their local architectural traditions. The town is thus referred to as 'Gupta Vrindavan'. The temple town in the colonial records (1766) is described by the local administrator J.Z. Holwell who observed, "There are, in this precinct, no less than three hundred and sixty considerable Pagodas or places of worship, erected by the Rajah and his ancestors". Similarly, Hesilrige in 1789, commented, "In the whole district there are four hundred and fifty three Hindoo temples; the principal one in the town of Bissenpore formerly contained the idol of Mudun Mohun". The walls of the temples were adorned with terracotta carvings inspired from the epics, *Puranas* and the narratives associated with *Vishnu* and *Krishna* (Plate 18.9). These visual displays were largely meant for attracting and educating the newly converted populace. Kumkum Chatterjee (2009) observes that Krishna's biography through these depictions could have been associated with the *Malla* origin narrative of an orphaned boy who is raised by his foster family, displays signs of royalty, and goes on to become a king. This analogy would surely have enhanced the dynasty's authority. But *Vishnu* in his early medieval forms is not represented in the terracotta depictions. The form retained in these medieval temples is the *Anantasayana Vishnu*. Zulekha Haque (2014) suggests that this might reflect the use of the 10<sup>th</sup> book of the *Bhaktivata Purana* by the followers of the *Bhakti* cult which is based on the concept of the Gods visiting *Vishnu* in the sea of milk who incarnates himself in two portions, *Vasudeva Krishna* and *Ananta Balarama*. This is why *Anantasayana* is the appropriate image for their sect and the subject is an illustration of the event prior to the birth of Krishna. The basal friezes of the temples are embellished with secular scenes like people participating in *Kirtans*, devotional performances in reverence to the God, supposedly Madan Mohan. There are interesting differences between the dresses of the aristocracy and the general people; the dresses of the aristocrats being heavily influenced by the fashion of the Mughal court (Haque 2014). This could possibly be due to the close association of the *Malla Rajas* with Man Singh. Quite engagingly, the terracottas on the temple facades also depict the *Dasamahavidyas* of the *Sakta* tradition along with the *Dasavataras* of Vishnu. Around thirteenth century or sometime later a certain section of the *Sakta Tantras* in Bengal became close to *Vaishnava* faith and ideology. Shin (2018) draws our attention to the composition of *Kali Vishnu Tantra* around the sixteenth century and the carvings therefore could be related to this tradition. This is further confirmed by the terracotta depictions of both the *Dasavataras* and *Dasamahavidyas* on the western wall of the Shyam Rai temple in Bishnupur.

The change from a mythical guided by the goddess Mrinmoyee to a constructed landscape for Madan Mohan at Bishnupur was necessarily planned and well adapted to the times. The series of negotiations and changes like the naming of the villages according to the place names around Vrindavan, the introduction of water management systems in the form

of tanks, the introduction of a Musical *gharana*, the introduction of crafts like *Dasavatara Taash* (Ganjifas), scroll paintings were some of the ways in engaging the communities in specialised activities associated with Vaishnavism. The construction of water bodies in the peripheries of the town was strategically undertaken according to the undulating contours of the land. The tanks were named by the *Mallas* according to the names of *Krishna*. One might cite here references from the text *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, datable to the end of the sixteenth century, where it is claimed that when the saint reached Vrindavan he entered an ecstatic state while wandering through its forests and bathing in its ponds (Dimock 1999). These tanks are considered to have added to the purity and spirituality of this newly constructed landscape and also to have provided open spaces for Madan Mohan to reunite with his *Gopis* and *Radha*. Strategically the water bodies also contributed to the security measures of the town. Sanyal rightly observed that ‘the *Mallas* had entrenched their power in the more centrally located arid uplands around Bishnupur, which owing to its location in the dense forest between Dwarakeswar and Silai, was much less vulnerable to external aggressions from the plains than Laugram’ (Sanyal 1987).

The ideology of *bhakti* had a profound influence on the life of the subjects as well. The loose rings of settlements beyond the limits of the old fortified town of Bishnupur developed largely with expansion of the *paras* and *mahallas*, which were mostly the dwellings of the artisans and craftsmen. These form a part of the tangible heritage of the town with continuing traditions of shell work by the *sankharis*, potteries by the *kumbhakars*, smithery by the *karmakars*, and *tash* workers engaged in making *Ganjifas*. Different sections of people were thus accommodated within the town with allotted sectors like the *Sankhari para*, the *Kabiraj para*, *Brahmap para* so on. It is interesting to note that these sectors are all connected with one other through narrow lanes and by-lanes which are in turn connected to the temples that form an epicentre of a typical neighbourhood. Temple complexes thus dominated the landscape and played a decisive role in the planning of the working and habitation areas. The small shops adjacent to the temples might have been large markets or *bazaars* within the precincts of such complexes. What becomes noteworthy is the constant expansion of the territorial limits with new constructions and improvisations (Chatterjee 2017). Temple building and the territorial expansion in such new areas fostered on one hand the genesis and integration of the neo-*Vaishnava* school of faith and the economic and political infrastructure of the Malla local state on the other (Saha 2012). Eventually this generated a regional identity for the western uplands of Bengal that had to be designed and executed through a series of improvisations and estimations, amiably concealed by the tone of devotion, evocatively known as *Bhakti*.

### **Discussions:**

*Vishnu* and his associated forms underwent changes through the passage of time. Bishnupur particularly became important as the capital of *Mallabhum* when a ‘scared cartography’ was imposed on the medieval landscape. Vaishnavism became all-encompassing in

contrast to the traditions that heralded during the earlier period. In the early medieval period, based on the *Puranic* rituals, *Vishnu* and his worship was perhaps more personal. The initial record of worship in the isolated topography of Susunia bestows the elements triggering awe, mystery, fascination and overpowering feeling that are instrumental in the idea of the holy (Otto 1923). The natural topography with the elevation of the hill on which the inscription is engraved provides the earliest testimony on the linkage of this region to an organised polity. This is further substantiated through the finds of the Puri-Kushan coins from the adjacent areas around 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Sengupta 2001, Mukherjee 2000). The advent of Vaishnavism in the region by the middle of the fourth century CE suggests the progress of the Brahmanical culture in these uplands. The small images of Vishnu carved in low relief in the succeeding period between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE does not allow us to delve deeper other than speculating on the nature of worship, which seems to have been peripatetic. Having parallels of similar figures from distant areas of Bengal allows us to consider that these were quite prevalent and might have served the purpose of regular worship. The inclination was surely towards private worship and faith which continued for some time till we have the elaborately carved stelas with the diagnostic carvings. Though pertaining largely to the Pala-Sena traditions, these iconographic representations have amalgamated and syncretistic features which need a more critical study. However, at this juncture from the abundance of Vaishnavite images in various forms, it can be judged that the social base of patronage was steadily increasing. The availability of stones for a range of artistic expressions and the choice of stones for a particular execution needs a careful analysis that might lead us to the networking ties of the area. The Tantric elements cannot be underestimated in some of the carvings which were possibly implemented through the religious texts and enhanced by the pilgrimage and trade route connections linking north India and the coastal regions in Bengal and Orissa. Chattopadhyay (2010) observes the dimensions of the early medieval sculptures from the region and suggests that they were primarily meant for decoration of the temple facades or niches or these served as major deities to be installed in the temple precincts. He cites the examples of the Deogarh and Ratnagiri traditions in this regard.

The tradition of *Upapuranas* and *Mangal Kavyas* in the subsequent period shows a strong inclination towards goddess worship and the present study area well conforms to the same. The widespread popularity of the Goddess cults in eastern India was due to her prolonged and ubiquitous association with tribal groups on the one hand, and her delay and restricted contact with Brahmanical culture on the other (Shin 2018). Mrinmoyee, the form of Durga and the *adhithatri devi* of the Mallas, was accepted and worshipped before Madan Mohan. According to the earliest narratives of the *Malla Rajas*, an ancestor of the *Malla Rajas* was hunting in a deep forest when he encountered the goddess who commanded him to build a stronghold on that spot which came to be known as Bishnupur. Chittaranjan Dasgupta points out that there were strongholds all over the Malla kingdom and all of them had protective *devi* images installed within them, a phenomenon majorly noted in the south western tracts of Bengal (Chatterjee 2008). The goddess' connection with fortresses also linked her to the function of guarding and

protecting specific territorial units such as a village or an entire kingdom. The Mrinmoyee temple still remains one of the most revered places within the town around which most of the Vaishnavite temples are located. The annual *Durga Puja* is celebrated with grand and pomp. Here we refer to the concept of *Vaishnavisation* of the deity as argued by McDermott (2000) where there is permeation of the goddess tradition with the powerful and potent influence of *bhakti* or devotionism. The transformation of the goddess from fierce warrior to benign mother and daughter was, as McDermott (2000) explains, symptomatic of a process whereby the deity was ‘softened, elevated, humanized and popularized’ via the solvent of Vaishnava devotionism and this offered important resources to the adherents of Bengal’s Shakta tradition. The inhabitants were consequently connected to both the deities. The elderly people residing near the Madan Mohan temple still have fond memories of how their forefathers were guarded by Madan Mohan and how he wandered along the lanes of the town in midnight for safeguarding his people. Some of these narratives also bring up the heroic deeds of Madan Mohan who supposedly saved the town from the attacks of Bhaskar Rao (*Bargis* as collective term) by firing the Dol Madal canon. The concept of Madan Mohan being ‘*jagrata*’ is reverberated in the landscape and so is Mrinmoyee. If ‘He’ is the saviour, ‘She’ is the protector. If one provided security to the town from the intruders, the other offered her blessings of wellbeing and the *Malla Rajas* could ideally promote both in Bishnupur.

The region thus offers a fascinating evidence of bringing up a capital with an extended social patronage to the deities, particularly *Vishnu* in his various forms along with *Mrinmoyee* as the mother Goddess. These practices can be best perceived as traditions getting adjusted and amalgamated from time to time according to the socio-political circumstances. The flourishing capital ‘Bishnupur’ strategically established in the western uplands of Bengal as the capital of *Mallabhum* provides an apt setting to have materialized as one of the major *bhum* territories of Bengal during the medieval period. The present endeavour unfolds only a part of the multiple traditions and the associated socio-cultural fervours of which *Vaishnavism* was the most vibrant and influential. What emerges is an ambience of harmony, negotiation and synchronisation, particularly evident in the medieval times. Islamic influences too played a major role in shaping up the cultural and religious scenario. A lot remains unexplored of which the prime task is to categorically study the temples, shrines, communities and the interactions at various levels between the rulers and the ruled. It is only through these in-depth studies that the palimpsests of history that defined and redefined the past cultural landscape at Bishnupur would be deciphered.

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