



Reflection of Lord Modonmohan on the People of Bishnupur

Ramyajit Sarkar*

Abstract

Lord Modonmohan was the tutelary deity of the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur. Bir Hambir, the 49th king of the dynasty, took him to Bishnupur. The deity has been closely connected with the lives of the Malla kings of Bishnupur and also the common people of Bishnupur. The Malla family has thought of the deity as a symbol of their prosperity. Interestingly with the coming of Modonmohan, the dynasty prospered in every aspect, from the extension of the empire to the personal life of the kings and royal family. The deity has a large impact on religion, society, food habits, dresses, culture, administration, war techniques, and lifestyles. This paper looks at this relationship through a critical lens.

Keywords: Lord Modonmohan, Bir Hambir, Dalmadal, Gopal Singha, Ratna, Malla

Introduction

Raghunath Malla, the founder of the dynasty, founded the Malla kingdom in 694 A.D., and the Malla kings ruled the kingdom for thousand years. At first, the capital of the kingdom was Praddumnapur. During the reign of Jagat Singha, the 19th king of the line, the capital of the kingdom was transformed from Praddumnapur to Bishnupur. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, we can see the development of two kingdoms in India. One is the Mogul Empire which extended over a large part of India under the reign of the emperor Akbar, the third emperor of the line and the other one is the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur which extended a large part of the Chotonagpur plateau and almost the whole Rarh Bengal till the bank of the Subarnarekha River under the Malla king Bir Hambir. Though we should not compare these two kingdoms from their length, it is known that Bir Hambir was a friend of Akbar

* Independent Researcher

and his general Man Singha, who helped them to defeat the Afghans in Bengal (Chandra 136). With these political achievements, under his reign, the Malla kingdom saw a new change with the coming of Srinibas Acharya, an important Vaishnava saint of Bengal, in Bishnupur. Bir Hambir, with his queen Sulakshana took the new faith. A great transformation came to Bir Hambir. The warlord became a Vaishnava saint. During his reign, the idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha came into Bishnupur. The coming of lord Modonmohan changed the course of history of the Malla kingdom, which I will be discussing below. During the reign of Gopal Singha, the kingdom faced an attack from Bargis, but Modonmohan compelled the attack. Chaitnya Singha was the last independent king of the Malla dynasty. During his reign, most parts of the kingdom were sold due to his failure to pay taxes to the British East India Company in time, and the kingdom was transformed into a small zamindari. Sree Sree Kalipada Singha Thakur was the last king of the dynasty.

Now when did the idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha come to Bishnupur? During the reign of Bir Hambir, Srinibas Acharya, the great Vaishnava saint came to Bishnupur and Bir Hambir, with his wife Sulakshana, took Vaishnavism from him. Thereafter many Vaishnava temples were built all around Bishnupur, and many Vaishnava idols were taken to Bishnupur. Perhaps in this way, lord Modonmohan also came to Bishnupur. The story goes by that on his way back to Bishnupur from Vrindavan; he halted in a Brahmin's house for a night, where he saw lord Modonmohan. The king was very much attracted by the grace of lord Modonmohan. He sat near the idol and did not want to leave the place. But as he was a king of a large kingdom, he had to do many other works besides worshipping Gods. So he could not stay there for a long time. Then Modonmohan himself solved the problem. He came in the dreams of both the king and the Brahmin and told the king to take him to Bishnupur and forbade the Brahmin to make a bar to the king to take him to Bishnupur. The king, being very much pleased, took the idol of lord Modonmohan with him and reached Bishnupur and made arrangements to worship lord Modonmohan. The Brahmin became very upset and cursed lord Modonmohan that as he left the house of his poor disciple and went

to his rich disciple's house, one day, the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur would also reach in poverty, and lord Modonmohan had to leave Bishnupur forever though another tradition says that the king appointed the Brahmin as the royal priest of lord Modonmohan (Chandra 216).

After the coming of lord Modonmohan, king Bir Hambir, who was already devoted to Vaishnavism, totally surrendered his body and mind to lord Modonmohan. He stayed near lord Modonmohan most of the time. The whole Malla royal family became converted to Vaishnavism. Now some changes began to emerge in the Malla kingdom. Devi Mrinmoyee had been the tutelary deity of the Malla dynasty till lord Modonmohan came to Bishnupur. In fact, it is said that it was Devi Mrinmoyee who herself ordered Jagat Malla, one of the predecessors of Bir Hambir to build the Bishnupur city (Malley 26). It is said that, in earlier times, the idol of Devi Mrinmoyee was a fearsome Devi murti. In almost every festival around the worshipping of Devi Mrinmoyee, there were arrangements of offerings of animals. It is also said that, sometimes, people were also offered to Devi Mrinmoyee though these people were the antisocial elements of the Malla kingdom, who had got life sentences by the royal court or by the king himself. After defeating Afghans in the battle on the bank of Birai River, Bir Hambir gifted Devi Mrinmoyee a garland of heads of defeated soldiers. Another tradition says that he gifted the garland of heads to another idol of Devi Kali in the battle place. However, the story seems to be true as the battle place has been called as the "Mundamalar Ghat" (the bank of a garland of heads of people) (Chandra 142). But after coming of lord Modonmohan, he became the tutelary deity of the dynasty replacing Devi Mrinmoyee. Actually after converting the Malla dynasty including the king Bir Hambir into Vaishnavism, the Devi Mrinmoyee already started to lose her earlier status, lord Modonmohan took the status of tutelary deity from devi Mrinmoyee. In fact, the idol of Devi also changed from her fierce look to an affectionate mother who with killing Mahisashura and she is saving the Earth and the Heaven. In fact, many Vaishnava rituals added to the worshipping of Devi Mrinmoyee, replacing older rituals like human sacrifices near Devi.

The kingdom was mainly inhabited by people of lower class Hindus and outskirt people. They have their own Gods and Goddesses and their own religious faith and rituals. Vaishnavism and lord Modonmohan also made some changes in their religious belief also. Many of their gods and goddesses became semi-gods around lord Modonmohan and other Vaishnava deities. In this case, I want to mention a story. Though it is not directly linked with lord Modonmohan but linked with Vaishnavism. It is said that when Shyamananda went to Mayurbhanj, Rankini Devi, a Goddess of mainly outskirt people, took him as her guru. Some tribal gods have also become a form of lord Vishnu whose one form is lord Modonmohan. To worship lord Modonmohan and other Vaishnava deities, installed in the temples of Bishnupur, Kirtan, the community singing of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, became popular in Bishnupur. There were two types of Kirtans. One was Nagar Kirtan, where people roamed the city singing Vaishnava songs with different types of instruments, mainly khol, kartal and others and the other one was the Kirtan which was generally held every day in Vaishnava temples. The Kirtan slowly broke the barrier between higher castes and lower castes people in society. The Malla kings, with the people of Bishnupur from all strata of the society, joined in the Kirtan. Chanting Vaishnava songs, either personally or with some people, became an aspect of the daily lives of the people of Bishnupur (Malik 90).

Dramas based on the life of lord Krishna were started to stage on. Bir Hambir, Gopal Singha and other Malla kings participated in these dramas. Slowly lord Modonmohan entered into every single thought of the people of Bishnupur. It is said that during the Rash festival, all Vaishnava deities of various temples of Bishnupur headed by lord Modonmohan were taken to the Rashmancha, built by Bir Hambir. Bir Hambir himself played a vital role in the dramas staged in front of lord Modonmohan. A beautiful story is there in Bishnupur around lord Modonmohan during the Rathayatra festival. It is said that Raghunath Malla I, one of the most important Malla kings after Bir Hambir, built a stone chariot for lord Modonmohan. Once on the day of Rathayatra, in spite of the effort of thousand men, the chariot could not be pulled out. At last, it was seen that an old woman, due to her age, could not reach the place before the

Rathyatra. She reached the place and slowly pulled the chariot with other people. The chariot began to roll out. This story may signify the thought that God is for all people of whom there is no distinction between poor and rich, between lower and higher castes which became the foundation philosophy of the Malla kings to rule the Malla kingdom of Bishnupur.

Cultural Impact

Reading Vaishnava scriptures became popular among the members of Malla royal family. Bir Hambir, after embracing Vaishnavism, wrote two Vaishnava lyrics. One of these is in honour of his guru Srinibas Acharya. The other one is to honour Kalachand, a form of lord Krishna or Modonmohan. Dhari Hambir, the eldest son of Bir Hambir and did not live long, also composed a Vaishnava lyric. Raghunath Singha, another son and successor of Bir Hambir, also composed two lyrics. Gopal Singha, one of the successors of Bir Hambir composed a complete Vaishnava kavya, i.e. the Krishnamangal Kavya. He also copied the Chaitnya Charitamrita of Krishnadas Kaviraj. Chaitnya Singha, the son of Gopal Singha and the last independent king of the dynasty, translated the Bidagdha Madhab of Rupa Goswami (Saha 188). A great change came in the society of Mallabhum. Where women of India in the medieval period were generally limited to households, Vaishnavism took the Malla women out of the household. It is true that the men and women of lower castes and outcastes of Mallabhum, due to their poverty, both worked in the field. But Vaishnavism took the women of both rich and poor families out of their households. Sulakshana, the queen of Bir Hambir, with other royal women of the Malla dynasty, listened to different interpretations of Vaishnavism from Ramchandra Kaviraj, one of the most important disciples of Srinivas Acharya (Saha 185). Dhajamani Pattamahadevi, the queen of Gopal Singha, copied the famous Premvilas of Nityananda Das. They also arranged local gatherings in every village where Vaishnava texts were recited to villagers. The feudal chiefs under the Malla kingdom built Vaishnava temples and Rasmancha in their areas. In fact, they also promoted local scholars to compose new literature and copied many Vaishnava Kavyas. Chaitnya Das of Chhabra village wrote a commentary on Joydev's Gitgovindo in

1794 A.D. During the reign of the Malla king Durjan Singh, Ramcharan Chakrabarty of this village translated the Aswamedhaparba of Mahabharata into Bengali. Kichakbadha, another manuscript by Niti Verma was copied in 1604 A.D. in Patpur village under the present Bishnupur police station. One Kavichandra of Peno village in the present Kotulpur police station was a court poet of Malla king Gopal Singha and translated a part of Mahabharata at the king's request. His narrative poem Govindamangal became famous during his time. An interesting note of the popularity of Vaishnava literature in the Malla kingdom can be found in the Maliara village. The Maliara village was ruled by a local Adhurya family under the Malla kings. Vidyaniidhi, a local scholar of the Maliara village, had a personal library from where Vaishnava texts like Gitagovinda, and Chaitnyacharitamrita have been found. The prosperous village Ramsagar had a stone house of manuscripts, of which many of them have been taken to the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad of Bishnupur. So from the above instances, it can be easily understood how much development of Vaishnava literature occurred in the Malla capital Bishnupur and other places in the Malla kingdom. Rash, Dol and other Vaishnava festivals became popular. During Rathayatra, the kings and their subjects pulled Modonmohan in a stone chariot and travelled with him to Bishnupur.

A new type of card game, i.e. the “Dashavatar Tas” became popular where ten avatars of lord Vishnu replaced the traditional king, queen, mate and other forms of cards (Ghosh 698). It is said that Bir Hambir ordered Bhaskar Fauzadar, a person of Fauzdar family of Sankharipara of Bishnupur whose descendants have made these cards till date, to build these cards. The ten avatars of lord Vishnu were Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Baraha (boar), Nrisingha (whose upper portion of body is like a lion and the lower part of the body is like a man), Vamana (dwarf), Parasurama, Rama (Raghnatha), Balarama (the elder brother of lord Krishna), Buddha (Jagannatha) and Kalki (Chandra 284). This game took Vaishnavism to people's amusement. The making of Vaishnava God and Goddesses became a tradition in Bishnupur and other parts of the Malla kingdom (Ghosh 89). People, according to their financial ability, built Vaishnava idols though it is interesting to note that

most of the fine and large Vaishnava deities were gifted to the feudal chief and other officers appointed in different works by the Malla kings. The Vaishnava idols were made of clay, fire clay, stone, wood and different metals. Two very fine idols of Radha and Gobinda belonged to the Roy zamindar family of Patrabakhra, built of eight metals have to mention here, but they were stolen now, and new Vaishnava images built of brass have been there in the temple now. According to tradition, it was the Malla king Bir Singha or the Malla king Gopal Singha who gifted Madhab Roy or one of his successors Paramananda Roy, who were one of the generals of the Malla army. Even now, the people of Bankura district go to Bishnupur and buy the clay models of Modonmohan temple and lord Modonmohan with devi Radha. A new style of Hindustani music, i.e. the "Bishnupur Gharana" evolved, mixing Kirtans and local folk songs.

Political Impact

After the coming of Modonmohan, "ahimsa" or nonviolence, was disseminated in the Malla royal family and the common people. As the kings became Vaishnava, they lacked their interest in guarding the borders and increasing military power. The kings depended on lord Modonmohan more than their army to save their kingdom from attacks from outer enemies. After taking the Vaishnava faith, Bir Hambir was so devoted to the Vaishnava deities that he was kidnapped by Mughal army in a conspiracy of Suja and the zamindar of Burdwan. Even during the attack of Bhaskar Pundit, the Bargi leader, Gopal Singha, then Malla king, depended totally on lord Modonmohan. Even he ordered his troops not to advance towards enemies. He began to chant Vaishnava songs with the common people of Bishnupur throughout the city. It is said that lord Modonmohan himself fired the famous "Dal Madal" canon of Bishnupur and destroyed the enemy troop totally (Chandra 223). The story is beautifully mentioned in the "Modonmohan Bandana," an 18th century Vaishnava text written by Chaturmukh. The story goes by that:

Bhaskar name Bargi gar kari akramon
Mone kaila luthiba ei gupta Vrindavan.
Murshidaba Dhaka luthe elo Bishnupure

Devkhat gare prabeshite nahi pare.
Asi bela diprohore Mundamalar ghat

.....
Uchharole bolite lagilo Hari Hari.
Mahaprabur Sreemondire kore Haridhani
Bole rakho ohe damai Gunomani.
Bhakat batsal Prabhu janilo ontore
Raja praja dile bhar bargi tarabare.
Dekhite dekhite omni dhuli uraia
Ghora ek doure jai barabajar dia.

.....
Nija gar rakhile nije Modonmohan
Apar mahima tobo ke bujhite pare
Chaturmukh osomortho jaha barnibare.

(Mallik, 145-148)

It means that Bhaskar, a Bargi thought to loot the “Gupta Vrindavan” i.e. Bishnupur. They had already looted Murshidabad and Dhaka, but the fort of Bishnupur became inaccessible to them. During the time of noon, the bargis reached the Mundamalar ghat, but they feared to see the prepared canons. But they saw there was no one to fire these canons, so they thought that it would be easy to capture the city. When they were crossing the trench, one artilleryman saw them. He fired some gunshots towards them, but he became failure to shoot at his target and ran to Gopal Singha, then Malla king to warn him about the attack of Bargis. But the king did not order his twenty-two thousand soldiers to advance. He ordered all his people to chant the name of Hari, i.e. lord Modonmohan. All people of the kingdom, irrespective of kings and common people, prayed to lord Modonmohan to save them from Bargi attack. By their prayer, lord Modonmohan himself saved the fort from Bargi attack.

But as the kings slowly neglected the administration and their army, the kingdom showed attacks from outer enemies again and again. Kirtichand, the zamindar of Burdwan, once attacked the Malla kingdom. In fact, Siraj Ud Daula, after becoming the nawab, once sent an army to attack Bishnupur. The attack was repulsed but mainly for its inaccessible position and the past skills of the Malla

army. But it is clear that slowly the kingdom became weak, and during the reign of the British East India Company, due to their inability to give the settled tax by the company, the kingdom was sold. The idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha were sold. Due to the financial crisis, Chaitnya Singha, the last independent Malla ruler, could not pay the tax to the British East India Company. With this problem, he faced another problem from his cousin Damodar Singha who at first wanted the royal throne of Chaitnya Singha and later half of the kingdom. To pay the tax and to pay his loan, which he had been taking to fight against Damodar Singha in the British court, he had to keep the idols of lord Modonmohan mortgage to Gokul Mitra, a merchant of then Calcutta (Chandra 209). As most of the land under the Malla kingdom were transformed into tax-free Devottar land for their gifting to Vaishnava saints, Brahmins and their official large number of tax-free land as Devottar property, the possibility to collect sufficient tax to pay the tax levied by the British East India company. Though after winning against Damodar Singha in the British court, Chaitnya Singha took his Modonmohan back, but the story goes that Gokul Mitra gave him a replica of the real idol of lord Modonmohan. In fact, thereafter, the idols of lord Modonmohan have been stolen many times. Though there are idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha now in the Modonmohan temple, they are not the old idols.

Impact on Food/Habit

The Malla kingdom comprised a large number of lower caste and outcaste people. Before the coming of Modonmohan in Bishnupur, the kings and people of Bishnupur ate different types of meats and fish. On the day of Ekhan, kings went into Jungle to hunt. There were several scenes of hunting in the Vaishnava temples of Bishnupur, including the famous Modonmohan temple. But after the coming of Modonmohan, as they took nonviolence, they stopped killing animals. They became vegetarians. As they became vegetarian, slowly, they lacked protein in their body, which they had gotten from the meat of the animals. Though the Malla kings and their feudal kings tried to promote dairy foods, it perhaps did not get much success. Even now, there are very few meat shops in

Bishnupur, but in other parts of Bankura district, there are many meat shops. In the various festivals of Zamindar families of different parts of the Bankura district, who either got their zamindari from the Malla kings or Malla kings enforced them to be subordinate under the Malla kingdom like the Hazra zamindar family of Patrasayer, Simlapal zamindari family, offered a large number of animals. But the descendants of Roy zamindar family of Patrabakhra village under Bishnupur p.s. of Bankura district, who also got their zamindari from the Malla kings, have not given permission to enter chicken into their household. From the above examples, we can come to a conclusion that the places near the Malla capital of Bishnupur, which were under the direct influence of the Malla kings, obeyed the rules and regulations instructed by the Malla kings and the Vaishnavism and lord Modonmohan had also a greater influence on them than the people of far areas from Bishnupur who might return to the ritual of animal offerings due to demand of their subjects through the passage of time. It is also clear that though there emerged a new cultural sphere in the Malla kingdom; the kingdom lacked its past chivalry.

Impact on Lifestyles

The people of Bishnupur started to be in a morning and evening prayer daily. A regular nagar Kirtan was in Bishnupur. They became honest. The rate of theft and other unsocial activities decreased. A French traveller Abbe Raynal writes that liberty and property were sacred in Bishnupur. Robbery, either public or private, was never heard of. When a stranger entered the city, he was under the Malla king's protection. The people of the Malla kingdom slowly developed the idea of nonviolence in their daily lives. Vaishnavism became everywhere in the lives of the people of Bishnupur. The sub-caste and outcaste people of the kingdom also slowly lost their old anger and cruelty and their habit of living separated from the other people who were out of their society. They became loyal to the Malla kings. In fact, they also developed some Vaishnava rituals in their own culture. The people of the Malla kingdom started to involve in the new cultural trend begun by the Malla kings, influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Lord Modonmohan. But sometimes, the people also became irritated as

Vaishnavism started to control their lives. The proverb "Gopaler begar" justifies it (Mallik 51). Gopal Singha ordered all his subjects to make a fast on the day of Ekadasi. He also ordered all of the people of his kingdom to chant the name of Hari every day before taking their supper. The common people began to ridicule it as "Gopaler begar". There is an interesting story related to this proverb, "Gopaler begar" in Bishnupur. Once, the Malla king Gopal Singha in disguise was travelling to Bishnupur city. Suddenly he came across an incident. A wife of a daily worker told her husband in the late afternoon to take his supper. Though he sat for taking supper, he quickly got up and told his wife to give him the garland of Tulsi (a garland which is made of dry seeds of Tulsi) to complete the "Gopaler begar" for that day. The king listened to all of their conversion and returned to his royal palace. The next day, he summoned the man to his royal court and asked about the whole incident. The man, being afraid, told the whole truth. Then the king gifted him some land to make him rid of his daily tension to collect his food daily as he could chant the name of Hari without any tension. Many songs and gathas were written by lord Modonmohan.

An important example of gatha is the "Modonmohan bandana". It was composed in the late 17th century. Some Malla kings also started to compose Vaishnava songs. Even some queens also started to compose Vaishnava songs. Bir Hambir and his queen Sulakshana were famous of them. Even many Vaishnava poets also emerged in Mallabhum. The Malla kings patronized them. In fact, Srinibas Acharya, the great Vaishnava scholar and his disciples got patronized by the Malla kings of Bishnupur. New types of temple architecture were started to be built. Ratna temples became popular as temples for worshipping the Vaishnava gods. The ek ratna temple style was own style of the Malla kings, and this style is shown in most of their temples. The ek ratna temples had some similar characteristics. The temples are with a single square tower on top of the temple. The single tower rests on a square building with a curved Bengali roof. The temples are generally made of stone and brick. The walls of the temple have a large number of terracotta panels depicting different types of scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Krishnaleela and various deities and many other scenes. The Modonmohan temple is the best example of ek ratna

temple (a temple with a single tower on its roof) (Chandra 216). In some cases, Chala temples were also built to worship the Vaishnava deities. Two important chala temples built in Bishnupur after the coming of Modonmohan to Bishnupur are Radhabinod temple and Radharaman Jiu temple. Both temples are Atchala temples. The first one was built in 1659 A.D. by the wife of the Malla king Raghunath Singha I in Kharbangla, and the later one was built in 1687 A.D. by Hemlata Devi, the daughter of Srinibas Acharya, in Goswamipara with the help of the Malla kings. The deul style of temple architecture was slowly replaced by Ratna and Chala temple architecture styles. The two small deul temples near Gar darja are of the sixteenth century. Though both temples have no deity in the sanctum, local people believe that the temples are of Krishna and Balarama. If we consider the earlier deul temples of Bankura district like the Siddheswar temple of Bohulara with these two temples, we can easily understand how the deul temples, from their earlier large form took small form in the days of later part of Malla kingdom mainly after coming of Vaishnavism into the Malla kingdom.

Modonmohan Temple

The Modonmohan temple was built by the Malla king Durjan Singh. The temple was built in 1694 A.D. The south-facing temple is 35 feet high and 40 feet square (Chandra 218). It has a single shikhara on a chala roof. It was built of bricks. The temple has three archways on the east, west and south side. The outer walls and inner walls of the temple have a large number of terracotta panels. The terracotta sculptures of the Modonmohan temple represent how the transformation of faith took place in Mallabhum from pre-Malla age to the coming of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, especially Lord Modonmohan. The upper portion of the temple is decorated mainly with battle scenes, like the scenes from the battle of Kurukshetra of the Mahabharata. On the lower part of the temple, there are terracotta panels depicting animals, hunting scenes and fighting between animals. The pillars of the temple bear attractive terracotta motifs of kirtanias and khol and kartal musicians (Chandra 220). One of the most interesting sculptures of the Modonmohan temple is the scene of navanarikunjar where eight sakhis of Radha and Krishna take the position of an elephant

together, and Devi Radha and Lord Krishna are on the back of the elephant.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can easily understand that the impact of the coming of Lord Modonmohan was in every sphere of the lives of the people of Mallabhum. It is interesting to note that with his coming to Bishnupur, the city's prosperity reached its peak, and with his mortgage to Calcutta, the prosperity started to decline. Coming of Modonmohan to Bishnupur made the Malla kingdom proper in cultural aspects in Bengal and the rest of the world. But on another side, it decreased the military power of the Malla dynasty. In spite of twenty-two thousand soldiers in his army, Gopal Singha did not give them a chance to fight with Maratha Bargis. And with donating most of the land as Devottar property, Malla kings closed the ways to develop their financial condition and its consequence, they had to suffer through selling most of their property of them to bidders by the British East India Company and remained as titular king to the people of Bishnupur.

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