

The World According to Ghanarām: A Partial Translation of His *Gītārambha*

Frank J. Korom

By writing books the individual becomes a universe. And since the principal quality of a universe is its uniqueness, the existence of another universe constitutes a threat to its very essence.

(Kundera 1980: 105)

My title is a play on John Irving's well-known 1978 novel in which a man is born unusually out of wedlock who grows up to become a celebrated writer. Instead of Irving's character named Garp, my contribution to this *Festschrift* focuses on Ghanarām Cakrabartī, an 18th century Brahmin writer from Bengal who composed a lengthy narrative poem dedicated to the medieval Bengali deity known as Dharmarāj ("Dharma King") or Dharma Ṭhākur ("Dharma Lord") or simply Dharma. His is only one of many texts included within a subgenre known as *Dharmamaṅgal*, which further belongs to a class of texts known generically as *Maṅgal'kābya*, auspicious poems honouring deities within the vernacular pantheon. One noticeable distinction between the *Dharmamaṅgal* corpus and other *Maṅgal'kābyas* is the former's resemblance to the epic genre and its extended cosmogony.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Korom 1997a and 1997b), Dharma is a very elusive deity, but one thing that is certain is that he is equated with creation of the universe in the literary tradition (Kilpatrick 1977). As with *Maṅgal'kābyas* generally, there is a cosmogonic section at the beginning of Ghanarām's text, since they all adhere structurally to the model of Sanskrit *Purāṇas*, but present uniquely Bengali perspectives on nature and life (Chakrabarti 2001). By literally creating his own world, Ghanarām, in a sense, threatens other authors and their respective universes, as Kundera suggests in the epigraph opening this essay, for there were at least ten authors who composed and wrote Dharma texts. Each text must thus be seen as an individual work of art, not simply a "variant" of some prototypical *Urtext*.

When I first began my own studies of the various *Dharmamañgals*, in the middle of the 1980s, there was not very much current literature on this corpus of texts, except for a significant piece Rahul Pater Das published in 1983, followed by another in 1987, in which he provided a wealth of philological and linguistic evidence to stimulate Dharma studies. What he was advocating in that pair of articles was a methodology to supplement ethnographic fieldwork with philological and linguistic evidence, for he saw too much fixation on the literature and not enough emphasis on anthropological inquiry (Das 1983: 663). I had the good fortune to meet him in Philadelphia during that early period, as I was beginning to embark on my doctoral research.

Unfortunately, studies of Dharmarāj have not really increased since those days, but more recently there has been some renewed interest in the deity and his worship that has emerged from historical, psychological, and anthropological perspectives, respectively (Curly 2008; Ferrari 2010; Nicholas 2008). Indeed, it seems that, while earlier studies were more focused on the literature about Dharma, as Das indicates, more recently the tide has turned toward more field-based studies. Although I agree with Professor Das that texts alone cannot solve the enigma that Dharma is, they can certainly provide some interesting clues, especially when combined with participant observation in the field (Korom 2004).¹

Given Dharma's high stature in the Bengali pantheon as the otiose Creator, it is strange that not more interest has been taken in him in the present than in the past. We are thus fortunate that Professor Das had the insight to focus two of his writings on the deity's origin and development in an attempt to stimulate Dharma studies within a comparative Indic

¹ The problem still remains, though, that most of the studies available, Das included, largely take an either/or approach: either they are field studies based on personal observation and interviews or they are archival studies based on textual evidence. The issue is really one of training. Anthropologists generally do not study Middle Bengali (and often have a minimal knowledge of the spoken language), while Indologists do not delve beyond the confines of the archive. It was for this reason that I was inspired by Das to attempt a combination of methodologies that drew on extensive fieldwork combined with the study of the Middle Bengali texts about the deity. The danger, of course, is not meeting the rigorous standards of either discipline, which I attempted to avoid with a lengthy residence in the field and by consulting with people such as Rahul Peter Das and William L. Smith while in the field. The results, I had hoped, would also further stimulate Dharma studies, but only time will tell.

framework. His correspondences during the period of my fieldwork in West Bengal were valuable in enabling me to formulate some of my own ideas about the challenging topic I had chosen for my dissertation. His words, quoted below, inspired me, reluctantly yet enthusiastically, to proceed with my own study (Korom 1992a):

Though the name or appellation Dharma(n) is found in all stages of old Indo-Aryan literature, it never figured predominantly; it is used for various deities and personages, and sometimes also represents an independent entity. We, however, know little of all this, and neither the various Dharma(n)s in Old (and Middle) Indo-Aryan literature nor in the various parts of India today have been systematically studied; this holds good *eo ipso* for their possible relations with the Bengali Dharma too (Das 1983: 662).

Here, I do not wish to engage in such a broad exploration of the deity and its ritualistic worship as others have done before me (e.g. Robinson 1980), but focus more specifically on one neglected aspect of the textual tradition associated with Dharma; namely, the peculiar *sṛṣṭi* (“creation”) section at the beginning of Ghanarām’s text. In retrospect, of special interest to me now is Ghanarām’s introductory *Sthāpanā pālā* (“Invocation chapter”), where, after several invocations to Gaṇeśa and a host of other pan-Hindu deities is completed, we encounter a section of this opening chapter titled *Gītārambha*, the song beginning, in which there is a rather unusual account of the creation not found elsewhere in the literature, to my knowledge. Before presenting my translation of this critical section of the *Gītārambha*, followed by some tentative concluding comments, a few words about the author and his text are in order.

Numerous poetic versions of the *Dharmamaṅgal* have come down to us in various stages of completion and in manuscript form, as adumbrated above. From Maṅgla Bhaṭṭ’s earliest known version to the 18th century work written by our Ghanarām Cakrabartī and continuing well into the 19th century, there is a considerable amount of structural (Bhaṭṭācārya 1975: 629) and narrative consistency, even though each author emphasizes or elaborates certain portions of the story. Bhaṭṭ’s version, for example, is more ritually oriented by focusing on the story of Rāmāi Paṇḍit, the person believed to be the author of the *Śūnya purāṇ* (“Empty *Purāṇa*”), one of the religious movement’s liturgical texts, and performer of the first *pūjā* (worship service) for the deity Dharmarāj. On the other hand, Ghanarām’s narrative develops the story of the hero Lāusen, the deity’s crusader on earth who toils endlessly on a quest to establish Dharma’s ne-

glected worship on earth. His journey ultimately ends in a miraculous self-sacrifice that allows for the regeneration of all those dearly departed in battle, a ritual purificatory act that ultimately leads to Dharma's reign over humankind.²

According to the tradition, Ghanarām came to write his text after receiving a dream command (*svapnādeś*) from the deity, which is a common motif found in the compositions of other *Maṅgal'kābya* authors, since they are often high-caste members writing for low-caste cults within broader, regional traditions (Bhattacharya 2000). Ghanarām's text is normatively perceived as the most popular version because it is considered to be more poetic and complete than others.³ But certain versions are also more noticeably associated with specific sites of worship located near an author's place of birth. This is clearly the case with Ghanarām, who is situated in northern Rarh (*rārh*), which is roughly equivalent to the modern-day Burdwan, Bankura, and Birbhum districts of West Bengal. We know this from his signature verse where he states that he was born in the village of Krishnapur, located in Burdwan (Sen 1975: 188).⁴

² The miraculous act performed by Lāusen in the text is still mimetically conveyed through local rituals practiced in some Birbhum villages, where temporary renunciants called *bhaktiyās* ("devotees") represent the different parts of the hero's body, whose dismemberment is recounted in Ghanarām's penultimate chapter. It is this event that allows for the sun to arise miraculously in the west. The ritual is often preceded with a performance of professional singers and musicians melodically reciting an oral version of the text's *Paścim udaj pālā*, the western sunrise chapter (see line 176), although this tradition is becoming rarer and rarer since I first recorded it, due to a lack of patronage. Bhujāṅgabhūṣaṇ Cakrabartī, who was accompanied by a chorus of refrain singers and several percussionists, sang the version I recorded in 1990. In total, it consists of 89 handwritten pages of transcription that oscillate between *gān* ("song") and *kathā* ("exegesis"), a common technique of sacred recitation in Indic vernacular traditions (see Lutgendorf 1989).

³ Ghanarām's text is certainly the longest in the *Dharmamaṅgal* corpus, running more than 9,600 *ślokas*. It is important for both its informational content and poetic use of language. Unfortunately, a reliable critical edition does not exist and no translation of the text has ever been attempted. Two printed editions exist, but I have been working with the Mahāpātra (1962) edition, which is the one I use for my translation below.

⁴ The poet is thought to have been born of Gaurikānta and Sītā Debī circa 1669 CE in the village of Krishnapur, which we know from his *bhaṇitā* (signature verse [Mahāpātra 1963: vii]). Krishnapur is located on the Damodhar River in

Virtually all of the previous studies of Dharma have focused on either trying to locate him in some utopian past, or they attempt to understand the beliefs about him and rituals performed for him to be related to fertility, but virtually no one except Kilpatrick (1977) has paid much attention to the framing of the narrative, which takes place at the beginning, just after the required invocations are completed. Framing, of course, is critical for the successful narrative to reach fruition (Goffman 1986). Like the Sanskrit *Purāṇas*, the action of the text cannot begin until the world has been created, since the *dramatis personae* need a place upon which to stand, so to speak. There can be no dramatic action, therefore, in the absence of created space. Ghanarām must thus begin *in illo tempore* to construct a universal stage out of nothing for his creation to play out what is already predestined in his own mind, planted there, as it is, by Dhar-marāj himself. The *Gītārambha* accomplishes this task.

What follows is my translation of a major portion of Ghanarām's *Gītārambha*, which sets the stage for the epic that is to follow. Being a devotee of Krishna himself, which might also partially explain his hesitation in composing this song for a deity alien to him and his caste, he urges everyone to chant Hari's name.⁵ Having thus drawn his audience into the narrative world, Ghanaram then 'breaks through' into performance (Hymes 1981: 79–141) by using a framing device urging everyone to listen to the song that can liberate them from rebirth upon being heard.⁶

eastern Burdwan. He studied at a *pāṭh'sāla* (Vedic school) in Rampur before eventually finding a patron for his composition, who was Rājā Kīrticandra of Burdwan. On the latter, see McLane (2002). Bhaṭṭāchārya (1975: 654) suggests that he completed the work in 1711 CE. Sanyal (1982) notes that most of the *Dharmamaṅgal* writers came from western Rarh, an area that was known for its struggles against the landlords of Burdwan, an aspect of historical reality expressed in the various turmoils suffered by the hero of the epic.

⁵ Sen (1975: 140) suggests that when Rām is referred to in the Dharma texts, it actually designates Rāmāi Paṇḍit, which may be true in some of the texts, but our author repeatedly refers not to Rām but to Hari, which is clearly a reference to Viṣṇu. More research would have to be undertaken, however, to determine whether or not the statements to worship Hari are formulaic accretions added as Vaiṣṇavism came to dominate the Bengali religious landscape.

⁶ This narrative poem, thought by many to be the most complete and ornamental, won him the title of "jewel of the poets" (*kabiratna*). It oscillates back and forth between basic *paṅjār* (rhyming couplet with 14 syllables), the so-called heroic mode that is also quite common in Bengali folk music and oral tradition in

Tripadī:

1. [p. 11]: Everyone say Hari, Hari! I start the song. In hearing [this], [even] the transgressor crosses over.
2. According to the *Hākanda purāṇ*, in Maṅyūr Bhaṭṭ's path, in the Dharma assembly knowledge can be reached.
3. There is one Brahma⁷ that is eternal, formless (*nirañjan*), without colour, beyond qualities, the ultimate cause, full of emptiness.

general, and what Ghanarām himself calls *tripadī* (“triplet”) meter (see line 186 below), which is somewhat more complex in structure. Each line has two “feet” of equal length, often with an end rhyme, followed by a third foot that is slightly longer (e.g., 6+6+8 or 8+8+10). For an elaboration, see Mukherjee (2018). I have not attempted to replicate the metrical structure in the following translation. Although the lines are not numbered in the original, I have included them to aid the reader in discerning where the breaks in the narrative occur. My translation begins after the conclusion of the invocation (*sthāpanā*) and ends just before the epic action begins on earth with the cursing of the hero’s semi-divine mother to be reborn as a human. The page numbers in brackets refer to the corresponding page numbers in Mahāpātra (1963). Implied words are contained in brackets, whereas translated key terms appear in parentheses. Lastly, I have tried to stay as close to literal as possible to give the reader a sense of how the original text reads. However, there are limitations to a literal approach, so on some occasions I had to opt for “equivalence” instead of literalness to guarantee that the translation made sense. On the notion of equivalence, see Stewart (2001). As for the transliteration, it is commonly known among scholars of Bengali that the language is notoriously difficult to transliterate. Some systems, like the one used by the Library of Congress (1976), opt for a more Sanskritised method, but Dimock and Inden (1969) advocated their own version, being dissatisfied with the LoC one. However, Rahul Peter Das himself also created his own system that has been widely adopted by his students, among whom are the two editors of this volume. I therefore left it up to them to use the Das system. One last point: standard Bengali technically does not have the consonant /v/ but only /b/, so the letter ঝ is used both as a labial and as a semivowel. When it occurs as the second element of a conjunct letter—that is, as a second consonant in a cluster—it is transliterated as *va* (e.g., *sva* rather than *sba*) here. The consonant /v/ is also used for words more commonly known originating in Sanskrit, such as *deva* (“deity”).

⁷ There is an important distinction between Brahma (Skt. *Brahman*), the abstract principle and monistic force of the universe, and Brahmā, the creator deity, both of which appear separately in this text.

4. Seeing all darkness, the doer was concerned [saying], “If nothing is created, how can he move?”
5. [No] earth, underworld, heaven, no classes of gods or demons, no day or night, sun nor moon,
6. [No] water, no living creatures; rather only the tremendous dissolution (*pralay*). There is only one Brahma, Gosāñ!
7. Nirañjan is full of emptiness. He thought the three worlds. “[I] desire to create and nurture.”
8. Who can explain the essence? Becoming himself Brahma, [he] made manifest the seed of the universe in his body.
9. [Like] a new dark cloud, winning over so many crores⁸ of desire, the doer’s form is incomparable.
10. [Like winning over] so many crores of suns, totally born of one body, the beauty of his figure split the darkness.
11. His limbs adorned with gems, breaking the pride of Manomath,⁹ how many waves of flirtations and jests?
12. In his heart, a desire to travel, led to a startling event, [in which] he gave birth to the owl from his nostril.
13. Being born, he folded his wings. The owl in many various ways, [p. 12]: praised the lotus feet of the Lord (*prabhu*).
14. “The doing, the cause, and the doer, the creator, maintainer, and destroyer, you are the brilliant Father of the Ages (*yuga pati*).”
15. “Creation has achieved dissolution. Glancing compassionately, climb up onto my back.”
16. Hearing such praise, the Father of the Ages [climbed] on the back of the bird! How many ages did he wander?
17. His wings becoming tired, [and] with an aim toward getting rest, he desired to slurp some water.
18. The humble devotee softly spoke, “Without shelter or food, my body will not last, oh Lord!”
19. The king [who moves] toward the Lord, will never be terrible. He will always think of the patron’s (*nāyaker*) welfare.¹⁰
20. Wishing care to the feet of the guru, the jewel of the poets Ghanarām, brings the new essence of the auspicious poem (*maṅgal'ras*).

⁸ A crore equals 10,000,000.

⁹ Kāma, the god of love.

¹⁰ The poet is here referring to his own patron, Rājā Kīrticandra of Burdwan.

Paṅār:

21. The ultimate man, hearing the prayer of the bird,
22. The Lord placed some nectar (*pīyūṣ*) in the beak of the bird from his own mouth.
23. Drinking a bit and increasing his strength, he was overjoyed,
24. Whatever remained fell to become [an inundation of] water.¹¹
25. Then, being without shelter, he desired to create.
26. Then, from Paramabrahma's left side, Prakṛti was born.
27. There was no young woman in the three worlds comparable to her.
28. Her charming physical beauty split the darkness.
29. Her limbs and toes were all adorned with jewels.
30. The sound (*rab*) of her ankle bells was greater than the swan's sound (*dhvani*).
31. Her waist, ornamented with three folds, beat out the king of deer.
32. A series of hair vines (*lom'latābali*) surrounded the whole of her navel.
33. [p. 13]: An enchanting and charming garland of crown (*mandār*) flowers around her neck.
34. Seeing her form, that very Brahma's heart was moved.
35. Prakṛti had to become endowed with the three constituents (*guṇas*).
36. The great Brahmā, and Mahādeva were born [from her].
37. Giving birth to them, Mahāśay hid in the blink of an eye.
38. Brahmā and the others only saw intense darkness.
39. Becoming amazed, they all went to the water and prayed (*jap kare*).
40. After some time, the Lord (*thākur*) came in disguise in order to explain.
41. In his mind he was desirous of a rotten smelling (*pacāgandha*) dead body.
42. Performing austerities (*tapasyā*), he floated past Brahmā.
43. Because of the terribly bad smell, he put his hand to his nose,
44. And pushed the corpse away with his left hand.
45. Then the dead illusory body went to Viṣṇu.

¹¹ The owl portion of the story is also found in Bengali oral tradition in the form of what is generically known as *cālān gān* ("moving song"), which is sung during the annual rituals held for the deity. For one such song in English translation, see Kilpatrick (1977: 155–156). Mahapatra (1972: 98) also mentions folk songs in honour of Dharma. On the relationship between the text and the context of Dharma belief and practice, see Korom (2004). However, during my fieldwork, I found that *cālān gān* simply referred to the particular beat used by the drummers during processions that occurred during certain phases of the ritual. Different rhythms mark different phases of the *pūjā*, and the drums conveyed these phases in a paralinguistic fashion.

46. Not able to recognise it, he pushed it far away.
47. Then, being about to start in the direction of Maheśa,
48. Mahādeva noticed the corpse's smell from afar.
49. His joy increased greatly when he understood that it was Brahma's body.
50. "There are no living creatures aside from those created by Brahma in the water."
51. Thinking this, Sadānanda¹² became ecstatic, [and]
52. Taking the dead illusory body Maheśa danced.¹³
53. Becoming content, Brahma gave Vāmadeva¹⁴ a boon.
54. "From now on you will be the creator of illusion (*saṃsār*)."
55. Receiving Brahma's command Hara became the upholder of creation.
56. He [then] gave birth to such coarse, fierce bodies,
57. Like ghosts (*bhūt*), spirits (*pret*), and ghouls (*piśāc*), etc. Seeing this, [and]
58. Stopping creation, he said to Brahmā,
59. "The law (*bidhi*) is my offering [that] you create."
60. Hearing him say this, Brahmā offers obeisance (*praṇati*).
61. [p.14]: "In his haste, the Lord gave to me."
62. "What shall I create when there is no earth?"
63. "Oh Lord, you are the past, present, and future."
64. "The ultimate god, oh Lord, you are Brahma, the one beyond the beyond."
65. "Therefore you effortlessly accomplish impossible tasks."
66. "In order to save the earth [you] killed Hiranyākṣa yourself."
67. "He had placed the earth under the seven underworlds."
68. Hearing Brahma's message he made extreme haste.
69. Taking the form of a boar to save the earth,
70. Huge teeth and a great big body,
71. With a deep roar, the guru went to the underworld.

¹² Śiva.

¹³ This unusual motif of Brahma taking the form of a rotten corpse for the purpose of testing the three main deities of the Hindu pantheon seems to be presented here first, although it becomes a popular motif in later tantric texts focusing on the great goddess Devī. It also appears in a later *Maṅgal* text written by Bhārat'candra Rāy for the goddess Annadā, in which the goddess appears to the same three male deities in the form of a rotten corpse (*pacāgandha māṃsa gale*) to test the deities' devotion. See Bhattacharya (2017: 53) and my discussion below.

¹⁴ Śiva.

72. Going along the path of the seven underworlds, the Lord,
73. Then, in order to hold the earth he placed some dirt on his tusk.
74. Uprooting the earth with his tusk was quite a spectacle.
75. Like a swinging child uprooting the stock of a water lily,
76. Piercing the chest of the warrior Hiraṇyākṣa, he slays him.
77. He places the earth on the waters of the Lord's dissolution (*pralaj*).¹⁵
78. Thinking of the guru Hari's feet,
79. The twice-born Ghanarām sings the Dharma song.
80. The earth was bobbing on top of the water.
81. He created Bāsukī,¹⁶ Kūrma,¹⁷ and the eight mountains (*kulācal*).
82. Sumeru¹⁸ became the root of everything.
83. The amount of earth became very abundant.
84. The seven heavens, the underworlds, earth, the seven islands.
85. The king of Brahma's abodes, Vaikuṅṭha and Kailāśa.
86. You yourself have created the universe.
87. Seeing this, Brahmā prostrated himself at the feet of Brahma.
88. [p. 15]: Then the crowned jewel of the gods said to Viṣṇu,
89. "Brahmā will create and you will maintain."
90. "In the end, Śūlapāṇi¹⁹ will destroy."
91. The foundation was the three qualities: *rajaḥ, sattva, tam* [i.e. Skt. *tamaḥ*].
92. Having commanded thus, Ísvar disappeared.
93. After that Brahmā became the basis of creation.
94. With affection Brahmā agreed.
95. First Prajāpati²⁰ created the ego (*ahaṅkāra*).
96. From the ego the five elements (*pañcabhūt*) became manifest.
97. Earth, water, fire, wind, sky.
98. Then Brahmā's five sons were born.
99. Sanaka, Sanandana, and Sanatkumāra.
100. Then the others Sanātana and Mahājñānacētā,
101. Doing *tapas* ("austerities"), his seed moved upward.
102. Because creation did not happen, Brahmā's worries increased.

¹⁵ This particular event is a prime example of what folklorists have termed the "earth diver" motif, in which an animal has to dive down into the waters of a flood to bring earth to the surface. See Dundes 1986.

¹⁶ King of the Snakes.

¹⁷ Tortoise.

¹⁸ Mt. Meru, the Indic *axis mundi*, or navel of the universe. See Korom 1992b.

¹⁹ Śiva.

²⁰ Brahmā.

103. Then he gave birth to the ten sons of mind.
104. Marīci, Aṅgirā, Atri, Pulastya, Pulaha,
105. Pracetā, Nārada, Dakṣa, Vaśiṣṭha, Bṛghusaḥa.
106. Brahmā gave them all the responsibility for creation.
107. They did not have any desire to create a family.
108. Then with inner vision, in the end [he] understood that,
109. Without Prakṛti and Puruṣa there would be no creation.
110. Understanding this he gave birth to two bodies out of his one,
111. A one hundred formed girl and the self-created Manu.
112. The man from his right side, the woman from his left.
113. They all became well endowed with the desire for a family.
114. From Brahmā's right breast *dharma* ("law") was produced.
115. From the self-created Manu offspring were born.
116. [p. 16]: His two sons are Priyavrata and Ānupāda.
117. The three daughters of the god are Ākūti, Prasūti, and Hati.
118. Rucimuni became the husband of the daughter of Akuti.
119. They had a son named Yajña, who was an avatar of God.
120. They had a daughter Dakṣiṇā, who had a bit of Lakṣmī in her.
121. Tell me who has the power to describe their glory?
122. Devahuti's husband was the modest *muni* ("sage") Kardana,
123. Whose son was Kapila, born a *yogācārya* ("celibate yogi").
124. Their nine daughters were the other arts.
125. Prasūti's husband was Dakṣa, who had many sons.
126. Dakṣa had given the responsibility of creation to his sons.
127. Among them, Nārada *gosāīnī* became the priest (*hotā*).
128. "First, going forth, find out the amount of earth."
129. "Then you will create as much land as you see."
130. Accepting the *muni*'s words, he set out for the earth.
131. Then, in the end, he became disinterested [and lost], finding no end.
132. All of Dakṣa's other offspring who had been born,
133. For the purpose of finding their brother, they found the same end.
134. For this reason, one brother set out after another brother.
135. Until this day, no person goes abroad.
136. If there are no sons left in the family, what purpose is there?
137. Abandoning the sons Dakṣa created the sixty daughters.
138. Ten daughters, among them Bhānu, were gifted to Dharma.
139. Six others made three *ṛṣis* happy.
140. Twenty-seven daughters, Aśvinī, etc.
141. He made Arcanā the wife of the moon.
142. Another of Dakṣa's daughters, Sati Ṭhākuraṇī,

143. Became Śaṅkara's wife, the destroyer of Dakṣa's sacrifice.
144. The other women, Aditi and Diti, etc.
145. Were given to Kaśyapa as brides.
146. [p. 17]: All of the gods were born in Aditi's belly.
147. The very strong Daityas were born in Aditi's womb.
148. Ascetics, truth, yoga, sacrifice, and every law,
149. Dharma, Non-Dharma, *Veda*, *Purāna*, and *Āgama*,
150. The still, the moving, etc., big and little rivers, oceans.
151. Out of his mercy the friend of the folk²¹ created all of this.
152. In a moment he created all of the measurements of time.
153. He created darkness, twilight, fortnights, months, and more.
154. The years, the two paths of the sun (*ayan*), and six seasons.
155. The duration of the path of the sun [was set] for this reason.
156. *Yugas* and *manvantaras*²² were set in this way.
157. What will I, with a very deficient mind, say in brief?
158. *Ṛkṣa*, *rāṣi* (zodiacal signs) were set,
159. [Each] fixed according to one's own fate.
160. How much will a child's mind say in summary?
161. Each one was born in its own place with care.
162. In all the *yugas*, there were *tapasyā*, charity, and *dharma*.
163. At the deepest point in the time of *kali* (dark age), people will be of low *karma* ("action"),
164. Lest anyone think about anything other than Dharma.
165. Dharma himself thinks these thoughts.
166. Concentrating my mind on the lotus feet of the guru,
167. The twice-born Ghanarām sings the sweet *maṅgal*.

Tripadī:

168. Listen everyone with adoration. In every age, in every house, Dharma's worship used to be done.
169. [p. 18]: Nowadays in the worst of the dark age, nobody is even concerned about sacrifice for Dharma.
170. Ṭhākur, in his mind, thinks this: "Into the world, I have to send someone to increase [my] worship".

²¹ Lok'bandhu, which is another one of the appellations of Dharmarāj, could also be interpreted as a commoner or low-caste person.

²² Duration or lifespan of a *manu*.

171. Whoever thinks this, will perform the [correct] service in this time [and] will acquire the benefits of the four *vargas*.²³
172. Seeing him [in] this thoughtful mood, Hanuman, the expert of the *Hākanda purāṇ*.
173. Folding his hands he offered, “In every house during the dark age, there will be love for Dharma *pūjā*”.
174. “According to prescriptions, so many devotees will worship, like Hariścandra, etc. in the dark age”.
175. “Desiring a son in the dark age, a woman will serve Campai, [like] Rañjābatī leaning against the tree”.
176. “In the *Hākanda purāṇ* it is written, “Seeing me face-to-face, the sun will rise in the west during the dark age.”
177. “In the twelfth *daṇḍa* of the day, in the ninth *khaṇḍa* of the *Hākanda purāṇ*, Rañjā will have a son”.
178. “As a curse, send the dancer with a restless mind, Ambubātī in Indrapur, to earth”.
179. “Becoming the *pātra*’s sister, taking the name Rañjābatī, have her born on earth and you will receive worship”.
180. Even though it is imperceptible to them, for the sake of the devotees, the troop of gods ride in jewelled chariots.
181. In heaven, shouts of “victory, victory”! Filled with the sound of conchs and bells, he entered Indra’s mansion (*bhaban*).
182. His mind immersed in happiness, the king of gods,²⁴ along with Śacī, are in possession of the entire world.
183. [p. 19]: A charming jewelled necklace, and a flower of the celestial coral tree, they made an offering to the feet of Suradhūni.²⁵
184. All of the gods, they sat in jewelled thrones. In their minds they think of how praiseworthy life is.
185. Then the chief god (Indra) performed various *pūjās*. Who will say how much fortune Indra has?
186. At Rām’candra’s pair of feet, I worship in *tripadī* verse. Ghanarām has a happy heart.
187. The jewel of the poets speaks the essence (*ras*). In hearing [this], misdeeds are destroyed. Fulfil the heart’s desire with good expression!

²³ The sixteen astrological divisions of time.

²⁴ Indra and his consort.

²⁵ The Ganges River personified.

Paṅyār:

188. There was no end to the joy in Indra's *bhaban*.
189. The Lord of the Universe (*biśvapati*) sat, surrounded by the horde of gods.
190. Mindful devotees massage his two feet in joy.
191. Śacī herself fans him with a yak-tail whisk (*cāmar*).
192. The celestial girls (*apsarās*) dance, the humans sing.
193. The six *rāgs* and the thirty-six *rāgiṇīs* in their contemporary forms,
194. [Like] all of the bumblebees alighting on the scattered *kusum*²⁶ flowers,
195. [For] the amorous play of the bumblebee in the special time of spring (*basanta*),
196. How their wishes are scented with the fragrance of the *mandār* tree,
197. Indra says, "Today I am in such a delightful state".
198. Every god is happy watching the *tāṇḍava* dance.
199. On a day like that Indra says, "Where is Ambubati"?
200. Then Indra sent to have the dancer brought.
201. Then the friend of the helpless (*anāth*²⁷) worries in his mind.
202. "In Indra's immortal city, surrounded by immortals",
203. "It is improper for a dancer [to be among them]".
205. [p. 20]: "On the path, Durgā will curse her".
213. "Then she will go to earth and proclaim your *pūjā*".
214. When Dharmarāj was thinking this within,
215. Durgā understood the task.
216. Ganeśa's mother, taking the guise of an old Brahmin woman,
217. Went with a quivering body to deceive the dancer.
218. At Indra's command, "[Bring] Ambubati here"!
219. Making arrangements to bring along her assistants,
220. Having bathed in the celestial Ganges,
221. The old woman sat on the *ghāṭ* ("bathing steps") to obstruct the path on a false pretence.
222. Her hair the colour of *balakṣa* ("white fur"), like a woman at the end of her life.

²⁶ *Schleichera oleosa*.

²⁷ Another appellation for Dharmarāj, who is watching and speculating as his plan plotted with his advisor Hanuman unfolds.

The text then continues to describe how the proud celestial dancer approaches the bathing steps, but is obstructed by the goddess Durgā in her unrecognisable form. The dancer brazenly yells at the old woman and kicks her aside, at which Durgā curses her to miss a beat during her dance in Indra’s court, which will then result in her banishment to earth, where she is born as Rañjābatī, the future mother of the epic’s hero named Lāusen, whose birth occurs as a result of his mother’s self-sacrifice on an iron plank (see line 175).

Much of the text is familiar to students of Hindu creation narratives, but with some interesting Bengali twists that become more apparent as the epic unfolds. Perhaps the most unusual motif found in Ghanarām’s cosmogony is that of Dharma taking the form of a rotten corpse in an act to test the three major male deities in the pantheon, who are born blind and must go to the river to cleanse their eyes before they might see. It is then that Dharmarāj takes the form of a rotten corpse to float down the river in their direction. Brahmā and Viṣṇu are disgusted by it, but Śiva is elated, ecstatic with joy! In his intoxication, he lifts the decomposing corpse from the water and dances wildly with it (see lines 40–52).

The particular episode described above, without a second to my knowledge, is peculiarly Bengali, coming from tantric traditions emphasising an indifference to opposites such as life and death, purity and impurity, which allows for a merging and transcendence of binaries altogether (*coincidentum oppositorum*) that characterises much tantric thinking, so it is not surprising that this motif would be picked up later to characterise the monistic relationship between Devī and her masculine consort Śiva. Edward Dimock (1976) coined the phrase “a theology of the repulsive” to describe such passages emphasising events that may seem disgusting to the non-initiated reader or hearer.

The same “repulsive” motif is thus found in certain Sahajiya texts dedicated to the great goddess Devī (Mukhopadhyay 2018), where it is the goddess who appears to the three male deities instead of Dharma. In these texts, too, it is only Śiva who recognises the disguise. However, unlike his ecstatic behaviour, he remains composed when the goddess tests him. Bharatchandra Ray, for example, describes their encounter in the following manner in his *Annadāmaṅgal*:

Annapurna floated and touched Shiva’s body.
Shiva, the knower, did not feel disgusted, but stayed in his place.
Remaining cautious, he sat, unmoving.
When she saw Shiva’s behavior and realized his intention,

She became Bhavani and took the form of his wife.

Thus, Pashupati Shiva became her husband, and they made love together
Gradually they created all that exists (Bhattacharya 2017: 55).

Without including any documentation, Sukumar Sen (1960: 37) suggests that the motif of the floating corpse is of Polynesian origin, but I have found no evidence to suggest this.²⁸ The motif does, however, serve as the basis for a ritual performed during Gambhīrā festivals in Bengal, where a skull is retrieved from a cremation ground and used as a makeshift ball for a lacrosse-like sporting match between competing teams of *bhaktyās* mimicking Śiva's frenzied dance with Dharma's putrid corpse (Ferrari 2005). This play of the macabre is once again intended to be a ritual expression of the monistic principle of non-duality that is ascribed to many tantric practitioners in eastern India. Rahul Peter Das himself notes this *maīā khelā* ("corpse play") in both of his articles mentioned above and draws parallels with other practices of human sacrifice in the Indic traditions (Das 1983: 687; 1987: 248), yet wisely prefers not to make unnecessary international connections.

In conclusion, Professor Das remarks in his second installation of Dharma studies that, "the Bengali Deity [sic] Dharma, or at least certain aspects of this deity, is or are in all probability nothing specifically Bengali" (Das 1987: 245). This may be true when looking comparatively at the ethnographic evidence for rituals associated with the god,²⁹ but I would

²⁸ In the Japanese "birth of the gods" (*kamiyumi*) narrative found in the 8th century *Kojiki*, where Izanami, the female deity of the primordial couple, descends into the underworld (*yomi*) and becomes a rotten corpse, from which other *kamis* are born. It could be postulated that this rather late Japanese story was influenced by Polynesian sources, since it shares many international motifs found around the world (Vasić 2010), but most scholars believe that it is a borrowing from religious Taoism, where *yin* and *yang* are manifested as the Japanese primordial couple. I would prefer not to beg a comparison here, but simply attribute the motif to a peculiar Bengali sensibility that pervades a tantric mentality found throughout eastern India.

²⁹ Scholars such as Alf Hiltebeitel would agree with him. Hiltebeitel's various studies of Draupadī (e.g. Hiltebeitel 1991) tend to take a broad view in attempting to link everything back to the Vedas to present local rituals as part of a seamless whole. While such attempts to link text and context are provocative, I have remained cautious over the years (Korom 1997a and 1997b), even while

argue also that when looking at the rich literary tradition in which the rituals are often embedded, we do find very distinct forms of Bengali thought and practice that begin immediately with the account of the creation. My current project here, then, might be somewhat of a reversal of Das' prescribed method, for he wishes to inform anthropology with philology. Having done that earlier (Korom 1992a; 1997c; 1999; 2000; 2004), I now wish to focus on what the texts themselves have to say, which might be able to add to anthropological or folkloristic inquiries in the future by demonstrating not only what is more broadly applicable in India or more academically universal but also what is distinctly local and vernacular.

Maṅgal'kābyas, as suggested above, do not simply mimic Sanskrit *Purāṇas*, but borrow from them structurally for didactic purposes. Therefore, they must be understood as unique innovations that demonstrate the vernacular ingenuity of the Bengali mind. The late William L. Smith goes so far as to state that the similarities between the two genres are merely superficial. In fact, he argues that Bengali auspicious poems are the antithesis of their Sanskrit panegyric equivalents (Smith 1982: 69), for cosmologically, theologically, and sociologically they portray a worldview and social relationships crafted specifically for the Bengali landscape and mindscape. At the same time, however, they embody international motifs and tale-types recognised by folklorists of the so-called Finnish method of historical-geographic diffusion studies, the goal of which is to find a common origin of narratives identified as related to one another by a designated number in an index (Khalek 1982 and 1985). Ghanarām's text, being a *Maṅgal'kābya* itself, has both universal motifs and unique elements in it, like virtually every other epic known to exist. Therefore, while I appreciate the statement that the "scholarly study of the subject has, however, had one great drawback: it was to a certain extent and still is fixated too much on the literature which has evolved out of the cult of Dharma [...], on their literary evaluation and dating and on the cult's historical interpretation from their data" (Das 1983: 663), I still feel that there is a clear need to return to the texts to mine them deeper for insights they may be able to provide. After all, we have dozens of translations of texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Daodejing*, but with the exception of the 15th century Manasābijay's French translation by France Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya 2007), not one single *Maṅgalkābya*

acknowledging that there are elements of intertextuality that resonate between old texts and contemporary practices (Korom 2004).

has been translated in its entirety into any European language. This suggests a serious lack from my perspective that needs to be rectified as we move forward in our studies, for we have not even scratched the surface of the rich traditions that Middle Bengali has to offer.

I hope that my partial translation of one of the most unusual creation narratives in the *Maṅgal* corpus does justice to the tradition and draws the reader deeper into a world relatively unknown to those outside of the region. Like Garp, Ghanarām created a world for us to better appreciate the region in which he lived out his life. Professor Das, being a partial product of that same environment, has taught us to delve deeper to explore the Bengali world within its Indic context. The task now remains for a newer generation of scholars to continue inquiries into Middle Bengali culture and literature, which still remains an area of research beckoning us to build upon what the previous generation has begun but left undone.

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