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THE BENGALI DHARMARĀJ IN TEXT AND CONTEXT: SOME PARALLELS

In explanation the text had only internal relations, a structure; in interpretation it has now a significance, that is, an accomplishment in the subject's own discourse. By means of its structure the text had only a semiological dimension; by means of the actualization, it now has a semantic dimension (Ricoeur, 1971: 146).

INTRODUCTION

In a pair of earlier articles (cf. Korom, 1997a, b) I explored the identity of the Bengali Dharmarāj from an ethnographic perspective; that is, how people who worship him understand his true nature. I concluded by suggesting that Dharmarāj worship on the ground in rural West Bengal is a pluralistic set of traditions bearing family resemblances in the sense adumbrated by Wittgenstein (1976). I further concluded that contemporary Dharmarāj traditions bear very little resemblance to the medieval textual tradition that initially bolstered his elevated position in the Bengali pantheon. However, the 'ethnographic' Dharmarāj and the 'textual' Dharmarāj are interrelated insofar as the texts suggest some provocative parallels that help shed light on our contemporary understanding of the deity.

The texts to which I refer are known as *Maṅgalkābya*s, poetic narratives comprised of couplets and triplets. *Maṅgalkābya* forms the bulk of medieval Bengali poetry (Zbavitel, 1976: 156), and as such has been an area of much inquiry (cf. Sen, 1911, 1975; Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975; Bandyopādhyāẏ, 1980). Here, I highlight only those aspects of the literature that lend support to the notion of a text/context interface. As a distinct sub-genre – for it belongs to the larger branch of literature known as *pāñcālikā* (Sen, 1960: 60) – Bengali *Maṅgalkābya*s differ considerably from the Sanskrit *kāvyam* literature in that the latter is more formalized than the former (Robinson, 1980: 2). If any comparison is to be drawn between a body of Sanskrit literature and *Maṅgalkābya*, it would have to be the *purāṇa*s (cf. Rocher, 1986).

Thematically and structurally the two share many things, such as an emphasis on creation accounts, the mythology of the primary deity of the text, length, and narrative style. The authors of the Bengali texts seem to have consciously borrowed the classical model and utilized many motifs and stories from the Sanskrit texts in their attempts to indigenize the form by presenting and praising autochthonous deities. In fact, many *Maṅgalkābya*s are referred to as vernacular *purāṇ*s. But here the comparison ends. As William L. Smith writes: "These surface similarities are, however, deceptive; in their conception of the divine order, their portrayal of the relationship between god and man, as well as their caste and sexual bias, the *maṅgals* not only differ from the *purāṇas* but are in many respects their antithesis" (1982: 69). *Maṅgalkābya*s present a unique and interesting view of Bengali religion and culture that often takes very specific theological turns not found elsewhere in India (Dimock, 1976; Smith, 1982). They also lend to the formation of a distinct Bengali regional tradition (cf. Chakrabarti, 2001).

Since one of the main functions of the *Maṅgalkābya*s is panegyric, each text praises and develops one specific deity in the Bengali pantheon. Dharmarāj (King of Dharma), also known as Dharma *ṭhākur*, or simply Dharma, stands out in this pantheon not only because of his significant role in the genre as creator (cf. Kilpatrick, 1977; Smith, 1982), but also because ethnographic evidence (Mahapatra, 1972: 60; Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975: 653; Sen, 1975: 153; Dasgupta, 1946: 279–280) suggests that the *Dharmamaṅgal*, in its various recensions, was still being performed in honor of the deity during specific ritual occasions as late as the 1960s. Not only that, out of all the texts in the sub-genre, the *Dharmamaṅgal* corpus is somewhat distinct from the other *maṅgal* texts because due to its massive length, martial imagery, royal patronage, and thematic content, it most resembles what we might call 'epic'. This observation has not gone completely unnoticed by Bengali literary scholars (e.g., Bandyopādhyāẏ, 1980: 352). Western authorities, on the other hand, tend to see the whole sub-genre as 'homogeneous' and 'epic-like' (Zbavitel, 1976: 156), based mostly on their massive length (Sen, 1960: 19). But length cannot be the only criterion for determining if a piece of literature or performance is epic or not (Blackburn and Flueckiger, 1989: 2–5). At any rate, the *Dharmamaṅgal*s are clearly distinct from other *Maṅgalkābya*s in content and style, while generally adhering to the basic structure of the typical *maṅgal* outlined by Dušan Zbavitel (1976: 159).

Numerous poetic versions of the *Dharmamaṅgal* have come down to us in various stages of completion and in manuscript form. From Mayur Bhatt's twelfth-century (? cf. Sen, 1911: 47–48) version to the early eighteenth-century work written by Ghanaram Cakrabarti, there is a considerable amount of structural (Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975: 629) and narrative consistency, even though each author emphasizes or elaborates certain portions of the story.[1] Mayur Bhatt's version (cf. Maẏūrbhaṭṭa, 1381BS), for example, is more ritually oriented by focusing on the story of Ramai Pandit, the person believed to be the author of the *Śūnya Purāṇ* (Empty *Purāṇ*; cf. Ramāī Paṇḍit, 1977) – one of the religious movement's liturgical texts – and performer of the first *pūjā* (worship service) for the deity Dharmarāj. On the other hand, Ghanaram's narrative develops the story of the hero Lausen, Dharmarāj's crusader on earth.

Ghanaram's text is normatively perceived to be the most popular version because it is considered the most poetic and complete.[2] But Sandra Robinson has pointed out that certain versions are more closely associated with specific sites of worship usually located near an author's place of birth (1980: 4). This is the case with Ghanaram, who is more associated with the northern Rarh (roughly equivalent to modern-day Burdwan, Bankura and Birbhum districts) area of West Bengal, since we know from his signature verse that he was born in the village of Krishnapur, located in Burdwan District (Sen, 1975: 188). Further, because the medieval authors were often writing under royal patronage and singing for the court, popular renditions per-formed by singers utilizing local versions must have flourished among the broader audiences at ritual sites and elsewhere, for there are in-tertextual references in the texts which suggest this. Each may thus have been used as separate bases of recitation during ritual events. This contrasts to the *Śūnya Purāṇ* and the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān* (cf. Bandyopādhyāẏ, 1323BS), the two liturgical texts associated with the deity that were more widespread due to their ritual authority (Rob-inson, 1980: 18). Even today, the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān* is used, or at least invoked, in some form or another to perform Dharma rituals at many sites.

During the early stages of my research I attempted to locate the recitative traditions so well documented in the literature cited above, but gradually came to realize that the oral performance of *Dharm-amaṅgal*s was in decline. As I travelled to many sites of Dharmarāj temples in West Bengal, I kept expecting to find the recitative or singing tradition intact. But at each site, a ritual specialist or learned

resident would send me somewhere else in search of the elusive 'performed' *Dharmamaṅgal*. Except for locating a single singer who sang one *pālā* (section) of the text concerning the hero Lausen's sacrifice of his body for Dharmarāj's boon, my attempts turned up very little evidence to suggest that the oral performance of the *Dharmamaṅgal* played a central role in the contemporary worship of Dharmarāj. What I found instead were numerous village-based systems of vibrant and complex ritual activities in honor of the deity that evoked the medieval corpus of texts in subtle ways without direct reference to it. These initial observations implied that the text/context interface within the conceptual galaxy of Dharmarāj worship would take shape quite differently from other Hindu recitative traditions on both the local (Blackburn, 1988) and transregional (Lutgendorf, 1991) level. In other words, the Dharmarāj tradition(s), as we know it/them today, raise(s) a different set of issues related to textuality because the 'text' is not situated in the center of performative ritual acts. Rather, the text functions in an imaginative way as a source of 'scriptural allusions' (cf. Briggs, 1988), themes, images, and pre-scriptions related to the modern-day context of religious performance. But how does one tackle such a subtle and difficult problem that defies easy answers?

Since earlier comparative studies had already been done (Mitra, 1972; Robinson, 1980), I ultimately ended up studying the annual event in a small, all-Hindu village named Goalpara in Birbhum District, West Bengal.[3] Dharma's worship as practiced in Goalpara has been mentioned in the literature (Mitra, 1972; Bhattacharya, 1986; Rohner and Chaki-Sircar, 1988: 108–111), but has not been studied in depth. I chose the village not because the observance is well known outside of the immediate area, but because it has a special meaning for the community in question. The phenomenon in Goalpara holds the distinction of being the first village in the district to celebrate the observance each year. As such, it serves as a model for other adjacent villages that celebrate their own local forms of the *pūjā* a month after the Goalpara event. Yet even though it has obvious local relevance and importance, the Goalpara Dharmarāj *pūjā* remains relatively obscure to outsiders. It is not, for example, mentioned in the virtually exhaustive four volumes of *Paścimbaṅger Saṅgskṛiti* (Ghoṣ, 1976), nor does it find mention in government census data on Bengali festivals (cf. Mitra, 1968). By choosing a small, relatively unknown site, I was able to explore in depth this community's belief system related to Dharmarāj, highlighting verbal and non-verbal aspects of religious

phenomena that emphasize the deity's personal relationship with the residents of Goalpara. To a certain extent, every village that worships Dharmarāj has its own corpus of narrative about the deity (cf. Mitra, 1972: 123–133). But I have never observed a level of ethos and sense of pride taken in Dharmarāj's worship as great as Goalpara's at other sites in the region.

Even though oral accounts of personal belief and worship are quintessential factors in the study of localized forms of religious expression, very little has been published about such narratives in English. Peacock (1984) has pointed out how life stories, or portions thereof, reflect the religious beliefs of the individual and his or her community. Personal experience narratives and memorates (cf. Honko, 1964; Langellier, 1989; Korom, 2000) further provide us with rich and detailed accounts of how individuals create a sense of place and community, as Barbara Johnstone has suggested (1990: 5). It is in such narratives that we find one level of correspondence between text and context. There are others as well, which will be taken up below. In the remainder of this essay, I move away from the microstudy model of one very small community to reflect on the theoretical implications of my material. A key issue that emerges is the relationship between text and context.

TEXTUALITY AND THE STUDY OF DHARMARĀJ[4]

In the introductory section, I have been alluding to the fact that the medieval *Dharmamaṅgal* corpus serves as background for the study of the modern context in which the Dharmarāj *pūjā* is performed. But it must be emphasized that the textual tradition plays a seemingly minor role in understanding Dharmarāj and his worship in Goalpara. This is not to say, however, that the texts are irrelevant. On the contrary, it would be useful to see the relationship between the *Dharmamaṅgal* texts and the *pūjā* as a dialectical one. The former *in*forms and the latter *per*forms. In other words, although certain ritual practices emerged in Goalpara and elsewhere independent of textual prescriptions, many of the contemporary actions of participants build on a foundation of practices and beliefs that were already embedded in the texts themselves. These features suggest that the *Dharmamaṅgal*s cannot be divorced totally from the modern-day context. Although the average participant is not aware of the relationship between the actualized performance and the idealized

texts, the latter have been responsible for the historical shaping of the tradition. The texts therefore provide us with insights into contemporary beliefs and ritual performances by filling in the 'blank spots' (Ingarden, 1973) otherwise unattainable from the performances themselves. From a pragmatic perspective, the texts serve an indexical function, pointing to past understandings that have subconsciously and historically influenced present-day events.

The issue of textuality is thus a necessary consideration for understanding the broader context of Dharma worship. William Hanks has defined textuality as "the quality of coherence or connectivity that characterizes text" (1989: 96). He goes on to say that connectivity is "dependent upon the inherent properties of the textual artifact, the interpretive activities of a community of readers/viewers or a combination of the two" (ibid.). But because the community of viewers does not have a great knowledge of the textual tradition, the relationship between the text and performance is ambiguous and problematic at best in Goalpara. Hanks admits that such a relationship can create a problem of disjunction, but rectifies the discrepancy by saying that "it is the fit between the sign form and some larger context that determines its [i.e., the text] ultimate coherence" (ibid.).[5] The ultimate coherence to which he refers is grounded in social action (Hanks, 1989: 103); that is, the implicit ways that the medieval texts serve as sub-texts for the annual event in modern times. This idea ties in nicely with Goalpara residents' understanding of their ritual activities as a coherent whole, rather than a random arrangement of practices, as some critics have argued.

Making a quantitative leap from medieval text to modern context can lead to speculative interpretation on the part of the researcher, but Alf Hiltebeitel (1991) has shown that much of what we label 'folk' or 'popular' Hinduism cannot be appreciated fully without resorting to textual data to complement ethnographic fieldwork.[6] One must be cautious, however, of giving priority to texts, for it is tempting to trace all modern practices on the local level back to a Vedic precedent (cf. Korom, 1990: 17). Potential misunderstandings may indeed arise when an overemphasis is placed on text. Yet attempting to understand the context of worship without reference to scripture is equally problematic. Understanding the interaction of the *Dharmamaṅgal* texts with a specific galaxy of local beliefs and practices thus requires situating the written sources in meaningful social action. Let us then move on to explore some of the ways that *Dharmamaṅgal*s can be used to inform the context of religious performance.

THE TEXT/CONTEXT INTERFACE

Although some practices are mirrored in the textual tradition, it would be pointless to suggest that the text precedes the ritual or vice versa, for one would only end up arguing the unsolvable problem of the relationship between the chicken and the egg. Making any assertion related to this controversy would only result in engaging in the myth/ritual debate, which is not my intention here. It would be more productive simply to point out the possible connections that might exist between textual and contextual features of the Dharmarāj phenomenon in order to suggest aspects of 'connectivity.'[7] To this end, I will extract some themes that we find in both the medieval sources and the modern context.

In the *Dharmamaṅgal* of Ghanaram, we find many passages that describe the context of the *gājan* (thunder), or annual worship of Dharmarāj. Many of the passages provide us with accounts about the general atmosphere of the event. The following passage, for example, describes the event in much the same way as we know it today; that is, as an occasion accompanied by much music and song (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 33):

kata padya bādya bāje ādyer gājane
In Adya's (= Dharmarāj) *gājan* there was much recitation, music and song.

This passage, and others like it (cf. Cakrabarttī, 1962: 62; also below), suggests that the annual rituals for the deity have always been occasions for musical and verbal performances of various sorts. Such performances ranged from intertextual references concerning the recitation of still other *Maṅgalkābya* texts to the ritual use of the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān* (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 90) and riddling contests (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 303–312). As mentioned above, the tradition of reciting key portions of the narrative still exists today in some villages of West Bengal, but is being increasingly replaced by other forms of music and ritual activity. Unlike the recitation of the narrative, however, the liturgical use of the *Dharmapūjā Bidhān* still exists in Goalpara and a number of other locations. The famous riddling contest between the hero Lausen and Suriksha, his female captor, described by Ghanaram in the *Golāhāṭ Pālā* of his text is not, to my knowledge, performed today. Some have suggested, however, that the riddling section of the text serves as a model for present-day verbal

duels performed annually during the rite elsewhere in Bengal (e.g., Sen, 1975: 146).

Aside from references suggesting the use of folklore genres, a number of other themes and activities can be gleaned from the texts to aid our understanding of the modern performance event. These are: ritual practices, austerities, and the use of liturgical texts in the performance of the rite; the mentioning of the names of Dharmarāj's multiforms (i.e., the seven Ray brothers); Dharmarāj's form, both iconic and human; personal encounters; and the deity's relationship to low castes. I will now review each of these categories to point out the *Dharmamaṅgal* literature's essential role as background for understanding contemporary beliefs and practices.

1. *Ritual Allusions*: Many of the literary works related to Dharmarāj suggest numerous ritual dimensions of present-day activities. The most notable incident in this category is the hero Lausen's mother's *tapas* (austerity) described in the *Sále Bhar Pālā* of Ghanaram's text (cf. Cakrabartti, 1962: 91–114) because it encapsulates many other recurring references to ritual acts performed in the contemporary event. In this chapter, the barren queen Ranjabati makes a vow to perform ritual austerities for Dharmarāj at a place called Campai in Bankura District (Sen, 1911: 30) by impaling herself on a spiked plank. She does this in exchange for the boon of giving birth to the hero Lausen. To this end, Ranjabati sets out from her palace by boat, accompanied by her maid Shamula and a party of devotees and pilgrims. After arriving at the forested site, she hires Dalits of the Hari caste to clear the area prior to her austerities. A pandit named Ramai[8] builds a sacrificial fire, another feature we find in the modern context, and urges the queen to begin the worship service. I pick up the narrative at this point, since the section makes many references that pertain to the following discussion (Cakrabartti, 1962: 93–97):

2. Yelling "Victory to Dharma!" they all respond with the drums.
1. The pandit says "Oh queen, why delay any longer?
2. Bathing in the waters of the river, worship."
1. In order to show approval, Shamula, along with all of the pilgrims,
2. All took canes in their hands and began to dance.
1. The musicians danced, immersed in their drum playing.
2. Coming to Campai's *ghāṭ*, they rolled on the ground.
1. First, putting a bit of the meritorious water on her head,
2. She enters the water with the pilgrims at the auspicious moment.

1. Then they bathed, performed ablutions and offered the boat,
2. Completing the Vedic and Tantric chants,
1. Everyone meditating on Dharma with a pure mind,
2. Ranja raises her hands and says "Let me be with son."
1. Wearing clean white clothes, they all got out onto the riverbank.
2. Various musicians and bands play and dance with canes in their hands.
1. While dancing, they make the victorious sounds of Dharma.
2. Coming near the deity's residence, they roll on the earth.
1. Playing intensely on the drum, the drummers stop.
2. [And] receiving the auspicious moment, they all sat in meditation.
1. The beautiful woman Ranjabati with all the pilgrims,
2. Began the *dharmapūjā* in the desire for a son.
1. A copper plate was decorated with basil, sesame and *kuś* grass.
2. Thinking of the "ultimate man" (= Dharma) and taking a vow,
1. With a book in hand, the pandit explains the rules of the rite.
2. The seats were purified in order to drive out ghosts.
1. Worshipping Ganesh and all of the other gods and goddesses, Ranjabati
2. Worships the "Lord of the World" in desire for a son.
1. According to prescription, she gives many offerings in worship.
2. Clarified butter lamps and incense; incense darkens the area.
1. Sun-dried rice, sugar, rice pudding and bananas
2. In large amounts. A huge fully-blossomed lotus garland.
1. A moon[like] garland of *cãpā* flowers smeared with sandalwood.
2. They worship rooted in devotion [and] in utter joy.
1. The flowers go to the heavens as an offering.
2. They are unflinching in their efforts to satisfy Dharma.
1. Some raise their arms in the air standing on one foot,
2. Along with the pilgrims shouting "Victory to Dharma,"
1. Some are burning incense over their heads.
2. Even so, the cruel-hearted Lord is not compassionate.
1. The blazing fire burns with extremely violent heat.
2. Without moving their lips, they perform chants with their tongues.
1. Lighting incense in the very special desire,
2. The twice-born Ghanaram recites the *Śridharmamaṅgal*.
1. "Oh friend of the childless Dharma, be merciful."
2. The unfortunate Ranja begs for the gift of a son.
1 + 2. Holding her hands folded above her, with feet together on the ground, she lowers her head.
1. There where the sacrificial pit was blazing with fire,
2. Ranjabati says "Lord fulfill my desire."

1. The golden doll, in the middle of the five products of the cow,
2. Rolled around in it.
1. Trumpets, hand cymbals, drums were being played intensely by the band.
2. Ranjabati worships and Shamula yells "Victory!"
1. The fire glimmers and incense floats up.
2. In that, Ranjabati rolls around in the worship of Dharma.
1. "My brother's sharp words rent my breast asunder.
2. In contempt, he said that I was barren for twelve years.
1. I am worthless and afflicted, but let me be successful in having a child.
2. The face of a child will save me from the hell of the childless.
1. Let my name as a barren woman be destroyed in India.
2. Let all of the heretics' heads be struck by thunderbolts."
. . .
1. With every difficult austerity,
2. Yoga, sacrifice, worship, recitation,
3. The auspicious day nears.
1. Bathing, worship, music, dance.
2. On the tenth day, thorns of the *gāmār* tree,
3. They yelled "Victory, Victory!" at the river.
1. The pandit along with his manual,
2. Invoked the *gāmār* tree,
3. Worshipping Ganesh and all of the other deities.
1. Welcoming the tree,
2. The pilgrims grab it.
3. He tied threads on all of their hands.
1. The blacksmith, the *gāmār* thorns,
2. Neatly arranged them in the room,
3. The mendicants laid the thorns in it.
1. "Victory, victory Nirañjan (= Dharma)!"
2. Many devotees, yelling this,
3. The great festival of the *gājan* passes.
1. Others at the *ghāṭ*,
2. The mendicants performing much worship,
3. They go to Campai *ghāṭ* with pomp and splendor.
1. Decorating the platform with plantains,
2. A cleaver is placed on the platform,
3. Dharma came onto the road and possessed them.
1. Completing the incense worship,
2. They concentrate on the deity Dharma.
3. The nine jewels of the female ascetic shine.
1. In joy, on a standard-sized platform,
2. Accompanied by recitation, music, song, and dance,

3. She passed the night in sacrifices.
1. In the morning, the horizon becomes visible,
2. When the sun appears.
3. Having plucked flowers in auspicious desire,
1. Having bathed and worshipped Dharma,
2. Having immersed [her] mind in the Brahma *mantra*,
3. Having arranged the platform, [she] got up [on the spiked plank].
1. Piercing the plank on the sacred platform,
2. [She] drives the moon-arrow-shaped blade,
3. The gruesome looking sharp-edged razor.
1. The queen desires a child.
2. Folding her cupped hands,
3. Having performed meditation as an offering to the sun.
1. Merciless should never be,
2. The Lord, the "Savior of the Sinful."
3. "[This] sinful one salutes at your feet."
1. Saying [this, she] girds [her] loins,
2. [And] closing [her] two eyes,
3. She jumps over it (= the plank) with a thud.
1. [There was] deafening drumming and cries of victory.
2. Shamula embraced her.
3. She stood up fearlessly once again.
1. Whichever devotees, including [her] entourage [were there],
2. In this way again and again,
3. [She] jumped over, [but] still no mercy.
1. Then Ranja says "Sister,
2. Fate (= Dharma) has not been pleased.
3. Let [me] renounce this body by jumping onto the spike."
1. Then Shamula says,
2. "Your mental wish shall be fulfilled.
3. The divine master of illusion will show himself to you.
1. Fruitless is the goal of everyday life,
2. [When] being a householder without a son.
3. Do not have any fear in mind.
1. Even if you die on the plank."

. . .

1. When Shamula spoke these words to Ranja,
2. The pandit says, "This is sound indeed.
1. The Lord will fall into trouble due to the murder of a woman.
2. Then [even] his father cannot deceive his devotees.
1. As [you] enter this austerity, even so [you] will attain fruit."
2. The queen answers, "[Oh] Lord! If so [it will be] the greatest auspiciousness."

1. The queen tells the group of devotees, "Everyone go home.
2. I will renounce this body at Campai, throwing [myself] onto the plank.
1. Convey my innumerable salutations to [my] husband."
2. The poor Ranjabati died throwing [herself] onto the spike.

The above passage, more than any other, brings together many metareferences found scattered throughout the *Dharmamaṅgal* literature by concisely alluding to a number of features that we encounter in the Dharmarāj rituals of Goalpara and elsewhere in West Bengal. The most obvious connection is the relationship between fertility and Ranjabati's sacrifice on the spiked plank. Although Ghanaram's text does not explicitly refer to the spiked plank as *bāṇeśvar* (arrow lord), the term used in Goalpara, he does mention an arrow (*bāṇ*) in the passage. Given the relationship between fertility (cf. Maity, 1971) and the ritual usage of the *bāṇeśvar*s in the contemporary *pūjā* context, we can be fairly certain that the connection between the textual and contextual objects is sound. Further, the specific use of thorns from the *gāmār* tree (*Gmelina arborea*) described in the passage is prevalent in other Dharmarāj rituals observed in West Bengal (Robinson, 1980: 410). In Goalpara, the type of thorn used is not from the *gāmār* tree, but the *kā̃ṭā khelā* (thorn play) – including dancing with and rolling on thorns – implicitly suggests the symbolism of impalement so graphically described in the above passage.[9] The notion of 'rolling around' for the deity as described in the text, can also be seen during the thorn play. But more generally, the theme of rolling or lying on the ground finds its parallel in prostrations done in the presence of the deity on several occasions during the annual service.

We find other thematic associations as well. Ranjabati's preparatory bathing and subsequent baths during the course of the ritual described above, for example, remind us strongly of the preparatory bath taken in the Ganges by *bhaktyā*s (devotees) as well as the constant bathing activities that are performed during the course of the annual event. The extensive use of drumming and music also suggest the central role played by the *ḍhākī* drummers while the continuous 'shouts of victory' in the passage parallel the *nām ḍāk* (name call) performed on numerous occasions during the contemporary event. In both text and context, Dharmarāj is being called to enter into the assembly of worshippers not only to view the proceedings, but also to fulfill vows (*mānasik*) taken by participants. Lastly, the use of canes, dance, incense, flower plucking at sunrise, sacrificial fire pits, and

invoking the hosts of deities in the text also find their modern counterparts in Goalpara (cf. Korom, 1999).

One could argue that many of the latter features such as incense burning, flower offerings, fire sacrifices and deity invocation are part and parcel of general worship in Hinduism. This may be true, but the unique constellation of these ingredients taken together with the symbolism of thorns and spiked planks suggest the continuation of a set of practices that have been perpetuated in some cases, elaborated in others, and attenuated in still others over a long span of time.[10] The ways that these various ritual activities are brought together in different places in West Bengal suggest the distinct nature of the event in each local context, but also imply interrelations. In this sense, it would be wise to admit that the rituals, as actualized in different places, are obviously not isolated events, for they all stem from a common core of practices and beliefs related to the deity Dharmarāj. But as mentioned above, it is useful to view the Dharmarāj traditions as pluralistic, since each village localizes aspects of the broader tradition by giving it specific meaning through expression in oral narrative, religious belief, and ritual praxis. How this is done varies from place to place.

A fine example is the way in which Dharmarāj is identified and perceived in his local forms. In Goalpara, Dharmarāj has seven names and forms. *Dharmamaṅgal*s provide us some information on these forms, as I suggest below, but local innovation has led to the amalgamation of regional folk deities in a way that makes sense to the residents of this particular place. In this sense, the interpretive process leading to a local 'composite' image of Dharmarāj is not so far removed from the way nineteenth and twentieth century scholars created the image of the object of their study (cf. Korom, 1997a). But whereas scholars drew on fragmented textual sources available to them to create an overall picture of the deity, local pandits and worshippers utilized contextual sources within the realm of their immediate experiences to interpret the multiforms of Dharmarāj as one deity. A brief review of Dharmarāj's multiforms in Goalpara will be useful at this juncture.

2. *Dharmarāj's multiforms*: The names of some of the seven Ray brothers are found in textual references.[11] Although the references refer mostly to the brothers named Bankura Ray, Chand Ray, Kalo Ray, and Photik Ray in locations other than Goalpara, it is in this village that the oral tradition connects and equates the deities as being multiforms of one deity. The idea of connectivity is not unique to Goalpara (cf. Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975: 632–633), but it is the only village I

know of that coherently brings together seven local forms. On the textual side, Manikram Ganguli's *Dharmamaṅgal* is perhaps the most explicit text mentioning numerous forms of Dharmarāj as one deity. Along with a number of other appellations, his text includes references to names we are now familiar with from Goalpara: Bankura Ray, Kalu Ray and Buro Ray (Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975: 626). Taken together, such references, though scattered, suggest the broad diversity and local variation of the composite Dharmarāj traditions of West Bengal. In the case of the names of the deity, the texts provide recurring references to deities that have individual identities in local contexts, but become equated on the textual level. However, in the Goalpara tradition, the deities are brought into relationship with the over-arching figure of Dharmarāj on the local level as well. Some residents hold the opinion that these deities once had individual identities and were gradually incorporated into the overall image of Dharmarāj. Although the evidence is too scanty to make the claim outright, it might be the case that the *Dharmamaṅgal*s facilitated the process of unifying local heroes and deities in the figure of Dharmarāj (cf. also Blackburn, 1985). Dharmarāj's form itself, as described in the texts, also partially parallels the way Dharmarāj is represented as an ani-conic and nonanthropomorphic figure in the contemporary context.

3. *Dharmarāj's form*: In the opening *Gītārambha* section of Gha-naram's text, the creation (*śṛiṣṭi*) of the universe is described (cf also Caṭṭopādhyāẏ, 1338BS). Dharmarāj is here equated with Brahma, the creator, and his formlessness (*nirañjan*) is emphasized constantly (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 11):

3. In the Dharma assembly knowledge can be understood.
1. There is one Brahma that is eternal,
2. Formless, without color.
3. Beyond qualities, the ultimate cause, full of emptiness.
. . .
3. There is one Brahma, Gosai (= Dharma).
1. Nirañjan is full of emptiness.
. . .
1. Who can explain the essence?
. . .
3. The Doer's form is incomparable.

References to formlessness such as these abound both in the narra-tives and liturgical texts concerning Dharmarāj. And even though the

texts do not explicitly state that Dharma is to be worshipped in the form of a stone, as he is throughout rural West Bengal, it is possible that the deity's formless nature led to the custom of representing Dharmarāj in nonanthropomorphic form. A note of caution is necessary, however, since it is just as possible that the worship of Dharmarāj as a stone existed before any of the texts were written in his honor. This is especially viable in light of the fact that rock representations of deities are quite ancient (Das, 1983: 679–768). Whatever the case may be, Dharmarāj's empty form (*śūnya mūrti*) has been overemphasized in the historical reconstruction of the deity, for he is often depicted in both oral and written tradition as a human during his many appearances on earth. In order to accomplish the task of creation, for example, Dharma must manifest himself so that he may create the universe (Cakrabartī, 1962: 11):

3. [He] made manifest the seed of the universe in his body.

. . .

2. Totally born of one body,
3. The beauty of his figure split the darkness.

Elsewhere in the text, he is described as a Brahman mendicant who comes to earth 'in rapture' for the sake of his devotees (Cakrabartī, 1962: 33):[12]

1. Manifesting himself as an incomparable sannyasi,
2. The charm of his body was like a freshly washed flower.
1. A white umbrella over his head, a book of scriptures under his arm,
2. A bright mark on his forehead; his head covered with matted hair.
1. Clouds formed around him with the luster of lightning.
2. His clothes were bright red, his seat a lion's skin.

Dharmarāj's appearance in human form is a motif that often occurs in the texts and is also to be found in oral sources (cf. Korom, 2000).

It thus seems that Dharmarāj must manifest himself so that human beings can comprehend and worship him. As the passage cited above continues, Dharma appears on a road to a number of worshippers during his *gājan* (Chakrabartī, 1962: 33):

1. Charmingly decorated with *mandār*, jasmine, *ṣuthī* and magnolia flowers;

2. In the aroma of incense he says to the king, "Oh father!
1. All devotees are receptacles of the Lord's mercy."
2. Having performed *dharmapūjā*, they are walking on the path [when] they meet him.
1. A cane in his hand, a fan around his neck, a Dharma mark on his forehead;
2. His head decorated with the jasmine offered to the lotus feet of the Lord Dharma
1. Seeing the world-charming form of Gosai (=Dharma),
2. They all moved aside and performed obeisance.

In his human form, Dharma also speaks to devotees. For example, after Ranjabati's sacrifice, she is lying dead on the spike. Dharmarāj appears in the 'garb of a mendicant' (*sannyāsīr beśe*) and brings her back to life by lifting her off of the plank and applying vermilion paste to her wound. The use of vermilion to heal wounds acquired during the performance of austerities is present in other locations in West Bengal such as Beliator (Bankura District) and Kamarpara (Birbhum District), where piercing of the flesh is performed by *bhaktyā*s during the annual observance. Such practices are not performed in Goalpara, but vermilion is applied repeatedly to the *bāṇeśvar* during the rite. The paste is then transferred to the heads of devotees. In any case, Dharmarāj does not reveal himself to Ranjabati. Rather, he tests her devotion by questioning his own worship in the following dialogue (Cakrabartī, 1962: 103):

1. "Longing for Dharma, I
2. settled at Campai,
3. For a long time in the company of mendicants."
1. "Still then [there] was no mercy?
2. The infatuation for Dharma [is] terrible!
3. Why do [you] make trouble for nothing?
1. Serve other gods and goddesses!
2. [That] service will be fruitful.
3. Who the hell gave [you] such advice?
1. Why so much mortification for him,
2. Who has no rules,
3. Without qualities, formless?"
1. The queen answers, "Save Dharma,
2. I do not consider others [as] Lord."
3. [Feeling] blessed at this, the merciful one said,

1. "I am Dharma, the 'Master of Illusion.'
2. [Oh] child, ask for a boon."

Not being convinced that he is Dharmarāj, Ranjabati asks the mendicant for a miracle as proof, much in the same way that people in Goalpara cite miracles as proof of the deity's active (*jāgrata*) presence in the mundane world. Dharmarāj then makes a dead margosa tree blossom with fruits and flowers. She becomes convinced and he suddenly disappears. Ultimately, Ranjabati's encounter with Dharmarāj results in her attainment of the boon. We notice here the use of miracles as proof of Dharmarāj's worldly involvement in both oral stories (cf. Korom, 2000) from Goalpara and textual narratives.[13] Dharmarāj's sudden incursion into human affairs and equally sudden disappearance is a theme that we find in both written and oral traditions, and it plays an important role in the closure of a published synopsis of Goalpara's master narrative (Mitra, 1972: 126–127):

That's a story from a long time ago. A herdsman used to take one barber's cow to the bank of the Kopai river to graze. There, Dharma *ṭhākur*, taking the guise of a human, used to play with him. Grabbing the herdsman, he used to dunk him in the water and lift him [again]. Taking responsibility for watching over the cows, he used to send him off to eat. One day the master asks him, "whose care have you placed the cows in and come?" The herdsman explained, and the barber wanted to make the acquaintance of that man. At asking about an introduction, the man said, "I am Dharmarāj. Tell your master to worship me!" After relating that conversation, the barber expresses his weakness and utter poverty. At this, Dharmarāj says, "Don't worry about this, I'll make my own arrangements for worship services and drummers. In this region, however many *dharmapūjā*s there may be, I want mine to be before them all." Saying this, *ṭhākur* took the dress of a Brahman and himself began to go from one Bayen (low-caste drummers) house to the next. Gradually the Bayens started to become willing. Going to Shiyan-Shukhbazaar village as a Brahman, he appeared on the day of *mukta snān* (liberation bath) and makes his request known that the Bayens of that place should come and play. The Brahman himself took a few drummers and returned. Entering the village and coming to a small pond, he said, "You all wait, I'll wash my face and hands and come." But *ṭhākur* never returned...

Dharmarāj's unpredictable coming and going, as well as his dialogues, tests, and miracles are all themes that we find in oral narratives. It is interesting to note that one of Dharmarāj's appellations in the textual tradition is *bhakter adhīn*, which can be translated loosely as "[he who is] dependent on his devotees." Dharmarāj must make these occasional forays into the human realm for his own sake as much as for the sake of his devotees. After all, the justification for the literary narratives is to establish the worship of Dharma on earth. This textual clue corresponds rather nicely with Robinson's well-taken point that devotees must, in a sense, create Dharmarāj by

giving form to the formless one.[14] The theme of absence and presence is most apparent in the visitations made by Dharmarāj that are found in the Goalpara master narrative and the memorates discussed below.

4. *Personal encounters*: In an earlier discussion of personal experience narratives, I drew parallels between the oral tradition of recounting encounters with Dharmarāj and textual accounts (Korom, 2000). I recount one such narrative here to point out the strong thematic connection that textual personal experience narratives share with oral sources. The following translation is a published account of the eighteenth-century poet Rajaram Das' *ātmā kāhinī* (autobiography) embedded in his *Dharmamaṅgal* composition. Like so many other conversion accounts in this genre (cf. Smith, 1980: 180), the poet is walking along a road at night when he encounters Dharmarāj (Kilpatrick, 1983: 2):

13. I was not able to see the way due to the dense darkness. I thought meaningless thoughts and sat down in the middle of the road.
14. Distress arose immediately in (my) mind so I sat down. A compassionate (*dayada*) sannyasi came face to face with me.
15. He had a golden trident in his hand that glistened. He was clad in a tiger skin. His two eyes were red.
16. When I saw the matted hair on his head, I became afraid. I had it in mind to flee, but I did not possess the strength.

. . .

21. [Dharma says]. . . "By my command compose the Story of Dharma."

. . .

23. When the stars fell to earth, they twinkled. In a flash of lightning, I saw the earth.
24. The one who had bathed after the rite pervaded the Cosmic Emptiness and vanished. Before one's eyes the stars rose in the sky.

. . .

26. When I no longer saw the Sannyāsī, I cried "Alas, Alas!" He had descended in the middle of a field almost as in a dream.
27. I felt much distressed and struck a blow to my head with my hand.

The poet is then afflicted with a wound (*ghā*) of the foot for neglecting to compose the song for Dharma. Once again, after the passing of an

unspecified period of time, Dharma appears to the poet and tells him that if he does not compose the poem he will die from the wound. Wayne Kilpatrick (1967) has pointed out structural and thematic parallels to this narrative in the *ātmā kāhinī*s of Rupram Cakrabarti and Manikram Ganguli (cf. also Korom, 2000: 41–45). Taken together, these narratives bear some striking resemblances to the personal experience memorates told by residents of Goalpara about numinous encounters with the deity.

In virtually all of the accounts, both oral and written, the encounter occurs in the dark as the individual is engaged in the act of walking.[15] Other themes, such as a strong bolt of light accompanying the deity's appearance are implicated in the liturgical texts and oral accounts as well. Further, oral accounts similarly describe the affliction and personal suffering experienced by Rajaram Das. The fear (*bhay*) brought on by a numinous encounter with Dharmarāj described by Rajaram Das, Rupram, and other writers is quite apparent in the stories told by people in Goalpara. Writers of *Dharmamaṅgal*s clearly experienced something very similar to the descriptions given to me by Goalpara residents. Yet to make any concrete connection between the oral and written sources would be highly speculative. For example, signs of Dharmarāj's presence in the form of non-human agents are, to my knowledge, missing from textual accounts of personal encounters with the deity, as is the specific location. Most of the contemporary encounters with Dharmarāj take place on or near specific sites that are vividly described in oral narratives. Because the texts are translocal, they are less clear about the location of such events, giving narrative priority to the experience of the individual. The transformational power of place, however, must be considered as an important factor in interpreting contemporary stories (cf. Korom, 1997c). Because the oral accounts have a limited circulation and serve the needs of a specific community, the stories not only describe the experiences of individuals, but also reinforce the notion of local sacred space. It seems that the writers of the texts, on the other hand, do not give priority to the place of occurrence because they are not writing for a localized audience. One last feature that I might point out before moving on with my discussion is that textual encounters usually occur in the context of Dharmarāj giving an explicit command to a poet or character in the narrative, whereas the oral accounts usually do not contain this feature. With the exception of the Goalpara master narrative cited above, the reasons for Dharmarāj's visitations are often obscure in the stories I recorded.

The relationship between written and oral accounts of encounters with the deity is not to be found in historical connections, for there is no evidence for continuity. Rather, we see strong thematic elements running through these accounts that suggest a common source of inspiration and experience. Themes, then, provide the 'connectivity' discussed by Hanks as a central feature of textuality. One last area of relatedness between text and context is the social issue of castes implicated in the worship of Dharmarāj. Thematically, it seems apparent that Dharmarāj is strongly connected to lower castes in the texts. I have already shown this to be true in Goalpara (cf. Korom, 2001), but let us explore how one *Dharmamaṅgal* writer conveys the relationship.

5. *Dharmarāj's relationship to low Castes*: One of Dharmarāj's textual appellations is "friend of the poor" (*dīnbandhu*; cf. Cakra-bartti, 1962: 115, 324). The use of this term suggests an intimate connection between low castes and the deity. Low castes, for example, tend to refer to Dharmarāj as *bābā* (father) and *bhaktyā*s, themselves being mostly from the subordinate castes, speak of entering *dharma gotra* (the Dharma lineage) at the time of initiation. Ghanaram's text refers to the kinship metaphor quite explicitly when speaking of an encounter between Lausen and a flower seller (*mālī*; Cakrabartti, 1962: 282):

manete bujhila raẏ mālī śuddha jāti
putrabhāb chila tāẏ dharmmer sebāti
Ray considered in mind that the flower seller caste [is] a pure [one].
[They] were like sons; that's why [they were] Dharma's servants.

If low castes are considered to be sons of Dharmarāj, then it makes good sense that they should address him as *bābā*. These features, along with Dom and Lohar (blacksmith) claims to the deity, imply both a kin- and caste-based relationship connecting Dharmarāj to lower strata groups. But the relationship between the deity, his hero, and the lower castes is also portrayed as a servant/master bond. I have already mentioned, for example, the Hari caste's involvement in the clearing of the forest at Campai above, and the servile role played by the Dom warriors employed by Lausen during his military campaigns is well known from the *maṅgal* literature. Elsewhere, the relationship is described in terms of a teacher or counselor to a student, as in one case below where Lausen and his brother enter the home of a blacksmith. Ghanaram describes the meeting "[as] a wise householder [to his] revered preceptor" (*jñānbān gṛihastha jeman*

gurudebe; Cakrabartī, 1962: 315). In any case, the notion of serving (*sebā karā*) the deity, whether as a child to a parent, a servant to a master, or a student to a teacher, is clear in the text and performed in ritual context. One could further speculate that the servile relationships portrayed in the texts also reflect a patron/client relationship paralleling the agricultural and economic interdependence between Brahmans and low castes in Goalpara (cf. Korom, 2001, Rohner & Chaki-Sircar, 1988: 15–37).

Although the *Dharmamaṅgals* were mostly written by Brahmans – who often hesitated to take on the task of composing for fear of losing their high-caste status (cf. Smith, 1980: 180) – they still reflect superior/subordinate and devotional relationships between low-caste occupational groups and the hero Lausen. Since Lausen is a direct link to the deity, it is safe to say that the texts portray a god who finds a place among the lower castes. In fact, a Bengali proverb states that Dharma always finds a home in the Dom quarter. Such ideas found in oral tradition are reflected in textual compositions as well. Take, for instance, the following encounter between Lausen and his twin brother Karpur with a Tamali (betal nut seller) on the road to Gaur to meet the king (Cakrabartī, 1962: 206–207):

henakāle dharmmaputra lāusen rājā
sarobar salile karilyā snān pūjā
At this time the king Lausen, the son of Dharma,
Bathed and performed worship in the waters of the lake.
bidāẏer biṣaẏ balite haridāse
tāmalitanaẏ tabe sabinaẏe bhāṣe
When told about their departure, Haridas,
The son of a Tamali, then said politely,
mahāśaẏ paricaẏ kara ataḥpar
ki kāje kothāke jābe kon deśe ghar
"Sir, now introduce yourself.
Where will you go [and] for what purpose? Which country [is your] home?"
. . .
śuniyā praṇati kari kaẏ juṛi
padaraje pabitra hailya mor bāṛī
Hearing, offering homage, [Haridas] said with folded hands,
"My house has turned sacred by the dust of your feet."
. . .
ki kaba mahimā tār prabhu jār dharmma
"How do I express his greatness, whose lord is Dharma?"
eta śuni lāusen ānande bibhāl
maitra bhābe tāmalitanaẏ dila kol
Hearing this, Lausen, overjoyed,
Embraced the son of the Tamali as a friend.
śuno bandhu edeśe āmār tumi sakhā

jātāẏāte eikhāne more pābe dekhā
"Listen friend, in this country, you are my mate.
At this place, you will see me as [I] come and go."

This passage clearly shows Lausen's growing affiliation with lower castes as he proceeds on his mission to establish the worship of Dharma on earth. As Lausen and his twin continue their journey toward Gaur, they meet a blacksmith along the way, and an event much like the encounter with the Tamali is described by Ghanaram (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 314–315):

suśīl sajjan satya bujhi karmmakāre
param pīrite paricaẏ dila tāre
Understanding the blacksmith [to be] humble, honest [and] truthful,
[Lausen] introduced himself to him very warmly.
. . .
dharmmer kinkar āmi lausen nām
ei mor anuj abanī anupām
I [am] Dharma's servant, Lausen [by] name.
This [is] my brother, having no second on earth.
gaurpati meso mor jāba tār ghar
śuni karmmakār kahe kari joṛ kar
The lord of Gaur is my uncle; [we] shall go to [his] house.
Hearing, the blacksmith said with folded hands.
āmi paricaẏ kari śuna sumahattva
karmmakārkūle janma nām lāudatta
"I introduce myself. Listen [oh] magnanimous one!
Born into the lineage of blacksmiths, [my] name is Laudatta."
eta śuni mitā bali rāẏ dila kol
nata haẏe kahe datta ānande bibhol
Hearing this, Ray offered him an embrace, saying friend.
Saluting, Datta said exhilarated in joy.
. . .
joṛhāte kahe kāli jeẏo rājpure
kṛpā kari āji esa āmār mandire
With folded hands [the blacksmith] said, "Go to the king's palace tomorrow
Kindly come to my temple today."
saṅgsār saphal hok tari bhabasindhu
sen bale tumi mitā mor ma
"Let [my] mundane life be successful; let [me] cross the ocean of existence."
Sen said, "You [are] my friend, a great mate."
atithir bhābe sen gelā tār bās
svagoṣṭhī sahit bale pūrṇa abhilā
Sen went to his house as a guest.
[The blacksmith] told his clan, "My desires have been fulfilled."[16]

Such correspondences are to be expected in the vernacular texts, since they grow out of model relationships developed in classical literature, such as in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, where the divine hero Ram encounters the outcaste Guhak during his forest sojourn.[17] This

statement, however, should not necessarily suggest that the theme filtered down from the written to the oral then back to the written. It would be difficult to determine which direction the influence went, since it is also possible that the classical types were gleaned from an oral base of storytelling. It might be the case that vernacular and classical texts both share features of a more general Indic consciousness. Whatever the reality of the situation may be, it is clear that the texts share such thematic linkages. But the most interesting parallel between the textual narrative and Goalpara practice is the implication of the cow-herding Goyala (Gopa) caste who take the surname Ghosh. Unlike their north Indian counterparts, Goyalas are considered to be an 'unclean' caste (Smith, 1980: 69; Risley, 1981.1: 289–290) in Bengal, but their population is considerably large in the area once known as Rarh.

The villain of this *maṅgal*'s narrative is Ichai Ghosh, Ranjabati's brother, who is a Goyala by birth. Because Ichai was not informed of Ranjabati's marriage to the aged king Karnasen, he goes to great lengths to destroy Lausen. Ichai is thus portrayed in the texts not only as a conniving villain out to ruin Lausen, but as an enemy of Dharmarāj. Versions of the Goalpara master narrative also present Goyalas in a role opposing the deity. They are cursed by Dharmarāj, and eventually are destroyed because of their transgression. Although people in Goalpara do not make the connection between the textual villain and the master narrative, this is an interesting aspect of textuality. It is a subtle way that the text is implicated in reality. Yet even though the general tone of most of the versions of the master narrative suggests the ruination of the Goyala caste, one version presents the transgression in a positive light. We also cannot forget that the important hereditary role of *mūl deẏāśī* (head devotee) in the village is held by Sudarshan Ghosh, a member of the Sadgop sub-caste, a faction considered to be relatively purer than other Goyalas because they have become agriculturalists (cf. Smith, 1980: 69). Similar transformations occur in other areas of the district, where the role of Ichai Ghosh is transformed from villain to hero in folk ballads because he is perceived to be the upholder of the Goyala caste. He is praised in legend for establishing Gopabhum (the land of milkmen), a residential and administrative unit created solely for milkmen in Burdhwan District (Smith, 1980: 69; Sarkar, 1985: 76ff; 104–105). The following couplet from a local song, for example, laments Ichai's fate on the morning of his impending battle with Lausen by advising him not to go (Ghoṣ, 1976.1: 124)

śanibār saptamī sammukhe bā
āji bane jeonā re ichāi goẏāl
In [Lausen's] presence, on the morning [of] Saturday the seventh.
Don't go into the forest today, oh Ichai Goyal!

CONCLUSION

In the above section, I have suggested that there is a dialectical rela-
tionship between text and context on some level. That is, the text
resonates with aspects of the context and vice versa. It would be far
too speculative to make any concrete assertions connecting text and
context without much more historical evidence, but my point has been
to suggest that textuality is a factor worth considering when
attempting to understand and explain a localized version of the
Dharmarāj phenomenon. The relationships between textual narra-
tives and contemporary performances are thematic in nature, and do
not suggest a direct link or connection in Goalpara.[18] Such thematic
associations, however, enable us to appreciate more fully not only the
interaction between a text far removed from a localized context, but
also the intricate ways that a modern set of ritual performances draw
on other traditions to create innovative vehicles for devotion. More-
over, combining fieldwork with textual scrutiny allows us to appre-
ciate Dharmarāj's multiple personalities as creator, virtuous king,
master of destiny, shapeshifter, friend of the poor, and boon giver.

NOTES

[1] For overviews of the *Dharmamaṅgal* literature (see Bhaṭṭācārja, 1975: 725–776;
Sen, 1975: 135–224; Dasgupta, 1976: 259–342; Kilpatrick, 1977: 85–99; Bandyo-
pādhyāẏ, 1980: 311–352).
[2] Ghanaram's text is certainly the longest in the *Dharmamaṅgal* corpus, and is
important for both its informational content and poetic use of language. Two printed
editions exist, but I have been working with the Mahāpātra edition. Unless otherwise
cited, this is the text used throughout. All translations here are my own.
[3] For a general overview of the phenomenon in Birbhum (see De, 1392BS; Mitra, 1972;
Ghoṣ, 1976.1: 315–322). For a description of the rituals in Goalpara (see Korom, 1999).
[4] The word textuality has taken on two distinct senses in anthropological literature;
the first deals with the postmodern concern for representation in ethnographic writing,
while the second defines the term in a sociolinguistic fashion. I utilize the latter here
(see below), but for an engaging review and critique of the former (see Howes, 1990).
[5] Hanks (1989: 96) has also come up with a useful typology for kinds of texts
necessary to understand the tradition with which I am dealing here. His types are: (1)
Co-text, "designates the accompanying discourse in a single text;" (2) Meta-text,
"any discourse which refers to, describes, or frames the interpretation of text;" (3)
Con-text, "the broader environment to which text responds and on which it oper-
ates;" (4) Pre-text, "whatever prepares the ground for or justifies the production or

interpretation of text;" (5) Sub-text, "whatever understandings or themes form the background or tacit dimensions of a text, inferable but not explicitly stated;" and (6) After-text, "the constellation of consequences and outcomes of producing, distributing or receiving a text, whether foreseen or not." Most important for my considerations here is his notion of 'sub-text.'

[6] This is a point already made by Milton Singer. Singer states that "contextual studies ... help in essential ways to locate and specify the meaningful content of a religious system depicted by the textual studies of the historian of religion, the philosopher, and the philologist" (1961: 274).

[7] One could, for example, argue that since ritual practices are found in the texts, they must have existed prior to the writing of the text. Or conversely, that the portrayal of rites in the texts led to the establishment of the practices. Such arguments, however, give precedence to one over the other on speculative grounds only. Bell (1987) has recently pointed out that the academic discourse on theory may itself be at the root of the problem by making an artificial division between thought (i.e., myth) and action (i.e., ritual). It would be much more reasonable to assume that both texts and rites existed simultaneously as the tradition developed.

[8] We can assume that the name Ramai Pandit here refers to the tenth-century author of the Śūnya Purāṇ discussed in the introduction and, according to the texts, legendary founder of the Dharmarāj pūjā tradition. See Sen (1911: 30–37).

[9] The enactment of impalement is much clearer in other villages in West Bengal, such as in nearby Kamarpara, where a bhaktyā who has taken a vow lies on a human sized spiked plank and is paraded around the village for hours before he is finally brought to the local Dharmarāj temple.

[10] The mention of Ramai Pandit holding a manual (paddhati) in hand and reading the ritual rules to the worshippers suggests the liturgical use of the Dharmapūjā Bidhān during Goalpara's annual event. It would be difficult to say, however, to what degree the text has shaped ritual practices, since versions of the Goalpara master narrative also describe and explain which rituals must be performed. Further, most of the extremely detailed rules in the manuals are not followed today. Ghanaram, for example, mentions no less than 28 items from the manual which must be used by Ranjabati for the performance of her austerities to Dharmarāj (cf. Cakrabarttī, 1962: 90), most of which are not used in Goalpara, but might be found randomly at other sites throughout Bengal.

[11] Most of the references cluster around the figures of Bankura Ray, Chand Ray, Kalo Ray, and Photik Ray. Bankura Ray, for example, is mentioned in the Dharmamaṅgals of Sitaram (17th century), Prabhuram (19th century) and Manikram Ganguli, where Dharmarāj appears and equates himself with Bankura Ray, saying "For the sake of the universe (biśver kāraṇ) I am Bankura Ray." See Sen, 1975: 179; 199; 206 respectively. Manikram's text is also important because in it he equates most of the well-known manifestations of Dharmarāj. See Bhaṭṭācārja (1975: 626). There is no evidence to suggest that Chand Ray is a deified version of a historical figure of the same name who was murdered in East Bengal during 1593 (cf. Majumdar, 1943.2: 210), but Hridayram Sau, an 18th-century Dharmamaṅgal poet does mention the deity as the Dharma ṭhākur of Kharugram in Burdwan District. See Sen (1975: 200). Kalo Ray is well known in all of the Dharmamaṅgals as the Dom general who is recruited by the hero Lausen to aid him in his military campaigns. Ghanaram, for example describes him as a servant of Yama, the god of death, "fat, hairy, with moustache, awful to look at" (kāl moṭā lom gõp ghor darśan). See Cakrabarttī (1962: 346). His identity is, perhaps, clearer than any of the other manifestations, and will be discussed below. Photik Ray is more obscure but is known elsewhere as sphoṭikrāẏ (or sphoṭikeśvar = crystal god). See Mitra (1972: 70, 189, 198) and the comments in Das (1983: 679). Sarkar, (1985: 120) mentions an unidentified Dharma slab made of 'transparent rock' in Tantipara, Birbhum District.

[12] Ghanaram makes this quite clear elsewhere, when he states (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 29):

nirākār gosãi ākār bkaktibeśe
karile ekānta bhakti pāi anāẏāse

The formless Gosvami takes corporeal form for the sake of devotion,
So that devotion can be performed with ease.

[13] Miracles occur quite frequently in the *Dharmamaṅgal*s. Aside from Ranjabati's miraculous conception recounted above, the hero Lausen's resurrection of a dead boy (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 271ff) and a rogue elephant (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 340) as well as his alchemical transformation of cowrie shells to gold (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 289) with the aid of Dharmarāj can be cited. Also, Lausen's brother Karpur is miraculously born from camphor flowing from Dharma's lips as he smiles (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 131).
[14] "Dharma requires his devotees to complete him as a deity. He is activated through their interactions with him; they realize and actualize the god. They lend form to the Formless one" (Robinson, 1980: 71).
[15] This, of course, does not apply to the dream visitations described orally by villagers and in written form by Khelaram, but it is noteworthy that the dreaming occurs at night.
[16] Another blacksmith is implicated earlier on in the text, when he is asked to forge Lausen's magical sword and shield. See Cakrabarttī (1962: 167–191).
[17] Indeed, Ghanaram, like other *Dharmamaṅgal* poets, utilizes classical stories to frame and justify his own narrative. Thus we read in Ghanaram's text about Ram's encounter with the *caṇḍāl* Guhak as a framing device for Lausen's own encounter with the betal nut seller (Cakrabarttī, 1962: 206–207).
[18] The relationship between the *Dharmamaṅgal* texts and modern ritual contexts is much more concrete in villages such as Kamarpara or Baruipur, where the ritualized singing of portions of the epic actually accompany rituals being performed that enact the text. On this facet of the *pūjā* in the village of Baruipur (see Robinson, 1980: 76–175).

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