

TUNNEL OF LOVE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE KĀLIKĀ MAṄGAL

W.L. Smith

The *Kālikā Maṅgal* or the *Vidyā Sundar*, as it is also known, is certainly the oddest theme in maṅgal literature. Maṅgal kāvyā, as it is also called, is a genre of medieval Bengali literature which consists of religious epics based on the myths of regional deities such as the Snake Goddess Manasā, the Sun God Dharma and the smallpox goddess Śītālā, and tell how these upstart deities succeeded in spreading their cults among men. Though the *Kālikā Maṅgal* ostensibly deals with the goddess Kālikā or Kālī, it is actually a love story featuring prince Sundar and princess Vidyā in which the goddess Kālī plays an offstage role. Humayun Kabir, referring to the *Vidyā Sundar* of Bhāratcandra Rāy, whose version is considered one of the finest works of Bengali literature, writes that, “In spite of its religious veneer, we cannot regard *Vidyā Sundar* as anything but a sordid story of courtly intrigue. The strange thing is that the more sordid and worldly the story became, the greater was the anxiety of the poet to exhibit it as a work of religious devotion.”¹ What then, we can ask ourselves, does this “sordid tale” have to do with the goddess Kālī and how did such a story ever become the basis of a maṅgal kāvyā?

The oldest versions of the *Kālikā Maṅgal* are from the early part of the 16th century and there seem to be around a dozen extant all in all. In some of these poems the *Vidyā Sundar* is part of a larger work, as in the *Anmadā Maṅgal* of Bhāratcandra Rāy, which also contains a poem about Siva and his wife Pārvatī along with another about the Moghul general Mansinha. Another poet, Gobinda Dās, composed a poem of five parts, the other four being purānic stories about the goddess.² Authorities on the subject of maṅgal poetry, Āśutoṣ Bhaṭṭācārya,³ Sukumār Sen⁴ and Asitkumār Bandyopādhyāy,⁵ do not entirely agree on the number of versions of the *Vidyā Sundar* or the names of the poets who wrote them.

1 Kabir, Humayun 1962: 43.

2 Sen 1963: 480.

3 Bhaṭṭācārya 1970.

4 Sen, Sukumar 1963.

5 Bandyopādhyāy 1966.

The basic story is a simple one. Sundar, a prince in Kāñcī,⁶ heard that a husband was sought for Vidyā, princess of Gaur, and so traveled to her kingdom in order to win her. Upon his arrival he chanced to meet a woman flower seller, *mālinī*, named Hīrā, who supplied the palace with flowers. Hīrā promised to help Sundar gain access to Vidyā and Sundar moved in with her. The next day when Hīrā went the palace to sell flowers to Vidyā, hidden among them was a garland containing a secret message from Sundar. When the princess read it, she became immediately interested.

The next night Sundar made his way to the Vidyā's chambers through a secret tunnel. After some intellectual sparring, Vidyā became enamored of Sundar and the two were married. They then enjoyed a passionate affair which was only revealed when Vidyā became pregnant. The king and queen were scandalized and Vidyā's enraged father ordered his constable (*koṭwāl*) to find the culprit responsible. As the constable searched for him, Sundar visited Vidyā during the night and wandered around the town during the day disguised as a yogi. The ingenious *koṭwāl* finally solved the mystery of Vidyā's secret lover by smearing vermilion (*sindūr*) in her chambers, then going to the local washerman the next day and asking if he had taken in any vermilion strined laundry. The next night the constable burst into Vidyā's chambers but not before Vidyā had her entourage dress Sundar in women's clothes. Thus when the *koṭwāl* lined the woman up, he could not single out Sundar. The wily constable solved the problem by drawing a line on the floor and telling all the women to jump over it. This they did, one after the other, left foot first. When Sundar jumped, however, he put out his right foot first, and so betrayed his sex. He was captured, arrested and condemned to death. As the axe (so to speak) was about to fall, a bard (*bhaṭ*) from Sundar's homeland fortuitously turned up in Gaur, and revealed Sundar's identity. He explained to Vidyā's father that Sundar was a prince and the heir to a mighty king. Vidyā's father, a practical man, then reconsidered the matter and welcomed Sundar as a son in law instead of cutting off his head. The couple returned to Sundar's kingdom where they lived happily ever after.

According to scholars⁷ and reference works,⁸ the Vidyā Sundar story is apparently based upon a "biography" of the 11th century Kashmiri poet Bilhaṇa. Bilhaṇa, author of the *Karṇasundarī*, the *Vikramacarita*, and a collection of erotic verses, the *Caurapañcāsikā*, was court poet of the Chālukya king

6 The names of places and secondary characters vary from version to version, as do the details in the story.

7 That is, those mentioned in the footnote on the previous page.

8 As Frederic 1937 (under Bilhana).

Vikramāditya IV (1076–1127). Bilhaṇa’s biography, the *Bilhaṇa Carita*, is a brief work written in Sanskrit and, like all other premodern biographies of Indian poets, a product of fantasy. According to it King Madanābhirāma and queen Mandāramālā of the land of Pāñcāla had a highly intelligent daughter, Yāminīpūrṇatilakā, whom they wanted to learn all the arts and sciences. Their daughter succeeded in mastering all the branches of learning with the solitary exception at *sāhitya śāstra*, the science of literature, a subject that could only be taught by a true poet. So the king appointed the handsome poet Bilhaṇa as his daughter’s tutor, but as a precaution, he told the princess that that Bilhaṇa was blind, and told Bilhaṇa that the princess had leprosy, and then hung a curtain between them. Despite these safeguards, one romantic night a beam of moonlight strayed through the window and a breeze rustled the curtain. Suddenly other thoughts entered the princess’s mind and romance bloomed. After a short but intense love affair Bilhaṇa and the princess were found out and Bilhaṇa was sentenced to death. On the scaffold he recited fifty verses about their lovemaking *Caurapañcāśīkā*, “The Fifty Verses of a Thief”, each verse containing the well-known lines *adyāpi ... smarāmi*, “still today ... I remember”. The king and queen were so impressed with his extemporaneous poetry that he was pardoned and allowed to marry the princess.⁹

The earliest version of the *Vidyā Sundar* is from the beginning of the sixteenth century and was written either by a poet named Kaṅka, or by one named Śrīdhara. Scholars disagree as to who has priority. Kaṅka had a rather unconventional life. Born a brahman, he was orphaned at an early age and raised by cāṇḍāls, that is untouchables or dalits. His story is told in one of the East Bengali Ballads collected by Dinéscandra Sen entitled *Lilā Kanyā-Kabī Kaṅka Pālā*.¹⁰ Ashutosh Bhattacharya considers Kaṅka to be a contemporary of Caitanya (1486–1533),¹¹ as does A.K. Banerjee.¹² (Sukumar Sen moves him up to the 18th century.)¹³ According to the poet his guru ordered him to write a work praising the Hindu-Muslim deity, Satyanārāyaṇa. Thus his work, though about Vidyā and Sundar, is the *maṅgal* of another deity altogether. Śrīdhara’s poem has been recovered in the form of two mutilated manuscripts in which he refers to Peroz (or Phiruz Shāh) as his patron. Peroz assumed the throne of Bengal in 1532 and was murdered a year

9 The synopsis here is after the versions of the *Bilhaṇa Carita* in Tadpatrikar 1966 and Pāl (n.d.).

10 Maulik 1973: 10 ff.; see also 5–6.

11 Bhaṭṭācārya 1970: 764.

12 Bandyopādhyāya 1961: 190.

13 Sen 1966: 478.

later. He was the grandson of the Bengal's most famous sultan Hussein Shāh and son of his successor Nasrat Shāh, another noted patron of literature. Śrīdhara's poem was composed in 1532 and it is a romance pure and simple. No religious influence can be seen in it.¹⁴ Another early version of the poem, the third, was written by a Muslim named Sābirid Khān. One mutilated manuscript of his work has survived. What remains of Sābirid's poem does not follow all the conventions of the Vidyā-Sundar story but otherwise resembles that of Śrīdhara. It contains some Sanskrit passages. None of these two poets mention Kālī.¹⁵ Thus of the three earliest versions of the Vidyā Sundar theme, one is dedicated to another deity, Satyanārāyaṇa, and in the other two the goddess is not mentioned. The inclusion of Sanskrit verses indicates that the poets were well educated and were acquainted with Sanskrit poetic theory.¹⁶

The *Vidyā Sundar* comes into its own in the works of later poets whose works have survived in their entirety. These poems are not very long, varying in length from around forty to seventy printed pages and, although they all follow the same basic story line, they differ in details. Later *Kālikā Maṅgal* poets include Gobinda Dās, Kṛṣṇarām Dās, Bharatcandra Rāy, Dvija Rādhākānta, Madhusūdan Cakrabartī and Rāmprasād Sen.¹⁷ Their poems were written in the 17th and 18th centuries. Kṛṣṇarām Dās was a professional writer of maṅgal poems and also wrote a *Ṣaṣṭhī Maṅgal*, a *Sītālā Maṅgal*, a *Rāy Maṅgal*¹⁸ and a *Lakṣmī Maṅgal*. Bhāratcandra Rāy, the greatest of the medieval poets, wrote his version of the Vidyā Sundar in 1752. A poet named Rāmprasād Sen wrote some famous devotional hymns to the goddess Kālī but he does not seem to be the same Rāmprasād who wrote a *Kālikā Maṅgal*.

In these renderings of the *Vidyā Sundar* or *Kālikā Maṅgal* we find that various innovations are added to the theme. In Gobinda Dās, the earliest of them, we find an interesting new addition. There as Sundar awaits the executioner's sword, he describes Vidyā in verse, in the form of a *cautiśā*, that is, a poem in which the first letter of each verse follows in the alphabetical order of the (Sanskrit/Bengali) alphabet from the consonant K.

14 Bandyopādhyāya 1961: 184–185.

15 Zbavitel 1976: 192.

16 A. Bhaṭṭācārya 1970: 765–768.

17 Pāl (n.d.) contains the Vidyā Sundar poems of several poets and other works related to the theme. All are paginated separately. The names of the poets will be abbreviated as follows: Gobinda Dās (GB), Kṛṣṇarām Dās (KD), Dvija Rādhākānta (DR), Madhusūdan Cakrabartī (MC), Rāmprasād Sen (RS) and Bhāratcandra Rāy (BR).

18 Rāy is a tiger deity.

kotāle dharila cora kumārīra ghare |
 kaṣṭha mukhe laiyā yāy rājāra gocare ||
 kāṭite hukuma dila bīrasimha rāy |
 kumāra balen kichu śuna mahāśay ||
 khaṭṭāy basiṅyā rājā kabe kharatara |
 kharḡe khāna khāna kara kumāra sundara ||
 kbagendra samānā bidyā khañjana nayāna |
 khasila kuntala phula loṭāy dharanī ||
 gajendragāmīnī bidyā gandha candane l[...]
 gananera śaśī ye se mukhamaṅḡala ||¹⁹

The *koṭwāl* caught the thief in the room of the princess.
 With a grim expression he took him to the king.
 King Vīrasimha gave the order to execute him.
 The prince said, “Listen a bit to me your majesty!”
 Sitting on a cot, the king said sharply,
 “Chop the boy Sundar into bits with a sword!”
 (Then Sundar said) “Vidyā’s bird-like eyes are like Garuḡa.
 Flowers have fallen from her tresses and lie upon the ground.
 She walks with the stately gait of an elephant and is redolent of sandal.[...]
 The orb of her face is like the moon in the sky.

The king paused to listen to the praises of his daughter all the way through to the end of the alphabet. By the time Sundar was finished, the *bhaṭ* appeared to rescue him. Later poets follow suit and also include a *cautiśā* here.

Subsequent poets also add another element. After his rescue and marriage, Sundar leaves his new wife to visit his parents. Vidyā, filled with the anguish of separation, expresses her feelings in another popular genre of love poem, a *bāromāsi*, “twelve month” where she describes them month by month.

Madhusūdāna’s *bāromāsi* poem opens according to tradition with the summer month of baiśākh.

19 GD 22.

baiśākha māsete rabi pracaṇḍa kiraṇa |
śītala karaṇe taru kumkum candan ll [...]
prabhu he āmi kahi tomāre kahi tomāre |
dujane bañciba jalayantra mandire ll²⁰

In the month of baiśākh the rays of the sun are fierce,
 and red sandal paste cools my body. [...]
 I'm telling you Lord, again and again,
 we two could (only) survive in a jalayantra.²¹

Kṛṣṇarām's Vidyā Sundar contains a third innovation as well. As Sundar stands before the executioner, he recites some Sanskrit *ślokas*, beginning with

adyāpi tām kanakacampakadāmagaurim

Even now (I think of) her of a bright color like that of a garland of gold²²

This is the first line of the *Caurapañcaśikā*, the collection of the fifty erotic lyrics of Bilhana. Here the connection between the *Vidyā Sundar* and the *Bilhana Carita* becomes clear. Since Bilhana's poem was included in the *Vidyā Sundar*, his biography was eventually assumed to be its basis. Kṛṣṇarām includes nine more of Bilhana's fifty Sanskrit verses along with translations into Bengali. Later poets do the same and include varying numbers of Bilhana's verses along with Bengali renderings. Bhāratcandra Rāy includes all fifty of Bilhana's verses as does Madhusūdan Cakrabartī. These later versions of the Vidyā Sundar theme are well-written with learned vocabularies and the poets display considerable verbal agility (alliteration is popular). They also employ a wide range of meters.

According to Dušan Zbavitel, the *Vidyā Sundar* is, "a non-Bengali romance of secular origins".²³ While certainly secular, it is not necessarily non-Bengali. Though the Vidyā Sundar story does not resemble other *mañgal* myths, a few of its features do bring to mind other Bengali themes. Most notable of these is the flower seller Hīrā (to use one of her names) who plays the role of go-between (*dūtī*). She is very reminiscent of "granny" in the *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Kīrtan* of Baṛu Caṇḍīdās who plays a similar mediating role between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, a role not found in other treatments of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa theme. Whatever its origins,

²⁰ MS 37.

²¹ A *jalyantra* is any kind of device or machine worked by, or delivering water. Whatever it exactly is, it cools one in the hot month of baiśākh.

²² KD 41.

²³ Op.cit. p. 192.

the story attracted skilled poets from the very beginning. Medieval Bengali poets could not cultivate secular poetry with the same freedom as did poets of other vernaculars. In Bengali all literature was expected to be at least formally “religious”. By contrast contemporary Braj Bhāṣā poets produced a large body of secular poetry, much of which was erotic, and technical treatises based upon Sanskrit literary theory. The same is true of many other medieval vernaculars. To write this kind of literature Bengali poets needed, so to say, a cover story for their work. The *Vidyā Sundar* seemed to be an excellent vehicle for the *śṛṅgāra rasa* or erotic sentiment and was eventually transformed into one. The most successful of the poets, Bhāratcandra, was later criticized both because of his tongue-in-cheek attitude and his erotic treatment of the theme. This can be seen in the remarks of Humayun Kabir which introduce this paper. Dušan Zbavitel seems critical as well. He writes, “in depicting erotic scenes (Bhāratcandra) does not respect any limitations. It was for this reason that he was so often been accused of obscenity and immorality.”²⁴ One can ask what limitations he disrespects. Being so well versed in Sanskrit poeto-rhetorical theory, Bhāratcandra knew its limitations – and possibilities – very well. And he used them. It is not that Bhāratcandra goes too far, but simply that he is extremely good at what he is doing.

Once Bengali poets found a suitable vehicle for their erotic poetry, it had to be disguised as a *Kālikā Maṅgal*. So Kālī was inserted into the poem in bits and pieces. The appearances she makes depend on the predilections of the individual poets and vary from version to version. The first step in remolding the poem into a *maṅgal kāvya* was to add a prequel: Vidyā and Sundar are described as celestial beings in Indra’s heaven who were cursed to be reborn on earth as mortals. Such prebirth stories are a convention of *maṅgal kāvya*. Another change is in the *cautiśā* which in its first appearance describes Vidyā. In later versions, such as that of Kṛṣṇarām, it describes Kālī:

24 Zbavitel 1976: 192.

karayoṛe kabibara kare parihāra |
karago karuṇamayī kṛpā ekabāra ||
khaṭṭāṅga kharparā kharā kharatara asi |
khaṇeke kariye khuna rakṣā kara āsi ||
girisutā guṇabati gahanabāsini |
gale naramuṇḍamālā gaganabāsini ||²⁵

With folded hands, the best of poets laments.

Oh Merciful goddess, show mercy to me!

With your razor-sharp, hot sword

put an end to him and come and protect me.

Oh daughter of the mountain, denizen of the wilds,

you who wears a necklace of skulls on your neck, resident of heaven.

Then Kālī had to be worked into the body of the story. In Gobinda Dās both Sundar and Vidyā are born thanks to a boon given by Kālī to their respective parents; later Kālī protects Sundar from wild beasts as he travels to Gaur and when he returns home he arranges an elaborate Kālī pūjā. Vidyā prays to the goddess when Sundar is captured according to Kṛṣṇarām Dās and Rāmprasās Sen has the goddess assure Sundar that he will be safe as he is being led to execution. Kṛṣṇarām Dās describes how the goddess appears before king Vīrasimha, Vidyā’s father, and, terrified, he releases Sundar. In several versions the goddess appears to Sundar in a dream and tells him his parents miss him and commands him to return home. Kālī’s other appearances are of this kind and they were felt sufficient to transform the Vidyā Sundar into a Kālikā Maṅgal. The poem does not seem to have played any role in Kālī pūjā, in contrast to some other maṅgal themes.

Why Kālī? The *Vidyā Sundar* could obviously comfortably be dedicated to a number of different deities as indeed it was as we can see in the case of the poem by Kaṅka which features hybrid Hindu-Muslim god Satyanārāyaṇa. We can also remember that in two early versions Kālī was not even mentioned and the story did not suffer from her absence. So why was it that Kālī selected? The reason seems to be that Sundar is a thief, *cor*, and Kālī is the patron of thieves. Sundar may be a thief of love,²⁶ but he is a thief nonetheless. Bilhana was similar and his lyrics are entitled, *Caurapañcaśīkā*, “the fifty (verses) of a thief”. The Kashmiri

²⁵ KD 44.

²⁶ This is the title of Edward C. Dimock’s translation of the *Vidyā Sundar*.

poet, so to speak, stole the daughter of the king and Sundar did the same. Sundar even has the *modus operandi* of a classical Indian thief. Instead using a crowbar to force open a door, an Indian thief breaks into the homes of his victims by digging a tunnel through the wall with a digging tool known as a *sinda*. And this is exactly what Sundar does: he excavates a tunnel – a tunnel of love so to speak – from Hīrā’s quarters to Vidyā’s chambers in the same way a thief digs a tunnel into a treasure room. According to Bhāratcandra²⁷ when Sundar sits in the home of Hīrā, wondering how he can gain access to Vidyā, he prays to Kālī. The goddess responds by throwing down a *sinda* with a mantra written on it. Sundar worshipped the tool, recited the mantra and expelled his breath (*phunk dijā*), creating a tunnel. In some poems Sundar prays for a boon from Kālī and the boon is the tunnel. In other versions Kālī sometimes creates the tunnel herself or supplies him with mantras. Mantras are very important to thieves. Sanskrit texts describing the art of thievery mainly consist of lists of mantras. Such texts are dedicated to Kālī. Among the most important mantras are those that put the residents of the house to be burgled asleep and those which render the thief invisible, so if burgled residents wake up, they won’t see the thief. In the *Vidyā Sundar* of Dvija Rādhākānta Kālī takes the form of Hīrā and gives Sundar magic collyrium (*kajjal*) which renders him invisible when he puts it on his eyes. When it is stolen by one of Vidyā’s companions, Kālī helps him dig the tunnel so he has another way to visit Vidyā.²⁸

Towards the end of the 18th century the Vidyā Sundar theme prospered. A poet who called himself Varuruci wrote a Sanskrit version; another poet, Ābdul Karim, wrote a Persian version. It also appeared in Urdu. By the time Bhāratcandra died, the British were well established in Bengal and the age of medieval Bengali literature was drawing towards its close. As the upper castes began to be mesmerized by the West, the Vidyā Sundar story was adopted by the Bengali folk theater, the Jatra. There it fell from the heights to the depths as it was popularized and vulgarized. The upper castes came to see these performances as distasteful and obscene and turned away from it. This stigma is still echoed today in criticism of Bhāratcandra. But by then Kālī long since ceased playing a role in the theme she once had so a tenuous place in.

27 Rāj n.d.: 28.

28 DR 10.

REFERENCES

- ASITKUMĀR, Bandyopādhyāy 1966. *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itibṛtta*, tṛtīya khaṇḍa. Kalikātā: Modern Book Publishers.
- BHAṬṬĀCĀRYA, Āśutoṣ 1970. *Maṅgal Kābyer Itihās*. Rev. & enlarged (5th) edn. Kalikātā: A. Mukherjee and Co.
- FRÉDÉRIC, Louis 1987. *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne*. Paris: Robert Laffont.
- KABIR, Humayun 1962. *Studies in Bengali Poetry*. Bombay: Bhavan's Book University.
- MAULIK, Śrīkṣītīścandra (ed.) 1973. *Praçin Pūrbbaṅga Gītikā*, III. Kalikātā: Firma K.L. Mukhopādhyāy.
- PĀL, Praphullacandra (ed.) n.d. *Vidyā-Sundar Granthāvalī*. Kalikātā: Basumatī Press.
- RAY, Guṇākar Bhāratcandra (praṇīta) n.d. *Bhāratcandrer Granthāvalī*. Kalikātā: Basumatī Sāhitya Mandir
- SEN, Sukumār 1963. *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās*, pratham khaṇḍa aparārdha. Kalikātā: Eastern Publishers.
- TADPATRIKAR, S.N. (ed.) 1966. *Caurapañcaśikā. An Indian Love Lament of Bilhaṅa Kavi*. (Poona Oriental Series, 86) Poona: Oriental Book Agency.
- ZBAVITEL, Dušan 1976. *Bengali Literature*. (History of Indian Literature, IX: 3) Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.