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David L. Curley. *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-kabya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal.* Chronicle Books, 2008. xi + 296 pp. $46.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-8028-031-3.

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The King, the Merchant, his Wife, and the Goddess: Reading Precolonial Bengali Poetry

When confronting a literary document the historianâs first instinct is to place the text in context. David Curley, one of North Americaâs few serious scholars of precolonial Bengali literature knows this well, and I shall have more to say about his understanding of the challenges that confront anyone who sets out to study the genre known as *mangal-kabya* (*mangala-kavya* in Sanskrit orthography). But what scholars of South Asia will appreciate from the very first page of *Poetry and History* is the way Curley situates his own book in its historical context.

Who can resist the charm of being taken back to the University of Chicago in 1973 and ushered straight into the office of Edward C. Dimock, the great patron and guru of Bengal studies in the United States? Curley relives for us something of the excitement and the almost certain trepidation of a graduate student in history commencing his first semester of study with Dimock. With great candor he describes for us not simply his first encounter with a particular text known as the *Candimangal*, but also Dimockâs attempts to help him find the interpretive tools to process this narrative poem from the late sixteenth century. There was a time when LÃ©vi-Strauss did seem to have the key, and Curley describes his eager attempts to decode mythemes and uncover hidden meanings in the text. But with the advantage of hindsight he can tell us now what he feels he must have begun to sense already when reading such a text. He would not be able (or wish) to uncover structural meanings embedded in this text that were somehow unknown to its author and its audiences.[1] Rather, here was a text that taken as a whole âwould prove to be what it clearly was in its parts: intelligent, thoughtful, and self-reflectiveâ (p. 4). So began Curleyâs long collaboration with his mentor and his even longer engagement with the genre of *mangal-kabya*.

To follow Curley, the genre of *mangal-kabya* may be defined as vernacular narrative poetry, didactic and religious, composed between roughly the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. These texts by their very name are associated in some sense with producing âwell-beingâ (*mangala*). They are typically dedicated to promoting the worship of a particular deity (like the great goddess Candi). It seems likely that they were performed orally in ritual contexts, perhaps with musical accompaniment (p. 6), although there is a rich manuscript tradition and authors do betray familiarity with written versions of other *mangal-kabya*. The language of the texts might be called âmiddle Bengaliâ and the meter is typically the straightforward and very popular *payar* meter.[2] Such are the generally agreed-upon characteristics of the genre.[3] But for Curley the really interesting questions turn on how the historian should approach such texts. *Poetry and History* is his extended reply to this question, less linear argument than recursive investigation of key issues that emerge from a close reading of

one text in particular, the *Candimangal* of Mukundarama Cakrabarti (a.k.a .Kabikankan, âThe Jewel of Poetsâ).

Curley gathers together five previously published essays on selected and interlocking themes, adding here an initial chapter on historiographical issues and a final essay that compares to good effect key aspects of Mukundaâs sixteenth-century text with two texts from the middle of the eighteenth century. South Asianists and readers of prominent journals like *Modern Asian Studies* and *Indian Economic and Social History Review* may well remember seeing some of these essays in earlier incarnations. The earliest essay was first published ten years ago, but it bears noting that some of the authorâs research dates as far back as the early 1980s. I mention this principally to highlight the depth of expertise the author brings to this work.

The opening chapter serves to put the big questions in play: What is *mangal-kabya*? How should they be read? How has the genre changed over time? How were they performed? How should an awareness of their performative aspects shape our reading of them today? What is the relationship between didacticism and ritual purpose in these texts? Curley is aware on the one hand of how early nationalist historians like Dinesh Chandra Sen sought to read into these texts romantic visions of an authentic precolonial India, a fact we must bear in mind whenever we pick up works purporting to tell us about this genre.[4] Noting this tendency, Curley chooses to think instead of how the texts participate in larger patterns of Indic and Persian storytelling. On the other hand, he is aware that too few scholars have given thought to this as a performative genre, often merely abstracting plots from what they take to be unchanging documents (pp.12-13). In a well-intentioned attempt to address this shortcoming, Curley provides some thoughtful comments on the âperformative pleasuresâ of satire, a prominent feature of the genre that accounted for its immense popularity (pp.17-21). Sadly, this attention to performance does not effectively carry over into the six chapters that make up the bulk of the book. We appreciate Curleyâs awareness of what remains to be done in this regard, but once we leave the initial chapter we quickly realize we will not learn much more on this particular front. However, no single volume can do it all and what Curley does do in the remaining chapters is eminently worth our attention.

As Curley notes at the outset, it has long been assumed that *mangal-kabya* can be mined in a straightforward fashion for the sociological and historical facts they communicate.[5] Curley questions this approach, emphasizing instead that these are âimaginative works of literature, not ... reports or documentsâ (p. 26). His instinct is to follow the poetâs descriptions, to listen to the predicaments and problems faced by the protagonists and to use these as a window onto the very real issues at stake in the world of premodern Bengal. Thus his role vis-Ã -vis these texts is not to transcribe facts, but to attend to the way social tensions, moral values, religious norms, gender roles, and political structures are articulated, tested, and challenged.

Rather than walking the reader sequentially through the remaining six chapters of *Poetry and History*, it may help to identify four broad themes that emerge from Curleyâs attentive reading. These themes are: (1) kingship, honor, and rule; (2) commerce and exchange; (3) women, gender, and agency; and (4) colonial modernity. Needless to say these themes are not addressed in isolation but crisscross and play off one another in these chapters. In terms of relative emphasis it could be said that chapters 2, 4, and 5 largely address the paired issues of kingship and commerce; chapter 3 explores the question of women and gender; while chapters 6 and 7 explore developments taking place with the advent of East India Company rule and the âruptureâ of modernity.

Curleyâs investigation of kingship, commerce, and exchange is richly informed by developments in South Asian history, most notably work on state formation in early modern India. To the fore is the problem of conceptualizing the so-called little kings, those rulers who claimed certain powers as kings but who owed their allegiance to more powerful overlords. Also to the fore is the question of commercialization. Reading Mukundaâs *Candimangal* for what it tells us about the relationships between rulers and merchants is one way Curley provides for thinking about the interplay of trade and rule in precolonial Bengal. In chapter 2, âKings and Commerce on an Agrarian Frontier,â Curley enters into debates over commercialization in north India. He notes, as have others, the tendency of scholars to focus on the eighteenth century in light of the âavailability of European recordsâ from the period and the assumption that âEuropean trading companies were the primary agents for changeâ (p. 36). He also laments that the tendency has been to approach the early modern state in structural terms instead of in terms of change over time.[6] Curley departs from this practice by taking us back to the world of Mukunda in search of the ways in which commerce and trade appear to be in flux. While he does not expect Mukunda to provide a realistic portrait of trade in the sixteenth

century, he does think the text opens up a way to consider the âre-evaluation and repositioningâ of kingly values during this period, notably the emergence of âmore pacific royal virtuesâ over an earlier warrior ethos (p. 37).

In chapter 4 Curley turns to Mukundaâs imaginative depiction of the ambivalence of trade, most noticeable in the traderâs status as either prey or predator. A central concept he develops in this essay is that of âtribute exchange,â a function of trading activity which appears to be related to the act of buying and selling and yet is other than the mercantile transaction we may be inclined to project onto Mukundaâs stories of merchants. He wonders aloud whether âconflicts of honor and dishonor are different from 'economic' conflicts over wealthâ (p. 117). This sends him off on an exploration of the liminal status of the Bengali Hindu merchant in the *Candimangal*. Curleyâs goal here, as in chapters 2 and 5, is to explore how cultural and political values informed the expression of relative relationships among rulers and subjects (including foreign merchants or upstart rulers on the jungle frontier). As Curley puts it, we need to think of âsome foreign tradeâ less in terms of business transactions and more âas a diplomatic game in which both royal honor and precious goodsâ were offered in exchange (p. 147).

By attending to the value structures that shape Mukundaâs depiction of such exchanges we learn that trade was perceived to be fraught with danger. Merchants, like hunters, could be predatory. They could represent risk. In some cases, as in the mythic Dhanapatiâs journey to Sri Lanka, they entered new realms with motives that appeared uncertain to their hosts. Mere market exchanges might not protect one against the merchant *qua* hunter. Tribute exchanges that served to encode norms of hierarchical deference might defuse conflict. Yet even this was a dangerous game, since both parties to an exchange had reason to feel anxious over the maintenance of their honor. When Dhanapatiâs son Srimanta is married to the foreign king, Curley sees signs of an attempt to arrive at a still safer exchange relationship. The unstable tribute relationship is converted into the more stable affinal relation (p. 147). There is insufficient space here to convey the sensitivity and care with which Curley uses the text of the *Candimangal* to interrogate competing norms of honor, profit, warrior valor, peace, and domesticity. What is significant is that while eschewing the temptation to find a ârealisticâ picture of sixteenth-century Bengal in this text, he actually sheds much light on the expression and transformation of central values in this world.

Curleyâs exploration of marriage and gender roles is equally compelling for this reason. He sets the argument of chapter 3 against the backdrop of studies of gender in colonial India, asking whether such work has both drawn too sharp a line of demarcation between âcolonial and precolonial discourse on gender in South Asiaâ and simultaneously misunderstood or inaccurately characterized the nature of precolonial gender (p. 75). His foil here is the attention paid by colonial reformers and nationalist authors to the creation of a fundamental binary between the âmasculineâ and the âfeminine.â By contrast, his view of gender as revealed in Mukundaâs *Candimangal* is that it was âscalarâ (p. 78). If we are attentive to Mukundaâs rhetoric, his assumptions, and some of the âcounter-argumentsâ he appears to address, we come to see that for him gender roles were âmultiple and rankedâ (p. 78). Attitudes to gender are revealed in the way such themes as âhunting,â âbuying and selling,â and âmaking offeringsâ are deployed in Mukundaâs narratives. As the story of Dhanapati and his co-wives Lahana and Khullana suggests, men and women could occupy shifting gender roles. Hunting is the more masculine role–even though Lahana is at one point described as a âhuntressâ in respect to other women (p. 80). But roles are fluid. We notice that when it comes to something like buying and selling both men and women can become involved.

Take Kalaketu, who is a hunter. His wife sells meat and skins in the market. Here hunting is the higher-ranked, more masculine role. But when the jungle animals appeal for help to the goddess Candi and she takes away Kalaketuâs ability to hunt, he is forced to assume Phullaraâs place in the market. She in turn is asked to go to a friend and make an offering (*bhet*) in order to receive financial assistance. While it would seem Phullaraâs marketing ranks as feminine beside Kalaketuâs hunting, this does not preclude Kalaketu from taking up marketing; and Phullaraâs gender identity then shifts accordingly to the lesser role of making offerings (p. 79).

There is much more to this chapter, including reflections on the question of identifying female agency in these stories and the investigation of what Mukundaâs narrative reveals about the nature of precolonial norms of marriage and the role of *jati* councils in deciding disputes. It should be read by all scholars working on gender in South Asia.

The final two essays in the book bring us closer to the advent of British rule in India. One essay returns to the theme of the âlittle kingâ by examining the career and

religious initiatives of Maharaja Krshnacandra of Nadiya (1710-1782).[7] Inheriting from his forebears what Curley calls a âbi-polar model of rulershipâ in which the âlittle kingâ remained a Mughal âoffice holderâ (p. 224), Krshnacandra responded to the upheavals of his day by seeking to define himself as a different kind of Hindu ruler. Curley asks, what did âindependenceâ mean for Krshnacandra? Rather than military strength, Krshnacandra advanced his status by associating himself with a vision of a unified, inclusive Hinduism. Central to this strategy was the role of yet another piece of *mangal-kabya*, the *Annadamangal*, created by Krshnacandraâs court poet, Bharatacandra Ray. In Bharatacandraâs text Curley finds the hermeneutical key to unlocking a linked program of poetry, architecture, and revived Vedic sacrifice that worked to shape Krshnacandraâs identity as âan independent sovereign whose authority derived ... from Annapurna or Siva or the Vedic sacrifice itself, not from a *sanad* of the Mughal Emperorâ (p. 217).

In the final chapter, âLost Meanings and New Stories: *Candimangal* after British Dominance,â Curley examines the continuing saliency of the *mangal-kabya* genre in the eighteenth century, while simultaneously revealing the ways two authors–Ramananda Yati and Lala Jayanarayana Sen–reworked Mukundaâs narrative for new times. Ramananda is viewed as attempting to âcorrectâ Mukundaâs text, in a sense channeling its moral and economic complexity into a narrower groove of devotional piety. Put simply, in Ramanandaâs text, Kalaketu is just a hunter; hunting is no longer âa metaphor for human exploitationâ and the business of âbuying and sellingâ is no longer a way to think about the deeper problems of economic and political predation (p. 244). Devotional piety or *bhakti* comes to the fore in Ramanandaâs text; the goddess is no longer sexually alluring, but is the loving mother who expects those âaffective practices of remembering, expectant waiting, weeping, and confessingâ that we now associate with devotional Hinduism (p. 246). In Jayanarayanaâs *Harilila*,[8] which evokes the arrival of the Kali Yuga as a ârupture with the pastâ marked in part by the âabsence of kings,â Curley finds a poignant image of modernity (p. 273). Further, by reading Jayanarayanaâs *Harilila* alongside his *Candikamangal*, Curley reveals how the author drew upon other âmore fluid narrative traditionsâ such as tales of Satyanarayana to examine the challenges of human agency in his changing world (pp. 274-275). One bonus of this chapter is Curleyâs retelling of the little-known comic romance of Madhab and Sulocana (pp. 262-266). Unlike the standard trope of indebtedness to the goddess, in this tale Jayanarayana emphasizes âmorally neutralâ aspects of human agency, such as courage, trickery, and beguilement (p. 273). This willingness to think outside the âdevotional problematicâ is for Curley one further index of Jayanarayanaâs modernity.

Overall, this is a book that should repay the close reading of historians, scholars of Bengali literature, and students of colonial India. There is great mastery evident in Curleyâs use not simply of the primary sources of *mangal-kabya*, but also of the best scholarship in Bengali on this genre. Indeed, in view of the rich and suggestive thematic coverage of this volume, and the authorâs obvious sensitivity to the use of literary texts for the reconstruction of history, we might have wished that instead of repackaging these earlier essays Curley had chosen to integrate his insights into a monograph on the history of Bengal from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Such a strategy would have allowed him to avoid some of the repetition that naturally occurs when reprinting articles on closely related topics; it would also perhaps have made for a book slightly more accessible to newcomers to this field. On this note, because Curley focuses so resolutely on the *Candimangal*, less initiated readers may find themselves wishing for a broader overview of the literature and authors of *mangal-kabya*, if only to firm up their bearings in the intellectual and literary world of precolonial Bengal.

In terms of the book itself, Chronicle Books (distributed worldwide by Orient Longman) has done a nice job of production. I only detected one or two minor typos throughout. However, the recurrent spelling of *stuti* as *sthutti* in chapter 2 struck me as unfortunate. Far more disappointing than this was the fact that the binding of the book broke down fairly quickly. That is a real disappointment in the case of a book that invites an engaged and active reading and which this reviewer hopes will find its way onto the shelves of undergraduate and graduate libraries.

Notes

[1]. For an example of a structural analysis of *mangal-kabya*, see Clinton B. Seely and Frederika V. Miller, âSecular and Sacred Legitimation in Bharatcandra Rayâs *Annada-mangal* (1752 CE),â *Archiv OrientÃ¡lnÃ* 68, no. 3 (2000): 327-358.

[2]. For an accessible description of the meter, see Clinton B. Seely, *The Slaying of Meghnad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62-63.

[3]. The standard work on *mangal-kabya* is Asutosha Bhattacarya, *Bamla mangalkabyer itihasa*, 4^{th} edition (Calcutta: Mukerjee, 1964). In English, see J. C. Ghosh, *Bengali Literature* (reprint, London: Curzon Press, 1976); and Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*, 3^{rd} edition (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1979).

[4]. For an example of this approach, see Aniruddha Ray, âMiddle Bengali Literature: A Source for the Study of Bengal in the Age of Akbar,â in *Akbar and his India*, ed. Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225-242. Rayâs approach to mining data from these texts is signaled by his use of such phrases as âVijay Gupta gave detailsâ (p. 228) and âthe existence of a market ... is evident hereâ (p. 239). Ray also cites examples of other scholars who preceded him in the use of *mangal-kabya* as source documents, notably Asutosha Bhattacarya, *Bamla mangalkabyer itihasa*; Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 2^{nd} ed. (Chittagong: Baitush Sharaf Islamic Research Institute, 1985); and Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966).

[5]. See Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, 2^{nd} ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1957). In situating Sen within the discourse of romantic nationalism, Curley draws upon Dipesh Chakrabarty, âRomantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal,â *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 654-682.

[6]. Curleyâs work is informed in part by Sanjay Subrahmanyamâs essay, âThe Mughal State–Structure or Process? Reflections on Recent Western Historiography,â *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 29, no. 3 (1992): 291-321.

[7]. This essay is reprinted from *Rethinking Early Modern India*, ed. Richard B. Barnett (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002).

[8]. Though the name does not suggest it, Clinton Seely refers to Jayanarayanaâs *Harilila* as a â*mangal kavya* in all but nameâ and suggests it represents perhaps the âlast of the great Bengali narrativesâ; see âSecular and Sacred Legitimation in Bharatcandra Rayâs *Annadamangal* (1752 CE),â 330.

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