

The theoretical Premise of Myth & Reality: A Case Study of Manjusa Art, Sati Bihula-Goddess Vishahari (Nagin) Worship and Regional History of Ancient Anga Janapada (Bhagalpur Region of Bihar)



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Abstract

Manjusha art is intertwined with a very popular folktale 'Bihula-Vashahari Gatha' and the tradition of 'Bihula- Vishahari Puja'. Every year during the month of August large number of colourful and decorated baskets in the shape of a cottage known as 'Manjusha' are offered to Goddess Vishahari, or Mansa, the foster daughter of Lord Shiva. The devotees offer 'Manjushas' along with flowers, fruits, sweets and betel (Pan) to Goddess Vishahari (Nagin) with the hope that she will fulfill their wishes and protect their lives and wealth. Every year on 17th August or with the advent of Singha Nakshatra, worship of Goddess Vishahari begins at various temples in Bhagalpur region.

Transition of Anga from pre-history to history thus gained momentum with the Aryanisation of the middle Gangetic Valley beginning from circa 1000 BC⁵⁰. Chando Saudagar, as a trader, came to Champa and settled there with his beliefs and culture of Indo-Aryans. In the process of Aryanisation the traders had played a great role in India as well as in making of Greater India. In such a historical perspective we may evaluate the role of Chando Sandagar's activities and his contempt with the culture of this region i.e. Naga and Mother Goddess Vishahari worship. It seems five sisters Vishahari were Mother Goddesses or rulers of Champa in pre-historic period and they were well related to Naga Totem. They wanted to be worshipped with her Totem Naga and Chando refused to worship them and contempered with saying them as 'frog eating'. But Vishahari sisters compelled Chando Saudagar to worship them at last by damaging the lives of his seven sons and wealth. Bihula persuaded Chando to be agreed for worshipping of Vishahari and Naga.

Thus the annual worship of Mother Goddess Vishahari and Sati Bihula along with Naga became prevalent as a people's worship ceremony. A veil of mythology seems to have been woven around a historical event of great antiquity i.e. the struggle between two different cultures of Asura or Nagas and Aryan, during Aryanisation of the region of Anga Janapada. The myth of Bihula-Vishahari gives an indication of the society which was matrilineal when actual incidence took place. The cross-section of depressed classes largely associated with this ceremony provides an inkling how process of Aryanisation had worked upon tribal animism and totem, imposing a super structure of Brahmanical pantheon. The rituals, the priest (Bhagats), the paraphernalia, the traditional folk songs all indicate that despite of having been brought under Aryan social fold very long ago the myth of Bihula-Vashahari has been persistently redacted and the latest version seems to have been reworked during late medieval period.

The idea of recording events, historic or mythic, in pictorial form was prevalent throughout the ancient world. Cultural norms determined which events would be recorded and artistic convention prescribed the manner of portraying the essential elements of time, place and action.¹ In the early Indian context every thought, word and deed belongs to the world of seen as well as unseen and shows the traditional arts of India.² Another important feature is that everything is hand wrought and everything, down to the cheapest toy or earthen

vessel, is therefore more or less a work of Art. The spirit of fine art is indeed every where latent in India, but it has yet to quickened again into operation.³ Historical analysis requires not only recognizing the events but also relating them to a whole in a manner that determines what causes events, and formulating an explanation.⁴ Most often historical studies are influenced by sentiments, ideology, theories and the methods and tools of study adopted for the analysis. As such a considerable gap exists between the actual events and the written history.⁵ This raises the fundamental question as to how to recognise the events and collect source material for its study. The answer lies in a systematic study of regional history within the broader framework of national history. Regional history has a special justification in our country. India is known as a land of unity in diversity. Unity of the country is often invisible, but the diversity is quite obvious and palpable. It lies on the surface and is easily perceived.⁶ In a country like India, where majority of the population is illiterate, where tribes still inhabit many parts, absence of written historical tradition is quite natural. But being un-written does not mean being unknown. The need of the day is therefore to pay proper attention to the oral and other pronounced traditions.⁷

These traditions are reflected in the form of folklores, folktales, myths, legends, and primitive arts of people of pre-literate societies. In the absence of literacy these arts cover a wide range of activities such as sculpture, painting, basketry, weaving, masks, song, dance, body decoration, architecture and follow local traditions.⁸ These arts bear religious, political, cultural and social messages and are major form of communication promoting identity, conformity, and solidarity.⁹ The present paper attempts to study and analyse a very popular art 'Manjusha' and people's worship of Bihula-Vishahari (Nagin) in historical perspective of Bhagalpur region, the ancient Anga Janapada.

Manjusha art is intertwined with a very popular folktale 'Bihula-Vashahari Gatha' and the tradition of 'Bihula- Vishahari Puja'. Every year during the month of August large number of colourful and decorated baskets in the shape of a cottage known as 'Manjusha' are offered to Goddess Vishahari, or Mansa, the foster daughter of Lord Shiva.¹⁰ The devotees offer 'Manjushas' along with flowers, fruits, sweets and betel (Pan) to Goddess Vishahari (Nagin) with the hope that she will fulfill their wishes and protect their lives and wealth.¹¹ Every year on 17th August or with the advent of Singha Nakshatra, worship of Goddess Vishahari begins at various temples in Bhagalpur region. From this very day begins the singing of folk songs related to Bihula-Vishahari Gatha. How and when the gatha took its present form is difficult to fix. The Gatha and songs are in Angika language, the local dialect of Bhagalpur region.

Scholars have tried to trace the origin of Angika from the Middle Indo-Aryan Language loosely called Prakrit.¹² The earliest and famous Buddhist Mahayana Text Lalitavistara (circa first century A.D.) provides a list of sixty four scripts in which Angalipi, i.e. the script of Anga is placed at the fourth place.¹³ This has tempted local scholars to equate Angika with 'Prachya of Ardhmagadhi branches of Prakrit'¹⁴ On the first day called as 'Lakpanchak' male cobra snake named as 'Nag Maniyar' is worshipped. People clean and sanctify their houses by spreading the cowdung slurry and offer corn of rice husk (Dhan Ka Lava) and cow-milk to Naga (Maniyar). In some places prayers are offered to the picture form. of Naga (Naga Maniyar).¹⁵

The second day is 'Mainapanchak' five sisters of Goddess Vishahari-Maina, Aditi, Jaya, Padma and Dwitela, known as 'Goddess Mansa' are worshipped. In day time the 'Manjushas' and 'Dalias' (small basket along with flowers, sweets, fruits, etc.) are offered by thousands of devotees through Bhagat (Priest) from so called lower castes like Kewata, Gorhi, Vinda, Mehtar, Nishada, Chamara, Domba, Dhobi, Mushara, etc. The same night the marriage procession (barat) of Bala Lakhindra, son of Chando Saudagar, a prominent businessman of Champa, is taken out and his marriage with Bihula, a beautiful daughter of prominent businessman Basu of Ujani, is held with all pomp and gaiety. The couple is then shifted to a house, then named 'house of iron bamboo or Jungli bomboo. In the same moment of the same night, dreadful Singha nakshtra enters and Bala Lakshindra is stung by the snake 'Naga Maniyar' and Bihula becomes a widow. Next day, a large section of society belongs to depressed classes partakes in the ceremony known as 'Vishahari Mela.' Idols of Goddess Vishahari, Naga Maniyar, Bihula with her dead husband, Bala Lakhindra and Manjushas are exhibited in every temple of Goddess Vishahari or Mansa in the region of Anga (Bhagalpur).

In Bhagalpur proper about sixteen temples of Goddess Vishahari are known of which the Mansa temple of Champanagar is the most important.¹⁶ Champanagar mohalla is settled on and around the mound of ancient Champa, the capital of Anga Janapada, and the temple is located on the main mound popularly known as Katnagadh.¹⁷ Champa was subjected to excavations by Patna University for seven seasons and it revealed continuous occupation from about the Pre-Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) culture phase to the period of the Palas (A.D. 750-1150). Significantly among the material relics of the Sunga period was found a number of soapstone jeweler's moulds inscribed with human and animal designs and a terracotta figurine of a pair of Naga and Nagin with a human head.¹⁸

The Bihula- Vishahari Gatha in Folk Tale and Folk Lore:¹⁹

According to Bihula-Vishahari folktale and its folklore five sisters of Goddess Vishnahari were the foster daughters of Lord Shiva and they wanted to be worshipped by the people of the earth like their father. Lord Shiva told them that if Chando Saudagar of Champanagari accepts to worship them, they would be worshipped by all people on the earth.²⁰ Then Vishahari sisters went to Champanagari and narrated to Chando what Lord Shiva had told them. But Chando refused to worship Vishahari sisters saying that he worships only Lord Shiva and in no case will worship frog eating snake goddess. Humiliated, Vishahari threatened Chando with dire consequences, but Chando did not budge and again refused to worship them. Chando had seven sons and the youngest of them was Bala Lakhindra. Chando had a good profit in trade with Srilanka and his all adult six sons were on trade route. Vishahari killed Chando's six sons and destroyed his wealth by sinking his boat with the crewman in the mid sea, but Chando once again refused to worship them.²¹

Chando's life had become miserable and his all six daughter-in-laws were leading a widowed life.²² But both husband and wife, Sonilka were also afraid with Vishahari's threats and sent their son Bala Lakhindra to his maternal home at 'Sonapur'.²³ After many years Chando thought about Bala's marriage and he agreed to settle the marriage with Bihula, the most beautiful daughter of Vasu Saudagar of Ujani.²⁴ Keeping in view the threats of Vishahari, Chando requested Vishwakarma (carpenter) to make a house of iron-bamboo having no any window, ventilator and hole. But Vishwakarma was threatened by Goddess Vishahari and he agreed to make a hole in the house on being assured by her that before checking she would enter the iron-bamboo or hard bamboo (Jungli-Bamboo) house and close the hole. On being fully assured Chando brought Bala Lakhindra and Bihula to Champanagari after their marriage in Ujani.²⁵

Vishahari requested 'Nag Maniyar' (Cobera Snake) to bite Bala Lakhindra and then Maniyar entered iron-bamboo house and bit Bala Lakhindra. Bala died and Bihula became widow on the wedding night. Chando Saudagar made arrangement to dispose the dead body. But Bihula didn't agree and she decided to go to 'Devalok' (abode of the gods) and bring back her husband into life.

Bihula requested Vishwakarma (Carpenter) to make a big boat with a case looking like palace and it was built soon. A gardener named 'Lahsan Mali' decorated the boat and created 'Manjusha' with all his might of earthly passions, with painting of the five Vishahari sisters, the Naga Maniyar, cottage of iron-bamboo and Kingdom of Indra (The Indrasan Raj) with all the

glory of the rainbow colours.²⁶ Bihula then placed the dead body of her husband in the case and started her journey for 'Devalok' from Gokul Ghat (River Bank) of Chamapapuri. After a long journey for many days through Ganges from ghat to ghat she reached Netula Ghat near by Devalok (Varanasi?) and succeeded to approach the Gods. Bihula performed a unique devotional dance there. Lord Shiva and other Gods of Devalok became very pleased and asked her to seek blessings. Bihula, firstly, wished the life of the dead brothers of her husband with lost boats and the wealth along with the life of the drowned sailors. Lastly, she wished for the life of her dead husband. All her demands were fulfilled by the blessing of Lord Shiva. Then Bihula returned back to Champapuri with all the seven brothers and the sailors. Bihula was welcomed in an unprecedented manner. Bihula narrated all the events to Chando and requested him to Worship Vishahari sisters. Chando unwillingly agreed to worship Vishahari. A grand 'Mandapa' (temple) of Goddess Mansa Vishahari was built for the worship. Vishahari sisters were now happy and blessed all and announced that Bihula would be worshipped along with them on this earth.²⁷

Archaeological remains from this area corroborate this Nag worship ceremony. Finds of terracotta figurine of a pair of Nagas (Nag/Nagin) with human head from Champa belonging to the Sunga period (185 B.C.- B.C.75.)²⁸ and a fragment of door jam of a Vishahari temple made of black granite with Nag engraved on it belonging to 8th-9th centuries A.D. also from Champa²⁹ clearly supports the continuance of Nag worship from the beginning of the historical period to the early medieval age.³⁰ A most decorated stone idol of Goddess Vishahari or Mansa with hood of Nag on her head has been found from Vikramshila. It indicates that Mother Goddess Vishahari was worshipped in this region.

Manjusha Art

Manjusha is a part and parcel of the Gatha of Bihula-Vishahari worship and its Folk Lore. The colourful and heavily decorated manjushas are mainly made by a particular caste 'Mali' (gardener) in the month of August, when Vishahari worship is performed with all gaiety.³⁰ Jhapi, a simple and less decorated manjusha, could be made and offered on any other day according to the need and wish of the devotees.³¹

The Manjusha is made of light weight sanai (jute fibre) and sola (pith-balls). It is square with a pyramid like top in the shape of a cottage. Its size vary from one to three square feet in area according to its height which also normally reaches two to three feet.³² Designed in either two or three tiers its sides are fixed with frames, three in numbers, meeting at each corner. The first frame is at three/four inches above the ground providing base and support to the manjusha. The second and third frames are on the upper part of

the manjusha which provides support to the top pyramid. The edges and arches of the frame is projected like a cornice and is decorated with hood of snake Nag made of paper. In the centre of the manjusha there is a box like structure. The base, the central box, the top frame and the pyramid are covered with paper from all the sides with openings known as 'akshiya' door. It is on the paper wall that 'manjusha paintings' are drawn with natural water colours.³³

The subject of the painting is derived from the Bihula-Vishahari folk tale and folk lore. Champak flowers, Mansa Mandapa, Maniyar Nag, Panchamukhi Vishahari, Maina Vishahari, Chando Saudagar, scene of fish in water, Sati Bihula in a boat along with the dead body of Bala Lakhindra with a toy are to be essentially illustrated. In addition, Saropa offering, elephant with mahout, cat, the horse etc. also to be illustrated.³⁴ Other images on the manjusha includes moon, sun, fish, bamboo, garden with snakes and mongoose. On the outer portion of the manjusha can be found the guard hawk, mongoose, cat, elephant along with the mahout and a man with long curvy moustaches.³⁵

In fact the manjusha is heavily decorated with coloured and white papers, jute shafts, pith balls and gota. While illustrating the images paper, pith balls and jute fabres are used as the base. The arch of manjusha is also decorated with natural colours pink, green, yellow and black and consists of images of nature, sky and the universe with philosophical and conceptual perspective of the artists. The imaginative and effective illustration of Shiva Linga along with Nag in the local art form is worth seeing. The local artists also draw manjusha art on plain paper, piece of silk, earthen clay pot and brass vessels. No influence of any dominant Indian school of painting has, been found on the paintings of Manjusha and on the whole, the art appears to be essentially local in its form and content.³⁶ The art has religious connotation which further comes out during the month long Bihula-Vishahari folk festival in the region of ancient Anga Janpada or Bhagalpur (Bihar).³⁷

How and when such manjushas come into existence is difficult to say. The making of manjusha is intertwined with the folktale and folklore of Bihula-Vishahari. As such we may trace its history of making in the formation of the myth, folktale and the folklore. We have no any information as to when the myth of Bihula and Vishahari came to be orally systematized and transmitted in the form of folk gatha and folk songs. It is certain that the myth was embedded in the masses particularly among the lower class people in the form of a great tradition of the Goddess Mother worship and 'Nag Worship'. James Hastings writes that Nag worship is, originally, an independent form of Totemism.³⁸ C.F. Oldham, also, says that Nagas, originally, were not

Demons, but were human beings and their Totem or AI was Nag.³⁹ Supporting this view James Fergusson says that Takshila was the centre place of the people, who were worshipping Naga and their Chief was Takshak Nag of the Nagadynasty.⁴⁰ It is said that 'Takshila was named in the name of Takshak Nag'. In Indus civilization the people were worshipping Nag (Cobra) with different other totems like Vrishabha, Devadrum Tree, Fish, etc. These were Totems of different tribes.⁴¹ Mother Goddess was also worshipped by the people of the Indus Civilization with their totems. The worship of Naga was prevalent in eastern India and Bihar (Anga Janapada).⁴²

Social formations in the Anga region has to be studied in the wider perspective of developments that took place in the Middle Gangetic Valley from about 1000 BC. Before the arrival of the Aryans in the middle Ganga Valley, the Anga region was already marked by advanced culture features which were the outcome of the fusion of the aboriginal i.e. Proto-Australoid and the Mediterranean- Armenoid peoples.⁴³ It is quite certain that the Aryans has nothing to do with the original village settlement in the valley.⁴⁴ The area surrounding Oriup, Patharghatta and Antichak thus served as a prelude to the primate site of the region in the more open plain of the Bhagalpur area namely Champa.⁴⁵

Literary sources on the whole gives enough indication to assume that the emergence of the historical personality of Anga had its roots in the events that took place' in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and the mid-Gangetic region with the advent of iron using Painted Grey Ware (P.G.W) culture of the Aryans around 900B.C.⁴⁶ Discovery of Black and Red Ware in association with iron using Northern Black Polished ware (N.B.P.W.) at Champa and Oriup has led scholars to believe that the original inhabitants of the Anga region may have been the Black and Red ware using people of Oriup⁴⁷ who gradually moved into the plains where later on they came into confrontation with the iron using Aryans. The entire process must have witnessed a keen struggle for supremacy between the migrating Aryans and the original inhabitants, who were Asuras and they were worshipping Nag as their totem like Indus Valley civilization. It is said that their (Indo-Aryans) immigration into the East and South India was barred by powerful Asura Kingdoms,⁴⁸ This struggle is well reflected in the contemporary brahmanical texts⁴⁹ in which the people of Anga were despised as Varatyas and in oral folk tale of Naga and Mother Goddess Vishahari of common people of this region .

Transition of Anga from pre-history to history thus gained momentum with the Aryanisation of the middle Gangetic Valley beginning from circa 1000 BC⁵⁰. Chando Saudagar, as a trader, came to Champa and settled there with his beliefs and culture of Indo-

Aryans. In the process of Aryanisation the traders had played a great role in India as well as in making of Greater India. In such a historical perspective we may evaluate the role of Chando Sandagar's activities and his contempt with the culture of this region i.e. Naga and Mother Goddess Vishahari worship. It seems five sisters Vishahari were Mother Goddesses or rulers of Champa in pre-historic period and they were well related to Naga Totem. They wanted to be worshipped with her Totem Naga and Chando refused to worship them and contempered with saying them as 'frog eating'. But Vishahari sisters compelled Chando Saudagar to worship them at last by damaging the lives of his seven sons and wealth. Bihula persuaded Chando to be agreed for worshipping of Vishahari and Naga.

Thus the annual worship of Mother Goddess Vishahari and Sati Bihula along with Naga became prevalent as a people's worship ceremony. A veil of mythology seems to have been woven around a historical event of great antiquity i.e. the struggle between two different cultures of Asura or Nagas and Aryan, during Aryanisation of the region of Anga Janapada. The myth of Bihula-Vishahari gives an indication of the society which was matrilineal when actual incidence took place. The cross-section of depressed classes largely associated with this ceremony provides an inkling how process of Aryanisation had worked upon tribal animism and totem, imposing a super structure of Brahmanical pantheon. The rituals, the priest (Bhagats), the paraphernalia, the traditional folk songs all indicate that despite of having been brought under Aryan social fold very long ago the myth of Bihula-Vishahari has been persistently redacted and the latest version seems to have been reworked during late medieval period.

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