

Poet's Present, Imagined Past: Martial Imaginings and Literary

Anachronisms in *Mangalkavyas*

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Abstract:Most pre-modern literary works employ anachronism as a prevalent style, because even in modern times, literary imaginations do not aim to keep their imaginations bound by the historical fact of the narrative time. In this respect, modern period pieces of literature are historically accurate; nonetheless, anachronism is plain to see. Historians might use them to scale the temporal conceptualization of the narrator's world or age rather than criticize them in literature. Thus, this article argues by exploring the martial imaginings in the texts that the pre-modern Bengali literature's viz Mangalkavyas' anachronistic examples demonstrate a tri-temporal notion of time: mythical, legendary, and contemporary. In our current concept of historical time, such events may appear impossible, yet in Bengali popular culture of the 17th and 18th centuries, this was the accepted view of time. Anachronism is a very common style of most of the pre-modern literary piece because even in modern times none of the literary imaginings try to keep its imagination strangled with the constraints of essence of the historical reality of the narrated time.

Keywords: Anachronism, Mangalkavya, Martial Imaginings, Renaissance, Temporality.

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Introduction

The very representation of war in pre-modern literature irrespective of culture represents some imageries but far from being commentaries of past reality it represents a layered manifestation of an imagined past from the perspective of the narrator. But narrator never has been a singular entity in the pre-modern times. As the literary expression of the popular genre usually transmute as a form in between written and oral terms narratology has ever been a collective endeavor. Representation of battle scenes usually follows a particular narrative model irrespective of battle field reality in most cases because the prioritized object of any popular literature in pre-modern times, especially which were presented through songs is to entertain and secondly to pass on the narrative to its next. Unlike the quasi-historical annals, written for collecting necessary experiences and memories for sustaining a centralized system or institution, pre-modern popular literature has no such objectives. They remained alive by incorporating elements from the narrator's present which is also the present for the listeners just like any other bardic traditions. Written literatures had a tendency of leaving the narration in a stand still form; dead like the letters of any documents, preserving the flavor of the time of composition.

I

Mangalakavyas were composed between 13th to 18th centuries. Most of the manuscripts which have survived were written between 17th and 18th century. As popular *akhyans* (tales) written in poetic forms and sung in particular occasions, the subject matter of these, mostly revolved round main narrative regarding any auxiliary deity or *devakhanda* (part related to the deity in divine world) and the start of their worship along with various subplots regarding the mortals who were rewarded or punished based on their relation to the deity or *narakhanda* (part related to the mortals). Scholars like Ashutosh Bhattacharya found these literatures mostly related to regional folk pre-Aryan traditions, part of lower caste daily life, away from the mainstream *Smartadhara* and *Chaytanya Vaktidhara*.¹ After the Muslim conquest of Bengal, it is thought that the idea of *shakti* became prevalent and localized forms of *shakti* worship started to crept in the mainstream.

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But it seems that since these oral traditions started to enter in the written versions, the writers started to infuse their lived experience. This is where those *akhyans* started to get shapes of the present and anachronistic elements appeared in them. David Curley mentions about these figments of anachronistic imaginings in Chandimangala, where the poet Mukunda mentioned about barter system despite the fact that the poem was being written in the 16th century. Curley's argument is that Mukunda's Chandimangala though mentions about mercantile activities like 'tribute exchange', it had very little resemblance to the mercantile reality of the 16th century.² So following this Curley further argues that the literary form of Chandimangala was 'merely an archaic folk-tale, transmitted orally for generations' which has little significance to existing condition. It is true that barter system survived in the rural areas even in the colonial times for which one can criticize Curley's argument but his conclusion that Mangalkavyas are full of anachronistic elements could be proved through other ways.

Anachronism is not only getting the history wrong but 'mistaking some aspect of a period's regulative conceptualization of the world or worldview'.³ The idea of historical sincerity emerged during the time of Renaissance, but before that even the Western literary traditions had very little sense of history. But in some sense anachronism could be found in Shakespeare also. He made references of Turks and Emperor Nero in *King Lear* or mentioned about Aristotle through Hector's dialogue in *Troilus*.⁴ Greek tragedies were also full of such instances. Now dramatists or bardic traditions had no obligation of moving away from anachronistic representation and in that sense anachronism in pre-modern literary pieces like the Mangalkavyas would be obvious. But for historians who are trying to extract the real from those texts should be aware of that. This is where Reinhart Koselleck's tools of conceptual history would be necessary. Koselleck wrote that each 'translation into one's respective present implies a history of concepts'.⁵ Giambattista Vico in his work *In Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations* mentioned about four types of anachronisms: categorizing eventful periods as uneventful or vice versa and uniting periods which should be separated or vice versa.⁶ Mangalkavya's chronologies follow the second type where the narrators' present and narrations' past were united while historically they are separated. So, a historian's reading as well as using of such texts is full of pitfalls of historical inaccuracy. So following Koselleck's formula, a historian should read these texts while going

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between the inaccuracies to find wrong unifications which express the idea of contemporary consensus regarding temporal *durre* or duration. In sum, by reading-finding-analyzing anachronisms, historians could find out the narrators idea of time as well as unified duration of time in their worldview.

II

In case of *Chandimangala's Akkhetik* portion, a detailed narrative of the siege of Gujrata city shows a glimpse of lived reality of the poet. Sukumar Sen edited *Chandimangala* manuscripts probably would have dated between the 17th to 18th centuries. Author's imaginings of epical battles were often intermixed with contemporary ones in these works. A close study of these parts evoking *virarasa* could provide a better understanding of the martial past of pre-modern Bengal. According to the story, *Nilambara* and his wife were reborn as human in *martyaloka* (the world of mortals). Their earthly incarnations, *Kalketu* and *Fullara* found hidden wealth by the help of Goddess Chandi and set up the city of Gujrat. Being instigated by some sinister character, the king of Kalinga *sent* troops to subdue *Kalketu's* usurping city of Gujrat which led the army to besiege the city fort. Eastern Ganga rulers Anangabhima Deva III or Narasingha Deva I attacked Bengal in the 13th century. This memory might have influenced the composer to import such instances where the raja of Kalinga attacked the southern parts of Bengal. *Kalketu*, just like *Ichai Ghosh* might have been a local feudal ruler. A people of the jungle, *Byadh* or hunting caste, *Kalketu* set up the city by clearing forest. This type of agricultural expansion in pre-modern period happened in the frontier areas. In this sense both *Ichai Ghosh* and *Kalketu* set up their cities in the frontier region. A close reading of this part shows layers of multiple styles of narratives from earlier to present times intermixed in a way where *puranic* as well as contemporary elements coexisted. *Puranic* traditions might be compared to the mythical duration. This can be pointed as the literary anachronism. According to the narrative the king of Kalinga observed the newly emerged city of Gujrat, unparalleled in riches and prosperity as well as well fortified.

“pāthore nirman garh dware bāndhā hathi-ghorh

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nijojito choudike kaman ⁷

Translation: Fort made of stone. Elephants and horses placed in entrance. Cannons placed in every side.

In the start of the verse we get mentions of '*pāthore nirman garh*' or stone worked forts, a rare thing in Bengal delta. Most of the forts were either made of mortar walls or bricks. Mahasthangarh of Bogra in the western bank of the river Karatoya shows the evidence of brick ramparts but that doesn't meet the criteria mentioned in the text or probably for literary necessity the poet of the text used the term 'stone' to express the fort has been substantially strong. In *Dharmamangala*, another such *kavya*, we get the name of another fortified settlement *Dhekurgarh* or *Trishasthigarh* and its ruler *Ichai Ghosh*, who fought against *Lausen*, another feudal lord. According to the narrative *Ichai Ghosh* cleared the forest near the river Ajay and set up a settlement encircling the palace of the king;

“Choudike pāhār bera bāri garh

Durgom gohon kāti l

Koriya chwattor bosālo nogor,

Rājār bosot bati l l⁸

Translation: Mountains in every side and walled fort in the middle was set up. Impassable forest was cleared away. Creating a square, city was set up along with King's palace.

According to this verse the protagonist *Ichai Ghosh* created city where surrounding hilly terrain along with walls fortified the house, palace and the entire city. There is one legendary *Ichai Ghosh*'s temple on the bank of river Ajay but archaeological experts mentions that these types were constructed in the late medieval phase probably in the 16th century where the legend of *Ichai Ghosh* goes back to the Pala period.⁹ D. Middy on the other hand mentioned *Ichai Ghosh* to be the same as *Iswar Ghosh*, mentioned in the Ramgunj copper plate of the 11th century.¹⁰ But we can assume from the other instances of fortifications contemporary to the Pala period that the presence

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of fortified positions is historical. But for that at first the probable position of Kalketu's legendary fortified city of Gujrat and Ichai Ghosh's fortified city of Dhekkurgarh needed to be found. There are some debates related to Ichai Ghosh's identity. Most of the forts were earthen works but the term 'garh' could be found anywhere in Bengal often as a suffix to any locality names. In Bengali lexicography, 'garh' could be anything from a well-fortified palace to a fort with bastions and all. The term 'garh' along with 'kot', 'dhap', 'dhibi', 'qella', 'burj', 'khitta', 'damdama', 'chouki' were used interchangeably to point out different types of fortifications in Bengal. But the term 'garh' is at use since the Hindu-Buddhist phase of Bengal because mud-forts and archaeological sites like *Dharmapaler Garh*, *Minamatir Garh* etc could be still found in various parts of Bangladesh.¹¹ In the western part of Bengal during the Pala-Sena period, we get names of various small feudal lords having small fortified settlements like *Dhekkarigarh* of Pratap Singha, *Telakupigarh* of Rudra Shikhar etc. Here in these two *kavyas*, *Kalketu*, the protagonist of *Chandimangala* cleared forest to set up his urban center just like *Ichai Ghosh*, and both of them created *garhs*, shows the social mobility among comparatively lower castes either because of money or king's patronage. Kaketu was a *byadha* and Ichai Ghosh was a *gopa* by caste and due to that belonged to the *asatshudra* or unclean lower caste heritage. Such small chiefs only could have afforded to create mud-forts because even the frontier forts of Pala king Dhammapala like *Dharmapaler Garh*, *Minamatir Garh* were basically mud-forts. The statements regarding stone and masonry worked forts were the poets' imaginations gathered from their own times. So, the poets had interwoven the main narratives which had taken place much earlier with elements of the poet's lived experience and that's why created a layered invented narrative of present within precedent. Both Mukunda and Ghanaram lived in between 17th to 18th century, a period experienced the might of Mughal and Nawabi rule through the making of fortified settlements made of stones and masonry.

III

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The battle scenes, sieges as well as marches to battles in *Mangalakavyas* are often adorned with the anachronistic mentions of gun-powder weapon. In case of *Chandimangala*, different *punthis* or manuscripts have mentioned about canons and other gun-powder weapons which remained absent in other manuscripts. Just like the manuscript found in Madhabpur, which might have been composed during the year 1793 mentions about gunpowder weapons along with traditional weapons like bows and arrows;

“tobok belok kache kaman kripan

prishthadesh tunete purrnito shove ban /”¹²

Translation: Warriors become ready in armor, hand guard, cannon, sword and quiver in back adorned with arrows.

This verse mentioning about canon (*kaman*) along with sword (*kripan*) is not present in the earliest manuscript found in Vurshut, composed in 1717. This reveals that the copyist of manuscripts themselves often infuse verses colored with their own experience. Although it does not mean that the Vurshut manuscript has no mention of gunpowder weapons. In the earlier verse of *Chandimangala*, it was mentioned that the fortified settlement of *Kalaketu* was braced with canons. The description usually matches with the forts after Mughal conquest. The architectural reality intermingled with narration's imagined position. While the troops of Kalinga besieged the city, even the earliest manuscript of Vurshut mentioned that the besieging troops brought lots of canons with them;

“dekhiachi nikote lak lak shokote

kaman sob thore thor”¹³

Translation: Have seen thousands of carts where cannons were placed in stacks.

This meant that thousands of canons were brought on carts. Even Kalketu's forces counter-fired against the besieging forces and the way, in which the poet described the procedure of loading and

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firing of canon, it showed that even the literati class was aware of the basic functions of gun barrage;

“kamaniya kaman patilo thore thore

talsomo gola pelilo vitore /

guru swamroiya tahe vejailo onole

pachuiya pore gola kotaler dole /”¹⁴

Translation: Artillerymen placed cannons in lines. Shots in the size of palm fruits were stuffed inside. In the name of God ignited it. Shots were fired into the ranks of *Kotal*.

This verse mentions about the loading of cannon with cannonballs in the size of palm fruit (*talsomo gola*) as well as igniting the touchhole to put a match to the inner charge of gunpowder. In case of Dharmamongal, there are mentions of soldiers with guns or *bonduki* which seems to be an adoption from the Persian term *bandukchi*.¹⁵ According to the narrative when *Karnasen*, father of *Lausen* attacked *Ichai Ghosh*'s fortified city, cannons were used;

“boro gola bonduk ninade damdum /

oboni akashe uthe ekakar dhum / /”¹⁶

Translation: Cannons with big shots are fired. Dust touches the sky like smoke.

This verse mentions about big cannonballs (*boro gola*) and their charge against soil causing temporary smoke of dust covering sky (*oboni akashe uthe*). The picturesque is pretty original but anachronistic for a battle happening in the period of *Dharmapala*, who had granted *Soma Ghosa*, father of *Ichai Ghosa*, the feudal holdings of *Dhekurgarh* or *Trishashthigarh*.

But not all *Mangalakavyas* are full of anachronistic imaginings. In case of *Mansingha* part of *Bharatchandra*'s *Annadamangala*, the poet mentioned about Man Singh, Mansabdar of Mughal Empire and his campaign against Pratapaditya, one of the *Bara Bhuyans*. The number twelve is

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represented by the word *baro*, but there were many more chiefs and landlords than that, therefore the term *baro* also denoted many. There were two distinct groups of people who were called 'Baros', one of which was *Bhuyan-raj* and the other was *Baro-Bhuyan*. During times of foreign threat, they tended to work together to defend and expel the invader. When things were calm, they each kept control of their own spheres of influence. They pledged loyalty to the king in the face of a powerful monarch. While each had sovereignty over a group of villages, known as *chakala*, the most powerful of them were known as *rajas*. Ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds varied among the *Bhuyan* monarchs. Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* provides an eyewitness account of that military reality but in *Annadamangala* text the narrative style remained very much like the ones used by his predecessors. In this text we get mentions of gunpowder weapons but that is historical reality. In the description of battle between Man Singh and Pratapaditya we get simultaneous use of traditional and gunpowder weapons;

'koto nishan for for ninad dhordhor

kaman gor gor gaje l

sob joban rojput pathan mojbut

kaman shorjutsaje l l¹⁷

Translation: Flags are flying. Warriors scream 'get him'. Cannons are fired with high sound. All infidels and Rajputs, strong Pathans appear. Cannons are placed in battling position.

This verse is regarding cannonades and positional system of Mughal canons in war. It is right that the poet used a narrative which is in many ways similar to the lived experience of the narrator. Mughal conquest of Bengal started in late 16th century and the *Bhati* campaign to subdue remnants of the *Bara Bhuyans* started in the time of Jahangir. Man Singh was sent by Jahangir along a substantial force composed of cavalry, gunships and artillery. Contemporary Mughal records like *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*, chronicles written by some Mirza Nathan also testifies the use of gunpowder weapons but it does not that *Annadamongala* is free from anachronism. While Sundara, the protagonist of the story went to Burdwan mentioned about English (*ingorej*), Dutch (*olandwaj*),

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Portuguese (*firingi*), French (*forash*), Danes (*dinamar*), Armenians (*eleman*) residing within the city. Now it is real that European population, particularly the Portuguese were very much prevalent in Bengal but the way in which the narrator mentions about dense constellation of European population in Burdwan city it seems to be a picturesque from the 18th century world. Bharatchandra was a man of the 18th century for which the picturesque of his literary narration always projected the reality of his experience and thus made way for further anachronistic incorporation. For example, French entered into the Bengal market much later and by the time of Mughal conquest of Bengal it is impossible that the French would be treading as far as Burdwan. But the verses continued to be likewise;

“prothom garhete kolaposher nibash /

ingorej olandwaj firingi forash //

dinamar eleman kore golandaji /

soforiya nana drobya anoye jahaji //”¹⁸

Translation: In the outer fort area lives the men who wear hats. English, Dutch, Portuguese, French, Danes, Armenians who works as artillery men and brings merchandise from various areas by ship.

Another obscure *Mongalakabya*, written just a generation after Man Singh's expedition in Bengal, also adorned its verses with battle descriptions. This one is known as *Anadimongala*, written by Ramdas Adak in 1662.¹⁹ In the first portion called *Adya-Dhekurpala*, this text re-narrated the story of Ichai Ghosh from *Dharmamongala*. Interestingly the mention of gunpowder based small arms and canons echoed just like Ghanaram's *Dharmamongala*; imageries like gun carrying sepoy firing on each other or Ichai's *garh* being besieged as well as bombarded with cannons.²⁰

Guns and cannons were introduced in Bengal in the last decade of Husain Shahi dynasty when Husain Shah's general used cannons against Dhanya Manikya in between 1513-14 AD.²¹ Alauddin Husain Shah grabbed the throne in 1494 AD.²² It is said that Dhanya Manikya's army

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defeated Husain Shah and captured his cannons.²³ In *Rajmala*, the use of guns is mentioned.²⁴ But proper use of gun started with the Mughals. Not only had that, but a synergic use of forts and cannons become prominent during their time. Mughals erected river forts highly guarded with cannons at Hajiganj, Sonakanda, and Idrakpur.²⁵ All the poets mentioned above more or less experienced the war in the Mughal times which annexed the troublesome Bengal frontier in between 1575 to 1688. The first one started with the defeat of the Bara-Bhuyans (1576-1611) and the last ones ended with Shaista Khan's campaign against Chittagong (1680-88). So the martial reality at the material level always followed the poets' own experience.

Conclusion

The above discussion proves one thing that the poets of *Mangalkavya* described the battle narratives through their lived experiences and that's why incorporated various material anachronisms within but that was not the only scale of conceptualizing temporal duration available there. Apart from that two other scales were there: the mythical and the legendary modes of time. In first mode the poets utilized the model of *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* type model. For example the story of Ichai Ghosh and Lausen's battle provides an analogical type for the Rama-Ravana battle scenes from *Ramayana*. David Curley mentioned that the plot establish comparisons between Lausen and Rama, his wives and Sita, and Ichai and Ravana; indeed the whole episode evokes mnemonic commentary alluding to events in Rama's invasion of Lanka.²⁶ The instances like *maya-munda* (severed head made of illusion) of Lausen, projected by the minister is very much like the one projected by Ravana before Sita. After Lausen and Ichai commence the combat, other echoes of the *Ramayana* may be heard in the background. Three divine arrows had been sent by the goddess to Ichai, one for Kalu, one for Lausen's horse, and one for Lausen himself, to be used against the latter. In the end, after a protracted battle, Lausen severed Ichai's head, only to discover that it continued to invoke the goddess's name. As a result of the goddess's blessing, Ichai's head leaped up and rejoined his trunk. The story very much similar to Rama's tries to cut off Ravana's heads which just like Ichai's head rejoined to his trunk every time the other tried to cut off it. Kalu originally faced Ichai, and was defeated and slain by the weapon intended for him,

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exactly as Ravana initially appeared to have killed Laksmana; however, just as Laksmana was immediately brought to life by Dharma, Kalu was immediately restored to life by Dharma. All these examples show that the poets like Ghanaram often used the analogies of mythical instances from epics within the narrative. As performative affair such literary analogies served as the mythical time duration in the narrative. Characters like Ichai or Kalketu belonged to the legendary status of the memory whose distance from the narrators present was more than the material narrative related to battlefield imaginings but less than the mythical ones. Thus three types of narratives separated in temporal scale intermixed. The material time of experience, quasi-historical time of legends and ahistorical time of divine myths conjugated and coexisted within the layered narrative of the texts. They are anachronistic in strict historical sense but it provides us a picture about the idea of time in memorization procedure prevalent in pre-modern literary texts like *Mangalkavya*.

Anachronism is a very common style of most of the pre-modern literary piece because even in modern times none of the literary imaginings try to keep its imagination strangled with the constraints of essence of the historical reality of the narrated time. Modern period pieces of literatures are very much historical in this sense but otherwise anachronism is obvious. But rather than criticizing this type within the literature, historian can use them to scale the temporal conceptualization of the narrator's world or age. In this sense the pre-modern Bengali literature's use of anachronistic instances shows that these literatures have tripartite sense of temporality: mythical, legendary and contemporary. Such matters may seem to us as improbable due to the modern sense of historical time but that was the temporal consensus prevalent in the 17th and 18th century popular culture of Bengal

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