

***Padmā Purān* as a Literary Source of Assam’s Diverse Socio-Cultural Manifestations**

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Abstract:

The classics of India, particularly the *Puranas*, occupy a complex and often contested position within the country’s intellectual and cultural tradition. However, the classical traditions of North East India differ markedly from those of other regions in their relative marginality to Sanskritic canons and their closer engagement with oral narratives, performative traditions, and localized cosmologies. Consequently, North Eastern classics foreground fluid identities, nature-centric worldviews, and community-based ethics, thereby challenging dominant notions of what constitutes the “classical” in Indian literary tradition. According to Emily Greenwood, classics function as foundational or “source” texts for multiple forms and traditions, shaped by existing myths, texts, and modes of reception (Greenwood 43). Among the numerous classics of India, the *Padmā purān* by Sukabi Narayandeb, not only stands as a classic for its timelessness, cultural centrality and interpretative richness, but also serves as narrative “source” of Assam’s varied socio-cultural practices. The particular research article attempts to highlight how the classic is relevant through sustained circulation—textual, oral, or performative.

Keywords: classics, Purana, *Padmā purān*, “source” text.

Introduction:

The term ‘classic’ or ‘classics’ is applied to a number of meanings which may be distinguished, mostly refers to a particular genre. ‘Classic’, across the globe is conceived as something/someone belonging to the first rank or authority, referring to a writer or a work of the first rank, and of generally acknowledged excellence. Where the west interprets the classics as the literature or art of Greece and Rome, in Indian context, classics are primarily excellent ancient art and literature, fundamentally driven by humanity’s perennial search for meaning, ethical clarity and spiritual fulfilment. Basically it is the ancient literature of India, comprising Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas which qualify the parameters of classics as defined in the Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory by J.A. Cuddon as a genre known for the following qualities – a) excellence, b) ancient and c) typical (Cuddon 127). The term ‘classic’ has been “applied to any later literary work that is widely agreed to have achieved

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excellence and to have set a standard in its kind (Abrams 237).”

Among the ancient forms of Indian classics, *Puranas* occupy a foundational space in the philosophical, cultural and poetic imagination of the sub-continent, yet they are relatively unexplored in the contemporary scholarship. ‘*Purana*’, etymologically meaning ‘old traditional stories’, is applied to a group of 18 narratives, believed to have been collected by the ancient sage Vyas. Though the genre refers to excellent reservoir of history and culture, they are also called as the ‘fifth *Veda*’ or ‘*Veda* to the lower castes and women’ (Monier 509) as the genre caters to the people to whom the Sanskrit manuscripts of Vedas are unintelligible. Monier defines *Puranas* as the particular form of ancient Indian literature which strictly deals with the five topics – “1. The creation of the universe (*sarga*); Its destruction and re-creation (*prati-sarga*); 3. The genealogy of gods and patriarchs (*vanéa*); 4. The reigns and periods of the Manus (*manv-antara*); 5. The history of the solar and lunar races of kings (*vansdnudarita*)” (Monier 511). However, it is clarified that not every *Purana* holds the ‘*Panca-lakshana*’, and might not focus on each of the themes (Monier 512).

Rooted in the various legends and myths of different regions of the subcontinent, the *Puranas* were composed in a simple shloka metre. *Padmapurana* is also one among the 18 narratives. However, there are multiple narratives among various communities in different regions of India under the same title, ‘*Padmapurana*’. The particular research paper attempts to study the *Padmā purān* by Sukabi Narayandeb, popular in the eastern part of the country, (West Bengal and Assam) as a source of various socio- cultural manifestations of the region, focusing on Assam.

Various versions of *Padmapurana*:

The Sanskrit manuscript of the encyclopedic text, *Padmapurānā*, assumed to have been composed at various point of history of ancient India, is primarily dedicated to Lord Brahma, the god who appears enthroned on the Lotus (Padma) and the rest of the text is weaved around Lord Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti. Again the multiple sacred texts known as *Padmapurānā* or *Padma charitā*, followed in Jainism and Buddhism, composed by a number of poets – Ravisena, Raidhu, Somadeva, Dharmakirti, Bhattaraka Candrakirti have different narratives in them. Moreover, the version of the *Purana*, popular in the eastern part of the country, covering West Bengal and Assam, keeps the Shakti cult at the centre.

The ‘*Padmā purān*’, also known as one of the ‘*Manasāmangal*’ or/and ‘*Mangalkāvya*’, in the state of Assam and West Bengal covers the narrative of the snake goddess Manasā, Behula and Chando merchant with many other mythological tales. Other than Narayandeb, Kobi Monkori and Durgabor from Assam are also credited with similar tales composed as *Mansākāvya*. Again in West Bengal, the epic is believed to have been composed by a group of twenty two poets, including Sukabi Narayandeb. The particular manuscript is popular as *Baish Kobir Padmā Purān*. Pronounced as ‘*Padmā Purān*’ in the eastern part of the country, the classic is composed in a register carrying the influence of both Assamese and Bengali language. Due to which, people of both the states, Assam and West Bengal claim the epic as their own. Although scholars hold varied views on the origins and identity of Narayandeb, the arguments suggesting his association with Sualkuchi or Darrang in Assam remain significant

and cannot be dismissed.

***Padmā purān* by Narayandeb as a classic of Assam:**

Padmā purān by Sukabi Narayandeb is regarded as a classic not merely for its narrative depth but for its enduring cultural resonance within Assamese literary tradition. As one of the region's most significant mytho-cultural compositions, the text demonstrates the qualities of a classic by transcending temporal boundaries and offering insights that remain relevant across generations. Narayandeb's retelling preserves the scriptural gravitas of the *Purana* while embedding distinctly Assamese sensibilities—its social structures, regional customs, ecological imagination, and ethical worldview.

During the 15th -16th century, when the Vaishnava movement was at its peak in the ancient Assam, poet Durgavar, Mankar and Narayandeb composed long poems free from the Vaishnavite influence and weaved around the Shakti cult. During the reign of the Koch king Viswa Singha (1496-1533), poet Durgavar received his patronage and wrote songs about goddess Manasā or Padmābati (Barua:1959 77), which is similar to the substance of the '*Padmā purān*' composed by Sukabi Narayandeb under the patronage of the king of Darrang, Dharmanarayana, in the early 17th century (Barua:1959 79). Also known as the oral epic of Assam, the '*Padmā purān*' by Narayandeb shares similarities with the tales found in the songs of the poet Mankar, "poet of the unlettered masses" (Barua:1959 80), which are popular among the Rabhas and Hajongs of Assam. However, the '*Padmā purān*' by Narayandeb has managed to attain relevance due to its wide acceptance as a source of various cultural and religious practices of Assam, as well as, West Bengal.

In addition to serving as a storehouse of Assamese collective memory and a foundational text for comprehending the region's socio-cultural formations, *Padmā Purān*'s ability to illuminate Assamese identity while maintaining universality in theme and moral inquiry solidifies its status as a classic within both literary and cultural discourse. The work's timeless appeal is attributed to its stylistic richness, linguistic purity, and capacity to synthesize myth with lived reality.

The Plot of *Padmā Purān*:

Padmā Purān, the classic comprises the myths and legends around the divinity of the snake goddess Manasā, popular in the eastern India and Bangladesh. Goddess Manasā is believed to have two incarnations- benevolent and malevolent. Manasā is the benevolent form of the deity, whereas Marei is believed to be the malevolent manifestation of the goddess. Though there are innumerable opinions regarding the origin of the deity, also called as the 'fringe goddess', the tale of Manasā or 'Padmābati', as recorded in the *Padmā purān* alludes to the history of migration, the sacred space of anthropomorphism, consequences of Aryanization, existence of social hierarchy in terms of gender and class and so on.

Opening with the creation myth, the particular epic does not only hold rhymes dedicated to the universal philosophy of 'Trimurti', Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar, but also distinctively highlights the equal or more significant part of the creator, Shakti. However, the text presents Shiva not as a distant, transcendental deity but as a figure endowed with distinctly human

traits, emotions, and actions. This anthropomorphic portrayal serves a dual purpose: it brings the divine closer to the everyday experiences of the common people, while also challenging the conventional hierarchies associated with mythological representation. By depicting Shiva's activities in a manner akin to those of an ordinary man, the text demystifies the god and situates him within the cultural and social realities of the time. The repository of mythic history then unfolds the story of the birth of the goddess Manasā as a consequence of 'lust' of Shiva.

The Puran narrates the unnatural birth of Manasā that locates her identity outside the sacred space shared by the Vedic Gods and their consorts. The journey of the helpless goddess to establish her identity especially by battling against the powerful Chando merchant, privileged by caste, gender and supported by the ultimate power Shiva (De 85), is narrated in the rhymes of the epic. The uneven battle between the fringe goddess and the wealthy, influential merchant is interfered by Behula, the brave, and another non-normative woman character except for Manasā, who not only brings closure to the continuous conflict, but also consequently causes the allotment of sacred space to the snake goddess in the mythical history.

The story of Manasā, Behula, and Lakhindar narrates the conflict between the goddess Manasā and the merchant Chando, who refuses to acknowledge her divinity. To punish him, Manasā causes the death of his son Lakhindar by sending a snake into the heavily protected bridal chamber. Behula then undertakes a long and difficult journey with Lakhindar's dead body, appealing to various divine powers. Her perseverance ultimately leads to Lakhindar's revival and forces Chand *Saudagar* to accept Manasā. The tale symbolically represents the struggle for the goddess's recognition and the integration of her cult into mainstream religious practice.

Padma Puran as a Source of Socio-Cultural Manifestations in Assam:

Padma Puran as a classic of Assam possesses ritualistic and cultural importance across communities. Covering the tales of creation myth and trials and tribulations of Goddess Manasā as well as Behula, the epic does not only reflect the social realities of ancient times, but also is the foundation of many ritualistic and cultural practices of the state. Assam, a rich tapestry of innumerable culture and identities, has many forms of performances and practices which adhere to the narrative of the particular classic. The art forms like *Sukanani Ojapali*, *Bisahari gaan*, *Marei Gaan* and *Padmā purānar gaan* derive their narrative from the particular classic. Moreover, *Deodhani*, a shamanistic dance performance of the state has its root in the same classic.

Sukanani Ojapali or the *Rong gowa Ojapali*, popular in the Darrang and Udalguri districts of Assam, narrate the myths and legends around goddess Manasā, collected by Sukabi Narayandeb in the *Padmā purān*. In the particular art form of Kathakata tradition, a troupe of performers, not only narrate but also enact the tales in a dramatic manner, using the regional dialect of Darrang. Though the practitioners follow various handbooks to refer to derive the tales, (like *Sukanani Padmabati* by Daibachandra Talukdar), it is claimed that their narrative is rooted in the *Padmā purān* by Sukabi Narayandeb (Sarma 139). The significance of the art form lies in the belief that the malevolent nature of the snake goddess Manasā, known as

Marei, remains disappointed if the devotees do not arrange the Sukanani Oja performance while worshipping the goddess. Known to have been practiced among the Muslim communities of the region too, the particular practice is mostly popular among various castes of Hinduism. In case of Gota Rong Puja, (one day worshipping of the snake goddess Manasā), the troupe of 5 to 7 people sing selective rhymes from the *Padmā purān* as it is customary to conclude singing before the sunset on the one day worshipping ritual. However, the sense of fear and the need to appease the deity is mutually present among the practitioners, organizers and/or devotees.

Again among the tribal communities of the state- Patirabhas of Goalpara district and Chaygaon, Bamunigaon, Boko, Khatalpara of South Kamrup and the Bodos and Kacharis of the mentioned regions observe the tradition of Marei gaan, especially on the occasion of Barmani Puja, marriages, death rituals, first rice ceremony and so on (Sarma 146). Though the tribes claim to sing songs transmitted orally, the narratives of the performances are similar to that of the *Padmā Purān* by Sukabi Narayandeb and the Manasā kāvya by Monkor. In this particular form, the focus is put on the presentation of the story telling. Various props are used to enhance the quality of the performance.

Moreover, another form of Kathakata tradition, *Padmā Purān Gaan* is popular in some parts of Dhubri and Goalpara district of lower Assam, for which the practitioners sing the songs from *Padmā Purān* however in the regional dialect (Sarma 150). Especially performed on the occasion of marriage, the narrator of the troupe is called 'Geedal'. Some performers also use mask to add more entertainment to the performance.

Except for the various *Kathakata* forms of Assam, *Deodhani*, a ritualistic dance performance is also inspired from the tale of *Padmā Purān*. The semi-shamanistic performance is observed in different ways in different regions of Assam. In the southern part of *Kamrup* district and the western part of Goalpara district, *Deodhani* is ritual on the ceremonies of worshipping of Shakti. Whereas, in Darrang district, it is seen as a dance form, customary for Marei puja and also is a popular performance in social gatherings. Again, in the Kamakhya temple, *Devadhavawani* is a religious festival (Barua:2018 5). The belief behind the Deodhani performance is present in the particular part of *Padmā purān*, known as the 'Swarga khondo'. In the particular part of the narrative deals an ordinary human being, Behula reaches heaven to bring back the life of her dead husband Lokhindar. Behula already knew that it was Devi Manasā who was responsible for the death but she was very wise not to question the Goddess directly. Behula pleased all the Gods with her beautiful and enchanting dance. Consequently, she received the God's boon and asked back her husband's life. The particular dance form is called '*Deodhani Nritya*' and Behula was called '*Deodhani*'. In North-east India, several communities, such as, Bodo, Kachari, Chutia, Deuri, Bebejia, Garo, Rabha and Hajong have been worshipping Manasā Devi in similar way by following customary practice of Deodhani dance from time immemorial (Nath 29).

Conclusion:

Indian classical literature extends far beyond the cultural and political spheres of royal courts, encompassing the lived realities of the wider populace. The poetic corpus of the Tamil

Sangam tradition and the devotional literature of the medieval bhakti movement testify to the significant role of non-elite voices in shaping the literary landscape. Moreover, religious and philosophical inquiry forms a crucial dimension of Indian classical literature, mirroring the plurality of spiritual traditions that evolved across the subcontinent. Texts such as the Puranas, with their layered narratives and symbolic episodes, function not only as repositories of mythic history but also as vehicles for articulating ethical values, cosmological principles, and spiritual disciplines. *Padma Puran* in this context, does not only hold a place among the ancient writings of Assam, but also is a lived reality. In Assam, an abode of diverse culture, a state of both Aryans and Non-Aryans, a land of multiple belief systems and religions, *Padma Puran* is more than just a repository of mythical history but a “source” text of numerous ceremonial, ritualistic, cultural and folk practices.

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