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Icon of Panchanan in Harishpur, Nadia District, West Bengal

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Abstract: Panchanan is a gram devata (village deity) of Bengal, worshipped among rural communities. Conventionally, he is depicted with a red complexion, matted hair, and an aggressive nature. However, during fieldwork in Nadia district, an unusual icon of Panchanan was identified at Harishpur. Here, the deity is represented with a white, camphor-like complexion, calm demeanor, and five heads. Despite this variation, villagers maintain the same conceptual understanding of the deity as the fierce guardian of liminal spaces, associated with disease, death, and fertility. The Harishpur icon may have been influenced by the *Rudrayamala*, a tantric text, where Shiva is also referred to as Rudra. It is possible that a local folk deity was assimilated into the scriptural persona of Sadashiva. This paper explores the adaptability and evolution of deities in response to local needs.

Keywords: Harishpur, Nadia, Panchanan, Shiva, Rudra.

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Introduction

Panchanan is a rural folk deity mainly popular in southern and western Bengal. The term *Panchanan* means one who has five head. Iconography of *Panchanan* describe as naked (Sky Clade), red complexion with braided hair. Like *Rudra*, *Panchanan* has fierce characteristics and worshipped for healthy progeny. He is also considered a great physician. Comparing the deities reflect the continuity and evolution of religious belief. Possibly he had connection with *Rudra*. In Bengal *Panchanan* has unique iconography which has correlation with Vedic *Rudra*. *Rudra* is an atmospheric destructive furious god in Vedic fold. Sayana described the word *Rudra* from the “RUD” means to cry, while interpreting the “one who makes *Agni* (fire) cry” (रोधानं अग्निः). Frequent characteristic of *Rudra* is fierce and destructive. On the other hand, he is wise and bountiful. In *Rigveda* he is said to be great physician. Vedic fold throws light on his dual nature as a destroyer as well as a healer. Comparing Vedic gods with contemporary rural folk deities reveals the development of cultural patterns and belief systems in early human societies.

Harishpur and the Cult of Panchanan

Harishpur is located in Krishnagar–I Block, Nadia district, West Bengal (23°24'08"–23°24'07" N, 88°26'48"–88°26'49 E) (Fig. 2). The village lies in the fertile plains of the Gangetic delta and sustains itself on agriculture, cattle-rearing, and forest-based activities. Its population, around 500, is predominantly of the Bagdi community. Panchanan serves as the village guardian deity (*gram devata*), believed to control disease, death and fertility.

The temple of Panchanan stands beside the Krishnagar–Nabadwip ghat road, near a channel that may once have been part of a Gangetic meander. Local tradition holds that the site was visited by the 15th-century Bhakti saint, Sri Chaitanya. Historically, Panchanan was worshipped in aniconic form: a vermilion-smeared mound under a banyan tree, accompanied by river-borne cobbly-pebbly stones (Fig. 4). In recent decades, however, a consecrated idol has been installed beneath the same banyan tree (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1: Panchanan idol, majority of icon of Panchanan in West Bengal (Courtesy: Babathakurpuja)

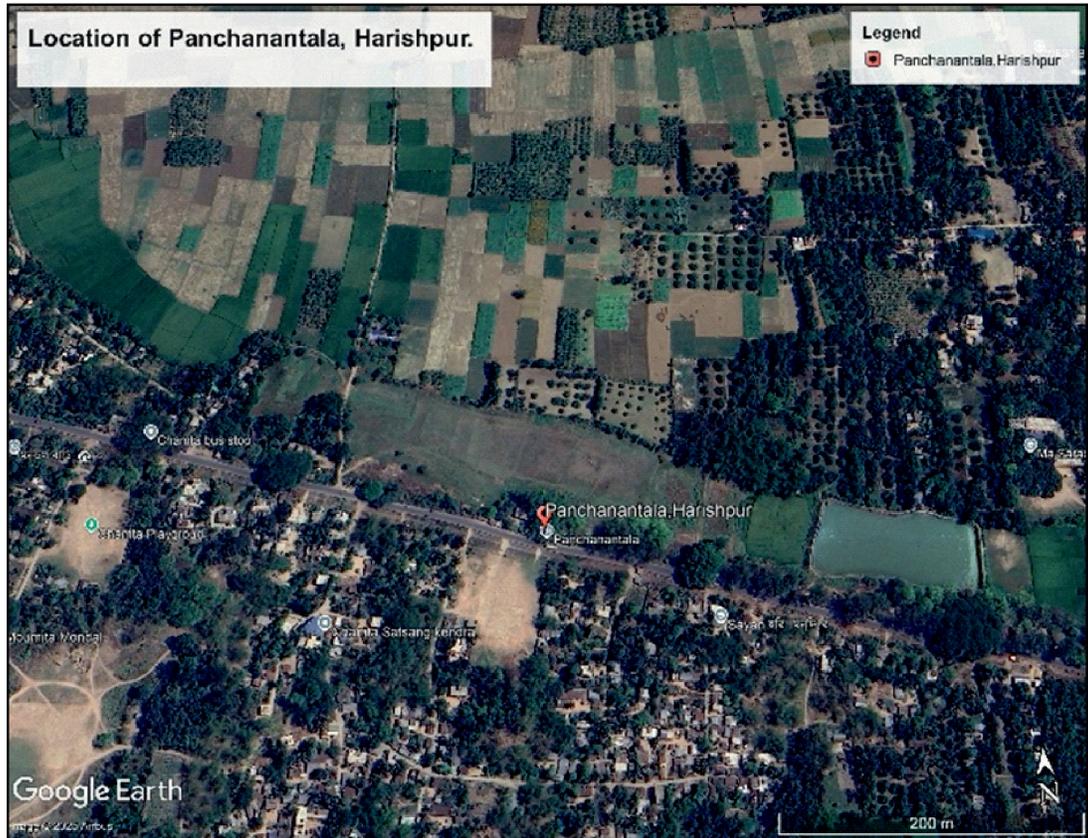


Fig. 2: Location of Panchanantala in Harishpur, Nadia District, West Bengal



Fig. 3: Recent temple and icon of Panchanan in Harishpur, Nadia



Fig. 4: Recent temple and icon of *Panchanan* in Harishpur, Nadia



Fig. 5: River born Cobbly-Pebbly Stones were used as worship of *Panchanan*

The temple is located beside the Krishnanagar - Nawadwip-ghat roadway. It is outside the village near a channel (which might be part of Gangetic meander in earlier times). The Site is said to be visited by *Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya* a Bengali *Bhakti* saint of 15th century AD. Recently a *Shiva* murti with four hand and five faces is consecrated under a Baniyan tree. According to the locals, the temple is a living shrine of *Panchanan* from pre-*Chaitanya* period.

Before consecrating of the idol of *Panchanan* in recent years, worship of *Panchanan* was conducted by making a small mound coated with vermilion under the Banyan tree, along with a river born Cobbly-Pebbly Stones. In recent scenario a physical icon is consecrated for worship.

The present idol of the temple in Harishpur has an unique representation than other *Panchanan* icons present in Bengal. In Bengal *Panchanan* is depicted with red complexion along with matted hair, having aggressive a nature, sometime ridden on a horse. Even eminent scholar G. Basu (1987:40) referred white *Panchanan* is an unique icon which he reported only from South Sithi Road of North Kolkata. The *Panchanan* of Harishpur is one such unique icon. The icon is recently placed having feature of white camphor colour with clam nature, along with five heads. G. Basu (1987:39) referred white Panchanan from *Rudrayamal*, a tantric text that describes Panchanan as having a white complexion and five heads.

In tantric procedure of *Jaggadhatri*, *Neelkanta Bhairava* reflect similarity with *Panchanan*. However, it needs a detail comparative enquiry to understand *Neelkanta Bhairava* with *Panchanan*. Most of the scriptural text refer not to worship the deity. However, in time of *Jagadhatri puja* he is worship as *Bhairava* as a subsidiary deity.

However, *Panchana* referred in *Rudrayamal* and *Mahashivapurana* is of *Sadashiv*, not vernacular deity of Bengal *Panchanan*. The *dhyana mantra* presents in *Rudrayamal* of *Panchanan* is:

“ध्यायेन्नित्यं महेशं रजतगिरिनिभं चारु-चन्द्रावतंसं,
रत्नाकल्पोज्ज्वलाङ्ग परशु-मृग-वराभीतिहस्तं प्रसन्नम्।
पद्मासीनं समत्तात् स्तुतममरगणैर्व्याघ्रकृत्ति वसानं,
विश्वाद्यं विश्ववन्यं निखिलभयहरं पञ्चवक्त्रं त्रिनेत्रम् ॥” (Tripathi 1994: 150)

This mantra means, one who is clam and always in *Dyana*, meditation, complexion is like of white silver mountain adorned with crescent moon. His body shines like gems. He is holding axe, deer, giving blessings and protection in *Abhaya* and *Barada mudras*. He is sitting in *Padmasana* and wearing tiger skin with compassion expression. He is remover of all fears with five faces and has three eyes. Below illustration of the current icon of *Panchanan* in *Harishpur* help to corelate that the icon is made as per *Shiva's dhyana* mantra in *Rudrayamal*.

Whereas the *Dhyana* mantra of *Panchanan* refers,

पंचाननं महादेवं रक्तवर्णं दिगम्बरं
पद्मासनस्थंगश द्विभुजं भूषितं
प्रवलम्ब बाहु सुबलं पट्ट यज्ञोपवीतकम्
शिरे पिंगल जटाभारं शिशुग्रीरारि-मर्दनं
वामहस्ते शिशु धारं दक्ष हस्ते त्रिशुलम्
गोमृग बाहनम् चैव बेष्टितं मणि मण्डलं
कण्ठे रुद्राक्षमालां य शोभितं रक्तलोचनं
उग्र तेजोमयों रुद्रं ब्रह्मीष्टं च तपस्वीनं
ध्यायेत् पंचाननं देवं भक्तानुग्रह कारकम् ॥ (Basu 1987:33)

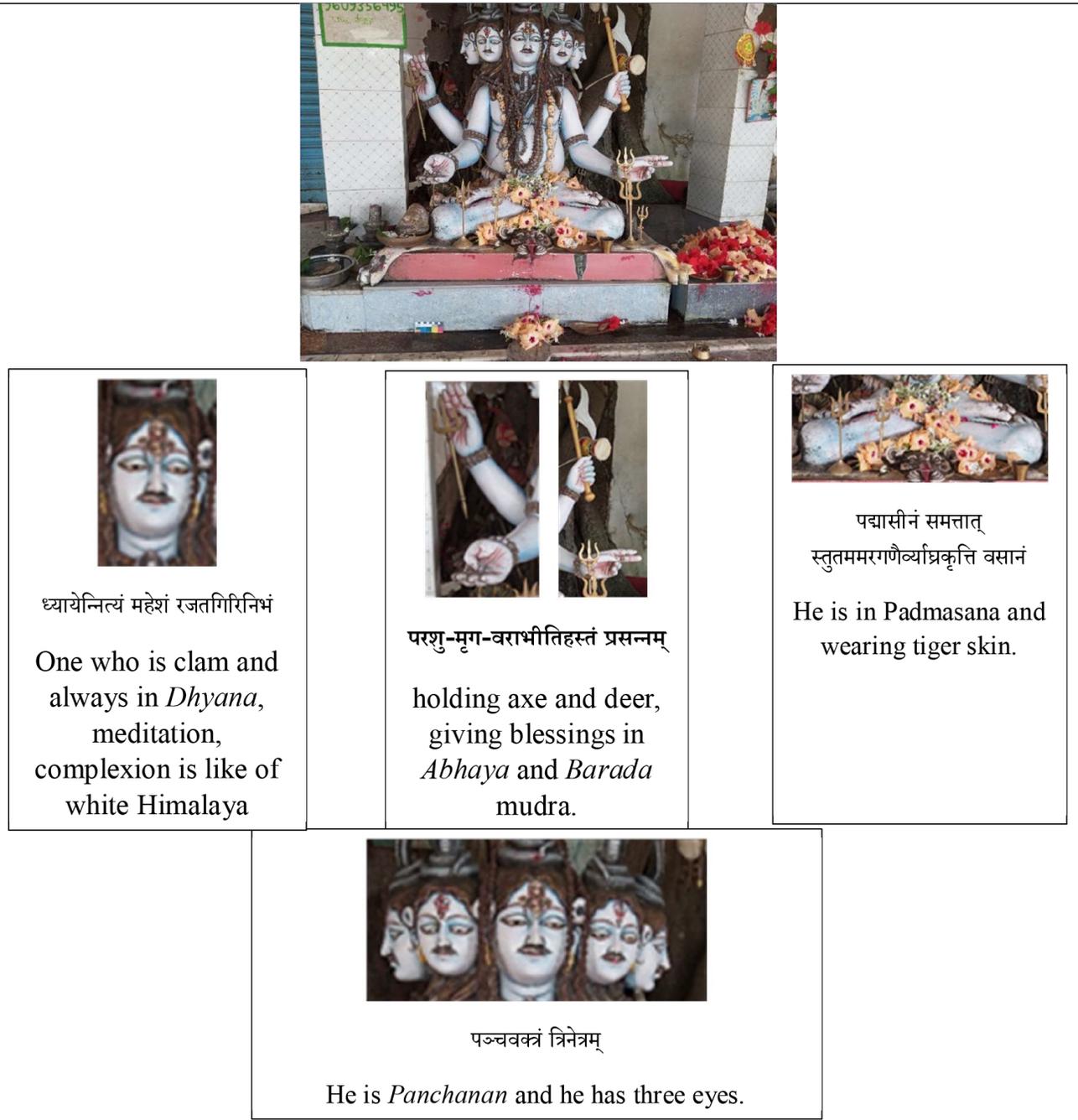


Fig. 6: Attributes of *Panchanan* as per given mantra in *Rudrayamal* text

The mantra means, *Panchanan* is a form of *Mahadeva*, he is *Digambar*, sited in *Padmasasna* and having two hands which is very powerful wearing a *Yagnoupabit/Janeu*. His hair is matted with reddish brown colour; he protects as well as kill the baby in the womb. In left hand he holds a baby and right hand he is holding *trishula*. He is sited on cow and a deer, covered with different precious gems and jewellery. On his neck he is adorned with *Rudraksha mala* around the neck. His eyes are bloody red in colour, he is fierce and radiant, served by ascetics. Also bestowing his grace upon devotes.

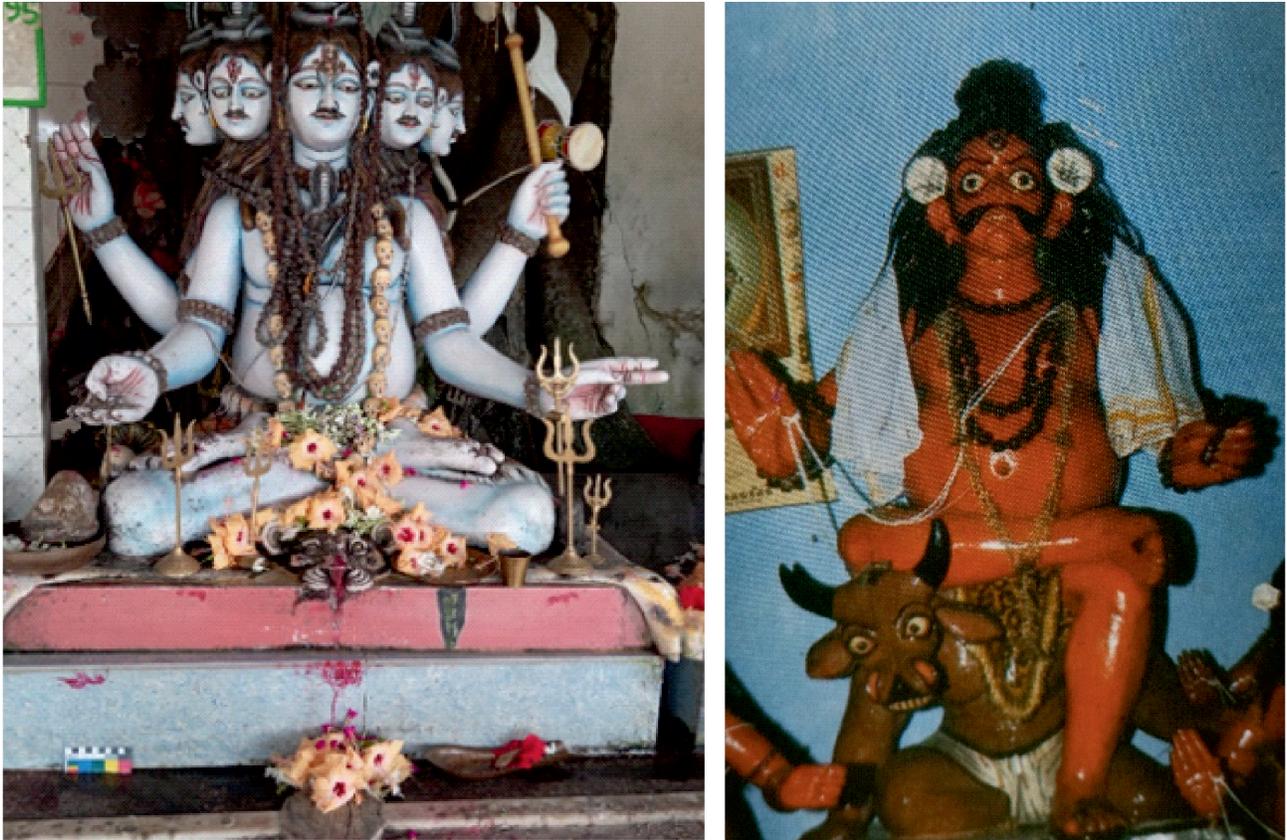


Fig 7: Comparing the *Panchanan* Shiva of Harishpur with other *Panchanan* icons present in West Bengal

Local Beliefs and Oral Narratives

Despite its calm appearance, villagers continue to regard Panchanan as a fierce deity who must remain outside the settlement. According to a local informant, Mukto Bag, “Shiva is calm and peaceful, but Panchanan is furious and angry. He protects the village, but if displeased, he punishes.” A nearby dried lake is explained as a sign of his wrath. This illustrates the duality in local perception: while the icon embodies scriptural calmness, the belief system preserves Panchanan’s traditional fierceness.

Conclusion

The study shows a folk deity assimilating with a major cultural practice. It reflects culture never ends rather it assimilate with contemporary cult and shows its presence. The present study illustrates the continuity of a cultural pattern in which a vernacular rural folk deity of Bengal assimilating with major Scriptural cultural. This cultural continuity reflects, the ability to integrate new influences, which help a society/culture to endure the flow of religious belief systems in human societies.

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