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Divine thresholds of marginality: Liminality and the representation of Chandi and Annada in Mangalkavyas

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Abstract
This study investigates the representation of Chandi and Annada in the Bengali Mangalkavya corpus, emphasizing their liminal and marginal positions within Shakta narratives. By analyzing textual, symbolic, and ritual dimensions, the paper examines how these goddesses inhabit thresholds-spaces where social, cosmic, and religious norms are unsettled or renegotiated. Their liminality is intricately linked to marginality, revealing how peripheral figures and spaces become sites of divine agency, ethical intervention, and symbolic negotiation of power. Through the study of the Chandimangal Kavya and Annadamangalkavya the article seeks to explore the portrayal of the Goddess as mediating the threshold of marginality. The analysis demonstrates that Mangalkavya poets deploy Chandi and Annada as mediators between normative orders and the chaotic or marginalized realms, reflecting broader strategies within Eastern Shakta traditions to conceptualize authority, gender, and social peripheries. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship on the intersections of marginality, liminality, and sacred power in medieval Bengali religious literature, highlighting the dynamic role of goddesses in shaping both textual and socio-religious imagination.

Keywords: Chandi, Annada, Mangalkavya, Eastern Shakta traditions, liminality, marginality, goddess representation, threshold spaces

Introduction
The Mangalkavyas of Bengal originate within the dynamic and mutable landscape of the Ganges delta, a region characterized by its swampy forests and shifting waterways. The geography of this area is in constant flux, paralleling the fluidity of the oral traditions that circulate among its inhabitants (Sengupta, 2002; Majumdar, N.D.; Curley, 2008) [5, 12]. These poetic texts are closely connected to the daily experiences and aspirations of marginalized groups such as fisherfolk, forest dwellers, and healers, whose lives are shaped by both environmental forces and religious devotion (Curley, 2008; Chakravarti, 2015) [12, 1]. Central to these narratives are deities like Chandi and Annada, who are depicted as transcending established boundaries and moving freely along river routes and social margins. These goddesses are believed to provide protection against dangers including snakebites, smallpox, tiger attacks, and crocodile-infested waters, reflecting a sacred presence that is deeply integrated into the realities of daily survival (Chakravarti, 2015; Ray, 2020) [1, 2].
Although the Mangalkavyas were written down mainly between the 16th and 18th centuries, they originate from an oral tradition that was transmitted across generations (Curley, 2008; Sengupta, 2002) [12, 5]. The texts feature Gods/Goddesses, humans, and animals whose identities are depicted as fluid and subject to change (Chakravarti, 2015; Ray, 2020) [1, 2]. Rather than solely celebrating divine power, these narratives document the intersection of survival, faith, and supernatural beliefs within the constantly changing environment of the riverine and forested delta (Curley, 2008; Eaton, 2005) [12, 8].
Academic historiography of Mangalkavyas has highlighted their narrative structures, thematic markers, regional dynamism, and alternate perspectives to dominant historical accounts (Curley, 2008; Chatterjee K, 2009) [12, 11]. Yet, their full significance in representing liminal identities and pre-modern mobility remains underexplored.

Viewed through the lens of liminality and marginality, the Mangalkavyas offer a vital hermeneutic framework for understanding identity formation amid the delta's mercurial ecology and social landscape (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) [3, 4]. The pre-modern Bengal deltaic mosaic was characterized by fluid, shifting geographies floodplains and river courses continually redefined and, by extension, the lives of its inhabitants (Sengupta, 2002; Eaton, 2005) [5, 8].

The concept of liminality in the Mangalkavyas, represented through themes such as pilgrimage, forced migration, and divine quests, symbolizes processes of emergence and transformation (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) [3, 4]. These motifs reflect experiences of social exclusion and the potential for transcendence. The quests undertaken by characters in these texts are mediated through the divine intervention of Goddesses and as much as they generate a level of awareness of fluid identities and mobility in pre-modern Bengal, where movement is both a challenge and a means of overcoming marginality (Chakravarti, 2015; Ray, 2020) [1, 2]. The goddesses Chandi and Annada exemplify this liminality, as their presence is associated with transitional spaces that are marked by potential, transformation, and vulnerability (Chakravarti, 2015; Ray, 2020) [1, 2]. Significantly enough the Goddesses Chandi and Annada are also constantly negotiating threshholds of marginality and power. This reframed narrative situates the Mangalkavyas as profound cultural texts that articulate the "Divine Threshold of Marginality" by demonstrating the intertwined dynamics of liminality, mobility, and identity through the representation of Chandi and Annada within the socio-ecological matrix of pre-modern Bengal (Curley, 2008; Ray, 2020; Chakravarti, 2015; Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) [1, 2, 12, 3, 4].

Thresholds of Liminality and marginality: Chandi and Annada

Handi (also known as Chandika) is a prominent goddess in East Indian Shakta traditions, whose representations merge Vedic, Tantric, and vernacular strands. Annanda, though less widely studied, features in certain regional Mangalkavya texts, sharing with Chandi liminal attributes tied to empowerment, protection, and boundary-crossing. Both emerge in narrative contexts reflecting shifting socio-political realities and ritual performance, as evidenced in field and textual research (Chakravarti, 2015) [1].

Chandimangal, one of the earliest and most elaborate texts in the Mangalkavya tradition, powerfully illustrates how sacred narratives emerge from and speak to the fluid and marginal landscapes of Bengal. The backdrop of the text is the Rarh region of West Bengal, situated between the Chotanagpur plateau and the Ganges Delta. Significantly, Rarh is mentioned as early as the 6th century BCE in the Jaina text of Acharangasutra as Ladha, where Mahavira is said to have visit. It is also referenced in the Naihati Copper plate inscription as the center and ancestral abode of Sena Dynasty founder Ballal Sena (Eaton, 2005) [8]. Andre Wink identifies Rarh during the Pala-Sena period with modern-day Bardhaman in West Bengal (Wink, 2002) [10].

The work is divided into three parts: a) Book of the Gods, b) Book of the Hunter, and c) Book of the Merchant (Chakravarti, 2015) [1]. The first book contains the author Mukundram Chakravarti's brief self-introduction; he was a migrant to Rarh from Daminya village. The area was under Governor Raja Mansingh. After unfortunate events, Mukundram fled and received instruction from Goddess Chandi before settling in Rarh under Brahmin King Raghunath, who patronized him and the singer Vidyapati (Chakravarti, 2015) [1].

Liminality and Protective Divinity

Goddess Chandi is the central divine force guiding protagonist journeys and transformations in the *Chandimangal*, especially those of Kalketu and Dhanapati. Her agency acts as both catalyst and protector, shaping the liminal and marginal experiences within the text (Chakravarti, 2015) [1]. Kalketu's migration under Chandi's direction is more than a physical movement; it is a profound rite of passage evolving his identity from a marginal hunter to a chief and founder of a settlement. Chandi's critical interventions appearing in disguise, testing Kalketu and Phullara's virtue, bestowing wealth, and later rescuing Kalketu during imprisonment illustrate her role as guardian across marginal boundaries, enabling transformation through adversity and divine grace (Chakravarti, 2015) [1].

Similarly, in the *Book of the Merchant*, Dhanapati's journeys fall under Chandi's domain, where her interventions mitigate natural threats and social suspicion, reflecting her protective power across rural and urban liminal spaces. Both narratives underscore Chandi's role as a divine mediator facilitating movement, transformation, and navigation of liminal states, marking transitions from marginality to centrality and illustrating divine agency that enables survival amid pre-modern exclusion and flux (Chakravarti, 2015) [1].

Chandi herself is a liminal figure, embedded in folk religiosity but repositioned within a Sanskritised pantheon, merging maternal benevolence and destructive power (Chakravarti, 2015) [1]. The unstable geography of Bengal Rivers flooding and shifting, forests advancing and receding functions as metaphor for the precarious nature of existence that both shapes and reflects her transformative power (Chakravarti, 2015) [1]. As such, *Chandimangal* becomes a cultural palimpsest layered with tensions and negotiations between land and water, folk and elite, human and divine, mirroring migration, adaptation, and survival rhythms in early modern Bengal (Chakravarti, 2015) [1].

Annadamangal of Bharatchandra Ray

Annadamangal by Bharatchandra Ray is a profound work that marks an important evolution in the Mangalkavya tradition of Bengal, offering a textured lens into the literary, social, and religious complexities of 18th-century Bengal. The geographical backdrop of Annadamangal is deeply rooted in the riverine and pilgrimage landscapes of Bengal, particularly centered on the Ganges River and its sacred banks. The Ganges functions not only as a physical geographical feature but as a mutable, sacred route that shapes the narrative's flow and cultural imagination. This riverine setting includes pilgrimage sites, temples, agrarian fields, merchant routes, and forest settlements, thus reflecting a broad social and ecological spectrum where divine blessings of Goddess Annada (Annapurna) are conferred across varying strata of society. Bengal in Annadamangal is portrayed as a spiritually unified mosaic where shared sacred spaces and cross-caste participation mentally transcend the political fragmentation of the era. The geography is not strictly defined by turbulent political boundaries but is constructed through collective cultural

memory and devotional connectivity, where rivers and pilgrimage routes knit together the cultural and religious life of the region. The Ganges' banks serve as fluid corridors of movement, symbolizing the liminal and interconnected nature of the people and places in Bengal during the 18th century.

Composed under the patronage of Raja Krishna Chandra of Nadia, the poem stands at a critical juncture between oral performance and courtly refinement, blending Sanskritised poetic forms with persistent folk motifs that had defined earlier Mangalkavyas. The work is organized into three major chapters (Khands):

- The praise and mythic origins of Annada (Annapurna)
- The love story of Vidya and Sundar
- The historical episode of Mansingh

Each segment weaves cosmic myth, local legend, and historical narrative, producing a diverse literary tapestry. The text's rhythmic invocations and episodic structure, reminiscent of oral traditions, are re-shaped through courtly aesthetics and layered storylines (Ray B, 2020) [2].

Liminality, Transformation, and Divine Agency and Annapurna

Annadamangal's engagement with liminality is exceptionally rich, embedding the poem within a framework of transformation, ambiguity, and negotiation that permeates both its narrative device and its depiction of historical processes (Chatterjee, 2009; Curley, 2008; Ray, 2020) [11, 12, 2]. The military expedition led by the Rajput warrior Mansingh, historically remembered for violence and conquest, is transformed within the text into a pilgrimage guided by divine intervention. This reframing shifts the focus from destruction to transcendence, where Mansingh's journey through Bengal becomes an allegory for spiritual and cultural reconciliation (Ray, 2020) [2]. The Rajput's passage is no longer simply a movement of imperial aggression; it is reimagined as a means of engaging with Bengal's multifaceted religious landscape, marked by a persistent dialogue between Islamic imperial rule and emerging local Hindu devotionalism (Chatterjee, 2009) [11]. Through this transformation, Annadamangal underscores fluidity in the construction of identity, faith, and sovereignty: boundaries between ruler and devotee, conqueror and pilgrim, Muslim king and Hindu goddess, become permeable and subject to reinterpretation (Curley, 2008) [12].

Goddess Annapurna, the central divine figure in Annadamangal, is herself emblematic of liminality, inhabiting the space at the intersection of cosmic order, domestic routine, and political authority (Ray, 2020) [2]. She is not merely a cosmic deity abstracted from daily realities, but a nourishing mother whose presence pervades fields, households, and courtly chambers (Chatterjee, 2009) [11]. Annapurna's gifts grain, sustenance, and plenitude carry heightened resonance in Bengal's ecology, where famine and scarcity loom large (Curley, 2008) [12]. Her blessing directly mitigates anxiety around hunger, intertwining sacred cosmological order with practical survival the metaphysics of abundance with the politics of food distribution. Ritual offerings, communal feeding, and grain allocation turn religious devotion into a force that underpins the region's material and social stability (Ray, 2020) [2].

The role of Bhabananda becomes pivotal within the Mughal context. As a character, Bhabananda assumes the charge of glorifying Annapurna and advocating her supremacy within the imperial court. His imprisonment by the Badshah triggers dramatic consequences divine wrath directed at the Mughal capital, signaling the ultimate ascendancy of Annapurna's will over all forms of temporal power (Chatterjee, 2009) [12]. The defeat and submission of the Badshah, who relinquishes his own authority to the goddess, marks a radical overturning of established hierarchical norms. The goddess's supremacy is thus not just a theological or symbolic victory; it is a performative and political renegotiation of whose power truly governs the land (Curley, 2008; Ray, 2020) [12, 2].

Ultimately, Annadamangal's narrative strategy foregrounds the power of divine liminality: where the goddess is neither confined to an abstract spiritual domain nor limited by the politics of the moment, but is continually negotiating, transforming, and transcending boundaries. In rendering Annapurna as a force both intimately nourishing and cosmically authoritative, and in reframing conquest as a journey toward devotional unity, the text emerges as a sophisticated meditation on the shifting terrains of pre-modern Bengal where the sacred and the secular, the folk and the elite, and the personal and political are held in dynamic balance (Chatterjee, 2009; Curley, 2008; Ray, 2020) [11, 12, 2].

Geography and Sacred Space

The Mangalkavyas of Bengal originate within the dynamic and mutable landscape of the Ganges delta, a region characterized by its swampy forests and shifting waterways. The geography of this area is in constant flux, paralleling the fluidity of the oral traditions that circulate among its inhabitants. These poetic texts are closely connected to the daily experiences and aspirations of marginalized groups such as fisher folk, forest dwellers, and healers, whose lives are shaped by both environmental forces and religious devotion. Central to these narratives are deities like Chandi and Annada, who are depicted as transcending established boundaries and moving freely along river routes and social margins. These goddesses are believed to provide protection against dangers, including snakebites, smallpox, tiger attacks, and crocodile-infested waters, reflecting a sacred presence that is deeply integrated into the realities of daily survival (Eaton, 2005; Chatterjee, 2009; Curley, 2008) [8, 11, 12].

Although the Mangalkavyas were primarily transcribed between the 16th and 18th centuries, their origins lie in an oral tradition transmitted across generations. The texts portray gods, humans, and animals with identities that are fluid and mutable. Instead of focusing exclusively on divine power, these narratives record the interplay of survival, religious faith, and supernatural beliefs within the ever-changing environment of the riverine and forested delta (Curley, 2008; Eaton, 2005) [12, 8].

Scholarly analyses of the Mangalkavyas have emphasized their narrative structures, thematic elements, regional diversity, and alternative viewpoints to mainstream historical narratives. However, the texts' roles in articulating liminal identities and patterns of pre-modern mobility have not been fully examined. Interpreting the Mangalkavyas through the concepts of liminality and marginality provides a valuable framework for analyzing identity formation

within the volatile ecological and social context of the Bengal delta. The pre-modern delta was marked by constantly shifting floodplains and river courses, which directly influenced the lives of its residents (Chatterjee, 2009; Eaton, 2005) [11, 8].

Divine Threshold: Negotiating Marginality and Power

Liminality in the Mangalkavyas is expressed through motifs such as pilgrimage, forced migration, and divine quests. These narratives dramatize separation, displacement, and transformation, aligning with Arnold van Gennep's (1960) [3] tripartite schema of rites of passage, which comprises separation, transition (liminal phase), and incorporation. The journeys reflect social exclusion while also indicating possibilities for reintegration and transcendence. Mobility emerges as both a challenge and a strategy for resilience in pre-modern Bengal. Drawing on Victor Turner's (1969) [4] insights, these liminal episodes represent anti-structure, periods when normative social hierarchies are suspended or inverted. Such moments allow new social orders to emerge and foster communitas egalitarian bonds formed through shared vulnerability and movement that reshape the relationship between the sacred and the social. The figures of Chandi and Annada illustrate this liminality, with their divine agency most evident at points of instability, where mobility, transformation, and marginality intersect.

Seen through this lens, the Mangalkavyas are not only devotional texts but also cultural archives that map the negotiation of marginality within Bengal's socio-ecological milieu. By staging divine encounters in zones of uncertainty river crossings, pilgrimage routes, forest clearings they show how sacred power is generated in transitional and marginal spaces. Through Chandi and Annada, the tradition demonstrates how the divine inhabits thresholds: dismantling order, forging new solidarities, and re-signifying the margins as sites of both vulnerability and creative potential (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) [3, 4].

Conclusion

The representation of Chandi and Annada in the Mangalkavyas demonstrates how divine figures inhabit and activate liminal thresholds, transforming marginality into a site of negotiation, resilience, and sacred authority. Themes such as pilgrimage, displacement, and divine quests dramatize the precarious conditions of pre-modern Bengal and articulate a worldview in which movement and instability serve as generative forces. The Mangalkavyas reflect Van Gennep's model of rites of passage, where separation and transition lead to reintegration. They also embody Turner's concept of anti-structure, in which social norms are suspended and new forms of solidarity, or communitas, can emerge.

By situating the goddesses within liminal and marginal spaces such as river crossings, forest boundaries, and zones of ecological danger, the texts present divine power as inseparable from uncertainty and transformation. Chandi and Annada exemplify how the divine inhabits marginality, embodying both vulnerability and potency. Their liminal positioning highlights the sacred's ability to subvert established hierarchies, redistribute authority, and create new possibilities for reimagining the relationship between society, ecology, and power. Seen through this lens, the Mangalkavyas are not only devotional compositions but also cultural texts that register and reframe the historical experience of marginality in Bengal. They provide a symbolic grammar through which thresholds are reconfigured as dynamic sites of meaning-making, where the excluded and displaced can find new forms of recognition. In revealing the divine at the margins, the Mangalkavyas suggest that liminality is not a temporary rupture but an enduring mode through which pre-modern Bengal conceptualized identity, power, and belonging.

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