

# Bhaskar Pandit's Incomplete Durga Puja

By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

In 1739 as soon as Nadir Shah of Iran completed his unimaginably ruthless dance of death in Delhi and looted one of the biggest treasure of history of mankind the Mughal rule of India was virtually over. After a long Islamic rule of more than 700 years finally India saw an emergence of a Hindu kingdom by Marathas whose political control over India from 1740 became almost equal of Mughal. Maratha power originated from Maharashtra covered Punjab, Delhi, Gujarat, Sindh, Mysore and a large part of today's Uttar and Madhya Pradesh. However the richest province of Mughal India Bengal was not under Maratha kingdom and it was still ruled by a Mughal representative named Aliwardhi Khan who was almost an independent ruler ruling a large fertile geography covering Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

At that time Maratha kingdom was controlled by two different power centre. One was from Pune by Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao and other was by one Raghuji Bhonsle from Nagpur. Both Balaji Baji Rao and Raghuji Bhonsle were embittered to each other and hardly agree to accept each other's supremacy over Maratha kingdom. The Nagpur Maratha ruler Raghuji suddenly planned to collect the tax of *chauth* which was a 25% contribution of revenue Maratha king as a protection money. Bengal which was never a part of Maratha regime was targeted by Nagpur and for next 10 years a huge set of cavalcade named Bargis were sent to Bengal for plundering in the name of tax collection.

'Bargi' a Pharsi word meaning low levelled Maharashtrian soldier who do not have their own horses and artillery. They were nothing but a gang of uneducated ruthless murderers working under a warrior named Bhaskar

Ram Kolhatkar who was also Prime Minister of Raghuji Bhonsle. Bhaskar became famous by the name Bhaskar Pandit in Bengal for every possible wrong reason.

In Bengal he and his army in next many years will become such a symbol of deadly terror that their reference of invasion will become a part of folklore and song. The Bargis under the leadership of Bhaskar Pandit created a saga of moving death to common villagers of Bengal and Orissa. Their troops not only looted and burnt down almost all villages in western part of Bengal and killed innumerable innocent men and women but also instituted a cult of gangrape of young women. Such was their horrific conduct that a contemporary writer named Kavi Gangaram in his book *Maharashtra Puran* gave a vivid description of their misconduct to common women. It is the first detailed description of gang rape in any Bengali literature. Bhaskar Pandit and his gang of 25000 Bargis with 24 commander first invaded Bengal in 16th April 1741 and did unimaginable brutality. Stricken by panic many rich traders and families in districts of Birbhum, Purulia, Midnapore moved their wealth to Calcutta.

Bhaskar Pandit made his base at Dainhat a rich trading centre on the bank of Ganga.

Here he observed the grand festivity of Durga puja among Bengali Hindus and had a desire to worship Durga the Devi of Shakti. To invocation of Devi Bhaskar Pandit decided to organize a Durga puja for his soldier in 1742. He selected a house with big courtyard which was believed to be the office of Royal family of Burdawan. However it is not known whether this was gladly given to him by Burdawan royal family of as a ruthless looter he snatched the house from them.

That year Durga Puja was fallen in the last week of September



and Bhaskar allowed an unlimited degree of freedom to his all soldiers and commanders to enjoy the puja. His soldiers had a gala time in first three days of puja and consumed uncontrolled amount of liquor.

On September 26, 1744 the 4th day of puja known as *Mahanavami* suddenly Bhaskar felt that he is surrounded by soldiers of Aliwardhi the Nawab of Bengal. Engrossed in the high festive mood Bhaskar did not notice that Alivardhi's soldiers constructed a boat bridge over the river Ajay near a place called Uddharanpur adjacent to Katoa on the dark night of Maha Ashtami when Bhaskar's Hindu soldiers were at the zenith of celebrating Durga puja with unlimited consumption of liquor.

Next day morning when Mahanabami puja was about to start it was found that most of the soldiers are so badly intoxicated that there is almost none to stand up. Meanwhile nawab's troop was ready for final assault. A helpless Bhaskar Pandit whose bravery was never under the question had

no choice but to abandon the puja in midway and ran for his life to Panchet and from there to Ramgargh to Chandrakona to Narayan gargh and finally arrived Cuttack in Orissa.

Meanwhile Nawab's army ravaged Durga puja mandap of Bhaskar, broke the idol and killed many Maratha soldiers. The devi puja of Nagpur's Bhaskar Pandit remained incomplete. A part of the house where Bhaskar Pandit organised this puja still stands at the Samaj bati locality of Dainhat town of Bengal and common people call it as Durga mandir of Bhaskar Pandit. Though Bhaskar Pandit has no good reason to be remembered in Bengal still people recall him through this dilapidated structure. Now a new temple is added with the old one.

The end of Bhaskar Pandit was painfully tragic and it took place a few years after. It is interesting to note that for the sake of saving Bengal from the hand of Nagpur based Raghuji Bhonsle nawab of Bengal approached to another Maratha warrior Balaji Baji Rao

of Pune.

On March 3, 1743 Alivardhi and Balajir Baji Rao met at Plassy or probably at a place named Mankara or Daudhpur to settle a pact. The pact cemented an assurance of protection from Nagpur Maratha Bargis by Pune Maratha army. Balaji Baji Rao demanded Rs 22 lakhs a *chauth* or protection tax from nawab of Bengal which later agreed to pay. Balaji assured Aliwardhi that he would uproot Raghuji Bhonsle from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

Raghuji was then in a place between Katoa and Burdawan of Bengal. On April 16, 1773 the combined force of Balaji and Aliwardhi chased him there and Raghuji fled to Sambalpur of Orissa. Soon Balaji Baji Rao also left for Pune thinking that Bargi nightmare is over for Bengal.

As soon as Balaji left for Pune Raghuji Bhonsle was back to Midnapore and demanded *chauth*. Soon in 1744 Bhaskar Pandit returned to Bengal with 20000 soldiers and this time his degree of plunder was even more. He devastated rural economy of

Bengal and created every town a necropolis. The ugly dance of death continued for months and making life hell for nawab who by then realised that his huge payment to Balaji Baji Rao is a waste.

Realising the fact that Maratha Bargis deserve no ethical treatment Aliwardhi planned to kill Bhaskar Pandit by pushing him into a trap. He sent the offer of peaceful negotiation in exchange of more money to buy the peace.

Aliwardhi invited Bhaskar to a place named Mankara and before that his senior minister Dewan Janakiram and commander Mustafa Khan met Bhaskar Pandit at a place called Diknagar.

Finally Bhaskar Pandit had a meeting with his council on this on 30th March 1744. All of his 22 commander suggested him to accept the offer while Raghuji Gaikowad a senior commander advised him not to go to Aliwardhi's camp for security reason. Ignoring the advice of Raghuji Gaikowad, Bhaskar Ram Kolhatkar entered the camp of Aliwardhi with his 22 commander on March 31, 1744 at Mankara. Raghuji Gaikowad refused to accompany him and stood waited at a distance with his troop.

As soon as Bhaskar Pandit entered inside the nawab's camp they were physically overpowered and brutally slaughtered. His chopped off head was shown to Nawab Alivardhi who was waiting on an elephant back. Smelling the danger Raghuji Gaikowad fled to Katoa to save his life. This ends the story of Bhaskar Pandit the man from Nagpur who was a terror to Bengal for 4 years. However Bengal's suffering from Nagpur continued till 1751 as Raghuji Rao Bhonsle carried on his invasion and loot for next few years.

In 1751 a peace treaty was signed by Marathas and Alivardhi who again agreed to pay Rs 12 lakhs annually and Rs 32 lakhs as arrears. Marathas agreed that they in future will not cross river Subarnarekha. The amount Banegal kept on paying to Nagpur till 1857.