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# ARTICLE REQUEST

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## Pictures in Celestial and Worldly Time

### Illustrations in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Almanacs

*Gautam Bhadra*

#### AN IMMENSE ARCHIVE

From the nineteenth-century cataloguer James Long to the twentieth-century cultural historian Sripantha (pseudonym of Nikhil Sarkar), everyone agrees that almanacs or *pañjikās* had the largest circulation in the Bengali book market of the nineteenth century. Printed Bengali almanacs carried pictorial images from the very beginning, the number of images growing significantly from the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Sripantha declares that no discussion of illustrated Bengali books can be complete unless it includes the topic of printed images from almanacs.<sup>1</sup> I agree. However, his discussion hardly extends beyond this declaration. Although a few images from almanacs are reproduced in Sripantha's book, he does not engage in any discussion of their visual significance. Pranabranjan Ray's piece in the volume edited by Ashit Paul examines very briefly the engravings of Krishnachandra Karmakar, the ingenious craftsman of the Chandroday Press at Serampore, but the volume does not contain any instance of his artwork.<sup>2</sup> Sukumar Sen, again, completely avoids the question and simply reproduces a couple of samples in his book.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the texts contained in almanacs, let alone their images, go almost unaddressed in the standard histories of Bengali books. For example, the chapter on the history of book images in Partha Mitter's sizeable monograph has an impressive title—'The Power of the Printed Image'—but does not even mention almanacs.<sup>4</sup> As far as I know, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay's brief essay remains until now the only reliable and systematic discussion of

nineteenth-century Bengali almanacs. However, even in that essay, the question of images is restricted to one paragraph.<sup>5</sup>

Yet there is hardly a richer archive for printed images in Bengal. Of course, like all other archives, this one too is marked by play between eloquence and silence. In correcting the inattention in the existing historiography, I will indulge in a commentary on this archive. After all, as Sanskrit grammarians tell us, the primary meaning of the word *pañjikā* is commentary—relentless, meticulous commentary.

In popular memory, the origin stories of Bengali almanacs are organized around the name of Krishna Chandra, the famous eighteenth-century Raja of Nadia. In the printed almanacs of western Bengal, we mostly hear of the patronage of the Rajas of Nadia and the discursive predominance of the pundits of Navadvip. According to popular understanding, the almanac prepared by the local astrologer (*grahabipra*) was the chief instrument in deciding on the dates and sequence of different social and ritual occasions. In his autobiography, Jogeshchandra Roy Vidyandhi described the period before the coming of the printed almanac in this manner:

In an adjacent village there was an astrologer (*grahācārya*). In the beginning of the year and after every fortnight, he would visit and read out the almanac for the price of a *sidhā* (a gift of uncooked rice and other food ingredients). He read aloud briskly the palm-leaf text and the housewives listened carefully. They had to memorize the almanac for the fortnight: the auspicious dates of the lunar calendar, the day of the new moon, the day of the full moon, the seventh day of the fortnight, the fifth, the sixth, the eighth; they had to remember the different dates of the pujas and ritual observances. The priest (*purui*) too had to learn the dates by heart. In those days there was no printed almanac.

Then Jogeshchandra went on to describe how different festivals were observed in affluent households in accordance with the ritual requirements of their sectarian affiliations and lineages. He mentioned that in the case of absence of particular communities or sects in the village, their ritual occasions were not observed. Indeed, there was little means of knowing of such occasions. 'The village was the world'.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of their evolution, Bengali almanacs showed remarkable dynamism. The process of transforming handwritten manuscripts into printed texts had an impact on the very structure of almanacs. A distinctive shape gradually came into being. Novelties, both in terms of contents and arrangement, were noticed. Elements were added to and taken away from the old forms. Of the old handwritten almanacs, very few survive and I cannot claim to have seen all of them. However, there are fragmentary references

and occasional comparisons between old and new almanacs in contemporary newspapers. In the handwritten manuscripts, stellar calculations used to be recorded in shorthand, in cryptic forms, in the style of symbolic diagrams. In the printed versions, these cryptic forms came to be expressed in words, explained in commonly understandable Bengali sentences. As a result, the almanacs became much more accessible to common people. The *Samācār Darpan* of 11 March 1820 mentioned that in the almanac printed at the press of Bishwanath Deb of Sobhabazar, one could both 'know the days and dates of auspicious occasions and so on from numerals [as in the customary almanacs, cf. Figure 9.1] as well as from sections which have been separately written in words. Any literate person can know the dates and the occasions, the auspicious and inauspicious hours, without difficulty'. In 1818, following the directives of the pundits of Navadvip, Durgaprasad of Jorasanko published a Bengali almanac after consulting the original *Siddhānta* text. This was an explicitly commercial venture: 'Desiring wealth, I publish this almanac'.

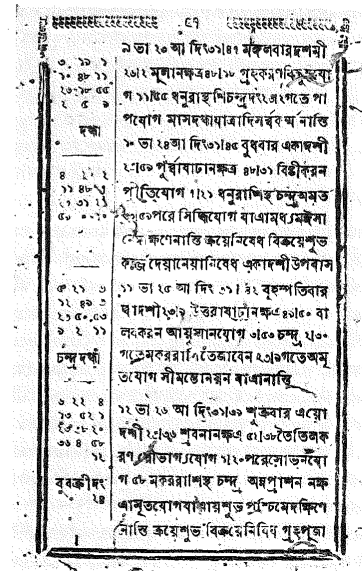


Figure 9.1 A page from the early printed almanac, title page missing, 1825–6, Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

The writer suggested that the printed almanac would be of great help to all householders who required knowledge of the positions of planets on particular days. 'There will be no difficulty. This almanac contains everything. Consult it when you want to'.<sup>7</sup>

Again, in 1835, the almanac of the Dinasinidhu Press published a Bengali edition of the *Subhāsubha Dinakṣaṇa Vicāra* of Gangagovinda Vidyālakṣaṇa of Mahanada. These vernacular versions of Sanskrit texts and their common strategy of complementing arithmetical figures and diagrams with plain words certainly rendered the form of the almanac more intelligible to a large section of the population than ever before. Drawing attention to the superior efficacy of printed almanacs over older locality-specific forms, a news item in *Jñānānveṣaṇ* reported in 1838 that 'the almanac printed in the Vidvanmod Press is truly excellent as it contains much more necessary information than is usually considered essential for an almanac'. It was suggested that these printed almanacs with extra information would prove useful not only to ordinary people but also to the expert grahabipras. The value of the old locality-specific almanacs prepared by the pundits appeared to decline as new printed almanacs became available.

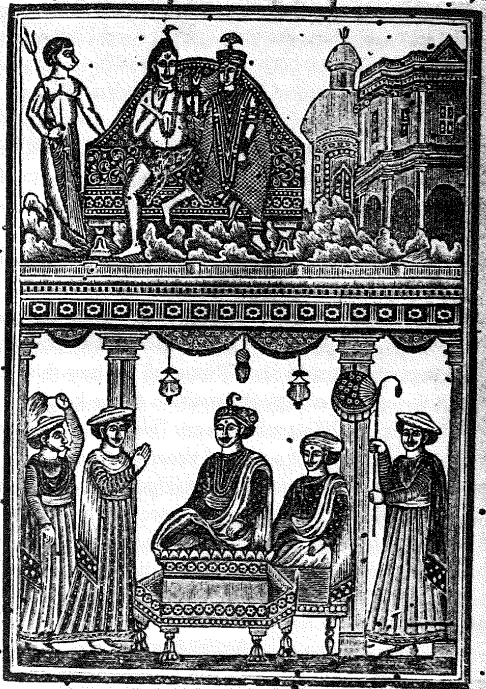
Consultation of this almanac will greatly facilitate the work of the *daibajña*. Previously, first-rate almanacs used to be published under the authority of Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Nadia and following the directives of the pundits of Bali. The pundits had high regard for them. The almanacs which have come into circulation since the extinction of those almanacs stand nowhere in comparison to this excellent almanac [printed at the Vidvanmod Press].<sup>8</sup>

From the second quarter of the nineteenth century, certain neighbourhoods such as Bali came to specialize in composing almanacs. In fact, the grahabipras from these localities became involved with the publication of almanacs on account of their training, their family status and the eminence of their lineages. Handwritten almanacs did not completely disappear, but their circulation was certainly reduced.<sup>9</sup> What we need to note, however, are the ways in which the structure of the *pañjikās* were gradually stabilized and a balance emerged over time between the traditional subjects and the necessary extra information. In the initial phase, at least, this formal balance was tied to a new, pragmatic sense of the proper use of time. Some of the images too seem to relay this concern.

A number of almanacs from the third quarter of the nineteenth century were characterized by long opening poems. They often contained Sanskrit verses with corresponding Bengali translations. In line with the popular mythological tradition, these were styled as conversations between Siva and

Gauri. Siva, after all, is the Lord of Time. Gauri's question is certainly grandiloquent: 'Fascinated, Parvati asks the Lord/"O Kind Lord, please speak of the origin of the world./ Who is born first/As the world comes to be created?"' Very soon, however, the question becomes somewhat different: 'Why are there new almanacs every year?/Why are they called "new almanacs?"/Why should one listen to new almanacs? Please explain, O King and Nobles'. The response is the justification and validation of almanacs, the description and commendation of their usefulness—in short, a preface, in the modern sense of the term. These long rhymed lines could be used equally in the customary Eulogy to the Nine Planets (*nabagrahabandanā*) and for explaining the procedures of reading almanacs. However, by the 1840s, they were regularized into brief formulaic expressions. The popular almanac printed in the Chandrodai Press at Serampore, for instance, carried these standard opening lines: 'The goddess tenderly asks Siva/"Please tell me how this year will go./ Which planet will come to occupy the position of the king and which will be a minister, so to speak?"/Siva tells Parvati, "Here it is./Listen how it will go"'.<sup>10</sup> Usually, the first image of a printed almanac would be a pictorial representation of this introductory conversation (Figure 9.2). In Krishnachandra Karmakar's stylized grid, for example, one can see Siva making infallible predictions from the upper panel, with Parvati sitting on a throne next to him. Evidently, the heaven of Kailāśa now has European-style facades. The spatial symmetry is defined by the juxtaposition of a trident-decorated temple and a colonial mansion.

The form, texture, and claims of this pictorial syntax were embedded in the political and social realities of the nineteenth century. The Eulogy to the Nine Planets could almost function as a textualization of the sense of being oppressed by a turbulent, disorderly time. Everyday lives were at the mercy of unseen and powerful planets. The authority of Siva and Parvati was indisputable in Kailāśa. But the temporal kingdom of Bengal belonged to the East India Company. Whether a zamindar, or a pundit, or an ordinary householder—all Bengalis were subjects of a colonial empire. Seemingly, the intensity of this recognition never escaped the publishers and compilers of printed Bengali almanacs. Much before the almanacs named after Lord Ripon or Empress Victoria would appear, Pitambar Sen of Sealdah made an interesting effort to synchronize the authority of Siva and the power of the Company by having an 'Account of Kings' ('Rajbibaraṇ' or 'Rājābali') inserted in his *Bengalee Annual Almanac* of 1835–6. Written in the standard style of Rājābali, the text recounted a brief history of the empire with its landmark events for the reader.



**Figure 9.2** Conversation between Siva and Parvati, woodcut, 15.5 x 10.7, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1842–3, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

The traffic between the cosmic order and the imperial chronology also registered itself in the way the checklist of ritual obligations during the Ratanti and Vasanti Pujas was followed in quick succession by a list of the courts of law, a compilation of information on the police, registration offices and the post office, and an inventory of official holidays.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Chandroday Press almanac of 1840–1 apprised its readers of the details of holidays in courts, the dates and timings of their sessions, and the schedule of judicial vacations. These were typically the new ‘necessary information’ which could not have been present in the handwritten almanacs. In the discursive

world of new almanacs, however, religious duties and imperial obligations emerged as intertwined, and a look at *Lord Ripon's Pañjikā* published in the last years of the nineteenth century will suggest how the logic of reticulation was reiterated through the juxtaposition of images: the serious but compassionate face of a bearded Viceroy on the first cover (Figure 9.3) and an image of the elephant-headed god Ganesha on the fourth. Did viewers really care to make a distinction? Consider, again, the new almanac published in 1875–6 by B.R. Day and Brothers, designed by Madhabchandra Siddhanta of Serampore and printed by Siddheshwar Ghosh at Jorasanko. This well-edited and comprehensive volume gave the important dates according to both solar and lunar (Hijri) calendars, listed the occasions associated with Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Muslim, and Christian persuasions, and did not skip even the popular unorthodox rites. But it also firmly clung to the particulars of different government regulations, revenue rates, stamp duties at courts of law, and even the fee payable to the government for bringing out processions on



**Figure 9.3** Cover page of *Lord Ripon's Pañjikā*, 1884–5, compiled and published by Benimadhab Dey, Chitpore, 1884. Courtesy of Bodleian Library, Oxford.

the city streets. Printed almanacs of the nineteenth century not only armed their readers with the knowledge of auspicious hours and the zodiac divisions of the celestial pathway, but also tabularized the laws and regulations of government as well as the duties and obligations of subjects. Without the latter, no calculation of everyday time was possible for householders in a colonial society.

Indeed, it was an extension of this principle that allowed Nriyalal Sil and Balam De an edge in the competitive market of vernacular almanacs during the mid-1870s. Between 1874 and 1877, they introduced the style of adding to their almanacs a certain number of blank pages for each month (as in a diary). The middle-class householder could now keep his temporal and spiritual balance sheets together. Adding a separate section of 'Directory' to the Bengali almanac, Balam De said in 1874:

An almanac is a most essential book. In fact, one has to consult this book every day for conducting daily domestic affairs. I have worked hard to add to it a variety of necessary details with great care. I present this almanac and directory to the general public at a very cheap price so that everyone can use it without difficulty.<sup>12</sup>

Adopting the style of English directories, Nriyalal Sil's almanac included a Bengali version of the two volumes of the *Victoria Empress Directory* which contained information on several government offices, markets, shops and professionals. Not surprisingly, native Ayurvedic practitioners (*kavirāj*), midwives, and traders dominated this list. At times, inventories of affordable lodgings (*dharmaśālā*) near different Indian pilgrim centres also made their appearance. After all, the target audience was the native Bengali subjects of the Empress.

The power of almanacs in disseminating knowledge was recognized early. During 1856–7, the Vernacular Literature Society of Calcutta, a distinguished forum of the local intelligentsia, published a multi-volume almanac 'inclusive of several practical matters'. Needless to say, the utilitarian thrust of these practical matters, such as a district-wise list of the dates of and merchandises sold at local fairs, set these volumes more in tune with official gazetteers than precolonial manuscripts maintained by *grahabipras* (astrologers). In the very first volume of this almanac, there was a list of the dates of revenue collection, monthly agricultural routines, and a table of exchange rates and commissions in currency.<sup>13</sup> Such intermingling of different representational forms spoke to the yoking of the diurnal rites of colonial discipline to the quotidian performance of social customs. In a series of sliding knots, the sacred ritual occasions of a colonial society remained delicately bound up with the profane

revenue calendar. Evidences of this tangled time lie scattered on the pages of nineteenth-century almanacs.<sup>14</sup>

The language of printed almanacs also reflected this tension. Typically, an almanac opened with rhyming lines, continued in the *caupadi* metre, and culminated in a language that belonged to the bureaucratic domain of colonial administration. The Bengali almanac never ceased to shuttle between the poles of everyday ritual and official regulation. In fact, there is reason to argue that both the province-wide standardization of domestic rituals and the popularization of legal-administrative knowledge became possible through the circulation of almanacs. The mobility and dynamism of the form also ensured that certain topics and subjects could emerge or disappear in the compilation according to the changing imperatives of life or the rules of a competitive market.

#### ALMANACS AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE

Almanac images were located precisely in this assemblage of information and power, within the space of actions prescribed in both astrological and secular time. Our archive begins to fade at this point. Instances of precolonial almanacs are rare, and even memoirs do not clarify if those handwritten scrolls carried any image at all (apart from, of course, the figure of the zodiac constellation which was a regular feature).<sup>15</sup> In Durgaprasad's almanac (1818), we find a picture of the solar eclipse superimposed on the zodiac image (Figure 9.4). The sun and the planet *Rahu* occupy the upper segment of the picture, but the *grahabipra*-like figures who raise their fingers from the sides of the zodiac circle maintain the balance of the frame. The maze of engraved lines conjures up a dusky backdrop evoking the inky sky of a solar eclipse. In such a rendition of the zodiac constellation, a pictorial depiction of folklores surrounding the eclipse becomes possible. The zodiac images of almanacs definitely acted as a prototype for illustration of Bengali books. It is to be noted that the dress and gesture of the *grahabipras* are hardly Brahmanical. Rather, they point to a distinctly European source. Perhaps an imported picture acted as a model of reference. Imitations such as this indicate a history of exchange between the acts of reading and translating images, a history defined by an irreducible hybridity. However, it must also be pointed out that this picture of a solar eclipse is rather unique. I did not find a similar image (or even an image of the same subject) in Bengali almanacs of the next hundred years. In point of fact, it is difficult to speak of a tradition continuing uninterrupted from the early years of the history of almanac images.



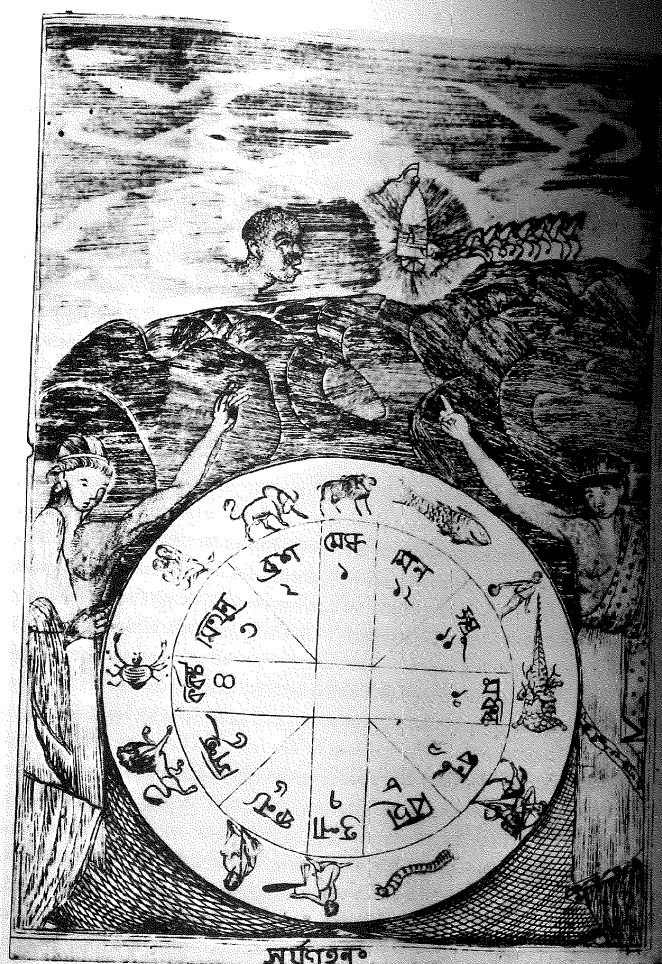


Figure 9.4 Solar eclipse, metal plate, 17 x 11.5, artist unknown, 1818–19, almanac by Durgaprasad Vidyabhushan, Jorasanko, 1818. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

The fashion of decorating almanacs with images of festivals arranged in their chronological sequence became established only from the 1840s. As the organizational arrangement of printed almanacs began to stabilize, the pictorial sections of different almanacs produced by different publishers collectively repeating an order of subjects, an 'overdetermined' structure was in place. Under the sign of this structure, the festival images were either placed at the beginning of the book or distributed in separate pages across it.

We must remember that there was considerable difference between printing images in almanacs and illustrating narratives such as *Vidyāsundara*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, or *Mahābhārata*. In the latter, interspersing continuous narratives with illustrative images sought to emphasize the pivotal or climactic moments in the story or highlight the characters therein. Frozen frames catered to the reader's desire for seeing pictorial expressions of verbal descriptions. The structure of almanacs functioned quite differently. Printed almanacs had a number of distinct sections (and all sections were not invariably present in every almanac). Of these, the forecasting accounts, the local proverbs, the fragments from *purāṇas* or accounts of kings, the stories of emergence of domestic rituals, or the description and mantras of rituals were meant to be read. But sections such as the Directory were for quick reference, for spotting relevant information and addresses—not for continuous reading. The texts of nineteenth-century almanacs did not always lend themselves to the form of an uninterrupted narrative. They were episodic organizations of ritual and ceremonial occasions that householders were supposed to perform during the year. The images of these ceremonies represented them in actually performable forms.

Buying, unpacking, and reading a new almanac constituted one such ceremony in itself. The *Bengalee Annual Almanac* of 1835, to which we have already referred, had these instructions for the occasion: 'Hear [this almanac] with a pure heart and in a pure mind./In company with friends and in front of ritually purified leaves/With fruits and flowers in hand to offer/... Listening to an almanac is a virtuous act'. The act of arranging a recitation session was clearly rewarding: 'Hearing the names of the years ensures a long life./Hearing the names of the kings cures the kingly [major] diseases'.<sup>16</sup> Looking at the images in such an exalted text also had its share of virtue. These images after all were displayed as idealized depictions of ceremonies and divine beings. I am yet to find a detailed nineteenth-century narrative recounting the users' reactions to images in almanacs. Perhaps, printed images in almanacs were not considered autonomously of the text. Titles and captions seemingly functioned as the key to these images. In some of the



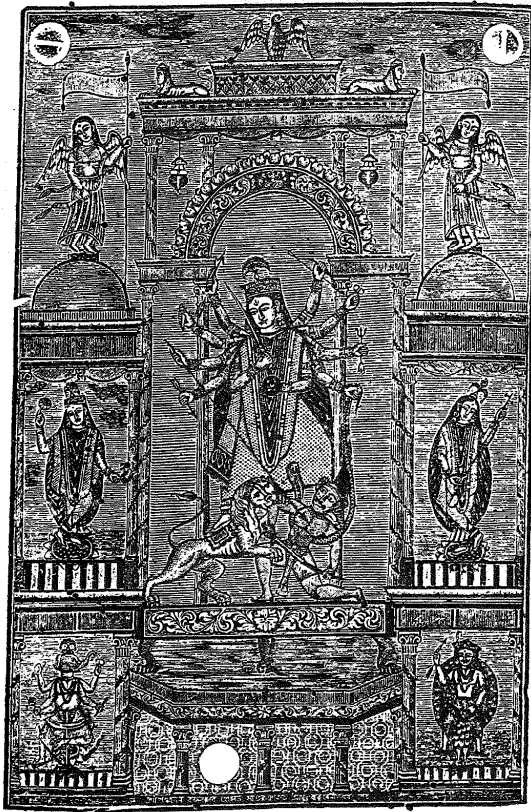
almanacs—such as the one published by Day, Law and Co. in 1867, or the ones published by Benimadhab Dey between 1894 and 1900—attractive and appropriate catchphrases (*jigir*) were printed below the images of particular festivals, expressing the perceived mood or the desired outcome of the occasions.<sup>17</sup> More general and consistent than putting up such slogans was the convention of mentioning the specific dates and hours of worship or rites against the images. Pictures in an almanac were not simply illustrative; they participated in the world of householders by marking everyday acts. In their participatory and performative capacities, the images continually refashioned the *Purāṇic*, brought into focus the complex play of desire and performance in which festivals took shape in society, and served the taste that would be marked as popular.

In this context, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay's comment concerning the immutability of the image of Durga in Bengali almanacs attracts attention. In almanacs, according to Bandyopadhyay, 'images of gods and goddesses have continued in the same style. The idol of Durga in the *sārbajanīn* (community) Pujas has distinctly changed over the last one hundred and fifty years, but the image of Durga in almanacs has remained the same'.<sup>18</sup> It cannot be denied that in spite of some variations, the structure that Krishnachandra Karmakar composed for the 1842 Chandroday Press almanac (Figure 9.5) has in the main continued. What the emphasis on the ostensible repetitiveness of this image obscures, however, is the fact that important, even radical, transformations took place over the long nineteenth century in the practices of seeing and showing images. A comparison between the mid-century descriptions of *Hutom Priyācār Nakṣā*, which found the figure of Durga at the centre of nouveau-riche extravaganzas, composed 'in the truly Jewish and Armenian manner' and adorned with banners, crests, and images of unicorns,<sup>19</sup> and the late-century account in *Ānandamath* which famously identified the goddess as the mother of the nation,<sup>20</sup> indicates the nature of this shift. Displacements happened, meanings changed, even if the familiar frame of the goddess persisted. The *baboo* model of illustration and decoration available to nineteenth-century engravers such as (Figure 9.6) had no place in the stylistic repertoire of early twentieth-century illustrators of Bengali almanacs. The figure of Durga that emerged in twentieth-century almanacs was systematically divested of her European adornments, while new pictorial conventions of using folded curtains and pillars were added to the image (Figure 9.7). The project of turning a carnival of decadent baboos into the respectable national festival of all Bengalis was a conflicted, protracted, and uneven process. Over the years, through regular reproductions, almanacs assisted this process by



২৫ আশ্বিন ত্রিভাঙ্গদীপ পূজা। ত্রিভাঙ্গদীপ বর্ষব্যয়ের কৃত।

Figure 9.5 Durga Puja, woodcut, 15.5 x 10.7, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, Chandroday Press at Serampore, 1842–3. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



২১ শ্রীদুর্গা ইংরাজী ও অষ্টোবর শনিবারে শ্রীদুর্গাপূজা

Figure 9.6 Durga Puja, woodcut, electro block, 16.8 x 11, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1894–5, Benimadhab Dey. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



২২ কাশিক মঙ্গলবারে শ্রীদুর্গাপূজা (২৭২ পৃ)

প্রান্ত: ব ৬।১।৪০ গতে ৭।২।৭।৩২ মধ্যে চরলয়ে, পুন: ব ৮।৫।২৪ গতে  
ব ৯।৬।৪৭ মধ্যে, পুন: ৯।৩।৭।১২ গতে ব ৯।৫।৩৯ মধ্যে চরনবাংশে নবপত্রিকা

Figure 9.7 Durga Puja, 15 x 10.3, *Naba bibhākar pañjikā*, 1920–1, Shambhuchandra Chatushpathi, 1920. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

popularizing an idealized structure of representing Durga. In its effort to bridge the tastes of the elite with the demands of the popular, the visual politics of nationalism cashed in on this continuity.

In an interesting anecdote told to Rani Chanda, Abanindranath Tagore once revealed how political necessities could open a space in almanacs for accommodating new figures and forms of sacredness. In the early days of the Swadeshi movement, at the behest of Rabindranath Tagore, an elaborate ritual with mantras was prepared for the newly conceived nationalist festival of Rākhibandhan (tying the brotherly knot). Kshetramohan, the performer-storyteller in charge of devising the ritual, used his personal contacts to have the ceremony included in the almanacs.<sup>21</sup> The inclusion was not only a guarantee of respectability for the newfangled rite but also an assurance of its continuity in the social life of Bengal. In order to appear traditional, a rite had to appear on the pages of almanacs. Performance was shot through with power, consecration with politics.

A history of display must consider the role of printed images in almanacs in relation to the wider market of books and the craftsmanship of engravers. The market for almanacs turned competitive from the middle of the nineteenth century. Several publishers entered the fray. Advertisements published in the almanacs themselves refer to differently priced 'Full Almanacs', 'Half Almanacs', and 'Quarter Almanacs'.<sup>22</sup> The printing of images had to correspond to this reality of a stratified market. Nityalal Sil published two types of almanacs in the same year. In the more expensive edition, a whole page was devoted to each picture, while in the low-priced edition an entire bunch of images was fitted into two sides of a page, distributed into small boxes (Figure 9.8).<sup>23</sup> Benimadhab Dey used to publish different almanacs under different titles, and the pictorial contents of these books usually did not match. In De's *Lord Ripon's Almanac*, the images of popular rites such as *paṣ-pārvaṇ* or *bhrātr̥dvitīyā* were drawn in a style that cannot be called anything but academic. (I could not find the name of the artist in the copy I used.)<sup>24</sup> But the style of the full-page images in *Benimadhab Dey's Pañjikā* was very different, and these images usually carried the names of the engravers. The varying modes of displaying images gave the publishers some scope for claiming distinctness in a competitive market.

In the nineteenth century, the artist would usually engrave his name and address in the bottom most panel of the image. In a certain sense, the engravers advertised their work through these images. While this practice leaves us with a considerable list of nineteenth-century engravers—Ramdhan Swarnakar, Krishnachandra Karmakar, Hiralal Karmakar, Panchanan Karmakar of



Figure 9.8 Woodcut, 22 x 22, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1869–70, Nityalal Sil, Calcutta, 1869. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

Hogalkura, Bishwambhar Karmakar, to name only a few—we know almost nothing about their social backgrounds, financial situations or the hierarchical arrangement of their craft. In the academic histories of European prints, we are told that the woodcut and the wood-engraving were two different processes, that the designer or the artist was often distinct from the cutter or the engraver, that the former usually employed the latter keeping in mind their respective styles.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to obtain similar facts about artists and engravers of nineteenth-century Bengal. We know that Krishnachandra Karmakar of Serampore both designed and engraved the images in the Chandrodoy Press almanacs.<sup>26</sup> In the 1867–8 almanac published by Day, Law and Co., there is an image of the *caḍak* festival which is clearly flagged as 'Artist and Engraver: Mr. Nafarchandra Bandyopadhyay of Chinsurah'.<sup>27</sup> It needs to be pointed out that none of the other images printed in the same volume puts the word 'Artist' before the names of the engravers. The difference between the artist and the engraver, therefore, was not entirely absent in the world of nineteenth-century almanacs. On the other hand, an engraver like Nityalal Datta of Jorabagan ran his own press. The works of Hiralal Karmakar of Battala, again, were not confined to almanacs; there was substantial demand for his woodcuts and illustrations of popular epic-Puranic texts sold as stand-alone prints. Most probably, these better known artists supervised a number of artisans, on whose work they put finishing touches. In an almanac

from the 1870s, we see that Panchanan Karmakar had the image of *Śivarātri* engraved 'by Radhaballabh Sil'.<sup>28</sup> Again, in the 1890s, perhaps as a mechanism of asserting proprietorship, the name of the publisher, Benimadhab De, came to be added to the images engraved by the same Panchanan Karmakar. But apart from these suggestive fragments, we do not have much data on the business of printing images in nineteenth-century almanacs.

### READING THE PRINTED IMAGES

In spite of such crucial gaps in our knowledge, it is possible to suggest a roughly tripartite division of almanac images for further analysis: the cover and/or the title page, images of festivals and deities, and images used in advertisements. During the 1830s, the cover of the Chandroday Press almanac was not distinguished from its title page. The title was printed in both Bengali and Roman scripts, a feature that sharply distinguished the new almanac from its precolonial versions. The cover page functioned like a handbill: it gave information on the places from which the almanac could be obtained. Incidentally, this handbill-like cover page would return in the declining years of the press. In the 1858–9 almanacs, for instance, the cover not only gave the details of the publisher, engraver and distributors, but also evoked, somewhat desperately, the name of the deceased founder-engraver Krishnachandra Karmakar. The name in itself had become a trademark.

But in the 1840s, during the high noon of Krishnachandra's engraving career, the cover pages of Chandroday Press almanacs used to be different. They followed the copybook style of what was then called mirror titles (Figure 9.9). The page was framed as a huge, palatial entrance, with two symmetrical lion figures guarding European-style columns on both sides. The title of the almanac was embossed on a classical-looking tablet in the middle, framed by a Sanskrit verse. The intended effect, undoubtedly, was grandeur and elegance. The covers of Nrityalal Sil's almanacs were evidently different from Krishnachandra's (Figure 9.10). Here, the engraver (and perhaps also the designer) Heeralal Karmakar filled the backcloth with a series of doll-like figures of the different zodiac signs, much in the manner in which a panel in a terracotta temple was filled with multiple divine figurines. The rather inconspicuous features of the figures had the effect, by their proliferation, of a wild growth that filled the empty space on the margins. The thickly dark back-cover of the same almanac however has carried a single book advertisement, printed in white, thereby underlining the name of the publisher prominently. We may also cite Benimadhab Dey's *Lord Ripon's Panjikā*, mentioned earlier, as

another instance of decorative variation, as it had the image of a large butterfly engraved on its title page, apart from the pictures of the viceroy and Ganeśa.

A skilful combination within a single frame of these different traditions of cover design can be seen in the works of Priyagopal Das, who decorated the P.M. Bagchi almanacs in the early twentieth century. Among various European illustrative stereotypes, the zodiac signs form a circle around the conversing figures of Siva and Parvati. The setting is defined by the heavenly hills of Kailāśa with a winding river, drawn in the typical style of a theatrical backdrop (Figure 9.11). In his time, Das was unparalleled in his skill of creating commercial labels drawing on both local and European styles. Creating trademark emblems for a mass product like the almanac was his forte. The cover itself was the emblem. Particular designs referenced particular publishing houses. This convention was already in place by the end of the nineteenth century.

To come to the second set of images, I want to point to the a woodcut figure of a Brahman recurrently adorning the pages of various almanacs since 1825. Comparable are the Brahman-like figures of *Samkrānti-puruṣa* (zodiac man, symbolizing movements of the sun), and the planets *Rāhu* and *Ketu*



Figure 9.9 Cover/Title page, *Nātan panjikā*, 1842–3, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.





Figure 9.10 Cover, 21 x 11, by Hiralal Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1869–70, Nrityalal Sil. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

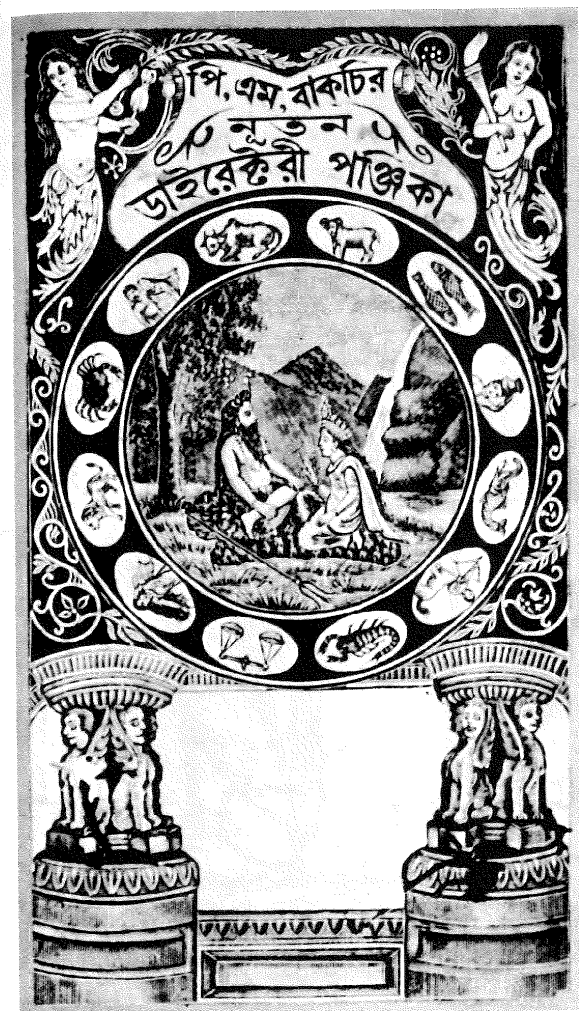


Figure 9.11 Cover, coloured process block, 16.5 x 9, P.M. Bagchi's *Nūtan pañjikā*, preserved in the design book of Priyagopal Das, 1905. Courtesy of Arup Sengupta.



Figure 9.12 *Samkrānti-puruṣa*, woodcut, 11.6 x 10.6, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1840–1, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

which appeared not only in the 1835 almanac printed at the Dinasinidhu Press by Pitambar Sen, but also, and more frequently, in the Serampore almanacs ('Figure 9.2') after 'almanacs'. From time to time, these images were placed inside the boxes of the zodiac diagram, almost as miniature illustrations in a manuscript (Figure 9.13). These practices trouble the claims of self-adequacy of printed texts. Moreover, the habit of seeing was also variously negotiated.

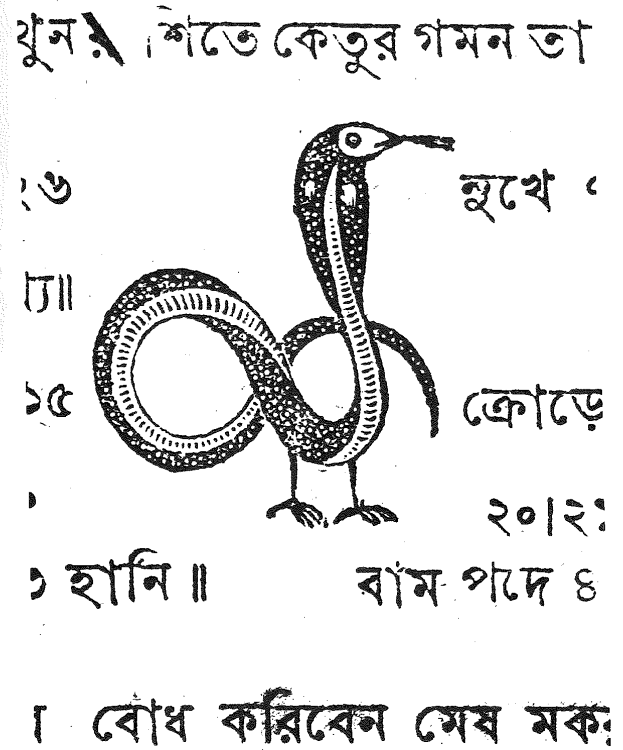


Figure 9.13 Image of Ketu, woodcut, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1840–1, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



Figure 9.14 Lakshmi, woodcut, 7.5 x 11, by Ramdhan Swarnakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1835–6, Dinashindhu Press. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

Consider the image of Lakshmi by Ramdhan Swarnakar, for example (Figure 9.14). In the rectangular surface of the page, both the Sanskrit verse and its Bengali translation were perpendicularly printed while the image faced the reader straight on. In order to read the verses, one would have to rotate the book. The image would always capture the reader's attention first, reducing the vertical lines of printed words to the status of its frame. This tension between the organization of words and images is remarkable.

Like every other committed artist, Krishnachandra Karmakar tended to rework and improve upon his older compositions. In the 1840 almanac of the Chandrodoy Press, he published a full-page rectangular image of the *chadāk* festival (year-ending festival in homage to Siva) with his name engraved inside it (Figure 9.15). The performances were framed against a Siva temple in full view and the arrangement of figures was cluttered. In the almanac published from the same press in 1842, we come across another *chadāk* image by him (Figure 9.16). The performances were more carefully organized in this one,

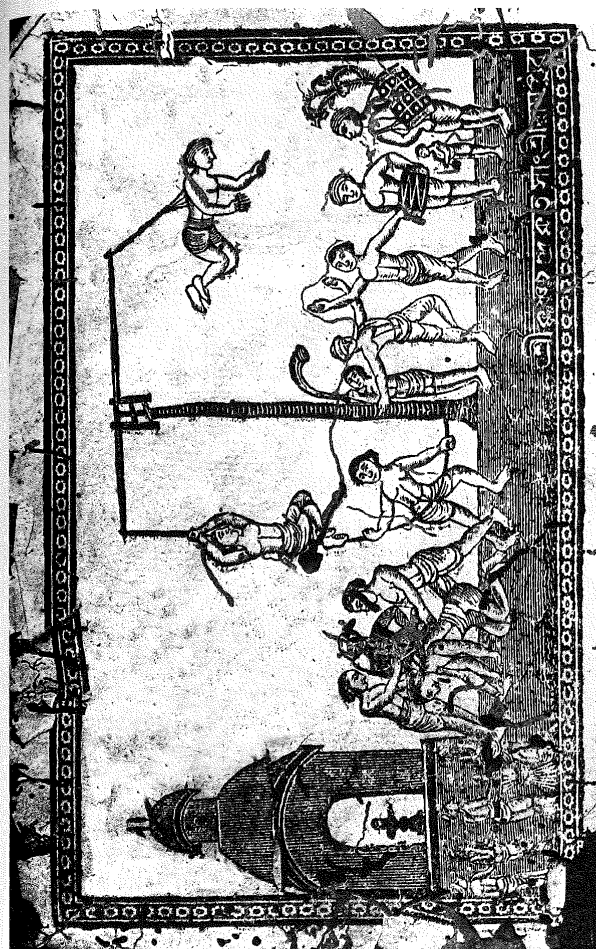
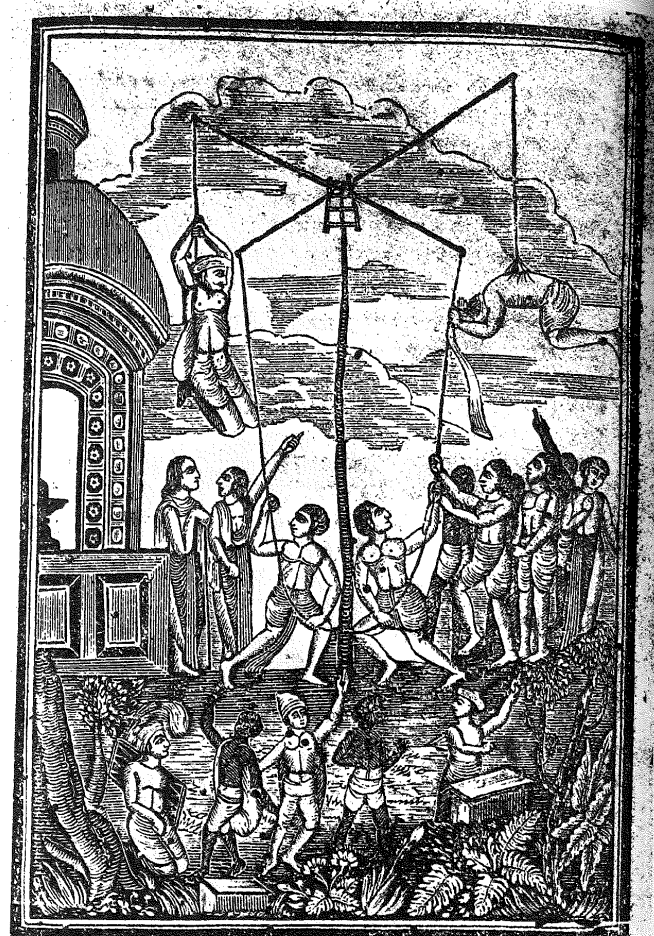


Figure 9.15 *Chadāk*, woodcut, 20 x 12, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1840–1, Chandrodoy Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.





চড়ক ।

কৃষ্ণচন্দ্র কর্ণকায়ের কৃত

Figure 9.16 *Cadək*, woodcut, 16 x 11, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1842–3, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

the temple dome was only partly visible, and a few casual strokes denoted clouds in the sky. In the manner of displaying parts of the temple, there was a clear projection of angular vision. The scene of *gājan* was now foregrounded and two conversing men stood out from a surging crowd. European-style floral-patterned illustrations filled the lower panel. This was a typical picture much in demand. Its success was its condensation of all the predictable gestures, likely figures and anticipated styles of a familiar annual ceremony into one frame. It brought the expected within the scope of perception. But to speak of Krishnachandra's achievements, we need to look elsewhere. The texture of the different activities of *cadək* in his work did not follow the traditional conventions of *paṭacitra*, or the bazaar art of Kalighat, or even the European style. The forms and figures in his image were not adjusted as objects in a convergent perspective, and hence his style was clearly different from the contemporary instances of European or Company Art. But he still used cross-hatched lines in his illustrations: it was the linear representation of gesture and movement that gave his figures their density and substance. In terms of dimensions, on the other hand, his depiction of the ceremony adopted the style of *paṭacitra*. The object of Krishnachandra's design was distinct: an economical but recognizable representation of the scene with all its characteristic attributes and actions in the two-dimensional space of the printed page. The ceremony as a spectacle had to be made directly accessible to the optical organ. When we compare the controlled composition of the second image and its use of angular vision to the cluttered order of the first, it becomes clear how Krishnachandra continually strove to better his style and why he came to be regarded as the master engraver by his colleagues.

We need to remember here that depictions of the scenes of *cadək* and *gājan* were extremely rare in the terracotta temple panels of West Bengal.<sup>29</sup> However, these popular festivals were portrayed in almanacs with almost a vengeance. Although Krishnachandra's visual account of these scenes remained modular, other engravers sometimes modified the representation a little, in keeping with the broad conventions. Let us look at Nriyalal Datta's *cadək* image in an almanac of 1877–8 as an example (Figure 9.17). The composition is almost identical to Krishnachandra's, but the details of the figures vary. The shape of the temple at the corner is different. The figures below are cheerful. A vendor is selling snacks in the fair. A boy is standing with his mother. In the context of terracotta temple decorations, Hitesranjan Sanyal points out a generic feature of such variations. These figures are characterized by their almost expressionless faces. The particularity of mood is conveyed principally through the bodily gestures or stylized contours of the figures.

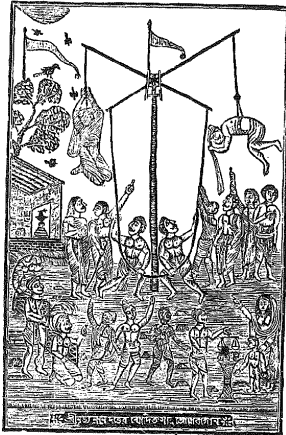


Figure 9.17 *Cadakpūjā*, woodcut, 14 x 12, by Nrityalal Datta, *Nūtan pañjikā*, title page missing, 1877–8. Personal collection of the author.

Individually, the images may have their origins in indigenous traditions or foreign conventions or the artist's observation of reality. But collectively they function to strengthen the overall design.<sup>30</sup>

We need to recognize the slippage between the successive mythological images in the almanacs: the framework was the same, but there were changes in the presentation of subjects. This applies to almost all images. I would particularly refer to those of Snānayātra, Rathayātra, and Śivarātri. We see two kinds of representation of the Snānayātra (Bathing ceremony) festival in the almanacs published from the Chandroday Press. The image created by Krishnachandra Karmakar in 1842 (Figure 9.18) was divided into two panels, the upper section containing the icons of Balarāma, Subhadrā, and Jagannātha, and the lower section distributed into columns and gateways. In Ramchandra Karmakar's image in another Chandroday almanac from the next decade (Figure 9.19), the established structure continued, but the subject of the lower panel became different. It showed the ritual act of bathing the god and introduced different female and royal figures. In a similar manner, Heeralal Karmakar's modifications in the 1869–70 almanac (published by Nrityalal Sil) were also confined to the lower panel. The figures continued to change. Kings on elephants and Europeans in hats came together in the same image, almost suggesting a social expansion of the spectacle of the festival (Figure 9.20). The ceremony of Jagannātha's



Figure 9.18 Jagannatha's Snānayātrā, woodcut, 16 x 11, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1842–3, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

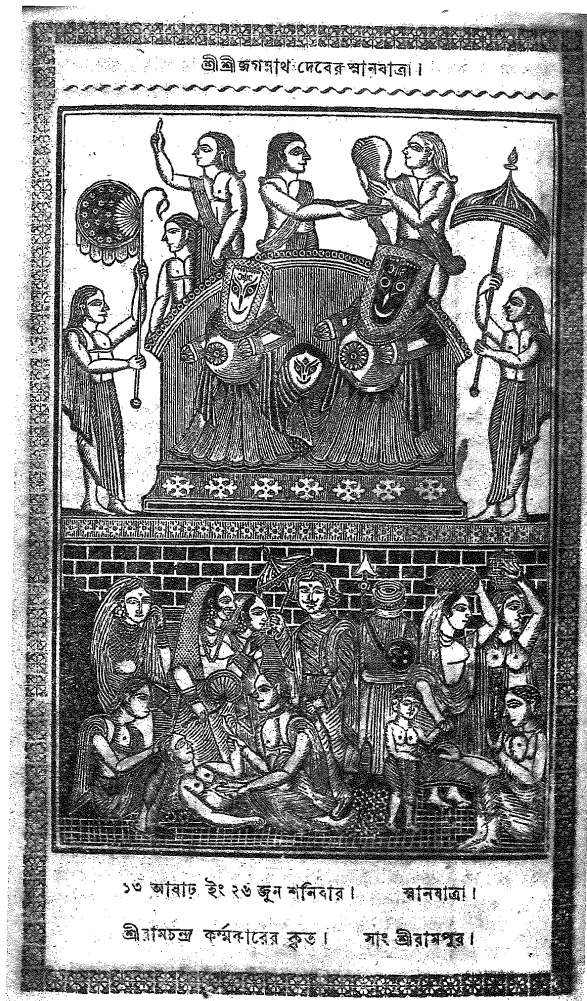


Figure 9.19 Jagannatha's Snānayātrā, woodcut, 20 x 12, by Ramchandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1858–9, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public Library.

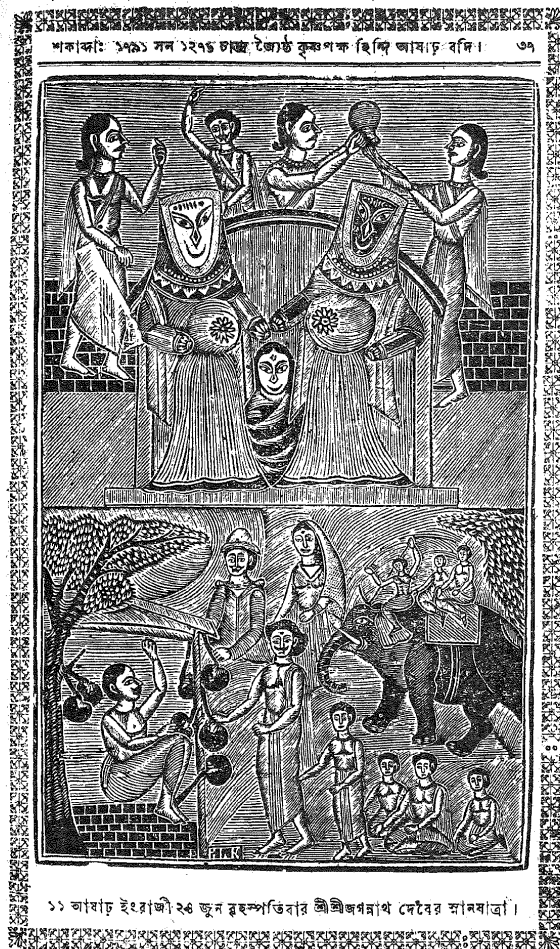


Figure 9.20 Jagannatha's Snānayātrā, electro block, 20 x 12, by Hiralal Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1869–70, Nriyalal Sil. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

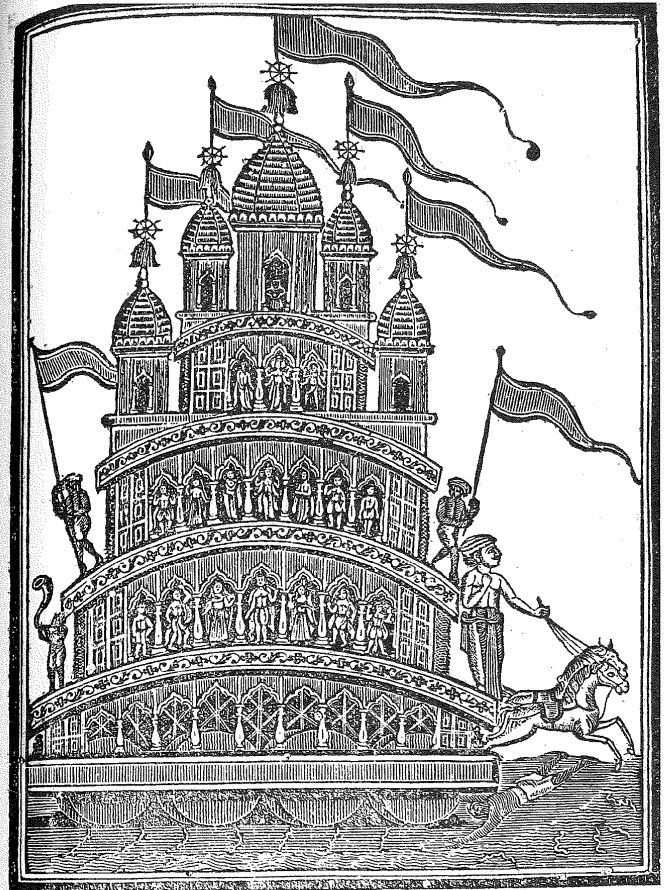
Snānayātra, at any rate, was an assortment of diverse Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Tantric rituals, a palimpsest of different cultural registers, and hence could allow greater representational freedom.<sup>31</sup> While the stability of the upper panel ensured continuity of visual consumption, the minor variations in the lower panel opened new points of departure in terms of the subject matter.

This was true for the Rathayātra (car festival) pictures too. What dominated Krishnachandra Karmakar's image was a single figure of the chariot (*ratha*), itself organized into a number of panels full of different figures (Figure 9.21). On the other hand, the lower panel of the work of Panchanan Karmakar (published in Benimadhab Dey's almanac) in the 1890s privileged the dancing procession and the ecstatic crowd that gathered around and followed the chariot (Figure 9.22). Icons realized themselves in performances.

The central figure of the Śivarātri images was certainly the most ubiquitously reproduced icon in the popular culture of nineteenth-century Bengal. In the almanacs (of which he was the chief promulgator) Siva appeared in a number of distinctive pictorial conventions: sitting majestically with his semi-divine companions Nandī and Bhṛngī on the side, or wearing his unique necklace of human skulls and accompanied by his wife (Figure 9.23). The manner in which Nandī and Bhṛngī stood in these images, the criss-crossed lines which were used to illustrate the pictures, the stylized use of the *bel* tree, and the sitting posture of the Lord clearly set apart the almanac images of Siva from those in the Kalighat *pais*. More remarkable perhaps was the image engraved by Panchanan Karmakar and published in the 1894–5 almanac of Benimadhab Dey (Figure 9.24). In placing a bow-carrying figure on a tree (purported to represent the legendary Wicked Hunter) alongside Siva, Karmakar inserted a solitary almanac image into a longer series of folk narratives. If the act of adding this figure had evoked a well-known story, then the social memory of that story now made possible a particular way of reading the image, even without an accompanying written commentary.<sup>32</sup>

Then again, there were also those images (notably of *Janmāṣṭami* and of 'The Descent of Gaṅgā') which clearly employed the narrative conventions of *pañcitra*: the successive scenes of a particular story ran in a row within horizontal panels, vividly resembling the act of writing and without demanding any other adjustment from the literate eye (Figure 9.25). A similar style is found in book illustrations. In this set of conventions, there would not be much difference between reading the almanac images and viewing the mythological *pañcitra* narratives.

One can say that there is a lowest common denominator in every age of viewing popular images. This is the standard taste, brought into being through

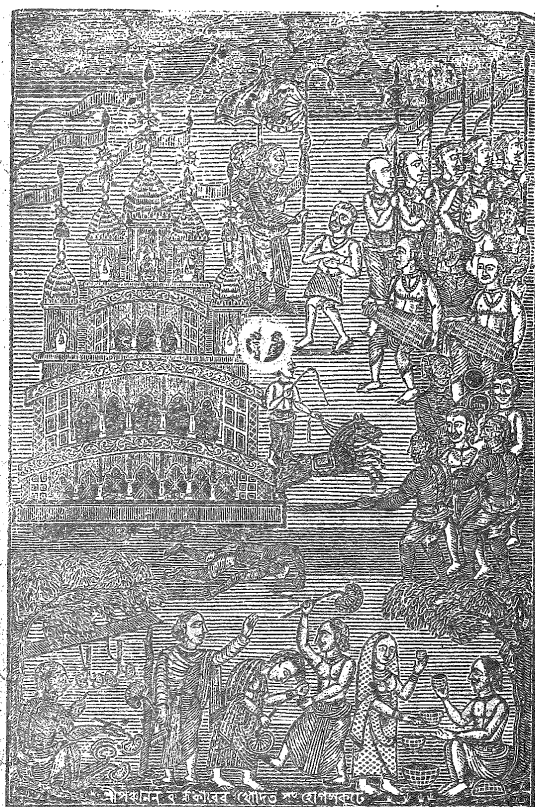


২৭ আষাঢ় রথ যাত্রা।

শ্রীকৃষ্ণচন্দ্র কৰ্মকাৰেৰ কৃত।

Figure 9.21 *Rathayātra*, woodcut, 15.5 x 10.7, by Krishnachandra Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1842–3, Chandroday Press at Serampore. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



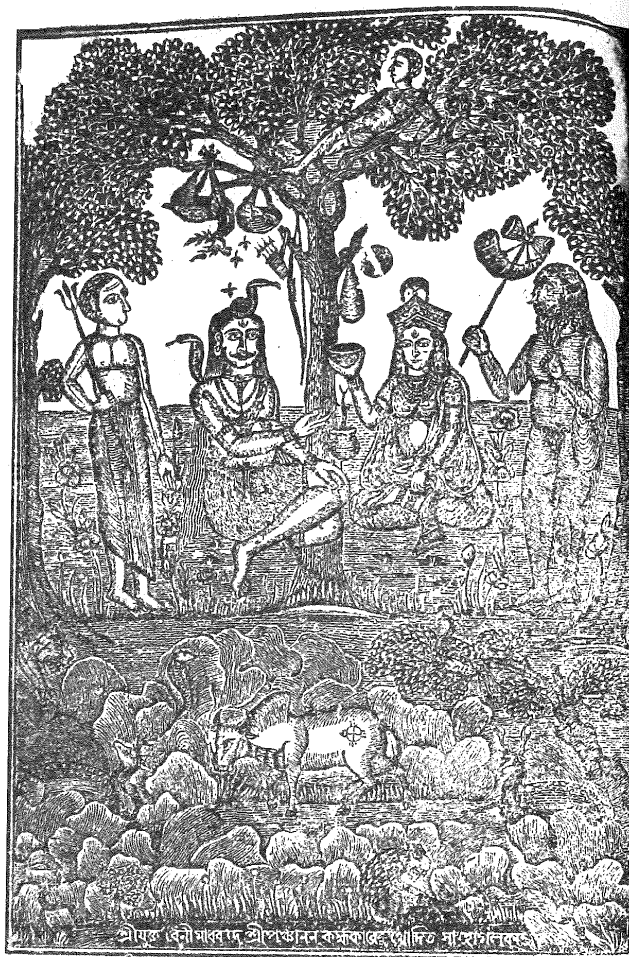


৮ আষাঢ় ইংরাজী ২১ জুন মঙ্গলবার শ্রীজগন্নাথদেবের রথযাত্রা ।

Figure 9.22 *Rathayātra*, electro block, 17.5 x 11, by Panchanan Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1900–1, Benimadhab Dey & Co. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

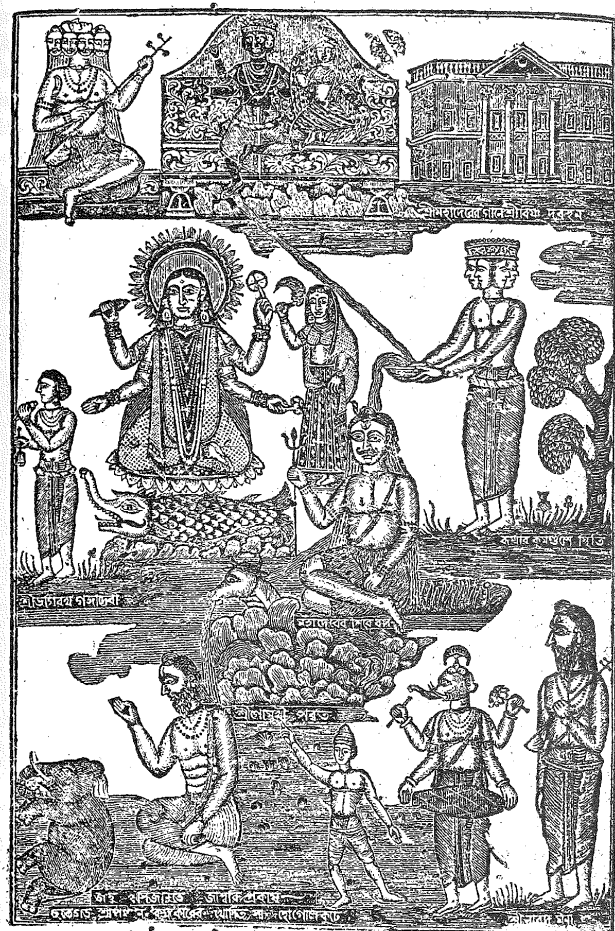


Figure 9.23 *Śivarātri*, woodcut, 21 x 12, by Panchanan Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1870–1, Harihar Press. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



১১ ফাল্গুন ইংৰাজী ২২ ফেব্ৰুৱাৰী শুক্লবাম শ্ৰীশিৱৱত্ৰি।  
বোম বোম শিৱ শস্ত্ৰে হৰ হৰ বোম কেদাৰ।

Figure 9.24 *Sivanātri*, woodcut, 17 x 11, by Panchanan Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1894–5, Benimadhab Dey & Co. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



৩৮।৩১ জঠি ইংৰাজী ১১।১৩ জুন মঙ্গলবাৰ ও বুধবাৰ শ্ৰীদশহৰা  
গজা ও মকগা পূজা।

Figure 9.25 *Dasaharā gaṅgā o manasā pūjā*, woodcut, 17.5 x 11, by Panchanan Karmakar, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1894–5, Benimadhab Dey & Co. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

various common viewing practices. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, reflecting on his encounter with the mythological paintings of Ravi Varma, Rabindranath Tagore spoke of the commonly accepted norm of reading images. The poet was not as enthusiastic about Varma as was his nephew Balendranath. Nor was he much concerned with the stylistic details of the paintings or the artistic ideals of ancient India. Instead, he was thinking about the popularity of mythological paintings in the context of the tradition of viewing. He knew that it was 'easy to find fault' with these pictures. But the real question, he thought, was something else: namely, what the viewers expected from these images. The acceptability of the images sprang from the familiarity of their themes: these were 'native themes', and so 'our mind begins to cooperate with the painter's effort. We anticipate what he is trying to say and get it before he says so. If we can recognize his effort, we complete the rest'.<sup>33</sup> What is expected from an image flows from this foreknowledge, this very style of collective presentiment. This is the lowest common denominator of viewing. Both in their attempt to portray what the people expected and in their capacity to embody an accepted visual norm in a certain historical period, almanac images of festivals become a part of social performance itself.

In this context, it is meaningful to remember Ernst Gombrich's observation of the tension between repetition of conventionality at the structural level and minor modifications at the level of subject matter or illustration. Almanacs and their images were required to negotiate both the suturing of different, heterogeneous times and the performance of rituals in regular everyday cycles. This was the sense of order at work. The routinized actions of the everyday informed the clichés with which the textual and visual designs were suffused. European almanacs suffered equally from this. Bernard Capp notices 'a steadfast rejection of originality' in English almanacs.<sup>34</sup> Repetition of habits renders every scheme static. In the repetitiveness of frames, too, the slight displacements in subject matter actually incite the power of the original scheme. The recurrence of the structure creates a familiar space, and the viewing eye remains trapped in this space. Varying figural combinations within this space create the aura of its distinctiveness. It is the tension between the recurrence of the structure and the variations of subject matter that guides the viewer's attention to the viewed object. Through habit, his expectation translates into a visual norm. The process neither allows a burst of visual surprise to overpower the viewing habits nor induces the monotony of repetition to completely overtake the viewing agent.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, advertisements. Advertisements began to appear in almanacs from the 1880s and their number substantially increased from the next decade. Books, various medications, and many other items were advertised here. Indeed, circulation-wise, there was hardly a more effective vehicle. The

contest over taste was primarily focused on the style of these advertisements. We need to remember that in spite of their prominence, the mythological pictures did not serve as the sole model for commercial visuals in almanacs. Mythological characters were, of course, present. But contemporary European fashion also made its way into the Bengali almanac (Figure 9.26).



Figure 9.26 'Śiva giving salsā' (tonic), woodcut, 8 x 7, advertisement of N.C. Mukherjee & Co, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1898–9, Benimadhab De & Co., Vidyaratna Press. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.



In any case, the standard of judging these images had to be different. Since the overriding imperative was that of popularity and saleability, the question of stylistic agreement took a back seat. The artists created such hybrid images in the hope of drawing attention and stirring up desire. The accompanying texts also followed this rule. Take, for example, the advertisement of Kaviraj Haralal Gupta Kaviratna's medicinal product 'Mahameda Rasayana' in the 1890 almanac of Benimadhab Dey (Figure 9.27). The engraved image placed right in the middle of the vertically arranged text was presented as evidence of the truth of the text. And a supposedly scientific explication of male reproductive powers was also provided through the symbol of the sperm. The commercial logic of the visual design was prepared to use every available resource. The ethical implications of such advertisements were, of course, hotly debated at the time. The following excerpt may be cited:

Captivated by the gorgeous splendour of the advertisements put up by these traders, ordinary village people buy and consume these medicines in the hope of saving their lives, only to find themselves cheated at every step. ... In the first page of [such] an advertisement are printed the images of gods and goddesses, bordered with peculiar designs of flowers, leaves and figures of angels; amidst all this, the names of "This Company" and "That Company" are written in strange cursive styles. Even pictures

of Dhanvantari [the celestial physician] descending from heaven with a bottle of medicine in his hand are not uncommon. The names of the medicines, printed with various special [engraved] blocks, are then placed in these advertisements and they are further decorated, glamourized and beautified by all means.<sup>36</sup>

'These comments, couched in a language of warning against allurements of advertisements, underline the arrival of a new visual genre of commercial art pervading a wide arena of popular vision full of colour and glamour, thematically a mixture of the earthly and the divine.' history of almanac images shows how visual representations of commodities gradually became indispensable in the world of consumption, even in those spaces where religious ritual was deeply embedded in everyday life. These images were a site of the intertwining of desire, taste, and piety. In the history of social practices, the pleasing display of commodities, along with the resonant voice of vendors and the seductive incitement of advertisements, inserts the acts of consumption in the sensory, corporeal regime of everyday practice.

## NOTES

- 1 Sripantha, *Jakhan chāpākhānā elo* (Calcutta: Banga Samskriti Sammelan, 1977), pp. 88–9.
- 2 Pranabranjan Ray, 'Printing by Woodblock upto 1901: A Social and Technological History', in Asit Paul (ed.), *Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983).
- 3 Sukumar Sen, *Battālār chāpā o chabi* (Calcutta: Ananda, 1989).
- 4 Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 5 Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay, 'Bānglā pañjikā', *Bāngla-prasaṅga* (Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1987), pp. 38–58.
- 6 Jogeshchandra Roy Vidyānidhi, *Atmacarit* (Bankura: Swastik, 2002), p. 2 and pp. 42–3.
- 7 Durgaprasad Vidyabhushan, *Pañjikā* (Title page missing, 1225 b./ 1818–19); copy in National Library, Calcutta.
- 8 Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Saṅgbādpātre sekāler kathā*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, c. 1932), pp. 60–2; Vol. II, p. 164.
- 9 Anjan Mukhopadhyay, 'Bālir paṇḍit samāj', *Sānnidhya*, September 2008, pp. 54–8. I am indebted to Professor Brajadulal Chattopadhyay for referring me to this source.
- 10 *Nūtan pañjikā* (Serampore: Chandrodya Press, 1842).
- 11 *The Bengalee Annual Almanac, Nūtan pañjikā* (Calcutta: Dināsindhu Press, 1242 b./1835–36).
- 12 Introduction, *Bengalee Almanac and Directory*, 1874–5, B.R. Day and Brothers, Jorasanko, Advaita Jantrālaya. *Pañjikā-directory*, 1878–79, compiled and published by Nriyālal Sil, Ahiritola.

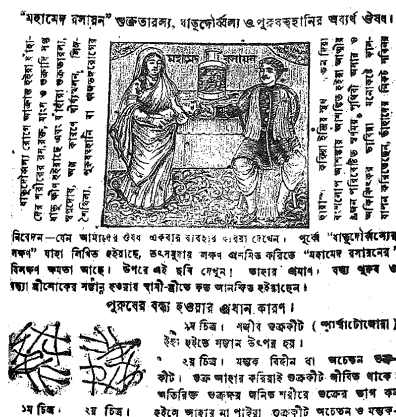


Figure 9.27 Advertisement of Mahameda Rasayana, Vṛhat Ayurvediya Auśadhālaya, Upper Chitpore Road, woodcut, 5.5 x 6, *Nūtan pañjikā*, 1898–9, Benimadhab Dey & Co., Vidyaratna Press. Courtesy of National Library, Calcutta.

- 13 'Bāṅglār melā pañjikār pāñjite', *Kaushikī*, Special Issue, 1997, p. 65.
- 14 See Ranajit Guha, 'The Advent of Punctuality' and 'A Colonial City and Its Time(s)' in his, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, ed., Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), pp. 391–434 for a wonderful discussion of the issue.
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- 16 *The Bengalee Annual Almanac, Nutan pañjikā* (Calcutta: Dinasindhu Press, 1242 b./1835–6).
- 17 Cf. *Nūtan pañjikā 1898–99* (Calcutta: Benimadhab Dey and Co., 1898).
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