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Mothers and kings in *Mangalakavya* weddings: Negotiating authority in the *Dharmamangal* tradition

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Abstract
Marriage episodes in the medieval Bengali *Mangalakāvya* tradition function as key narrative sites where royal authority, kinship, and gender are negotiated in concrete social terms. Focusing primarily on the *Dharmamangal* text, this essay examines how weddings stage moments of tension between sovereign power and the prerogatives of kin groups, and between patriarchal authority and domestic morality, through the figures of the king and the mother. While royal authority appears as the ultimate guarantor of social and cosmic order, it is repeatedly tested by the claims of kinship and customary rights. Similarly, maternal voices, though formally excluded from decision-making, emerge as moral interlocutors that articulate apprehension, foresight, and dissent at crucial junctures in marital negotiations. Drawing on episodes from the *Dharmamangal* alongside parallels from the *Chandīmangal* and *Manasāmangal*, the essay argues that these texts do not undermine patriarchal or monarchical hierarchies but sustain them through controlled articulation of dissent. Mothers' protests and subjects' remonstrances function as ethical punctuation within an otherwise normative order, transforming unilateral decrees into scenes of dialogue, persuasion, and eventual submission. Situating these narrative strategies within the Performative context of the *Mangalakāvya* corpus and broader historical shifts in post-Sena Bengal, the essay demonstrates how authority in these texts is constructed not as brute command but as negotiated legitimacy. Weddings thus emerge as ritualized arenas where defiance and submission coexist, revealing a social imagination that relied on voiced dissent to secure obedience.

Keywords: Medieval Bengali literature, Mangalakāvya, *Dharmamangal*, marriage negotiations, royal authority, kinsmen's prerogatives, patriarchal authority, maternal voice, gender, dissent, negotiation vs. coercion

Introduction
Mangalakāvyas are medieval Bengali texts which contain long verse-narratives (roughly between 15th to 18th century) that eulogise a tutelary deity and tell the story of the establishment of his or her cult. The term *maṅgal* signifies benediction, hence the composition, performance and even the act of witnessing the performance are believed to bring benediction upon those participating in each of these roles. In these texts, divine episodes mainly from the epic and Puranic literature are woven in relevant ways into the main narrative, creating an image of a recognisable social world, located between the realms of mythological imagination and everyday reality. These texts stand at the intersection between textual and performative traditions in Bengali's literary history. From roughly the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, poets composed sequential "*pālās*" or cantos that were copied and recopied in manuscripts, meant to be performed before a village audience. The major texts include the *Chandīmangal*, the *Manasāmangal*, the *Dharmamangal* and the *Annadāmangal*, dedicated to the deities Chandi, Manasa, Dharma Thakur and Annapurna respectively, alongside a host of minor texts dedicated to other divinities such as *Śashthī, Śītalā, Śiva* and *Kālī*. There are several recensions of each of these texts composed by different poets over the centuries and also several manuscripts of each of these versions since they were copied and recopied by scribes, often resulting in minor variations between manuscripts of the same text. The poetic style in these texts draws inspiration from the aesthetics of classical Sanskrit poetry to some extent and hence the more prominent and celebrated compositions are often ornate and embellished *kāvya*.

However, since these were meant for the consumption of simple rural folk, most compositions adopted accessible verse metre such as the *payār* and the *tripadī*. The texts were lengthy enough to lend themselves to performances that ran typically over eight days and nights. These narratives were also amenable to be adapted to the shorter *pañchālī* or *bratakathā* format, meant to be recited in the performance of women's daily domestic rites and ritual fasts such as *brata*s. Twentieth century linguists, folklorists and scholars of Bengali literature such as Sukumar Sen and Ashutosh Bhattacharya, who played the role of early canon-making anthologists of Bengali literature, drew the *Mangalakavya*s into a Bengali 'classical' archive. Yet this corpus was fundamentally performative.

Within this ecosystem of texts that spanned over the textual and performative traditions, the wedding episodes constituted crucial hinges of social narrative where gods, kings, merchants and households met, and the roles of mothers and rulers became audible not only in written scenes but as arguments staged before listening communities. This paper attempts to analyse some of the more prominent wedding episodes primarily in one such text, *viz*. the *Dharmamangal*, composed by the poet Ghanaram Chakrabarti. This is considered to be one of the most prominent of the *Dharmamangal* texts. The composition of this text is usually dated around 1711. The narrative is mainly about the propagation and establishment of the cult of Dharma Thakur, identified in this text as a form of Lord Vishnu, through the courageous adventures and enterprise of his ardent devotee, Lausen who is the protagonist of the story.

Three episodes of marriage figure prominently in the *Dharmamangal* text one pertains to the marriage of Lausen's mother Ranjabati with his father Karnasen, the other two are based on his own wedding, first with Kalinga and then with Kanara, the princesses of Kamrupa and Simula respectively. In each of these episodes, as in many others across the *Mangalakavya* corpus, the marriage negotiations constitute a densely layered field where ideas of royal authority, kinship, patriarchy and gender intersect and counter each other. These poems, situated between the divine and the mundane, articulate social values through ritual scenes that audiences would possibly have recognised and related to, through everyday experience. In the *Dharmamangal* texts in particular, weddings become occasions to explore the limits of power – both royal and patriarchal. The king, though sovereign, must contend with kin who sometimes resist his interference; mothers, though marginal in formal decision-making, raise objections that briefly expose the cracks in paternal authority before being absorbed back into the normative order. In this essay, I focus on these two figures the king and the mother that together make visible the negotiations through which medieval Bengali society sustained its social hierarchies while allowing momentary spaces of dissent. The references shall mainly be to episodes from the *Dharmamangal* text, but in analysing these, I will also draw upon relevant parallels from two other prominent *Mangalakavya* texts the *Chandimangal* and the *Manasamangal*.

In the narrative world of the *Mangalakavyas*, marriage is at once social contract, ritual passage, and moral trial. The episodes surrounding the selection of grooms and the conduct of weddings uphold the codes prescribed for these in the *Dharmashastra* but they also balance this with the regional and local moralities through which those codes were interpreted. Fathers and Brahmin priests play dominant roles in these scenes; their decisions are presented as acts of dharma that are meant to secure lineage and status. This aligns perfectly with the didactic texts, on their ideas about whose responsibility or prerogative it was to select a groom. In the *Manusmriti*, the father is held to be the guardian and protector of the daughter as long as she is not married and his important duty is to give her in marriage at the right time, i.e., when she comes of age. A father who failed in this duty would become an object of contempt, according to the law givers [1]. However, *Mangalakavyas* do not stop where the *Dharmashastras* do. Alongside the father's command, two other voices frequently make themselves heard those of the sovereign and the mother. The king usually appears as the upholder of cosmic and social order, extending his reach into the domestic realm; the mother, in contrast, appears as its emotional conscience, questioning choices made in the name of that same order. The texts neither overthrow the primacy of men nor challenge the sacred hierarchies that sustain it. What they do permit is a glimpse of tension in the moments when established power must defend itself against the murmured objections of the kin.

In the *Dharmamangal*, there is a certain ambivalence regarding the king's authority in matters concerning marriage. It has been depicted as both natural and precarious. R. M. Das in his work on the Manusmriti, mentions exhortations by Manu regarding the marriage of daughters. According to Manu, the father's duty of giving a daughter in marriage at the right time, was of such prime importance, to be considered in all seriousness, that he deems it the responsibility of the king to see that no shirking of such duties was happening amongst his subjects [2]. In such a dispensation, the king therefore represents the highest node of worldly power, yet in the various episodes of the *Dharmamangal*, his interventions in domestic matters often provoke resistance from within the household. When the king of Kāmarūpa gives his daughter Kalinga in marriage to Lausen, his act restores political peace after defeat in battle and allows him to retain his kingship albeit with a reduction in status from independent sovereign to tributary chief. However, all this is achieved at the cost of using his child as ransom. The decision was absolute: there was no question of Kalinga's consent, nor any consultation with her mother. Nonetheless, the episode immediately introduces the queen's objection. She accuses her husband of sacrificing their daughter's life for his own safety and likens the marriage to a transaction of wealth. The king responds by invoking epic precedence Jambavan giving his daughter to Krishna after being vanquished by the latter to justify the act as dharmic necessity. What is significant here is that rather than dismissing his wife's protests, the king engaged with her through an elaborate discussion, by citing from the epics. Thus, although the queen's protest is silenced, the narrative records it fully, acknowledging its moral weight even as it must ultimately yield to patriarchal law. The text thereby concedes that the sovereign's will can be challenged within speech, even if it does not change the outcome [3].

Such fleeting challenges recur elsewhere too in the corpus. In *Chandimangal*, Khullana's mother Rambhavati objects when her husband Lakshapati agrees to marry their daughter to Dhanapati, already husband to Khullana's cousin. Her outburst, "Why will you make your daughter's life miserable?", expresses not rebellion but worldly foresight.

She foresees the hardship of her daughter sharing a household with a cruel co-wife [4]. Yet, once the priest assures her that astrological fate leaves no better alternative, by predicting early widowhood for Khullana, in case they waited any longer for a groom other than Dhanapati, Rambhavati capitulates [5]. In the *Manasamangal*, Behula's mother Amala protests her husband's consent to a match sealed by an impossible chastity test, berating the priest who arranged it; she too is overruled. Chand, the prospective father-in-law, put forth the absurd condition of a chastity test, whereby Behula was required to perform the impossible feat of cooking black gram made of iron until they were tender enough to be eaten, as proof of her chastity. This made Amala apprehensive about Behula's future as a daughter-in-law to such a man. This led her to question and criticise her husband's decision regarding the choice of groom. However, she was placated by Behula herself, who was confident of passing the test with the grace of goddess Manasa [6].

In each of these cases, the mother's protest is brief and each ends in resignation. The mother's speech therefore functions less as a disruption than as a necessary interlude of realism, an acknowledgment that private apprehension or dissent cannot overturn public order.

If mothers in these texts momentarily interrupt the patriarchal writ being laid down, kings sometimes find themselves resisted by their subjects. The *Dharmamangal* episode of Ranjabati's marriage shows this dynamic with exceptional clarity [7]. The king of Gauda decides to marry his wife's sister Ranjabati to the aged Karnasen, disregarding both the girl's youth and the kin's opinions. Mahamad, Ranjabati's brother, denounces the act, declaring that the king may rule the kingdom but not the lineage. His protest exposes a rift between political sovereignty and kinship autonomy. The scene does not end in revolt the marriage proceeds but the poet allows Mahamad's challenge to stand, unpunished, as the voice of local right against monarchical overreach. In doing so, the text mirrors a broader historical tension noted by historians: The gradual displacement of royal control over social regulation by caste and family councils in post-Sena Bengal.

Describing the transition from the period of Sena rule to that following the Turkish conquest, Richard M. Eaton says that while earlier the king had traditionally been the upholder of the social order, maintaining hierarchies through differential bestowing of wealth and patronage, in the Hindu society of the later period, maintenance of the social order was displaced onto the "caste" councils, that were now responsible for the enforcement of group endogamy, regulation of marriage and the keeping of genealogies [8]. The *Dharmamangal* renders this shift as moral argument rather than legal reform. Kings remain powerful, but their moral legitimacy is tested by the reactions of kin who speak for customary authority.

The figure of Mahamad is crucial to understanding how dissent could coexist with loyalty. His anger at Ranjabati's unsuitable marriage erupts in violent metaphors; he likens himself to Kamsa persecuting Devaki, but his words also reveal the limits of rebellion. He cannot undo the match or punish the king; his protest ends in self-imposed estrangement from his sister. What remains is the act of speaking itself: an assertion that the king's decisions are not beyond moral scrutiny. This pattern of voiced resistance followed by capitulation is repeated across the *Dharmamangal*. Authority is shown to be ultimate yet never uncontested, and that contestation is itself part of the moral texture of the narrative world.

Within this world, the mother's speech occupies a parallel position to the subject's protest. Her words mark the threshold of agency allowed to women: the ability to foresee danger and to articulate fear, but not to alter the course of events. The queen of *Kāmarūpa* voices precisely this kind of resistance. She recognises that her husband's political compulsion has turned their daughter into currency and names it as such. Yet when Kalinga herself expresses willingness to marry Lausen, the mother's authority dissolves [9]. The coincidence of filial consent with paternal command seals the act as fate, and the queen's words recede into the narrative past. Still, the very necessity of giving her speech such space suggests that the poet considered maternal dissent indispensable to the credibility of the story. The realism of the domestic sphere demanded that a mother speak, even if she must eventually submit.

In the same *Dharmamangal*, Bhanumati, the queen of Gauḍa and Ranjabati's sister argues vehemently with her husband when he proposes the marriage to Karnasen. She points to the groom's old age and the disparity between the pair, but her objections collapse before royal will. When the bride's mother learns of the match only on the wedding day, her disappointment is voiced too late. The successive silencing of women, first the sister, then the mother, illustrates how patriarchal decisions absorb dissent without erasing its memory. Each objection, though ineffective, registers as moral commentary, ensuring that the narrative conscience remains divided.

The *Dharmamangal*'s treatment of Kanara's marriage takes this tension to its extreme. When the Gauda king sends a proposal to the ruler of Śimulā, Kanara's father is ready to yield under political pressure. It is Kanara's mother who first insists that their daughter must be asked, describing her as "a woman of free will" [10]. The father consults her but ignores her advice when Kanara refuses. The mother's insistence on consultation momentarily suspends patriarchal routine; it recognises the daughter as a moral subject. Yet once Kanara defies her father outright, the mother disappears from the scene. The ensuing confrontation between father and daughter dramatizes a direct collision between patriarchal command and female agency, and the maternal voice that enabled this collision is withdrawn. Here again, the texts concede speech but deny consequence. The possibility of a woman's will is imagined only to be folded back into divine design, for Kanara's destiny as Lausen's bride is already ordained.

The royal perspective was never entirely secure in these narratives. Kings, in these tales sometimes justified their actions through scriptural analogy. The Kāmarūpa king appealed to myth to validate his choice of son-in-law. Recitations of epic precedence served to anchor royal actions within a moral genealogy, but they also exposed the king's dependence on persuasion rather than decree. When the Gauḍa king hesitated after hearing that Kanara had rejected him, he recalled the story of Krishna and Rukmini, distinguishing willing abduction from coercive seizure. The emphasis here fell on discernment: true kingship requires not simply command but judgment of right conduct. The poet thus humanises the sovereign by subjecting him to moral deliberation, yet the outcome reasserts hierarchy, no matter who speaks, it is the king who decides whether or not

to listen. When the challenge came from a male kinsman like Mahamad, who certainly poses a potentially stronger resistance than a mother, then resorting to guile seemed to be a wiser strategy. The Gauḍa king never debated Mahamad on the propriety of forcing marriage with an elderly man upon a much younger woman. Instead, he resorted to the deceitful tactic of sending Mahamad off on an impossible mission to Kāmarūpa, while engaging in debate with more pliable relatives/subjects such as his own wife, and conducting Ranjabati's wedding while Mahamad was far away.

What emerges from these exchanges is a texture of negotiation rather than confrontation. Kings exercise power within a field of moral dialogue while mothers express dissent within the etiquette of devotion. Neither completely subverts the structure but both define its ethical perimeter.

The *Dharmamangal* repeatedly shows that even the highest political authority depends on the approval of the community [11]. The sovereign who ignores counsel risks ridicule or divine retribution; the father who disregards his wife's fears invites misfortune. In each case, dissent functions to create a space for reasserting the scope and limitation of dharma rather than as an act of rebellion.

The domestic scenes following marriage confirm this containment. Once the daughter is wed, the mother's concern turns to ritualised grief. The weeping at the bride's departure, contrasted with the father's composure, translates earlier verbal protests into silent lament. The act of parting completes the cycle of limited agency. The mother who once spoke up, now accepts separation as destiny. Menaka's quarrel with her daughter Gauri in the *Chandimangal* for overstaying in her natal home extends this logic. The mother who once resisted an unsuitable groom now complains of the married daughter's burden upon her household. The moral is consistent, that a woman's right place is with her husband, and the mother's responsibility ends once that transfer is accomplished. This closure, however, does not erase the earlier act of speaking. The *Mangalakavya* poets preserve maternal speech not as subversion but as conscience. Rambhavati's anger, Amala's fear, Bhanumati's resistance, and the queens' protests accumulate into a pattern of moral commentary running parallel to the male privilege of enforcing a decision. Their defeat is certain, but their articulation transforms what would otherwise be unilateral decrees into scenes of dialogical persuasion. In narrative terms, such persuasion is essential to credibility; audiences accustomed to the negotiations of real marriage may have recognised their own experience in these dramatized debates. The *Mangalakavya* thus reconciles normative ideology with social realism by granting women the right to voice anxiety, even if that right ends at speech.

A similar mechanism governs the contest between royal authority and kinship. The king may decree, but subjects like Mahamad in the *Dharmamangal* or kinsmen of Dhanapati in the *Chandimangal* could question his jurisdiction publicly, on matters involving the lineage and caste group, such as marriage and chastity. Their protests never undo royal power, yet they delineate its moral boundaries. In the case of Mahamad the poet's authorial inclination towards sympathy for the challenger is somewhat evident in tone: he is not punished or ridiculed but portrayed as an anguished kinsman defending family honour. Authority is supreme in outcome, not in discourse. The king's dominance is Performative in some senses: he must stage his righteousness before an audience that includes his own subjects and kin.

In the *Chandimangal* the kinsmen questioned the king's authority to intervene in a matter such as the questioning and testing of a woman's chastity and the consequent ostracism of her family by kinsfolk. When they cast aspersions on Khullana's virtuosity and threatened to boycott the ritual feast hosted by her family on the occasion of her father-in-law's death anniversary, her father Lakshapati suggested that the matter be brought before the king for his adjudication. The kinsmen rejected it squarely, citing Puranic and epic precedence. They referred to the story of Garuda's son Sampati and that of Duryodhana, both of whom met with severe retribution for having ignored kinsfolk because of their royal pride and vanity. In this way, the texts affirm hierarchy while allowing its critique to be heard. They sealed their protest against invoking the king's authority on matters pertaining to caste and lineage with the aphorism that while the king had the power to take away one's wealth and the executioner had the power to take away one's life, the power to take away or restore one's caste status was solely the prerogative of the kinsmen [12]. This episode draws the limits of royal authority even more firmly than the previous one.

The relationship between the two axes of power, royal and domestic is therefore complementary. Both rest on male control over women's marriage, and both are haunted by the possibility of moral error. The king can err by overstepping into family affairs; the father can err by ignoring maternal foresight. The corrective in each case is speech: the remonstrance of the subject, the protest of the mother. Yet, since in most cases, neither can alter the decision, their words function as moral punctuation, reminding listeners of the cost of absolute authority.

The inclusion of such exchanges, in the *Mangalakavya* texts may also be a reflection of the performative context of the tradition. Recited before mixed audiences of men and women, these narratives balanced didacticism with empathy. The moral order they depicted had to remain recognisable, not idealised beyond reach. To render the sovereign entirely infallible or the father entirely unchallenged would have drained the performance of emotional resonance. The inclusion of mothers' voices, with their blend of affection and helplessness, introduced a tone of realism of a cultural and moral world that audiences perhaps inhabited. Their eventual silence reaffirmed order, but the memory of their words lingered as a warning about the fragility of human judgment.

The figure of Phullara's mother Hiravati in *Chandimangal* offers a faint variation on this pattern. When the priest proposes the hunter Kalaketu as groom, Hiravati is readily convinced by the words of the priest that the match "fits like the lid of a pot" [13]. Her unhesitating consent stands out precisely because it is rare. Situated within a lower-caste, impoverished household, the stakes of the marriage are minimal; the mother's ease mirrors a world less burdened by property and honour. The absence of protest here does not signal equality, in all likelihood, but rather the absence of power altogether. The rule of consent or dissent seems to operate most strongly where the material consequences of marriage are greatest among merchants and kings. Thus, the louder the lament, the higher the social rank.

Conclusion

Across the *Mangalakavya* tradition, then, two patterns sustain the depiction of weddings. First, the king's authority, while formally unchallengeable, is continually measured against the competing claims of kin. Second, the mother's protest, though always defeated, introduces human complexity into ritual compliance. The coexistence of these tendencies keeps the narratives balanced between prescription and representation. The *Dharmamangal* neither celebrates rebellion nor suppresses it; it acknowledges that the social fabric depends on the controlled articulation of dissent. The logic of capitulation that concludes each maternal protest does not erase its significance. On the contrary, it defines the cultural limits within which women could speak. Their ability to question the wisdom of fathers and kings marks a space of ethical reasoning, however bounded. Similarly, the kin's capacity to challenge royal intrusion registers the persistence of local autonomy within an expanding framework of central power. The poets' interest lies not in overturning these hierarchies but in portraying how they are maintained through negotiation. Authority in the *Mangalakavya* is not brute command but argument followed by submission.

In the final analysis, the weddings of the *Dharmamangal* embody the paradox of a society that valued obedience yet relied on speech to secure it. Mothers and kings, figures at opposite poles of the social order, enact this paradox most vividly. The mother's words question, the king's words conclude; both affirm the need for dialogue within hierarchy. The texts allow mothers to speak so that their silence may later appear voluntary; they let subjects protest so that the king's rule may appear just. The result is a moral world sustained not by coercion alone but by the performance of consent. In these narrative rituals, therefore, the power of kings and the voices of mothers are two sides of the same social logic. The king's edict gains legitimacy through the visible endurance of objection; the mother's lament gains meaning through its final defeat. The *Mangalakavya* wedding thus stands as a scene of reconciliation between speech and submission, revealing a culture that could imagine resistance only as the prelude to acceptance. Within that limited but eloquent space, medieval Bengal recognised the necessity of both dissent and hierarchy.

References

1. RM Das. Women in Manu and His Seven Commentators, Kanchana Publications, Bodh-Gaya, 1962, Women in Manu and His Seven Commentators, 57-59.
2. Ibid, p. 57
3. Piyush Kanti Mahapatra (ed.), SriDharmmamangal, Ghanaram Chakrabarti birachita, Calcutta University, Calcutta; 1962, p. 393-395.
4. Difficult relations between co-wives, in any case, seem to have been the social reality of the times. Being a relative and not a stranger, Lahana's difficult temperament was well known to Rambhavati. France Bhattacharya translates her impassioned outburst at her husband thus:
5. Ibid., p. 200
6. Akshaykumar Kayal and Chitra Deb (Eds.), Manasamangal, Ketakadas Kshemananda rachita, Lekhapara, Calcutta; 1977, p. 244.
7. In the *Dharmamangal* episode titled Ranjābatir bibāha, it was Ranjabati's brother-in-law (her sister's husband), also the monarch of the realm, who decided on Karnasen, as a suitable match for her. Her father participated in the wedding ceremony discharging all his ritual duties without complaining. This may be interpreted to mean that he had no objection to the choice of Karnasen as the groom. It could also mean that since the match was proposed by the monarch himself, Ranja's father may have found it difficult to object. However, Mahamad, her brother, questioned the king's prerogative in such matters. This may possibly indicate that besides fathers, brothers and other male relatives may have had a say in the decision. It may also indicate conflict over jurisdiction in such matters. Piyush Kanti Mahapatra (ed.), SriDharmmamangal, p. 73-75.
8. Richard M. Eaton, the Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760, Oxford University Press, Delhi; 1994, p. 103.
9. What is significant here is that rather than dismissing his wife's protests, the king engaged with her through an elaborate discussion quoting from the epics. He spoke of Jambavan giving his daughter Jambavati in marriage to Krishna even after being vanquished by him. Such arguments, however, failed to convince the queen. Resolution of the debate came in the form of the daughter Kalinga herself expressing her desire for the groom that her father has chosen, without any apparent coercion to concur with her father's will. That perhaps is a means of sealing the normative position even more firmly, when the daughter's independent choice happens to coincide with the father's writ.
10. She says, 'Kanara is a self-willed woman, first you must ask her, to find out which husband the beauteous daughter of this lineage covets for herself' (Kānaṛā kumārī icchābotī, jijñāsā karaha dhanyā, kulakāminī kanyā, kāmanā karyācche kon pati). Piyush Kanti Mahapatra (Ed.), SriDharmmamangal, p. 417.
11. In the Chandimangal, the kinsmen said it in as many words. They told Lakshapati that even a king as mighty as Lord Rama was forced to pay heed to the words of a humble washerman, who cast aspersions on the character of Sita. Thus he made her undertake the ordeal (by fire) and was forced to send Sita to the forest once again. Sukumar Sen (ed.), Chandimangal, Kabikankan Mukunda Birachita, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; 1975, p. 182.
12. The moral of this reference was clearly that even powerful kings could not afford to be insular to the opinions of the community they led.
13. Sukumar Sen (Ed.), Chandimangal, p. 182-183.
14. Ibid, p. 42