

## THE ORIGIN OF THE MALLA DYNASTY OF BISHNUPUR: A RELOOK

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### ABSTRACT

Malla kings of Bishnupur reigned for over thousand years. Their capital was in Bishnupur of Bankura of West Bengal in India. Raghunath Malla was the founder of the dynasty. Probably he became the king in the last of the seventh century A.D. Thereafter the Malla dynasty ruled a large part of western part of Bengal and a part of Jharkhand including the Chotonagpur plateau. The name of the kingdom was Mallabhum. During the reign of Raghunath Malla, the capital of Mallabhum was in Praddumnapur. Jagat Malla, nineteenth king of the dynasty, shifted the capital of the Malla kingdom from Praddumnapur to Bishnupur. The kingdom had a great impact on literature, art and architecture, culture, politics and lives of Bengal. But what was the parentage of Raghunath Malla? Did he belong to an upper caste family? Did he migrate here from outside? What was the real truth behind the scene? These questions have haunted several historians to find out the real truth but no one has come with a permanent decision yet. There has been no solution of this debate. In this article, I will be trying to find the parentage of Raghunath Malla and find out a solution of this debate.

**Keywords:** Raghunath Malla, Panchanan Ghosal, Praddumnapur, Bagdi, Laogram, Joipur

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### INTRODUCTION

Bishnupur is now a town in Bankura district of West Bengal in India. A powerful local dynasty titled the Malla dynasty ruled a large area of western part of West Bengal and some parts of Jharkhand, centering their capital at Bishnupur of Bankura district for over thousand years. We find the name of first Malla king in 695 A.D., a year when in Bengal, there was no sign of Pala dynasty and in European context, the Europe was again and again penetrated by the raiders like Huns, Goths, Visigoths, Germans and others. The Malla kingdom being started from the later part of seventh century, continued till independence of India in 1947 though after establishment of British raj in India in eighteenth century, the kingdom was curbed into a small zamindari due to their failure to pay the tax to the British East India Company. In this article, I will be discussing about some aspects of the kingdom.

Raghunath Malla, the first king of the dynasty, ascended on the throne in 695 A.D. But then the capital was not in Bishnupur. The capital then was in Praddumnapur of Bankura. At first I am more interested in finding the answer to the question as to which origin Raghunath belonged to? There are generally two theories about parentage of Raghunath Malla. Some scholars say he is of Rajput origin. Some scholars say that he is of sub castes.

At first I will be focusing what Hunter says in Pundit's chronicle in his "Annals of Rural Bengal" about parentage of Raghunath. According to the chronicle, father of Raghunath was a king of Jai Nagar near Brindavan. He along with his wife was travelling to Purushottam Puri. But in the midway his wife gave birth to a son. The king saw the problems carrying a baby with him and he left his wife and new born son there. Some scholar suggested that the temple of Puri was not erected before eleventh century A.D. Then how could they go for pilgrimage to Puri. But the term Puri was an ancient term, which also existed in the Rig Veda. Sages like Bhrigu, Atri and Markandeya had their hermitage near this place. Then though the temple was erected later but the importance of the place was known to people from earlier period. So Hunter suggests a Rajput origin of Raghunath.

Later some scholars also supported the view of Hunter about the parentage of Raghunath as the records of the Royal family and local traditions also have supported it. But local traditions have sometimes replaced the ancestral home of Raghunath from Joynagar to Joipur of Rajasthan. It also refers an incident to give a strong base to the theory. It is said that Joy Malla, the son of Raghunath Malla, took his relatives from Joipur and made a new settlements of them in the place which we know as Joipur of Bankura district in modern days. The term may be derived from the name of their ancestral home. Local tradition also refers the name of the place where Raghunath was born. The place was Laogram in Bankura district. The scholars also give some points to make the theory strong. The royal priest of Raghunath was Panchanan Ghosal who had also reared him up. If Raghunath belonged to a low born family, the brahmin did not look after him and did not become his royal priest. Suja, the son of the great Mogul emperor Sahjahan, adorned Raghunath Malla II with the title "Singha", a title generally used by Rajputs. Thereafter Malla kings used the title "Singha" instead of "Malla" If Raghunath did not belong to a Rajput family, the other Rajputs of Mughal court protested against the giving a high title to low born king.

Now come to the theory of a low born Parentage of Raghunath which scholars like Benoy Ghosh supported. Scholars questioned about the origin of title "Malla" of Raghunath. Though the term "Malla" refers the game of wrestling, it may also be derived from the term "mal" which refers a sub caste of Bankura and its adjoining areas. But we must not forget there is a Mahajanapada, also titled as "Malla" in sixth century B.C. There is also a kingdom in Nepal of same title. So we may not be provoked to say the term "Malla", derived from "Mal" without other strong points to support the view. Some scholars like Ramesh Chandra Dutta refers that Raghunath Malla was famous as "BagdiRaja". He suggested that the term means the king of Bagdis which may suggest his low born parentage. If we look at the traditions, a bagdi woman rescued Raghunath and sometimes reared up and as the place where Raghunath reared up was the settlements of Bagdi and other sub castes. So his playmates were generally the children of these sub castes. Tradition also says that his army was mainly made of Santals. So it can be possible that though Raghunath was a high born child but as his life continued among these sub caste people, he became popular as "BagdiRaja".

There is a sukta (hymn) in the Rig Veda which refers that a man cannot be in a caste by his birth; his deeds will prove his caste. Now let's look on the life and works of Raghunath. After left abandoned by his father, a bagdi named Kasmetia reared up the child for some time. Then a

brahmin named Panchanan Ghosal took him to his house. A.P. Mallik gives a different version of the story. Father of Raghunath was deposed from his territory and he with his wife was on their way to a pilgrimage to Purushottam Puri. But the queen was pregnant and was about to deliver. They arrived at the village named Laogram. Here the king kept his wife under the care of a brahmin Manohar Panchanan and a kayastha Bhagirath Guha. He also left a sword “Jaishankar” near his wife. Then the king went out again to reach Puri. This zeal to reach Puri hurriedly may be due to his religious madness. After some times the queen gave birth to a son and died. The child was kept with a bagdi woman from whom the brahmin Panchanan Ghosal took him. But he appointed him as his shepherd. Tradition tells that one day Raghunath lost one of the cows and became tired of searching the cow for some hours. He fell asleep. When the brahmin came in the field to find Raghunath, with his astonishment, he saw a snake was making shadow with its hood over the face of Raghunath. The brahmin took it as a royal sign. Now he kept the boy in comfort. He taught him various skills of fighting and other lessons. In a few days, Raghunath became the most prominent wrestler of the area. Probably his title “Malla” came from his fame on wrestling. There is another story related to young Raghunath. One day he went to catch fish in a river but instead of catching fish, some stones and bricks were caught by him. When he showed it to his master Panchanan Ghosal, Panchanan Ghosal recognized the stones as Shalagram Shilas and the bricks made of gold. This was another royal sign.

After few days, one day Raghunath went to take a meal in the royal palace of Praddumnapur with his master. Raghunath ate on the ground without any shade on his head. Suddenly it started raining. When the king saw the incident, he himself took an umbrella on the head of Raghunath. The brahmins shouted out that as a king himself is holding an umbrella on the head of Raghunath, he would become a king in future.

Actually noticing the power of Raghunath, Nrisinghadev, the king of Praddumnapur wanted him to fight in his favour against his enemies. He granted Raghunath a zamindari of six villages including Laogram. An opportunity to extend his kingdom came to him shortly. Pratapnarayana, the feudal lord of Zatbihar, which is now in Indas of Bankura, under the king of Praddumnapur became rebellious. He declared a revolt against the king. The king sent Raghunath to subdue the revolt and punish Pratapnarayana. Raghunath succeeded and his zamindari included Zatbihar and its surrounding areas.

Actually, Raghunath was a very energetic person, who within a few days, with his skills and faithfulness towards the king of Praddumnapur, became a favourite person of the king. Raghunath was a born leader. He easily made a short contingent in few minutes. Bagdis and other aboriginal people of area obeyed his leadership. If we look on the stories related to young age of Raghunath, we can see how he reached near the crown from a stage where he had nothing. Obviously, the credit goes to Raghunath. And he made no distinction between upper and lower classes of the society which helped him to reach to the success. The brahmin Panchanan Ghosal was his mentor, we also find a kayastha named Bhagirath Guha who also helped Raghunath. In opposite side, he was loved and obeyed by the aboriginal people of the area.

Now after subduing Pratapnarayana, the king of Praddumnapur went out on a pilgrimage. Taking the chance, his general prisoned Raghunath and ascended to the throne. After hearing the

news, the king came hurriedly to his kingdom. Being afraid, the general freed Raghunath and returned the throne to Nrisinghadev. But within a few days, he prisoned whole royal family and became the new king. He also snatched out the zamindari of Raghunath. In this time, he became friend of a Santal chief and with his help he built a strong army with Santals and invaded the Praddumnapur. As most of the aboriginal people were in the side of Raghunath, the new king became alone after resisting Raghunath for some time and was defeated eventually. Raghunath freed the king, queen and their daughter. But being prisoned for many days the king became mad and sadly one day he committed suicide. The queen gave the hand of her daughter Chandrakumari in marriage to Raghunath and also took the path which her husband did. Raghunath ascended the throne of Praddumnapur in 695 A.D. and started a new dynasty i.e. the Malla dynasty. From the accession of Raghunath on the throne of Praddumnapur, a new era “Mallabda” was started.

Raghunath was famous as Adi Malla. Probably as he was the founder of the Malla dynasty, the title goes to him. Raghunath extended his kingdom by defeating some neighbor kingdoms. He also introduced the worship of Devi Dandeswari, who was the tutelary deity of the Malla dynasty before transferring capital from Praddumnapur to Bishnupur. His son Joimalla is said to build a Pancha ratna temple to worship devi Dandeswari. Raghunath reigned for sixteen years and died. Raghunath was succeeded by Joimalla. Jagat Malla, the 19<sup>th</sup> king of the dynasty transferred the capital from Praddumnapur to Bishnupur.

So, Raghunath with his power and bravery became the king of Praddumnapur and founded a new dynasty. So if we accept the hymn of Rig Veda that a man does not become brahmin, kshatriya, baisha or sudra by birth, his or her deeds will certainly make him great and Raghunath was certainly a Kshatriya by his deeds, in this sense.

Later on his successors like Jadav Malla, Kharga Malla and others extended the kingdom. All of us know the name of Bir Hambir, the most famous king of the line who kept the Malla kingdom independent in the days when Akbar, the great Mughal emperor started capturing one kingdom after another in Bengal. So the kings of Malla dynasty of Bishnupur again and again proved their valour. So, what we may conclude that though we are not sure what the caste of Raghunath was by birth ? but if we look from deeds of Raghunath and later Malla kings of Bishnupur, they were surely the Kshatriyas. They were loved by people of both upper castes and lower castes. Just think about Raghunath's glorious career. From a shepherd, he became a king. In mid time, he faced many difficulties, but he never retreated from his strong will. He was not a greedy person. After being freed from the jail, when the king of Praddumnapur wanted to return his zamindari, he did not accept it at first as he understood the greed for capturing the throne would create problems again and again. But conditions forced him to become a king. Actually there was a proverb that nature will give the baton to rule to an adequate person; Raghunath was the adequate person in that condition.

Raghunath became parentless in his childhood. But with his faithfulness, strong will, honesty, strength, intelligence and sympathy towards people of every class of the society finished his career as a successful king and founder of a dynasty.

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