

Practice of Hinduism in the ancient society of Assam

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Abstract

The prime force which influences our behavior and shapes our identity is religion. It plays a vital role in the formation of a cultured society as religious beliefs facilitate social bonding. Every religious system has its own code of conducts and ideologies which are inherited through tradition from generation to generation and shapes the individual and collective mind. Assam which is the frontier province of India is a land of religion and culture, where religion plays a major role in the formation of a cohesive society from ancient period to contemporary period. Like other parts of India Assam also practicing Hinduism since pre-historic period. Most of the inhabitants of early Assam worship the Hindu Trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara and believe that each God is in charge of one aspect of the creation like Brahma as the creator, Vishnu as the preserver and Maheshwara as the destroyer. There are in addition to Trinity many sectarian gods major or minor emerged within Hindu religious system and accordingly worshipped by their followers. The practice of Hindu religious system shows that there are three major sects of Hinduism – Śaivism, Śaktism and Vaishnavism. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the cohesive practice of Hindu sectarian religion prevalent in the ancient society of Assam with special reference to the inscriptions issued by the rulers of that period.

Key words: Śaivism, Śaktism, Vaishnavism, Religion, culture, practice.

Introduction: The most common feature of all religious system is that it believes in a power which is beyond human reach. This faith is generally identified with a super natural being, possessing all super natural power that controls the course of nature. As quoted by Galloway religion is ‘Man’s faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gains stability of life and which he expresses in acts of worship and service’¹. From this definition of religion it is clear that religion is a way of solving the problem of survival of life and in the course of endurance men develop certain norms of worshipping such as how, where, when and whom to be worshipped. In Assam, since immemorial time Hinduism has been the most dominant religious faith. There are three major sects of Hinduism namely Śaivism, Śaktism and Vaishnavism. As a religious system Śaivism is Śiva predominant, Śaktism is *Devi* (Goddess) predominant and Vaishnavism is Vishnu predominant. It is said in epigraphic

record that in pre-historic or ancient period Śaivism was the most popular religion in Kamarupa, but from the perspective of religious practice from pre-historic period to contemporary period Śiva-Śakti form of religious worship is mostly practiced in Kamarupa.

Assam in ancient period was known as *Pragjyotisa* and *Kamarupa* both in epigraphs and literatures. Its capital was known as *Pragjyotisapura*. The earliest inhabitants of *Pragjyotisapura* were mainly *Kirātas*, *Cinas* and the primitive tribes commonly known as *Mlecchas* and *Asuras*. It is generally believed that in pre-historical time *Pragjyotisapura* is preserved by *Shambhu* (Śiva) as His own royal domain: “*Sa ca deshah svarajyarthe purvam guptashca Shambhuna*”². It is supposed that Śiva and His consort Śakti secretly lived in Nilachal hill. This hill was also known as *Kāmaparvat* in antique time as Śiva and Śakti used to come here to satisfy their *kama* (amour). It is stated in the *Kalikapurana* that

when Sati died in the yagya Kunda of her father Daksharaj, Śiva could not take this pain and in frantic grief he carried the dead body of Sati over his shoulder and roamed here and there. It is believed that Sati's genital organ fell on this mountain. In course of time this place is known as *Kamakhyā-dham*. The mountain is regarded as both grave-yard and secret love-tryst of Lord Śiva and Goddess Śakti. So from *satya-yoga* both the worship of Śiva and *Devi*(Śakti) began in Pragiyotish.

Objective: The main objective of this paper is to study the growth of the sectarian religion of Hindu society in ancient Assam and also to study the synthesis of the two major sects of Hinduism i.e. Śaivism and Śaktism prevalent in that era.

Data Source and Methodology: This work is based on secondary data in the form of books, journals, historical records etc. Mainly descriptive method is adopted.

Religious practice of ancient society of Assam: The worship of Śiva is prevalent in ancient society of Assam from great antiquity. Even the worship of *Devi* (Goddess) also began from that time, as both Śiva and *Devi* are worship together in ancient society. In ancient period the inhabitants of Assam was mainly primitive tribes. All groups of these people were devotees of Lord Śiva and worshipped Him with their own traditions. As per oral tradition after the death of king Ravana(king of Lanka) when *Satya-yoga* was over and *Treta-yoga* began Naraka become the king of *Pragiyotisapura*. In that time this land was protected by Lord Śiva, the inhabitants were mainly *kiratas* with shaven heads and addicted to drink and flesh and ruled by *mleccha* king Ghataka. Naraka defeated him and killed him, Vishnu then according to Lord Śiva's order settled the tribes on the coast of the eastern sea. So Naraka, after getting the throne of Kamarupa propagated the cult of *Devi* worshipping. The Goddess was worship in the form of *yoni* (female genital organ) as opposed to the cult of worshipping Śiva in the form of *linga* (phallic symbol). Due to this matriarchal tradition Śaivism stood banned in ancient Kamarupa. It seems to have been driven underground. As Dr. Kakati writes, 'Naraka confess in one place that Śiva remains hidden within his city'³. But due to naraka's misdeeds he was killed by Lord Vishnu in His human form, Krishna. After killing Naraka his

son Bhagadatta was placed on the throne of *Pragiyotisa* who was a devotee of Lord Śiva. After Naraka's dynasty the political history of Assam remained dark for almost two hundred years. The legacy started from the period of Pushyavarman's dynasty. In the records of the grants issued by the royal families like Varman dynasty(355-650 A.D.), Salastambha (650-990 A.D.) and Brahmapala (990-1138 A.D.) of ancient period both Śaivism and Śaktism have appeared as royal religions of Assam. The grant of king Banamala (835-65AD) recorded the incident of Sri Krishna's bestowal of the kingdom of *Kamarupa* on Bhagadatta and states that Bhagadatta worshipped Śiva with great humility and penances⁴.

One of the most illustrating Śaiva king in ancient Assam was Bhaskaravarman(594 -650 AD) who was also known as kumara-Raja in Assam History. Two copper plates of the king have been discovered – one is Dubi Plate another is Nidhanpur grant. Both the inscriptions begin with a salute to Lord Śiva. In his Nidhanpur grant Bhaskaravarman offers his loving adoration to God Śiva, 'the holder of *Pinaka* (bow) with his crescent as crown and bedecked with ashes and further visualizes the deity as surpassing the God Kama in beauty'⁵. He was personally devoted to Śaivism, but tolerant to other faiths also. He invited the famous Buddhist Chinese pilgrim Huen-Tsang to his court in spite of having no faith in Buddhism. To run the administration and society he made proper arrangement of the *Varnashrama-dharma* which was in disarray. Here the concept of dharma is referred in context to the idea of established right. It covers the whole field of human activities, as well as established social order with its attributes of law, conduct and worship.

In society Mimamsa was the code of conduct, the science of polity of Canakya was the best jewel and like the vow of a traveler who intended to move over the good path, people accepts the right path laid down by the *Shrutis* and *Smritis*. Kautilya's Arthasastra was also regarded as a guideline to lead life.

Another king Vanamalavarmadeva (835-65AD) tried to synchronized the worship of Śiva and Śakti. His inscriptions contain definite references of the workshop of Śaiva and Śakti cult. His The Tezpur grant opens

with an invocation to Lord Śiva 'may that deity with a bow (Śiva), on whose head the waters of the Ganges thrown about by the *recaka* wind have assumed the beauty of a mass of stars, purify you'⁶. *Recaka* means winds diffused from the exaltation of breath in Yoga. His grandson Balvarma's inscriptions (Nowgong plates), also opens with an invocation to Rudra 'May the lustre of Rudra that splits the darkness of the earth conduce to the peace of the world'⁷. The Tezpur grant of king Vanamala records that the king out of devotion got the tall and towering temple of Hatakasulin, rebuilt and provided it with villages (for maintenance), elephants and *veshyas* : *gramebha -veshyajanairya uktam*⁸. In Tezpur grant and Parvatiya grant Vanamala mentioned about the seat of *Sri - Kameshvara* and *Mahagauri* on the peak of *Kamakuta* hill near the capital *Harupesvara*⁹. The dynasty of Salastambha has temporarily shifted the capital of *Kamarupa* from *Pragjyotisapura* to *Harupesvara*. Both Harjaravarma and Vanamalavarmadeva have issued their grants from the city of *Harupesvara*. The city of *Harupesvara* is now identified as modern Tezpur. There is a confusion regarding the exact location of the *Kamakuta* hill. Both the grants affirms the presence of God *Kameshvara* and Goddess *Mahagauri* on the top of a hill called *Kamakutagiri*, on the strength of the *Kalikapurana* it may be presumed that *Kameshvara* means Śiva and *Mahagauri* means *Kamakhya*, and *Kamakutagiri* is the of *Kamakhya* hillock or *Nilaparvata*. But the same grant gives the impression that the water of the river (*Lauhitya*) must have already become purified by washing the slopes of the *Kamakutagiri* before coming to the region of the city of *Harupesvara*. Hence it would be more reasonable to locate the hill at a little distance in the eastern direction from the modern town of Tezpur. King Vanamalavarmadeva's depth of devotion to Lord Śiva is also confirmed by his grandson Balavarma's Nowgong copper plate in this inscription Vanamala is said to have placed the kingly burden on his son's shoulder and become absorbed in the spirit of Maheshvara (*Jejasi Maheshvara*) by means of fast¹⁰. From the interest shown by Vanamalavarmadeva in propagation of Śaivism in *Kamarupa* it may be inferred that

he wanted to establish a Śaiva Society based on spiritual principles of Śiva and Śakti.

In all grants of Ratnapala, a famous king from Pala dynasty, the *mangala* verse is meant for paying homage to Lord Shiva (*Sankara*). In the second verse of his grants there is a respectful reference to the auspicious Śakti of *Sankara- Saktih Subha Samkara*: implying hereby that the mother Goddess is to be conceived as Śakti (i.e. the energy aspect) of Lord Śiva himself. Ratnapala who was a devotee of Shiva, had the credit of giving the old city of *Pragjyotisa* a new name of *Durjaya* (impregnable). The vastness of the city is described in Bargaon and Sualkuci grants as 'it resembles the summit of mount *Kailasha* in being the residence of the *Parameshwara* (Śiva) and in being inhabited by a *Vittesa* (Kubera)'¹¹.

The identification of *Pasupati* (Śiva) with *Mahavaraha* (Vishnu) appeared as a new concept of worship in Pala dynasty's reign. In the Gauhati grant of king Indrapala the deity is referred as '*Pasupati*' and '*Mahavaraha*'. Śiva was also identified with Vishnu¹². The Gachal copper plate grant of king Gopala described that his father, king Indrapala, by constructing a series of clearly whitewashed temple of *Sambhu* rendered the whole of the world, as it were to be full of *Kailasha* Mountain. Another descendent from Pala dynasty was Dharmapala, who was an accomplished king. In his grants Shiva is conceived probably as an embodiment of two unifying principles called *Ardhayuvatisvara*. In both the Subhankarapataka and Khonamukh grants of Dharmapala Lord Śiva is conceived of as having half his form as woman (*ardhayuvatisvara*) and "having on (one side of) the neck as blue lotus, (on the other side) a jeweled hood of serpent attached; (on one side) a lofty breast painted with saffron, (on the other side) besmeared with ashes; who thus appears as it were an amalgamated creation of the amorous and the dreadful sentiments"¹³. There is an image of *Ardhanarisvara* at a place called Mathorbari in Nagaon district of Assam, of which the pedestal of the motif has respective mount of the two divinities as bull and lion respectively for Shiva and Devi, which are unified in one body¹⁴. The *Kalikapurana* also describes the concept of *Ardhanarisvara* in chapter 45. According to it

when Kali or Gauri entered in to the body of Śiva, the physical form of the Godhead looks like half female and half male.¹⁵ In this form right half represents Śiva and the left half represents *Devi* (Goddess). The main tenant of this form is the concept of *Purusa-Prakriti* or Śiva-Śakti, which symbolizes two cosmic forces. This unified concept also attempts to synchronize two major cults of Hinduism, i.e. Śaivism and Śaktism. Though Śiva is regarded as perfect his perfection inclined with Śakti. So perfection is not single, rather it is duality which yields perfection and which is the origin of the creation. From their practices it can be inferred that the rulers wanted to establish a Śaiva Society based on spiritual principles of Śiva and Śakti.

The most striking feature of the ancient Śaiva society was the *Varnashrama-dharma*. The Kamarupa kings seem to take special care to preserve the traditional divisions of society. King Vanamāla was also not different from the rest and he too patronage the *Varnashrama* system. Regarding the four classes, in Vanamāla's reign the Brahmanas get the highest social status. They are mainly engaged in spiritual duties, there are different types of Gotra of Brahmanas. For example Vanamālas grant refers to a Brahman of Sandilya gotra and his grandson Balavarma refers to Brahman of Kapila gotra. Again their inscriptions record academic titles such as Srutidhara, Pandita, Kathanistha etc. Ksatriyas belong to the fighter groups. Vaisyas belong to the field of trade and the sudras belong to the most lower class. They were engaged as potters; weavers; boatmen etc. The most dominating feature of *Varnashrama dharma* prevalent in Ancient Śaiva society was that the Brahmanas are allowed to make offerings to Lord Śiva. It doesn't mean that other castes didn't fulfil the rituals they even performed sacrifices. But the fact is that they performed this through the help of a priest who was well-versed in scriptures. In deed rites and rituals were performed by the Brahmanas both in personal and social sphere. It is clear from the epigraphy that Bhagadatta son of Bhauma Naraka was the leader of *Varnashrama dharma*, Bhaskara Varma has created the proper organization of their divisions, which had become mixed up and Vanamāla gratified the appetite of the people of all classes and stages of life. As Vanamāla's Tezpur grant

records, 'where all people of the *Varnashrama dharma* are satisfied, where countless fortunate saints and learned men have their residence a city of Harupesvara protected by Lauhitya foremost among rivers'¹⁶. During ancient period in Assam Brahman villages were responsible for teaching of Sanskrit, Vedas, the system of philosophy etc. Brahman villages were known as '*Agraharas*'. In that time temples were popular centre of education through the recitation of Ramayana; Mahabharata and Purānas. In educational institution casteism was not maintained. *Gurugrihas* and Sanskrit *Tole's* are the means of education. Conveyances generally consisted of bullock carts; carriages (*ratha*) drawn by elephants & horses and boats. Religious practices showed the belief in the concept of liberation of individual soul as the best cardinal virtue. In that era liberation of individual being is regarded as the ultimate aim of human life. But liberation for the followers of Śaiva society consists in realizing the true nature of one's own self as non-different from the supreme reality, Śiva. People had recognized this fact that individual souls are not different from the universal soul, which boost up in the creation of a cohesive stabilized society.

Findings: It is a matter of fact that the norms and values of a society are mainly determined by the religious practices taken up by that particular society. So in shaping the social norms of a society the principle of coexistence and cohesiveness play a vital role among the various religious beliefs. In ancient society Lord Śiva is regarded as the main worshipful deity of the inhabitants of Assam and Epigraphic records also showed that all the rulers were practicing Śaivism, granted royal patronage to it and formed a Śaiva society. But so far as a belief in a God Head is concern Śiva is not conceived in the abstract alone, He is rather worshipped with his consort Śakti. In fact Śaivism has been nurtured in the background of Śaktism and both the cults have been seen to adhere together. The Śaivite symbol 'Z' which is called *añji* is found before the commencement of *Svasti* (a blessing for prosperity). This sign is sometimes also written as 'S'¹⁷ which is also used in Śaktism. So Śaivism and Śaktism were growing side by side coherently. This trend of religion in ancient *Kamarupa* showed a clear and distinct evolution toward dualism, through stressing

upon a system of monistic worship, that is Śaivism, which is testified by the inscriptions of kings of Varman dynasty, Salastambha dynasty, Pala dynasty and last but not least by Vaidyadeva's family. Because after Pala dynasty Vaidyadeva (1138-1145 A.D.) had occupied the throne of *Kamarupa*, his successor Vallabhadeva was a devotee of Śiva. The Assam plates of Vallabha (1175-1195 A.D.) records that at the command of his father and for the spiritual benefit of his mother, Vallabhadeva founded an alms-house for the distribution of food (*Bhakta-Sala, anna-Sattra*) near a temple of God Mahadeva (Śiva) standing to the east of *Kirtipura* in the *Hapyacha-mandala* and endowed it with a number of villages and hamlets (i.e. their revenue)¹⁸. Thus the scrutiny of the ancient period shows that under state patronage, the most practiced religion was a dualistic Śiva-Śakti form of religion. Śiva appeared as the supreme entity and acknowledged as the object of worship *Paramamaheshvava*. It is believed that the absolute Being Śiva, in association with *Śakti* always alluring in this manifestation. This belief of existing together contributes a lot to the psychological well-being of a particular individual which influence the society, because the pattern of society solely depends on the values inculcated by the individual mind.

The main object of the Philosophy of the dualistic (Siva –Śakti) religion as practiced in the society of ancient Assam is to spread and recognize the individual and social virtues, which also emphasized the virtues of love, kindness, compassion, truth, purity, self – restraint etc as virtues to be inculcated and cultivated. In fact the religion of that period was more socially oriented so that it could conceive the principle of seeking well being of all creatures through religious compulsion. This is the most philanthropic quality of Śiva-Śakti form of worship. This dual worship represents the destruction of evil spirit in the society and motivates the people to restrain from preaching evil practices.

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