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A Study of the Temples of Barak Valley during the reign of the Kachari Kings

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Abstract

Barak Valley, erstwhile Cachar, was ruled by a number of state powers in the pre-colonial period. Though ruled by different state powers, the land had been an example of social and cultural coexistence and assimilation of different culture and faith. The Dimasas were the last to rule the land before it was annexed to the territory of British India in 1832. On the backdrop of the above transition, the present paper would be an attempt to study the different Temples established through the efforts and patronage of the Kachari Kings, to trace the historical background behind the evolution of the Temples, to highlight the various religious practices evolved centering the Temples, the process of acculturation of the Dimasas and their adaptation of Brahminical Hinduism. It is noteworthy that Barak Valley has a number of Temples built during the reign of Kachari Kings viz., Ranachandi temple at khaspur and Bijoypur, Bharkhola, Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Temple at Sonai, Nrimata Temple at Ujaan Nagar, Barkhola, which has enriched the socio-religious tradition of this Valley.

The Dimasas are an off shoot of the Bodos of the Indo-Mongoloid ethnicity in the North-east of India. They are also known as Kacharis and Hedambas (Sanskritisation of the term Hachengsha), who had at one time ruled the greater portion of Upper Assam, from the Sadia-Dibrugarh to the borderland of Nagaland; but had to move towards west to settle at Dimapur (in the present Nagaland) from where they were, again, pushed further southwards by the rising Ahom force; thereafter, they had settled at Maibong on the bank of Mahur I in the present N.C Hills. The Dimasas, however, could not stay peacefully at Maibong due to the continuous attack of the Ahoms, and

other tribal groups, and after two centuries of sojourn at the hills had to forsake the hills to come down to the plains of Cachar shifting their kingdom at khaspur. The Dimasas, as a matter of fact, had already made a progress towards the process of acculturation or Sanskritisation by absorbing Brahminical Hinduism in their Maibong days.

Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Shiva Temple at Chandragiri, Sonai

Every year in the Bengali month of Kartik, about ten kilometres south from the Silchar town in a place called Sonai a huge mass of people from Barak Valley as well as from Manipur get accumulated to

offer prayer to the Mahadev of Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Temple situated in the Chandragiri hill. Besides the Manipuris, people of other communities also visit this temple but the Manipuris are more in number. This is due to the fact that the Temple was established by the Dimasa king Raja Krishna Chandra whose wife Induprabha was a Manipuri princess. She was devout Vaishnava but at the same time she used to worship Lord Shiva at her parents house before her marriage.

About two or three kilometer south from Sonai Bazaar, in the right side of Sonai-Palanghat road, there is a small mound called Shiv Tilla. Locally, it is also known as chengur Tilla. According to the Government record, the mound measures about 28 bigha of land. There is a small pond below the mound. In the left side, there is the beautiful Chandragiri park. One has to climb atleast ten to fifteen small and large sizes of steps to reach the Temple. There are two face to face brick built structures at a distance of about thirty feet. One is the famous Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Shiv Temple and the other is an abandoned structure which was probably used as a rest house of the Sevait.

The main reason for which the Temple is historically so important are the two inscriptions found inscribed on the wall of the Temple. Both the Inscriptions are in Sanskrit and the script is in Bengali.

Inscription No. I

In order to propitiate Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Shiva, Noble Jay Singha Burman, the minister of His Majesty, the King, has completed (the construction of) the marvelous Palace (Temple) made of bricks of mine, situated in Chandragiri, in the city of Swarnapur, under the jurisdiction of Sri Sri, the Lord of Hidimba.

Inscription No. II

In the city known as Swarnapur, this marvelous palace is built with bricks for Bhuvaneshwar. In the shaka year when the sun ascends the Manmatha (the work was) completed.

The wise Sri Jaysingha, who was commissioned as the minister of Sri Maharaj, the Lord of Hidimba, has built the shiva Temple with bricks in the hill top of Chandra.

The information provided in the inscription I is clear, but the Inscription II contains an astrological puzzle, the portion could not be rendered in literal translation.

From the inscriptions, we learn, firstly, the Temple was constructed during the rule of Hedemba, that is Dimasa; Secondly, the construction work was supervised by the minister of the King, Jay Singha Burman; thirdly, the place was known as Swarnapur, the hillock where it was placed was called Chandragiri, and the place was within the jurisdiction of Hedambya Rajya; lastly, the astrological puzzle indicated that it was completed in 1707 shake, that is 1785 A.D.

From the local sources various legends relating to the Temple could be collected. It is said that Ranee Induprava, the queen of Krishna Chandra (1780-1813) had urged the king to construct the Temple like that of 'Nongmaiinching' (Nilkanthashiva), in Manipur, her parental state, as Bhuvan shine was not easy accessible to her. As she was used to worshipping Shiva in Manipur, she kept up the practice here too.

The diety in Sonai is worshipped in Sunday following the practice of Manipur in the temple of 'Nongmijinching', an uncommon practice, as Shiva is worshipped in Monday everywhere. It is said that the queen used to come to the temple annually on the Sunday of Suklapakshya in the month when the sun ascends the Monmoth. She used to stay for sometime at a place in sonai named Chandpur. Following the tradition, the

Manipuris from all corners assembly in
Sonai
in the

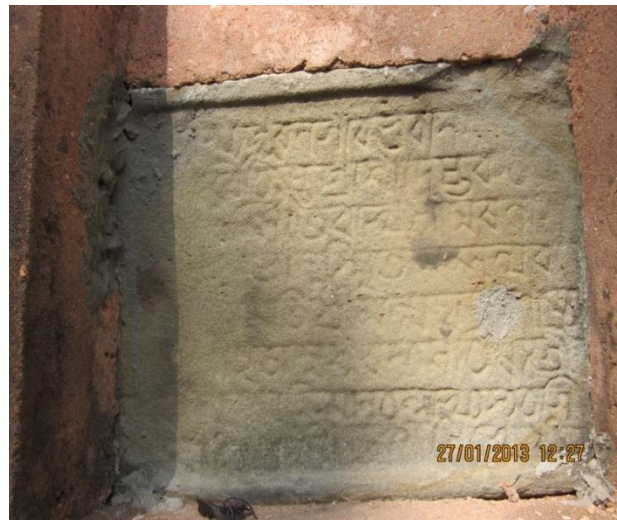
month of Kartik, Sunday of Suklapakhysa
every
year



Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Temple in Chandragiri at sonai



Picture of the Abandoned Structure just facing opposite to the main Temple



The Two Inscriptions inscribed on the wall of Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Temple in Sonai, Chandragiri

Ranachandi Temple at Bijoypur, Barkhola:

About two hundred years ago, in 1824 BCE a few years before the death of the last Dimasa king, Govinda Chandra Narayan, the Capital was shifted from Khaspur to Haritkar. Raja Govinda Chandra along with his queens and subjects and the idol of Devi Ranachandi in the symbol of sword shifted to Haritkar .In Khaspur, the last capital of the Dimasa kings there still survives a temple known as the temple of Ranachandi. This old shrine was abandoned long ago and the altar has long been vacant. It is said that the Devi in the symbol of the sword had originally been installed in the temple of Khaspur from where during the course of

Burmese invasions, she was secretly carried to Bijoypur where her honour would be secured. No inscription or any other archaeological remain has been found regarding the establishment of the Temple. The Temple is a recent renovation as the deity was originally enthroned in a tin shed. Here, Ranachandi is not worshipped in the Idol form but in the form of a sword which is kept concealed under a piece of cloth as no one is allowed to see or touch the sword. Here, Devi Ranachani is worshipped every Sunday. Besides this, every year in the Bengali month of Magh and Baishak, the Devi is worshipped with great pomp and grandeur.



Gateway to the Ranachandi Temple at Barkhola, Bijoypur



Ranachandi Temple at Bijoypur, Barkhola



Inside View of the Temple of the Ranachandi Temple at Bijoypur, Barkhola

The Nrimata Shrine at Ujaan Nagar, Barkhola:

Nrimata is a mother Goddess of Dimasa origin situated in Barkhola, a large village situated about 30 kilometres from Silchar town. The Shrine of the Goddess is situated in the north of Barkhola Bazaar. The shrine was established in Barkhola in between 1890-1895 BCE. The Kachari kings were great patrons of religion and they established quite a number of Temples through their patronage. The Nrimata shrine was established by the minister of Kirti Chandra Narayan, Maniram Laskar also known as Maniram Uzir who was appointed as a minister of the king to look after the administration of Cachar in the year 1736 BCE when he established a temporary Capital in Khaspur. Although the Goddess has been established in this village about a hundred years ago but the goddess was first established in Sonapur village about two hundred and fifty years ago. There is another shrine of Nrimata in Ujaan Nagar village in

Barkhola. There is a legend behind the establishment of the shrine. It is said that Maniram Laskar after being appointed by the king had a dream where the mother Goddess instructed Maniram to install two stone slabs from nearby hill and venerate them as her manifestation in the Barkhola shrine. Regarding the religious practices and rites held in this Temple, it can be said that besides being a Shakti Temple Hari Sankirtan, Shiva Puja and the different female rites or Vratas are held here. Durga Puja, Jagadhatri Puja and Kali Puja are held with grand pomp and grandeur every year. Although Devi Nrimata is a Goddess of Dimasa origin and has retained her original tribal name, however, the Goddess herself is being subjected to a process of significant transformation in a new direction. The Goddess is now a recognized Hindu divinity and occupy honourable position in the cult practices of the Bengalees of Cachar.

Conclusion:

From the Temples and shrines established through the efforts of the Dimasa kings, it can be concluded that the Dimasa had already adopted Sakta cult in their first phase of Hinduisation. The Bhabishya Puran states-

***Hedemba desha cho madheya
Ranachandi birajate***

They began to worship Ranachandi as the Royal deity, and introduced animal sacrifice as per the Sakta tradition that was current in Bengal of the period. Bengali Hindus sought to regain their strength by surrendering to a Mother figure-a Kali, Durga, who, however, were venerated in the folk tradition, nurtured primarily by the women in their Vratas performed by them to the exclusion of males in it. The Sakta cult made its appearance in Dimasa court in two ways. Firstly, the cult of Kamrup-Kamakhya which permeated through the North-East in the ancient and medieval period had

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its entry in the Dimasa Court during Maibong days following their association with the Ahom and the Koches. The other one representing the traits of Bengal version of sakta cult carrying the basic philosophy of it had its entry through the Bengal frontier. There are also numerous myths and legends current among the Dimasas regarding their initiation to the Sakta Cult. One such a legend is of a dream oracle which instructed the King to find the deity by touching a fearsome snake in the river at a stipulated time in the dead of night. The king, however, dared not touch the head and could only obtain a golden sword instead of a promised idol by placing his trembling finger on its tail. This sword has been adopted as a symbol of Devi Ranachandi, and is worshipped even today. Of course, this kind of legend with some variation is current among the various tribes of North East India.