



SAIVISM IN BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT: Brahmaputra Valley is situated in Assam, the frontier province of India on the extreme north-east. Assam is located between 24°8' to 27°56' north latitudes and 89°41' to 96°02' East longitudes. The state of Assam is surrounded by Bhutan, Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Nagaland and Manipur in the East, Meghalaya and Mizoram in the South and Tripura, West Bengal and Bangladesh in the West. Assam is divided physically into two main Valleys - The Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. This paper namely "saivism in brahmaputra valley in the medieval period", explains the exploration of saivism in Brahmaputra valley.

KEY WORDS: Saivism, Brahmaputra valley and medieval period.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the religious systems shows that Hinduism is the oldest religion of the world. It has neither any date of its origin nor has any definite founder associated with it. It is called Sanatana Dharma, a religion coming down to people through eternity. It is said that Hinduism is a social system, a tradition which is beginningless. K.M. Sen writes in his book 'Hinduism' "Hinduism is more like a tree that has grown gradually than like a building that has been erected by some great architect at some definite point in time. It contains within itself the influences of many cultures and the body of Hindu thought thus offers as much variety as the Indian nation itself"¹. Hinduism has many sacred texts as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Dharma-Sutras and Dharma-Satras, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavadgita and many more. But no one can claim exclusive authority, of course the Vedas are regarded as the oldest one and it is regarded as the highest authority by most Hindus and philosophers. In all Hindu scriptures we found three major sects of Hinduism viz. Shaivism, Saktism and Vaishnavism.



Though there exist different sects of Hindu religion a mutual penetration and brotherhood exist between these sects.

OBJECTIVES

The proposed work is completed in order to study the practice and influence of Saivism in Brahmaputra Valley, which enlist the tradition, custom and beliefs of the inhabitant of the Valley. The nature of different Saiva centres is studied in order to understand the degree of influence exerted by these centres in the field of politics and culture. The type and degree of royal patronages received by the religious centre has also taken into account in order to know the relation between religion and royal powers.

DATA SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY

Possible efforts are made to make the method of treatment on the said subject. Mainly analytical and synthetically method is taken into account and to some extent historical method is also adopted for all available source material. Primary sources in the form of literary and epigraphic records including Buranjis, inscriptions, copper plates and other records scattered on different sites of the Brahmaputra Valley is consulted.

EXISTENCE OF SAIVA CENTRES

The existence of popularity of the cult of Saivism in ancient Assam may be ascertained from the existence of the greater number of centres of Siva worship. Numerous Siva temples scattered all over the Valley of Brahmaputra prove the flourishing state of this cult in that period. The sacred places which are associated with Lord Siva are greater than Devi and Vishnu, as B.K. Barua says “the number of places associated with Siva, Vishnu and Devi are respectively fifteen, four and five. But according to M.M. Sharma, “a careful study of the content of the chapters show that there were as many as twenty such holy places which may be indicated by the following names of the deity or ksetras concerned: 1. Jalpisa (now in New Jalpaiguri) 2. Surasacal 3. Krittivasa 4. Sutiksnagiri 5. Vibhrata 6. Subhacala 7. Goloka 8. fringa 9. Gandhamadana 10. Kalahaya 11. Bhadrakamada 12. Gokarna 13. Kedar Shambhu on Madanagiri 14. Manikarna 15. Pandunatha 16. Kameshvara 17. Heruka 18. Sringata 19. Vishvanatha and 20. Dikkaravasini Pitha.



REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the field of religious history Kamarupasasanavali and PrachyaSasanavaliedited by Dr. Dimbeshvara Sharma and Dr. MaheshvaraNeoga respectively can be treated as the milestones for the information of ancient and medieval period as far as the primary sources are concern. These two books rightly frame worked the copperplates and inscriptions relating to shrinesof Assam as a whole. Dr. N.P. Bardoloi has dealt about the practice of Saiva cult in Assam in her books Shiva (1997) and Devi (1986). Dr. H.N. SharmaDoloi has widely studied about the Saiva religion and Saiva literature in his book Asamat Saiva SadhanaAru Saiva Sahitya (2003) B.K. Barua has focused on the structural value of ancient religion and society in his book/1 Cultural Historyof Assam (1951). On the other handKalikapurana published by the Jatindra Dutta Barua and Shiva Purana written by KingRudrasimha mainly focused Saiva cult and the mode of Siva worship and served as primary sources. Yogini Tantra which is edited by Biswanarayan Shastri also throws light on the religious practice of theKamarupa or ancient Assam. Dr. MaheshvaraNeog's anothe two books-Religions oftheNorthEast, (1984) and Asmara Dharma BuranjiAndhararu Puhar, (1988) also supplied valuable data on the sectarian religion. On the study of temples the books - A History of the temple ofKamrup and their Management (2001) by Dr. G.Adhikary and the StudyoftheTempleArchitecture ofAssam (1981) by P.C. Sarma contributed a lot to study temple architecture and archaeology.

A few other books to its kind are MedievalAssamese Society (1988) by Sarbeswar Raj guru, Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs (1976) by Dr. PodeswarGogoi, The Mother GoddessKmiakhya, (1989) by Dr. B.K. Kakati, The Comprehensive History of Assam (1994) edited by H.K. Barpujari in five volumes, Religious Establishments of Assam (2006) by Gajendra Adhockery etc.

SAIVISM IN BRAHMAPUTRAVALLEY IN THE MEDIEVALPERIOD

In medieval period the Valley of Brahmaputra was mainly ruled by the Ahomdynasty, indeed the rise oftheAhom dynastymarkedthis period. During this period some highly significant and noteworthy developmenttookplace in the sphere of religion and culture. Prior the Ahoms the Valley of Brahmaputrawas divided and ruled by varioustribessuch as Kachari, Bhuyan, Maran, Brahe, Chutia etc. But all divisions came under one jurisdiction in Ahom period. All castes



whether tribal or non-tribal which were scattered here and there in this Valley, synthesized into one race called the “Assamese.” Kamarupa’ has changed to ‘Assam’. Again in the field of Saivism new shrines and temples were constructed and also reconstructed the old ones with a spirit of religious toleration. As the Ahoms were Buddhist by religion, so the establishment of a Saliva Society by them and gave Royalty to this religion is very much significant.

The most remarkable feature of the Valley of Brahmaputra is the plurality of religion, which gives rise to socio-cultural diversity, because each religion has its own rites, rituals, doctrines and moral code of conducts. Different set of doctrines not only presuppose inter religious diversities but also inculcate some amount of intra religious diversities. As for the upliftment of the society religion should be same for all people, so the rulers of medieval period adopt Saivism as their religion and gave up their traditional religion. The practice of Saivism by the rulers showed that to achieve spiritual merit and religious goal they have taken mainly three means as - Siva Manama (uttering the Siva mantra or prayer), Siva Savanna (listening from others about Lord Siva) and Siva Kirtana (singing the glory of Siva). The third one was practiced by devotees on special Saliva festival. Siva japa plays an important role on this context. The pancaksara mantra (five syllables) "Sivaynamah' is regarded as the most effective mantra and it also evokes mukti from material world. Recitation of 4 Sivasahasranama' is also an integral part of manana. Above all merit of good deeds is also highly extolled in this Valley by the Salivate. Yogic practices were also highly praised by the Saiva rulers and they worship Siva as Mahayogi and Mayabi.

SAIVA PRINCIPLES PRACTICED IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Now coming to the close of the medieval period under survey we find that this period is marked with the absence of the performance of Ashvamedhayajna by the rulers. Rather it is marked with the assimilation, adaptation and equality of religion. The influence of Hinduism, especially of Saivism was so much that the inhabitants of this plural society not only accepted Saivism as their religion but also forgot their own religion and practice this cult in their own way. Due to its impact the never ending series of costly sacrifices with gross ritualism of religion is gradually making its way to a simple one. The inhabitants of this Valley believe in one Supreme Being Siva, with Sakti as a supporting being. The gradual change toward Saivism in this period is all because of its religious principles which are intrinsically related with the socialization of people.



The structure of medieval society is a complex of various tribes, communities and castes based partly on the traditional ground and partly on the power structure. So to bring unity and integrity in social system the Saivite practices some special principle. The foremost principle practiced by the Saivite is the principle of removing untouchability. The Saivite motivated the people to live in harmony in a pluralistic society and among people there shouldn't be any caste barriers. Because God equally bestows his grace to all living being, whatever as they be. As Tamil saint Sambandar said 'all are considered equal before God'. For the patron of Saivism love for God is the only thing gives equality to all persons. To maintain equality the rulers of 16th - 17th century unlike their ancient rulers granted land not in the name of any individual Brahman, but they have granted land in the name of deities of various shrines and also to their servitors which are always of lower caste. So granting land to different people even of different religion was their deliberate policy to maintain integrity among people, which are evident by their respective inscriptions. Their inscriptions are full of references of practicing Saliva cult, which includes all caste and creed, rich and poor, Brahman to sudras. Next principle practiced by the Saiva society in medieval period is religious and humanitarian feeling. A man loving another man is the most important quality of humanitarian feelings and tolerance. A service done to other beings with love disregarded as a service to God. Keeping this principle in mind, the rulers have done a great job in administration. For instance introduction of Paiks or foot soldiers where the whole male folk between the ages of 15 to 50 years were bound to render service to the state. As a result the whole Valley of Brahmaputra becomes a 'nation in arms' of the common people. The Paiks were organized in 'Gots' or group system. Each got consisted of four persons. One Paik of each got (group) was obliged to be present in rotation as militia. If necessary for public works or other military emergency two or three persons would be requisitioned. During the absence of the Paik requisitioned, the other members of the same group were expected to cultivate his land and supplied his family with food and fuel. Each Paik was granted two puras (2 2/3 acres) of rent free rice land³³. It is clear from the Paik system that as it constituted the masses of the Valley, it formed the backbone of all productive activities of the society and thus maintained equality among different groups of people. Another principle carried out by the propagators of Saivism is feeding the poor and charity. In Saliva society alms giving is highly valued. It started with the shrines, where rulers provided endowments for feeding the temple deities and the devotees. Actually charity is the marked symbol of the rulers. They have donated land, provided financial



grants for individuals as well as for the temples, because temples land were used for the development of society and it influenced the locality.

POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD:

Women of Brahmaputra Valley within the domain of Saliva religion in medieval period were comparatively free than in other parts of India. There were no restrictions in their movement, like men folk they were equally educated and if competent they had to participate in state affairs. Women from royal families took charge of the administration of the kingdom in absence of the king. Though they used to draw their veil in the presence of certain relative that is just to show respect towards elder person. Otherwise there were no proofs of practicing of veil system. This was possible due to the practice of the principle of granting equal status of men and women by the propagator of Saliva cult which was practiced not only in royal families but also in rural areas, because in rural areas women never sit at home in medieval period they took equal part in planting and harvesting crops with the men folk. Though the marital relationships were of basically monogamous, some of the Ahom kings were polygamous. But they maintained them respectfully. They held a position of honour in their respective quarters and had a staff of attendants with their assigned estates. Their assigned estates or Mels (councils) and keels (guilds) were supervised by their Phukans and Barms. Among different Queens the chief queen got a higher position. She was called 'Barkuwar V' and her received Raidangia Mel and khel (estate received for her maintenance).

CONCLUSION

Religious beliefs provide philosophy for the welfare of the mankind of the society. Slavism being the oldest religion of the Brahmaputra Valley plays an anchor role in providing in providing philosophical dimensions for the society, which is transmitted to men from generation to generation. The main object of the philosophy of Saivism is to provide messages to the society with social virtue. It also represents love, kindness, compassion, truth, purity etc. In Brahmaputra Valley Slavism is recognized as religion of nature, which restrains the people from preaching evil practices. In Brahmaputra Valley Saivism plays a great role in the socio-cultural life of this Valley. As Slavism is a fertility cult so the social and cultural foundation of the Valley is based on Slavism. The national festival of this Valley, the Bohag Bihu is also related with the



performance of Saiva rituals. The folk literature and folk dances of this Valley are also formed by the elements of Saivism. The festivals and rituals related with Slavism also influence the economy of this Valley. Some local products are regularly used in observing temple worship which helps the growth of local industries. For instance the brass-metal industry is mainly based on temple economy, the equipments of performing various rituals are made of brass-metal as this kind of metal is regarded as pavitra (pure). On the other hand pottery making, floriculture and pisciculture or aquaculture etc. are also very speedy incoming generating prospects, these local products not only cover the local market but also exported to other parts of the country.

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