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A Brief Study on the Origin of DouL Utsav- Holi Festival in Assam - with Special Reference to Batadrava than, Nagaon, Assam

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Abstract:

Festival is a sum total of traditional behavior, it gives a unified context for the description and definition of the different genres of folklore like dance, music, religious rituals, traditional customs, food etc. and festival cannot be understood without an understanding of the interrelation of these components. The Assamese society is a traditional society like India and so the festivals performed in Assam are traditional in context. They are moments of special significance to the group or community and reflect the life of the people. Festivals mainly of the Vaisnavite sect of Assam are related to some incidents of Lord Krishna's life and are mostly identical with those of other parts of Assam. The Phalgu Utsav or DouL Utsav or Holi is one among the main Vaisnavite festivals observed in different Satras of Assam. The present work is an attempt to study the DouL festival in Sri Sri Batadrava Than, its geneses and different aspects related to it. This particular celebration was introduced by the famous Assamese preacher Srimanta Sankardeva for the first time in the Brahmaputra Valley, in Bordowa also known as Batadrava Than, a place 16 km away to the western side of the Nagaon town in the Nagaon district of Assam.

Keywords: DouL Utsav, Batadrava Than, Srimanta Sankardeva, Satras, Kirtanghar

1. Introduction

Folklore is the pulse of the people. It is regarded as the living fossil of a folk group, which reflects the culture of the group. The vast material of folklore can be categorized into four sectors. Among these sectors of folklore, social folk custom gives emphasis on group interaction rather than on individual skills and performances. Festivals and celebrations which are occasions of participation of large social units in public performances and entertainment are included in this sector of social folk custom. India is a land of fairs, feasts and festivals and every religious community has his own list. Among the different festivals, Holi the festival of colors is celebrated all over the country by the Hindu community with great festivity and joy. There are special legends associated with it. Though these narratives vary from place to place, but most of them aim at victory of good over evil.

1.1. Objective

The present study intends to highlight the historical background of the place Bardowa of Nagaon district in the state of Assam and a descriptive account of the origin of DouL Utsav (Holi) and its celebration in Batadrava Than (Than signifies a Holy place for Worship in Assam).

2. The Study Area and Methodology

The area of study is Bordowa a place 16 km away to the western side of the Nagaon town. The area has great historical importance as it is the birth place of Srimanta Sankardeva. So along with the DouL Utsav the researcher intends to highlight the area as well.

In this study Interview and Observation Methods were applied for collecting data at different stages of the investigation. The Observation Method was used to observe the festival as well as the details of the performance of the people gathered on that occasion. The Quasi-Participant Observation which involves only a limited amount of participation has helped the researcher to play the role of both an observer as well as participator in the festival. Informants were also interviewed, here Direct Interview was conducted.

3. Historical background of Bardowa

Before the arrival of Ahoms, different areas of Assam were ruled by different groups of rulers like Kachari, Chutia, Koch, Moran etc. They became so powerful at times and were extending their kingdom by adding more land under their reign. At that time the areas on both banks of the river which was not under any independent ruler was ruled by a powerful group known as Bara Bhuyan. Bara Bhuyan indicates a group of twelve (Bara) main Bhuyans and their head was known as Shiromoni Bhuyan.

There has been controversy regarding the place of origin of the Bhuyans. While according to some scholars they originated from Chotanagpur area, others commented that they have been residing in the coastal area along the Bay of Bengal. Though, the Bhuyans

introduced themselves as Kayasthas (A Caste in Assamese). They were also many Bhuyans of Brahmin, Doibogya, Muslim etc. origin. According to Assam Buranji (Assam History), the Bhuyans were the subordinate rulers under the king of Kamrup or Kamata. But from the middle of the 13th century they became more powerful and ruled independently over areas from Goalpara district to Subanshiri River to the North Brahmaputra and Kapili River of Nagaon to the south. After some years they lost their power over many of their ruling areas in the hands of Koch King Biswa Simha and the Ahom ruler Suhungmung and Suklengmung. Before the arrival of the Ahoms the southern part of the Brahmaputra valley from Dikhou to Kolong was under the reign of the Kacharis. The barren land to the east of the Kachari kingdom which was once isolated was poured with a group of tribal inhabitants in the beginning of the 13th century who started settling there in and was named Rampur. Another flow of people came from Gour kingdom. As both these groups belong to the Kayastha families, friendly relation develop between them and they settled together peacefully in Rampur. They made them to be known as Bara Bhuyans.

A fierce battle took place between Gour king Dharma Narayan and king Durlov Narayana of the nearby Kamata kingdom who invaded Gour. Ultimately there was a truce between the two sides and Dharma Narayana sent seven Brahmin families and seven Kayastha families to Kamata on the request of Durlov Narayana who had asked him for a few scholarly persons. Chandibor was among them, he was very talented and pleased with him; Durlov Narayana conferred him the title of Shiromoni Bhuyan (the chief of the Bhuyans). The king granted them land and they settled near Lengamaguri. Chandibor was blessed with a boy child, Rajdhar. But the Bhots (Bhutanese were called so) created unrest and Chandibor along with his family came to Bhalikguri and settled there. Again they shifted to Kuthardubi, but due to some unavoidable circumstance they finally moved to Rowta. They next migrated to Tembuwami, in the south bank of the Brahmaputra river where, Chandibor breathed his last. The place at present known as Bardowa, in the Nagaon district was a very low and prone to flood. So after digging the ponds and making the land high and building roads there, they settled down permanently. The area came to be known as Alipukhuri (place full of ponds and roads). The eldest son Suryavar among the four sons of Rajdhar succeeded Rajdhar to the post of Shiromoni Bhuyan. Suryadhar's son was Kusumbar and the post of Shiromoni Bhuyan was transferred to him after the death of his father. Kusumbar married to Satyasandhya and they were blessed with a son Sankara or Sankardeva who later turned to the famous preacher from Assam, Srimanta Sankardev.

3.1. Bhuyan Kachari Conflict and Sankardeva's Departure from Bardowa

There used to be occasional skirmishes between the Bhuyans and Kacharis. While residing in Rampur and Alipukhuri, the Bhuyans faced many problems due to the frequent invasion of the Kacharis. In the reign of Biswa Singha, many of the Bhuyans of Kamarupa were killed and finding the situation to be worst many Bhuyans migrated to different areas.

The Bhuyans residing in Alipukhuri faced similar torture from the Kacharis. A state of terror grip Bardowa. As the whole Bardowa shook with the impact of the flurry life seemed miserable. Fed up with repeated depredations, the Bhuyans invited the Kacharis for a community feast and killed many of them. Knowing about the ghastly incident Sankardeva condemn the Bhuyans for their heinous act. Sankardeva thinking about the terrible consequences decide to leave Bardowa for good. And crossing the Brahmaputra they left Bardowa and settles at Rowta. In Rowta they stayed for six months but a rumor spread that the Koch armies under the commander Chilarai were fast approaching Rowta. To escape from another conflict situation, they left Rowta and settled at Gangmow, where they stayed peacefully for five years, to their utter disgust, the Dafalas coming from the hills started chaos and began to attack the plain people. A staunch believer of peace and non-violence, Srimanta Sankardeva always avoided conflicts and to save his people from distress they left Gangmow to settle in Komorakat. But this time flood water carried away their houses after four months of stay they went to Maluwator-ati, here Kalindiaai (aai means mother), Sankardeva's wife gave birth Ramananda Thakur. In Maluwator-ati, Sankardeva along with the Bhuyans stayed for only two months and left for Buwahat near Ahatguri in Majuli. They were searching for a good place to stay and Duwahat was the only where they stayed for eighteen years. A than known as Belaguri Than (named after the bel or Marmelos fruit which were found there in plenty) was built there in a year time with all the paraphernalia where he continued with the preaching of Ek Saran Nam Dharma. Here at Duwahata, Sankardeva had first encounter with his great disciple and apostle Madhavdeva, who carried out Sankardeva's philosophy of Bhakti after Sankardeva's demise.

3.2. Rediscovery of Bardowa

From the second wife, Kalindi Aai, there were three sons: Ramananda, Kamalaluchan and Haricharan Thakur. Haricharan Thakur had a son named Chatarbhuj Thakur, he nominated his wife Kanakalata as his successor. But after a few years of her husband's death, she left Vishnupur Satra of her husband, in search of Bardowa, the ancestral home. She came with one of her cousin Damodar and with the help of Barphukan Tangshu Phukan of Jaydhwaj Singha, went in search of Bardowa in places like Manipur, Jajori, kuji etc.

In Raidongoiya, she established a transit camp at a highland later came to be known as Aai-bheti (literally mother's place). This place exists today with an Aailakhi Than and a Kirtanghar (Place to keep Holy book) and is considered as a sacred place even today. Aai Kanakalata with her associate took extensive search of Bardowa and finally she recognized the abandoned areas like Douul, Manikut, Santijan, Charihati, the great Silikha tree and assured that this was the place she had been looking for. She rebuilt them and rediscovered the original place where Srimanta Sankardeva took birth and began his Vaisnavite religious activities.

4. The Satra Institution within the Batadrava Than

After Sankardeva's departure from Bardowa it was left unhabited for about 140 years. It was Damodar Ata (Ata for Father), nephew of Chatarbhuj Thakur along with Aai Kanaklata, granddaughter in law of Srimanta Sankardeva, came to Assam to trace Bardowa, the ancestral place of Sankardeva where he lived and preached during the early period of his life. They succeeded in tracing it and

permanently established a "Satra" which came to be known as Bardowa Satra. In course of time Narowa Satra established temporarily at North Lakhimpur by Damodar Ata and Bordowa Satra became two of the leading Satras of Purush Samhati.

With the death of Damodar Ata, the Bardowa Satra became the bone of contention between Ramakanta, son of Damodar Ata and Anantaraya grandson of Aai Kanaklata. But the invasion and victorious march of Mirzumla in 1662, brought about a state of instability to the Bardowa Satra also. Both Ramakanta and Anantaraya moved towards eastern Assam in order to avoid Muslim oppression. Though peace was restored later on, Ramakanta and Anantaraya did not return to Bordowa. King Chakradhvaja Singha patronized them and helped them to establish themselves in Eastern Assam. Ramakanta reclaimed the site where his father Damodar Ata had once temporarily settled and established a Satra which came to be known as Narowa Satra. Anantaraya, on the other hand founded two more Satras in the present Sivasagar district which later on assumed importance as Kowamara and Salaguriⁱ.

The Bardowa Satra reclaimed by Damodar Ata and Kanaklata, a few years before was jointly managed by descendents of Anantaraya and Ramakanta. But, towards the end of 18th century the Satras were brought to the verge of ruin due to a destructive quarrel between two families. A lasting settlement to the troubles was reached through the intervention of the royal court. And the Satra was divided into two families descending from Ramakanta and Anantaraya. The Satra descending from the family of Ramakanta came to be known as Narowa Satra and that descending from the family of Anantaraya came to be Salaguri Satra. The quarrel between Ramakanta's son Ramdeva Ata, and Anantaraya's great grandson Ramcharan, regarding the ownership of Bardowa came to a settlement when the greater part of Bardowa was given to Ramdeva because he was the elder of Ramcharan. The area came to be known as Borhisha and the smaller part of Bardowa came to be known as Chatuhissa or Saruphal. These two Satras carries out the religious rituals of Batadrava Than and also contributes to the management and development of the Than.

5. Origin of DouL Utsav in Batradava Than

A Than is a place where certain relics related with a great person or saint are preserved, such a place is considered as sacred and people often visit them to pay their obeisance. Bardowa also known as Batadrava Than treasures such relics related with the life of the great saint Sankardeva. Foot impression cut on stones (pada-sila) and foot wares (paduka) supposed to be of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva or any other apostle are carefully preserved in the Than.

Srimanta Sankardeva was a versatile person who took active interest in all aspects of life. He for the first time introduced and popularized the DouL Utsav in Assam. It is also believed that Sankardeva celebrated the DouL Utsav only once in his entire lifetime mad that was in Bordowa, later in his life though he migrated and settled in different places, he observed it nowhere.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva in the Kirtan describes the DouL Utsav as:

“Range phaku khela chaytyana bonomali
Duhate phakur gunda shichanta murari”ⁱⁱ

In the “Guru Charit” written by Ramcharan Thakur, there is a description of the origin of DouL Utsav. Srimanta Sankardeva, while digging the earth in Bordowa for constructing the Kirtanghar, found a chaturbhuj idol and with it he intended to celebrate the DouL Utsav.

“Sankare kirtanghar sajjiboloi loila
Bhithi bandhibako lagi somosto asila
Apuni sankare pase kuroke dhorile
Prithibit chaturbhuj murtiko dekhila”ⁱⁱⁱ

There is also an elaborate description of the “meshadaha” ritual and “Yagya”, a part of the DouL Utsav, in the: "Guru Charit" of Ramcharan Thakur. This part of the ritual is believed to be performed by Sankardeva himself. But this part of the “Guru Charit” is a conventional issue especially because Sankardeva was the stern propagator of “Ek saran nam dharma” where performing of any kind of “Puja” and “yagya” was totally prohibited and he could not have done it any cost. Scholars who support the performance of such rituals by Sankardeva however argue that Sankardeva was only a young man of 21 years and was surrounded by a host of Brahmins who might have influenced him to perform such deed. Sankardeva by then was not established as religious exponent and through the DouL Utsav, he wanted to explore the Krishna culture in the erstwhile fractured cultural scenario and not the religious side of it.

In the Driitiya Skandha of the Bhagawat, there is description of the DouL Utsav:

“Danda chatra samar dhariya bhakat choi
Jai jai Krishna buli phalgu shinsoroy”

Again in the “Guru Charit” written by Ramananda Dwija and Dyatari Thakur there is mention of making idols of Madan Gopal and Jagganath by a person Kurula Barhoi and with these DouL Utsav is celebrated. While in “Katha Guru Charit” it is described that digging the first lump of soil for constructing the Carihati in Bardowa, a Vasudeva idol was found.

In “Bardowa Guru Charit” there is mention that Sankardeva introduced the DouL Utsav in Bardowa, following the request of Ramrai and other relatives who insisted to entertain them with a festival which he have experienced from his different tours to different places of pilgrimage. As such the DouL was constructed, the ‘Meshdaha’ ritual was performed and the foundation of the DouL Utsav was laid. But according to some sources Ramrai came to the association of Sankardeva in the later part of his life while he was at Barpeta. So Ramrai's influence to perform the DouL Utsav in Bardowa could not be based on facts. From this it has been found that regarding the origin of DouL Utsav in "Bardowa Than" opinion differs.

5.1. Celebration of DouL Utsav in Batadrava Than

Doul Utsav in Bardowa Than is celebrated by the two Satras: Sri Naruwa Satra and Sri Salaguri Satra of Bardowa in two alternate years. This tradition of celebrating the DouL Utsav by one Satra in a particular year and the other Satra in the next Phakua Purnima (Holi Full Moon Night) has been continuous affair. The festival lasts for five days. In the first three days, the main religious rituals are conducted related with the Utsav, while various cultural programs, devotional services and worship continue for the following two days. Starting from the day of "Gandha" to the fifth day of the Utsav, there is continuous flow of thousands of devotees who assemble together in the Than.

The DouL Utsav starts with the rituals 'Gandha'. In the evening of the first day of the movable idol of Lord Govinda is brought out with Gayan Bayan (Singers and Musicians) singing 'Gandhagit' from the Kirtanghar and installed in a well decorated temporary stage (robhatoli)

"Karoto gandhas bidhi bihar gopal
Sokol gupo gupi nanda jasuda adi
Mongol kora soba bhal"^{iv}

But there are some differences between the two Satras in the celebration of this ritual. According to the tradition of Sri Salaguri Satra after bringing the idol of Lord Govinda from the Kirtanghar, the idol is taken to the "Gandhghar", a small hut made of straw and bamboo in the bank of Akasiganga. In the Gandhghar, after performance of some rituals by the head priest, the idol is ceremonially bathed with scented water, decorated with new costumes and jewellery and then taken to the temporary stage; the Gandhghar is set to fire. There is a tradition of burning a goat along the hut known as Meshdaha ritual, but the actual burning of a goat is not practiced today. Instead a round shaped ball (laru) is made out of rice powder and goat is put inside it and the ball is burnt along with the hut as a part of the Gandhghar. It symbolizes indirectly the burning of a goat. But the meshdaha ritual is not performed by Sri Naruwa Satra, they also do not make such Gandhghar, they bring the idol from the Kirtanghar placed it near the main seat of a well decorated temporary stage, where the idol is ritually bathed and decorated with new attire. And, with Gayan bayan singing:

"Bhai dekhi komolapati doular upora
Bikunthar nath douL rosa keli kora"^v

The idol is installed on the main seat of the temporary stage, where it is kept for the whole day till it is taken to the DouL Mandir on the next day. After installation of the idol, the devotees spend the whole night singing hymns and devotional prayers in praise of almighty by offering obeisance and seeking its blessing.

On the next day, that is on the day of Purnima, the Gayan Bayan in the afternoon performs Nam Kirtan (Songs in praise of Lord) in front of the idol and offer prayer. Amidst a religious atmosphere with the performance of devotional songs and musical instruments like khol, tal (cymbals), doba (drum), Nagara (kettle drum), sonkho (conch shell), colored powder (phaku) is sprinkled over Lord Govinda.

"Ae phaku khelia karunamoi ae nanda kumar
Debor durlov keli phadur bihar
Phaku pori shyam tanu kora tiri miri
Robir kirona jen morokot giri"^{vi}

In the night after the idol is again ritually bathed and after decorating with new attire it is kept in the same seat. Devotional service and worship continues till the third day, the day of "protipod". Nam Kirtan is held in the Kirtanghar and in the afternoon, the idol placed on a well decorated chariot is taken towards the DouL Mandir and also around the adjoining areas. A huge procession comprising of devotees singing Nam, mainly 'Biyanam (marriage songs) by the womenfolk accompanied by Tal (cymbals) Khol, Kali, Pepa and also with lusty hand clapping following it. The people throw colored powder phaku on each other and enjoy the festival.

"Karpur kusum phagu oti subasito
Gupo gupi soba khela huwa anondito
Aaur aare phaku mare anjali bjotiya
Phagu nase hase Kirtan koriya"^{vii}

In the DouL Mandir, the idol completes seven circumambulations around the DouL. Seven rounds around the DouL Mandir symbolically indicates Lord Govinda's tour to seven Vaikunthsa (paradise).

While returning to the Kirtanghar, the idol is given a warm welcome by every household of the village by making offerings and seeking its blessings. The idol is taken to both the Sattradhikar and Dekasattradhikar's house of both the Satras where the idol is worshipped by performing specific Satriya rituals.

When the idol of Lord Govinda is brought back, in the doorway of the Kirtanghar, the idol is obstructed and is not allowed to enter the Kirtanghar. With the performance of this ritual known as 'Duwardhra Anusthan' or obstruction in the main door, there starts a mock fight between the two groups one who accompanied Lord Govinda to the DouL Mandir and the other who stayed behind in the Kirtanghar. This ritual is performed at about 10 PM in the night. While this part of the ritual is performed by Sri Sri Salaguri Satra, Sri Sri Naruwa Satra does not perform it.

The mock fight is nothing but an imitation of the quarrel between the party which accompanied Krishna to the house of Ghunusha and the party headed by jealous Rukmimi (Wife of Krishna). As described in the 'Oreshwa Kirtan' in 'Dwapara'. Krishna went to the house of Ghunusha and stayed there celebrating the Holi for a number of days. This was done without the consent of Rukmini and therefore Rukmini wanted to take stern actions against Krishna. When Krishna returns from the house and this obstruction remains for a few days, it was only after Krishna consented to certain conditions of Rukmini that she allowed to enter her house.

"Lakshir kasok dhoru asa sorbojoi

Dui sukla stuti kori lakshik buloi
Karunaya suni lakshi dila dwar aeri
Grihak poshila soba koribor huri" ⁱⁱⁱ

This part of the story of Krishna has been taken by Srimanta Sankardeva as an important observation of the DouL Utsav in Bardowa. But this episode of the festival is also not from criticism. Some scholars even suggest that this part of the festival is a later addition but was not a part when Sankardeva first celebrated it, till then Sankardeva did not have an elaborate idea of this observance in Jagannath Puri.

The whole festival ends with bringing back of Lord Govinda idol to its respective abode and placing it on its own seat in the Kirtanghar. There is a tradition of singing 'range phaku kheli chatyana bonomali, jai jagganath Krishna surjya bhoilana udita' Kirtana during the occasion. Bardowa DouL Utsav is very famous as one of the most well-known folk festival in Assam.

5.2. Songs sung on the occasion of the DouL Utsav

Vaisnavism advocates that there is no necessity of totally renouncing the worldly life to attain the bliss of superior being; it can be attained by remembering and reciting the name of the Lord. According to Sankardeva's religious faith of Ek Sarana Nam Dharma, reciting, singing, muttering and remembering the names or listening to the glory of God could lead a sincere devotee to the path of liberation. In order to facilitate the process of cultivating devotion, Sankardeva and Madhabdeva took to translating many religious scriptures for the benefit of the common masses and composed suitable literature, prayer songs and lyrics tuned to classical ragas having lofty and sublime thoughts surcharged with intense devotion. With time this process of prayer and functions connected with prayer-the singing hymns, songs, the chanting of prayers to the accompaniment of musical instruments and the reading and explaining of the Bhagawata and the Gita became the integral part of the prayer service in a Satra institution.

On the occasion of the DouL Utsav, performance of various Nam Kirtana. Bargeet, Phakuwa Diha by Gayan-Bayan along with the devotees accompanied by musical instruments occupies an important place. During the festival days the devotees modify the Kirtana by adding two more Kirtanas than the usual. There is a tradition of singing "range phaku khela chaitnaya bonomali, jai Jagganath Krishnasurjya bhoilanta udita". Kirtana during the occasion. The womenfolk also sing the same Kirtana in the morning and afternoon Prasangas, while in the last Kirtana they sing 'Phakuwa Diha'. These songs are sung on the different contexts of the DouL Utsav, starting from the day of Gandha to the third or the last day of main DouL Utsav. Phakuwa diha are sung.

These songs are anonymous and have no particular lyricist and neither their time of composition can be traced accurately. They are actually composed by the devotees who together during the festival days in the Batradava Than. Sri Gajen Rajkhowa, a scholar of Vaisnavite Sankari Sanskrit took an active step in collecting these songs which were in verge of extinction. This work of Sri Rajkhowa in book form titled Bardowat Basartu aru Aai sokolor Diha Naam deserves great appreciation.

6. Conclusion

Holi, the festival of colors is celebrated and widely enjoyed throughout India. The festival acts as a prime device which promotes social cohesion and the cultural exchange in this connection is also of great significance. The present work has attempted to give a descriptive account of the origin of the DouL Utsav in Assam as well as to highlight the place where it was first celebrated i.e. Bardowa. There are several instances in which it is found that the opinions differ regarding the origin of DouL Utsav and its celebration in Batadrava Than, these are mention in this work. It is believed that Sankardeva introduced and celebrated the festival only once in his entire lifetime and that is in Bardowa. This study gave the researcher a chance to know the significance of the festival in the Assamese society, its origin and continuity throughout time, different folklore items associated with it and the cultural exchange and religious sentiments conveyed through the performance. Still there may be many aspects of the festival which may be left unnoticed. Scope for further and elaborate study is left for future.

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