

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Religious Beliefs and Practices under the Koch Kings of Darrang in Assam (1616-1826): An Analytical Study

Dr. Ajit Kumar Boruah

Vice Principal, Jorhat Kendriya Mahavidyalaya, Assam, India

Abstract:

The Koch Kingdom of Darrang in Assam was an abode of different ethnic tribes and castes with their own religious beliefs and thoughts. The people of the Kingdom practiced all the social rites without any restriction. There was no religious discontentment in spite of so many religious sects subsisting side by side. During the period our study, neo-Vaishnavism spread every nook and corner of the region and tribal communities entered the fold of a caste society. The royal family of Darrang was hard-core Sakta by faith, primarily worshipped the deities of Durga and Monasa. Siva cult was practiced by all sections of the Hindu and non-Hindu people in the kingdom. Nathism was also a popular religious belief which was prevailing at that time. Besides these major cults, there were also certain minor cults which were practiced in Darrang during that period. Among them, goddess Dharmasitala i.e. the goddess of pox, was very popular amongst the womenfolk of Darrang. This paper is an effort to an analytical study of the popular religious beliefs and practices which were prevailing during the reign of Koch Kings.

Keywords: Koch kingdom, Darrang, rites, religious sects, neo-Vaishnavism, Sakta, Durga, Monasa, Siva, Nathism, Dharmasitala, pox, reign

1. Introduction

The Koches are one of the ethnic communities of north-east India, formed a state early in the 16th century AD in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. In 1581, the Koch Kingdom broke into pieces leading to the creation of the two independent states- Koch Behar and Koch hajo or Kamrup. The two states soon quarreled between themselves which resulted in complete eradication of the kingdom Koch Hajo and in the creation of a tributary state in the present Darrang district of Assam. This tributary state of Koches was established in 1616 AD under Ahom kingdom in Assam which existed over a period of 210 years from 1616-1826 AD. The founder of this Koch kingdom was Balinarayan alias Dharmanarayan. The Kingdom was an abode of heterogeneous religions. Most ethnic communities worshipped the mother Goddess and were Sakta by faith. Both the Hindus and the tribes worshipped their own deities and performed their religious rites according to their own ways. The royal families, for political purpose patronized both Brahmanic and tribal systems although they themselves accepted Hinduism and were elevated to the status of *Khatriyas* by the Brahmin priests. Among the Hindus, Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism were the most dominant forms of beliefs in the Kingdom.

2. Worship of Sakta

Saktism or worship of Devi was much popular in Darrang. The tribal people of this region, along with their primordial male deity, had also worshipped a primordial female deity in different forms called *Burhi*, *Jakhini*, *Thakurani*, *Kuri*, *Mechini* and *Bali-Khungri* etc. The female deity was accepted to Hinduism as *Durga*, *Parvati* or *Kali* and *Chandi*, the consort Siva.¹ The royal family of Darrang was hard-core Sakta by faith and devoutly worshipped the goddess Durga in the court capital with great pomp and grandeur.² It is narrated in the *Darrang Rajvamsavali* that Viswa Singha (1510-1540) the founder of the Koch kingdom, used to worship the goddess Durga, while he was a cow herd, by sacrificing grasshoppers to the deity.³ All kings worshipped the deity in both her tribal and sanskritised forms as stated in the *Darrang Rajvamsavali*. Another form of Devi worship was associated with the worship of the goddess *Monasa* or *Marai*, the goddess of snakes, which was very popular among the people of Darrang. The Darrangi kings observed *Marai Puja* also. However, there is no difference between *Marai Puja* and *Manasa Puja*.⁴ *Manasa* or the goddess of snake was worshipped both by the tribal and non-tribal people there with a view to allaying the fear of snake-bite. It is mentioned in the Koch Rajar Buranji that worship of both the *Durga* and *Monasa* deities were patronised by king Dharmanarayan in Darrang.⁵ *Monasa* was used to be worshipped with the popular rituals of the choral performance known as *Oja-Pali*, accompanied by a dance called *Deodhani* and simultaneously, her worship was performed by Brahmana priest.⁶ It was connected with *Manasa* cult and was the tradition of Dharma-worship as evidenced by popular as well as a literary datum, provided by the *Manasa Kavya* of Mankar.⁷ Among the tribal peoples, *Monasa* was worshipped as *Bisahari* or remover of

poisons. It is stated that the worship of this goddess was prevalent in lower Assam since atleast the 13th-14th century AD if not from an earlier period. Sculptured images of *Manasa* are seen in some of the stone-cut remains of Assam which may be dated to the 11th or 12th century AD. In Mangaldoi, *Manasa* worship and *Deodhani* dance are still very popular among various classes of people. This shows that the cult has a strong and long antiquity in this land.

3. Worship of Siva

Along with Devi, Siva was the most popular of the gods among the people. On the basis of this mythological origin, the kings of the Koch dynasty claimed their descent of Siva. It is noted that they called Siva as Mesh and worshipped him according to the *vedic rites* like the other Hindus of the kingdom.⁸ Siva was worshipped in various forms, such as *Bhairava*, *Pasupati*, *Gopeswara*, *Nataraja* and *Kirata* and his sculptural presentation was Lingam. The non-Hindu tribes of the kingdom worshipped a primordial male deity called *Bathau*, *Bathau-Brai*, *Bathau-Sivarai*, *Burha* and *Baba* etc. with *vamchara* or left handed practices. The Bodo-Kacharis believe that they have originated from the *Bathau-Sivrai*. This god was later on Hinduised as Siva. The Kacharis worshipped Siva as the creator of the Universe. But they worship Siva in the form of a thorny tree called *Siju*.⁹ In Darrang, the Rabhas also worshipped Siva as their deity. Unlike the Bodo-Kacharis, the Rabhas worshipped a piece of stone called '*Ranjumuk*' i.e. *Linga* as the image of Siva or *Longabura*. Among the Rabhas, Siva is known as *Longa Burha*, *Garim Buda* etc. Thus the tribal people worshipped the deity according to their own traditional rites with the sacrifice of animals and birds like the goats, swains, cocks, rice and wines and with performances of dances of women.¹⁰ The *Yoginitantramm*, a 16th century work, contains reference to the Mahabhairva Siva in which form he gave himself up to unrestrained use of wine, women and flesh. The tribal concept that he was the god of diseases and death as well, was accepted to Hinduism in this form as *Mahakala Thakur*.¹¹ Ramaraya, a seventeenth century biographer of Damodaradeva, speaks that the tantrik rites were connected with popular Sivaism. From these facts, it can be assumed that Siva cult was practised by all sections of the Hindu and non-Hindu people in Darrang in whatever form they conceived him. But, during the period of the neo-Vaisnavite movement, Sivaism as a dominant popular religion lost much of its force. The followers of this cult gradually ceased to offer animals during the time of worship. It is possible that such changes are due to the influence of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva and his followers.

4. Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism which existed in ancient Assam as evidenced by epigraphic references¹² and literary sources like the *Kalika Purana* was also prevalent in the kingdom of Darrang. Like the early Koch rulers, the Darrangi kings also offered patronage to this cult. The building of the Hayagriva- Madhava temple at Hajo by Raghudeva has much bearing to understand the nature of existence of Vaishnavism in the Koch territories. This Vaishnavism was, however, much different from the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankardeva in that, while image of Lord Vishnu in various forms was worshipped here with much sacrifice in the latter form he was worshipped only by devotion without sacrifice and image. It was believed that reciting, singing, uttering and remembering the names or listening to the glory of God could lead a sincere devotee of the path of liberation and ultimately release him from the shackles of the world.

There are many *Satras* and temples scattered throughout the Mangaldoi region. Most of the *Satras*, which were established under the patronage of the Darrangi Koch kings, propagated Vaishnavism, Sri Sankardeva's apostle Lesakania Govinda Atai, established a *Satra* called Khatara at Dipila in Mangaldoi. This *Satra* was established in the year 1568 AD Later, the king Chandranarayan (1643) patronised this *Satra* and granted Land and wealth. Another king Dhajyanarayan is also recorded to have donated gold, silver and other necessary articles for the improvement of the *Satra*.

The *Satras* imparted spiritual education to the people through the agency of the Namghars. The Namghars thus became the centres of religious life of the people which promoted their intellectual and cultural activities. Among these *satras*, the *Viswa Satra* and the Devananda *Satra* of the Hindughopa mauza of Mangaldoi were the most important religious centres of the people of Darrang.¹³

King Bishnunarayana, established the *Viswa Satra* by granting lands and slaves for the development of the *Satras*.

Besides, there were some temples, Devalayas, or Moths, in Darrang. These were the main religious institutions which played vital roles in the socio-economic and religious life of the people of Darrang. The Mahmuni temple of Mazbat, the Hayagriva temple (of Majuli) in present Harishinga mauza and the Gopeswar temple of Singri are the most sacred places in Darrang. It is mentioned earlier that there is a Siva temple near Rowta, which still attracts people from distant places of Darrang. This is known as Madhagoshai moth. The pujari or the priest of this moth belonged to Chutia community Another sacred place of the Darrangi people was the Rudreswar devalaya of Maharipara village. It is stated that the Darrangi Raja Swarganaratan granted 160 *purus dharmottar* lands to the development of this devalaya in the *Saka* year 1708 (1786 AD)¹⁴ Nal-Khamara devalaya is another important devalaya in Darranga. It was constructed by the Koch king Naranarayan during his expedition against the Ahom and granted devottar lands to this temple.¹⁵

There are also certain ancient remains which speak of the existence of Vishnu worship in Darrang under the patronage of the Koch kings there. For example, the stone image of Vishnu of Hayagriva-Madhava temple of Rowta in the present Darrang district shows that Vishnu was widely worshipped in this region. Existence of the *Satras* as well as the temples indicates that Vishnu worship was popular among all sections of the people of Darrang. Thus, many tribes became *Vaishnava*. They were called '*Sarania*' i.e. lay disciple. These people used to observe both tribal and non-tribal *Vaishnava* customs, rites and festivals even after accepting *Vaishnavism*. It is noted that besides performing *namakritana* i.e. congregation prayer in imitation of the *Vaishnava*, they worshipped their tribal deities and freely ate things prohibited by the orthodox Hindus. The translation of the epic and the *Puranas*, adoption of the epic and the *Puranic* episodes in the form of independent *Kavyas*, devotional works explaining

the precepts, tenets, types and modes of devotion, devotional lyrics (bargits) and dramas of that time, which were composed and translated under the guidance of the royal families to exalt the greatness of Vishnu, are sufficient information to understand the nature of attempt at *Vaishnavising* the tribes.

5. Other Religious Cults: Nathism

The *Nathism* or *Nath* cult was also a popular religious belief which was prevailing in Darrang in our period of study, It is believed that this sect was practiced in Kamrupa since very early times. Regarding the origin and the nature of this cult, N.N. Bhattacharyya opines that the Nath cult was originally a non-Brahmanic or anti *Brahmanic* cult.¹⁶ M. Neog has mentioned the prevalence of this cult in the Brahmaputra valley since early times. It is said Nathism that was deeply indebted to many other heterodox sects, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and *Vaishnavism*.¹⁷ A section of scholars believe that *Nathism* is a sub sect of Saivism.¹⁸ But in practice, the cult is a yogi cult, and is a part of the *Siddha* cult of ancient India.¹⁹ According to S.B. Dasgupta, this *Siddha* cult is a very old religious cult in India. It is associated with the psycho-chemical process of Yoga known as *Kaya-Sadhana* or the culture of the body, which is practiced 'with a view to making it perfect and immutable and thereby attaining an immortal spiritual life. This cult became popular among the people under the leadership of Matsyendra Nath and his disciple Goraksha Nath in the early medieval period and some other preachers bearing the title of 'Nath' - meaning 'Lord' and it is because of this fact that the cult came to be known as the *Nath* cult in later times.²⁰ It is presumed that *Nathism* gained ground in Assam during the rule of Pala kings of Kamarupa.

The existence of the cult in Darrang is testified by the fact that Darrang is still the abode of large number of people following this cult. A number of literary sources also testifies this fact. There is a class of ballad, which is locally known as *Phul konwar* and *Mani Konwarar Git*, wherein the queen *Mainawati* (mati) is mentioned as the wife of king *Sankhadeo* (Sankardeo). It is believed that the name of the queen as mentioned in this ballad is an imitation of the name of the same queen of the Bengali ballad, where the queen (Maynamati) with her son Gopi Chandra, husband Manik Chandra and their glory of conversion to the Natha-Yogi cult are described. There is another class of ballad known as *Jana-Gabbharur Git*, where the story of a princess called *Janagabharu* is narrated. In this ballad also one finds the character of Gopichand again who is depicted here as a prince and is said to have been well-versed in all the super-natural powers like those of the *Nath-Siddhas*. Thus, the popularity of the character of Gopichand (Chandra) who is recorded to have been converted to the Nath cult through the instrumentality of his mother *Mayamati* may strongly indicate the wide-spread prevalence of the cult among the masses of Darrang. In this connection, it is to be mentioned that according to the Census Report of 1871 records in the district of Darrang contained a total of 18,095 population of the (Jugi-Katanis) out of a total of 236009 souls.²¹ Gopi Chandra's conversion indicates that almost all Natha yogi people of Darrang were local converts to what was preached by Matsyundranath and his guru Gorakshanath.

The Bodo-Kacharis worshipped Bullibriu (river Bharali) Mainaobri (goddess Lakshmi) etc. The bodo-Kacharis of present Kamrup district still worship their primordial male and female deities called *Burha Burhi*.⁶¹ The Koch *Rajvamsis* worshipped their god *Rishi* and his wife *Jago*, now identified with worship Siva and Parvati.

Besides these major cults, there were also certain minor cults which were practiced in Darrang during the period of our study. Among them goddess *Dharmasitala*.i.e. the goddess of pox, was very popular amongst the womenfolk of Darrang. This goddess is popularly called as *Ai* or *Sitala*. She was adored with a special kind of songs called *Ai-nam* which are still sung by the womenfolk of the entire Brahmaputra valley to get someone recover from the chicken pox or measles. The chief feature of worshipping this goddess is that she is never worshipped by a Brahman priest but female devotees by singing hymns.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the above facts that Heterogeneous sects and belief prevailed in the Koch kingdom during the period under study. Besides, being a land of diverse local ethnic communities, the kingdom presented a cultural zone of indigenous culture in the form of dance, music, beliefs and customs. The most popular deity of the Koch Kingdom was Siva. The deities of *Durga* and *Monasa* were worshipped by all sections of Hindu and non-Hindu people of the kingdom. Although the royal family accepted Hinduism and were elevated to the status of *Khatriyas* by the Brahmin priests they patronized the Vedic rites of the worship of the goddess *Durga* in her different manifestations. The Neo-*Vaishnavism* which received direct patronage of the Koch rulers brought significant changes to the society. *Brahmanic* rites continued to exist but priesthood was no longer monopoly of the Brahmins. A large number of tribes through new-Vaishnavism had been entering the fold of Hinduism and hence became aquainted with advance culture. Diverse sections of people were now brought under the fold of a common faith which also gave them a common *Lingua-franca* in the form of Assamese and a common culture. This had fostered community feeling and strengthened the bonds of social amity.

7. References

1. Nath, D. 1989. History of the Koch Kingdom (1515-1615), Delhi, Mittal Publications. Op.cit. P.166 Henceforth abbreviated as HKKN.
2. Koch Rajar Buranji (Ms.)
3. Sarma, N.C. (ed) 1973, Pathsala, Guwahati, Darrang Raj Vamsavali, vv 780-793; (Intro) P.XV. (Henceforth abbreviated as DRV.)
4. Sarma, N.C. 1989, Asamiya Loka-Samskritir Abhas, Guwahati, Bani Prokash Private Ltd. P.244.
5. Koch Rajar Buranji (Ms.)

6. Baruah, B.K. 1969. A Cultural History of Assam. 2nd edn. Guwahati. P.203 (Intra).
7. Sarma, N.C. 1989, Asamiya Loka-Sanskritir Abhas, Guwahati, Bani Prokash Private Ltd. PP.135-53.
8. HKKN, op.cit. P.166.
9. Sarma, N.C. (ed) 1995. Siva-Puran, 2nd Edn., Guwahati; p.218.
10. DRV. V.327.
11. HKKN, op.cit. P.166.
12. Sharma, M.M. 1978, Inscriptions of Ancient Assam. Guwahati University, pp.6, 50 ft.
13. Sarma, D.1974, Mongalldoir Buranji, Guwahati, Asom Prakashn Parisad, 2nd Edn. Op.cit., p.117.
14. Neog, M. (ed) 1969, Pabitra Asom, Guwhati, Asom Prakason Parisad, P.210.
15. DRV, v.332.
16. Bhattacharyya 1977, Bharatiya Dharmar Itihas, Calcutta, p. 336.
17. Ibid.
18. HKKN, p.169.
19. Das Gupta, S.B. 1976, Obscure Religious Cults, 3rd Edn. Calcutta, p.336.
20. Bhattacharya H. (ed) 1983, The Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. iv, Reprint, Calcutta, p.280.
21. Hunter, w.w. 1982, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol.I. Reprint, Guwahati. P.141.
22. HKKN, Op.cit. p.169