



Burhi Gosani Devalaya: A Cultural Heritage Site

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Abstract: The Northeast region of Indian subcontinent is known for its cultural heritages. The number of diverse people, their languages, traditions, custom, religious believes resulted in the formation of several cultural heritages, which carries the story of past. One of the cultural heritage located in the state of Assam is the Burhi Gosani Devalaya, a center of Shakti worship. Historically the Devalaya is connected with the Ahom- Jaintia conflict as well as the Sakti worshipping practices of the Ahom Dynasty. This paper aim to locate the historical significance of the Burhi Gosani Devalaya as a cultural heritage site.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, temple , Saktism, Ahoms, Jaintias

I. INTRODUCTION

The word “heritage” generally defines something that handed down from past. Every new generation acquired something from their ancestors; be it language, tradition, customs and buildings. Heritages like the houses, monuments, ponds, forts, which are visible to one’s eye can be touched or we can say physical are under the intangible category. Apart from this division, heritages are also sub divided on the basis of their creation. Human made heritages are called cultural heritage. Culture is the creation of society. According to E.B. Taylor, “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The Assamese society formed through the process of amalgamation of different ethnic groups. This diversity is reflected in its cultural heritages.

This work is mainly based on the *Burhi Gosani Devalaya* located at the heart of the Jorhat town. The temple enshrines a metallic image of Mahisamardini Durga. Though the image has a historical background, the building of the temple complex is modern. It was one of the prominent Sakti Devalaya of Upper Assam regularly visited by a large number of locals or outsiders.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is an extensive literature on the Saktism and the centers of Sakti worship of Assam. Edited by Maheswar Neog, Pavitra Assam (1960) , Holy Shrines of Assam(1940) by Pradip Sarma are the used to get information of the Sakti worship center of Assam. Cultural History of Assam Volume I (1951) by B.K. Barua, Comprehensive History of Assam Volume I (1990) by H.K. Barpujari, Folklore of Assam by (1972) Jogesh Das are used to understand the tradition of Sakti worship in Assam.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The present work aim to study the historical significance of the *Burhi Gosani Devalaya*, a centre of Shakti worship constructed by Ahom monarch Gaurinath Singha in the 18th century, situated at the Dewal road at the heart of the Jorhat city. The idol of this Devalaya, “Burhi Gosani” is related with the Jaintia religious beliefs. It is one of the main attractions of the Jorhat town, mainly during the yearly celebration of the Durga Puja.

METHODOLOGY

The source materials collected are both primary as well as secondary. Primary sources include interviews, photographs and Buranjis.

Secondary sources include books, magazines and internet sources.

II. DISCUSSION

From ancient time Saktism has been enjoying prominence in the Brahmaputra valley. Kamarupa was recognized as a principal seat of the Sakti cult. In the 'Devi Purana' Kamarupa is named along with few others as a place where the Devi always remains in different forms. (Barpujari H.K.,1990,p.318) Throughout the medieval period, Saktism was one of the prominent religion of the region .Worship of mother goddess is also embedded in the life of the ethnic group of the valley and the Hills. The supreme deity, Kamakhya is, according to Kakati of Austric origin. In the medieval period, the *Kacharis* and *Jaintias* both royal families worshipped the Sakti cult. Saktism was also one of the chief sects followed by the *Ahom king. Pratap Singha , Godadhar Singha, Rudra Singha, Siva Singha, Pramatta Singha, Rajeshwar Singha* and others, mostly the later Ahoms were great devotee of the mother Goddess . These rulers constructed and made donations and grants to different Sakti temples in Assam. Sakti in the forms of *Kamakhya, Ugaratara, Dikkarvasini, Tamreswari , Durga , Kali and Uma Paravti* is enshrined in temples at various places. Kamakhya with three temples at Gauhati, Khetri and Silghat is the most known among them. The *Devi Dol* at Sibasagar, the *Burhi Gosani Devalaya* at Jorhat, the *Mahisi Mardini Durga Mandir* of Hatimara in Nowgong, the old *Bhairavi Mandir* at Tezpur, the *Umavana* of Biswanath, the *Dirgheswari* temple at North Gauhati, the *Turkeswari Devalaya* near Krishnai and the *Bageswari Devalaya* at Bongaigaon in Goalpara district (present Bongaigaon district) are some of other places where the Devi is worshipped.

SHAKTISM AND ITS PROMINENCE AMONG THE ROYALS

“Saktism is the cult of worshipping a female goddess as the supreme deity”.(Barpujari H.K.,1990,p.317) The deity is known in different names in different part of the subcontinent as Durga, Devi, Kali ,Kamakhya ,Tara ,Chamudni etc. the female form is considered as the Sakti i.e. the power/energy of the supreme god Shiva. The worshippers of this goddess are known as the Saktas. In northeast India, the goddess is mainly as Kamakhya, the centre of worship located at the Nilachal Hills. B.K. Kakati on the basis of philological analysis of the Kama part of the words Kamakhya and Kamarupa and the interpretations of a episode related by Siva, maintains that the aforesaid names are of Austric origin and “the Kama Goddess might have been originally a spirit of the graveyard and represented ancestor spirit in the form of an ancestral mother”.It appears to be the fact that Kamakhya was the object of worship of some of the primitive tribes, which has later on been given a place of honour in the Aryan pantheon.(Barpujari H.K.,1990,p.319)

In the medieval period the *Koch , Kacharis* and Ahoms were the worshippers of Sakti. The worship of Sakti is related with bloodshed in the form of animal sacrifice. Hence, Saktism had a greater appeal to the royal families who were frequently required to have more strength for remaining in power and needed to get involved in lot of bloodshed in the frequent battles with foreign forces as well as the rebels from time to time. The *Bhuyans , Koch , Kacharis, Chutiyas* and Ahoms , all were devotees of the goddess.

BURHI GOSANI DEVALAYA

Burhi Gosani Devalaya, now located at the Dewal Road, beside Gar Ali of the Jorhat town is a Devalaya i.e. temple dedicated to a form of the mother goddess the *Burhi Gosani*. Initially the goddess was a deity of the *Jaintias*. During *Jaintia* campaign by Rudra Singha, the Gosani was brought from *Jaintia* kingdom to the Ahom kingdom. The westward expansion of the Ahom kingdom at the cost of the *Kacharis* brought it into contact with the *Jaintias*. The *Jaintia* raja disobeyed Rudra singha's call to release Tamradhwaj, the Kachari king. This precipitated the Ahom invasion of Jaintia. Rudra Singha ordered mobilization of his army to invade *Jaintia* after the rains. The Ahoms attacked *Jaintias* from fronts, one led by Bairagi Barbarua and the other by Barphukan. The *Jaintia* Raja was captured and brought to Biswanath. The commander of the Ahom army was ordered to bring the image of the *Jaintia* Devi, the deity of the *Jaintia* royal family. But the Devi manifest herself in the dream of the Ahom commander and told that “she” would not leave the *Jaintia* kingdom and advised him to took the image and yoni of the Gosani located near the river Burhi. Hence the goddess was named after the river *Burhi* and came to be known as the “*Burhi Gosani*”.(Neog Maheswar,2008,p.117) The *Gosani* is considered by the priests as a form of Durga, the destroyer of Mahishasur.

When the capital was transferred to Jorhat, the temple structure could not be constructed. The later part of the Ahom role faced both internal and external difficulties like the Moamoria rebellion and the invasion of Burmese. The Upper Assam was adversely affected by the political changes. In such scenario, the economic contribution, in the form of constructing temples and grants was impossible for the Ahom rulers. During the Burmese invasion, the Devalaya lost its land as well as the copper plate that mentioned the list of servants. Thus it failed to gain anything from the British government. The present area where the Devalaya located was acquired from the government with the help of Raibahadur Radhakanta Handique. The last Ahom Raja Purandar Singha constructed a thatched house in this land to continue the worship. Later on, with the donation from locals a temple building was constructed but it was also ruined in Earthquake.

When the Ahoms brought the image of the *Gosani*, they also brought the family of priest, named *Sanatana* with them. The descendents of this priest continue to worship the goddess. Once, the Ahom Swargadeo removed this branch and appointed another branch as the main priest. But the situation in the capital deteriorated, which compelled the king to reappoint the former branch and garnered the priest with the title of “*Pujaghariya Baruah*”. From there on the family continued to use this title.

Swargadeo Rudra Singha, initially, established the *Burhi Gosani* in the capital Gargaon , constructing a dol. The priest had to give the offering and the ‘tilak’ (sacred mark worn by Hindu on the forehead) to the king after daily prayer. The practice of animal sacrifice was present from a long time in this Devalaya. It is mentioned that along with the offerings the priest sent a sacrificial goat to the royal household. The royal family took the deity with them while travelling out of the capital. When the capital was transferred from Rangpur to Jorhat , the Ahom monarch brought the image of the Gosani to Jorhat.

The present temple compound includes the main temple of the goddess Durga and two small temples of gods, Shiva and Ganesha. The temple structure is completely modern as the later Ahoms could not contribute much for the reconstruction after the deity was brought from the capital Rangpur.

Conclusion

The Devalaya is one of the chief Sakti worship centers of Upper Assam. The image of the goddess Durga, presented in the Devalaya is visited by thousands, mostly during the of Durga puja, celebrated in the season of autumn. The animal sacrifice is still practiced in the temple. Thus the Burhi Gosani Devalaya , situated at the heart of Jorhat bear the story of Ahom – Jaintia confrontation, the prominence of Shakta institution among the Ahom royals and the story of foreign invasion which broke the backbone of the Ahom Monarchy.

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