

The Tradition of Sun: Worship in Ancient Assam a Northeastern State of India: an Outlook

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Abstract:

Amongst the brahmanical deities worshipped in ancient Assam, Surya or Sun occupies a very prominent position. In the Markandeya Purana (300A.D.-400 A.D.) we have found the earliest reference to the prevalence of Sun-worship in ancient Assam. The account of the Buddhist monk Arya Dhritika depicted in Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India shows the popularity of Sun-worship in ancient Assam. Kalika Purana, one of the famous Upapuranas of about 1000-1100 A.D. refers to two distinct centers of Sun-worship of ancient Assam. The first one is Raviksetra which can legitimately be identified to the Sri Surya mountain, located about 12 km southeast of Goalpara town and about 136 km northeast of Guwahati and the second one is the Citrasaila hill which is a worshipping seat of nine Grahas, where Surya (the chief of the Grahas) is also worshipped. This Citrasaila hill is lawfully identified as the Navagraha hill situated in the city of Guwahati, the capital of Assam. However, some archaeological findings of Assam, witness the prevalence of Sun-worship in ancient Assam. The aim of this paper is to throw light on the tradition of Sun-worship prevailed in ancient Assam from historical point of view.

Keywords: Assam, Sun-worship, Kalika Purana, Surya pahar, Navagraha temple

Introduction:

Sun-worship in Assam has a great antiquity. Among the Brahmanical deities worshipped in Assam Sūrya or Sun occupies a very prominent position. In ancient days, Assam was known as Prāḡjyotiṣa later as Kāmarūpa. The earliest reference of the Sun - worship in ancient Assam has been made in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa which was composed between the third and the fourth centuries A.D. In the hundred and ninth chapter of the Purāṇa it is narrated that when a king named Rājyavardhana became old and retired to the forest the Brahmanas of his kingdom, who were very much attached to him resolved to propitiate the Sun by austerities in order to get the king restored to youth. Accordingly, they started austerities and while they were striving to propitiate the Sun a Gandarva named Sudāman appeared and advised the Brahmanas: "If ye desire, O dvijas, to propitiate the Sun, let this be done whereby the Sun will become well pleased. Therefore, there is a forest, named Guru – Viśāla by the Siddhas, in the very mountaneous Kāmarūpa, go there verily in haste. There perform your propitiation of the Sun with minds completely composed; the Siddha's friendly region is there; there ye shall obtain all your desires". After hearing the words of Sudāman the Brahmanas proceeded to Kāmarūpa and beheld the sacred and beautiful shrine of the Sun there. The Brahmanas by practicing austerities there succeeded in propitiating the Sun and got the youth restored to Rājyavardhana¹. Tārānātha's History of Buddhism in India, which has been composed

in 1608 A.D., contains an important account of Ārya Dhitika, a Buddhist monk, who flourished in the third century B.C. According to that account, in Kāmarūpa, there lived a very wealthy Brahmana named Siddha who used to worship the Sun. The Buddhist monk, Ārya Dhitika, with his magic powers, appeared before him as the Sun and delivered sermons with an aim to convert him to Buddhism. The Brahmana realised the ‘Truth’, with great devotion built a Mahācaitya, and “Lavishly entertained the Saṅghas all around”.² Thus, it becomes clear that the people of Kāmarūpa were formerly worshippers of the Sun-god prior to the advent of Buddhism.

One of the famous Upapurāṇas, the Kālikā Purāṇa refers to two important seats of Sun-worship. The first reference has made to the Ravikṣetra situated on a hill called Tattva to the west of the river Trisrotā³. This holy place is identified as the Srī Sūrya mountain in the district of Goalpara which contains a large number of sculptures of great iconographical significance⁴. The most prominent one in the form of a large outer circle containing one smaller inner circle. Within the inner circle there is the figure of a four-faced deity who may be identified as god Kaśyapa or Prajāpati, the father of the Suns. Aditi is the consort of Kaśyapa and hence, her offspring are known as Ādityas⁵. In between the inner and the outer circles there are twelve identical figures arranged around the figure of Kaśyapa in the form of lotus petals. These are the figures of the twelve Ādityas or the twelve Suns. At the Sūrya-Pāhār there is a row of five images of of similar size, sculptured on the same rock. These were first identified as Bodhisattvas. P. D. Choudhury considers them all the figures to be Durga⁶. There is another row of three figures sculptured on the same rock of similar size, earlier, which were supposed to represent the Buddhist Triratna. But, P. D. Choudhury recognizes the middle figure to be that of Durga and the side figures of Siva⁷. It is not unlikely that these eight (five plus three eight) figures standing in rows represent the eight Grahas other than Sūrya, who is represented by the circular figure of twelve Ādityas, so as to form a cluster of Navagrahas in the same place.

Further, the Kālikā Purāṇa refers to a hill named Citraśaila, as a centre of worshipping the nine planets or Navagrahas presently identified as the Navagraha hill in the city of Guwahati on which the temple of Navagraha stands. The present temple of Navagraha has been constructed during the time of the Ahom king Rājeśvara Siṅha in Saka 1674 (1752 A.D.). But, on the basis of the date of the composition of the Kālikā Purāṇa the tradition of the Navagraha worship may be traced back to the ninth or tenth century A.D. The antiquity of the Sun-worship in ancient Assam is testified by a verse of the Kālikā Purāṇa where Viṣṇu, after installing Naraka on the throne of Prāgjyotiṣha, says, “ O son ! Mahādeva, Brahmā and myself are established in this place and Candra and Sūrya also reside here permanently”⁸.

There is no clear evidence in early epigraphical records regarding the prevalence of the Sun-cult. In the Guwahati grant of Indrapāla, there occurs the expression ‘tathāgata-kārita-āditya-bhaṭṭāraka-satakaśāsna-bhavisā-bhūmi’ where the word Āditya occurs⁹. According to Hornle, the expression ādityabhaṭṭāraka signifies the Sun-god¹⁰. The expression ādityabhaṭṭāraka also might refer to simply a scholar (bhaṭṭāraka) as suggested by P.N. Bhattacharya¹¹. The prevalence of the worship of the Sun is however, proved by the existing archeological remains of temples dedicated to the deity. Some of the iconographical representations of the Sun-god are furnished below:

1. One image of the Sun-god has been found on one of the Caitya windows from Dah Parvatiyā, ascribed to the 5th - 6th century A.D. The deity is found seated cross-legged and holding

- lotuses in both of his hands, with an attendant on his left holding a pen and an inkpot, and on his right there is another attendant holding a staff.¹²
2. Among the Tezpur ruins there is a stone lintel having three raised panels on it, where the central panel is occupied by an image of Sun flanked by two attendants. In this respect R. D. Banerji holds that certainly there was a Sun temple because in Hindu temples the central panel of the lintel of the stone door - frame of the temple is generally occupied by the presiding deity of the temple¹³. The date of this sculpture may be ascribed to the 8th century A.D.
 3. A fine iconic representation of the deity is found engraved in the rock behind the Sukreśvara temple, in Guwahati, in the standing posture and holding lotus in both hands.
 4. Another image of Sūrya has been found in a temple of Sualkuchi in Kāmarūpa district which is ascribed to the 10th century A.D.
 5. Among the archaeological finds of the Narakāsūr Hills situated in the southern part of the city of Guwahati, there are two bronze Sūrya images. In one of the figures the deity stands on a ratha drawn by seven horses and in the other figure the god is seen in a standing posture¹⁴.
 6. A stone image of Sūrya, sitting on a chariot drawn by seven horses has been found in Sadiya, in the Dibrugarh district, at the north-eastern extremity of the state of Assam¹⁵.
 7. Two other Sun images has been seen in the precincts of the Kāmākhyā temple. One appears in the jaṅghā of the garbhagrha and the other in the animal slaughter house near the temple. Thus, the prevalence of solar - cult is proved by the existing remains dedicated to the Sun and many icons of the deity found in Dah- Parvatiyā, Tezpur, Gahpur, Sadiyā, Sukreūvara, Sūryapāhār and other places of Assam.

On the western crest of the Chitrāchal (the present name of Citraśaila) Hill, overlooking the mighty Brahmaputra on one side and the city of Guwahati on the other, surrounded all around by tall trees, stands the Navagraha temple. The temple is dedicated to nine Grahas or planets where nine identical aniconic symbols in the form of Siva-liṅgas are found instead of iconographic representations of the nine Grahas¹⁶. The large liṅga at the centre of the spacious cell is the Sūrya and the smaller liṅgas around it are the rest of the eight Grahas excluding Sūrya. From this aniconic representation of the planets it can be presumed that there lies a very intimate relationship between the Saivet-cult and the Sun-cult. Sūrya being the chief of the Grahas, the relationship between Siva and Sūrya naturally expanded to the nine Grahas and that is how we have all the nine Grahas in the form of Siva-liṅgas. It has been observed that in the Devapujānirṇaya section of the Sukla-Yajuḥ- Sākhiya-Karmakaṇḍa-Pradīpa, p. 181, in the adoration of the eighty murti of lord Siva the Sun-god is also referred at the same time. In the southern part of India the close relationship between Siva and the nine Grahas has been a common feature. In this regard T. A. Gopinath Rao says: “the nine planets Sūrya, Chandra, Bhauma, Budha, Sukra, Brhaspati, Sani, Rahu and Ketu are worshipped by the Hindus and their images are generally found in all important Saiva temples in South India”.¹⁷

Assam has a rich tradition of astrological studies from very early period. The tradition of astrological studies remains intimately connected with the cult of worshipping Sūrya and the Grahas. Prāgjyotiṣa, the ancient name of Assam, may be shown to be connected with the practice of astronomy. According to the Kālikā Purāṇa, the name of this city was derived from the fact

that Brahmā, the Supreme creator, created a star while he had his abode in this city.¹⁸ In this regard K.L. Barua states that from the tradition of planetary worship the name Prāḡjyotiṣa has been derived.¹⁹ A distinct system of astronomy for calculating the almanac has been developed in Kāmarūpa from ancient time which is known as Kāmrūpīya Nibandhanīya Khaṇḍasādhyā. In about 665 A.D., Mihira had composed a treatise on this system and large number of manuscripts of which are found in the district of Kāmarūpa.²⁰ Some scholars attribute this tradition of planetary worship of ancient Assam to Iranian influence. Gait takes the term Prāḡjyotiṣpura to mean the city of eastern astrology.²¹

Conclusion:

Sūrya is a principal god of sectarian Hinduism and judging from the number of extant images. He seems to have been popular in ancient Assam. Some literary references indicate the prevalence of the worship of the Sun-god in Assam from fairly early times. Sun is worshipped not only for the attainment of desire and welfare but also for the healing of many ailments. Sūrya's popularity may have been due more to his position as the healer of diseases and as the illuminator of the universe. A donative inscription on the pedestal of a beautiful image of Sūrya in a sitting posture from Bengal bears this aspect of the Sun-god. Hence, he has been invoked as samastaroganām hartā and viśva-prakāśaka.²² The Assamese people looked upon the Sun-god in this aspect. Among the tribal people of Assam traces of Sun-worship still survive. Again, Sūrya is held a very important position in the context of Hindu rituals and this also may have contributed to the popularity of the Sun-god. As a territory in the extreme east where the Sun rises first, Assam was held sacred to the Sun-god from very ancient time.

References:

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