

Traditional Rituals Prevalent in Nagasankar Temple, Assam: A Discussion

Dr. Mitali Nath¹, Dr. Praveen B.M²

¹PDF Scholar, Srinivas University, Mangaluru

²Research Guide cum Director, Research and Innovative Council, Srinivas University, Mangaluru

Abstract:

On the basis of traditional beliefs and imaginary theories that the Elani Puja of Assam - Patal Devalaya, Temple, Satra has been specified. The three streams of Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava have been flowing in parallel for ages.

One of the ancient and major deities in Hinduism is the 'Shiva God'. There is a lot of evidence about the prevalence of Saivism since the era of Mahabharata. Shiva who is known by different names can also be seen imagining different forms. Shiva idols and Shiva lingas scattered in different places in Assam are the ones who remember the antiquity of its practice.

Scope of the Study: Our paper deals with the origin of the Shaiva religion in Assam, its spread and the Shaiva tradition. Also, the traditional rituals of Naimitri Shaiva Puja, Shivratri, Bolbam etc. in Nagashankar Temple are discussed and the lineage of the temple priests is discussed.

Objective of the study: This discussion is expected to help the younger generation to learn about the history of Shaivism in Assam and also to learn about the heritage and very faithful and popular Nagashankar Temple in Assam.

Method of the study: Descriptive methodology has been adopted mainly but analytical methodology has been resorted to as required.

Sources of the study: In preparing our discussion paper, data have been collected through interviews and other reference books, magazines, memoirs etc. have been used.

Keyword: shiva, nagshakar, traditional rituals

1. Introduction

Sonitpur is one of the districts of Assam that carries the heritage and is mentioned in various legends of Puranas, Mahabharata, Yoginitantra etc. There is a mention of King Ban of Sonitpur in the copper plate inscriptions which bear historical witness. Such is Usha, the daughter of Banasur, who got married to Aniruddha, which led the battle between Hari and Har as mentioned in the Puranas. Thousands of people died and flooded the capital of Ban with blood. Therefore, after this terrible battle, the town was named Sonitpur. One of the Shiva temples scattered in different parts of Assam is the Nagashankar temple. The temple is located about 58 kilometres north of Tezpur in Sonitpur district of Assam about 17 kilometers west of Biswanath town. The mouza centered around this temple is known as Nagashankar Mouza. Located on the south side at a distance of one and a half kilometers from the National Highway 15.

Origin of the Nagashankar Temple: There are many legends associated with the Nagashankar Temple. It is said that Mahadev came to see the establishment of the second Kashi in Bishwanath by the

Banaraja. This is the place where Shiva's navel touches when he falls asleep in sorrow for missing a Shiva Linga. There erected a Shiva Linga and later a temple was built there.

Another legend says that after the death of Sati, Lord Mahadeva carried her body around. The navel of the body collapsed here. From this navel part, the Shiva Linga is placed on the spot and worshipped and the temple originates.¹ Again according to another fact, Mahamuni Dhaumya, the priest of Panchapandava, is immersed in meditation considering this place where the navel of Lord Shankara, is the best place to enhance Shankara. Nagashankara who had the navelpeeth of Shankara started waking up in the penance of Mahamuni Dhaumya and later impressed with the scholarship of Mahamuni Dhaumya, the Pandavas made him their high priest

Reconstruction and builders of temples: Many legends are found about the timing and construction of the Nagashankara temple. The temple was rebuilt in the 4th century during the days of king Pratapsingha, the king of the Hitari dynasty, from the time Mahamuni Dhaumya left Nagashankara. Later at the end of the 4th century King Nagaksha built a temple and dug a pond next to the temple by digging the story of Navi Shankara hidden in the forest land. It was with his efforts that worship was introduced here.²

Again according to Harinath Sharma Doloi, this temple was established by the Nagamatta king and it is said that the nagamatta was named after Arimatta.³

In the late 14th century, when the temple split in 1480, Ahom Emperor Suchenfa rebuilt the temple and laid the foundation of the soil. The amount of land in this Devttor temple is 833 bikhas. However, in this context one says that Ahom Emperor Suchenpha repaired or rebuilt the Nagashankar temple instead of building it. It vanished at the crooked pace of time. Only the former hole remained intact. The idea of this comes from flat bricks lying in the vicinity of the campus.

However, until direct evidence is available, the Nagashankar Temple will remain known as the contribution of the Ahom Emperor Suchenpha and will continue to occupy an important place as the first Hindu temple during the Ahom period.

2. Various religious traditions prevalent in Nagasankar temple

The tradition Shiva puja is very ancient. Imagining the different forms of Shiva, devotees offer prayers at various Shiva statues and 'linga' scattered in different parts of Assam. In Assamese society, a Shiva temple is found in the house of every devotee. Where one worships Shiva in the morning and evening. It is worth mentioning that it is known from many Charit books of Assamese that Kusumbar Bhuyan got his son Shankar (later Sankardeva) to worship Shankara. It is known from Guru Charit that before Shankaradeva preached Vaishnavism people in Kamarupa worshipped Bhairava Shiva with liquor and goat instead of worshipping Hari. Shiva is known by various names in the folk society. They are Shankar Bhairava, Maheshwar, Pashupati, Tripati, Nataraja, Gangadhar, Jaleshwar, Gourishwar, Burhagohsai, etc.

Like other Shiva temples in different districts of Assam, the ancient Nagasankar Temple in Bishwanath sub-division of Sonitpur district also celebrates daily Shiva Puja and various religious festivals and pujas at different times of the year.

Daily Shiva Puja: The Nagashankar Temple is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. This puja is mainly performed as follows:

First, the designated priest of the temple takes water from the kusha and puts basil leaves in it and calls upon the Ganga. Then he touches the 'ashana' with sandalwood flowers and purifies it by saying, "Ete

gandhapushpe om hring aadhaar shaktaye kamala sanaya namah'. During this time, the priest chants 'bighrapasaran' mantra at the same time to remove all kinds of obstacles pronouncing 'Om Namaha Shivaya'. After this, there begins the worshipping of Ganesh chanting the mantra like:

Ete Gandhapushpe Om Ganeshaya namah⁴

Then the priest performs pranayama with the Shiva mulmantra. After the pranayama, the priest bathes the Shivalinga and worships the 'ashtamurti' on the altar.

The mantra is as follows:

'Ete Gandhapushpe om Sarvaya Kshitimutaye Namah'⁵

At the end of the Ashtamurti Puja, the priest chants 'Om Namah Shivaya' 108 times. After the chanting, the mantra 'Om Mahadev Kshama' is chanted. This marks the end of the daily Shiva Puja.

Other festivals and events: One of the categories of culture is festivals. These festivals are used to learn about the various activities of the nations of the society. However, these festivals are mainly related to religious aspects. Other temples in Sonitpur district also celebrate daily Shiva worship and various festivals. For the convenience of discussion, these festivals are divided into two types.

Day before Shiva Puja, the priests take 'Havish' (fasting). This puja is mainly

- (a) Religious festivals related to worship
- (b) Social reform festival

(a) **Religious festivals related to Puja Patal:** The religious festivals celebrated at the Nagshankar Temple include Bolbom, Shivaratri, Fakuwa, Janmashtami and Ganesh Puja. This is discussed below:

Shivaratri: Shivaratri Puja is one of the religious festivals held at the Nagshankar Temple. Like other Shiva temples, the Nagshankar Temple celebrates Shivaratri with great pomp. The held four times in the four segments of time. The Shiva Linga is revived with a different substance in every segment. The priest bathes the Linga with milk, curd, ghee and honey. In the fourth segment offerings, fragrant flowers, incense, lamps, durva, bell leaves, etc. are used in the worship. After the fourth segment, 'Bhog' is offered to Lord Shiva.

During this puja, candles and incense are lit in front of Shiva. After the puja, the devotees bow down to the Shivling. In the temple, a designated priest recites the pranam mantra on behalf of the devotees. Sprinkling the 'shanti jal' he blesses them to live a life of thousand years. One of the strophes of the 'nam' sung by the devotees on the day of the Shivaratri is mentioned below:

Shivar sange janta kevale nangatha

Dug Dug dambaru bai

Kandhe bhiksha patra gawe bhashma matra

Bhiksha magiboloi jai⁶

Bolbom: Bolbom is a month-long festival held at the Nagshankar Temple. This festival is mainly held in the month of Shaon in Assam like other parts of India. Thousands of devotees from all over Assam and India come to worship Lord Mahadeva, making the spiritual atmosphere of the Nagshankar Temple even more fascinating. Every Monday in the month of Shaon, about 10,000-15,000 people from different places visit the temple.

Bolbom pilgrims have a strong belief that Shiva will fulfill their wishes if they walk on Bolbom. It is believed that a devotee who fetches water from the river barefoot, carries a cauldron on his shoulder, walks to the Shiva temple and anoints the Shiva Linga with the water receives the merit of an Ashwamedha sacrifice and is pleased with Lord Shiva. Many devotees also eat vegetarian food during the month of Puja.

However, the Bolbom festival has changed radically nowadays. There are many devotees who travel by car instead of walking. Many times, Bolbom's spiritual feelings are stuck in his reverence for God. It is not uncommon for many devotees to go out for fun without respect for God. The scene of drinking drugs and playing Hindi movie songs in the car is really disturbing.

Fakuwa: Another notable festival celebrated at the Nagashankar Temple is Fakuwa. This festival is celebrated on the full moon of the month of Fagun. However, the Fakuwa festival is celebrated at the Nagashankar temple from the last few days of the month of Chot for a few days. On the first day of the Falgu festival, a ceremony is also held at the Nagashankar temple. According to the Adhivasa rules, Fakuwa begins with the installation of the idol of Lord Krishna in the evening. Then, inside an open-air velaghar, the Gosai is brought out 'openly' and made to walk around the house with joyful sounds and the house is set on fire. This is called cloud burning (Megh Dah). Then the idol of the Gosai is lowered to the altar of the daul and a seat is arranged to swing on the altar with a canopy over it. This is where the act of 'Adhibash' ends. In the next morning, the idol of the temple is worshiped ritually with five ingredients (Panchadrabya)- agaru, sandalwood, turmeric, fragrant oil and holy water. The devotees sprinkle 'Faku' to each other and return home taking the offering (Bhog) of the temple. In the morning of the third day, arriving at the temple people lower the Gosai to the bottom and with devotion they play Faku revolving the idol of Gosai in the courtyard of each household. During this time people pray according to their capability with bunches of burning fragrance sticks, betelnut etc. igniting earthen lamp. Everyone takes blessings by offering donation. During this time, devotees play Faku and the idols of Gosai are circulated from the courtyards of each household. The priest wishes the blessings of God to destroy evils and increase happiness and peace in life. When the Gosai was finally allowed to enter the temple, a battle took place between the obstructors and the Govinda Yatra pilgrims. However, Govinda's side won the battle. The winners enter the temple with great joy and everyone ends the Fakuwa festival by receiving offerings. A traditional song sung on the occasion of Fakuwa festival is-

“Basanta kalar din ati bitupan

Brindavane faku khele Nandera Nandan

Faku khele Brindavane Choitanya Banamali

Duyu hate faku loiya khelishhe Murari”⁷

Janmashtami: Like the religious festivals like Shivratri, Bolbom, Fakuwa etc., another religious puja is celebrated in the Nagshankar Temple with great spirituality and festivities. That is the Krishna Janmashtami festival. Janmashtami is celebrated with a one-day program in the month of Bhado in connection with the birth of Krishna. After the daily pujas of the temple, the priests sing Janmashtami songs, ghoshas and kirtans to create a festive atmosphere in the temple area.

It is noteworthy that this festival is especially associated with women. Therefore, some of the women take the character of Daivaki, some of Yashoda and some of Gopini and perform different rituals for the birth of Krishna. After the Naam Kirtan, everyone takes the blessings of God and distributes prashad. Some of the songs sung at the Nagshankar Temple on the occasion of this festival are:

“Bhado Mahare Krishna Ashtamit

Mangal barar Dina Rati

Rohini Nakshatrat Gosai upajile

Sugandhir lagale Bati”⁸

Ganesh Puja is performed in the courtyard of the newly built Ganesh Temple at Nagshankar Temple according to scriptural rituals. In this puja, five-part offerings, one-part offerings, snacks, candles,

incense, bell leaves, oil, laddu, a glass filled with water, sugar and camphor are placed on top of the offerings. The priest takes the 'ashana' cleansing at the beginning of the puja. Then he establishes the kosha-arghya. First, he should make a resolution to worship the Sun and then worship the five gods. The 'Dash Devata' like Indra are worshipped, and the nine planets like Ketu, Rahu and Saturn are worshipped. The mantra of meditation in Ganesh Puja is-

Om sri sri Ganesai namah⁹

Devotees who come to seek the blessings of Lord Shiva to seek freedom from peace, harmony, fear of royal fear enemies and troubles offer various donations in this temple. Devotees also offer pigeons, goat, trient, belpat etc. at the feet of the Lord in an exclusive manner

3. Conclusion:

The worship of the Almighty Shiva, the deity worshipped by the Hindus, is different from that of the Aryans. It is also practised among indigenous peoples. The Nagashankar Temple is the oldest Shiva temple established in Assam. The temple was built in 1480 by Ahom Emperor Suchenpha and is the oldest example of Ahom architecture. There are many legends about the origin, date of construction and builder of this temple, but it is one of the contributions of the Ahom king Suchenpha. Apart from performing the daily routine pujas Shivaratri, Fakuwa, Bolbom, Ganesh Puja etc. in this temple there is a facility to organize other reform activities such as the peaking of the marriage hall upanayana etc. Efforts have been made to make this temple attractive by setting up cooking house for specific marriages as well as many tourists to facilitate the accommodation of people coming from far and wide. Today it occupies a special place in the folk society as a religious tourist destination.

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