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धन्योऽयं भारतो देशः धन्येयं सुरभारती ।
उपासकाः वयं यत्र धन्या अहो परम्परा ॥



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Lord Śiva in the inscriptions of ancient Assam

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The importance of epigraphs in the proper study and authentic reconstruction of ancient Assam's history cannot be ignored. It is from this point of view that the Copper-plate and stone inscriptions of Ancient Assam attain great historical value. Along with other vital issue the devotion to the Lord Śiva seems to have been reflected through the inscriptions of ancient Assam. It is seen that most of the kings of ancient Assam were devoted to Śiva. The paper throws light on the fact that Saiva cult was very much popular in ancient Assam.

Keywords: Epigraph, Mythological manifestations, Śiva, Devotion, Worship.

Ancient inscriptions of any country provide the most reliable source for its history. One is required to study the Sanskrit works like Kālikāpurāṇa, Yogītantra, Kāmākhyātantra, Raghuvamśa, epigraphs, coins, archeological records etc. to gather knowledge on the socio-cultural aspects of ancient Assam. Assam can rightly boast of her contributions towards the rich treasure of epigraph. Epigraphs of ancient Assam were found mostly in the form of rock engravings, Copper-plates issued by kings, sometimes they are found on clay or metal seal and sometimes only plates inscribed on the body of the stone idols. The tradition of writing inscriptions in Prāgjyotiṣa- Kāmarūpa took place mostly under royal patronages in the ancient and medieval period. These inscriptions had a great value as the literary and cultural products.

The tradition of worshipping 'Śiva' by a large number of people is seen from time immemorial. There are a good number of Śiva temples in most of the places of Assam, which show the popularity of the Saiva cult in Assam. Among them, some of the major Śiva temples are Śiva Douḷ in Sivasagar, Parihareśvar temple in Pathsala, Mahābhairaba temple in Tezpur, Haleśvar temple in Tezpur, Negheriting Douḷ in Dergaon, Umānanda temple in the midst of the Brahmaputra, Garakhiyā Douḷ of Baligaon near Jorhat, Bhīmaśaṅkar Jyotirlinga in Guwahati and many more.

The word Śiva simply means 'Auspicious' and anything that is auspicious is Śiva.¹ Lord Śiva is worshipped in different mythological manifestations such as Trinetra,² Nīlakaṇṭha,³ Viśvanātha,⁴. The two prominent symbols of Lord Śiva are the Trident or Trisūla and Ḍambaru. In the work "Understanding Shiva", D. K. Hari and D. K. Hema Hari state "Trisūla denotes the three modes of action in mankind and these three are- Kāyika (Physical action), Vācika (speech or verbal action) and Mānasika (Mental action). The trinity concept in the universe has been conceived as Brahmā (creator), Viṣṇu (preserver) and Maheśvara (destroyer).

There is evidence of the prevalence of Saivism in ancient Assam. In the copper plate grants of the Kāmarūpa kings especially in the two Copper plate grants of Bhāskaravarmana eulogy is made to Lord Śiva. The Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhāskaravarmana starts with the obeisance to Lord Śiva who wears the moon as the crest jewel, who is lovely, who holds the Pināka⁵ bow and who is decorated with particles of ashes⁶. Here deep reverence is shown to Śiva whose garland is made of snakes and who destroyed the body of Kāmadeva with a mere glance.⁷

King Nārāyaṇavarmana flourished in the 5th Century AD was the epitome of virtues. He could win the favour of Lord Śiva. The Ḍubi Copper plates of Bhāskaravarmana narrates that like the Lord of the Bhūtas i.e. Śiva he was a repository of supernal abilities.⁸

In the Tezpur Copper plates of Vanamālavarmadeva it was wished that the dwellers of Kāmarūpa would be purified by the holder of the Pināka i. e. Śiva in whose head the waters of the heavenly Ganges looked like a host of stars.⁹ In the same inscription the relation between Bhagadatta and Śiva is nicely delineated. It is stated that Bhagadatta, after being the lord of Prāgjyotiṣa, attained the supremacy over Uparipattana through the deep penance to the Lord Śiva and won favour to secure the throne of Prāgjyotiṣa for his heirs too.¹⁰

In the Hāyūnthal Copper plate of Harjaravarmana the illustrious Harjaravarmana who was like Paramamāheśvara in respect of meditation was said to ascend the throne at the royal capital of Hārūppeśvara. He was prospering at the royal capital winning favour of Śiva. King Vanamālavarmadeva is said to have re-constructed the temple of Mahādeva in the Tezpur Copper plates.

In the Nowgong plates of Balavarmā III, the, capital of the kings of the Śālastambha dynasty is referred to as Hārūppeśvara where there prevailed the daily worship of Śiva.

It can be known from Tezpur Rock inscription of Harjaravarmana that the supreme monarch Harjaravarmana with high erudition was Paramamāheśvara who had much pride due to indomitable might of his army and who lived in the city of Hārūppeśvara.¹¹

Bhāskaravarmana, the contemporary of emperor Harṣavardhana, had great veneration for Śiva. From the Harṣacarita it is known that since childhood he resolved not to worship and bow down to deities other than Śiva.¹²

It is in Ḍubi Copper plate that Susthitavarmana had two auspicious sons adored by the world like Kārtika and Gaṇeśa of Śambhu.¹³ Here Susthitavarmana is said to adore the lord of the world Śaṅkara who pacifies endless troubles.¹⁴

In the Gauhati grant of Indrapāla while going to depict Pārvatī's jealousy against Gaṅgā it is wished that Lord Śambhu will be triumphant. Brahmapāla's son Ratnapāla was the treasure-house of priceless merits. He constructed temples wherein the images of Śiva were installed as found in the Gauhati Copper plates grant of Indrapāla¹⁵ There was a Brāhmaṇa of the Kāśyapagotra named Haripāla who was an ardent devotee of Śiva. In the benedictory verse of the Khanāmukh Copper plates of Dharmapāla salutation is made to the Ardhayuvatīśvara form of Śiva. The idea of the Ardhayuvatīśvara i.e. Ardhanarīśvara form of Śiva is also echoed in the Śubhaṅkarapāṭaka grant¹⁶. That the concept of the non-duality as underlined in the Advaita philosophy was prevalent in ancient Assam can be known from this. Raghuvamśa shows that Siva and Parvati in this form are to be worshipped¹⁷. In the Śvetāśvataropaniṣad the dual form of Śiva and Pārvatī is conceived as Māyā and Māyī¹⁸. The extent of the religion of ancient Assam may be best understood if the worshipping to Śiva is taken into consideration. Installation of Śiva idol in individual household and community places are also referred to in the inscriptions. In the Uttarabarbīl grant and Bargāon grant too we find reference to Śaṅkara¹⁹. In the Kālikāpurāṇa and Yoginītantra there is enough evidence of the prevalence of Śiva worship.²⁰

The Parbatīyā Copper plates of Vanamālavarmanadeva states that king Vanamālavarmana out of sheer devotion re-constructed the abode of Hāṭakaśulin whose feet were worshipped by all the best gods.²¹

The inscriptions of ancient Assam bear testimony of the faith and worship of Śiva in different mythological manifestations. The Saiva worship which is seen mainly through the devotion of kings and the royal families to Śiva obtained a strong footing in ancient Assam. It is no denying the fact that a little poetic exaggeration knowingly or unknowingly crept into the inscriptions connected with the eulogy of the patron kings. Yet their value as historical and cultural evidences can never be ignored.

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1. Eyaṁ śivāyā niyaterivāyatiḥ – Kirātārjunīyam, IV/21
2. Mahābhāratam 13/140/29-30

3. Tadā pravṛti devastu nīlakaṇṭha iti śrutiḥ- ibid. , I/18
4. Śivapurāṇam, I/71
5. Kumārasambhavam, V/77, Abhijñānaśākuntalam, I/6
6. Aum praṇamya devam śaśīsekharāṁ priyaṁ pinākināṁ bhasma-karṇaivibhūṣitam- Nidhanpur Copper plates of Bhāskaravarmana, V. I.
7. Bhogīśvarakṛtaparikaramīkṣaṇajitakāmarūpaṁ vimuktaṁ parameśvarasya ruṇaṁ nijabhūtivibhūṣitaṁ jayati. – ibid. , V. 2.
8. Bhutyau prajānāmiva kārṭikeyaṁ bhūtādhipaḥ parvatarājaputryāṁ. guṇādhivāso vasatiṁ vibhūtyāḥ śrīdevamatyāmudapīpadatsaḥ. – Dubi Copper plates. of Bhāskaravarmana, V. 28
9. Sa punātu pinākī vo yaschoṣe swardhunījalaṁ koṇaṁ recakavātena tarakāprakarāyitam. - Tezpur Copper plates of Vanamāla, V. 2.
10. Tuṣṭena tena tasmai dattamuparipattanādhināthatvam. prāgjyotiṣādhirājyaṁ kālena tadanvayasyāpi. - ibid., V. 6
11. Harūppeśvarapurāvathitasvabhujabalamadadarppagarvitamahārajā-dhirajaparamēśvaraparama bhaṭṭāraka paramamāheśvaraśrīharjaravarmadevasya. - Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarmana, p. 42
12. Ayamasya ca śaisavādrabhya saṁkalpaḥ stheyān stheyān sthānupādyārvindadvandādṛte nāhamanyaṁ namaskuyāvamit- Harṣacaritam, 7th Ussvāsa.
13. Dubi Copper-plate, V. 62
14. Śāṅkara in one sense is Lord Śiva and in other sense is – śaṁ sukhaṁ karoti iti, - Inscriptions of ancient Assam (IAA), p. 118
15. Sambādha vasudhā sudhādhavalitauḥ śambhūpratiṣṭhāpairdauyasya śrītriyamandirāṇi vibhavairnamaprakaroirapi - The Gauhati plates of Indrapāla, V. 10.
16. Śubhaṅkarapāṭaka Copper Plates of Dharmapāla, V. I
17. Raghuvamśa, I. I
18. Māyāṁ to prakṛtiṁ vidyān māyināṁ tu maheśvaram - Śvetāśvataropaniṣad, IV. 5
19. Bhavatu bhavatimirabhidūraṁ tejo raudraṁ praśāntaye jagataḥ parivarttate – Uttarabarbil Copper Plate, V.I. evemyaḥ paramātmavatprthugūṇau hyekopyanekī sa syātsrīye Śāṅkaraḥ – Bargāon Copper Plate, V. I
20. Sa ca deśaḥ svarājyārthe pūrvam guptamśa śambhūnā – Kālikāpurāṇam, XI. 20 namo mahābhairavāya – Yoginītantram, Pūrvakhaṇḍa
21. The word Sūlin means Śiva. The name Hetukaśūlin possibly means the Śiva established by a person named Hetuka-IAA. , p. 110

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