

Vedic References in the Cultural Heritage of Ancient Assam

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Abstract-The word culture means different ideas, customs and beliefs of a particular society. It comprises everything from the traditional manner in which people live including the modern ways of life. It resembles with that of an umbrella which covers the social behaviour of a particular class found in human society with the knowledge of beliefs, arts, laws, customs and habits of the individuals.

The present day Assam was a smaller part of ancient Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha. Actually the territorial boundary of ancient Kamarupa extended inside Bihar, while the Pragjyotishpura extended even more into Bihar and Eastern UttarPradesh. After few centuries later the size of the Kamarupa area reduced. Even the seven North Eastern states were the part of erstwhile Assam till independence. Hence we cannot exclude the other North Eastern states in this study.

The *Vedic* studies and the performances of the *Vedic* sacrifices were found among the people of ancient Assam. Even today the influence of *Vedic* culture is very prominent among the people of Assamese society. The original source of the cultural life of the people of these regions was the *Vedas*.

The *Vedic* society had a high-minded attitude to the land and the people of the eastern part. The earliest information about Vedic tradition in ancient North-East India may perhaps be found in the *Hastyayurveda* of Palakapya.

The paper attempts to show the different areas upon where the *Vedic* influences were found.

Keywords: *Vedic*, Culture, North-East, Assam, Inscription

INTRODUCTION

Most of the people of ancient Assam followed Hinduism and their culture originated from the *Vedas*. The present day North-East comprises seven states, which was known by the name Kampura in ancient time. This region was covered from the foothills of Himalaya, part of present day Bangladesh in the south, part of west Bengal in the west. It is not known from which period the Aryan or Vedic culture started here. It is certain that the Aryanisation of this region is very old.

The Neolithics were the first inhabitants of this region. Then the Dravidians belonging to the Chalcolithic age migrated to this land with their rich cultural tradition and the migration of different tribal people mainly belonging to the Mongoloid origin took place in this region for a long time and probably the Aryan people came last. So this land can claim to have a rich inheritance having amalgamated the Aryan, Dravidian and tribal culture.

It is very difficult to ascertain since when the Vedicism made its access in this part of India. Logically, it seems that the invasion of the Vedic religion or culture started with the victory of Naraka over the Kiratas.

METHODOLOGY

The study is mainly an analytical one. It is also based on secondary sources like books, journals etc.

OBJECTIVES

Following are the major objectives of this study:

1. To study the Vedic culture in Assam.
2. To analysis the Vedic impact on the other North-East states.
3. To study the ethnic culture and Vedic culture simultaneously.

Vedic references in the cultural life of ancient Assam

Pragjyotisa was the name of ancient Assam and that is first mentioned in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and there, it was a highly praised land. According to the accounts of the epics, it is assumed that the Assam range of mountains formed the northern boundary of Pragjyotisa and the southern boundary was formed by the eastern sea. The ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisa comprised the greater part of undivided Assam, some of the present Bangal district like Jalpaiguri, Coochbihar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Dhaka, Tippera, part of Pabna and probably part of east Nepal¹. The kingdom spread to river Kusi in the west and to the far east of the Brahmaputra valley. Some portions of Bengal were under Kamrupa from the time of Bhaskaravarman who ruled in the first half of the 6th century A.D. This area was also known as Kampura in the medieval period. The historical reference to this place is first observed in the Inscription of Samudragupta where Kamrupa is described as the frontier kingdom of India. The said territorial area has been bifurcated into different states of modern India.

(A) *Assam* - The earliest reference to the Vedic culture in this region is found perhaps in the *Hastyayurveda* compiled by sage Palakapya. It deals with the rearing, treatment and training of elephant. It is stated that the *asrama* of Palakapya's father was situated at the sub-Himalayan region on the bank of the river Lauhitya². Palakapya was well-versed not only in the elephant lore, but also in the *Vedas* including the *Vedangas*³. He was the son of Sāmagāyana, who was an expert in the *Samagana* as the name suggests. The āsrama of sage Bhargava was also adjacent to the asrama of Samagayana, sonorous with the recitation of the *Vedas*⁴. It may perhaps be assumed from this reference to the Vedic recitation that the *varnasramadharm* propounded in the *Vedas* was followed by the people of ancient Assam of that time.

The *Puranas* like *Narasimha*, *Linga*, *Brahma*, *Skandam*, *Garuda*, *Kalika* etc., and some *upapuranas* describe the Brahmaputra as *tirtharaja* and identify it with the Lauhitya. Therefore, it may be said that the river *Lauhitya*, referred to in the *Hastyayurveda*, is identical with the Brahmaputra of ancient Kamarupa⁵.

Moreover, references to Vedic studies and Vedic culture are found in the inscriptions issued by the kings of this region. It is stated in the Dubi Copper Plates Grant (7th Century A.D.) of King Bhāskaravarman, the Vajradatta, son of Bhagadatta studied the four *Vedas* along with the *angas* (ancillary texts). King Balavarman, ancestor of Bhaskarvarman, performed several sacrifices accompanied by gifts. The performance of horse-sacrifice by King Mahabhutavarman is referred to in the grant. The word *avasarika*, found in the grant, signifies a tangible meaning⁶. The Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskarvarman also reveals that more than two hundred Vaidika Brahmanas of different *Vedas* used to live in the North-East⁷. The chanting of Vedic hymns is stated in the Tezpur Copper Plates Grant of King Vanamala. We find clear information in this grant about the study of the *Vedas* and Vedic culture, including the performance of marriage according to Vedic procedure⁸.

The Parbatiya Copper Plates Grant of Vanamalavarmadeva informs us about the tradition of the study of the *Samaveda* in this region⁹ (middle of the 9th century). References to sacrificial post (*yup*), sacrificial altars and performances of sacrifice, *Varnasramasharma* etc., are found in the Gauhati Copper Plates Grant of King Indrapala (1058 A.D.)¹⁰.

The Brahmanic or Vedic culture practiced in the land of Assam made a great influence in the contemporary rituals. However the tradition of Vedic studies, orally and in the traditional way, in this region, is almost lost to us since long time. Though most of the people of Assam are followers of the *Suklayajurveda*, the tradition method of study of the *Veda* is hitherto lost to us. The people of Assam are not accustomed now-a-days, to the recitation of the Vedic hymns in their proper accents and intonations.

(B). *Tripura*: The ancient name of Tripura was *Kirata* or *Kiratadesa*. The *Kiratas* used to live mostly in the hill-tracks of Tripura and they became known as Tipperahs.

Druhyu, the son of King Yayati was sent into exile by his father. Druhyu came to present Tripura and defeating a Kirata King established a new dynasty, But the Kiratas living in the hilly tracks maintaining their distinct identity remained there.

The Brahmanisation or Sanskritisation began only from 640-641 A.D., when Hari Roy alias Dungarpha donated the whole area of Pancakhanda to some Brahmanas from Mithila. In the middle of the 7th cent A.D., Tipperah Copper Plate Grant records the name of Pradosasarman, a very learned Brahmana, whom King Lokanatha donated land for the habitation of two hundred and eleven Brahmins and to construct a temple.

(C) *Arunachal Pradesh*: It is very difficult to know the history of Arunachal Pradesh. The first ancestors of the tribal groups settled here came from Tibet and were soon joined by the Thai-Burmese. It remained as a part of Assam until it got annexed with India by the British in 1858. The earliest probable date of the material relating to the Brahmanical culture available is the 10th cent A.D. Legends of

Parasurama, Vidarbha, Rukmini, Sisupala, Bhismaka etc. associated with historical ruins and other places can be observed. Parasuram Kund in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh is a popular Hindu pilgrimage site. It is believe by many Hindus that Parashuram, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, had cleansed his sin of killing his mother by washing his hands in the water of river Lohit.

During the 10th cent A.D., the cultural aspect of Brahmanical traditions penetrated here. It is indicated from the temples, forts, Brahmanical images like Yaksas, Indra on Airavata, Surya on Chariot etc. Again, a few inscriptions in Sanskrit language and Tibetan language are also found.

(D)*Manipur* : Manipur had a very old history of its own. This state has a very rich cultural tradition. The archeological excavations have found here the evidences of Old Stone Age inhabitation. A Sanskrit text, *Dharani Samhita* (1825-1834) introduced the legend explaining the origin of the name Manipur. King Pamheiba introduced Vaisnavism by Guru Gopal Das. Hence the Vaisnavism spread all over the state. The classical dance of Manipur originated with the traditional way of worshipping the god through dancing.

On the other hand, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were translated into local language and some literary works were written in Sanskrit. Citrangada, the wife of Arjuna, was the princess of Manipur. The penetration of Vaisnavism brought about the Sanskritisation of Meetei names and the Hinduisation of the Meetei culture.

However, it is the Vaisnava tradition and not the purely Vedic tradition which made a great influence on the ethnic culture of Manipur. The *Vaisnava* is a cult in the Hindu religion and here the lord Visnu is worshipped as god. This Visnu is not the Vedic deity but a Puranic god. Vedic Visnu was solar. Vedic lore is a very ancient tradition in India and it might have some indirect connection with the Vaisnavism.

(E) *Other regions of the North-East*: The physiographic situation of Mizoram, Nagaland and to some extent Meghalaya also, made them close to the countries of South and South-East Asia. According to the legends, the Mizos emerged from under a large covering rock known as *Chhinlung*, which is taken as a city in China. They settled at Chin Hills on the Indo-Burmese border in the early 14th century. The earliest Mizos were known as Kukis. And the second batch of immigrants was called New Kukis. The Lushais were the last of the Mizo tribes who migrated to the Lushai Hills by crossing the *Tiau* river bordering Myanmar. Anthropology and history of Naga people are not very clear. Different studies are being made on them. The ethnic culture prevails in the Nagaland.

Meghalaya is inhabited by the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. There are different legends, beliefs and findings about them. The inhabitants of these parts of North-East India carry a rich cultural ethnic heritage. They remained faithful for a long time to their own beliefs and values. It is the religious preachers of

Buddhism and Christianity who influenced them. So, instead of Vedic culture, the Christianity and Buddhism have a great influence over them.

Conclusion: The North-East of India is very rich in respect of its natural resources, scenic beauty and diverse tribal communities with their socio-religious, indigenous faith and culture. This region has maintained an inter-relation with rich Vedic cultural heritage of India. It primarily depends on the treasure house of the *Vedas* and *Upanisads*. The people of the various parts of these regions do not cut themselves away from the unique spiritual strength generated by the Vedic seers.

On the other hands, the new culture or belief is accepted and taken up by the native people to some extent. In some of the regions of the North-East, the tribal customs are very strong and are largely practiced and the Buddhist influence also made its way through China and Tibet. So one may observe here the assimilation of different customs, beliefs, rituals, religions, philosophy whether Vedic or non-Vedic in a very natural process.

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