

MAPPING THEVAISNAVA FAITH IN EARLY TRIPURA: A STUDY ON INSCRIPTIONS.

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Tripura, is one of the smallest state in the north-eastern India. Geographically, the pre- Māṇikya period of Tripura is intertwined with that of ancient Samatata, a region roughly corresponding to the present districts of Sylhet, Noakhāli and Chittāgong. The Baghurā inscription of Mahīpāla-1 (988 -1038 CE) and Meherpur copperplate of Dāmudār Deva dated 1234 CE clearly established the connection of the Samatata with the districts of Tipperah , Noakhāli and Chittāgong. Vaisnavism or the worship of the god Visnu was an important cult in ancient Tripura from six century CE onwards. The first archaeological record of Vaisnavism in Tripura is found from Gunaigar (Comilla district, Bāṅgladesh) in the form of a copper-plate and has mentioned a temple of Pradyumneśvara, i.e. Visnu. The Nidhanpur copperplates, the Tipperā copper-plate, the Kalapur copperplate, the Paikpara image inscription, Baghaura Nārāyana Image-inscription all refer to the Vaisnavism or the worship of the god Visnu in this region. Vaisnava antiquities of the region dating from c700 – 1200 CE have come to light from Pilakand and some others part of Tripura and all Vaisnava sculptures, stylistically and iconographically, are rare in the Bengal School. Existing archaeological evidences prove that the Vaisnavism was popular religion in early Tripura from the eight century CE onwards.

Main Discussion

Tripura, is one of the smallest state in north-eastern India and the region is rich in natural resources and ethnologically interesting as a habitat of several tribal communities such as Tripuris, Riangs, Hālāms, Maghs, Jāmātiās, Chākmās, etc. (*www.censusreport of tripura.com*). Tripura is bounded in the north, west, and south-east by the international boundary of Bāṅgladesh in the present districts of Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhāli, Chittagong and Chittagong Hill tracts. Geographically, the pre- Māṇikya period of Tripura is intertwined with that of ancient Samatata, a region roughly corresponding to the present districts of Sylhet, Noakhāli and Chittāgong. As a kingdom under the early Māṇikya rulers it also included Tipperā (now Comilla, Bāṅgladesh) and portions of Sylhet and in an extended sense it comprised the districts of Noakhāli and Chittāgong. So the religious history of Tripura prior to the twelfth century CE is mixed up with the religious history of ancient Sylhet, Samatata, Noakhāli and Chittāgong which are now in Bāṅgladesh. (*Palit: 2004: 46*). The Baghurā inscription of Mahīpāla-1 (988 -1038 CE) and Meherpur copperplate of Dāmudār Deva dated 1234 CE clearly established the connection of the Samatata with the districts of Tipperah , Noakhāli and Chittāgong. Since the Gupta period Bengal and Burma had a trade link. The Buddhist preachers,

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traders and pilgrims from south-east Asia and Burma would travel through the hill tracts of Arakan, Chittāgong and Tripura. (*Mukherjee:1992: 24*)

Vaisnavism was the most widely prevalent and popular religion of Tripura from the sixth century CE. (*I.H.Q. (1930), vol-6, P. 40*). It comes to light from the epigraphic record from the village of Gunaighar in the district of Triperā (now Comilla, Bāṅgladesh), in this record, issued Gupta year 188 (i. e. 508 CE) during the reign of King Vainya Gupta, a temple of Pradyumnaśvara has been mentioned, rather incidentally, in connection with the demarcation of the boundary of the land grant (*I. H. Q. (1930), vol-6, P-53*). Most Scholars have taken Pradyumneśvara as a combined form of Hari-hara. According to P.C.Bagchi, Pradyumneśvara was represented as a Visnu, it also stood for a different composite icon of Hari-hara (*P.C. Bagchi, (1943), History of Bengal, vol-1, p-400*). In this context, it is mentioned that two beautiful carved stone images of Visnu, probably belonging to the late Gupta or early Pala period, have been discovered at 'Curārpār' a small mound of Gunaighar, Tipperā (now Comilla, Bāṅgladesh).

Both images of Visnu are still being worshipped at Gunaighar (now Comilla, Bāṅgladesh). It is to be considered that the 'Curārpār' is identical with 'Curamaninagar', mentioned in line 28 of Gunaighar Copper-plate inscription of Vainya Gupta (*I.H.Q. (1930), vol. 6, p. 53*).

Another opinion that Pradyumneśvara is a combined form of Hari Hara (Pradyumna and Isvara) i.e. Visnu and Siva. The combination of Hari and Hara in one image forms the theme of icon. In this aspect both Siva and Visnu are united in one image. The iconographic details given in *Vamana-purana* are quoted in *Sabdakalpadruma*.

The Nidhanpur copperplates of Bhaskar Varman (*EI -Vol XII and XIX*) are the most important archaeological evidence for Vaisnavism in this region. These copperplates were discovered from Nidhānpur village in Panchakhandapargana of Syhlet district in 1912. Pandit Vidyavinod deciphered this inscription. This Deed actually was made seven copperplates, however only six could be recovered. Each of these plates bears a royal seal which mention that Maharaja Bhaskar Varman donated tax free land (*bhumichchidra*) to 205 migrated Brahmins for the *Bali-charu-satra* of Anantanārayana. Literally, *Bali* means 'worship'; *Charu* means 'oblation' and *Satra* means 'hospitality'. The term *Bali-charu-satra* is associated with the worship of lord Vishnu. The Nidhānpur copper plates mention that maximum migrated Brahmins were the Vaisnavas or the devotees of Vishnu (*Sircar: 1971: 161*).

The Tipperā copper-plate of Lokanatha (*EI -Vol XV, p- 301*), belonging to the seventh century CE refers to the worship of AnantaNārayana (a form of Visnu-Anantasayin) in Tripura region. The Tipperā copper-plate records that king Lokanatha donated a plot of land for the founding a Ananta-Nārayana temple in the forest region (*atavi-bhukanda*) to his own *Brahmanamahasamanta Prodoshasarma*. The inscription records the grant of several plots of land in favour

of the *Ananta-Nārāyanana* temple which was financial support of the temple. The financial position of the temple was thus sought to be made secure and stable through a proper utilization of the resources provided by the gift aiming, in fact, at the creation of a self-sufficient economy for the establishment concerned. It is probable that the temple was assured of a regular supply the *bali*, *charu*, *sattra*, *sweet* and foodetc. for the daily worship of this god and similar requirements out of the products of its estate. The grants also mention that the resident Brahmanas communities who had to look after the necessary economic arrangement for their maintenance (*I.H.Q. vol-6 ,1930, P. 88*).

The Kalapur copperplate land-grant of samanta Marundanatha was discovered in Kalapur village of Maulavibazar, Syhlet district in 1963. Partial decipherment of this inscription was done by Kamalakanta Gupta choudhury. Samanta Marundanath issued the Kalapur land-grant for the establishing a temple of lord Ananta Narāyana in ‘*atvibhukhanda*’ i.e jungle area. The Kalapur copperplate does not give sufficient information about the socio-political and economic condition of the region, but it associated with Tipperācopper-plate of Lokanathaof Commilla district. There is a great similarity both copperplates. eKalapur copperplate of Marundanatha and Tipperā copper-plate of Lokanatha. Both copperplates granted land for the construction of the temple of Ananta Narāyana, both the lands were granted in ‘*atvibhukhanda*’i.e. jungle area (*J.B Bhattacharjee: 1991 :.61*). The next Vaisnavite record comes from Kailan (*I.H.Q. vol-22: 269*). It was issued by the *Paramavaisnava* king Sridharana Rata. In this record the king has been shown as a devout worshipper of the god *Purusottama (Jagannatha)*, a form of Visnu. The Varmans became a power in this region after the fall of the Buddhist dynasty of the Chandras. The Visnu-Chakra seal of the Samantasar (a village in Faridpur district), copper-plate grant of the reign of HariVarman, a *Paramavaisnava*, has undoubtedly proved his attachment with the Vaisnava faith. Though the Chandra kings were loyal followers of the Buddhist faith, yet the Mainamati (near Comilla in the Tipperā district of Bāṅgladesh) platesof Ladaha Chandra (c. 1000-20 CE) and Govinda Chandra (c. 1020-45 CE) prove that both of them denied the Buddhist faith of their predecessors and they made grants of land in favour of a Vaisnavite or Saivite deity in the name of Vasudeva-bhattaraka or Siva-bhattaraka (*Pakistan Archaeology, no. 5, 1966:-22 -55*). Although these two kings are also conventionally called Paramasaugata, these documents make it clear that they adopted brahmanical religion. Ladaha Chandra being specially devoted to the god Visnu and Govinda Chandra to Siva (Sircar:, *1975: 41-59*). The two records of Ladaha Chandra open with the Vaisnavitemangala :

Om namo Bhagavate Narāyanaya

It is interesting to note further that Ladaha Chandra’s gifts were made in favour of the Vaisnavite god Ladahamadhava-bhattaraka, installed byand named after him.

Ladahamadhava, really means Madhava installed by or named after Ladaha and Madhava is a well-known name of the god Visnu-Krisna. Another copper-plate from the same place issued by Viradhara deva (eleventh-twelfth century CE) bears on both sides of its seal the wheel of Visnu. King Viradharadeva who is regarded as an ancestor of Harikaiadva of the kingdom of Pattikera was a worshipper of Visnu. Besides the representation of the Visnu Chakra or the Sudarsana-Chakra, the grant was made in favour of god Vasudeva under the name Ladahamadhava (Sri Ladahamadhavabhidhana Sri VasudevaBhattarakaya) (Sircar: 1975: 70-75).

The Paikpara image inscription (*Indian Culture, Volume VII, Issue 4, 1941*, pp – 405 -416) of the reign of Chandra king Govinda Chandrarecords the installation of an image of Vasudeva at Paikpara, (a village in Vikramapur, Dacca district), by Gangadasa, son of Paradasa. The record bears a testimony to the fact that Vaisnavism was popular among the merchant class of the contemporary society. Baghaura Nārāyana Image-inscription of Mahīpāla (*I.H.Q. vol-16, P-631*) which is important record of Vaisnavism in the region. The Image-inscription was discovered from Baghaura village near Brahmanbaria, district Tipperā. This image inscription was issued during the 3rd renal year of king Mahīpāla-I, the son and successor of King Bīgrahapāla-II (*Mukherjee, : 1966:38*). King Mahīpāla-I, brought a new era of Vaisnava faith in the records of the Pala dynasty. The inscription shows that the Samatata region was also included the kingdom of Mahīpāla-I. The inscription, engraved under the lotus feet of a standing image of god Nārāyana (Vasudeva). This Image-inscription records that a Vaisnava merchant, Lokadatta, son of Vasudatta and an inhabitant of village Vilakindaka installed an image of the god in Samatata in the 3rd regnal year of king Mahīpāla-I. It is apparent that the family of Lokadatta had Vaisnavite leanings. It also appears from a study of the inscription that the said image was possibly consecrated in a temple in village Vilakindaka (of the Samarata region). This inscription also proves that a certain portion of Samatata was a strong hold of Vaisnavism (Mukherjee:, 1966:38). It may not be out of place here to mention that a discrepancy has crept in naming the deity as Nārāyana, for it has been rightly shown by J.N. Banerjea that the mode of placing the attributes in the four hands of the deity would indicate that this image was one of Trivikrama-Visnu of the order of the 'Caturvimisatimurtis' (Banerjea: 1960: 324).

All the evidences at our disposal tend us to believe that by the closing point of the first millennium CE the geographical orbit of Vaisnavism had extended remarkably on almost all the parts of the region. It may, however be mentioned in this connection that the grant of land in the name of Vasudeva or Narayana is a common practice among the rulers of the area, no matter whether they were Buddhist or Vaisnavites. From the eighth century CE onwards, the development of Vaisnavism may be proved by a number of Visnu images of the Pala and Sena period, discovered in different parts of Tripura. The earliest Visnu image made of stone found at Pilak is an interesting variety of Trivikramamurtis'. It is four-armed

figure, its back, right and back left hands are placed on the heads of the Gadadevi and Chakrapurusa respectively, the right from seems to have been the abhaya pose, the left one probably holding a conch shell. This image is assigned to the eight century CE. Existence archaeological evidences prove that the Vaisnavism was belonging in early Tripura from the eight century CE onwards .

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www.censusreportoftripura.com

Religious community	Rate (in %)
Hindu	85.6%
Muslim	8.0%
Christian	3.2%
Buddhist	3.1%

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