

The Religious History of the Tipras on the Background of Kharchipuja

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Tripura is a small state of the Indian Union in the North Eastern region with a population of 20,53058, of whom about 28.5%² belong to the tribal communities. The Tipras constitute 55.57% of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the State. It is generally believed that the Tipras are the Original inhabitants of the State. Subsequently, people from the plains belonging mostly to different Brahmanical sects started taking refuge in the hilly regions of Tripura. The plains people from the reign of Maharaja Ratna Manikya have been living side by side with the Tipra communities resulting in cultural exchanges. Through the centuries many of the Tipras along with the rulers have without doubt been drawn into the main stream of Brahmanical way of life along with its pantheon of gods and goddesses, in which because of the dominance of Sanskrit as the language of the intellectual elite and of improved methods of agriculture as the most important mode of production, perhaps also because of superior religion and culture of the Bengali speaking Hindus had come to enjoy an advantage. It was their sacred scriptures, their epic and puranic myths and legends and their socio-religious system which came to find their acceptance in the Tipras of Tripura. But one may not forget that many Tipras have also been forced by history to seek retreat into the relatively more inaccessible regions of forests, hills and hill-slopes where they are still maintaining their indigenous tribal religious behaviour patterns.

As yet, the traditional religious way of life of the Tipras differ with caste Hindus in case of some religious ceremonies and form of worship. That from very early times Animism³ flourished in different parts of Tripura, has been attested by a few archaeological materials⁴ which have been brought to light by the scholars. An attempt would be made in this paper to present an analytical picture of the religion of the Tipras as can be gleamed from the archaeological materials as

well as textual materials. This is a fresh attempt to reconstruct the religious history of the Tipras including their beliefs and practices.

The fourteen head-images of Chaturdasa devatas are worshipped in a temple at old Agartala during the Kharchipuja. Looking at these head-images, it makes one wonder that how they have attained the status of the state palladium under the patronage of the Brahmanical royal house of Tripura. Among the head-images, the thirteen are made of brass, while one is made of silver only. They are all equal in size and appearance measuring probably 22 cm. in height. Indeed curious and interesting, but equally significant are their two horns which are exhibited behind the crown. Besides, the identification of the head-images is not possible even in the field of genders also. These head-images bear no attributes according to the Brahmanical iconography so that they can be identified as the Brahmanical gods and goddesses.⁵ Moreover, it is a fact that the broken head-images may not be supported by the Brahmanical iconography as the objects of rituals.⁶

With the infiltration of the plains people Brahmanism including its diverse sectarian beliefs and practices got a firm hold in Tripura, for which we have the Brahmanical names of the fourteen head-images.⁷ Rev. James Long rightly pointed out that "the Brahmans exercised as arbitrary sway over the minds of the hill Chieftains as ever did Druid on the customs of our celtic ancestors".⁸ It is not unlikely that the Rajmala or Chronicles of the Kings of Tripura are compiled by Brahmans of the court of Tripura who seem to have been intelligent historians. A. Mackenzie is of the opinion that : "Tripur, from whom the Raj took name, and who is excreated by the Brahmin historian as the opponent of Siva worship, which was then alluring the imaginations and exciting the passions of the people".⁹ It is said that Tripur was extremely inimical and crude who was killed by Siva for his irreligious habits. It was Trilochana, successor of Tripur who is believed to have brought the fourteen deities from an island accompanied by the Chantai and Deodais. On the holy day of the Kharchipuja the fourteen gods and goddesses, i.e. Siva, Uma, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, Ganesh, Brahma, Prithivi, Samudra, Ganga, Agni, Kamadeva and Himalaya were worshipped.¹⁰

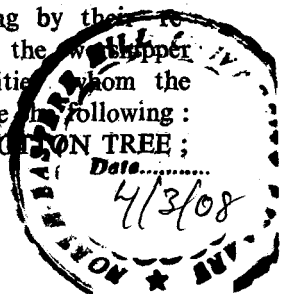
Unfortunately, none of these head-images has any archaeological bearings of Brahmanism. But, in this connection

I would like here to draw attention of our readers to "some additions and corrections and notes" in S. K. Chatterjee's "Kirat-Jana-Kirti". Vasanta Choudhury and Parimal Roy have sought to prove that "the fourteen deities have been identified with the Brahmanical names and thus the absorption of the Tribal religion by Hinduism was complete".¹¹ What is rather important to bear in mind is that animism is the highest factor in the religions of tribal people and the Tipras are not exception. Therefore, though the Tipras belong to Hinduism, owing to certain obscurantist beliefs and practices existing among them they are to be bracketed with the animists or spiritists as far as their Kharchipuja is concerned.

Jagadish Ganchoudhuri has dealt at length with their religion and culture and in his work "The Tipras of Tripura" (unpublished thesis) he has suggested the tribal names of the fourteen deities. He remarks, "After making an analysis of the Tipra deities a suggestion may be put forward in respect of these deities".¹² The pantheon of the fourteen deities according to Ganchoudhuri consists of Matai Katar, Matai Katarma, Mailooma, Khoolooma, Akhatra, Bikbitra, Tuima, Sangrang, Kalia, Gorla, Nachu Matai, Bichukma, Sirijamdu and Thoomnairak.¹³ In the priestly Brahmanical pantheon these name of the fourteen gods and goddesses are not classified as Laukika or sanctioned by the practices and conventions of the common folk. What is significant to note is that Ganchoudhuri is of the opinion that the way in which these fourteen deities of Tipras have been identified with the great deities of Brahmanical pantheon is "mostly imaginary".

As the paper is getting long, I like to make a brief resume regarding the fourteen deities to show the conception of the Tipras about the supernatural powers and spirits which are associated with the ceremonial worship during the Kharchipuja.

The Tipras recognize one super-natural¹⁴ supreme god called Matai Katar (means greatest god) who is believed to be the creator of universe. The supreme being Matai Katar with his wife Matai Katarma (means greatest goddess) are supposed to control all other deities like the other tribal religions of the North Eastern India.¹⁵ Judging by their religious beliefs, the Tipras have to be called the worshippers of natural forces and deities. The other deities whom the Tipras pay reverence during the Kharchipuja are in following: Mailooma, THE EARTH; Khoolooma, THE COMMON TREE;



Akhatra, THE SEA ; Bikbitra, THE SKY ; Tuima, THE WATER ; Sangrang, THE MOUNTAIN ; Kalia, THE SPIRIT OF ANCESTOR ; Gorla, THE SPIRIT OF WOR ; Nakchu Matai, THE TUTELARY SPIRIT OF THE FAMILIES ; Bichukma, THE FOREST ; Sirijamdu, THE SPIRIT OF BARRENNESS OF THE WOMAN ; and Thoomnairak, THE SPIRIT WHO BRINGS DEATH NEWS.

Similar to the Brahmanical Hinduism, there is a duality of god and goddess¹⁶ in the religion of Tipras and each of these gods and goddesses has a qualifying term of address of Fa and Ma which means "Father" and "Mother" respectively. It is good to remind ourselves that the sea, the sky, and the mountain seem to be the man god and the earth, the water, the cotton tree and the forest become the woman goddess and so on :

A very important fact to notice in the religious connection of Tipras is that "in the most of the cases the structure of the deities are made with bamboo poles. The alter of the deity is made with two bamboo poles which are created on the ground. The length of bamboo poles varies from one and half cubits to three cubits approximately as per category of the deity. Along with these two planted bamboo poles two other bamboos are tied to each other horizontally for specific deities. To make the structure of the deities only the specific green bamboo called "Mulli" varieties is needed."¹⁷

I have already indicated that the head-images of the fourteen deities were not isolated from those of the indigenous tipra gods and goddesses. Though the Chantai along with his assistants were obliged to succumb to accept the Brahmanical names of the fourteen deities but the practice of planting bamboo¹⁸ poles to make the structure of a deity is also prevalent in the religious ceremonies of Kharchipuja. For a scholar it is perhaps possible to find out a pole of bamboo which is planted in the ground behind each of the head-images as the representation of god or goddess. It appears that the bamboo pole is the main object of most of their worship and veneration. E. T. Dalton holds the same view, he remarks, "a trace of their old faith is to be found in their present practice of sticking a bamboo in the ground during one of their religious festivals and worshipping it."¹⁹

Thus, the above description of the religious beliefs and practices of Tipra of Tripura brings out that the worship of fourteen head-images is a secondary formation, a later degrada-

tion of the more primitive worship of gods and goddesses.

It will not be out of place here to put an archaeological evidence in support of the animistic representation²⁰ of fourteen deities on a coin of Ratna Manikya. With regard to the representation of Chaturdasa devata on the coin, the following observation of Vasanta Choudhury and Parimal Roy is worth noticing.

“Obverse : within horizontal line almost dividing the obverse into two semi-circles. The upper semi-circle contains a number of vertical lines overlapped by another concave curve. This motif apparently bears a close resemblance to tughra style of Arabic writing on the coins of Sultans of Bengal. But at the lower semi-circle of the reverse, there is a legend in Bengali characters which reads :

Sri Caturdasa de/va-carana-para/saka 1386”.

While the aforesaid vertical lines are fourteen in number, we presume, therefore, that these fourteen vertical lines are stylised representations of the fourteen gods and goddesses of Tripura, i.e. the Caturdasa devatas”.²¹

I would like to say that the antiquities of the tribal religion of Tripura is incontestably confirmed by the coin of Ratna Manikya. As regards Caturdasa devatas, no certain animistic representations of them appear on coin before the time of Ratna Manikya. It is interesting to note that the word “Caturdasa devata” is met with for the first time on the coin of Ratna Manikya and the name is not seem to have been ever in use prior to the reign of Ratna Manikya. Besides, from the study of the coin of Ratna Manikya, it is known that the King issued this particular type of coin which became an unique bearing of the Brahmanical Sanskritised name “Caturdasa deva” associated with the animistic symbols of fourteen deities of Tipras.

It is proposed by the authors like Vasanta Choudhuri and Parimal Roy that “the use of the head alone in lieu of full images is only something very unusual in the Hindu-iconographic system”.²²

This view, however has been corroborated by S. K. Chatterjee. After making a critical analysis of the remarks of Messers Choudhury and Roy, Dr. Chatterjee comments, “it would appear that we had first vertical columns or obelisks in place of full standing images, ‘vertical Men’ and then only the heads were substituted in their place’.²³ In this conne-

ction he also points out that "thus a piece of numismatic and epigraphic evidence of the highest value, indicating the final transformation of the Mongoloid (Bodo) pantheon of an important section of the Indo-Mongoloids into the orthodox Hindu pantheon of the puranas."²⁴

In the aforesaid statements, the scholars like S. K. Chatterjee, Vasanta Choudhuri and Parimal Roy have tried to prove that the fourteen vertical columns are substituted in place of full standing images, "Vertical Men". But it should be noted that the worship of the bamboo poles as the representation of deities and spirits is the characteristic manifestation of animistic belief of the Tipras even to day. Thus, I would like to indicate that these fourteen so-called "columns" or "obelisks" are nothing but the bamboo poles portrayed stylistically in a realistic manner. These bamboo symbols fully prove in the presence of the worship of super-natural deities and spirits among the Tipras.

Subsequently, S. K. Chatterjee makes the interesting remark about the representation of the head-images that they were also substituted in place of full standing images, "Vertical-Men". In any case, we have no grounds for supporting S. K. Chatterjee in his assumption that they are substitutes of full standing images. If these head-images prove any thing, they prove that they are fourteen deities and spirits or rather fourteen aspects of supernatural powers and forces. It is not likely that the head-images are all supposed to be concretised visual symbols of abstract concepts or ideas for each one of which there is a Dhyana according to the scriptures of Brahmanism. It is likely that they are strongly associated with the animism as the object of rituals. S. K. Chatterjee while commenting the distinctive feature of the head-images says, "this may have some connexion with a primitive cult of the head".²⁵ From the point of view of above mentioned, we come to conclusion that the animism may exist in the Kharchipuja.

It appears that there are the different forms of supernatural worship among the Tipras. One in which the bamboo itself is worshipped in its natural form, the other in which the bamboo deity or spirit is personified and endowed with human head shape. There can be no doubt that the head images and the bamboo poles are all eventually merged with the stream of Kharchipuja.

It is important to note that I came in close contact with

the priest, Chantai, during the Kharchipuja and found that he has his own animistic religious beliefs and customs and rites and rituals of which the most important seems to have been the sacrifice of animal, or eggs to his gods and goddesses. It deserves mentioning here that the Chantai offers nothing to the deities according to "Aryachara paddhati", but he sprinkles the water and wine to the deities from the two pipes (bamboo made) and sacrifices the animal and eggs only as per instruction of his fore-fathers. It is a characteristic of the Brahmin priest engaged in the temple of the fourteen deities that he does nothing but recites "Sri Sri Chandi" regularly. From the intensive field investigation of the Kharchipuja, I would like to say that the Chantai and his assistants are still dogmatic to follow their conventional tribal rites and rituals and beliefs and practices.

Incidentally, it is evident that the Hindu Kings of Tripura influenced the Kharchipuja more than the Bengali-speaking Hindus. It is not without significance, to my mind that by about the 15th century A. D. the Brahmanical Hindu Tipra dynasty had come to establish and to act as the spearhead of Brahmanical religion and society. The fact is well known that Hinduism has not been a proselytizing religion.²⁶ The Chantai consciously accepted the Brahmanical faith and practices with that of the animism. Another thing that deserves special mention in connection with the Brahmanism of the people of Tripura is the adoption of the Brahmanical Mantras i.e. 'Om' and 'Namah', side by side with the Tipra language. From the evidence of an old unpublished manuscript in the Tipra language, it is clear that the adoration of Surya of Puranic Brahmanism has flourished alongwith that of the fourteen deities on the occasion of Kharchipuja. In it, the priests are directed to observe 'Surya puja' even before the worship of fourteen deities.

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