

Sale and Mortgage of the right of Worship by the Priest of Kamakhya Temple

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The high priests of the Kamakhya Temple called *Bardeuri* belong to five houses (*panchaghar*, *pancha* = five *ghar* = houses) are charged with the worship of the goddess Kamakhya and the management of its endowments. These five houses are called of *Burhā*, *Dekā*, *Hotā*, *Bidhipāthak* and *Brahmā*. The *Brahmā* family had become extinct about a century ago, and the duties and emoluments attached to that house had since been distributed among the other four families who still continue to do worship the deity as before, but the term *panchaghar bardeuri* which was originally used to refer the five families, now apply to four families. There is, however, no document to show the origin of the five houses of Brahmin nor can any body give reliable information about their ancestros. But the importance of the five house is now an well established fact.

After the assumption of power by the British they followed the policy of non-intervention in religious and temple affairs². This resulted in a modified procedure which differed from the pre-British practice of management of the temple affairs and appointment and election of *Doloi*. Originally, they were appointed during the time of the Ahom king to make worship and manage other affairs of the temple.

With the abolition of the post of the *Sevā-chaloā* under the British the *bardeuri* came into prominence and gradually enjoyed more and more powers which they did not appear to have exercised during the time of the Ahom Kings. Consequently, the *bardeuris* became supreme trustees and turned into a landed class³ and came within the jurisdiction of the term *jamindar*. They were placed in charge of the temple and its endowments and the *Doloi*, the chief among them was reduced to the position of their manager. The practice of electing the *Dolio* by the *bardeuries* also came into existence. All the adult *bardeuris* of each group having the right to vote, they acquired the powers not only to elect a *Doloi*, but also to exercise control over him by enforcing the condition for submitting accounts and, if necessary

claimed to dismiss him. The *Burā* and the *Dekā* groups had a common ancestor. The *Bardeuris* of these two groups were apparently the persons who were responsible for the performance of daily worship (*Pujā-Sevā*) at the shrine of Kamakhya, although the other 3 families enjoyed the right only on the occasions of three other special *Pujās*. The *Bidhi pāthak*, attended all important pujas or worship with his *bidhi* (The book of rituals and procedure) and guided the officiating priest properly in conducting the worship and performing the details of the technique and leading him to chant *mantras* correctly and accurately. The *Hota* performed *homa* (or the kindling of and offering in the sacred fire) in all functions where *Homa* was an essential part. The *Brahmā* attended all important functions and counted the number of offerings given at a *Homa*, so that the prescribed number is neither reduced nor increased.

But at daily worship (*nityapujā*), the members of the *Hotā*, the *Brahmā* and the *Bidhipāthak* had no duty to perform as no *homa* is to be performed at such worship. By some special arrangements, the origin of which can not be traced, the *Hotā*, *Bidhipāthak* and *Brahmā* also shared the routine duty of performing *nityapujā* along with the *Dekā* and the *Burhā*. Thus in place of two families, the daily worship (*nityapuja*) was performed by all the five houses in rotation. Every turn of worship is called *pālā*. For this purpose 10 days formed a cycle in a month of 30 days. Hence a year according to this system is of 360 days. In this 10 days cycle, each of the families has to perform worship for 2 days consecutively in normal times. This division of duties for performing *nityapuja* was the cause of a number of litigations, 60 days are exclusively enjoyed by the *Burha* and *Deka* family as to perform *panchaparba* and the remaining 300 days are distributed among the five families for which each family gets 60 days *pala* in a year. These 60 days are distributed among the male discendents of the respective families. As the *Brahma* family is now extinct, its *pala* was distributed among the other 4 families and these extra *palas* are called *barabarsika pala*. This *barabarika pala* having been distributed among the 4 families in proportion of 2 shares (total 20 days) to *Deka*, 2 shares (total 20 days) to *Burah*, 1 share

(10 days) to *Hotā* and 1 share (10 days) to *Bidhipāthak*. The *Dekā* and *Burha* groups are, therefore, entitled to 110 days in a year against 70 days of the respective share of *Hotā* and *Bidhipāthak*⁵. This scheme of *palas* are accepted by the *panchaghar bardeuris*.⁶ These *pālās* being the only source of income of the priests⁷. A great price hike which took place due to the change of political as well as economic structure, the priests of the temple were compelled to leave their traditional profession and to seek for other sources for their lively hood. When the priests were in great financial crisis, they even sold their right of worship. We have 3 documents by which the right of worship were mortgaged and sold by the priests due to their extreme poverty. These documents are (1) Deed of hypothication executed on 7th August, 1907 by Sonaram Dekabardeuri in favour of Sri Braja Nath Sarma and others hypothicing of the shares of his *pālās*., (2) Deed of hypothication executed by Tarini Prasad Sarma and other in favour of Gauriprasad Sarma, Deka bardeuri by hypothicing of their *pālās* executed on 24th of April, 1912 and (c) Registered Deed of sale a part of his *pālā* executed by Ratikanta Sarma Bidhipathak bardeuri in favour of Lakshminath Sarma dated 12th Jan. 1924.

(1) *Deed of hypothication of pālā by Sonaram Sarma:-* In the document, the executer of the Deed of hypothication was Sonaram Sarma, a descendent of the Deka bardeuri. He was the son⁸ of Bholanath Sarma an inhabitant of village Nilachal. In this Deed he stated himself as a *pāndā* of the goddess Kamakhya as his occupation. In his extreme need of money for repayment of previous debt, he borrowed Rupees 1,300 from Brajanath Sarma and Kalinath Sarma of the same village and who belonged to the *Dekā* Bardeuri family. It was agreed that he would repay the amount within a stipulated period of eight years. During the period, in lieu of interest of the principal amount, both Brajanath Sarma and Kalinath Sarma would be entitled to enjoy the *barabarsik pālā* originally allotted to Sonaram Sarma, on condition that they would be able to enjoy and possess the profits of the *palas* thus hypothicated by performing *pujā* at the shrine but the executer reserved for him the rights

on goats offered daily, the daily *prasad* of service and *dodhi* of *madhuparka* of *nityaārati* (daily ablution). It was also stated that if the executor would not be able to recover the amount within the stipulated period of time, they (Brajanath and Kalinath) might continue to enjoy and possess the right until the time of repayment. However the right of worship of the Executor of the Deed at the other subordinate temples (*nānān devālayas*) such as Kamalesvar, Tārābāri etc. within the complex would not be included in this mortgage. The Deed was presented for the Registration at 1 P.M. on the day of September of 1907 at the Gauhati Sub-Registry office by Sonaram, who was identified before the Sub-Registrar by one Dhiresvar Sarma, an inhabitant of Nilachāl and the Registration of the Deed of hypothication of *pālās* was completed.

(2) *Deed of hypothication of pālā by Tarini Prasad and Deviprasad:*

The executor of the first Deed did not and could not repay the amount to Brajanath and Kalinath for which according to the terms and conditions of the Deed of hypothication, they were enjoying and possessing $\frac{2}{3}$ share of the *barābarsik pālā*. After Sonaram Sarma's death, his two sons Tariniprasad and Deviprasad having no other source of income to celebrate the marriage ceremony of Deviprasad and their younger sister gave the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ of the *barābarsik pālā* in hypothication of $\frac{1}{2}$ of the share (i.e. $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total *barābarsik pālā*) to Gauri prasad Sarma at a sum of Rs. 650/-. The terms and conditions of the hypothication were the same as of the hypothication by their father. The Deed was executed on 24th April, 1912 (11th Baishkha, 1319 B.S.) which was of course released by Gauriprasad after five years on receipt of the amount due on this mortgage bond up to date on 26th of Falgoon, 1324 B.S.

(3) *The third was the Registered Deed of sale executed by Ratikanta Sarma, a biānipathak bardeuri:*

Before discussing about this Deed, it is necessary to mention another relevant document, i.e. the registered

Deed of the gift with respect of *pālās* of the goddess Kamakhya executed by one Ratinath in favour of his seven nephews on 16th of September, 1915 (30th Bhadra, 1322 B.S.)

Abhoyram Sarma, a bidhipathak bardeuri died without a male heir, on 31st of Asar, 1322 B.S. His widow also died. So, according to the custom Ratinath Sarma, the eldest among the nearest agnates became the owner of the *pālās* of the deceased Abhoyram who kept 1/2 of this *pālās* for himself while other 1/2 were distributed as a gift among the seven members of the same stock. The properties left by Abhoyram as follows:

1. The *pālās* of the temple of Kamakhya along with *palas* derived from 8, 1/2 days in a year and the profits of *Durgotsav* and *Baroarsika* valued at Rs. 400/-
 2. *Jalkar* (rent for fishery) From Agyathuri up to the western end of Hatimukh hill and from Khanamukh upto Rangāgarā limits of the Brahmaputra. 1 *anna* 6 *pies* share out of 16 *annas* of the same valued at Rs.900/-
 3. The *Busti* with *zirat* and *ghar* at Nilachal comprising the land of the goddess Kamakhya valued at Rs. 600/-
- The grand total would be Rs.1,980 and the value of the half of the said property is Rs.990/-. Ratikanta Sarma, son of late Kayaram Sarma, an inhabitant of Sualkuchi, was a descendent of the Bidhipathak family. He borrowed some money from Lakshminath Sarma, a co-sharer of the same family and from same village on three occasions; (a) to perform the funeral ceremony of his mother (b) to celebrate his marriage and (c) on another occasion (not mentioned) for which a hand note was executed earlier. The total amount he borrowed from Lakshminath was Rs. 1,300/- (from 13th Magh, 1327 B.S. to 27th Paus, 1331). The total interest on this amount was Rs.200/- for which Ratikanta was to pay Rs.1,500/- (1300 + 200). In the Deed of sale Ratinath declared without hesitation thus. "I have no other means of repaying this loan". Moreover it was stated that " I cannot sell this property to any body else besides a co-shasre. "In this condition Ratinath had no alternative, but to sell a part of his pala to Lakshminath Sarma. This Deed of sale was

presented for registration at 11 a m. on the 12th day of January, 1924 at the Gauhati sub-registry office by Ratikanta and the Registration was completed.

From the above discussion we learn that (a) just after the assumption of power by the British Government in Assam, the people from priestly class lost their economic stability for which they were compelled to leave their traditional occupation and due to suffering from extreme poverty they mortgaged and sold their right of worship at the shrine, (b) that to mortgage or sale, the priests were obliged to preserve the custom to sell or mortgage only to the members of their own families.

Notes & References

1. The importance and emergence of the **panchaghar bardeuries** are fully explained in the judgement of the Second additional Judge, Assam valley district on 2nd of January, 1935, in the title Suit no.28 of 1932.
2. Letters of the Governor-General, no.100,1842
3. Judgement of Judicial Commissioner. (Col.Agnew) of Assam in Regular Appeal no.1 of 1873 dated 30th of January, 1873 (Durga Prasad and Krishna Kanta, vs. other Bardeuris)
4. In a case in the High Court of Calcutta (Title suit no. 28, 1928, A.V.D.) it is mentioned that the distribution of pala is not equal but the Burha and Deka families enjoy special and exclusive right to perform nityapuja on the following 60 days.
 - (a) 2 astamies in each month 2 days
 - (b) 2 chaturdasis in each month 2 days
 - (c) 1 sankrati in each month 1 days

$$\text{Total} = 5 \text{ days } 5 \times 12 = 60$$

These five days are called **Pancha-prava**

5. Plaint in the T. suit no. 11 of 1931 in the court of Subordinate Judge, Assam valley District.
6. Judgement on the T.suit no. 20 of 1932, dt. 2nd January 1935 in the court of the Additional gude,AVD.
7. According to their share of **palas**, the bardeuris receive the rent and other produces of the **devottar** land confirmed to the shrine of Kamakhya. So the

term **pala** here includes not only the right of worship but the other profits coming from other sources of income.

8. Nilachal or Kamakhya is being treated as a town since 1961 census.
9. Details of the previous debt are not mentioned.
- 10.(a) In Mauza Beltola, village Sualkuchi in patta No.232/587 10 bighas 4 kathas and 10 lechas
- (b) In Mouza Beltola village Barsajat in Kheraj patta No. 167/861 13 bighas and 6 lechas
11. Out of the 16 annas in all of the joint palas of Bidhipathak family, Ratikanta's share was of 4 annas i.e. 5 days and the whole of his share of Barabarsik **palas** (gained as gift from Ratikanta Sarma at the death abhoyram) of **durgotsav** etc. were sold.