

The Worship of Surya in Ancient Guwahati

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The modern city of Guwahati dates back to ancient times. Epigraphic evidence indicates that it was earlier known as Pragjyotisapura.¹ The archaeological remains discovered in the city provide us with a wealth of information regarding its religious life. This paper is an attempt to determine the popularity of the worship of the Sun God Surya, in Guwahati, on the basis of the archaeological remains discovered therein. Primarily based on field study, the period under consideration is from the earliest times upto the 13th century A.D.

In India, the worship of the Sun God *Surya* can be traced back to Rig Vedic times. The *Rig Veda* in chapter X, verse 158.1 invokes *Surya*, *Vata* and *Agni* for protection from heaven, air and earth respectively.² As the all-seeing deity he is often called the eye of *Mitra*, *Varuna*, *Agni* and other gods. He is also identified with the Avestic *hvarē*, “sun” who has swift horses and who is the eye of *Ahura Mazdā*.³ In the early Vedic period *Surya* is frequently referred to as *Savitri*, *Pusan*, *Bhaga*, *Vivasvat*, *Mitra*, *Aryaman* and *Visnu*. These different names of the deity embody his different aspects like ‘stimulator’, ‘beneficence’, distributor of wealth’, ‘the first sacrificer’ and ‘the ancestor of the human race’.⁴ In Vedic literature *Surya* is said to be one of the Aditya (sons of *Adin*, an abstract, mysterious creation, representing infinity), along with *Mitra*, an important Indo-Iranian god.⁵

The solar cult was also prevalent in Egypt and in Iran. In Egypt, Amenhotep IV (1380B.C.) had proclaimed the supremacy of the Sun God *Ra* as the “source of all earthly life and light”.⁶ The Sun priest of Iran, the Magi, were entitled to install images of the Sun God. Legends refer to Iran as a centre of Sun worship and also relate how some Magha priests of Iran had been brought to India to perform ceremonies connected with Sun worship.⁷ References to sun worship are also found in the *Puranas* and the *Epics*. The *Ramayana* records that it was the sage Agastya who initiated Rama into worshipping the sun through the *Aditya Hridaya Mantra*. Varahamihira the astronomer also refers to the intricate ceremonies that accompany the installation of the icon of the Sun.⁸ Thus sun worship was popular not only in ancient India, but also in Egypt and Iran.

It is contended that in the third millennium B.C. there was an Alpine immigration into Eastern India. These Alpines lived in or near the Iranian tableland, before their entry into India and came into contact with the common ancestors of both the Vedic and Avestic Aryan speaking people.⁹ It is not improbable that Magyan priests were included in the group that came to Assam, and that it was they who introduced Sun worship into the region.

Ancient literature contains stray references to the popularity of Sun worship in Assam. Assam, which was earlier known variously as Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa, was held sacred as the land where the Sun God Surya first rose. The *Markandeva Purana* refers to it as *Udayachala*, the land of sunshine, wherein stood a temple of the sun.¹⁰ The *Kalika Purana* refers to the Sri Surya Pahar, in Goalpara, as the permanent abode of the Sun God.¹¹ This text also refers to the Chitrasaila/Arvak or Navagraha Hill in Guwahati as the abode of the *Nava Grahas*.¹² The Sun God *Surya* is also included among them.

Archaeological remains discovered in Assam corroborate literature, regarding the worship of the Sun God *Surya*. They indicate his worship in Sri Surya Pahar area in Goalpara, at Da-Parvatiya and Cole Park in Tezpur, at the Mahamaya Than in Karbi Anglong district and in Kamrup district that includes the city of Guwahati.

The archaeological remains in Guwahati indicate that the Sun God (*Surya*) was an object of worship. Rock-cut images of *Surya* are seen on the banks of the river Brahmaputra at Pandu and Sukresvar. *Surya* images have also been recovered from the site of the Ambari excavations, from Kahilipara and elsewhere in the city. Most of these images date from the 9th to 13th century A.D. *Surya* images belonging to a later date are also seen on top of the Nilachala Hill, Chatrakara Hill and Navagraha Hill. They indicate his continuing popularity upto the late medieval period.

The earliest images of *Surya* to be found in the city date back to the 8th-9th century A.D. Two bronze icons were recovered from Kahilipara, along with a group of other images popularly referred to as the "Narakasur hoard".¹³ Now in the Assam State Museum, the first image is very small (ASM 3006, 13 cmX5 cm). The deity stands in *samapada sthanaka* and holds two *padmas* or lotuses in its hands. However the right *padma* is damaged. It wears the usual *alamkaras* or ornaments and a pair of boots. The deity stands alone on a simple *pitha* or pedestal. Behind the deity's head rises the *prabha* or halo. In the second image which is slightly bigger

(ASM 3001 21 cm X 15 cm), the god stands in a similar attitude on his *ratha* or chariot, flanked by Danda and Pingala, on his left and right respectively. As the charioteer Aruna sits at the deity's feet, it is not clear whether the god is depicted wearing his usual boots.

Two rock-cut images of *Surya* are seen on the island of Urvasi in mid-Brahmaputra. Assigned on stylistic grounds to the 9th-10th century A.D., the first image (80 cm X 55 cm) of the deity is inside a niche. Crowned with a *kirita-mukuta* (crown) and wearing *kundala* (ear-studs) and *keyuras* (armlets), the deity stands on a *padma*, flanked by two small female figures, probably his consorts Nikshubha and Rajni. The second image has similar attributes, but due to erosion caused by the river, the identity of the two figures flanking the deity cannot be determined. It is to be noted that besides the images of *Surya*, we also find rock-cut images of *Visnu* and *Ganesa* on the island.

To the same period belongs the massive rock-cut *Surya* image below the Visnu-Janardana temple at Sukresvara. Here also *Surya* is found adjacent to rock-cut sculptures of *Ganesa*, *Visnu*, *Mahisamardini* and *Siva*. At the Dakshinaarka Sun Temple at Gaya also, we find a group of five stone sculptures on the *sabha mandapa* (assembly hall) depicting *Surya*, *Durga*, *Siva*, *Visnu* and *Brahma* instead of *Ganesa*.¹⁴ The deity stands in the usual attitude on his chariot, holding two lotuses, facing the Brahmaputra river. He is decked in a *kiritamukuta*, *kundalas*, *keyuras* and an *upavitamala* (sacred thread). His consorts flank the deity and Aruna sits at his feet. Below him is the *chakra* (wheel) of the chariot inside which is the head of a single horse and three horses on either side.

Further down the river at Pandu we find another rock-cut *Surya* together with an image of *Indra*¹⁵ in a shallow niche. *Surya* stands on his chariot in the usual attitude flanked by his two consorts and Danda and Pingala. Below the deity is Aruna, and below him the single wheel of the chariot with seven horses depicted in the usual way. The apex of the niche is crowned by a *kirttimukha*, flanked by two flying *vidyadharas*.

In a 12th century A.D. *Surya* image of Paltan Bazar area, we find the deity similarly depicted, i.e. with Danda, Pingala, two consorts and Aruna the charioteer. The stele is however more elaborate, with scrolls issuing from the mouth of the *kirttimukha* at the pointed apex, flanked by flying *vidyadharas* with garlands. The pedestal on which the chariot stands is embellished with *gaja-simla* motifs and a *kinnara* couple with musical instruments.¹⁶

Surya images can also be seen on top of Nilachala, one in the sacrificial chamber house of the main Kamakhya temple, and the second, carved on a panel of the Ghantakarna temple. Although belonging to a later date, in details they resemble the features of the Kahilipara *Surya* image on a pedestal. The pedestal of a 9th-10th century A.D. *Surya* image has also been recovered from Hengerabari and is now stored in the Assam State Museum (ASM 2938, 30 cm X 28 cm).

A few *Surya* images belonging to the 13th-14th century A.D. have also been recovered from the site of the Ambari excavations. These images are now preserved in the Assam State Museum. A big granite image (ASM 6739, 1.10m X 57 cm) shows the deity in *samapada sthanaka*, on his chariot, flanked by two consorts and Aruna at his feet. The chariot is depicted in the conventional way, but also contains a miniature figure of *Prithvi*. Another image of nearly the same dimensions (ASM 6737, 1.19m X 57cm) is similar in all details, except *Prithvi* is omitted. In a third image of more or less the same size (ASM 6738, 1.19m X 65cm) the deity is four-armed. The upper right and left hands hold *padmas* in the conventional way, the lower right hand is in *varada mudra* (benediction), while the lower left hand holds a *sula*. The other features are the same. Two other images recovered from Ambari are made of sandstone and are small in size (ASM 7529 & 7530, 25.5 cm X 12cm). In both, the deity stands erect, flanked by consorts and holds two lotuses in the usual way. Details are unclear.

At Chitrachala we find *Surya* in the aniconic *linga* form. Although the present temple was built in the 18th century A.D. (as stated in the inscription embedded in the temple wall), the site was always held sacred as the abode of the *Navagrahas*.¹⁷ The *Kamrupar Buranji* records that the Ahom king Rudra Simha compiled a list of existing *tirthas* (sacred sites) of Guwahati and the area around it.¹⁸ The Chitrachala is included in this list as the abode of the *Navagrahas*. In the aniconic form *Surya* is known as Ravi. The *linga* representing the Sun is placed in the centre and surrounded by eight other *lingas* representing the other celestial beings, in eight directions at equal distances, thus forming an octagon. According to Dharmeswar Chutia, "the aniconic representation of the *grahas* are a manifestation of the fusion of the predominant Saivite cult and the Solar cult."¹⁹ The scholar is of the opinion that the temple of *Navagraha* bears the remnants of a legacy of the Solar cult and planetary worship in Pragjyotisapura or ancient Guwahati. Biswanarayan Shastri endorses this view when, with reference to the nine *lingas* representing the nine *grahas*,

the states, "As *Siva* is made identical with *Surya* in the *Puranas*, *Siva* is being worshipped in the form of the *grahas*."²⁰ According to Shastri the *Markendeya Purana*, the *Bhavisya Purana*, and the *Sambha Purana*, "assert the identity of *Aditya* with *Siva*."²¹

Thus it is seen that the worship of the Sun God *Surya* was prevalent in the city of Guwahati. The sculptures discovered in the city all conform to the canonical norms.²² The deity was also worshipped as one among the nine celestial beings or *Navagrahas*. Representations of the deity discovered in the city all belong to the period 8th/9th century to 13th/14th century A.D. As opposed to only about a dozen images of *Surya*, in the same period we find more than seventy representations of *Siva lingas* and icons, more than fifty-five of *Visnu*, and over one hundred and sixty *Devi yonipithas* and icons. While remains of temples dedicated to *Siva*, *Devi* and *Visnu* have been found in the city, till date, no temple dedicated to *Surya* has been found. Thus his worship was not very popular in the city as compared to the other three deities. Although he declined in popularity, his worship continued down to the late medieval period. In the 18th century Chatrakara Temple, near the Uzanbazar riverside, we find him on the outer walls. According to R.P. Gupte, "In the evolution of Hindu worship, *Surya* lost his importance by the 12th century A.D."²³

Notes and References

1. D. Sharma (ed.), *Kamarupasasanavali*, (Guwahati, 1981) : Nagaon Copper Plate of Balavarman, verse V, p. 182; Howraghat Copper Plate of Balavarman, verse V, p. 186; Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, p. 201; M. Neog (ed.), *Prachya Sasanavali* (Jorhat, 1969, 2nd Edition), Texts, Ganesvara Puskarini Stone Inscription, p. 3.
2. R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Vedic Age* (Bombay, 1988, 5th Edition), p. 366.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
4. R.S. Gupte, *Iconography of the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains*, (Bombay), p. 366.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. K. Kannikeswaran, *Sun Temples in India*, (Templenet. com, 1999), p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*
9. K.L. Barua, "Alpines in Eastern India", M. Neog (ed.), *Studies in the Early History of Assam* (Jorhat, 1973), pp. 121-131; P.C. Choudhury. *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam* (Guwahati, 1987, revised 3rd Edition), pp. 94-102.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 406-407.
11. Srijeva Nyayatietha, (ed. and trans.) *Maharsi Markendeya's Kalikapuranam*, (Calcutta, 1384), Chapter 78, verse 41, p. 799.
12. *Ibid.*, Chapter 79, verse 121, p. 811; verses 140-142, p. 813.
13. R.D. Choudhury and D. Chutiya "A Note on the Archaeological Finds in Narakasur Hill", JARS, Vol. XIX, 1972, pp. 23-34.
14. K. Kannikeswaran, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
15. The construction of a Hanuman temple in the 20th century has now covered this 9th century sculpture from view.
16. H.K. Barpujari, (ed.) *Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol I (Guwahati, 1990), p. 406.
17. Srijeva Nyayatirtha, *op. cit.*, Chapter 79, verses 121-142, pp. 811-813.
18. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.) *Kamrupar Buranji* (Guwahati, 1987, 3rd Edition), pp. 105-110.
19. D. Chutia, "Some Observations on the Aniconic Symbols of Navagraha Temple at Gauhati", JARS, Vol. XVIII (1968, Umakanta Goswami Commemoration volume), pp. 98-106.
20. B.N. Shastri, "Sun Worship in Assam," JARS, Vol. XXXI, (New Series) No. 1 & 2 (Premadhar, Choudhury Felicitation Volume, Guwahati, 1989-90), pp. 37-54.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
22. R.S. Gupte, *op. cit.*, p. 53; H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 402.
23. R.S. Gupte, *op. cit.*, p. 52.