

The Religious History of Unakoti on the Background of Rites and Myths

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Unakoti, a wonderful place with its hills, streamlets and vegetations is situated to the eastern side of Kailashahar at a distance of 9 kilometres. From time immemorial, the sacred streamlet 'Unakoti Chhara' has been the life-stream of pilgrims of North-East Indian region which flow down the hill-top and forms three *Kundas*. With a grand panorama of ever green jungles around, the holy place of Unakoti becomes the main attraction of the fair of *Ashokastami*¹ when a holy bath in the *Kundas* of 'Unakoti Chhara' is religiously observed by the people.

The fundamental characteristics of the religion of Unakoti prior to the A.D. 6th Century is shrouded in obscurity. An attempt would be made here to present an analysis of the religious beliefs regarding the antiquity of Unakoti *Tirtha* according to various textual materials.

It is extremely difficult to offer even a plausible conjecture as to the origin of the primitive religion or to guess when it first came into vogue. The theory of animism as the original form of religion was set forth by E.B. Tylor in his well known work '*Primitive Culture*' of 1871. It cannot be denied that according to Tylor religion means the beliefs in supernatural beings.² The belief of Supernatural Power compels primitive people to depend on it. Everywhere, both India and out side, there is no people in primitive day, wholly devoid of religion.

From a thorough study of the development of the six-stages of pre-civilised cultures,³ the cultural sociologists have found the traces of various elements of primitive rites, rituals and beliefs in the present *pujas* and fairs of the Brahmanical religion.⁴ Traditional tribal religion is characterised as animistic.⁵ Through the centuries, the primitive communities thought that there must have been some Supernatural powers who created the sufferings of man.⁶ The creation of world and order of the nature compelled him to think that there must be an invisible force behind the natural objects without which the rivers would not flow, the fountain would dry up and the fields go barren. As a result, man came to know a way to please the nature deities⁷ by initiating their worship. Observing their religious beliefs, the Indo-Mongoloid peoples of Tripura have been said

to be the worshipper of Natural forces.⁸ The Goddess *Tuima* has been identified with one major force of nature 'The Water' who performs her defined role and ensures protection to her worshippers.⁹ Water was given special importance for various reasons. It is believed that the Supernatural deity of water always did good from the beginning of life in the world.¹⁰ It is believed in Tripura that a worshipper of water who, wishing a water Goddess to grant him a wish united himself with the Goddess by throwing some 'offering' into the water of Unakoti Kunda.

The primitive religion thus stood as a symbol of challenge to the external forces and instead of becoming depressed and submitting hopelessly to the forces of nature, the primitive people of Tripura thought that they could put things right by their own efforts.¹¹ The bathing rite alone was a worship of the water which enabled them to survive from the calamities of nature. It was believed that the un-seen power of nature should be pleased so that it would not dry up the water sources.

In fact it can be pointed out that the primitive people started to believe in the Supernatural power of water during the Neolithic period.¹² Since these very distant days of unrecorded history, it was a rite of the Indo-Mongoldoi people to bathe in the water of river or streamlet for removal of sin as well as purification of body. Thus, the ritualistic bathing as a cult of water was transmitted naturally from generation to generation, each generation changing it and adding to it with changing times and situations.

The female deity of water has often enjoyed the highest place among other deities in the early agrarian societies.¹³ As a matter of fact, the rite of bathing in the holy water might be observed collectively, by a number of persons belonging to tribal communities. It is possible and probable that the indigenous people of Tripura performed the rite of bathing at the Unakoti Chhara collectively from the ancient period.¹⁴ Unakoti is one of the centres where the nature deity of water was worshipped once in a year in the season of winter or spring, collectively, the main, reason of which was that rivers, streamlets or *chhara* would dry up during these seasons. In course of time the archaic ceremony of bathing was modified by the Brahmanical *Shastras*.¹⁵

What is significant to note is that the indigenous people had come into contact mainly through the plains people, with *Smriti* of *Raghunandan* which had brought considerable changes in the society in medieval

Bengal.¹⁶ In the said *Smritis* certain common indigenous rites and *Lokachars* were codified by condifiers like *Smartha Raghunandan* and incorporated these eventually into the *Shastras*.¹⁷ It was thus that, the bathing rite of Unakoti *Kunda* had been merged with that of the *Smartha 'Ashokasthmi Snanotsava'*.¹⁸ So although the prescription of Hindu *Smritis* appear prominent in case of *Ashokasthmi* in Unakoti, but it is possible to find out a distinctive essence of the primitive bathing rites of the tribal people of Tripura.¹⁹ The way in which the bathing rite of the Indo-Mongoloid people had been identified with the Brahmanical rites and rituals, probably as early as the 14th - 15th century A.D.²⁰, is an interesting study.

So far as *Tirtha* is concerned a mythical story regarding the antiquity of the Unakoti *Tirtha* has been described in the chronical of the Royal House of Tripura. It is held that the Brahmin *Pandits* of the Royal Court of Tripura were considered the supreme authorities for the implementation of the Hindu *Smritis*. The *Pandits* along with the tribal priest *Chantais* compiled *Sri Rajmala*, the chronical of the kings of Tripura in Sanskrit and Bengali as directed by the rulers. It is mythically expressed in the chronical that the king *Trilochana* was born by the blessing of Siva as the son of queen Hiravati. The mythical king *Trilochana* having a third eye and *Trisul* emblem became as part of Siva and he was called Subdhai²¹ who constructed a temple for Siva at Unakoti. According to the Sanskrit *Rajmala* or *Raja Ratnakarm* the king Kumara, the son of Vimara worshipped Siva at Unakoti inhabited by the *Kiratas* where *Subdhai* constructed temple for Siva.²²

The assumptions presented by the chronical mentioned above, were expressed for the justification of Unakoti as an ancient pilgrimage. The chronicle also gives us information about the sage Manu who bathed in the Manu river for which the Manu river converted into a holy stream and it was known as *Manu Nadi*.²³ Justifying the mythical story of *Raja Ratnakaram* Pandit K.P. Sen sought to prove that Manu was one of the *Chaturdasha Manus* who should be recognised by the *Purana* as one of the *Prajapatis*. The *Vayu Purana* indicates that Manu was the co-ordinator of *Varnashram Dharma* and he was recognised as a king on one hand and on the other a *Maharshi*. According to the *Sanskrit Rajmala*, Unakoti was the isolated place on the bank of river Manu where Manuraj paid homage to Siva.

An old manuscript entitled '*Unakoti Tirtha Mahatya*' has furnished information regarding the antiquity of the Unakoti. It is held that Unakoti was converted into a *Kapil Tirtha* as a result of the *Tapasya* of *Kapil*

Muni. The Siva linga, the giver of the *Sarvasidhi*, was installed at Unakoti for the people.²⁴

Tantras were compiled at about the 6th or 7th Century A.D.²⁵ and *Varahi Tantra* is one of them in which the reference of Unakoti *Tirtha* seems to have come prominently. It provides informations that *Sankara* should be considered as the deity of the Unakoti *Tirtha* and *Vishvakarma* has given the shape of Unakoti *Kunda*. He who uses the water of *Kunda* for bathing, drinking and worshipping, should obtain the same benefit as from the Manikarnika of Varanasi.²⁶

What ever the authenticity of the *Puranas* and *Unakoti Tirtha Mahatya* it is reasonably clear that the mythical stories of *Manu*, *Kapil Muni* and *Vishvakarma* were utilised in order to establish Unakoti as one of the *Tirthas* of India. One may express that none of these stories has any historical bearings and the assumptions presented by the stories could not be vouched by evidence, but as a matter of fact, our sources for the traditional history from the earliest times to the Gupta period are mainly the primitive rites and myths of *Puranas*. The account of the mythical king *Subdhai*, the sage *Manu* and *Kapil* were mixed with the earliest history of Unakoti and in spite of obvious defects the primitive rites and the traditional accounts of *Purana* may not be regarded as wholly unreliable. In any case there is hardly any doubt that the description of *Raja Ratnakaram* and *Unakoti Mahatya* embody many historical tradition which have not been otherwise preserved.

What is significant in Unakoti is that the tribal priests are strongly connected with the religious activities of Unakoti most probably from the pre-Manikya period and yet the fact is well known that the traditional observance is still going on. What has been happening at Unakoti is still more interesting and illustrates more sharply that the tribal priests are worshipping the water Goddess, sacrificing animals and throwing flowers and money into the *Kunda* for the satisfaction of the devotees belonging to both the tribal and non-tribal peoples. Having spoken of religious culture base of the Unakoti *Tirtha* as provided by the rites and myths, one may now turn to another component of history of the religious pilgrimage of Tripura which refers to the contributions made in historical times to the religious culture by diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. It is a fact that the worship of water appears to have originated from the devotion of the indogenous peoples during the pre-vedic periods²⁷ and evidently these folk rites and rituals were polished, made elegant before they came to be characterised as belonging to the Brahmanical Pauranic religion.

Notes and References

1. Ashokasthami is a Brahmanical rite of bathing approved by the Smritis of Bengal during the 13th to 14th Century A.D.
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3. Henry Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Society, India*, 1982, pp. 9-11.
4. Pallav Sengupta, *Puja Parbaner Utsakata*, Calcutta, 1984, pp. 9.
5. *Encyclopeddia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. I New York, p. 535.
6. Frank Byron Jevons, *The History of Religion*, India, pp. 13-27.
7. *Puja Parbaner Utsakata*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
8. P.B. Bhattacharjee, The Religious history of the Tipras on the background of Kharchi Puja, in *Proceeding of North East India History Association*, 6th Session, 1985, p. 105.
9. Abdus Satter, *Tribal Culture in Bangladesh*, Dacca, 1975, p. 60.
10. *Ibid*, p. 60.
11. *The History of Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
12. Narendranath Bhattacharjee, *Bharatiya Dharmer Itihas*, pp. 20-23.
13. *Puja Parbaner Utsakata*, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-163.
14. *Sri Rajmala*, Vo. II. Ed. K.P. Sen, P. - 107.
15. P.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Glorious that was Unakoti", in *Tripura Review*, July, 1993, p. 44.
16. Dr. Atul Sur, *Hindu Sabhyatar Nritattik Bhashya*, 1981, p. 41.
17. Dakshina Ranjan Shastri, *Smriti, Achar o Dharma*, 1977, p. 29.
18. *Bharatiya Dharmer Itihas*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
19. P.B. Bhattacharjee, *Tripurar Upajatiya Sanskriti*, 1989, p. 21.
20. *Bangladesher Itihas*, Ed. R.C. Mazumder, Vol. II pp. 239-243.
21. *Sri Rajmala*, Vol. II, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.
22. *Ibid*, p. 113.
23. *Ibid*, p. 109.
24. *Ibid*, p. 108-109.
25. *Hindu Sabyatar Nritattik Bhashya*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
26. *Sri Rajmala*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
27. *Bharatiya Dharmer Itihas*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.