

Sun Worship in Assam and Bengal: A Peep into Comparative Study

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Assam and Bengal are geographically contiguous with more or less ethnic similarity. The socio-cultural structure of both the regions tended to be similar with distinctive features of their own. Since the early times Assam and Bengal along with Orissa and Bihar constituted a wide cultural zone.¹ It is from the western side of early Assam that easy land and navigable routes were possible, which helped in the migration and the expansion of culture from the Indian mainland. The Brahmins of the by-gone age played a great role in associating and inducting the non-Aryan people into their fold, thereby creating a new culture. With the expansion of the Aryan domination to eastern India, Indo-Aryan ideas penetrated early Assam. Like other major religious cults, sun-worship was also prevalent in both Assam and Bengal in early days. Both similarities and differences marked the solar cult in these two geographical areas.

Before embarking upon a comparative study, we'll give a short but general description of the solar cult in both the regions in ancient time. The cult of the sun god prevailed in Assam from the early days. The earliest reference to *Prāgjyotiṣa* as a centre of sun-worship is said to be found in the *Sāṅkhāyana-Grihyasamgraha (tato niṣkrāmya Prāgjyotiṣām puṇyadeśam upāgāmya anudīta āditye)*.² However, according to Barpujari, this passage has nothing to do with the prevalence of sun-worship in *Prāgjyotiṣa* or ancient Assam.³ That Kāmarūpa was once renowned as an ideal place for worshipping the Sun could be seen in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*'s story of propitiation of the sun in Kamarupa by the Brāhmaṇas of the kingdom of Rajyavardhana for his restoration to youth.⁴ Thus, it appears that Sūrya was also worshipped for removal of disease. The prevalence of the cult is also proved by a number of existing manuscripts like the one, '*Kāmarūpa nibandhanīya khaṇḍasādhya*' (6th-7th century A.D.), which also speaks of the introduction of the solar cult along with the planetary worship in the land by the Alpine-Magian group of people.⁵ The *Skanda Purāṇa* also refers to the worship of sun-images in early Assam.⁶ The *Kālikā Purāṇa* mentions a place, sacred to Surya, called *Ravikṣetra* on *Tattvasaila* (Śrī Sūryapāhār) in the Goalpara and two *kundas* (ponds) – Kapota and Karana associated with sun-worship. It also states that Śrī Sūryapāhār was the perpetual abode of the sun: (*yatra deva ādityah satatam sthitah*).⁷ The *Kālikā Purāṇa* (78/42, 79/142) further refers to the *Chitraśaila* or the Navagraha hill near Guwahati, where the nine planets (*Navagrahas*) were worshipped in aniconic form.

There are also a few epigraphic references to the deity, but without any definite invocation. Wide-spread Sūrya-cult in Assam is attested to by many icons of the deity. Though Sun-worship has a remote antiquity in this province, surprisingly the earliest of

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the sun images from Assam (carved on the door-lintel of a ruined, Visnu temple at Dāh Parbatīā near Tezpur) belong to the 5th-6th century A.D.⁸

Anyway, all these images belong to a period from A.D. 6th to A.D. 12th century, most of them being dated at 10th-12th centuries A.D. Besides the independent representation, Sūrya also appears as an accessory figure in the image of Brahmanical deities. He also finds representation as a god of *Panchopasana*. Some sun-images from Assam are also very significant from iconographic point of view. Besides the free representation, the god has also been sculpted in niches, on lintels of temples and rock-cut. The Sun god has been depicted both in standing and seated position. Sun-images from Assam mostly are made of stone, though of bronze in some cases. Influences of Bengal, Bihar and West Indian sculptures can be traced in the Sūrya images of Assam. Sculptures of Assam tended to be closer to the art of the Guptas and those of the schools of Bihar and Orissa rather than to the contemporary Pala school of Bengal. Though they were fundamentally based on the Indian traditional system, generally following the lines laid down in the *Silpasastras*, Assamese art very frequently exhibits marked peculiarities, which were mainly due to the non-Aryan influence in Assam that was more effective here than other parts of India. The *Brihat Samhita* and the *Markandeya Purana* indicate the existence of sun-temple in early Assam. Based on archaeological remains, it can reasonably be presumed that there must have been shrines of the god Surya in places like Tezpur and Shri Suryapahar.

In early Bengal, the most important of the minor religious cults was that of the Sun. It is interesting to note that numerically Sun-images occupy here a position second to that of the most popular god Visnu. The earliest definite reference to the worship of the god in this land occurs in the *Ārṣeya Upaniṣad* datable to the fourth century B.C. In this Upaniṣad,⁹ the non-Āryan people like the Puṇdras of North Bengal and the Sumhas of *Rādha* (Midnapore, Hooghly and Burdwan) are described as the Sun worshipping tribes, who looked upon the Sun as the highest reality.¹⁰

Sun worship was no less popular in pre-Gupta period. From inscription as well as the extant Terracotta figures, plaques, seals and sealing, a comprehensive picture of the adoration of the Sun god may be drawn. It seems that the Magians from Iran were not responsible for the introduction of sun-images in Bengal because there definitely existed an indigenous art tradition. The early indigenous tradition of representing the Sun god in his anthropomorphic form may be traced in some terracotta plaques of the Sunga-Kushana period found in different parts of Bengal. In fact, those terracotta plaques may be considered as the earliest remains indicating the beginning of the anthropomorphic Sun worship in Bengal.

A standing, terracotta, winged figure of Surya¹¹ from Tamluk belonging to c. 2nd century B.C. with long stalks of full-blossomed lotus in his hands depicts the Vedic Surya at its embryonic stage of iconic development and shows strong Brahmanical influence in Sun worship. The Chandraketurgarh terracotta Surya (1st cent. A.D.),¹² which figures as an independent deity along with attendants on a four-horsed chariot, seems to have been an object of worship with *bhakti*. The advent of the Iranian Surya can be visualized in the northerners' dress of the 1st century A.D. Sun-icon from Hadipur (24 Parganas).¹³ This Magian tradition continued to be the major guiding force in the later representations.

Aniconic depiction of Surya and the Surya-pillar were not also probably unknown (2nd Cent. A.D. Terracotta Seal with a round object representing the Sun;¹⁴ Horse and lotus on a terracotta seal).¹⁵

During the Gupta rule, anthropomorphic worship of Surya and solar cult of a purely northern culture spread far and wide. The earliest Sun images of Gupta India come from Kumarpur and Niyamatpur (Rajshahi). Representation of seven horses in the Kumarpur sculpture marks a departure in the subcontinent from the custom of Kushana artists to provide the *Surya-ratha* with two or four horses. Some development in solar iconography such as the increasing number of attendants also occurs. The Deulbadi (Comilla) icon points to his worship even by the Buddhists and also his domestic adoration.

Surya and his worship are frequently mentioned in the inscriptions of the Pala-Chandra age with emphasis on his atmospheric aspects. *Surya-pranama* came to be a popular form. With the progress of Vedicism during the Varman-Sena age, Surya was increasingly worshipped by *Sandhyopasana* along with the *Gayatri*. The solar cult became more popular probably because of the belief in the god as the curer of all types of diseases. As a result, numerous Sun images came to be carved in the Pala-Sena period. All the figures are in the family groupings, with all symbolism clearly manifest. Religious outlook of the northern and Iranian regions is retained, but in the meditation and interpretation of Surya, the Vedic and Brahmanical religious concepts appear to have merged.

The charioteer Aruna, two principal attendants Pingala and Dandi, as well as the earth-goddess Mahasveta accompany the Sun god in most of his representations and in those of the 11th and 12th century A.D., two consorts Samjna and Chhaya appear. The arrow-shooting Usa and Pratyusa frequently appears in the sun-images from the very period. Sun worship gained much more popularity in the 11th and 12th century A.D. as is evidenced by several images of Surya. Many Sun images illustrate eleven *Adityas* to highlight the concept of *Dvadasaditya*, while some images represent the god along with Navagrahas. It seems that at a later period, the *Sauras* assumed a syncretic approach. References to Sun-temple in various sources and its design in some icons point to the popularity of Sun worship in the shrines. The Vedic as well as the Puranic form of solar worship was prevalent. Sun cult was also influenced by Tantricism, though outwardly. The presentation of the god as the eye of Hari as well as his adornment, though stray, with *karandamukuta*, *tilaka*, *vanamala* etc. indicates his assimilation and downward course of his cult. Distinct worship of Sun-images is not noticeable from the medieval times. The emergence of *Panchopasana* left no scope of exclusive worship of Surya. In addition, the preponderance of *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* over-shadowed the cult of the Sun god. It appears that there existed a Sun-sect, though not strong, in Bengal throughout the early period. There also developed some centers of Sun worship in Pundravardhana and Gangasagara-*samgama*.

Let us now make a comparative study of different aspects of sun-worship prevalent in Assam and Bengal.

Antiquity: As noticed earlier, Surya came to be an object of worship in Bengal at least as early as the fourth century B.C. and that too by the contemporary dominating

tribes like the Pundras and Sumhas as suggested by the *Ārṣeya Upaniṣad*. On the other hand, the most convincing, earliest reference to the worship of the god in Assam occurs in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* that may be dated in the 3rd-4th century A.D.

Epigraphic Evidence: There are enormous epigraphic evidences of sun-worship in Bengal. We can draw a comprehensive picture of the popularity of the sun-god in this land from the inscriptions of the pre-Gupta,¹⁶ the Gupta,¹⁷ post-Gupta period,¹⁸ the Pala¹⁹ and the Sena period.²⁰ The inscriptional evidence of the solar cult in Assam is meager. There are a few references to the god in epigraphs of 9th/11th centuries,²¹ though no definite invocation is found.

Aniconic depiction: Sūrya is not depicted in human form in early Bengal art until a comparatively late period. However, side by side with the anthropomorphic representation, the aniconic representation of the Sun god and its worship might have also been in use in Bengal during the early centuries of the Christian era.²² Symbolic representation of the Sun god in the second century A.D. Bengal is attested to by a terracotta seal²³ from Berachampa (North 24 Parganas). It displays a boat with a mast carrying a banner. Above it, there is a round object representing the Sun in the sky. The most important point is the display of the Sun on the seal along with an advice in the accompanying legend in Kharoṣṭhī and Kharoṣṭhī-Brāhmī for the sea-farers to take resort unto the Brāhmaṇas while at sea. Aniconic representation of the Sun is traceable in a 3rd cent. A.D. hemispherical terracotta seal²⁴ from Chandraketurah, depicting a staff rising from the water and flanked by two lotuses is quite significant. In the *Rigveda* (4.13.5), Sūrya has been called the pillar of the sky. We may also refer to the Sūrya pillar from Nagarjunakonda²⁵ of the 2nd century A.D. Thus, the staff for the pillar of the sky may be taken as personifying the Sun. Theriomorphic representation of the Sun was not also probably unknown in Bengal.²⁶ There can but be aniconic representation of the Sun-god in early Assam, but evidences thereof are not available to us. However, such representation of nine planets (*Navagrahas*) is found in the Navagraha temple built in the late Ahom period near the Kamakhya shrine in the vicinity of Guwahati. Here the nine *grahas* are represented by nine cylindrical pieces of black stone, each one of which has been erected on a wide elevated base. The central pillar is supposed to represent Surya and around it, there are other eight planets.²⁷ Probably, the *grahas* are symbolically represented by their numbers at this place.

Earliest anthropomorphic representation: There occur no remains of sculptural art in Assam in any medium - metal or stone, which may be assigned to a period earlier than the 5th century A.D. Judged by the extant remains, the sculptural activities in Assam began with the expansion of the Gupta Empire. The Umachal Rock Inscription and the Nagajari Khanikargaon fragmentary stone inscription of the early 5th century A.D. (or earlier), point to the penetration of Brahmanical religion into Kamarupa (early Assam). In view of the sculptural remains at Dah-Parvatia, Mikir-Ati, Barganga, Kamakhya and Dudhnai, belonging to the late 5th and 6th century A.D., sculptural art appears to have burgeoned into full flowering in Assam during this span of time.²⁸ It is evident that the sun image was introduced in Assam in the late Gupta period. The earliest representation of Surya in Assam is found in the extreme left-hand ornamental niche in the projected top section of the lintel of a door-frame of a ruined temple dedicated to Visnu²⁹ at Dāh

Parvatīā (near Tezpur) of 5th-6th century A.D.³⁰ He is seated cross-legged (in *utkaṭikāsana* attitude) with two lotus flowers in two hands and flanked by Pingala and Daṇḍa in seated posture.³¹ In view of the earliest reference to *Pragjyotiṣa* as a centre of sun-worship occurring in the *Grihyasūtras*, it may, therefore, be suggested that the Vedic tradition of aniconic as well as symbolic worship had been the principal way of venerating the Sun god at least till the late Gupta period. Further, Surya does not appear here as an independent deity along with his attendants and thus seems not to have been an object of worship in image-form. Here he is merely depicted as an accessory decorative figure in the religious architecture of another Brāhmaṇical sect.

The early representation of the Sun god in Bengal in anthropomorphic form is to be traced in some terracotta plaques of the Suṅga- Kuṣāṇa period. The first to mention is a 2nd cent. B.C. terracotta figure of standing, winged Surya from Tamluk³² with long stalks of full-blossomed lotus in his hands. The next worth-mentioning is a terracotta image of the Sun-god (first century B.C./A.D.) from Chandraketurah (24-Parganas), seated on the chariot drawn by four horses and accompanied by the charioteer Aruna as well as Usa and Pratyusa.

Role of the Magians in image-introduction: As noted above, the Iranian Magians did not introduce the anthropomorphic representation of the Sun god in Bengal because we find an earlier, indigenous art tradition of representing the god in some terracotta plaques of the Sunga-Kusana period discovered in different parts of Bengal.³³ In fact, those terracotta plaques may be considered as the earliest remains indicating the beginning of the anthropomorphic Sun worship in Bengal. However, the solar cult along with the planetary worship was introduced in the Assam by the Alpine-Magian group of people, which is confirmed by the astronomical work, *Kāmarūpa-nibandhaniya Khandasādhyā* (6th-7th centuries).³⁴

Non-Indian iconographic feature: Non-Indian features of solar iconography like Northerner's dress (*udichyavesa*), boots, etc. slowly but steadily penetrated into the mainland from the north-western India. The terracotta Surya datable to c. 1st century A.D. from Hadipur (North 24 Pargana) is found to be clad in a close fitting jacket gathered at the anklets and soft-padded boots - a northerner's dress (*udīcyaveśa*). This is the earliest occurrence of tunic and boots in solar iconography in ancient *Vaṅga* and thus, indicative of the coming of the Irānian Sūrya (Mitra) in this land. However, a slate stone image of early 4th-5th century A.D. from Harinarayanpur (South 24 Parganas)³⁵ shows the Sun god in *udichyavesa* with the upper part of the body of the deity being denuded, which reflects an absolute Indianised version of the image. In ancient Assam, Kilt-like garment hanging down to the knees of the god as well as a pair of boots occurs for the first time in a small 8th century A.D. bronze icon of the Sun-god from Narakāsūr ruins at Kahilipara near Guwahati.

Companions: (i) *Aruna:* Aruna, the celestial charioteer of the Sun god, appears for the first time in solar iconography in Bengal, though only in its upper bust, in a 1st century B.C./A.D. terracotta figure of the Sun-god from Chandraketurah, 24-Parganas. He wears a small cap-like headdress. It points to the development of Sun's personality because of sectarian devotion. In Assam, we find earliest representation of Aruna in sun-image in a sculpture³⁶ of the god Surya stylistically datable to 7/8th century A.D.³⁷ and

found at Sadiya wherein the god is seated on a lotus on the chariot, with two lotuses in the hands and with Aruna in front holding the reins of the seven galloping horses.

(ii) *Usa-Pratyusa*: Usa and Pratyusa – two consorts of the Sun-god- make their first appearance in Bengal solar iconography in a beautiful, seated, 1st cent. B.C./A.D., terracotta sculpture of Surya from Chandraketurah,³⁸ 24-Parganas. Here the deity is flanked by the goddesses, who passionately cling to him by the neck. However, Usa and Pratyusa, who are generally represented in archer pose in the latter-day sun icons – is first noticed as simply carrying bows and arrows and not in archer pose, in the sun-image of the 4th cent. A.D. from Kumarpur (Rajshahi, Bangladesh).³⁹ Coming to Assam, as far as the existing knowledge is concerned, we come across earliest representation of the same goddesses in the sun-images from Dabaka (Nowgown) and Gahpur,⁴⁰ both belonging to 11/12th century, in which the Sun-god is also accompanied by Aruna, Pingala and Dandi as well as Samjna and Chhaya. In other words, Usa and Pratyusa came to be a part of the solar iconography in Assam when there was full development of the god's iconographic traits as well as the journey of standardization.

(iii) *Pingala-Dandi*: As regards Pingala and Dandi (principal attendants of the Sun god), in Bengal we find their earliest representation in a coarse-grained sandstone Surya image of the 5th cent. A.D. from Niyamatpur (Rajshahi, Bangladesh).⁴¹ Interestingly, almost at the same time appear the pot-bellied Pingala and youthful Dandi in solar iconography in Assam too. The earliest image of Surya in Assam found at Dāh Parvatīā (near Tezpur) of 5th-6th century A.D. shows the seated god flanked by Pingala seated on his left holding a pen and inkpot as well as Daṇḍa seated on his right holding a staff.⁴²

Separate images of Pingala and Dandi: It is interesting to note that separate images of Pingala and Dandi have also been found in Bengal. One bronze image⁴³ of Pingala and another⁴⁴ of Dandi, both belonging to the 12th Century A.D. are now housed in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. The images give an indication of independent worship of the two principal attendants of the Surya to some extent. However, no such image of Pingala or Dandi has ever been noticed in Assam.

(iv) *Samjna-Chhaya*: Two other consorts of the Sun god - Samjna (Sarenu or Rajni) and Chhaya (Niksubha) – come to our notice first in a photograph⁴⁵ of a sun-image from Assam, stylistically belonging to the 9th cen. A.D. Here both the goddesses with *chowri* in their hands attend upon the god on either side. In Bengal too, the same goddesses enter the iconographic scene in the 9th century A.D.,⁴⁶ though in a very few images. They are represented as carrying lilies and flywhisks or showing *abhaya-mudra* with their right hands and placing the left on the hip.

(v) *Mahasveta*: According to the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*,⁴⁷ the goddess in front of the Sun god is Mahasveta (Prithivi). She makes a frequent appearance in front of Surya in the Bengal sun-images of the ninth cent. A.D., exhibiting *abhaya* with her right hand and holding *aksamala* (rosary) and *kamandalu* (water-pot) in the left or holding *aksamala* in the right hand and *kamandalu* in the left one.⁴⁸ In Assam we find her earliest representation in the 11-12th century sun-icons from Dabakā (Nowgong) and Moronoi.⁴⁹

No attendant: It is not always that the sun-images are invariably depicted as attended by some or other companion. For example, a terracotta figure of Surya⁵⁰ from Bogra district (Bangladesh), which is a remarkable piece of Gupta sculptural art, shows the god Surya in tunic, boots and a sword dangling on the left but without any consort or attendant. Similarly, coming to Assam no attendant and even chariot is found in an 8th century bronze icon of the booted deity from Kahilipara (Narakasur hill) near Guwahati.

Number of Horse: The Sun-god is usually represented as seated or standing on horse-drawn chariots with the charioteer Aruna seated or half-embedded into the *ratha*. Two Surya images from Bengal shows only one horse,⁵¹ another with four horses,⁵² the third with eight⁵³ and the rest with seven. Representation of seven horses in the Kumarpur relief marks a departure in the subcontinent from the custom of Kusana artists to provide the *Surya-ratha* with two or four horses. However, no horse is seen in a number of Sun images at all. In Assam, no horse is found in the Dah Parvatia (Tezpur) seated Surya image of 5th-6th century A.D. as well as in an 8th century A.D. bronze image of Surya from Narakāsūr ruins at Kahilipara near Guwahati. In case of presence of horses in Assam Surya images, the number is always seven, which first occurs in a 7/8th century A.D. seated image of the Sun-god from Sadiya.⁵⁴

Surya images with bare-feet: We have already noticed that the Northerner's dress (*udichyavesa*), boots, etc. penetrated into Bengal solar iconography (terracotta Surya from Hadipur, North 24 Parganas) since the c. 1st century A.D. and in Assam since the 8th century A.D. (Bronze icon of the Sun-god from Narakāsūr ruins). However, a specimen discovered from Gāzole (Malda district, W.B.)⁵⁵ and dated in the 11th Century A. D., shows the god Surya and his attendants without any boots, which is a characteristic feature of south Indian Surya images. Sun-image of early medieval period without boots is also found in Assam too. A stone image of the Sun-god in the precincts of the Kamakhya temple standing on a lotus within a pilastered niche has bare feet. This figure may belong to about the eleventh century A.D. The absence of boots in sun-images of both Bengal and Assam belonging to the same century is quite thought-provoking.

Surya as an accessory figure: Sūrya appears as an accessory figure in the images of Brahmanical deities in Bengal as well as in Assam. However, neither in pre-Gupta nor in Gupta period was Surya ever seen as an accessory figure in Bengal. During the last two or three centuries of the so-called Hindu rule, Surya was not only represented as combining with other gods but also shown as an accompanying figure of the major cult-gods. But in case of Assam, the earliest Surya figure of 5th-6th century A.D. from Dāh Parvatīā makes his appearance simply as an accessory, decorative figure.

Surya in Panchopasana: It has been enjoined by the *Smritikaras* that in the daily worship, one has to pay one's obeisance to the five deities namely, *Ganesa, Narayana, Surya, Siva and Sakti*. A Brahmin, officiating as a priest for the worship of any god or goddess, is found to perform initially *Panchopasana* or the worship of five-deities.⁵⁶ During the last centuries of the Hindu rule in ancient Bengal, Surya received worship as a constituent cult-deity of *Pancopasana* from a large number of followers of this religious system. Most of the Sena kings were also followers of *Panchopasana*, as is evidenced by simultaneous show of reverence to Narayana, Mahesa and Surya in a few of their inscriptions as well as reference in the *Pavanaduta* (verse 28) to installation of both the

Laksmīnarayana and *Mahadeva* images in temples in Suhmadesa.⁵⁷ In Assam also, sun-worship came to be a constituent of *panchopasana*. At Nigrīting about 16 miles from Jorhat, the sun-god has been dedicated a subsidiary shrine in the campus of a big temple dedicated to God Siva.⁵⁸ Other subsidiary shrines of the temple, which is of the *Panchayatana*-type, are dedicated to Visnu, Devi (Sakti) and Ganesa.

Surya's predominance in Trinity: There existed many a religious sect, major or minor, in Bengal as well as in Assam and rivalry among them was not quite unnatural. The enmity revealed itself mainly by way of representing other dominant god or gods as attendant or accessory figures of the other ambitious cult-god or replacing some opponent deity from the Trinity. The Sun-cult, especially spearheaded by the Maga Brahmanas of foreign origin, could not have been an exception. In *Trimurtis*, Surya as the principal god is not unknown as it is found in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Surya replaces Brahma in the trinity in an inscribed sculpture of Bengal. The god replaces Visnu in the door lintel of the tenth century A.D. Siva-temple at Tezpur in Assam with Brahma and Siva on either side.⁵⁹

Paramasaura: The royal patronage to the cult of the Sun-god in ancient India is not totally unknown. Maharaja Dharapatta of the Maitraka dynasty as well as Prabhakarvardhana, Adityavardhana and Rajyavardhana of the Vardhana dynasty of Thaneswara were most devout worshippers of the Sun (*Paramaditya-bhaktah*).⁶⁰ Visvarupasena (son of King Laksmānāsena) and his son Suryasena, the Sena kings of Bengal, pronouncedly call themselves *paramasaura* (staunch devotees of Surya). However, no reference is found to such type of royal devotee in the history of Assam.

Surya-worship and Buddhists: As we know from Tārānātha⁶¹, the solar cult enjoyed a special favour in Assam even before the Christian era. But about the 3rd century B.C. a Buddhist monk Ārya Dhītika, with his supernatural power, converted to Buddhism a wealthy, Sun-worshipping *Brāhmaṇa* of Kamarupa named Siddha by appearing before the latter as the Sun and delivering sermons to him. The Brahmana then spent his energy and wealth for constructing *mahāchaityas* and lavishly entertained the *Sanghas* all around. This speaks of rivalry between the two religious faiths of India and the aggressive predominance of Buddhism over the solar cult. Coming to Bengal, we notice a different picture. All the Pala kings, though Buddhists, were prominent patrons of Brahmanas, Brahmanical images and temples and therefore, made grants of lands for them to enhance their own virtue and renown. Prabhavati, the queen of the Buddhist Devakhadga, set up an image of the goddess Sarvani (Durga) with which was found a seated bronze image of Surya.⁶² *Chaitya* windows are found in solar iconography of Bengal, which is natural in view of the Pala kings being ardent patrons of Buddhism. A seated miniature of the two-armed *Dhyani-Buddha Amitabha* appears on the crest of the image of a ten-armed Surya-Lokesvara from Bengal.⁶³

Surya as remover of disease: Sun-god was regarded not only as the bestower of welfare and fulfiller of desire. From the *Markandeya Purana*, which tells the story of propitiation of the Sun in Kāmarūpa by the Brāhmaṇas of Rajyavardhan's kingdom to get him restored to youth, it appears that Sūrya was worshipped for removal of disease too. In the Bairhatta image inscription from Bengal too, Surya is described as the remover of all diseases ("*samasta-roghanam hartta*").⁶⁴

Surya in relief: Besides the independent representation, the Sun god has also been sculpted in Assam in niches (pilastered niche of the Kamakhya temple), on lintels of temples (Dah Parvatia) and on rockcuts (Pandu Rock-cut Surya). In Bengal, the sculptured representation of Surya probably belonging to the 8th century A.D. from Bhadrakali (Hooghly Dist.) is found in a niche on a stone.⁶⁵ Navagrahas in seated posture are depicted in a sandstone panel in the State Archaeological Gallery, Calcutta,⁶⁶ broken into two pieces, which seems to have been a door lintel from some shrine. *Navagraha* images used to be carved on lintels over the entrance doorway allegedly to ensure prosperity to their founders and to prevent any evil happening to the temples themselves.

Surya's iconographic posture: Sun god is found as depicted both in standing and seated posture in Assam as well as in Bengal. The earliest (5th-6th century A.D.) of the Surya images in Assam from Dāh Parvatiā (near Tezpur) is found seated cross-legged (in *utkaṭikāsana* attitude). Another unique feature of this image, which is not at all found in Bengal, is that Pingala and Dandi are also seated here and quite contrary to the standardized practice, the former is to the left side and the latter is to the right side of the standing central deity. In Bengal, the god appears in seated position in first century B.C./A.D. on a four-horsed chariot in the terracotta sculpture from Chandraketurgarh (24-Parganas). However, the oldest specimen, yet known, of sun-images from Bengal, which is winged, terracotta figure of the god from Tamruk of the 2nd cent. B.C. as well as the first cent. A.D. *udīcyaveśī* terracotta Surya from Hadipur (24 Parganas) is represented as standing. Interestingly, the number of seated sun-images is more in Assam than in Bengal, taking into consideration the total number of solar sculptures from both the regions.

Material of Sun-images: The materials, according to the *Bhavisya Purana* (30.1-2.), employed to represent the images of Surya for worship are gold, silver, copper, clay, stone, wood, and paint. Amongst these seven materials, three - terracotta, stone and bronze - are found to have been used for making the sun-images in Bengal. On the other hand, the figures of the Sun-god from Assam are mostly made of stone, though bronze has also been made use of in some cases. Interestingly, an image of the god Surya from the Kamalabari *Satra* (Majuli Island, Jorhat District), dated to the 19th century A.D. is chiseled out in a piece of wood.⁶⁷

From the above, it appears that factors like location in the Indian subcontinent, the very geography, the demographic variety, etc. remarkably determined the extent and nature of sun-worship in Assam and Bengal. The solar cult discussed above is basically of the Brahmanical tradition, which penetrated into Assam much more lately than in Bengal. Still the Assamese society remained predominantly a tribal one with a pastoral economic life. Religious offerings and worship of various deities were actually symbolic and related to fertility rites. Moreover, much of the history of early indigenous sun-worship in Bengal is known to us because of extensive research already carried out. Surya being the creator of day and night and producer of plants, vegetation and food has attracted the attention of mankind for adoration all over the world from the very beginning of human history. And Assam, therefore, cannot be an exception. There must have been sun-worship in Assam in some form or other, presumably in aniconic form,

among its indigenous people since the very days, which awaits to emerge on a large canvas through a comprehensive research.

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