

Advent of Vaishnavism in an Animistic Environ: The case of the Deoris of Assam

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Abstract: Animism is one of the oldest form of religion, which is professed by almost all the tribes of the world. Most of the tribes of North East India, both in the hills and plains, professed animism from time immemorial. The Deoris of Assam, a scheduled tribe principally concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley, are traditionally animist. The Deoris are a patriarchal tribe divided in to four sections. Agriculture is their mainstay and their material culture has been developed centring paddy cultivation. Traditionally they were the worshippers of natural objects. Data for this paper have been collected from Majar Chapari Village of Lakhimpur District, Assam. The village is surrounded by the Assamese Hindu villages and the inhabitants of those villages practised Vaishnavism – a form of Hinduism. Gradually good number of traits of this religious system percolated to the society and culture of the Deoris of Majar Chapari village. In this paper a modest attempt has been made to examine the Vaishnavism practised by the Deori inhabitants of Majar Chapari Village.

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‘The foundation of the theory of *animism* is the work of Sir E.B Tylor and may be found in his *Primitive Culture*, 1971. The notion was a part of theory of primitive religion which endeavoured to account for the attribution by some peoples of a spiritual existence to

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animals, plants, and even on occasion to inanimate objects' (Mitchell 1970, 6). In remote past most of the societies of the world professed animism. Gradually different religions were originated and due to various reasons many a societies have adopted alien religions abandoning their pristine system of faith, and due to that universal process a good number of societies have adopted Hinduism.

Hinduism is not only a religion, but a way of life. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* the term Hindu means 'adherent of Hinduism or the Indian'. Hindu has been widely defined as Indian. This wide definition is not acceptable because we frequently divide the population of India on the basis of religions. The term Hinduism has been defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as the 'religious and social system with adherents especially in India with belief in reincarnation, worship of several gods and caste as the basis of society. The pivotal pedestals of Hinduism are *dharma* (religion), *karma* (duty), *gyan* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (unflinching devotion). Although initially *varna* system was integral to Hinduism, at present caste system is the basis of the Hindu society. The Hindus also believe in *punarjanma* (rebirth), i.e., a man has to take innumerable births, assuming innumerable bodies according to the status of his consciousness and finally culminates into *moksha* (salvation) when he is free from all desires for being embodied.

Unlike other religions of the world like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, etc., Hinduism is not based on single set of religious performances, modes of beliefs, propitiation, religious places, festivals, etc. This religion is a congregation of various religious sub-systems within a vast religious system.

Polytheism is the pivotal feature of Hinduism. It is also a faith in unity in multiplicity. The faith originated in the initial stage of Hinduism in one of the primary scripture *Rig Veda*, where the concept of one God is conspicuous among innumerable gods and goddesses. In the *Rig Veda* it is described like this: 'They called it Indra, Mitra, Varuna or Agni. And also Heavenly Beautiful Kirtiman. The Real is one, though sages name it variously'. Although polytheism and heathenism is conspicuous in the *Vedas*, the most dominant tendency of the scriptures is monoism, the realization of one in many. The philosophical evolution of Hinduism from polytheism through henotheism to monotheism also gives rise to a number 'sub-religions' in Hinduism.

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Vaishnavism is an important 'sub-religion' of Hinduism based on monoism. Initiation and evolution of Vaishnavism is thought provoking. In medieval period there was a renaissance against the domination of the Brahmanas throughout India. Moreover, at that period Vedic rituals became extremely complicated and the common Hindus have to obey the rule and

command of Brahmans, especially the Brahman priests, along with the compulsory performance of a good number of rites and rituals. Caste system was very rigid and the lower caste people have to face lot of hindrances in their day to day life. To give an obstacle to this undesirable system a new religion was originated under the vast canopy of Hinduism which is known as Vaishnavism (neo-Vaishnavism). According to this religion there is only one God and He is Vishnu. 'Vishnu is the Supreme Being for the Vaishnavas, His worshippers, and they believe that all things emanates from the deity. Vishnu, the preserver and restorer, has enormous popularity in India. Vishnu has been manifested to the world in ten incarnations (*avatara*) taking a variety of forms like fish (*matchya*), tortoise (*kurma*), man-lion (*nara-simha*), etc. In course of time the numbers of these incarnations have been increases to twenty four. Lord Vishnu took those forms to end some evils in the world. While all these incarnations are revered by the Hindus, Rama and Krishna, especially Krishna is greatly honoured as the full incarnation (*purna avarata*) of Lord Vishnu. He is the most cherished mythological hero of India and believed to be direct manifestation of Vishnu himself' (Medhi 2008, 90-91). The followers of Vaishnavism are known as Vaishnava.

In Vaishnavism idolatry is strictly prohibited; instead holy scriptures are worshipped placing over a wooden pedestal in the prayer houses. There is no division of high and low among the Vaishnava. For the appeasement of the God, no complicated rituals are required, and, therefore, Vishnu is propitiated only through *nama – kirtana*, i.e., uttering of the God's name again and again. In the long run many Vedic elements not sanctioned by this new religion entered to the Vaishnavism of different states of India except in Sikhism and Vaishnavism of Assam.

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Assam, the gateway of North East India, is situated in the tropical latitudes 24.3° N and 28.0° N and longitude 89.6° E and 96.1° E. Among all the states of North East India, Assam is the most populous state. According to the 2011 census report it is inhabited by 31,169,272 souls, distributed over 78,438 km² area. Population of Assam is mosaiced by both non-tribal and tribal including various religious groups. 'The prehistoric past of Assam is still a matter of conjecture in the absence of adequate authentic information. Whatever might be the case of the prehistoric time, it is a known fact that from very distant past, Assam was like a highway connecting the rest of India with South East Asia, through which passed people of diverse ethnic groups, who have different cultural entities and spoke various language. Most of them not only left cultural remnants in this land, but also contributed towards the ethnic composition of the people. These have made Assam a place, where people of different cultural, linguistic an ethnic groups live, each contributing

towards the growth and development of a composite Assamese culture' (Das 1967, 10). History of Assam is basically the history of migration of different ethnic groups. All the communities now regarded as autochthonous people of Assam have legends of migration from distant places to this part of India.

Forefathers of Sankaradeva, the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam, came from Kanauja and like many others settled here, and in the long run mingled with the main stream of Assam. 'The neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva (1499-1568) in Assam was a part of the larger pan-Indian resurgence of *Bhakti* (unflinching devotion) in medieval India that spanned nearly a little over five centuries from the devotional cults of Alvars in Tamil Nadu to the teaching of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhavacharya, Vallabhacharyya, Chaitanya, Kabir, Guru Nanaka and others. While it was basically a reaction against the excesses of sacerdotal religion, the spirit of new ideas manifested itself in overall social change almost unprecedented in its scale in the history of Assam. Sankaradeva was an extraordinarily gifted man, widely travelled, sound in traditional Sanskrit learning, poet, playwright and musician per excellence' (Neog 1988,1).

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'Sankaradeva propagated a form of Vaishnavism in Assam which was simpler and more accessible than the ritualistic Hinduism of that time. The doctrine propounded by Sankaradeva proved to be a great unifying force in Assam and initiated the concept of oneness among the people irrespective of caste and creed in this part of the land. The caste Hindus, different tribals groups, even the Muslims were brought in the universe of neo-Vaishnavism and had accelerated the process of integration among the diverse groups of Assam' (Medhi 2008, 92-93). In the noteworthy book entitled *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, S.K Chatterjee writes: He 'gave to Assam a new discipline of faith and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrine and its unmeaning practices and gave to the people something simple and straight forward devoided of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam bringing in a proper spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced and he deserved to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidasa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam' (cited in Neog 1988, 1).

In Vaishnavism of Assam, idolatry is strictly tabood while in the present Vaishnavism of Bengal, Odisha, Maharashtra, etc., is very conspicuous. Instead of idol of any god or goddess principal object to reverse of the Assamese Vaishnavas are scriptures. There are

bountiful Assamese Vaishnavite scriptures; however, the Vaishnavas of Assam have the rigid rule only to place five scriptures, viz., *Kirtana*, *Dashama*, *Gunamala*, *Namghosa* and *Bhakti Ratnavali* in the tiered pedestal (*thapana*, *asana*, *Guru asana*) of their worshipping houses. The first three scriptures are written by Sankaradeva, while *Namghosa* and *Bhakti Ratnavali* are the creations of Madhavadeva, the principal apostle of the founder of Assam's Vaishnavism.

To propagate the faith Sankaradeva adopted various means, among which mention may be made about two religious institutions: the *namghar*, i.e., the village prayer house, and the *satra*, broadly the Vaishnavite monastery, which proved to be very effective. Assamese Vaishnavism is institutionalized in *namghar* at the village context. At present there are 650 *satras* in Assam (Cantlie 1984, 152).

There is no systematic process in Assam's Vaishnavism to convert the people from other religions. Adoption of Vaishnavism is a natural process and many people from various tribal groups like the Bodo, Rabha, Mishing, Nocte, Deori, etc., have adopted Vaishnavism abandoning their pristine religion, though traces of traditional religions in their Vaishnavism are conspicuous. In Assam most of the villages are heterogeneous and people from different castes and religion live in a village in peace and amity. The tribal groups of Assam live in close contact of the Assamese Hindus; almost all the tribe dominated villages are surrounded by the Assamese Hindu villages. Naturally good number of Assamese Hindu culture percolated to the cultures of different tribals groups. This process creates inclination towards Vaishnavism in the heart and mind of some tribal people and in course of time they had adopted Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism is a living tradition of Assam and although it had to face various obstacles time to time in course of its acceleration, Vaishnavism is surviving with splendour and glory. Conversion of the tribals to Christianity through systematic and calculative measures is an ongoing acute process in North East India. All the members of some tribes of this remote part of India had adopted Christianity abandoning their age old religions. In this crucial environment also some of the tribals have adopted Vaishnavism which proves that although the acceleration of Vaishnavism is not smooth and rapid, yet it is flowing gently in this distant part of India.

Here we intend to present the case of a tribal community of Assam to depict the process how they have accepted Vaishnavism discarding their pristine animism. The story is integral to the Deoris of Majar Chapari village. The village is situated in Lakhimpur district of Assam, at a distance of 60 km from the district headquarters North Lakhimpur, and 4 km from nearest town Narayanpur. This village is a homogenous one inhabited by the Deori tribe having 629 souls distributed through 118 households. North East India is a surprising example of diversity reflected in the matrix of social, cultural, economic, political and religious spheres, which are followed by myriads of distinct tribal

communities inhabiting in this far part of India. The Deoris are indispensable part of tribal universe of Assam, which have maintained their unique identity in different dimensions of life. They have also maintained traditional practices from remote past, which have made a definite imprint on the socio – cultural landscape of Assam. The Chutiya community of Assam has four distinct divisions and the Deori is one of them (Bordoloi et al. 1987, 22). According to Dalton (1872) ‘An isolated colony on the river Dikrong in Lakhimpur calling themselves Deori Chutiya, who had a peculiar language which they called Chutiya and they were styled Deoris’. Ethnically they are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman tribe of North East India. The Deoris are distributed in different parts of Assam concentrated over the riverine areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts. The overwhelming majority of the Deoris are rural inhabitants and living composing big villages. They are patrilineal and agriculture is their mainstay. The Deoris are animists and believe in a good number of benevolent and malevolent deities. They frequently arrange household and community rituals to appease the supernatural. Sacrificing animals and offering country liquor to different spirits and deities are indispensable features of Deori religion.

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It has been already stated that the animist Deoris are the only inhabitants of Majar Chapari Village. Once, a youth of that village fall in love of a damsel Ms. Sewali (fictitious name) of a nearby village. The boy was a healthy, handsome and enterprising, and he was successful to attract Ms. Sewali towards him. Ms. Sewali was a Hindu girl, belonged to Kalita caste, a high caste of Assam. In no society selection of mate is free of choice and each society has an intricate system of incest and a rigid set of traditional prescription and prohibition. Traditionally a Kalita girl is not allowed to marry a tribal boy. Ms. Sewali met the Deori boy outside the Deori habitat, where he is like any other presentable Assamese boy. The boy is of good nature, humble, amiable and cordial. Ms. Sewali thought that she could easily establish her family of procreation accepting the boy as her husband. However, Ms. Sewali knows that her parent and kith and kin will never allow her to marry a tribal youth because it is against the norm and custom of their society. Therefore, one day she went with her beloved without informing anyone and started her conjugal life in the boy’s parental house with the member of his family of orientation. Dream of a person generally differs from the reality. Although the boy was a good husband and his family members are also accommodative and had accepted Mrs. Sewali as the integral part of their household, yet Mrs. Sewali was uncomfortable in that alien environment. She was from a Vaishnavite family, and her father followed rigidly the norms of Vaishnavism. She was assigned in her father’s family to clean the household prayer house. Vaishnavite

rituals were observed in her father's house frequently. From her childhood Mrs. Sewali was acquainted with the appeasing of God through prayer only. Sacrificing animals to propitiate God was a surprising fact for her which she could not tolerate.

One day Mrs. Sewali brought a small wooden plank (14'' x 9'') and had fixed it over the door frame of their bed room. In each morning and evening she lit there an earthen lamp; burnt incense sticks, and prays to God by singing Vaishnavite verses in low voice.

Her mother-in-law observed Mrs. Sewali's activities; she feared that the flames of the earthen lamp sometime may burn their house. The mother-in-law had discussed the matter with her husband and finally advised her son to construct a prayer house in the eastern corner of their courtyard. Mrs. Sewali was happy for this decision and with surprise she observed that within a few days a tiny prayer house was the formal institution in the animist Deori society of Majar Chapari Village.

Mrs. Sewali placed a small wooden pedestal inside the prayer house, where she installed a *Namghosa*, one of the principal scriptures of the Assamese Vaishnavism. The scripture was bought by her husband from the market of nearby town Narayanpur. Mrs. Sewali meticulously covered the scripture with a beautifully designed hand woven Assamese towel (*gamocha*). Every morning after taking bath Mrs. Sewali used to clean and wipe the floor of the prayer house with clay and cow dung mixed up with required amount of water. After that she lit an earthen lamp in front of the pedestal and burnt incense sticks and incense powder there. Both in dawn and dusk she used to pray there singing different Vaishnavite verses.

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Mrs. Sewali had a sweet voice, and therefore, her song could attract anyone easily. The scent emitted by incense sticks and incense powder burnt in the prayer house had created a holy environment in her household as well as in the neighbourhood. Such an environment in that tribal village was a rare exception and heart and mind of anyone came to Mrs. Sewali's house during morning and evening time was saturated with the flavour of Vaishnavism.

In Vaishnavism of Assam Janmastami (birthday of Lord Krishna), Holi (festival of colours), Diwali (festival of light), birth and death anniversaries of the Vaishnava Gurus, etc are observed both in household and community levels. On such occasions Mrs. Sewali had offered sacred food like soaked gram and green gram, coconut, guava, papaya, cucumber, sugarcane, jack fruit, pummelo, pine apple, etc., in the name of Lord Krishna and these were distributed among the family members and guests. Sometimes she also offered *paka-mithoi*, an eatable sweet ball, prepared from a mixture of rice flour, sugar,

black pepper, etc., which was relished by the family members including the children of the neighbourhood and the guests.

The Deoris are basically bilingual and they speak Deori language among themselves; outside that environment they use Assamese language for communication. Deori children of the Majar Chapari village principally read in the Assamese medium schools where they have to do prayer before beginning of their study. In such school prayers many of them have to sing Vaishnavite verses. When Mrs. Sewali sings in their prayer house, children present nearby also sang together in her tune.

Gradually the members of her husband's family had inclined towards Vaishnavism and in the year 1970 they had formally accepted Vaishnavism abandoning the age old forefather's religion. Her in-laws family was respected by the fellow villagers and adoption of Vaishnavism by that family had inspired many others for adhering the new religion. Among the total 118 families of Majar Chapari village, at present there are 32 (27.12%) families which had adopted Vaishnavism.

(vii)

'Festivals are important tools that bring people together, although they may reside at different places. They play an important role to add structure to our social lives and connect us with our families and other near ones. A festival develops good relationship among people and keeps them united. It could also bring peace and reduce unpredictable violence in the world. Again, festivals are a way to celebrate over glorious heritage, culture and traditions. They are meant to pass the legends, knowledge and traditions onto the next generation' (Medhi et al. 2014, 14-15).

Rituals and festivals are integrally related to each religion. Vaishnavism of Assam also knitted with both household and community rituals. Village prayer house is the main medium through which Vaishnavism of Assam flows from the past to the present day. Due to dearth of the *namghar* the Vaishnavas of Majar Chapari village has to face acute difficulties to observe the community rituals. In the year 1973 they have constructed a *namghar* in the southern side of the village. It is a spacious concrete house consisting of a big rectangular wall attached to three small rooms in a row in the eastern side. The middle room is use as *manikut*, literally store of jewels, and jewels mean the Vaishnavite scriptures. *Manikut* is the nucleus of a *namghar* where one to five prescribed scriptures are placed in a three/ five / seven tiered decorative wooden pedestal. However in the *manikut* of Majar Chapari *namghar*, instead of wood, that pedestal is a concrete structure. Over that structure, the Vaishnavas of the village have installed *kirtana* and *namghosa*, two pivoted scriptures of Vaishnavism of Assam. The room attached to the right side of *manikut* is used as office room to keep records of the *namghar* and to store valuable utensils of brass and

bell and the room attached to the left side is used as store room to keep things like bamboo basket, bucket, etc. There are two verandas in both the longer sides of the hall of the *namghar*. In the entrance of the *namghar* compound there is a small wall less small shed known as *karapat*.

There is a committee composed of five male persons to look after the activities and functioning of the village prayer house. A keeper (*namgharia*) is appointed by the committee who cleans the *namghar*, lit earthen lamps in *manikut* and also beats the kettle drum (*daba*) in each morning and evening. As soon as anyone heard the sound of the kettle drum, he or she stops immediately walking, talking or operation of any work and utters the name of Almighty for a while closing both the eyes. Anyone passing by the side of the *namghar* also stops for a while in front of its entrance and salute it. The *namgharia* is paid Rs. 800 per month as honorarium for his work. All the *namghar* of Assam is affiliated to a particular *satra*, however, the *namghar* of Majar Chapari village is not attached to any *satra* till date.

In all the village prayer houses of Assam some rituals and festivals are observed and the *namghar* of Majar Chapari village is also no exception. The Bar Sabah (literally the great assembly) festival is observed annually in this *namghar* with joy, devotion and enthusiasm for three days. Villagers offer sacred food, etc., in these days which is known as *sarai dia*. Continuous recitations of the Vaishnavite verses are performed in these days and males and females perform *nama – kirtana* in separate congregation during Bar Sabah festival. Performance of *Ankia Bhaona*, i.e., one act Vaishnavite drama, at least during the Bar Sabah festival is customary in *namghars* of Assam. The Vaishnavite Deoris of Majar Chapari village also perform *Ankia Bhaona* during Bar Sabah which is enjoyed by not only villagers, but also by the kins, friends and well wishers of the nearby village.

Bihu is the prime festival of Assam indispensably related to their mainstay of the state, i.e., agriculture. The Assamese people observe three Bihus – Bohag Bihu or Rangali Bihu, Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu, and Kati Bihu or Kangali Bihu in the months of Bohag (April – May), Magh (January - February) and Kati (October - November), respectively, in the households and also in the *namghars* and other sacred complexes by observing the folk rites and community prayers. The Deoris traditionally observe all three Bihus, and the Vaishnavite Deoris of Majar Chapari village observe it both in households and in the *namghar* following Vaishnavite customs.

(viii)

It has been already stated that in Vaishnavism of Assam devotion is expressed principally through *nama-kirtana* instead of observing complicated Brahminical rites and rituals. Sankaradeva initiated *sarana*, (literally ‘giving shelter’) and accepted disciples from Garo,

Naga, and other tribes, scheduled castes, and also from the Muslims. The neo-Vaishnavite movement started in North East India by Sankaradeva against the background of diverse ethnic groups having different religious faith came like a great unifying force. Vaishnavism is one of the factors for which caste system in this part of the country acquired remarkable flaccidity. Assam is quite different from other states of India in terms of social situation. So far as the aspects of atrocities on scheduled castes and untouchables are concerned, the position of Assam is undoubtedly better than that of other states of India. Absence of local untouchables made Assam's socio-cultural situation praiseworthy. Advent of Sankaradeva is one of the pivotal factors which greatly influenced the people of Assam against the maintenance of social distance among the different caste and creed. Although the Deoris of Majar Chapari village is now divided into two distinct religious groups on the basis of animism and Vaishnavism, yet both of the groups are living cordially in the same geographical environment maintaining close contact in peace, pleasure and amity.

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