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**Religious Belief and Practices of The
Sakta and The NEO-Vaisnavite Kaibarta
of Kukurmara Area of South Kamrup :**
a Study

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INTRODUCTION;

Sakti cult is a deep rooted religious and historical phenomenon which evolved throughout the ages in the world. Saktism is the cult of worshipping a female goddess as the supreme deity. In India this deity is variously known as *Devī, Durga, Kali, Kālīka, Uma, Kamakhya, Tara, Condi, Camunda, Bhadrakālī, Sakambhā* etc. Various names indicate different forms or manifestations of the same goddess (Barua:317). Saktism had been prevailing widely in Assam since ancient period. It was a dominant cult of Assam both in ancient and medieval period up to the advent of neo-vaishnavism and even today it occupies a strong place. The two principal works composed in Assam, *Kalika Purana* and *Pogoriana* deal mainly with the Sakta cult. The radiating centre of Saktism have been the shrines dedicated to *Kamakhya* and *Dikharanagarī* situated in Guwahati and Sadiā respectively (Sarma:6). Renowned scholar E.K. Barua observed in this regard "Throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, however soon to be Saktism. Kamakhya is the most holy and famous shrine of the sect, and with its worship was associated the various rites, mantras, *mantras* and sacrifices (Barua:170). Vaisnavism is also another religious cult that has been prevailing since the Rigvedic Age. The

origins of Vaisnavism are lost in obscurity but it is true that the Vaisnavism is a gradual development of the Aryan Vedic cult (Ashery:261). It earned much popularity as a result of *Bhakti* movement which was originated in Tamil region in around 9th century A.D. The movement travelled through Karnataka and Maharashtra and eventually reached northern India in around 15th century A.D. In Assam it spread in the form of neo-vaishnavite movement led by Srinava Sankaradeva (1489-1568 A.D). Within two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established neo-vaishnavism as the supreme religious order of the Brahmaputra valley. Later it became the part and parcel of Assamese social life (opcit, Sarma :1)

AREA OF STUDY:

Area of study is the two villages namely Jai Ananta and Kulmura of Kukurmara area situated in the southern part of the district Kamrup, Assam which is popularly known as South Kamrup. It is bounded by the mighty river Brahmaputra in the south. The area lying both sides of N.H.37 at a distance of 41 kms. to the west of Guwahati (Jalukbari) is the location of this study.

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY:

People of the area under study are divided mainly into two sections on the basis of their religious belief and practices – *sakta* and *vaishnu*. Through this paper it is attempted to highlight on the religious beliefs and practices of these two definite religious cults among the Kaibarta.

METHODOLOGY:

For the preparation of the paper mainly two methods were adopted i.e. Observative and Interview method. To acquire primary data researcher observed different religious programmes, customs prevalent in some shrines and *namghar* of the area and interviewed

the active bearers of the faiths. Similarly few historical works, unpublished theses, souvenirs, pamphlets were also taken as the secondary source.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF SAKTA KAIBARTA

Kaibarta is a tradition bound community. In practicing different faiths sakta Kaibarta generally maintained a clear distance from that of the upper Hindu caste. However it is all the same of their religious beliefs with that of the upper Hindu caste with some exception.

There is a good number of gods and goddesses in Vedic cults and vaishnavism. The divinities that the sakta Kaibarta commonly worship may be divided in to three categories. In first category pan-Indian Gods and goddesses like Rama, Krishna, Siva, Durga, Saraswati, Kali, Lakshmi, Menava, Yawakarma, etc. are remarkable. Of these some gods and goddesses are worshipped occasionally during emergent and critical situation.

In the second category there are some deities which are believed to have significant supernatural position among the rural folk of south Kamrup and hence are naturally worshipped by the Sakta Kaibarta of Kakumara. These deities have their permanent seats at a number of famous shrines located at Gosabat, Hajo and Chhaygon. Some of the important shrines of Guwahati are Kamakhya, Umananda, Assakanta, and Baithishaseni and those of Hajo and Srisri (Hayagriva Madhava and Kedar (Mahasta:22). Another Shrine called Sri Sri Chandika is located at Chhaygon (Champak Nagar) has great religious significance in the religious life of Kaibarta. It is important to be noted that immersion of earthen Durga idol at the end of Durga puja has been performed solely by the Sakta Kaibarta of Kakumara village in the river Kalahi flowing near Kakumara. Apart from these there are some strictly local

deities. Of these mention may be made of *pitamata barshogosain, lankeswar, nijeswari* and *bagheswari*.

In third category there is a class of supernatural beings. Some of which exert great influence upon the life of Kaibarta. Under this category may be included some big block of stones in surrounding hills of South Kamrup besides the spiritual beings. There are some banyan trees which are widely worshipped by the Kaibarta. All these have great magic-religious significance in the religious life of the Kaibarta (ibid. 52).

Kaibarta occasionally visit shrines like *pitamata lankeswar, bagheswari, nijeswari* and *chandika*. Kaibarta of these two places regards the deities of these shrines as their guardian spirit. Of these Chandika indisputably occupies a place of remarkable honour among these Kaibarta. Chandika is believed to be a local representation of all India spread goddess *Durga*. Kaibarta devotees like the other section of the society of the area through the famous shrine of saktin throughout the year especially during the Assamese month of *choi* and *bahag*. They take part in the sacrifice (*boil*) function which is performed in the day of *antim puja*. They generally offer pigeon and duck as the items of sacrifice to mother Chandika. It is also learnt from the study that Kaibarta are very prone to take vows to offer sacrifice of the goat or pigeon to goddess Chandika in case their respective desires and expectations are fulfilled.

Worship of snake goddess *Mamasa* or *Bisahari* or *Palma* is also widely prevalent among these Kaibarta. Manasa Mandir at Garal (now under the district of Kamrup metropolitan) is its important centre of worship. The propitiation of the snake deity is held annually.

The following are few important rituals performed by the Sakta Kaibarta of these two villages as stated by its active bearers.

RITUAL ON SIVA OR SIVA PUJA:

Lord Siva- Mahadeva is believed and worshipped as a household god to avert untoward events in the family and for general welfare. To perform the ritual in connection with the worship of siva, a Kaibarta priest is invited who offers prayer at altar of *Siva*. *Struti* or devotional verses on Siva from *Siva-Paran* are recited by the priest and the devotees. At the end *Prasada* or offering of eatable is distributed among the devotees. Sivaratri is considered as the most auspicious night for worshipping siva by the Kaibartas. On this night they offer prayer in their respective village shrines like *Barhagossala Thun* and other newly established *siva* temples. People who observe sivaratri spend the night awake. The special offering to siva is *ghanta* (intoxicating) and delicious drink prepared by mixing hemp (*ganja*). *Ganja* is believed to be favourite to siva and His devotees irrespective of sex and even age.

RITUAL IN KRISNA OR SATYANAKARANA PUJA:

Kaibartas believe lord Krishna as the greatest god of the Hindu pantheon. *Satyankarana puja* is the proper ritual to propitiate the god. They perform this ritual in Krishna when family feels unsafe. This ritual is conducted by a Kaibarta priest. At the end *bhog* or offering are distributed among the devotees. This ritual is observed annually in certain Kaibarta families.

RITUAL ON LAKSHMI OR LAKSHMI PUJA:

This ritual is arranged by female folk to offer prayer Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Here verses from *Lakshmi charit* are recited by the devotees.

GEETA PATH:

As the term suggests it is the recitation of *Geeta* in congregation of devotees assembled in ritual function. Normally experts called *pathak* are engaged to recite the scripture. Recitation

of religious scripture particularly the *Geeta* in Assamese is widely accepted as means of earning religious merit or *Punya*.

BHELDI:

Bheldi (communal floating of a raft) is a popular ritual which is widely practised by the Kaibarta. The presiding deity of this ritual is *Vima*. They worship this deity seeking His blessings at the time of their distress. To mark this ritual a banana raft is decorated by the villagers. In this raft pigeon, eggs, fruits like banana, coconut have been offered to the deity. After offering prayer the raft is floated along with the offering articles in the river Kalahi. Kaibartas of Kulumura observe this ritual annually in the Assamese month of *Bhog* or *Jeth* (April-May).

BHAKT SEWA:

Bhakta Sewa is another religious observance that has been prevailing in Assam since medieval times. It is a very popular function amongst the Vaishnava householders, but sparingly held in satras. Community feast is arranged as a part of the observance of this ritual. Pork and fish are the main food item of this observance. Some people try to establish its link with neo-Vaishnavism. However, it is not so. This practice was widely popular among the Kaibarta village of No. Amola and Kukurman. Here a *Bhakat* or a group of *Bhakat* were honoured with devotion by the villages. *Bhakat Sewa* was performed through both *Bhagavata* and *Sarne* system.

BELIEF AND PRACTICES OF THE VAISNAVITE KAIBARTA:

Kaibarta underwent some remarkable changes in their religious beliefs and practices after their initiation into neo - Vaishnavism. Kaibarta have not initiated into neo - Vaishnavism under the influence of Satra institutions. Instead, they became neo - Vaishnavite under

some revival organisations like *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* and *Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj, Assam*. Kaibarta of Kukarmara under the banner of *Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj, Assam* has been performing their daily religious activities as shown by their *Saranacharya* Haram Das.

Neo-Vaisnavite Kaibarta are staunch followers of the religious belief as shown by Srimanta Sankaradeva. Thus their belief is based on the *advaitavada* i.e. monotheism. According to its doctrine Vishnu or Krishna is the absolute reality, who is one without the second. Here *Krishna* is regarded as the absolute reality or *Param Brahma* who is *nirakara* (formless), *niranjana* (unattached, pure) and *nirguna* (attributeless) [epit. Sarma :19]. As emphasised by Sankaradeva, the Kaibarta too believe that *Krishna* is the repository of all auspicious qualities like omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence.

As sincere preacher of neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva, the Kaibarta believe in the supreme surrender to one God. I.e. Vishnu - Krishna. Officially neo-Vaisnavism propagated by Sankaradeva is known as *eka sarana nama dharma* (Neeg : 156; Dec 2008). *Sarana* is a Sanskrit word which means shelter and *eka* means only one. Name here stands for the names and attributes of Lord Krishna. As staunch monotheist, these Kaibarta renounce the worship of all other Gods and Goddesses except Krishna. According to them if *krishna* is worshipped, all other Gods are worshipped. They do not have belief in the idol worship. Similarly they rigidly oppose to all blood sacrifices in the name of religion. In essence they consider *bhakti* as the vital theme of their religious belief.

DAILY PRAYER SERVICE OF THE NEO-VAISNAVITE KAIBARTA:
(NITYA PRASANGA)

Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj, Assam has introduced the daily prayer service (*Nitya prasanga*) to be followed by the devotees in

their daily life as well as in particular occasional functions. These are widely followed in the community *namghars* as well as in household *namghars* of the Kaibarta. The singing of hymns and songs, the chanting of prayers to the accompaniment of musical instruments and the reciting and explanation of the *Bhagavata*, constitute the chief features of the services. The whole programme is called *sama prasanga* i.e. prayers and the functions connected with prayers.

The modes of *prasanga* performed by *Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj* have close resemblance with the *prasanga* performed by Barpeta Satra. However, Kaibarta of these two villages perform *prasanga* twice in a day except the Assamese month of *Bhadra* and other occasional days. These are morning service (*pratah prasanga*) which is performed in every morning. Other is known *sandhya prasanga* and it is performed in the evening.

Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj always regard the Assamese *Bhadra* month as auspicious, because the devotional occasions like *Krishna Janmashtomi*, *Tithi* i.e. death anniversaries of both *arjuna* and *Madhavadeva* fall in this month. Hence the Kaibarta perform *four prasanga* daily throughout this month. The morning service is known as *pratah prasanga*. It starts daily at 4 a.m. and endures about two hours. The evening service is known as *sandhya prasanga*. It starts at 6 p.m. and lasts about two hours. However, this time schedule may vary slightly in different *namghars*. The detailed programme of service including *Bhadra* month and other occasional day observed in these two villages have been discussed in *Nitya-Prasangar Arhi* (6th edition prepared, published and preserved by the *Eka Sarana Bhagavati Samaj, Assam*, 2010), a pamphlet containing different modes of observance of prayer service.

MORNING SERVICE (PRATAH PRASANGA):

Usual time of the beginning of morning service is 5a.m. The same religious items are prescribed to perform both in the daily service and in the *Bhadra* month. Morning service starts with the ringing of a *bhatna*, a devotional song ... *pratah somye ... jaganu jantni ... mukha sambhite abhaya jagawancho*. Having offered prayer in the praise of *guru* called *guru seva* a group of *bhaktas* (devotees) of high religious merit numbering around twenty-five perform *nam-jap* i.e. meditation in the first half an hour. It was followed by the chanting of the names of *god anu...* ... *krishna sankara guru hari rama nama*. After that morning service starts.

- i) The first item of this service consists of singing two *largitas* in *ahina, kisu, tulavani* or *syamaraga*. The first one is called *jaganu - gita* because it depicts the scene of rousing *Krishna* from his sleep and second one is called *chalana-gita* as it describes *Krishna's* preparations for *Prindavana* with cows.
- ii) The second item consists in chanting another *bhatna* which describes how *Yasode* used to send *Krishna* every day to tend cows at *Prindakana* with necessary supply of food, milk and clothes.
- iii) The third item consists in chanting *Nama - chanda* (prayer consisting solely of names of *Hrisna* and *sarona, chanda* (prayers expressing self - surrender and supplication). The unit is brought to close by reciting one or two chapters of *Kirtana - Ghoze*.
- iv) The fourth item of the morning service consists in reading or reciting a few Chapters from the *Bhagavata*. The service brings to an end by chanting different names of *Krishna* and recitation one verse from scripture. This chanting is known *spadisa patia*.

MID DAY SERVICE (MADDYAHNA PRASANGA):

- i) The first item of the mid day service consists of a *largita* in any one of ragas of *syama, akira, kedara, Kalyan, laltua, srividhura* etc. The *largita* of this service should be *chidara-gita*. It describes *Krishna's* activities with the cows in *Prindavana*.
- ii) In the second item of this service name of *Krishna* is recited. After that some verses from the *Bhagavata* is recited. At the end of it verses from *Namoghosa* are to be recited.
- iii) In the third item any one of the different chapters of *Kirtana* is to be recited. It brings to an end by chanting the different names of *Krishna*. Finally the service terminates with prayer of forgiveness from *Namoghosa*.

AFTERNOON SERVICE (DHYAIR PRASANGA):

This service should start at 2p.m. and same should be completed within 5pm.

- (i) This service starts with the concerned *largita* with the recitation ... *krishna sankara guru hari rama nama*. The next item consists in reciting a few chapters from any of the following scriptures - *Namoghosa, Bhakti - Ratnavali, Bhakti - Ratnachara, and Bhakti - Pradipa*. In this session of service the women devotee recites *Kirtan - Ghoze*. They perform *dhanar* a congregational prayer and recitation from different chapters of religious scriptures of neo-Vaisnavism to the accompaniment of playing on *magura* and *tal*.

- ii) & iii) The second and third item of this session service are identical with the 3rd and 4th items of the morning service.

EVENING SERVICE (SAMUDHYA PRASANGA):

- i) Evening service starts with *Bandi Prajvalan* (lighting the earthen lamp) before the *guru - usuna*. After that *guru bhaktina* is recited.

Joy guni sankara sarva gunakara
 jakeri nahike vpana
 Tibhari charana renu suta kouti
 baraka karoko pranama

ii) As the second item, some parts from *Lilamala* which depicts the early life of *Krishna* at *Gokula* and *Vindavana* are chanted.

iii) The third item is called *khola prasanga*. It consists of two *bhajans* sung to the instrumental playing on *bholi* (a leather *vainavite* musical instrument) and *tal*. The two *bhajans* sung on this hour narrating the glory and greatness of *Krishna*.

iv) The fourth item mainly consists in chanting *nama* – *chanda* and *sarana* – *chanda* as described in the third item of the morning service.

The last item begins with the recitation of verses from *Daxana Skandh* of *Bhagavata* composed by *Sanatkeva*. Devotional service (*prasanga*) are finally brought to an end by invoking glory to *nama*, *deva guru* and *bhaktata (chari bhata)* and seeking grace for the good of the world. At length prayer of forgiveness is offered for any sin that may be consciously or unconsciously committed in course of the day. The following verse from *Nangolani* is recited in this connection:

aparadha bhavanto taju name narayana
 jati name pavilo sarana
 aparadha kshama kari tvari dayavilo hari
 mokoraktika korio karant

The same has been rendered into English by *Dr. Maheswar Neog* in following terms:

"Knowing that thy name is destructive of sins, O *Narayana*, I take refuge in thy name. In death there is no other way (of escape than the reception of name), Mayest thou, O gracious *Hari* - keep me at thy feet, having excused all my sins (Neog 35:1998).

PAL-NAMA, THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVOTIONAL FUNCTION:

Apart from the above there are few other observances. Of these special mention may be made of *Pal-nama*. As the term *pal* suggests, it is a congregational prayer lasting for a few days and continues even for a month without any break or interval (Sarma: 189). *Eka sarana Bhagavati Sonaj* considers *pal-nama* as the most significant one. *Iaran Das* mentions in this context that even the a prayer taking *bhajant*, *Shajan* and *prasanga* altogether cannot be equivalent to the observance of *pal-nama* (Deka, et-9). Currently *vainavite* *Kaibartas* have been performing a kind of *pal-nama* of its highest order known as *pranata kshari pal-nama* annually.

CONCLUSION:

Saktism is the dominant belief of the *Kaibarta* of *Kukurmara*. Their initiation in to neo-*vainavism* is not an old development. There began a process of initiation into neo *vainavism* in the closing years of the sixth decade of the 20th century. *Iaran Das* a *vainavite* scholar acted as a pioneer to bring the *Kaibarta* into the fold of neo-*vainavism*. It is true that this faith is instrumental for the eradication of superstition and malpractices like witchcraft, child marriage and evil practices like intoxication and gambling. At the same time it is also observed that they especially the *sakta Kaibartas* are conscious about the preservation of the vital elements of their own folklore. Neo-*vainavite* *Kaibarta* generally do not participate in the religious

programmes of the sakti Kaitarta as their belief does not allow for that. But more or less sakti kaitarta takes part in all the religious programmes organized by the neo-vaisnavite Kaitarta. In spite of all these differences both the sections come forward together for the common cause of the society.

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