CHAPTER VI

RELIGION
The district of Bastar, known as 'area of isolation' in archaeological context, lacks in the literary and, to some extent, inscriptive evidences pertaining to the history of religion. The epigraphs presenting the sketchy picture of religion, too, are limited to the Nala and the Naga-period. Other sources such as coins and art-relics, however, enable us to know the forms of religion that existed in early mediaeval and mediaeval-Bastar.

It seems that the vast country of Bastar along with its adjoining regions remained untouched from the wave of the early Aryan civilization. The country, inhabited by the Sabaras and other tribal people, witnessed the spread of Aryan culture during the epic-period. Agastya and Rama should be held responsible for the spread of Aryan culture in this region. The Non-Aryan element predominated till the advent of the Nalas in Bastar.

The form or forms of religion during the early historical period remains unknown in want of archaeological evidences. A few megalithic monuments, of course, present a faint picture of the early religion.

The megalithic monuments found indicate that the iron-using people of the early historic Bastar had their belief in other world and super natural spirit. The grave-furniture i.e. earthen pots, implements and bones of the animals was being
put under the belief that the departed soul would need food, drinks and other things on the heaven-bound journey. The details of their worship are not known. This tradition still exists in Bastar in the form of Maria pillar and Danyakal. 1

It appears that though the worship of nature and Aryan deities was initially introduced during the epic period, the actual spread of Aryan culture took place during the time of the early Nalas. The evidence of Visnu-worship, though slender, seems to be the earliest. The Vaisnavism seems to have spread long before the advent of the Nala rule in Bastar. There is, at least, one instance (the Visnu-image at village Bastar) which indicates that worship of Visnu was prevalent in this region as early as 3rd century A.D. The evidence is noteworthy.

Religion under the Nalas:

The Bastar region witnessed all round development in the field of religion during the Nala-reign. Nalas were the follower of Hindu pantheon. The stable government and a well set currency system was introduced by them for the first time in Bastar. That the Nala rulers believed in divine origin of the state is indicated by their epigraphs which state that they obtained royal fortune through the grace of god Siva and Karttikeya (Mahasena) Maha Siva Mahasenatisrsta Rajya Vibhava2. The word 'Bhattaraka', which has been used as an

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1 Jha, V.D. (i) Archaeological Remains in Bastar, Prachya Pratibha Vol. V, No. 1, p. 68
(ii) 'Megalicthic Monuments in Bastar', paper presented in the conference of M.P. Itihasa Parishada, held at Sitamar in May 1979
epithet of the crown-prince, in their epigraph, is also indicative of divine origin of the king. 3

In the Nala-records homage has been offered to Visnu besides Siva and Karttikeya. The epigraphs prove that Bhavadattavarman and Arthapati had their devotion to Siva and Karttikeya. High extollation has been offered to Visnu in Podagodh, inscription of Skandavarman. A shrine of Visnu was also erected at Puskari by him — "Padamulam Kratam Visnu (Raja Sri) Skand va] mmarna." 4 This shows that Vamana-avatara of Visnu was popular during that period.

Their coins and names viz., Varaharaja and Skandavarman also prove their devotion towards Saiva and Vaisnava pantheons. The figure of humped bull, the vehicle of Siva, occurs on the coins of Varaharaja, Bhavadatta and Arthapati. 5

Primarily, the Nalas were the followers of Vedic system. The sanctity of the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna at Prayag was known to them. Bhavadattavarman made one of his grants from this holy place. 6 The Brāhmans enjoyed all the privileges during their regime and were being protected by them. They were

2 E.I., XIX, pp. 100 ff.; Ibid., XXVIII, pp. 12 ff.
3 Ibid.
4 E.I., XXI, pp. 153 ff.
6 E.I., XIX, pp. 102 ff.
rewarded with the land-grants by the reigning king. 7

Being the follower of Vedic religion, the Nala sovereigns took it as their primary duty to protect the cow, the Brahmana and the people - "Svasti GoBrahamaa Prajäbhühah Siddhirastu." 8

Land and money was being granted for maintenance of temples and to feed the Brahmana, Saints and down troddens. The 'SATRA' attached to the shrine of Visnu during the reign of Skandavarmana at Puskari served free meals to all the needy persons. 9

It should be noted that the archaeology adds very little to this scanty epigraphical evidence of Vaisnavism in early mediaeval Bastar. Excluding the Visnu icon at village Bastar, no archaeological evidence has yet come forth to throw light on the prevalence of Vaisnavism in Bastar prior to the Naga-period.

The history of Bastar after the rule of Nala dynasty remains practically unknown for about four centuries. There are absolutely no evidence to throw even the slightest light on the political and cultural history. It appears that the religion in that period missed the royal patronage owing to the political instability, caused by succession of invasions

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7 E.I., XXVIII, pp. 12 ff; Ibid., XXI, pp. 102 ff.
8 E.I., XIX, pp. 100 ff.
9 E.I., XXI, pp. 153 ff.
from all directions.

**Religion Under the Nāgavamsīs**:

With the advent of the Nāgavamsī-rule, in the first quarter of 11th century, Bastar region witnessed an era of political stability and prosperity. Nāgavamsī kings patronised Hindu pantheon. With the king at their head, the people in the kingdom of Chakrakuta (Bastar) were tolerant and liberal so far as religions policy is concerned.

Besides Śaiva and Vaisnava deities, Nāgavamsīs along with the Samavamsī kings of Kanker, worshipped various forms of Devī such as Vindhyavāsinī, Katyāyani and Māṇikya devī. Several temples of Hindu deities were erected by them. Though, their (kings of both the dynasties) leaning appears to be more towards Śaivism, Vaisnava deities were equally revered by them.

In spite of the absence of evidence for over 400 years, the Śiva and Viṣṇu-worship is found flourishing in the 11th century.

**Śaivism**:

The epigraphical and the archaeological sources as well enable us to know something about the Śaiva religion prevalent during the Nāga-reign. Happily, the archaeological evidences are overwhelming.
The first evidence of the erection of Siva temple comes from Barasura in the shape of Barsura inscription of Mahämandalesvara Chandraditya. The epigraph dated in Saka year 983 (A.D. 1060) records that a shrine of Siva named as Chandradityesvara was built by Chandraditya, the feudatory chief of the Nagavamsi king Jagdeksabhushana.

Two Siva-temples erected by Gangamahadevi and named as Virasomeśvara and Gangadhareshvara after the royal couple are mentioned in Barsura inscription of Gangā mahadevi.

The Kanker inscription of the time of Bhanudeva also records the erection of two Siva-temples by Vāsudeva the minister of Bhanudeva.

The land, money or lamp granted to god Siva has been referred to in the Kuruspāla inscriptions of Dharmā mahadevi, the Kuruspāla inscription of Somesvara deva of the Saka year 1019, and the Dantewārā inscription of the Saka year 984.

The Rajapur copper plates of Madhurantakadeva, the Kanker plates of Pamparajadeva, and the Narayapur inscription of Guntamahadevi also extol Siva.

11 E.I., III, pp. 164 ff; Ibid., IX, p. 162.
12 E.I., IX, pp. 129 ff.
13 E.I., X, pp. 31 ff; 35 ff.
14 Ibid., IX, p. 37-38.
15 DLICPB, p. 152.
16 E.I., IX, pp. 174 ff.
17 Ibid., IX, pp. 166 ff.
18 Ibid., IX, pp. 312 ff.
Several epithets of Siva such as Maheśvara, Lokesvarā, Kamesvāra, Bhairava, Chamārdityāsvarā etc. occurring in the records of the Nāgavamsīs and Somavamsīs indicate that his worship was very popular through the Bastar region.

Naga and Somavamsī rulers of Bastar and Kanker have been mentioned as Parama Maheśvara in their records. Their epigraphs invariably bear the figure of Sivalinga.

The temples and icons pertaining to the Saiva pantheon are met within a large number in the region under study. The two shrines Vīrasomesvāra and Gānagadharesvāra, erected by Gāngamahādevī still exist at Bārsur and are known as 32 pillared Śiva-temple. In fact, this temple, consisted of two sanctuaries, has a common Mandapa of 32 pillars. These twin temples may be identified with those erected by Gāngamahādevī.

The 12 pillared Śiva-temple and Ganesa-temple at Bārsur; 3 ruined temples at Bhairamgarh, and the temples at Gādia, Kesarpāla and Samalur were built during the Nāga reign. Remains of Śiva-temples, erected by Vaśudeva, can be seen at Kanker. A good number of icons of Siva, Bhairava, Uma-maheśvara, Lākuliśa, Gānesa and Kārtikeya have been noticed in Bastar during the course of studies. The lone sculpture of Lākuliśa at Jagdalpur indicates the prevalence of Pasupata sect in Bastar. Gānesa-worship was also very popular. The figure of Gānesa has been carved on the door-lintels and nitches of the temples. Huge cult icons of
Ganessa stand at Bārsura. Ganessa, treated as auspicious god in mediæval-Bastar was depicted on the door-lintel of every temple irrespective of religion. The images of Karttikeya, the war-god are very few in number. This shows that Karttikeya-worship was not that popular in this part of the country.

Vaisnavism:

As stated above the Nagavamsī and Somavamsī rulers of Bastar had no sectarian bias. The shrines and the land grants dedicated to Vaisnava deities have been referred to in their epigraphs viz. the Narayanapala inscription of Gundamahadevi and the Bihawa inscription of Karnaraja. The Rajapura copper plates of Madhurāntakadeva extols Rāma.

It is indicated by the epigraphs and art-relics that the Rāma, Vamana and Nrisimha avatars of Visnu were popular in mediæval-Bastar.

The Rajapur copper plates and the lone sculpture of Ṛṣa in Balājī-temple are indicative of Rāma-worship in this region. Though the earliest representation of Ṛṣa in sculptures occurs in the Gupta period at Deogarh, his worship as an incarnation of Visnu existed in the early centuries of the Christian era.

19 E.I., IX, pp. 123 ff.
20 Ibid., IX, pp. 174 ff.
21 V.S. Nīrī, p. 47.
Panels depicting Rāmāyana-scene have been noticed at Janjgir, Sivarinarayana, Kharoda and Rājim in Raipur and Bilaspur districts of Chhattisgarh in M.P. Bastar could have hardly remained unaffected from its neighbours. It may be surmised that Rāma-worship reached Bastar from the adjoining regions of Raipur and Bilaspur. The antiquity of the cult of Rāma in this part of the country cannot be fully ascertained.

The reference of the construction of a shrine dedicated to Kṛṣṇa has been made in Sīhawa inscription of Kānahāra of Kakoira. Excluding this, no archaeological evidence indicates the prevalence of Kṛṣṇa-worship in Bastar.

The Nārāyaṇa-temple at Nārāyaṇapāl is the only existing medieval-shrine of Viṣṇu in Bastar. The icons depicting Viṣṇu and his Vaṁana, Rāma and Nṛṣimha avatāras have been noticed at Karuspāla, Godma, Bhairangarh, Jagdalpur, Bastar and Tirathgarh.

Sun-worship:

Epigraphs and coins do not furnish the evidence of Sun-worship in Bastar. Sun-images noticed at Bārasura, Bhairangarh, Tirathgarh and in other places indicate the prevalence.

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22 E.I., IX, op. cit.
of Surya cult. The small number of Sun icons suggest that the
ruling dynasties refrained from patronising this sect in
mediaeval Bastar.

The icons found are sculptured according to the North
Indian principles, but the influence of South Indian feature
also appears in them. A syncretic icon at Bhairamgarh,
depicting Sun as central deity, represent the spirit of re-
conciliation and rapprochement prevalent between the divergent
sects in mediaeval Bastar. 23

The Sakti Cult:

The prevalence of Devi-worship in Bastar has come to be
known through epigraphical sources. It has been stated in
the Kurupala inscription of Someswaradeva, that the king
acquired the kingdom of Chakrakuta (Bastar) through the favour
of Goddess Vindhyavasini. 24 The other epigraph indicates that
Someswaradeva had his devotion to goddess Manikyadevi. 25
Extolation to Katyayani is offered in the Kanker plates of
Pamparajadeva. 26

Sculptures representing Mahishmardini, Chamunda, Dantura,
Laksmi, Parvati, Saraswati, Saptamatrikas and composite

23 Jha, V.D., "Unique syncretic Icon from Bastar", Prachya
24 E.I., X, pp. 25 ff.
25 Ibid., III, p. 316.
26 Ibid., IX, p. 166.
goddess have been noticed at Barsur, Bhairamgarh, Kuruspāla, Jagdalpur, Bastar, Gadia, Tirathgarh, Gudma and Dhanora. Devi was being worshipped in her various forms. Shrines dedicated to Devi are extant at village Bastar and Naolibhata.

It appears that the worship of Durga and her forms of Mahismardini (Kātyāyini) and Chamundā gained popularity in Bastar during the Naga reign. Somavamsis of Kanker worshipped them with an equal fervour.

It appears that the Śakta-cult reached Bastar from Orissa, particularly Jaipur. Jaipur (Virjaksetra) in Orissa, an old seat of Tantric worship, adjoins Bastar. Oriya-speaking persons, apparently migrated from Orissa, form a considerable part of population in Bastar. The predominating Ḥalbās of Bastar also claim to have come from Orissa with their leper-king at the close of 11th century A.D. 27 Their dialect—a mixture of Oriya, Chhattisgarhi and Marathi 28—also shows that the tradition prevalent among the Ḥalbās of Bastar bears some truth in it. Besides, the Čhalukyas, holding the reign of administration in Bastar from time to time, were also devout worshipper of Manikyadevi. Their influence might have added a lot in popularising Devi worship in this part of the country.

27 E.I., IX, p. 124, fn. 5; 194.
Mother-Goddess:

A reference of field deity has also been made in the Kanker inscription of the time of Bhanudeva. The deity referred to in the above epigraph indicates the worship of mother goddess, the goddess of fertility. The antiquity of mother goddess may be traced back to the Harappan period. Terracottas of mother-goddess have been found in large numbers at Harappan sites.

The archaeological evidence in Bastar, appearing in the form of an icon at Garh-Bodhara, also indicates the prevalence of this form of worship. The image depicts a headless female deity seated on her haunches with legs sprawled and projecting the Yoni prominently. The image, carved deliberately headless, has developed breasts, girdle, anklets, and incised decoration at the waist; one lotus-designed solid circle on each side near the neck. This icon belonging to 13th century A.D. is locally worshipped as 'Maaolidevi'. (Plate XVIII, Fig. c).

Such figures, of course not beheaded, can be seen carved on wooden Maria-pillars of later dates.

Naga-Worship:

Nagas were being worshipped in mediaeval Bastar in evident from the sculptures found. The antiquity of Naga-worship in India goes back to the Harappa culture. Seals and sealing bearing the Naga-figure have been unearthed in Harappan sites. The vedas also indicate the prevalence of Naga-worship. Here, it is to be noted that fergusson opines that—traces of serpent worship in the vedic and later-vedic literature are either interpolations or concessions to the superstition of the subject races. The Buddhist and the Jaina literature also refer to serpents.

No epigraphical and numismatic evidence has come forth to enable us to know the form of Naga-worship in Bastar. Nagvamsi kings of Bastar claim to have bourn in the race of the Naga (cobra).

Jainism:

Jainism flourished in Bastar region during the mediaeval period. Except a few sculptures of Jain deities, no evidence has been found. The sculptures representing Tirthankaras are noticed at Jagdalpur, Garh-Bodhara and at Retawanda.

30 Atharva Veda, VIII. 10, 29.
31 Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 115.
Land grants were made for the maintenance of shrines in medieval Bastar. In some cases money (gadyan) has also been given for the purpose. According to the Kuruppal inscription of Someśvaradeva a lamp was dedicated to Śiva—temple. The same epigraph indicates that the general public also played an important role and made contributions to enrich the religious ceremonies. Grants were also made to Brahmana and other persons to enable them in the performance of religious duties.

The Nagavamsī kings and their consorts made donations to the deities of both the Vaisnava and the Śaiva pantheons. They had liberal religious policy though they appear to be more inclined towards Śaivism. Gundamahadevi, the mother of Someśvaradeva extols god Lokesvara (Śiva) besides extolling Narayana. King Madhurāntakadeva worshipped Śiva and Rāma as well. Claiming to have acquired the kingdom by the grace of Vindhyavāsinī and Manikyadevi, Someśvaradeva adorned Śiva.

33 E.I., IX, pp. 174 ff.
34 E.I., IX, pp. 311 ff.
35 E.I., IX, pp. 179 Plate I, lines 4-5; Plate II line 22.
36 Ibid., X, pp. 25 ff.