Chapter III

Religious & Social Conditions

Śaivism was the dominant religion as evident from the images themselves and the copperplate charters of the Bhanja Kings. King Raṇabhanjadeva mentions in his Bamanghati inscription-“…Haracharanarādhana kshayita pāpah...”¹, that is, he was absolved of his sins by worshipping the feet of Hara, another name of Śiva. He is one of the eleven Rudras. The royal seal attached to the copper-plate charters of the Khiching Bhanjas bears Saivaite emblems of a bull, trident, symbols representing the sun and moon along with the legend reading the name of the issuer of the charter. The latter tradition however, associate these kings with the Sakta goddess Camunda who was apparently the tutelary deity of the family and was called Khijjingesvari. But their epigraphic records do not refer to this goddess as we find in the case of the Bhanjas of Khinjali-mandala who were devotees of their tutelary deity named Stambhesvari (Stambhesvari-labdha-vara-prasadah). Khijjingesvari, as she was known because of her enshrinement in the capital of Khijjinga or the present Khiching in the Mayurbhanj District, later on came to be called Kichakesvari, evidently a corrupt form of the name of the goddess. In course of time, mythological stories from the epics have grown round the deity and the archaeological site near Khiching known as Virtgarh. But at the same time, evidence is also forthcoming about the existence of a historical Virata family spread over the kingdom of Khijjinga-mandala.

Excavation at Chandiasal, Itamundia, Kukuragarh and Sankhurajagarh brought to light Buddhist sculptures and structures. A small scale excavation in a mound on the bank of Bhandan river, locally known as Viratgarh, exposed the remains of a fortified structure and the structure of a Buddhist monastery with six terracotta plaques (now in Khicing and Baripada museums) bearing the Buddhist creed in the character of 10th C.A.D with stupa in relief².


In the grants of the Bhanjas the word ‘Bhava’ occur ‘Bhava’ is the name of Siva as well as Surya, as included in the list of twelve Aityas. This shows that the Bhanjas were more attracted towards, the solar aspect of ‘Siva’, which is a Vedic concept. Rudra in the Vedic Mythology has been identified with mid-noon sun.

Several Surya images, however, clearly attest the fact that at Khiching sun-worship was popular. Along with Sun, ‘dik-palas’ and ‘grahas’ were worshiped. The image of Agni has been found from Benusagar, in the vicinity of Khiching. A navagraha wheel shows the strong impact of this cult at Khiching.

No official document of Bhanjas give any reference of Vishnu. But temple ruins of Vaishnava nature and some magnificent image of the god go beyond doubt to prove this cult was honoured by the people of Khiching and there was royal tolerance to this faith.

Since about 8th century A.D., the worship of Ganapati was prevalent in the territories of the Bhanjas. Some images of Ganapati have been found at Khiching also. In about 9th -10th century as the style of Ganapati image of Khiching suggest, the worship of the Ganessa was very popular at this place.

It can be said on the basis of the found images that the worship of all the five gods of ‘Panchopasana’ cult was popular in the region of Khiching.

Some semi cults were also prevalent in the region. One of them was Naga cult. It significant to note that prior to Bhanjas Naga worship was popular in the region and some branches of the Bhanjas were specially associated themselves with the Nagas. Probably Nagini was worshiped in the form of Manasa devi. Virata-bhujangas, who ruled before Bhanjas, accepted ‘Naga’ as their family deity. Original worship of Naga cult was situated at Patamundai hill, the sacred sit of Viratas and from them not only the Naga worship but the worship of Chamunda (Kichakesvari of Khiching) were adopted by the Bhanjas as token to the dynastic linkage of the Viratatas. At the south of Khiching there was a temple of Naga and Nagini.
The extant images of Naga and Naginis from Khiching, however from the part of Sarvite worship as they seem to be situated at the Savite temples of Khiching.

Besides these, religion of Hindu fold, Buddhism and Jainism have also received considerate patronage of Bhanja-rulers and their people.

It is significantly proved that Itamundia site is a rich Buddhist site from where a number of Marichi images have been recovered. We have already noticed the devotion of Rajabhanja to Avalokitesvara. A very significant image of seated Buddha in bhumisparsamudra (earth-touching pose) has also been found in Khiching. This was discovered in the course of excavation in a three chambered brick structure followed by a varandah. Probably this brick building was a Buddhist monastery surrounded by other Buddhist temples. The image may be dated 10th-11th century A.D. Other Buddhist images found, depicting Marichi Manjusri and Tara, also represent high quality art of the time and point to the fact that Khiching was a stronghold of Buddhism. As evident from images of Tantrik Buddhist gods and goddesses such as Arapachana Manjusri, Vajrasana Buddha, Vajra Tara, Buddhism at Khiching had Tantric traits of worship. Infact, the Vajrayana variant was widely prevalent in Orissa.

At a later stage of the art history of Orissa (11th – 13th century A.D.), Jainism also had some entry in the Khiching region. Some images of Tirthankaras, depicting Risabhanatha, Santinatha etc. have been discovered around Khandia deul. Such images without doubt show the impact of Jainism on the people of Khiching.