KINGS AND CULTS IN THE LAND OF KAMAKHYA UP TO 1947
(A Study on Religion, Power and State)

ABSTRACT

The dissertation under consideration entitled ‘Kings and Cults in the land of Kamakhya’ is a comprehensive study in which an attempt has been made to focus on the quest of the rulers for legitimation through religious institution, the evolution of religion and power in different phases in the district of Kamrupa before it was divided into three districts (Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta) in 1983. By the term ‘The land of Kamakhya’ we mean this part of ancient Assam. The study shows that since the early period the Cults, its temples and also the system of their management of Kamrupa have been inextricably linked with political development of the region.

Though the ‘Cults’ and its temples were primarily regarded as the places of worship for the devotees, but they had enjoyed considerable political, social and economic significance. Here it is necessary to clarify that by Cults we mean Hindu Cults only. The term ‘King’ is used in this work to mean a monarch who is fundamentally independent and self-governing on an autonomous economic unit, in the land of Kamakhya.

The indigenous people of earlier Assam belonging to Non-Aryan culture popularly known as Kiratas came in touch in a steady but gradual process of Indian religious systems at least from about the beginning of the Christian era, if not earlier. The state of Assam was possible only at the cost of tribal chiefs resulted the growth of a number of big temples, gradual and systematic settlements of Brahmins, extension of agriculture and propagation and maintenance of Varnasramadharma.
The introduction of the dissertation deals with the problem of the study, methodology, objectives, research question investigated as well as chapter distributions of the work. It has also focused on the quest of the rulers for legitimating through religious institutions. In earlier periods rulers derived religious legitimacy of their authority through the performance of grand royal sacrifices, the early middle ages witnessed a decisive shift towards royal patronage of local or regional cults. This development was deeply influenced by the various cults (Saiva, Sakti and Vaisnava) as the new genuine folk religion. Politically perhaps even more important, however, was the strong local and regional root of these cults. The spatial connotation of the cults, radiating from their sacred place, vested the newly emerging local and regional states with an additional dimension of territory. In particular interest in this regard are the changing modes of legitimating at different stages of state formation, ranging from princely patronage of tribal deities by emerging early kings to the construction of imperial temples by rulers of the great early medieval “imperial” regional kingdoms. During the late Middle Ages royal ritual policy shifted its emphasis to royal patronage of places of pilgrimage and their cults and sectarian leaders.

Temple and royal authority of Kamarupa: power and legitimacy, in which there is a discussion of Naraka of Mithila who seems to have been a political adventure but established himself in power in the non-Aryan dominated area of Kamarupa viz the land of Kamakhya. It is said that he introduced the Sakta worship of the non-Aryan Goddess Kamakhya, under whose banner the first empire of Kamarupa was built. This paved the way for entry of Hinduism and in this acclaimed territory the three main sects of Hinduism. Thus it is likely that Hinduisation had taken its root in the land of Kamakhya by slow infiltration sometimes between 2nd -5th century A.D. To win over the allegiance and support and also to facilitate the propagation of Hindu beliefs and
customs, Naraka extended royal patronage to this local cult of Kamakhya, which could easily be aligned with other forms of the mother Goddess. The ground became fertile for the rapid spread of Hindu ideas and Kamarupa became an extensive and prosperous kingdom under the rule of the Varman, the Salastambha and Pala lines of kings from 5th century to 12th century A.D. Since the days of Bhutivarman (6th century A.D.), lavish endowments of lands, men and other articles were made to the Brahmins, who were entrusted with the task of propagating the *Aryadharma*. Bhaskaravarman is said to have introduced and popularized the *Varnasramadharma* and donated lands to more than two hundred families of Brahmins. All these references prompt us to say that the kings of Varman line followed a systematic policy of creating *Agraharas* for the Brahmins who became the elites of their court. They undoubtedly played an important role in legitimizing and consolidating the power and prestige of the kings through the means of religious rites and rituals introduced in the worship of Hindu as well as many of the Hinduised local gods and goddesses. In this way the three main royal temple policy a) Royal patronage of important places of pilgrimage within their respective kingdom b) A systematic and large-scale settlement of Brahmins c) The construction of new imperial temples within the kingdom were followed by the kings through which the State-Temple relation was automatically highlighted. Detailed information is provided in chapter-I.

It was only after the Ahom occupation of Kamrupa viz the land of Kamakhya in 1682 that the temple building activities had again been taken up on a large scale with the re-construction of Umananda temple in 1694. The temple building activities started by Gadadharsimha in Kamrupa was continued by Rudrasimha, his son and successor. Rudrasimha understood well the great role of religion in consolidation and legitimation of political authority. It is for this reason he took his initiation of
Padmanabh Bhattacharya, a Tantrik Brahman from Majuli and at the same time stopped all atrocities upon the Vaisnavas. In the chapter ‘State and Religious Establishment of the land of Kamakhya’ , it appears that the Tai- Ahom rulers were never serious in respect of rites, rituals and procedure of worship; but very cautiously and carefully tried to utilize religions and religious sentiments in extending and legitimizing their political authority over the Brahmaputra valley. They often tried to use the different sects of Hinduism against each other. But eventually the very policy led the kingdom to its own destiny. During the Ahom administration the cults and its temples in Assam had grown up as government institution and were running smoothly without much trouble under the fair system of management. The details have been discussed in chapter-II.

The Burmese invasion of Assam eventually led to the downfall of the Ahom kingdom, which was annexed to British India following the Anglo- Burmese war (1824-26). During this period of turmoil most of the temple functionaries including priests fled to Bengal taking with them the valuables. With a view to collecting revenue from the temples, the Burmese Government appointed arbitrarily some new priests. With the establishment of the British rule, the original functionaries returned and claimed their right over the temples which led to dispute between the two groups of priests. As a result, the earlier system of management became outdated; a new chapter in the history of management system of the cults and its temples of Assam began in 1825 when the territory passed under the control of British East India Company. Although the old system of temple management was allowed to continue, the power and function of the Barphukan became irrelevant and the supervision and control of the Sevacaloa in respect of management of the temple seems to be greatly relaxed. On the other hand the European magistrates including the Commissioners of the province
evinced a general tendency to delegate their authorities to a Panchayat or Managing Committee. In almost all the cases, these Panchayats stood in favour of establishing the hereditary right of the ‘Panchaghar Bardeories’. Justice was made according to the laws based on age old customs and tradition. The details have been discussed in chapter-III.

Goddess Kamakhya is the most dominating name in the early history of Assam. It was under her banner that the first empire in early Assam was built. It was over her emergence and recognition as presiding deity of the state the Saivites and the Vaisnavites went into salient conflict and Naraka the first builder of the state lost his life. Later religious history also centers round her and other Goddesses recognized as her varied manifestations. The present location of Kamakhya temple was a part of Kamarupa kingdom and was dominated by the Kiratas (Non-Aryan tribes) who with the advent of the Arayans came under to a systematic process of Aryanisation since 2nd to 5th centuries A.D. In the same context the cults and its temples were the places of popular gathering as well as a means of strengthening of the associated authorities. All detail information is provided in chapter-IV.

The management of the Cults and its temples mainly depended upon the source of finance, administration and supervising machinery. Though the problems relating to the Dolai’s power, negligence of duty by the Priests and attendants, land revenue payable to the Government etc. are associated with the temples management but the amount of annuity so fixed is too small to meet the expenditure of the daily as well as regular worship of the temples. With the acquisition of the temple lands by the Government the Priests and attendants lost all interests in the temple and hence, in most cases, the temple became deserted. So, there is now none to look after them and hence the temple buildings too which are undoubtedly historical monuments are
facing ruins. The temple management in the land of Kamakhya during the period under our study is clearly discussed in chapter-V.

The conclusion of the dissertation is a capsule of the study. The dissertation also comprises Abstract, Preface, Acknowledgement paid to the various agencies and persons for providing necessary help and support, list of abbreviations appeared in the present work, contents, list of tables, list of maps and diagram by which an attempt has been made to bring to light the original materials used in the subject of the study. The bibliography of both published and unpublished works used as primary and secondary sources, a glossary and some charts utilized in its preparation appended at the end of the dissertation.

It is quite impossible to draw any inference based on a topic of historical importance. The division of the study into chapters, it may be mentioned that it is simply a matter of convention rather than of convenience; the whole study should be treated as an integrated analysis rather than of loose fragments. The thesis may be a humble attempt to fill up the gap to present an integrated analysis about the Kings and Cults in the land of Kamakhya up to 1947 (A Study on Religion, Power and the State) based on the source materials available so far.

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