
Religious Activities and the Nature of Engagement of the Priests in Sukreswar Temple

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ABSTRACT

The temples are the most important religious artifacts in Hinduism. It plays important role in the religious lives of the people and hence occupies important place in the society. The ancient temples in India received patronages from different dynasties for smooth functioning of the daily and other religious activities performed in the temples. In Assam also, the ancient temples were endowed with land, men and other properties by the kings during different periods. Among these, Sukreswar temple situated in Guwahati is one of the important temples. Here, different daily religious activities along with annual festivals are performed. Pilgrims from different places visit the temple and a good number of priests and other categories of workers are engaged here to perform the religious activities. . In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the religious activities performed in this temple and different aspects of the engagement of the priests in this temple. The present study is based on both primary and secondary data.

Key words: *temple, religious activities, priest, pilgrims, festival*

INTRODUCTION

The temples are the most important religious artifacts in Hinduism. The temples have great social significance and are the platforms where different religious and other socio-cultural activities are performed. In India, the temples play great roles in different spheres of society and the lives of people and are regarded as the most sacred place. In ancient times, the Kings of different dynasties offered patronages to the temples for the smooth functioning of the temples' activities. In Assam also the ancient temples receiving the royal patronages are not less. Guwahati city, which was famous as Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa in early days is dotted with a good number of ancient temples. Among these ancient temples, Sukreswar Devalaya is one of the important shrines where the Lord Shiva is worshipped. Daily worshipping and other annual religious festivals are observed here and pilgrims from different parts of the State and outside the state visit the temple. For performing the religious activities, Ahom kings endowed the temple with land, men and other properties. Now-a-days also the descendants of the priests assigned by the Ahom Kings are engaged in the priestly activities of the temple. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the religious activities performed in this temple and different aspects of the engagement of the priests in this temple.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present study are

- i. to discuss the religious activities performed in the temple,
- ii. to discuss the nature of engagement of the priests, and
- iii. to highlight different aspects of the engagement of the priests.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, both the primary and secondary data sources are used. Books, journals and different published and unpublished documents, etc. are the secondary sources for collecting different information while primary data are collected through questionnaire survey and interviews with the priests and other persons related with the temple. As per the information of the temple authority, there are 16 priests engaged in the temple and 15 priests among were interviewed. The data collected from the field as well as various secondary sources have been processed and analyzed by using appropriate quantitative techniques.

SUKRESWAR TEMPLE: MYTH AND HISTORY

Sukreswar temple is situated on a small hillock named Hastachal in Panbazar area of the city and its geographical coordinates are 26°11'17.27" North and 91°44'28.16" East. The presiding deity of this temple is Lord Shiva. There is a *Shivalinga* of about six feet of height in the main temple.

The belief related to Sukreswar says that the *Shivalinga* which is being worshipped here was established by sage Sukracharyya and he started worshipping Lord Shiva. It is believed that the *Shivalinga* of this temple is one of the *twelve jyotirlingas* of the world. The deity Shiva of this temple is worshipped here in the form of phallic symbol. It is also known as Dakshayini Bhimasankar (Bhattacharyya, 2009).

It is known that a *Shivalinga* was worshipped at this site at the time when Rudrasingha conducted a survey of holy shrines. King Sivasingha extended royal patronage to the temple by granting land and men. But King Pramattasingha built a brick temple on the ruins of an old temple (Adhiakary, 2001). There is a rock inscription of Rajeswarsingha in this temple.

It is found that the Sukreswara temple received grants of land and men from the Ahom Kings. A certified copy of Copper-plate Inscription bearing the date 8 *Kartik, Saka* 1680 (A.D. 1758), records that eleven *gots* of *paiks* from *brahman* caste, and 55 *gots* from *sudra* caste were assigned to the temple by Rajeswarsingha (Adhikary, 2001). The Inscription also mentions that an endowment of 243 *puras* of *devottara* land was made to the temple. A fixed amount of the revenue collected from the said land would be spent in the daily and regular *puja-seva* in the temple as specified in it.

RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES: DAILY WORSHIPPING AND ANNUAL FESTIVALS

The daily worshipping in this temple is a day long process which starts in the morning and ends in the evening. The door of the temple is opened early in the morning. After cleaning the temple,

the process of the worshipping starts. The priest performs the *snana* (bath) of the deities and then starts the worshipping of the deity with flowers and other materials. In the noon, cooked *bhog* is offered to the God and at this time the door of the temple remains closed. The *BHog* offered in this temple is generally vegetarian but in the days of Mahashivaratri and Madann Puja non-vegetarian *bhog* is offered. After the offering of *bhog*, the door of the temple reopened and in the evening, *aarati*, *naam-prasanga*, *bhajan-kirtan*, etc. are performed in front of the deity and the door of the temple is closed at 10 pm everyday.

The main annual festival of this temple is Mahashivaratri. Other festivals observed here are Madan Bhanji, Naam-prasanga in *Kati* month (October- November), Bol Bom and Mahajhulan Yatra.

(a) Shivaratri: Shivaratri is the main annual festival celebrated in Sukreswar devalya. Though the puja is performed in the night, the temple remains crowded by the devotees from the early morning. In the puja of Shivaratri, non- vegetarian *bhog* is offered to the deity during the night. The *bhog* is prepared by using the meat of a castrated goat. The devotees pour milk and water on the Shivalinga and seek blessings from the deity. After the completion of puja, *bhog* and *prasad* are distributed among the devotees.

(b) Madan Bhanji: Madan Bhanji festival is celebrated in this temple on the specified tithi. In the puja of Madan Bhanji also, non vegetarian *bhog* is offered to the deity.

(c) *Naam –Prasanga* in *Kati* month: *Naam-Prasanga* is performed during the whole month of *Kati* (October-November). Both the male and female groups perform *naam-prasanga* in the temple and this creates a very devotional environment in the temple complex.

(d) Bol Bom: This is a month long programme and lasts for entire *Shaon* month (July- August). In this festival the devotees go to Basishtashram temple and collect water from there to pour on the *Shivalinga* of Sukreswar temple. At first, the devotees worship the *Shivalinga* of Basishtashram and pour water. After this, they collect water from the Basishta river to Sukreswar temple and pour it on the *Shivalinga* and worship. This activity is performed for the entire month and especially on the Mondays of the *Shaon* month, the number of devotees increases. It is important to note that this festival is recent initiation and starts in the 1960's only. The devotees taking part in this festival are generally from Marwary and Bihari communities. But, now-a-days it is observed that people from all the communities perform this ritual with devotion.

(e) Mahajhulanyatra: Mahajhulanyatra is celebrated in Sukerswar temple in the month of *Shaon* (July- August). In this festival, Lord Krishna is worshipped.

Besides these annual festivals, pilgrims can offer special puja in the temple with the permission of the authority. On the other hand, marriage, *upanayan*, *Annaprashan*, *shraddha*, etc. are also performed in the temple.

PREISTS ENGAGED IN SUKRESWAR TEMPLE

The successors of the families assigned by the Ahom Kings are engaged as the priests of the temple and have rights on the temple affairs. They are known as the *bardeuris* of the temple. Apart from the *bardeuris*, persons from other brahman families do not have the right to perform

puja in this temple. the *bardeuri* families of the temple are distributed mainly in three villages namely Chamata of Nalbari district, Muktapur of Kamrup district and Gomura of Barpeta district. It is observed that priests from all the three villages are engaged in the temple and earn their livelihood. At present there are 16 priests in Sukreswar temple. The temple management authority gives the responsibility of daily worshipping of the temple to two priests for two months. During these two months of duty, the daily worshipping of the temple is managed by the priests on whom the responsibility has been given. For the next months, two other priests are assigned and thus the worshipping is maintained through the rotational system. The other priests, who do not have duties or have completed their duty period, can do other religious performances in the temple as their wishes and can also perform the intended religious activities of the pilgrims at any period of the year.

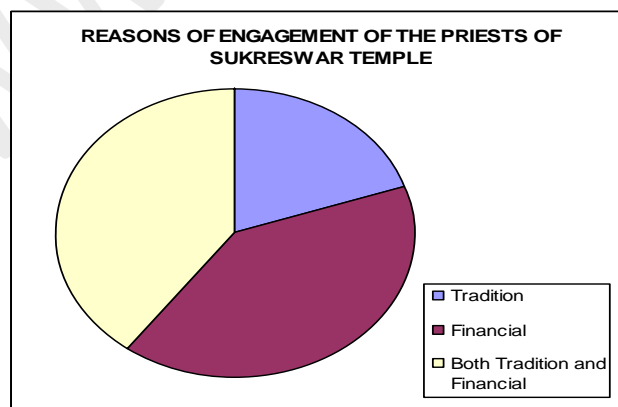
In the following paragraphs, an attempt is made to investigate some of the important aspects related with the engagement of the priests of the temple.

a. Period of engagement

The period of the engagement of the priests of these temples varies from less than 5 years to more than 20 years. The data from the field says that 33.33 per cent of them have been working in the temple as priests for 5 to 10 years while priests engaged for less than 5 years, 15-20 years and more than 20 years are 13.33 per cent are 13.33 per cent in each category. On the other hand, the percentage of priests working for 10 to 15 years is 26.66 per cent.

b. Reason

It has been mentioned earlier that the priests of Sukreswar temple are the descendants of the *bardeuri* families and are the traditional workers of the temple. But with the passage of time the scenario has been changed and the tradition has no longer remained the sole reason of their engagement. Among the priests surveyed in the present study, 20 per cent say that they work as priests to keep their old family tradition. On the other hand, maintaining the family tradition and earning the livelihood have equal influence on 40 per cent priests in choosing to work as priests in these temples while financial purposes are the main reason behind the engagement of 40 per cent of the priests (Fig. 1).

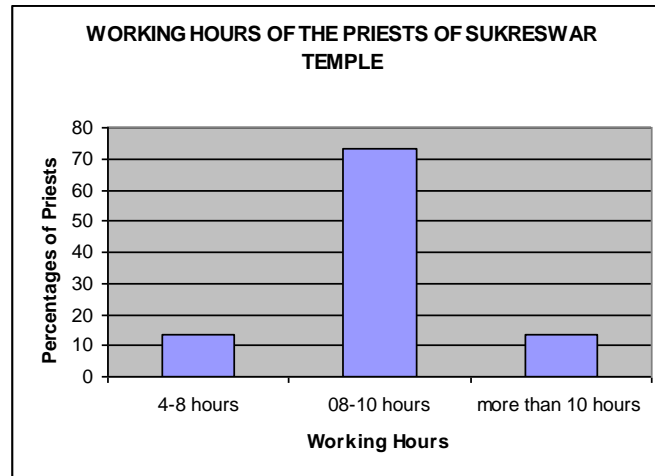


Source: Primary Survey, 2012-13

Fig. 1

c. Working hours

The activities in the temple start from early in the morning and end in the evening. Therefore, the priests have to work for a long time in the temple. It is observed that 13.33 per



Source: Primary Survey, 2012-13

Fig. 2

cent of the priests of the temple work for 4 to 8 hours and 73.33 per cent of them work for 8 to 10 hours and 13.33 per cent priests work for more than 10 hours (Fig. 2).

d. Other economic activities

It has been found that all the people engaged in the temple as the priests are also involved with some other economic activities. The activities performed by the priests outside the temples are mainly the priestly works in the houses of the devotees and other places. Besides this, some of the priests are engaged in different businesses also.

e. Importance as the income source

When the importance of the temple as the income source for the priests engaged here is assessed, it has been found that for 53.33 per cent of the priests, the temple is the main source of income. On the other hand, 26.67 per cent of them stated that the activities in the temple and other economic activities are equally important for them as the source of income. Only 20 per cent priests stated that the other activities are the main income source.

f. Earning members in the family

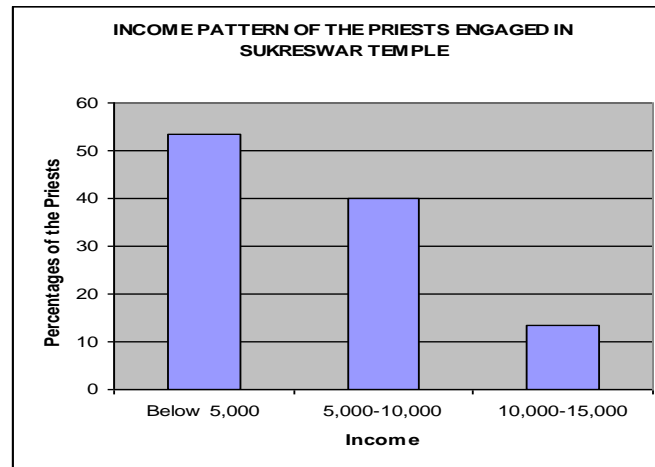
The data from the field says that in the houses of 53.33 per cent of the priests engaged in Sukreswar temple the priest is the only earner of the family. 40 per cent of the priests surveyed in the study have another earner beside him in the family while in the houses of 6.67 per cent priests, there are more than two earners.

g. Dependant members in the family

It has been observed that 53.33 per cent of the priests have less than 3 dependant members in their families and in the houses of the remaining 46.67 per cent priests, there are 3 to 5 dependant members.

h. Income pattern

The income of the priests engaged in Sukreswar temple is not fixed and it is dependant on the flow of the pilgrims in the temple. The data from the field says that 53.33 per cent of the priests earns less than rupees 5,000 per month on an average. 33.33 per cent earn between rupees 5,000 to 10,000 and 13.33 per cent earn between rupees 10,000 to 15,000 (Fig. 3). It is also observed that besides money, the priests receive cloth and some other materials from the devotees.



Source: Primary Survey, 2012-13

Fig. 3

CONCLUSION

Sukreswar temple is one of the important ancient temples of Guwahati. This temple was endowed with the grants of land, men and other properties during the Ahom reign. Daily worshipping is performed regularly and annual festivals are also celebrated with great pomp and ceremony. This temple is visited by a good number of people and the priests and other workers help the devotees in performing their worshipping and other activities. The present priests of this temple are the successors of the priests brought by the kings and they are serving the temple for generations and are dependant on the temple for their livelihood.

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