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Bhaskar Pandit & Raghunath Of Sribati: A Forgotten Narrative Of Bengal Vidarbha Relation

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Introduction

Sribati or Sreebati is a small village located in the Katwa subdivision of Purba Bardhaman (Eastern Bardhaman) district of West Bengal. It is located between Brahmani River to the north and Khari River to the south. Although a small village, Sribati holds a very important place in the history of Bengal. One of the earliest terracotta temple complexes of Bengal is situated here. But the more interesting fact is that this village holds a link between Bengal and Vidarbha. Although, due to the all-devouring nature of time not much written evidence is left but the oral tradition still preserves a very valuable key to unlock the dust ridden safe of the past.

Oral Tradition, History and...

Oral tradition, stories, legends etc. form an important part of history. Although literary evidences as well as archaeological evidences hold a very pivotal role in writing history, we cannot rule out the role of oral tradition. When there is no literary evidence and archaeological evidences are not sufficient enough to tell the truth in its entirety, to solve the puzzle of reconstructing the past the help of oral tradition is needed. And here lies the essence of ethnographic survey to collect the local myths, legends etc. about the target site or historical event or historical figure. The memories of the locals about the site or event tell us about the narrative and by investigating it we can know the truth. So, study of people's memories is necessary. Jan Vansina has described oral tradition as, "... verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation." (Vansina 1985) According to him the message must be "oral statements spoken, sung or called out on musical instruments only." (Vansina 1985) He more specifically says that there must be transmission of words through mouths at least for a generation. According to the Oral History Association, "Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities and participants in the past events." The reason behind all this discussion is that our present study is mainly based on Oral tradition due to scarcity of written materials.

The Chandras of Sribati and their family deity Raghunath

From the writings of Mahadev Chandra (one of the late descendants of Chandra family) we get to know about the ancestry of the Chandras. (Chandra 2014) According to him around 500 years ago the Chandras migrated from Porbandar of Gujarat to Adisaptagram (a famous port of ancient and medieval) Bengal. They were called 'Saodagar' by the locals. They traded spices and several other scented products to Java, Sumatra, Bali etc. countries. So, they were termed as Gandhavanik. From there they moved to Kaithan. It was a nearby village of Sribati. But due to the unfavourable behaviour of the local Muslims, the then member of Chandra family, Sobharam Chandra moved to Sribati village and established the temple of the family deity Raghunath on the occasion of Akshya Tritiya in the month of Vaisakh, 1112 Bongabdo (Bengali year) [1112+594= Circa 1706 CE]. Raghunath is worshipped in the form of Shaligram Shila called Raghunath

Shila. It was Chudamani Chandra, the earliest known ancestor of Chandras, who actually established the Raghunath Shila for worshipping. That shila was placed in the temple established by Sobharam. T.A. Gopinath Rao gives the following description of Shaligram (Rao 1914):

A Salagrama is generally a flinted ammonite shell, which is river worn and thus rounded and beautifully polished. The river Gandaki, which is one of the well-known tributaries of Ganges, is famous in India for its deposits of salagramas. Each of these has a hole, through which are visible several interior spiral grooves resembling the representation of the chakra or the discus of Vishnu; and these are in fact considered by people to be the naturally produced representations of the discus of Vishnu.

The encyclopaedic work of T.A. Gopinath Rao gives ideas about Shaligram stones but he does not mention anything about Raghunath Shila (Rao 1914). In the Prakriti Khanda of Brahma Vaivarta Purana it is said that Raghunath Shila should have two dvars, four chakras, with Gopada mark but without Vanamala. The present researcher while observing the present Raghunath Shila was not allowed to touch it. So, the present researcher could observe only one side of the shila where there is only one dvar. However, there is another Shaligram called Raghuvir Shila which seems to be similar to that of Raghunath Shila but the present family priest of Chandras Shri Ashim Ganguly says that both of these are different. He said that while Raghunath Shila is a unique deity worshipped by Chandras and they have carried it since time immemorial. On the other hand, Raghuvir Shila is locally worshipped in Bengal. But not only Chandras but also in several families of Bengal do worship Raghunath Shila for e.g.: Raghunath Shila of Banerjee family of Itya village of Mangalkot police station of Purba Bardhaman district, Raghunath of Ghatak family of Sujapur village of Purba Bardhaman district etc. (Thakur 2022). And not much difference is noticed amidst Raghunath and Raghuvir Shila by the present researcher. Along with Raghunath Shila there is a shaligram of Lakshmana. It was earlier not present. According to the information provided by Ashim Ganguly this was brought by the wife of the second brother of Dev Narayan Chandra when she was married in this family. A recent idol of Hanuman is worshipped along with them. However, a very interesting fact is that Sita is absent in Shaligram or iconic form. There is a design of 'OM' made on the Raghunath Shila with Sandal paste. The Shila along with Lakshman and Hanuman has been worshipped daily during morning and evening. During Janmastami the same Raghunath Shila has been worshipped as Sri Krishna. This shows people's memory about Rama and Krishna: they both are same and incarnations of Vishnu. During Nabanna (Paddy cutting ceremony) the first rice has been offered to Raghunath and Raghunath Jiu Nabanna utsav is observed. Special puja is observed on the occasion of Purnima (full moon).

The Thread of Bengal-Vidarbha connection: Arrival of Bhaskar Pandit

Now the connecting thread between Bengal and Vidarbha of Maharashtra has to be discussed: The arrival of Bhaskar Pandit and his stealing of Raghunath Shila. According to Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the first Maratha incursion into Bengal happened in 1742. Raghujii Bhonsle, scion of Nagpurkar Bhonsles, had sent his prime minister Bhaskar Ram Kolhatkar with a strong force to invade Bengal to collect Chauth (Sarkar 1932). We get the description of Maratha incursions into Bengal from some contemporary sources such as: Siyar-ul-mutakhkharin, Salimullah's Tarikh-i-Bangla, Riyaz-us-Salatin, Maharashtra Purana by Gangaram and Chitra-Champu by Vaneshwar. Marathas entered through Pachet into Bardhaman district first. In Maharashtra Purana we get the name of the villages which were looted by Bhaskar Pandit. There it is mentioned that Bhaskar has looted 'Indrail Pargana' which is probably Indrani Pargana, previous name of Katwa. In the name of the villages looted and burnt by Bhaskar, we get the name of Singi village (Mustafi 1907). Singi village is situated just next to Sribati. So, it is not improbable that Bhaskar and his Bargirs came to Sribati. From Riyaz-us-Salatin we also have the information that Marathas entered Bardhaman district. (Salim 1902) The oral tradition of this village says that during the Bargi attacks, Bhaskar Pandit after looting Sribati stole Raghunath and went to Dainhat in Bardhaman. Maharashtra Purana also tells us that Bhaskar visited Dainhat. Then, one member from Chandra family and one member from Chakravarti family (the then family priests of Chandras. Now Gangulis are their family priests.) went to Bhaskar Pandit and requested them to give the Shaligram back. Then Bhaskar Pandit at the request of these two people agreed to give them the Shila back but put a condition. He had collection of a lot of Raghunath Shilas. They had to choose their Raghunath Shila among them. It is said that in this situation the particular Raghunath Shila, the form of Ramachandra, himself appeared in the end of the cloth of the Bhakta. Now who is the Bhakta here between

the two cannot be said, as the present descendants are unable to tell that particular information. The Brahman who accompanied the member of Chandra family is not known. The name of the member who went to Bhaskar is also contestable. As per the information provided by Mahadev Chandra in 1741 CE when Bhaskar Pandit attacked Bengal, and reached Katwa, the Nawab of Bengal, Alivardi Khan took a huge amount tax in form of gold coins from Sobharam and gave a firman(? How a nawab of Bengal can give firman applicable to all over India?) to do business all over India. All over India they had around 200 ware houses. (Chandra 2014) But the Jadunath Sarkar says that the first Maratha incursion into Bengal happened in 1742 CE. As per the information provided by the present descendant Ranapratap Chandra it was Rukmini Ballava Chandra who went to Bhaskar Pandit. Here arrives a problem of chronology. If we follow the family tree provided by Mahadev Chandra, we do not find the name of Rukmini Ballava in the chart, in place of his sons, grandsons or father or grandfather. Here, arrives the problem of lack of chronology as one of many shortcomings of oral tradition mentioned by Vansina. (Vansina 1985) There is no way to solve it until any manuscript regarding the genealogy of Chandras are found.

Social and Economic Condition

Not much social condition can be known from the present study. However, the Chandra mention themselves as Gandhavanikas. This caste has been mentioned in Maharashtra Purana as one of the total 36 castes present at that time in Bengal. (Mustafa 1907) In the perception of the common people they are considered to be very rich, which is present till date (The present researcher has been told about their plenty by common villagers of Bardhaman district while on the way to Sribati). This shows the importance of trade and though there were economic instability, the traders of India were gaining while competing with their European counterparts despite having many disadvantages. This shows the skill and diligence of Indian traders and can be a topic of detailed research in the field of economic history of India. It was this richness which might have attracted Bhaskar Pandit to attack the small village of Sribati. From Maharashtra Puran we get names of several Maratha officers and some adjectives used to address them might give us insight into the social history of Maharashtra but it is not relevant in the present context.

Conclusion

The history of Bhaskar Pandit stealing Raghunath Shila from the temple of Raghunath Jiu and finally returning it is an important event. Study of it might help us to reconstruct the local histories and help us to connect two localities and also helps us to study peoples' memory. It is said by common people that as Bargis were devotees of Shiva, building Shiva temples might safeguard their village from Bargi attacks. This memory might have continued afterwards and Chandras constructed several beautiful Shiva temples. However, as the Chandras were devotees of Rama, depiction of Ramayan scenes can be seen over the outer walls of the temples.

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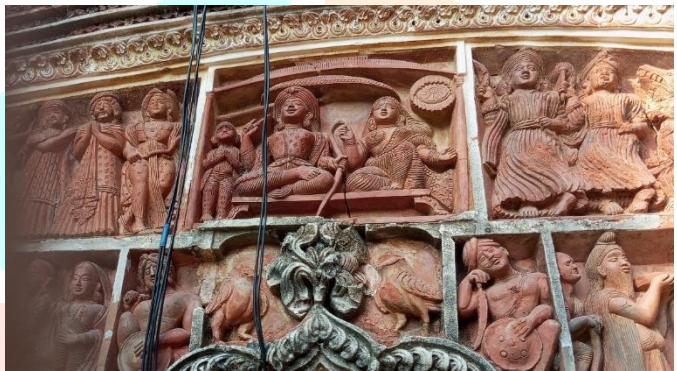
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Picture of Raghunath Shila



Picture of Lakshmana Jiu



**Scenes from Ramayana outside
Terracotta Shiva Temple (Rama &
Sita sitting on throne)**



**Three Terracotta Shiva Temples of
Sribati (Collected)**



**Picture of the Raghunath temple
before renovation as provided by
Ranapratap Chandra
(However, this is not the oldest
temple. The picture of the oldest
temple is unavailable at present)**