

NARAKA MYTHOLOGY IN PROJECTING RELIGION OF ANCIENT KĀMARŪPA

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Abstract- *Original geographical boundary of Ancient Kāmarūpa region is no more existed. But still numerous historical and mythological data introduce readers to a unique religious tradition of ancient Kāmarūpa. It is hard to collect the history of ancient Kāmarūpa due to lack of preservation technique and non availability of the practice of scientific documentation of historical data. Mythology describes traditional stories of people, often transmitted orally and is usually referring to stories of Gods or ancient heroes and kings. It is regarded as sacred for Hindu civilization. Those mythological data on Gods and kings are reflected in common folk tradition till today.*

The civilization of ancient Kāmarūpa witnessed co- existence of various religious faiths. It is revealed in puranic texts that worshipping of Lord Viṣṇu (or Vaisnavism) and worshipping of Mother Goddess Śakti (or Saktism) are two prominent lines of religious thinking, found hand in hand, in the tradition of ancient Kāmarūpa. It is proof for the colorful cultural affinity. Data regarding Naraka, the mythological king of ancient Kāmarūpa is one of these. The legend of Naraka is living proof to the diverse cultural affinity of this region. The story of this mythological king introduces us to a part of liberal religious belief of the people of this region.

Keywords: *Ancient Kāmarūpa, Naraka, mythology, Viṣṇu, Śakti etc.*

I. Introduction

Ancient Kāmarūpa was projected as an intellectual hub of religion and tradition by the ancient literature of India. This region is mentioned as Kāmarūpa in *Tantras* and *Purāns* and is quoted as *Prāgjyotiṣpurā* in *Mahābhārata*. According to *Joginitantra* ancient Kāmarūpa comprised- *Brahmapūtra* valley, Bhutan, *Rangpura*, *Coochbehāra*, North East *Maimansing*

and *Gāropāhāra*. (Gait, 1926: pp 11) Although in present time, geographical limit of this ancient region ceases to exist but available historical and mythological data still introduce the readers to a unique cultural tradition of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. The civilisation of ancient *Kāmarūpa* witnessed co- existence of various religious faiths. The five prominent Hindu forms of worship, i.e. *vaiṣṇava*, *śaiva*, *śakta*, *soura* and *gaṇapataye* were popular in this region. It is revealed in pauranic texts that worshipping of Lord *Viṣṇu* (or Vaisnavism) and worshipping of Mother Goddess *Śakti* (or Saktism) are two distinct lines of religious thinking, found hand in hand in the tradition of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. It is a distinguishing element found in the history and culture of this part of India. Examples of worship of *Viṣṇu* and *Śakti*, are indeed proves for the colorful cultural affinity of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. Data regarding *Naraka*, the mythological king of ancient *Kāmarūpa* is one of these.

Historical data of this region can be traced to 14th century AD (approximately). But, mythological reference of this region of more antiquity is found in puranic literature. Due to lack of preservation technique and non availability of the practice of the scientific documentation of historical data, it is hard to collect the history of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. But, even after ransack by nature and lack of the habit of preservation, still we have available literary data on mythological tradition which direct our vision towards the notion that this part of India carries the secular tradition of religious beliefs from time immemorial.

The very term “mythology” denotes traditional stories of people, often transmitted orally and are usually referring to stories of gods or ancient heroes and kings. Puranic literature consists of numerous mythological stories forming base for the tradition of Hindu beliefs and customs. It is sacred for Hindu civilization. Influence of such type of literature on the culture of ancient *Kāmarūpa* is noteworthy. Those Mythological data on Gods and kings are reflected in folk tradition till today. The principal theme of the discussion here is the existence of *Viṣṇu* and *Śakti* in controlling life of mythological king *Naraka*, having numerous references in contents of *Purāṇs* and other Indian literature. This study is an attempt to show rich tradition of co- existence of secular religious thinking of ancient *Kāmarūpa* from time immemorial.

II. Naraka Mythology

King *Naraka* is called *Narakāsura* because, according to tradition, the earliest dynasties of ancient Assam were of non Aryan origin suggested by the appellations, *dānaba* or *asura*, behind their name. (Gait, 1926: pp 12) Earliest king was *Mahirangdānaba*, succeeded by *Hatakāsura*, *Samberāsura*, *Rartnāsura*, *Ghatakāsura*. Later on *Ghatakāsura* was defeated by *Narakāsura*. Kingdom of *Narakāsura* was *Prāgjyotiṣpura*, extended from *Korotoyā* river on the west and *Dikrang* river to the east. (Barpujari, 1976: pp 26) Story of *Narakāsura* is described in *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, *Sivapurāṇa* or *Vāyupurāṇa*, *Bhagvatpurāṇa*, *Brahmapurāṇa* and *Harivamsa*. These puranic literature mentioned *Narakāsura* in emphasizing the grandeur of Lord *Viṣṇu* in preventing evil element from society. *Kālikāpurāṇa* gave the full life sketch of *Narakāsura* while emphasizing the role of mother goddess *Kāmākhyā* in destructing evil doers.

Pauranic story goes thus that in *Satyayuga*, *Naraka* was born to Mother Earth and 3rd incarnation of Lord *Viṣṇu*, i.e. *barāha* or wild boar and later on killed by *Kṛṣṇa*. According to the story, the child was conceived by mother earth during impure time of monthly cycle (since the formation of Vedas, time of menstruation is regarded as impure time of inception of any holy task). So expecting demonical character of the very child in future the gods prevented delivery of the baby. The child was born during middle of *Tretāyuga*. After birth the child was placed on the sacrificial ground of king *Janaka* bestowing the task of upbringing on the king, having his head placed on a skull. The royal priest christened it as “*Naraka*”, ka meaning a skull. (Sarma, 1982: pp 12) His mother impersonated herself as the caretaker of baby *Naraka*, as *Kātyāyani*. *Naraka* brought up along with the royal family and exalted the princes. *Janaka* seeing the valor of the child apprehended danger of losing his throne to his son in future. Once *Kātyāyani* or mother earth, heard the apprehension of king and queen (*Janaka* and *Sumati*), who disguised herself to be a care taker of *Naraka*, and wanted to protect her son *Narak*. So she pretended to perform pilgrimage to river *Gangā* and asked company of *Narak*. But he agreed to go with her only on approval from his father, *Janaka*. Then *Kātyāyani* told him that *Janaka* is actually his foster father. And later on, on the bank of *Gangā* river *Naraka* learnt the story of his birth and then through river way they arrived on the *Prāgjyotiṣpura* in ancient *Kāmarūpa*. Here the presiding deity was *Kāmākhyā*. And here *Naraka* defeated *kirāta*

Ghatakāsur. His father helped in establishing foundation of kingdom *Prāgjyotiṣpura*. The Kingdom of *Narakāsura* was named as *Prāgjyotiṣpura*.

With blessings of Lord *Viṣṇu*, *Narakāsura* almost becomes immortal. On his birth, mother earth sought the blessings of Lord *Viṣṇu* for her son to be full of valor and grandeur. While granting this, Lord *Viṣṇu* foretold that *Naraka* would be destroyed by a later incarnation of *Viṣṇu* himself and advised him to worship Goddess *Kāmākhyā* and told him that any deviation would not bring anything but death. At the beginning of his reign he was pious but later on *Narakāsura* became irreligious and destructive under the influence of *Bānasura*, the king of *Sonitpura*, whom he befriended with. *Naraka* following the example of *Bāna* disobeyed gods and goddesses. *Narakāsura* knew himself to be unrivalled in prowess after getting the boon of Lord *Viṣṇu*. So he brought all the kingdoms of earth and heaven under his rule. He stole the earring of *Devamātā Aditi* and kidnapped sixteen thousand women. Then he wanted to marry Goddess *Kāmākhyā*. At this point *Naraka* crossed the limit and disobeyed *Viṣṇu* by insulting Mother Goddess *Kāmākhyā*, the presiding deity of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. According to legend, his audacity infuriated the Goddess, she agreed on condition that he would have to erect a temple for her on top of the *Nilācala* hill, construct a tank and a road in one single night. *Naraka* almost accomplished the task, but Goddess *Kāmākhyā* caused a cock to crow and claiming this as a proof of the day break king *Narakāsura* was refused the grant. Then refuted *Naraka* slew the cock on that very spot. And thereafter that place is known as *Kukurākātācaki* (a place of slewing a cock).

According to puranic stories such lesson doesn't debar *Naraka* from further destruction or show of pompousness. He even blocked sage *Vasiṣṭha* (whose hermitage is known to be situated on eastern part of present day Guwahati city) from pilgrimage to the abode of Goddess *Kāmākhyā*. The infuriated sage reminded him the sayings of Lord *Viṣṇu* that dishonour to the Goddess *Kāmākhyā* would bring him nothing but death. And eventually he was killed by his progenitor *Viṣṇu* in his incarnation as *Kṛṣṇa* who was residing in *Dwarka* (western side of India) during that time. *Kṛṣṇa* attacked the fortress of *Narakāsura* riding his mount *Garura* along with wife *Satyabhāmā* and caused the end of king *Narakāsura*.

III. Retrospection

Ancient traditions (mythological or historical) embody a need that these are required to be deciphered for their applicability in the human society, than are stored in the museum just to display the past of a culture. In our present study, considerable time must have passed in between *Janaka* the foster father of *Narakāsura* to the incarnation of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, the slayer of *Narakāsura*. Kingdom of *Naraka* developed till he remains religious towards Goddess *Śakti*. His kingdom is said to expand throughout *Tretā* and *Dwāpara* yugas (ages of world). But at end of *Dwāpara* yuga under the destructive influence of *Bālīpūtra Bāna*, his character deteriorated and in *Kāliyuga* irreligious *Narakāsura* lost his life in hands of his father. This son of *Viṣṇu* was killed by *Viṣṇu* himself due to his misdeeds. And Goddess *Kāmākhya* played a pivotal role in punishing king *Narakāsura*. Time of *Naraka* is spanned over into three aeons in Indian tradition. time according to Indian division is divided into four separate *yugas* e.g. *Satya*, *Tretā*, *Dwāpar* and *Kāli*. These four together comprising 43, 20,000 years of men is equal to one *mahāyuga*. (Apte, 2005: pp 458) And again the descending length of *yugas* represents moral deterioration of morality of a society.

Historical tradition of ancient *Kāmarūpa* primarily relates to the later period. *Dubi* plates of *Bhāskarvarmā* says that first king to rule this place is *Bhouma Naraka* (of the dynasty of *Narakāsura*), followed by *Bhagadatta* and *Bajradatta* who had ruled for 3000 years. And after a gap of 3000 years *Pushyavarmana* ascended the throne. (Sarma, 1982: pp 13) This mythological data ascertains that last *Naraka* of the *Naraka* dynasty reign before the *Kuruksetra* war, i.e. 3101 BC. *Bhagadatta* was king during the time of the war. Thus, tradition of Saktism and Vaisnavism in ancient *Kāmarūpa* can't be later than this.

Although local tradition of documentation in ancient *Kāmarūpa* is related to later period, only two remains are proof of existence of mythological king *Narakāsura*, i.e. *Narakāsura pāhāra* and a road named after *Narakāsura*. Remembrance of a person and a name only attach commemoration to the same. Here a number of archeological findings of religious icons are discovered. (Sarma, 1982: pp 151) This *Narakāsura* hill is situated on the southern side of *Nilāchala* hill, the abode of mother Goddess *Kāmākhya*. *Visnupurāna* also states that the ancient *Kāmarūpa* is extended around the temple of *Kāmākhya* (100 *jojana* or approx. 450 mile around the temple). And again *Kṛṣṇa* is said to have arrived at a place named *Asvagrānta* (meaning ascended by horses) on his mission to invade *Prāgjyotiṣpura* to destroy

the ill impact of King *Narakāsura*. At this place a temple of Lord *Viṣṇu* is situated. A number of small holes on the rock which are regarded as foot prints of horses of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*.

The paurnic advent of *Narakāsura* indicates introduction of mainstream Aryan elements to the non Aryan culture of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. Mythology of king *Narakāsura* is attributed with both Aryan and non Aryan elements. Non Aryan people follow their animistic religion of worshipping elements of nature as malevolent and benevolent elements. And people of Aryan origin follow the religion of Vedic tradition. Legend of *Narakāsura* is important in the history of Assam as he is cited as the progenitor of many dynasties that ruled North East India. In his childhood he had training of *Aryavarta* under king *Janaka*. He was created by *Viṣṇu* and said it beforehand that in *Kaliyuga Naraka* would be destroyed by the presiding deity of this region, Goddess *Kamakhya*, the symbol of Saktism. According to legend, he is said to be grown as a demon and later on destroyed by the force of Saktism. Thus this region was accustomed to Vaisnavism and Saktism from beyond the time of history. Again in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, weapon of *Viṣṇu* is described as *Śakti*. (*Kālikāpurāṇa*: XXXIX. 45) The *Dasavatāra* (ten incarnations of Lord *Viṣṇu*) is portrayed in culture and tradition of this region as the destroyer of evil. The puranic story of mythological king *Narakāsura* is a representation of good over bad. And this story is represented in mythology, through the religious element of Vaisnavism and Saktism. The whole story is an example of moral code of conduct needed to be followed by people.

Conclusion

In the concluding paragraph, it can be said that the episode of mythological king of *Narakāsura* of literary world of India, is a proof of existence of both Saktism and Vaisnavism in the culture of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. Under religious parlance, once *Naraka* was made a pivot of success by God, and then due to sinful act, was destroyed by God later on. It is undoubtedly a proof of secular essence of religion of ancient *Kāmarūpa*. This region holds the mythology of *Narakāsura* through religious belief, lifestyle, tradition so on and so forth. Representation of Vaisnavism and Saktism through the legend of *Naraka* is a living proof of the diverse cultural affinity of this region.

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