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BILWESWAR DEVALAYA: A REPOSITORY OF THE EXTINCT CULTURE

KEY WORDS: Devalaya, Extinct Culture, Pyke, Devalaya Mores, Bhaira

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ABSTRACT

Bilweswar Devalaya is a temple originally of *Shaivite* cult located at village Belsor which is in the close proximity to village *Bilweswar* under *Paschim Nalbari* Revenue Circle of Nalbari district in Assam bears the traits of ancient to modern ways of lives, religiousness, rituals, traditions and mores. Though the time substitutes the elements of aged traditions of the society to welcome new; however, the establishments of the society erected by the people of that time endorse continuation of the traditions encompassing many things with the timeless value. *Bilweswar Devalaya* is one of such establishments that exemplifies this fact being the repository of extinct culture. Tradition and religiousness are fused by any religious site or establishment. Traditions in oriental society are made out of religiousness of the people forming to be religious culture. The *Devalaya* fosters this culture since the time of its erection before approximately fifteen hundred years ago by the patronage of King *Nagakhya*. Owing to a legend of 'grey colored cow' of Late *Rup Narayan Dev-a brahmin* of the locality, the shrine of Lord Shiva was started to be worshipped. Various royal dynasties extended support for the maintenance of the temple and for its repair in subsequent times. *Ahom* kingdom glorified the *Durga Puja* out of all others and the *Devalaya* began to receive recognition as one of the important *Shakti Pith(s)* of Assam. The *Devalaya* was also to be influenced by *Vaishnavism* through the Koch Kingdom. The religious events held by the *Devalaya* are the ultimate sources of inspiring the artisans and the artists along of a broad locality along with the others hired from outside on specific occasions. These have made paved the way for earning livelihood for the folk artists and for the entertainment of the local folk people. The engagement of *Pykes* for the conduct of *Bilweswar Devalaya* functions has made a remarkable feature of it. So, the *Devalaya* is known for equal participation and public benevolence for centuries due to which thousands of people gather themselves on various occasions. *Durga Puja* gets its prominence having a great fusion of pan-Indian and localized color beside its ancient practice of animal sacrifices and offerings. Through the observance of various religious events and daily activities, the *Devalaya* is fostering the elements of culture which are on the verge of extinction. So the *Devalaya* may be described as the perfect repository of the ancient traditions which are aggressed by science and technology. It is the confluence of past and present flowing through the people of varied age. Data are collected from both the sources-primary and secondary.

Objective of the Paper: To justify the *Bilweswar Devalaya* as a repository of extinct culture and to find out the ways by which its legacy of aged traditional culture is being prevented and continued. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the religious culture those are on the edge of extinction and how these are being prevented from extinction against the aggression of many factors imported by the globalization.

Methodology of the Paper: Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Explorative method is used for writing the paper. Field survey i.e. participation in the occasions, random interaction with the common people, group discussion with the members of the committee etc. and personal interviews are undertaken for reaching at the ground reality of the *Devalaya*. Both the qualitative and quantitative elements are kept in consideration in preparing the paper.

INTRODUCTION:

Though the *Bilweswar Devalaya* is located at Belsor revenue village at present times after the 1961 Revenue Settlement of Government of Assam; however, the adjoining village *Bilweswar* is supposed to be the original one. *Bilweswar* is the corrupt form of *Binneswar* (*Binna+Ishyar>bilweswar*). 'Binna' is the colloquial form of 'Birina-a kind of long grass growing at low land' which is pronounced so even in today by the majority people of lower Assam. A legend is associated with the formation of word. The tamed cow of *Rup Narayan Dev-a brahmin* had to give milk upon a place atop a hillock surrounded by 'Binna' of whose fact was discovered by following up a host of cowherds. When the place was cleaned, A *Shivlinga-phallus* was seen by the *Brahmin*. He started to worship the phallus of which legendary significance was spread throughout the territories of different kingdoms. From *Nagakhya* to *Naranarayana* (1533-1587) the *Devalaya* could receive patronages for its sustenance and maintenance. In recent times, besides the annuity from government of Assam, the *Devalaya* has seen various infrastructural developments. Major part of the land was taken over by the government for distributing among the *Pykes* to whom various *Devalaya* activities are assigned inhabiting there for centuries with the enforcement of The Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature Act, 1959 from 18th March, 1963. 'The present land status of the *Devalaya* is as follows: Patta No:01 Dag Nos: 1524 (11 Bighas 13 Lechas-Main Campus of the *Devalaya*);1696 & 2044(3 Bighas 4 Kathas 17 Lechas plus 2 Bighas 4 Kathas-Milan Silpi Sangha:2.5 Kathas & No:01 Belsor Primary School, Belsor) Dag:1596(7 Bighas 18 Lechas) covers Market place, Office of the Fire Services, Sub Registrar Office, Office of the Assam Tourism Development, Inspection Bungalow etc.'The *Ahom* kings granted lands to the *Devalaya*. The original amount of land was 5250 Bighas. In addition to that 365 was *Bhogdanimati* of which production was used for the *Bhog* of the *Devalaya*. Later on, it was reduced to 1420 Bighas 3 Kathas and 5

Lechas(*Lakheraj*) and 2461 Bighas 1 Katha 6 Lecha under different heads. The patronizing kings were: *Naganka*, *Debeswara*, *Nagaksa*, *Prithu*, *Sandhya*, *Sindhurai*, *Simhadhaj*, *Pratapdhaj*, *Durlav Narayana*, *Nilambara*, *Naranarayana*, *Pratapsimha*, *Sivasimha*. The kings belonged to the *Louhitya*, *Koch*, *Ahom* dynasties. At present times, the total lands possessed by the temple authority are only 25 Bighas. Majority portion of the lands were distributed and registered in the names of the *Bardeuri(s)* of the *Devalaya* and the *Pykes*. Their traditional activities related with the *Devalaya* have elevated the *Devalaya* as a cultural complex. Besides this, the continuation of faiths, unending ritualistic and traditional activities based on the religious culture has made the entire vicinity of the *Devalaya*, a sacred complex for ages till date. Basically the human behavior is being changed with a rapid pace due to the constant and consistent affiliation to the science and technology. These have greatly impacted upon human lives in every kind of aspects. So the traditional and ritualistic things are being changed in our society. Though the existence of *Bilweswar Devalaya* is supposed to be from 6th century by king *Nagakhya*; however, it has been receiving changes continuously. Many more things are on the edge of extinction. But, still it is ought to be regarded as the repository of extinct culture. The imposing a culture upon another community or getting rid of an established culture is known as cultural extinction. Cultural extinction implies the loss of languages, traditions. The access to technology has imported privileges to people to stay constantly connected. It allows us to interact across geographical borders. Despite its pressure, how the *Devalaya* is standing against the erosion of beliefs and traditions by virtue of its sacredness to serve the aspirations of the people of a greater locality is the focal point of the paper.

Bilweswar Devalaya And Its Demographics:

Demography plays a pivotal role for studying anything else which is people centric of any specific locality where the study is

undergone. From the current demographical data, it becomes easier to assess the changes, behavior of the people, activities and attitudes towards anything which is taken to be the subject of the study. So, the demographical outline of Belsor is presented here as the Devalalaya is located at.

The Devalaya is located at the Belsor Census Town consisting only one ward namely Belsor ward no: 01 in the district of Nalbari 15 kms west from the headquarter. The total geographical area of Belsor Census Town is 5 square kms. and it is the second largest census town in the state-Assam in India. Population density of the census town is 1853 per square km. The total population of it is 8523. Yearly average rainfall of it is 1905mm. Maximum temperature goes up to 36 degree C and minimum temperature goes down to 7 degree C. Among the total population of 8523 4351(51%) are male and 4172(49%) are female. 99% of the whole population are from general caste, 1% are from schedule caste. Child population (aged under 6 years) of Belsor census town is 8%, among them 54% are boys and 46% are girls. There are 1828 households in the census town and an average 5 persons live in every family. Hindus contribute 92% of the total population and are the largest religious community in the census town followed by Muslims which contribute 8% of the total population. The overall literacy rate is 92%. 96% of male and 89% of female population is literate. Belsor has 29%(2455) population engaged in either main or marginal works. 49% male and 8% female population are working population. 37% of total male population is main worker and 12% is marginal workers. For women 4% of total population is main worker and 4% is marginal worker. From this description, it is evident that the people of the locality are on the way of national average in regard of primary statistics except than the climate and other geographical components. Still the majority of the people believe in the ethnicity and all other traditional and ritualistic matters despite the new waves of thinking amongst the new generation people. This pristine culture is being fostered by the Devalaya since the time immemorial.

Assamese culture replicates all the ethnic behavior. Assamese literature of medieval time is primarily religious and its subject matters have been drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as other Puranic literature, the poets of those days while narrating the original subject matters also tried to incorporate descriptions of Assamese national religious and cultural life as also of contemporary social customs and manners, popular beliefs and also natural phenomena. Almost all the people of that time were accustomed to listening these through the oral transmission which had impacted the psyche of the people greatly. So our culture and the religion are always amalgamated in senses. Owing to the long flowing stream of consciousness, the Bilweswara Devalaya epitomizes the cultural and religious traits at the same time. Such flow of the cultural legacy is maintained by various folk customs related with the Devalaya. The original flavor of the culture has received changes in a natural way due to the interpolation of the modernistic elements. Still, majority of the traditions are being kept intact with a little change by the overall Devalaya traditions. These have impacted the majority people of the locality in maintaining their culture. More truly, these have occupied the entire body of culture. Despite the superficial changes seen in the behavioral pattern of the majority people associated with complex of Bilweswar Devalaya are resisting the extinction that makes the social fabric of the locality along with people related with the Devalaya. These are preserved by the various festivals, occasions and events.

Since the time of erection of the Shivalinga beneath the Birina Grass, daily Puja was arranged which is being continued. As soon as the patronage from the Koch dynasty was started to construct the Devalaya, Durga Puja is being celebrated. The chief deity worshipped in Bilweswar Devalaya is Maharudra Shiva. The entire Koch dynasty had a great belief in Shaivite tradition. Their chief deity was Lord Shiva. In 1546 A.D. Koch king Naranarayana ordered Army Chief, his brother Dewan Chilarai to invade Ahom king. In compliance of the king's order, he battled against the Ahom Sargadeu twice in 1562 and 1566 accordingly. King Naranarayana was a devotee of Lord Shiva. So he worshipped the deity before the battles. Even he ordered Dewan Chilarai to dig a

big pond in the vicinity of the Devalaya for the public utility those who came for worshipping Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva has the legacy of both the Puranic and Vedic traditions. So besides the daily worship, there is hard and fast traditions of offering non vegetarian Bhog to the deity. As a matter of fact, though the Devalaya was firstly erected by the Brahmin king Nagakhya who ruled Pratapgarh of Sonitpur; however, the religious beliefs received the culmination under the aegis of Koch Kings' patronage. and their ultimate beliefs upon the Lord Shiva and their ultimate affiliation with the Shaivite culture. In recognition to the royal patronage, after every kind of Puja, the tradition of 'Raaj Haridhyani-simultaneous loud utterance glorifying Hari' exists till today wishing well being of the patron kings'. It is really an example of maintaining extinct culture to recognize the one's contribution. According to people's belief, during the celebration of Bhatheli, the earth beneath the Para/Paura(a well decorated complete bamboo prepared for worship) is taken out and kept inside the nests of pigeon and duck which are reared by the villagers for contributing the livelihood with a view to protecting them from any calamities. In spite of the globalization, these traditions are still being maintained since the time immemorial. The Bhatheli of Bilweswar Devalaya is observed during the month of Bohag. Likewise the other scheduled occasions, in every Monday of the Month Jeth-Naam Prasanga is arranged. For this reason males and females come spontaneously to the Devalaya. This occasion is called Jethua Naam. Hundreds of people come from the neighboring villages to enjoy the Naam Prasanga. No one was invited to sing and participate the said Naam Prasanga. Owing to the significance of the Devalaya, three- four Nagara troupes come without any invitation and celebrate Jethua Nasam. It signifies the togetherness of the local people and their religiousness. Modern way of life very often vanity of the people due to the economic class system. But on the contrary to the class feeling of the society, the Devalaya vicinity is still remarkable for the sense of brotherhood and togetherness. In the month of Jeth and Ahar, first four days from Jeth and three days from Ahar-these seven days are celebrated as Saath. On the first day of Saath, an amount earth from the bottom of the Dewan Pukhuri, taken out by drowning in the pond. Upon the earth taken out, various seeds are kept for seven days. The germination of the seeds are verified and justified which seeds would grow better during cultivation season. The wooden Pira where the earth is kept for the seeds is worshipped being kept upon the altar of the Devalaya by the seasonal fruits. Just after the worshipping, Baratar Sadhu is told by the experienced people and the Naam Prasanga are arranged. After the Naam Prasanga, the Pira with the fruits are thrown in the water of the pond. There is long lasting faith, if the impotent women are to eaten the drowned fruits bringing from the amidst of the water of the pond-they become pregnant. During the month of Chat, Doul Utsab is celebrated in the Devalaya. There is rare tradition of the Devalaya that a live goat is worshipped inside a cottage temporarily constructed by the banana and beetle nut leaves. After completion of the worshipping, the cottage was set fire and the goat was dragged out by the youths and arranged feast. During the Doul Utsab, the deity-Gobinda is taken out from the Devalaya altar. The people of the villages throw Phaku towards Gobinda when the deity is carried thorough procession. Some of the villagers invite Gobinda(another name of Krishna) for worshipping. After the end of worshipping, Tetelir Sarbat is served to the people engaged with the procession including the Prasad. The Devalaya is unique in celebrating various festivals since its erection among which Durga Puja gets the top priority now-a-days. Lakhs of devotees come from various places of the state due to the prevalence of various legends, myths, narratives, beliefs, tales etc. Minute observation over the religious activities and the occasions held, it is apparent that the Devalaya is a perfect repository of culture of the people of the locality as well as the people connected by the kinship, lineage and relationship. 'Moreover, the recitation of the Bhagavat Shashtra was found to have been performed in the temple. This has manifested the truth that there was the existence of Vaisnavite element in the Saiva-Sakta temple.' We may be reached at the point that Devalaya is a confluence of all religious cults which is inclusive of Tantric practices also.

Culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of

culture; culture is the form of religion. This is true in case of the Devalaya also. Bilweswar Devalaya epitomizes traits of various cults of Hindu religion. In present times, pan-Indian religious elements are also prevailing which has begot an extra dimension in the complex of the Devalaya. History is sound, though not in chronological order, in regard of the patronages received by the Devalaya from the various kings from Ahom and Koch dynasties. In gratitude of them, the Devalaya fosters the various cults of the religion but with localized forms. The localized forms are nurtured by the local people. As they change, the forms of religiousness is liable to change. In many cases, the demography is matched with the entire behavior towards everything. But it is amazing to notice that, the Devalaya really treasures the long cherished practices till date.

Folk Performances of the Devalaya:

Through folk performances and the services of the Pykes or Sebaitis, the entire gamut of culture of the Devalaya is being reflected. The privileges of performing the folk arts have made the Devalaya a cultural hub for centuries and the way of sustenance, though not commensurate with their toil, for the folk artists. Classified services of the Pykes or Sebaitis have been looking after the theory of work distribution on the basis of inheritance and community faculty of working with an egalitarian view. It is really a laudable subject that the Devalaya has also the Pykes from Muslim community who are assigned with duty during festivals like others. As the residences of the Pyke(s) surround the vicinity of the Devalaya; their family members, kith and kin, relatives, in-laws, friends, invitees etc. are the regular spectators of the folk performances arranged during various festivals round the year. A list of such performances may be presented herewith. It includes: Ojapali of both kinds-Biyah Ojapali and Sukananni Ojapali-theatrical group performance in traditional attire based on mythical stories admixture with current events for spiritual and amusement purposes; Bhaira-a colloquial Assamese word for Bhaoriya of standard variety-a specific form of theatrical and clownish performance in traditional attire; Nagara Naam-dramatic performance with singing based on mythical stories beating a big drum; Dhuliya-a dramatic form of clownish activities based on folktales, legends, myths; Khuliya-a dramatic performance accompanied with the playing of a special folk leather instrument; Bhaona-a kind of mimetic art which was pioneered by Srimanta Sankardev; Kirtan-a devotional singing by using brass metal cymbals; Naam Prasanga-group singing with some folk instruments based on epic stories; Bhagabat Paath-a tuned recitation of Bhagawat; Putula Nach-puppetry based on mythical stories and tales etc. The series of festivals and events are made colorful and more festive by the folk performances. The performers primarily hail from the adjoining villages making the Devalaya a cultural habitat throughout the year. The folk people get relief from their comatose after the day-long works enjoying the performances.

The legends, myths, tales, magic, historicity etc. are being instilled in the minds of people for ages and transmitted in both oral and written forms to the new generation people. This happens to be a cultural bondage among the people generation by generation. In compatibility of the environment, the Devalaya is bound to be a repository of culture which is on the edge of extinction with urbanization process.

CONCLUSION:

The segments presented in this paper narrate various subject matters of the Devalaya. But all the things carry the prominence about the treasury of cultural elements among which many of them are disappearing from the general society. The indigenous cultural items are being substituted by the imported ones through the globalization process. Our new generation people are widely exposed to the media, internet, social site etc. The people of Belsor or Bilweswar are not exception to the common phenomena. But the Devalaya has been fostering the cultural items traditionally nurtured and grown up with the help of its sacredness for centuries. It may be assumed that these would endure for ever till the existence of the stature of the Bilweswar Devalaya.

Glossary:

Bilweswar: An Assamese compound word combining Bilwa (wood-apple) and Iswar(god) that means-Lord of Wood-Apple(Shiva). The legend related with the Devalaya supports the another derivation of the word Bilweswar. According to it, Birina+Ishar> Birineswar>Bilweswar that means the Lord of Birina(Reed Grass).

Devalaya: An Assamese compound word that means 'Home of God or Goddess'

Pyke: It is an Assamese word which is derived from the feudal system under the Ahom regime. But here, it is used to mean the people who are assigned with specific duty e.g. supply of flowers, ropes, banana leaf; maintenance of store; to supervise the pilgrimage; to purchase the essential materials for the Devalaya ; to settle the disputes etc. to render for the Devalaya and its events from the commencement of patronage by the Ahom kings. Each Pyke consists of four people.

Devalaya Mores: The specific traditions of the Devalaya and prevailing customs among the Devalaya community.

Bhaira: A unique folk-theatrical performance of Nalbari district that is a sub genre of Oja-Pali where gestures are much stressed and differs in attire from Oja-Pali. It is a colloquial word for Bhaoriya which means a clown.

Nam-prasanga: collective singing in praise of god or goddess which is a Vaisnavite tradition pioneered by Srimanta Sankardev.

Bhagawat paath: recitation of the hymns of the Sri Bhagawat-one of the eighteenth Puran.

Kirtan: singing hymns as prayer in the name of Lord Visnu according to Vaishnavite tradition.

Nagara: moderately big drum made of earthen half-elliptical body and leather which is the chief musical folk instrument for Nagara Naam with big bell-metal cymbals.

Nagara Naam: singing with acting in group of classics based stories with rhythmic beating of big drums which variety is in practice in lower Assam.

Putula Naach: dances of the puppet for religious and social purposes. The performance of the puppet is handled by the human beings with dexterity in theatrical mode. It is one kind of traditional animation.

Bhog: daily meal for the visiting devotees.

Bhogdanimati: Paddy lands of the Devalaya of which harvest is used as the Bhog of the Devalaya.

Chat: last month according to Assamese calendar.

Doul Utsav: known as Holi which is originally a fertility festival. Red vermilion is used as a symbol of the menstrual discharge during this festival.

Jeth & Ahar: second and third month of Assamese calendar respectively.

Pira: a folk furniture made of wood with four short legs used for sitting during worship and eating meal in Assamese domestic life.

Baratar Sadhu: It is known as also Ukani Burhir Sadhu amongst the local people. The legend of Ukani Burhi says that a Brahmin old woman who had an imbecile son to whom she was accustomed to tell story. But that practice of story telling was shifted to the Devalaya and perpetually prevails in the Devalaya by the older and experienced individuals on the last Monday of Jeth Mah-the second month of Assamese calendar after the completion of

Jethua Naam-a kind of singing in praise of god or goddess performed during Jeth Maah. It is assumed to have a relation with the fertility festival of Barat in Tiwa Community in Assam. As a matter of fact, the stories are primarily told in front of the childless women aspiring fertility to bear children.

Tetelir Sarbat: a juicy mixture of cool water and ripe tamarind fruits. It is helpful for the people with cardio-vascular ailment as it dilutes the cholesterol in blood. Though it is folk practice; however it has medical significance.

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