

Archaeological remains of Vaisnavism in Northern Rarha

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ABSTRACTS: Basically worship is the outcome of devotional realization. This devotional realization can also be termed as *bhakti*. During worship a devotee concentrates himself or herself to the god or goddess which he or she worships. Vaisnavism or the worship of visnu was very popular in ancient India. The word Vaisnavism is related with Visnu cult. This Vaisnavism or the Visnu cult was the composite form of three divine entities- the man god Vasudeva- Krishna, the vedic god Visnu and the cosmic god Narayana. Visnu worship was more or less popular in every parts of Indian sub-continent in a same period of time or different period of time. The region northern Rarha or Uttara-Rarha was not excluded from this popularity of Visnu worship. The region Rarha is mentioned in different literary as well as inscriptional sources. Most probably on the east the regional division of Uttara-Rarha was bounded by the river Bhagirathi and the large tracts of modern district Murshidabad, some parts of Burdwan district (mainly Katwa subdivision), modern district Birbhum were included in this region. Visnu worship was in vogue in this region during 7th to 12th century CE. Discoveries of inscriptions as well as number of images and fragments prove the prevalence of Vaisnavism. Among the five fold aspects or forms Vaisnava ideology (para, vyuha, vibhava, antaryamin, arca) Vyuha and Vibhava concept was in practice in this region. A number of places became important centres of Vaisnava faith, few of them continued its importance with new philosophy and rituals.

KEYWORDS: worship, phenomena, samapadasthanaka, yielded, deity, attributes

1. INTRODUCTION

In Indian subcontinent religion played a significant role in common people's life from the earliest time to the modern times. In the context of religious history of ancient India so many cults, sects were present. Among them Brahmanical cults were most important. In the context of Ancient Indian history Brahmanical pantheon comprises with number of cults. Brahmanical faith distinguishes itself by emphasizing on image worship. These numerous images represent various conceptions of divine presence. Vaisnavism or Visnu cult can be distinguished from other cult by distinctive image types representing various aspects of Visnu. Basically worship is the outcome of devotional realization. This devotional realization can also be termed as *bhakti*. During worship a devotee concentrates himself or herself to the god or goddess which he or she worships. We can rewrite the religious history of Ancient India from various sources. Among them iconography or the study of icons or images and inscriptions have an important role to play. Iconography deals with the deities. We can get more or less authentic scenario of the growth of different cults in a particular period from the icons and their characteristics. On the other hand we can also get information about the religious history from the inscriptions which were issued in different parts of Indian-subcontinent by different persons.

Vaisnavism or the worship of visnu was very popular in ancient India. The word Vaisnavism is related with Visnu cult. This Vaisnavism or the Visnu cult was the composite form of three divine entities- the man god Vasudeva- Krishna, the vedic god Visnu and the cosmic god Narayana.¹ Visnu worship was more or less popular in every parts of Indian sub-continent in a same period of time or different period of time. The region Northern-Rarha or Uttara-Rarha was not excluded from this popularity of Visnu worship.

The region Rarha is mentioned in different literary as well as inscriptional sources. From the Jain text *acarangasutta* we come to know that Mahavira passed through the region Ladha. It can be easily said that Ladha and Rarha was the same region. From the same text we come to know that this region was divided into two parts. One is Vajjabhumi and another is subbhabhumi.² Tirumalai inscription of Rajendra chola corroborates such division of Rarha region. The term Uttir-Ladam which is synonymous with Uttara-Rarha is mentioned in the Tirumalai inscription.³ The Belava copper plate of Bhojavarman also mentioned about a village Siddhala in Uttara-Rarha.⁴ Village Siddhala has been identified with the village Siddhangram of Birbhum district. So modern district Birbhum was a part of Northern-Rarha. From Naihati Grant of Vallalasenawe come to know about a grant of a village Vallahittha in Svalpadaksina vithi of Uttara-Rarha mandala of Bardhamana bhukti.⁵ Vallahittha has been identified with the village Balutiya of modern Burdwan district. It is located in the northern side of Burdwan district. If we take this as a reliable source, then we can say that Northern part of Burdwan district was also a part of Northern-Rarha.

Most probably on the east the regional division of Uttara-Rarha was bounded by the river Bhagirathi and the large tracts of modern district Murshidabad was also included in this regional division.⁶ So it is quite clear that the regional division Uttara Rarha was an important part of Ancient Bengal. This region carries some

religious history along with other aspects of history. Epigraphs as well as large number of images of deities bear testimony of religious history of this region. Among the various cults Visnu was worshiped by the royal families as well as common people of the region Northern-Rarha.

As per available sources the earliest reference of Vaisnavism in Bengal dated back to 4th century CE. We come to know from Susunia Rock inscription that the Chandravarman of Pokharna dedicated the cave in honour of lord *Cakrasvamin* (Visnu) and he himself mentioned as the servant of *Cakrasvamin*.⁷ Though, the earliest reference of Visnu worship in Bengal dated back to 4th century CE. In the context of Uttara-Rarha we do not have such references. Available source evince that in Northern-Rarha Visnu worship became an important religious phenomena between 9th to 12th c. CE. A number of images of different forms of Visnu has been discovered so far from the region.

Generally in the context of Bengal we have number of epigraphical evidences which mentioned various types of names of the god Visnu. In Northern-Rarha we have very few epigraphical evidence which proves the prevalence of Visnu cult in this region.

One inscription of Pala ruler Nayapala(C.1027-1043 CE) has been found from the village Sian of Birbhum district. This inscription started with the invocation of god Visnu. Though the inscription is partially damaged but some portion is legible. The inscription started with “*siddhan namo bhagabate vasudevaya*”. From this line it is clear the issuer of this inscription shows respect to the god Visnu. Among the thirty five stanza of this inscription 33rd stanza is dedicated to the god Visnu. First part of this stanza is damaged. Later part of this stanza probably mentioned about the image of Vasudeva Krishna, lover of Rukmini.⁸ This information establish the evince of Visnu worship in Northern-Rarha during 11th century CE. Paikor inscription of Kalachuri king Karna(C. 1041-1071 CE) referred about the prevalence of Vaisnava cult in this region. Presently the village Paikor is located in North-east side of Birbhum district and adjacent to Murshidabad district. Two lines are ascribed as

“*deva dwija guru bhajanto vaisnavadayah swan bhinatti* **

Nibedayan sraddhasmin karmani rajasrikarnadevasya”⁹

It clearly shows the respect of king Karna to Vaisnava cult.

Though the epigraphical evidence of Visnu worship in Northern-Rarha is rare but a number of images of Visnu as well as fragments which have been found from this region prove the prevalence of Visnu cult in this region. Now we shall look into images of Visnu found so far from this region. It will help us to reconstruct the scenario of Vaisnavism in Northern-Rarha.

An important Visnu image has been found from a Village named Chaitanpur of Burdwan district. The image is four handed. Lower right and left hand is placed on the gada and cakra. The ayudhas were personified as gadadevi and cakrapurusa. Upper Right and left hand of this image old is Lotus and a Conch-shell. According to J.N.Banerjea the image belongs to 7th century CE and a unique abhicarikasthanaka murti.¹⁰ According to R.P.Chanda It is an inferior specimen of the Gupta period. This is probably the earliest Visnu image found from this region.

Another important Visnu image of 10th century CE is preserved in West Bengal State Archaeological museum. It was found from village Manigram of Murshidabad district. The image is in Sridhara form and *samapadasthanaka* posture. The image is standing on a *pancaratha* pedestal. This is for armed Vishnu image holds Lotus in lower right hand, cakra in upper right, gada in upper left hand and lower left hand probably holds sankha. Central deity is accompanied by Bhudevi in right and Sridevi in left side.¹¹

A partially damaged Visnu image of 11th century CE found from Sagardighi of Mirshidabad district. It is also preserved in West Bengal State Archaeological museum. Except the upper right hand which holds the cakra, symbols of other three hands are damaged. The image is standing on a *pancaratha* pedestal and on *samapadasthanaka* posture. The central deity is accompanied by Bhudevi and Sridevi.¹²

A fine specimen of Visnu image of 11th century CE was found from Jalbandha of Murshidabad district. Now it is preserved in West Bengal State Archaeological museum. The image is Trivikrama form of Visnu and it is standing on *samapadasthanaka* posture. This four armed Visnu image holds padma, gada, cakra and sankha in his lower right, upper right, and upper left and lower left hand respectively. As usual Bhudevi and Sridevi are standing right and left side of the image¹³. Another damaged Visnu image of 11th century CE was found from the same village. In this image Visnu is on his vahana, Garuda. We do not have any scope to identify the

symbols of four handed (probably) Visnu image. Except this a number of fragments of Visnu image have been found from this place. These fragments belong to the 10th to 12th century. Provenance of such images and fragments speak about the presence of Vishnu or see in this region during 10th to 12th century CE.

A specimen of Trivikrama form of Visnu of 11th century CE was found from Gobardhandanga of Murshidabad district. The image is standing on *samapadasthanaka* posture as well as on *pancaratha* pedestal. As usual four handed Visnu holds padma, gada, cakra and sankha in his lower right, upper right, upper left and the lower left hand¹⁴. Another Trivikrama Form of Visnu image was found from unidentified place of Murshidabad district. All the features of Trivikrama form are prominent in this image.¹⁵

A number of Visnu image of different forms are kept in Jiaganj museum which were found from different places of Murshidabad and Birbhum district. Among these five are *sthanaka* Visnu, one is Narsimha form and one is Vaisnavi or Narayani. All these belong to 9th to 12th century CE. All these evince that the worship of Visnu was prevalent in this portion of northern Rarha. It may be noted that most of the Visnu images in well-known classification of 24 forms or in *avatara* forms are known from a tract bordering Birbhum and Murshidabad district. Important sites like Sagardighi have yielded important stone and metal images depicting Visnu with his consorts.

A damaged image of Visnu was found from a village Ketugram of Burdwan district. It is a standing figure with *samapadasthanaka* posture placed in *saptaratha* pedestal. Garuda is seen in the pedestal. Central deity is accompanied by his consorts¹⁶. A fine specimen of Visnu was found from same place. Both images belong to 12th century CE. Attributes of these images clearly prove the Sridhar form of Visnu. Among the four hands of Visnu lotus is marked in the lower right, upper right hand holds cakra, upper left hand gada and lower left hand holds sankha. As usual central deity is accompanied by his consorts¹⁷. Both the images are preserved in West Bengal State archaeological museum.

A sitting image of Visnu of 9th century CE was found from Mangalkot of Burdwan district. Now it is preserved in Burdwan university museum. Though the image is partially damaged but Garuda is seen in the pedestal. The image is placed on full blown Lotus. A fragment of Visnu image was found from same place. It is also preserved in Burdwan university museum. This fragmentary Visnu image depicts upper portion and is seen with upper right hand holding gada and upper left hand holding cakra. Except these a number of fragments of Visnu were found which can be dated back to 9th to 12th century CE. These are kept in university museum.

A Visnu image was found from a village Deulia of Burdwan district. It can be dated between 9th to 12th centuries CE. Now it is in Burdwan university museum. This figure is standing on *samapadasthanaka* posture and placed in *pancaratha* pedestal. Garuda is seen in the pedestal. Though some portion of lower right hand is damaged but other attributes probably evince the Trivikrama form of Visnu. Upper right hand is holding Gada, upper left is holding cakra, and lower left hand is holding sankha. Vidyadharas are seen in the upper back slab. As usual Visnu is accompanied by his consorts.

A specimen of Visnu image 11th or 12th century CE was found from village Mallarpur of Birbhum district. It can be dated back to 11th or 12th century CE. It is a standing figure on *samapadasthanaka* posture placed on a *pancaratha* pedestal. Attributes of four hands of this image are lotus in lower right, gada in upper right, cakra in upper left and Sankha in lower right hand. Sankhapurusa is seen on right side if Bhudevi and cakrapurusa on left side of sridevi.¹⁸

A number of Visnu images can be seen in the village Paikor of Birbhum district. According to the villagers a Narasimha form of Visnu Image was installed by Kalachuri King Karna. It can be located still in a place called Narayanachatvara of this village. The name Narayanachatvara proves the importance of vaisnava cult in this village. Another Visnu image is kept in a temple of the same village. Still it is worshipped by a Brahmin family. This four handed Visnu holds gada in upper right hand and cakra in upper left hand. Attributes of other two hands are not clear. The image is standing on a *samapadasthanaka* posture. Another one specimen of Visnu image is kept in same temple. A peculiar religious custom is still in practice. Animals are sacrificed in front of a Vaisnava temple. Flesh and fish are offered to Gopala(child Krishna). It is totally opposite of Vaisnava faith.

A fine specimen of Visnu image is in Village Jajigram of Birbhum district. It can be dated back to 10th to 12th century CE. The image is still or worshipped by the villagers. This four handed standing Visnu is on *samapadasthanaka* posture.

From the above evidences we can summaries that among the 24 forms of Visnu only a few forms can be traced in the context of Visnu worship in northern Rarha.

One of the most significant development in Vaishnavism of Bengal or for, that, matter throughout much of this subcontinent was the composition and popularisation of *Geetavinda* authored by Jayadeva who hails from Kendubilla, identified with present day Kenduli village of Birbhum district. Jayadeva flourished in 12th century CE in the court of Sena king Laksmanasena. Jayadeva popularised the idea of *Dasavatara* through his poetic composition. More importantly the divine love of Radha Krishna what is also provided with highly defined literary idiom? Kendubilla or Kenduli came to develop as an important centre of Vaisnavism and later on became the melting pot of bhakti tradition articulated through the philosophy and musical performance of the Bauls. Transformation of Kenduli from an orthodox Vaisnava centre to a seat of popular egalitarian philosophy and rituals is a historical process that merits detail investigation.

In the context of Northern-Rarha it is very difficult to say the actual state of Vaisnavism. Basically we know about five fold aspects or forms Vaisnava ideology. These are *Para* or the highest, *Vyuha* or emanatory, *Vibhava* or incarnatory, *Antaryamin* or the inner controller of all beings and *Arca* or the images. From the above discussion it can be said that Vyuha doctrine as well as Vibhava concept was in vogue in Northern-Rarha during the course of our study. Except that in some places of this region local cultures were incorporated into Vaisnava faith. Different places like Sagardighi of Mrshidabad district, Ketugram of Burdwan district, Kenduli of Birbhum district became important centers of Vaisnava faith. Few of them also continued their existence with some new philosophy and rituals in later period.

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