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Bilweshwar Devalaya: What Lies Beneath the Legend?

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Abstract

Is the Bilweshwar Temple of Belsor, Nalbari, a non-Aryan shrine later Aryanised? A popular myth recounts the story of a priest who followed his cow and discovered Bilweshwar. But what is the historical truth behind it? Dr Maheswar Neog says that King Nagakhsa built it in 1529. Could a king of a tiny state generate a surplus for raising such shrines? The Ahom kings rebuilt it according to stone inscriptions. There is uncertainty about Nagakhsa or Nagshankar. The fact that Shiva is claimed as a non-Aryan God, later Aryanized alone, can't establish that Bilweshwar was originally a non-Aryan shrine. There are other indications. Many ethnic groups in Assam worshipped Burha and Burhi as part of their magic ritual of worshipping male and female organs. The main idols of Shiva and Parvati of Bilweshwar are nudes, and this is unusual in Aryan shrines. Idols of Brahma and Bishnu are not so. In some cases, nudity is covered by *rudrakshas*. This exemplifies a mixture of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures. Here, a strange tradition is followed to date: the vegetarian god Shiva is offered the cooked meat of a goat. Buffaloes are sacrificed during Durga Puja, but the flesh is not taken by the locals; Bodo people from nearby villages take it. What is the significance of these customs? Does this indicate that some non-Aryans were promoted to caste Hindu status but could not completely abandon their habits? So they retain some non-Aryan habits of their distant past? "Belsor" may be a word of Mongoloid origin. A nearby village Bihampur, is Bodo in its origin. "Biham" in Bodo means "daughter-in-law". The Bodo word "dab" is in usage at Bihampur among a community. The predominance of the "-ng" sound is seen among the caste Hindus of Belsor. All these strongly indicate a non-Aryan ambience around the Bilweshwar temple in the distant past. Proper historical research of these may reveal many lost but exciting truths of history.

Keywords: Bilweshwar, Belsor. Non-Aryan, Bodo, Nagakhsa.

Introduction

It is an accepted fact of Indian history that many non-Aryan deities, tribes, myths, folk traditions, rituals, and places of worship were Aryanised in later periods. Many scholars hold the view that Shiva, one of the principal deities of Hinduism, was originally a non-Aryan god. When the spread of Buddhism in India challenged Hinduism, Brahmins at different times undertook programmes of Aryanisation of non-Aryan elements to counter that challenge and thereby played an important role in the expansion of Aryan religion. In this context, the presence of certain significant indicators raises an important question in our minds: is the Bilweshwar Devalaya, located in Belsor village of Nalbari district in Assam, actually an Aryanised non-Aryan sacred centre?

Sadly, till today, no one has been able to uncover the complete truth about this temple through rigorous historical research by piercing through the thick fog of legend and conjecture. We are neither students nor teachers nor researchers of history to undertake such systematic investigation. However, with the help of a few intriguing facts, we shall place some important questions before future interested researchers.

Uncertain Origins and Historical Records

Dr Maheswar Neog, in his book *Pavitra Asom* (Sacred Assam), notes that the date of the establishment of this temple is not known. The *Yogini Tantra*, a text of the sixteenth-seventeenth century, mentions a hillock¹ named “Bilwashri.” There is a local tradition that at or near the present site of the Bilweshwar Devalaya, there once existed a “mound of red soil.” However, it cannot be definitively claimed that the “Bilwashri” of the *Yogini Tantra* refers to the hillock of Bilweshwar. Referring to the *Kamarupa Buranji*, Dr Neog states that in 1529 CE, a king named Nagaksha built a monastery (math) for this temple. Later, the Ahom Swargadeo Lakshmisimha rebuilt the dilapidated monastery, as mentioned in an inscription on a stone slab there. Swargadeo Shivasimha also granted land to the temple.

Little information is available in the chronicles about who Nagaksha was. If he were a sixteenth-century king, then he must have ruled a small principality, since at that time the Ahoms and the Kochas dominated eastern and western Assam, respectively. It is difficult to assume that the ruler of such a small state could have generated sufficient surplus to construct monasteries and temples. It is said that Nagaksha was also known as Nagashankar. If so, could he be the Nagashankar or Narashankar of the fourth century who built the famous Nagashankar temple at Chatia of Shonitpur and Biswanath districts of Assam? In that case, the age of the Bilweshwar Devalaya would not be five hundred years but seventeen hundred years. However, the architecture of the present structure resembles Ahom architecture. It is also possible that the monastery built by Nagaksha no longer exists, and that the present one is the structure rebuilt by Lakshmisimha. The inscription on the stone slab at the temple also supports this view:

“Billeshwara-jirna-mathoddhara...Sri Srilakshmasinghena uddharita... Jirnamathah”²

Clues of Aryanisation and Cultural Fusion

Let us now turn to the question of Aryanisation. As already mentioned, many historians believe that the originally non-Aryan deity Shiva was later Aryanised. Thomas R. Trautmann writes that John Marshall “believed that the worship of Shiva is indicated on a seal of the Indus Civilisation and that Shiva-worship was passed on and absorbed into the Vedic religion.”³ In contrast to the relatively refined attire of Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva wears a tiger skin and serpents. He is often known as a naked or semi-naked deity and is fond of consuming *bhang*. All these point to his non-Aryan origins.

However, merely because the Bilweshwar Devalaya is primarily a Shiva temple, it cannot be concluded that it was originally a non-Aryan sacred site, since Shiva had certainly already been

Aryanised long before the establishment of this temple. Our assumption that it was originally a non-Aryan centre rests on other indicators.

Among many communities in Assam, alongside *linga* and *yonis* worship, there existed the worship of paired male and female deities such as *Burha Devata* and *Burhi Gosani*. Perhaps, in ancient times, the people of the Bilweshwar region also worshipped such a pair of deities. Over time, as a result of Aryanisation, these may have been transformed into Shiva and Parvati. In Aryanised forms, naked images of Shiva and Parvati are generally not seen. Yet, on the walls of the Bilweshwar temple monastery, the carved images of Shiva-Parvati (?) are completely naked. Along with Brahma and Vishnu, there are other images as well; even multiple images of Shiva appear, some of which are not naked. In some figures, the nudity has been covered by carving *rudraksha* beads. But the two principal figures carved on the lower part of the eastern wall are naked. This is perhaps a beautiful example of the fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures. It may be that the newly Aryanised people could not completely erase the characteristics of their earlier deities.

Aryan Shiva is a vegetarian deity. Yet, a startling fact is that in this Shiva temple, Mahadeva Shiva is offered goat meat as *bhog* (consecrated food). If this had not originally been a non-Aryan sacred site, how did such a strange tradition arise? Does this not clearly indicate a non-Aryan ritual practice? Is there any other Shiva temple where goat meat is offered to Shiva?

During Durga Puja, buffalo sacrifice is performed here. However, the local people do not eat the meat of the sacrificed buffalo. According to tradition, the Bodo people from nearby areas come and divide and take away the meat. Could it be that Belsor village itself was originally a settlement of non-Aryan Bodo people? Centuries ago, they may have sacrificed buffaloes at their sacred centre and consumed the meat. Later, under the influence of Aryanisation, some of them may have transformed into *Kalitas*. Is it possible that those who became Aryanised and rose to higher caste status continued the buffalo sacrifice but stopped eating the meat, while the Bodos, who did not undergo such transformation, continued to consume it?

Linguistic and Cultural Traces

Linguistic evidence further strengthens this line of inquiry. Many say that the name "Belsor" is derived from "Bilweshwar." Numerous non-Aryan words were later Aryanised and presented as being of Sanskrit origin. Bishnuprasad Rabha has shown that the word "Brahmaputra" derives from the Bodo word "Bhullungbuthur." Could "Belsor" also be of Bodo origin? Adjacent to Belsor is a village named "Bihampur," which clearly appears to be a mixture of a Bodo and a Sanskrit word — *biham* meaning "bride" or "daughter-in-law" in Bodo, and *pur* meaning "town" in Sanskrit. In the Kharshitha locality of Bihampur, some people refer to a particular field as "dabo." In Bodo, *dab* means field. Moreover, these people's speech shows a frequent use of nasalisation, a feature typical of Mongoloid languages like Bodo — for example, *khang* (I eat), *yang* (I go), etc. This feature is also present in the spoken language of Belsor.

Towards a Deeper History

Even today, scattered elements of indigenous language, ritual, and memory lie embedded in the cultural soil around Bilweshwar. Careful archaeological excavation, epigraphic analysis, linguistic study, and documentation of oral traditions could one day strip away centuries of accreted legend and reveal a far older and more complex history.

Until then, the Bilweshwar Devalaya stands as a living testament to Assam's layered past — where indigenous roots and Aryan traditions intertwined, resisted, and reshaped one another. Will some future researcher, like a skilled diver retrieving a conch from the depths of the sea, bring to light the long-hidden truth behind Bilweshwar?

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