

Priests and the Ancient Temples of Guwahati: A Study on the Nature of their Engagement in the Temples

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ABSTRACT

Guwahati city is dotted with a number of ancient temples. These temples have great significance as the places of worship as well as of great attraction of the tourists. A good number of pilgrims and other visitors visit these temples and people serving these temples are also not less. Priests are the most important part of the functioning of these temples. Most of the priests engaged in these temples of Guwahati are the descendants of the families assigned to worship in the temples by the Ahom kings. In the present work an attempt has been made to throw light on the nature of the engagement of the priests in these temples and also to describe their dependency on the temples and some other related aspects of their engagement. Both primary and secondary data sources have been used in this study and the collected data are presented using appropriate methods.

1. Introduction

The temples are the most important religious artifacts in Hinduism. In ancient times, the Kings of different dynasties offered patronages to the temples for the smooth functioning of the temples' activities. In Assam also the ancient temples receiving the royal patronages are not less (Adhikary, 2001). Guwahati city, which was famous as Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa in early days is dotted with a good number of ancient temples. These temples received royal endowments from different dynasties in different periods in the form of land, men and other moveable and non-moveable properties. For performing the daily worshipping in these temples priests were assigned with endowments in the form of land and other properties (Adhikary, 2006). In most of the ancient temples of Guwahati, the descendants of the priest families have been performing the worshipping following the tradition of their families (Bhattacharyya, 2009). In the present study, an attempt has been made to throw light on the nature of the engagement of the priests of these ancient temples and to highlight various other aspects related with their engagement.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the present study are

- to throw light on the nature of engagement of the priests, and
- to discuss different aspects of the engagement of the priests.

3. Methodology

In this study, both the primary and secondary data sources are used. Books, journals and different published and unpublished documents, etc. are the secondary sources for collecting different information while primary data are collected through questionnaire survey and interviews with the priests and other persons related with the temple. There are 409 priests engaged in these 14 selected ancient temples and out of them 166 priests were interviewed randomly in all the selected temples. The data collected from the field as well as

various secondary sources have been processed and analyzed by using appropriate quantitative techniques.

4. Ancient temples of Guwahati

Guwahati is dotted with many ancient temples of different times and different deities. These temples consist of three major cults, i.e. *Shaiva*, *Shakti* and *Vaisnava*. Sukreswar, Umananda, Vasisthasram, Manikarneswar and Rudreswar Devalaya belong to the *Saiva* cult while Kamakhya, Ugratara, Mangal Chandi and Dirgheswari Devalaya belong to the *Shakti* cult and are also very important *saktipeeths* of India. Among these, the Kamakhya Devalaya is very famous worldwide. Janardan Devalaya, Pandunath Devalaya and Aswakranta Devalaya have Bishnu as the presiding deity and thus they belong to the *Vaishnava* cult. Nabagraha temple is the only temple of *graha upasana* (planet worship) in this region and was known as the centre of astronomy from ancient times (Choudhury, 2009).

5. Places of Original Residence

It has been mentioned earlier that the priests of the ancient temples generally belong to the families who were brought to Assam by the Kings in different periods to perform worshipping in the temples and are known as *bardeuri* of the temples. The forefathers of these families were assigned landed properties in different places of Assam mainly in undivided Kamrup district. Therefore, the priests of these temples are not the inhabitants of the temple area. The geographical location and the topographical characteristics of these temples and the city may be the reason of establishing these families in other places far from their respective temples. These ancient temples are situated either in the top of very small hillocks or on the bank of rivers or amidst the river without having adequate facilities for agricultural activities. On the other hand, the city is surrounded by hills and hillocks. But exception is found in the case of Kamakhya Devalaya. Here most of the priest families reside on the same hill in the proximity of the temple.

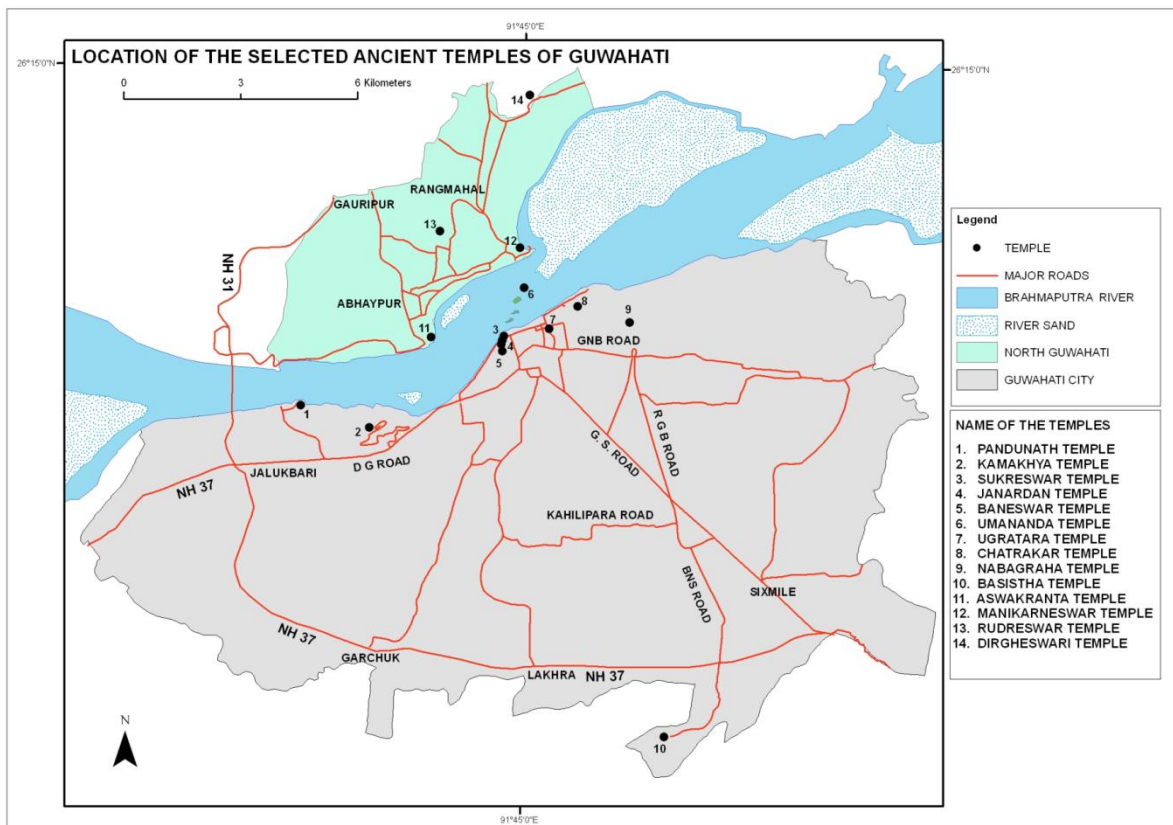


Fig. 1

Table 1

Places of Original Residence of the Priests Engaged in the Ancient Temples of Guwahati

District	Number of Priests	Percentage of Priests
Kamrup	115	69.28
Nalbari	41	24.70
Barpeta	9	5.42
Darrang	1	0.60
Total	166	100.00

Source: Primary Survey, 2014-15

The places of original residence of the priests engaged in these temples vary and most of the priests engaged in the ancient temples of Guwahati city are from Kamrup district followed by Nalbari, Barpeta and Darrang districts (Table 1).

6. Reasons of Engagement

In the 10 ancient temples of Guwahati, the daily worshipping and other religious activities are performed by the members of the *bardeuri* families. But, in four small temples, viz., Pandunath, Rudreswar, Manikarneswar and Baneswar the descendents of the ancient priests (*bardeuri*) no longer perform the regular worship and here the priests are appointed from other *brahman* families which have no prior relations with these temples. Number of these *bardeuri* families and its male members are high but only some of them are now involved in these temples' priestly activities. It has been observed that mainly the people who are not engaged in other economic activities like service or business, etc., are involved in the

temples as priests. Maintaining the family tradition and earning livelihood both have influence in engagement of the priests of the *bardeuri* families while earning livelihood is the only reason behind their engagement in these temples in case of the priests from other *Brahman* families engaged in the above mentioned four temples.

Table 2

Reason of engagement of the Priests in the Ancient Temples of Guwahati

Reason	Number of Priests	Percentage of Priests
To Maintain the Tradition	78	47.00
Financial	34	20.48
Both	54	32.53
Total	166	100.00

Source: Primary Survey, 2014-15

7. Period of Engagement

The period of the works of the priests engaged in these temples varies. It is found that the tenure of their work varies from minimum of one and half year to maximum of 45 years. The surveyed data shows that the percentages of priests serving the temples for different duration are less in the two categories, i. e. less than 5 years and more than 30 years (9.64 per cent and 7.83 per cent respectively). The priests who have been working for more than 30 years are found in three temples, viz., Basisthashram, Chatrakar and Kamakhya. In Basistha, three priests are working for such long tenure continuously and among them one has been working for last 45 years and this time span of work is the highest among all the

priests of these temples. The main priest of Chatrakar temple is serving for more than 37 years. On the other hand, in Kamakhya temple, 7 are found to be involved in priestly work of the temple for more than 30 years and among them two priests have been working for 37 years each. There is no entry or exit age or tenure for the priests and therefore such long period of work is observed. It is important to note that in present days also the profession of priesthood attracts people. In this regard, the percentages of priests engaged in last five years in these

temples may be mentioned. The percentages of such priests engaged in the temples of Pandunath, Sukreswar, Umananda, Aswakranta, Nabagraha and Kamakhya are found to be 50.00 per cent, 13.33 per cent, 14.29 per cent, 12.5 per cent, 16.67 per cent and 8.79 per cent respectively of the total priests interviewed in these temples. In the remaining temples no priests are found who has been working for less than 5 years (Fig. 2).

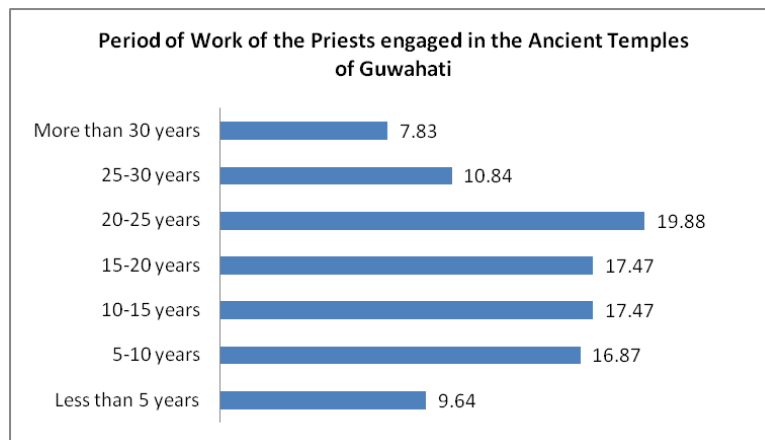


Fig. 2

Source: Primary Survey, 2014-15

8. Working Hours

The activities relating to daily worshipping starts in the morning and continued for whole day till the evening. Therefore, the priests and other workers have to be busy in temples' activity for a long time. It has been observed that the working hours of these workers vary from maximum of 10-12 hours to minimum of 4-5 hours. Regarding the working hours of the priests of these ancient temples, the data says that 30.12 per cent priests work for more than 10 hours in a day. On the other hand, the percentage of the priests working for less than 8 hours in a day is only 15.66 per cent of the total priests of these temples. 54.22 per cent priests work for 8 to 10 hours in

a day (Table 3). It has been found that the priests working for more than 10 hours are engaged in three temples viz. Kamakhya, Nabagraha and Sukreswar. In Kamakhya temple, among the total priests interviewed, 43.96 per cent priests works for more than 10 hours. The flow of pilgrims is very high in Kamakhya temple and therefore to serve the pilgrims the priests have to be engaged for more time. While in case of the other temples, in normal days, the flow of the pilgrims generally decreases towards the evenings after offering and distributing of the *bhog*. So, the priests can relax for some time till the offering of the *aarati* in the evening.

Table 3

Working Hours of the Priests engaged in the Ancient Temples of Guwahati

Working Hours	Number of Priests	Percentage of Priests
4-8 hours	26	15.66
8-10 hours	90	54.22
More than 10 hours	50	30.12
Total	166	100.00

Source: Primary Survey, 2014-15

9. Conclusion

The ancient temples of Guwahati are the places where different categories of people are engaged in different activities and among them the priests are the most important category of workers. The descendants of the priests are involved in the daily worshipping of their respective temples with few exceptions. The tradition of serving the temples still motivates the descendants of the *bardeuris* to involve themselves in the temple activities. On the other hand, the priestly activities in

these temples are good source of income and thus a fair number of priests are motivated to do priestly activities for earning their livelihood. While the period of work and the working hours of these priests are considered, variations are observed in both the cases. It is found that some of them are engaged in the temples as priests for more than 35 years and some other have choose this very recently. In case of the working hours too their working hours on a day varies from 4 hours to more than 10 hours in different temples.

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