

Editor

**DR. BINOD SARMAH**

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## **Religion, Culture and Society (Volume: I)**

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## Chapter 4

# BUDDHISM IN HAJO: MERGING MYTH AND REALITY

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The prevalence of Buddhism in Assam is a historical fact. Buddhism entered Assam in the ancient period itself. Both the literary and archaeological evidence prove the historical development of Buddhism in Assam. All the three major forms of Buddhism i.e. Hinayana, Mahayana, and tantric forms of Buddhism were prevalent in Assam.

Several sites associated with Buddhism have been discovered in Assam. These sites contain sufficient Buddhist archaeological remains to prove the existence of Buddhism in Assam. In the western part of Assam, especially in the Sri Surya Pahar area and its nearby places like Barbhita, Paglatak, Jogighopa, Dokaidol and Bhaitbari have contain ample archaeological evidence to point out the historical development of Buddhism in Assam. However evidence of Buddhism is given by quite a few archaeological remains discovered at various sites in present Guwahati also. Such archaeological sites include the

Narakasura hill, Aswaklanta, Urvashi, the Kamakhya temple premise and so on. Hajo, a village situated on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, contains linkage with Buddhism. The place has attracted followers of Brahmanical religion, Islam and Buddhism for many centuries. The Tibetan Buddhists believe that Kusinagara where Buddhas parinirvana took place was Hajo itself (Wadell, 1972; p.309). This myth has been continuing among the Tibetan Buddhists followers for many centuries.

Before going to discuss the main points of the research article, a proper and methodological survey of literature is important because it will fill up the gaps between the previous works and the present research article. There are a few works with important observations on Buddhism in early Assam. As this is only a research article it is not possible to make a review of all the materials. Therefore, an attempt has been made here to discuss those works which has some direct link with the topic of this research article.

The first such work is by titled *History of Buddhism in Assam: c.300BC-1200 AD* by S. Sasanananda. The book has discussed about Buddhism and Buddhist influence down the ages. The writer has discussed the literary evidence about the commencement of Buddhism in Assam in the third century BCE. He also discussed Hiuen Tsang's visit to Kamarupa in the seventh century CE. But the author is silent of the Buddhist linkages of Hajo.

The next important work done in this area is *Buddhism in Assam: From the earliest times to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD* by Boby Das. The work is objective and the author has done extensive library work. She has written a lot about Buddhism and its philosophical aspects. But in this book we do not found much information about the Buddhism in Hajo.

Prabin Chandra das in his book the *Blessed Land* gives a detail discussion on the socio-cultural and religious aspects of the temple of Hajo. However the work has done more from a cultural point of view.

D.B. Sarma in his book *Changing Cultural Mosaic of a village in Assam* gives a detail discussion on the temple of Hajo. However there is a dearth of information about the Buddhist linkages of Hajo in detail.

The present research article aims to find out the factors behind the emergence of the myth of Buddha's Parinirvana at Hajo. The article also tries to bring into light the Buddhist linkages of Hajo.

in stone' (Dalton, 1978, p.80). He advocates that the cloth, goggles and silvered noses were used 'to conceal mutilation' (ibid). Bidyaratna reports that some people considered the existing figure to be Buddhist figures. He describes the middle figure as huge, covered and having a monkey-like face and the 'calanta Hayagriva' figure as horse-headed. According to him in the Buddhist temples or the Buddhist Viharas many figures have been found having a face but no limbs or having a horse's head (Bidyaratna, 2014, p.31). He also advocates that the figures in this temple at Hajo are Buddhist because Hayagriva is an important God only in tantric Buddhism (Bidyaratna, 2014, pp.31-32). Facts about the original religious affiliation of the figures are known to a local family known as Biswasis (the faithful one). This family regularly changes the cloth of the figures. But the family always keeps this information secret. It needs to mention here that the Buddhist pilgrims are allowed to see the figures only from a distance, through the holes in the temple walls.

Tibetan Buddhists consider the biggest figure, generally called Madhaba or Hayagriva Madhava, to be Munir Muni Mahamuni (sage of Sages, the great Sage), meaning Buddha (Wadell, 1972, p.311).

Bhutanese Buddhists call it Nomo Guru i.e. Padmasambhava (ibid, p.314). Waddell identified the 'Garuda figure' (called by priests) to be of Tam-din, 'One of the finest forms of demons and on especial protection of Lamaism' (ibid). It should be mentioned here that the Brahmanical scriptures call the figure Hayagriva which is rarely worshiped in India. Banikanta Kakoti advocates that the Tibetan god Hayagriva was Vishnuvized at Hajo (Neog, 1998, p.32). The pre-Vishnuvized Hayagriva reached and gained importance in Hajo due to the already existing Assam-Bhutan-Tibet trade nexus.

The temple's paraphernalia also suggests some link with Buddhism. The temple has an idol-car for *calanta madhava* image and a canopy with an eight petalled lotus. These are significant characteristics of a Buddhist temple (Wadell, 1972, p.312). Moreover the six feet high basement of the temple also suggest some Buddhist link. The basement has a *gajathara* motif, with elephants facing outwards. The position of the elephants gives the impression of carrying the temple on their heads. The elephant figures, twenty inches in height, suggest that the basement was part of an ancient Buddhist

temple or of a stupa similar to the kailas cave temple of Elora (Wadell, 1972, pp.312-313). Moreover the tradition of Natis in the temple and the idol-car mentioned above has inspirations from the Jagannath temple at Puri in Odisha, which was originally a Buddhist temple (Bidyaratna, 2014, p.32). Again the word Daloi (the title of the high-priest of the temple and his counterparts in other temples in kamrupa) has come down from the seventeenth century Tibetan title of Dalai (Wadell, 1972, p.314). With images of heads of wild animals on the exterior walls, the house of the dalai of this madhava temple resembles "the house of an indo-Chinese chieftain" (ibid).

More important than these is a flat rock lying nearby the Kamaleswara temple. The Tibetan Buddhists believe it to be the place of Buddhas death and cremation. They tie rags from their dresses on the nearby bushes. The rock contains Tibetan tantric Buddhist aphorism like 'om mane padme hum', 'om ah hum', 'Hum' and others in Tibetan letters. According to P.C. Choudhury, the word 'padme' here means Padmasambhava (Choudhuri, 1964, p.402). It is important to mention here that at least four replicas of this spot have been made in Tibet.

Hajo has a tradition of taking a few figures from different temples in processions on the Makara- Sankranti by in mid- January. This ritual is known as sobha. The important point is this ritual resembles the Rathayatra Mohotsava (the car – carrying festival) of the Jagannatha temple at Puri, a Buddhist temple in origin.

Thus, the temple of Hajo has been some linkage with Buddhism. The myth of the *parinirvana* of Buddha in Hajo is wrongly, associated with the place. However, this myth gives insight that the place has importance among the Buddhists from different places and especially for the Tibetans. Moreover, the myth also brings into light the relation of Padmasambhava, the Buddhist scholar with this place. As Padmasambhava died in this place in eighth century CE the place must have some Buddhist connection from many centuries. Thus we can conclude that the temple of Hajo and the place definitely have some Buddhist Linkages.

### Notes:

1. Lamaism is a form of Buddhism in Tibet. It is a combination of Mahayana Buddhism of India and the antique Bon religion of Tibet.

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