Sage Vasistha in Sandhyachal

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The writer throws light on the visit of Vedic sage Vasistha to Kamrupa. He extensively quotes scriptures to prove sage Vasistha's presence at Sandhyachal, a place with hills and dales on the outskirt of the modern city of Guwahati. Devout Hindus have been offering worship to Lord Shiva there and taking holy dip in the Vasistha Kund, a stony water hole which is said to have been created by Vasistha himself. The write-up is of special interest to those inquisitive about the history and sanctity of this sacred place of pilgrimage.

Vasistha was one of the foremost seers of the Vedic era, who is said to be the composer of the seventh Mandala of the Rig Veda. Did this sage ever visit Sandhyachal of the easternmost region of the country and meditate here? In this connection, two things confront us. First, although different sages of eminence sojourned here at different times in the past, only Vasistha figured prominently in the mainland of Kamarupa as corroborated by the ancient texts. Secondly, a place with hills and dales referred to as Sandhyachal and associated with the name of the sage exists on the outskirt of the modern city of Guwahati, where the Ahom King Rajeswar Singha built a temple dedicated to the Lord Shiva in 1764 and later his brother, King Lakshmi Singha made some arrangements of regular worship of the Lord in the temple. Devout Hindus have been visiting this place from time immemorial to offer worship to the Lord Shiva and also to take a dip in the sacred waters of Vasistha Kunda - a stony water hole referred to have been created by Vasistha himself.

Sage Orbya, while narrating the sacred places of Kamarupa to King Sagara mentioned about this kunda thus - “there, in the middle part of Kamarupa, exists the Vasistha kunda created by Vasistha (Tatra Vasisthakundantu Vasisthamunisevitam/Kalika Purana, Chap. 51). Incidentally, sage Orbya visited this land in the past and consecrated the idol of Shiva at Devargaon or modern Dergaon of Golaghat district of upper Assam. So, he was well-versed in the general topography of this eastern part. It may, therefore, be assessed that, whatever the sage stated about the origin of the Vasistha kunda was based on fact.

Vasistha's presence in this hermitage of Sandhyachal has been authenticated by Kapot Muni - another sage of that period, who sent two young, aspiring ascetics named Vetal and Bhairav to seek guidance from Vasistha in their endeavour to earn the grace of Lord Shiva. The two ascetics after a long journey entered into the territory of Kamarupa and were jubilant to see Vasistha, who was immersed in the meditation of the Lord at Sandhyachal. They paid obeisance to Vasistha, who in turn initiated them into the path of meditation and also advised them to undertake penance at Natak Saila -- a place now known as Umananda, which exists in the form of an island on the river Brahmaputra near Guwahati. A Shiva temple exists here.

Further, it is said that the hillock in this hermitage was named as Sandhyachal by the divine beings for Vasistha performed sandhya (or meditation) on this hillock (K.P., Chap. 51). It is here that the king built the temple. In the garbhagriha of the temple, there exists the yogic frame of Vasistha in the form of a rectangular-sized stone in between the two adjacent kundas. The rock-cut kundas, round in shape on either side of the yogic frame of Vasistha are about one metre in circumference at the top, but gradually become wider below. In the side wall within the kunda on his left hand side, Golokeswar Shiva in the form of a linga sarira and the goddess Tara in the form of a navel rest at the depths of 90 cm. and 1mt. 30 cm. respectively. And at the wide bottom of the right hand one, at a depth of 2 1/2 mts.
from the surface exists Mangaleswar Shiva representing the joint form of Shiva and Shakti. Both the kundas remain filled with water throughout the year.

On the western side of this temple at about a distance of 10 mts. over a large rocky surface extending in a north-south direction, flows down the Vasishta Ganga - the stream regarded as sacred as the Ganges, for Vasistha not only invoked the sacred river, Ganges at this place after arriving here but also divided it into three streams giving the impression of the Trinity (Brahma, Visnu and Maheswar), which was supposedly made to serve the purpose of his meditation. These streams meeting at a place downward forms a small pool referred to as mahakunda. Slightly at a lower level of this kunda lies the round shaped, waist-deep, small-sized Vasistha kunda which has been formed by the three streams called, Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta.

Another fascinating aspect of this hermitage is the cottage of Arundhati -- the wife of sage Vasistha, which is situated on the southern bank of the Vasishta Ganga at about a distance of 1 1/2 furlongs from the Vasistha kunda and his place of meditation. The eastward cottage is but a huge stone with the top portion protruding in the shape of a roof. Inside the cottage, there is a small stone rising about a feet from below the earthen floor which is known as the yogic frame of Arundhati and has been revered by the devotees down the ages. What is, however, striking here is that a slab of stone cleanly sliced off from the outer surface of the overhead roof is leaning on the northern side of the cottage. A keen observation leads one to believe that this side was covered purposely to serve as a screen between the interior part of the cottage and the place of meditation of the sage and his bathing place as well.

Now, the question is, who built all these with a definite plan and purpose in this secluded place? It is also noteworthy that there is no chisel mark in these stone structures. The king built the temple here but definitely not the Vasishta kunda, the tridhara or the three streams and the cottage of Arundhati, etc. Away from human habitations and being located in a dense forest which was filled with wild animals, this hermitage remained isolated for long from the hub of human habitation. This is evident from the fact that no sincere effort has been made to unravel the truth of this hermitage. Even such a scholar as Dr. B. K. Kakati states that Kalika Purana, “does not connect Vasistha’s penance with Tara or any other goddess.” (Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 31). If that is so, how can we reconcile with the idol of nabhirupini Tara (navel-shaped goddess Tara) or the Mangaleswar Shiva which exist inside the two kundas?

We know that Vasistha advised the two ascetics namely, Vetal and Bhairav to worship Raudri Kali and other goddesses as well in order to propitiate the Lord Shiva (K.P., Ch. 5, v. 128, 129). Moreover, it was Vasistha who cursed the king Naraka as the latter restrained him from worshiping the goddess Kamakhya at the Nilachal hill. Vasistha meditated on Shiva but he himself proclaimed that Shiva bereft of Shakti is incomplete and cannot fulfil the wishes of the sadhakas. So, it can be surmised that he worshiped Tara-shakti, which is one of the ten mahavidyas of Mahamaya (primordial energy). The following mantra refers to Vasistha’s meditation on the goddess Tara, -'Vasistharadhita vidya tarini nabhirupini....' (The naval-shaped goddess Tara, the deliverer, embodiment of knowledge, upon whom the sage Vasistha meditates).

Dr. Kakati even ventures to describe Vasistha as a ‘legendary figure.’ “The Vasistha legend seems to go back to Buddhist Tantras and thence was first introduced into the Kalika Purana, whence it ramified into later documents.” (Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 31).

But, then, one wonders how the so-called legend of Vasistha developed only in this part of the region and why the writers of the Buddhist Tantras in ancient Kamarupa chose none but this sage alone to associate with their religion? The correct answer is that, as Saivism was the predominant religion of ancient Kamarupa and Vasistha being a Saivite to the core, he was prompted to move towards this part in search of his mission. Moreover, the land of Kamarupa was regarded as highly sacred where one could easily attain success in one’s sadhana. This fact is purported not only by the Kalika Purana, but also by other ancient texts. Tantra sastras termed Kamarupa as a “mahayogasthalam” or a highly worthy place for undertaking yoga sadhana. It was eulogised as the “foremost place of pilgrimage”
(Tirthasuramani) for which it became a centre-stage for the truth-seekers in the past. Here there was no political or social turmoil in comparison to other parts of the land. This seclusion and a belief about the sanctity of this region contributed greatly to attracting a number of ascetics to this area in the past, whose names are found to have been associated variously here. This, then strongly supports the advent of sage Vasistha in ancient Kamarupa. Moreover, Kalika Purana remarks thus about Vasistha -- “...in accordance with the turn of the yugas, he by changing his body, dress and thoughts, delightfully and in an unperturbed manner moves in the three worlds inducing all to the act of performance of dharma.” (K. P., p. 202.). Again, sage Medhatithi giving away his daughter, Arundhati in marriage to Vasistha said -- “O, Brahman, in whichever ashrams you stay, this devoted wife of yours would always follow you like a shadow observing strict penance and serving you to the best of her capacity,” (K.P., p. 198). Thus, the cottage that goes by the name of Arundhati at this hermitage may serve as a supplement to this view. Needless to say, the Puranic version about Vasistha justly corroborates the facts about the sage Vasistha of the Mahabharata. Incidentally, the epic specifically referred to his presence in this part while eulogizing the greatness of the eastern part of the land thus -- “Ancient sage Vasistha’s origin in the sacrifice of Maitra Varuna, his stay and the decay (of mortal frame) as well appeared to have been seen in this eastern side.” (Udyogparva, Chap. 100. v-13.).

In reply to Dr. Kakati’s other conjecture, it may be said that the preachers of Tantric Buddhism, in a bid to highlight their cult inclined on the greatness of the Vedic sage Vashistha, who was practising tantric penance at Sandhyachal of ancient Kamarupa. In doing so, they linked Vasistha with Mahachina (modern Tibet which was the seat of Chainachar sect) and with Buddha himself. Tantric texts, Brahmayamal and Rudrayamal went to the extent of saying that Vasistha on the advice of Buddha took the path of pancha makara sadhana, which was, however, apparently against the ideology of Saivite Vasistha. We can now safely say that the Kalika Purana gives a picture of the historical events of sage Vasistha in course of upholding socio-religious scenario of ancient Kamarupa, whereas the Tantric texts attempted to manipulate the facts to serve their sectarian interest.

That the Vedic sage, at a transitional period, was faced with a complex socio-religious situation is evident from his conflict with the goddess Ugratara, which ultimately led to his disappearance from the Sandhyachal. Kalika Purana says, “… thus, he disappears after cursing the goddess Ugratara and the Kamarupa Pitha” (evamukta Vasisthantu tatraivaivardhiyata, K.P., v. 26).

Dr. Kakati has no answer as to how the hermitage of the sage originated in Sandhyachal as is evident from his remark -- “It is worth mentioning, however, that there is a sacred place called Vasisthashram, Vasistha’s hermitage, about ten miles to the east of the town of Gauhati. A Shiva temple stands attached to the hermitage. There is also a temple in the town of Gauhati sacred to Ugratara where, according to the Kalika Purana, the navel of Sati fell.” (M.G.K., p. 32).

It, then, emerges that Vasistha’s link with the ancient Kamarupa, nay, the present Assam in the hoary past was a fact rather than a legend.

From Desire to Desirelessness

For the fulfilment of any desire, we would do well to call upon God first, because only He has the power to fulfil all our desires. We may be in the habit of praying to Him with a mind full of desires, but in the process once we fall in love with Him, then we cannot escape any more! Our love with desire gradually changes to love without desire. Once this desireless love takes hold of us, there is no fear of a fall. The sage Sandilya characterizes this love in these words: “An intense attachment to God is love—and that is the highest devotion.” The great devotee Prahlada says, “O Lord, may I be attracted to you with the same intensity as that of a worldly
person’s attraction to the world.” At first sight it looks as if Prahlada has said something rather ordinary. But if we think deeply we shall see its significance. Most people cannot think of anything higher than what is connected with the world. If we can love God the way everyone loves their parents, friends and family, then God-realization won’t be far from us.

_The Essence of the Gita_

by Swami Saradananda (pp. 116-117)