

AMBUVĀCĪ FESTIVAL AS REFLECTED IN THE GAṄGĀJALAM

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Abstract

We the Indian people are the lover of festivals and prayers. We celebrate thirteen festivals in twelve months. Ambuvācī is a popular festival held annually in the great shrine of Maa Kāmākhyā at Guwahati. It falls under the seasonal festival of the Hindus that particularly associated with agriculture. Dāmodara Miśra in his Gaṅgājalām stated that the earth is in her courses from the moment of the sun entering in the Mithuna rāsi. On the seventh day at the same time the Ambuvācī starts. According to him, during the time of Ambuvācī, seeds should not be sown and all the religious rites like dāna, yajña and vratas except the compulsory daily rites should be abandoned. Basically, Ambuvācī associated with an ancient fertility cult and incorporated in to the mother Goddess cult with Kāmākhyā as its Centre. The Gaṅgājalām of Dāmodara Miśra, present some important guidelines on the observance of Ambuvācī especially for the people of Assam and for the welfare of the society which is elaborately discussed in this

Ambuvācī festival is held annually during the monsoon season in the temple of Goddess Kāmākhyā or Kameśharī situated at Guwahati. This festival is closely related to the tantric cult and is also known as Kāmākhyā Devī pūjā. It is believed that Goddess Kāmākhyā is being worshiped from an early time in Assam. Believes goes that goddess Kāmākhyā goes through her menstrual cycle for four days and therefore the temple of Kāmākhyā remains closed for these particular days. Ambuvācī or the tantric fertility festival is closely associated with the tantric Shakti cult prevalent in eastern parts of India. During the days of Ambuvācī tantric sadhus from different parts of India and also from abroad assembled on that divine shrine. Ambuvācī in fact denotes the annual ritual of menstruation of Mother Earth which is considered as a source of all living beings. Kāmākhyā is worshipped and recognized as not only in the form of goddess of desire, but also is she the very source of

our desire as well as its fulfiller of the same. Almost every available space around the holy temple is taken up by the devotees, who sing, dance and mediate and get highly intoxicated with extreme religious emotions and they invoked Maa Kāmākhyā to enrich their lives

Significance: As the organ of Production of Devī Satī falls on the Nīlāchal hill therefore all the practices relating to the generation, menstruation etc. are spiritually honored by the people of India, especially by the Assamese Community. Ambuvācī is a significant festival where people of India pay due respect and honor to Mother Earth and gives her rest for 3-4 days, by restraining themselves from doing several earth related deeds like digging, sowing of seeds etc. as she is the generator of earthly things.¹

The great diversity of Indian religious beliefs and rituals are projected through the various festivals that are celebrated in our

country. These festivals indirectly express the identity of a particular place among the Ambuvācī is regarded as the most attractive festival by which the identity of Kāmarūpa and Kāmākhyā Dhām is focused. Ambuvācī, is celebrated in the month of Āṣāda (June) which lasts for four days only.² Etymologically, the meaning of Ambuvācī is ambu (water) and vācī (speak or express), which is suggestive of heavy downpour.³ As it is considered as one of the

Yasmin vāreṣaṇe caiva ravimithunaga

bhabet/ tasmin vāre kṣaṇe caiva

bhabetpṛthvīrajaswalā

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In the month of āṣāda (June) when the sun enters in the house of mithuna, in the first pāda, on that day the Mother Earth became rajaswalā. As per Indian calendar, it is noticed that, Ambuvācī starts from 7th of āṣāda and continues for four days. It is a seasonal festival. Ambuvācī means the impurity of the Mother Earth. In Assam it is regarded as one of the grand festivals the beginning of which is uncertain. All sections of people especially widows and the vratins observe this festival with a sacred mind

The popular name of this festival is Āmotī⁵ which is preceded by a custom called Bhumidāha. During Ambuvācī, the performance of nitya, naimittika, kāmya including japa, homa, tapah which are related with religious rites and ceremonies are totally prohibited. Even, pre-determined rites are also prohibited. Ploughing of lands and sowing of seeds on the grounds are not permitted. Though digging of lands are not allowed during Ambuvācī yet for the need of making funeral pyres measurement of digging almost four fingers deep on the ground are allowed. If unknowingly somebody produces agricultural products they should be feed to the animals.⁶

masses. Assam though is a land of many festivals yet celebration of most important festivals, therefore in many folk and Sanskrit literature this festival is written down from an early period. Out of these works Damodara Miśra's Gaṅgājalām is one where he elaborately discussed about the Ambuvācī vrata along with its related custom and conditions in the Vrataviveka parichheda of the S.S.S.

Damodara Miśra asserted that Bhumidāha and Ambuvācī, both are connected with Mother Earth. Bhumidāha is antecedent to Ambuvācī. Bhumidāha consists of a period of seven days

i.e. three days preceding the Mithuna samkranti which falls at the end of the month jeṣṭhya and in which the sun rises in the Vṛṣa rāsi (Tarsus).⁷ The following three consecutive days i.e. the beginning of the month of āṣāda the sun enters in the Mithuna rāsi.

In Gaṅgājalām it is asserted by Damodara Miśra that on the 7th of the āṣāda the earth becomes rajaswalā. During that time incessant rain is usually noticed to have flooded the earth with water. The smṛti-writers of Kāmarūpa school of dharmaśāstra viz. Ripuñjaya Bhattacharya and Śambhunath Miśra prohibited nitya and other described karmas during both bhumidāha and ambuvācī period. On the contrary, in the Bengal school of dharmaśāstra, we do not find any concept of bhumidāha or Sātha.⁸

Pūrṇacandra,⁹ a digest on Kāmarūpa school of dharmaśāstra specifically deal with the rules of prohibition of ploughing land i.e. on Halabāhana during the impurity period of Mother Earth. In fact, it is a living custom

practiced in Assam till today since ancient times, which is not in practice in almost other parts of the country. Assam is an agricultural land and much of the people live on agriculture.

As a result to honor the Mother digest writers of Bengal Śulapāni and Raghunandana Bhaṭṭācharya have taken verses from the S.S.S. of Dāmodara Miśra on Ambuvācī. On the other hand, Dhananjaya, Halāyudha and Aniruddhabhaṭṭa have quoted verses from the Svalpamatsyapurana.¹⁰ It makes no difference in between Damodara Miśra and Raghunandana in the case of prohibition on adhyayana and vapana during Ambuvācī. But according to Raghunandana both pravṛtti and nivṛtti continues for three days beginning from the first day of Mithuna samkrantī. On the other hand, Damodara Miśra strongly asserts that Ambuvācī falls on the 7th day of Āṣāda and it continues up to 11th Āṣāda.¹¹ This particular suggestion regarding Ambuvācī is closely followed by the succeeding digest writers of Assam and it continues even today. It is striking to note here that, no other digest writers in India accept those of Kāmarupā School narrated about Sātha or Bhumidāha. The 9th skandha of the 9th chapter of Devī-Bhāgavatpurāṇa have praised Mother Earth. This purāṇa prefers rest to mother Earth during the days of her impurity which falls on the last two Padas of Mṛgaśīrā and the first pāda of Ādrā asterism.¹² When the profane of Mother Earth vanishes the day is celebrated with joy and delight as expressed by Devī-Bhāgavatpurāṇa.¹³ In the 55th chapter of the Bāmakesvara-Trantra, Ambuvācī is narrated as quoted by Kāmākhyamāhatyamam.¹⁴ In the 58th patala

silken cloth so that nobody can gather round it.¹⁸ On the expiry day of the Ambuvācī the clothes are taken back. This cloth is considered as an amulet which possesses the power of

Earth the local digest writers of Assam formulating injunctions on digging and ploughing of lands during the impurity period. Dāmodara Miśra has corroborated the rules regarding Ambuvācī with the rules of Svalpamatsyapurāṇa. Later on, the of Matsyasukta¹⁵ Ambuvācī along with its relevant duties are discussed rightly. Maintaining the same serial order as mentioned by other digest the Matsysūkta goes further and suggested that if anyone unknowingly sowed the seeds on the grounds then these produced fruits are not allowed to partake. These are to be fed to the animals like cows. If one partakes unknowingly then he must have to perform candrāyaṇa vrata for atonement.¹⁶ Fast of widows and vratins is considered as an integral part of Ambuvācī. In Assamese society, it is often perceived that the widows and the vratins do not take cooked or self-cooked food during the days of Ambuvācī. Partaking of such food is equal to the food cooked by Chandalas. Ramānāth Goswami, in his commentary on S.S.S. gives support to Damodara Miśra's above mentioned view. Though Damodara Miśra rejected the performance of daily prayer, yet the later smṛti writers going ahead and allowed to perform daily prayer.

The annual obsequies rite in respect of deceased persons is allowed during Ambuvācī.¹⁷ In Kāmarūpa, it is usually seen that the person who has lost his parents can also observe the Ambuvācī vrata in the first year after the death of his parents. Yogīnītantra delineates that every women of Kāmarūpa is nothing but an incarnation of Devī. Before the commencement of Ambuvācī, the priests of Kāmākhyā temple piled the Yonīpītha of goddess Kāmākhyā with red

keeping away the evils from the society. On the closing day of Ambuvācī fun and fairs are arranged on the ground of Kāmākhya temple. Worship of Kāmākhya carries a special significance on this particular day. Devotees believed that, Devi the source of primordial energy will certainly bestowed welfare to their future. People of Kāmarūpa, washes their clothes, utensils, furniture and clean their floors and courtyard etc. on that particular day. The Brahmins change their old sacred threads at the end of Ambuvācī.

Footnotes:

- 1) Goswami, Ramānath., Gaṅgajalārtha praveśikā tīkā., commentary of S.S.S., p.34
- 2) Sarma, Naliniranjan., The Kamarupa School of Dharmasastra., p.56
- 3) Datta, B.N., Sarma, N.C., Das, P.C., A handbook of folklore material of north-east of India., p.164
- 14) nāpi pātho vījavapanaca bhūkhananādikaṁ//
ṛtumatī khalu pṛthivī varjyet tryahanī/na-svādhyāyo
15) vaṣatkāro na devapitṛpūjanam/ mṛgaśīrāśī
nipate roudra pade ambuvācī// ibid., p.40
- 16) Sarma, Sivakrisna Panda., Sarma Visnukanta Panda., Ibid., p.170
- 17) loc. cit., p. 170
- 18) Das, dr. Ansuman., Axamar saṁskṛti Butali., p.59

- 4) Miśra, D., Smṛtisāgarasāram., p.33
- 5) Datta, B.N., Sarma, N.C., Das, P.C., A handbook of folklore material of north-east India, p.165
- 6) Sarma, Sivakrisna Panda., Sarma Visnukanta Panda., Kamakhya Mahatmyam., p.170
- 7) Miśra, D., Ibid., p.33
- 8) Sarma Naliniranjan., Ibid., p.55
- 9) Ripunjaya., Pūrṇacandra (Khanda ii), Ms. No 892E., Kamarupa Sanskrit Sanjivani Sabha., p.119
- 10) Sarma Naliniranjan., Ibid., p.55
- 11) Miśra, D., Ibid., p.33
- 12) The Devi Bhagavatpurāṇa., ch.ix, book no.ix, p.39
- 13)
- 16) op.cit., p.170
- 17) Kakati, dr. Banikanta., p.63

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