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Kapilasram of Gangasagar: A Cult spot and its Background

Dr. Sahabuddin Ahmed

Associate Professor and HOD, Dept. of History, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam

Abstract

Gangasagar is believed as an ancient abode of the sage Kapila. It is also mentioned in the story of the Ramayana. This site is also regarded as one of the important holy places of Eastern India. People from all parts of India flock to the place to take holy bath on the occasion. The cult spot is associated with the river deity Ganga. It was originally associated with the cult of Kupli Goddess. The origin and antiquity of all these have been testified in this research article.

Keywords: *Kapilasram, deity, tirthas, cult spot, folk culture.*

There is a holy site in eastern India which bears the name Kapilasram or Kapil-Tirtha. It is a small island situated in the mouth of the Ganges where the river meets the Bay of Bengal and as such the place is also known as Gangasagar or Sagardweed. The holiness of Gangasagar is widely recognised all over the country and the site may be regarded as one of the most important *tirthas* of eastern India. On the auspicious day of *Makar Sankranti* (the 14th day of January) lakhs of people, predominantly from western and southern Bengal, flock to the site to take ritual bath on the occasion.

Gangasagar is believed to be the ancient abode of sage Kapila. The well-known Ramayana story¹ tells us that the great sage burnt to ashes sixty thousand sons of Sagara. The tragedy, it is supposed, took place in the vicinity of this spot. Bhagiratha, a resourceful descendant of Sagara, persuaded Ganga to descend to the cursed spot to liberate the souls of the unfortunate princes. Shiva helped Bhagiratha by holding the descending torrent on his head as no other god was able to bear the onrush. So Ganga travelled a long course from Kailash to the coastline of southern Bengal for the salvation of Sagara's sons and rendered holy the abode of Kapila and the water around it.

Ritual bathing at the Gangasagar has been prescribed in the 'Vanaparvan' of the *Mahabharata*. According to D.C. Sircar, Gangasagar attained fame 'as a very great *tirtha*' even before the Gupta age.² He asserts that in the remote past it was the greatest of all the *tirthas* of eastern India. With regard to antiquity and fame, Kapilasram of Gangasagar is far too great to be compared with its humble namesake of Siddheswar, and apparently it would appear futile to look for any traces of resemblance between the two cult spots.

A close observation reveals that at Gangasagar, people assemble in order to take ritualistic bath. This indicates that the cult spot is associated with river deity. At Gangasagar, the river deity Ganga is directly worshipped. Sage Kapila, it appears, had a curious association with these river deities. Kupli is a deity of the Austric-speaking people. The term Ganga, according to S.K. Chatterjee, is a word of Austric-origin.³

There is a river as well as a village in the mouth of the Ganges called Kulpi, which is only an anagram of Kupli. There are at least two other rivers within the cult-zone of Gangasagar whose first syllable bear affinity with Kupli. These two rivers are Kopai and Kapotakshya, of which the later according to Niharranjan Ray,⁴ is distinctly a word of Austric origin. In Khasi, the word 'Kapait' means a source or a place where a river originates. Again, the people of Jessore (Bangladesh) believe that the sage Kapila lived on the bank of Kapotakshya.

The cult of the river goddess at Gangasagar, like that of Kupli in the Khasi hills of Meghalaya is inseparably associated with human sacrifice. The antiquity of this tradition goes back to the days of the *Mahabharata*. One recalls the myth of Ganga, the wife of Santanu, who sacrificed her seven sons. The myth is suggestive of human sacrifice. This awful custom of human sacrifice continued vigorously till the nineteenth century. Lord Bentinck had to take stern legal measures to put a stop to this custom.

The orthodox section of the Khasis still confess their sins before crossing the Kupli river where Khasi 'priests of Pyrngap clan cleanse their sins by spiritual efforts'.⁵ It is believed that ritual bathing at Gangasagar also washes away all sins.

These sundry facts taken together suggest the common background of both the cult spots. The early inhabitants of eastern India are believed to be the Austric people.⁶ At presents, these people are spread over sporadically in some isolated pockets from the delta of the Mekong river in Indo-China to the sylvan ranges of central India. The name of the river Mekong, meaning the Mother River, is an obvious remnant of an early river cult.⁷ In the far west, another river, Damodar has also a name of Austric origin.⁸ The Santhals, also of Austric origin, hold this river in great veneration which is, according to Hunter,

“altogether disproportionate to its size.”⁹ He asserts that “a faint remembrance of the far-off time when they dwelt besides great rivers, still exerts its influence”.³⁶ On the basis of these two examples, alongwith the Austric association of the Ganga and Kupli cults already mentioned, it can be presumed that the early Austric dwellers of eastern India promoted one or more cults of river deities in the region.

S.K. Chatterjee suggests that the Khasis of Meghalaya might have adopted Austric culture after their migration to India through contact with local Austric dwellers in the pre-historic times.¹¹ Hamlet Bareh holds that they are one of the earliest Austric immigrants who entered India from Indo-China.¹² Without going into the details, it can be safely assumed that the Khasis represent, to a considerable extent, the early Austric culture of eastern India. Thus Kupli may be regarded as the river goddess of the early Austric people in general and her cult might have been prevalent all over eastern India in the pre-historic days. In the plains, the process of Hinduisation perhaps effectively erased the marks of the original cult whereas the Khasis in their isolation retained its original name and modes of worship almost unaffected.

It is possible that Gangasagar, alias Kapilasram began an important centre of river worship, was originally associated with the cult of Kupli goddess. It is pertinent, was originally associated with the cult of Kupli goddess. It is pertinent to mention that D.C. Sircar ascribes a non-Aryan origin to this *tirtha*.¹³ His view is quite in conformity with the contention that the pre-Aryan Austric cult of river goddess prevailed there. If it is assumed that Kapila is the Sanskritised form of Kupli, then on the basis of the myth of Bhagiratha it can be suggested that Kupli was the presiding deity of Gangasagar when the sons of Sagara, i.e., Aryan adventures, tried to conquer this strategic island. According to D.C. Sircar, it was perhaps the seat of an indigenous kingdom.¹⁴ The myth tells us of the tragic fate of the adventures, who were completely crushed probably by the adherents of Kupli. Initially Ganga might have been an allied or subordinate deity of Kupli, both having a common Austric origin. Ganga came into prominence only because the regions around the upstream of the Ganges had come under the Aryan domination at an earlier date and the cult of Ganga had already been Aryanised when the Aryans as adventurers encountered the adherents of the Kupli goddess. So the acceptance and glorification of the Ganga cult was attained at the cost of the Kupli-deity. But the latter deity had too deep a root to be erased completely. This is testified by the story of the *Ramayana* which had to accommodate Kupli in the garb of Kapila. The cult spot still bears the name Kapilasram as a remnant of this original association.¹⁵

While we identify Kapila with the aboriginal Kupli deity, we cannot overlook the fact that in Indian philosophical tradition, Kapila is believed to be the founder of the Samkhya school of thought and in Hindu *Puranas* he is often described not only as a great sage but also as a divinity. Conversion of a primitive female deity into a male divinity is quite plausible under the subsequent pressure of a male-dominated society and Kosambi furnishes us with some such South Indian parallels.¹⁶ But Kapila's inseparable association with the origin of the Samkhya philosophy demands, in the light of the suggestion that Kapilais simply a Sanskritised transformation of the goddess Kupli, an answer to the question as to how a blood-thirsty aboriginal deity could have been associated, even remotely, with a sophisticated philosophy. As we do not intend here to go into the details of the origin of the Samkhya philosophy, we shall remain content to mention a few curious features to demonstrate that the pre-historic adherents of the Kupli goddess might not have been altogether unlinked with the origin of the Samkhya.

Hara Prasad Shastri ascribed a non-Aryan origin to the Samkhya.¹⁷ According to him, it was the early inhabitants of eastern India, 'Vanga-Vagadhacheras', who promoted this philosophy. Niharranjan Ray identifies these 'Vanga-Vagadhacheras' as the pre-historic Austric dwellers of eastern India.¹⁸ These people, as has been already suggested, were presumably Kupli worshippers and Shastri's contention is relevant in the context. In the *Ramayana*, sage Kapila is mentioned as the lord of the nether world that reminds us of the primitive concept of the 'deity of the deep'- which again bears an obvious association with river deities.

D.P. Chattopadhyay, in the quest for the materialistic background of Indian philosophical traditions, makes an interesting observation on the origin of Samkhya philosophy.¹⁹ According to him, the concept of an active dominant female principle and its indifferent male partner, could have originated only in a society where women enjoyed an actual predominant position. In other words, only a matriarchal society could provide the material background necessary for the germination of the ideas on the foundation of which the Samkhya flourished. To illustrate his view point, he actually mentions the still prevailing matriarchal system of the Khasis and quotes from G. Thompson, "the Khasis have a saying, 'From the woman sprang the clan'. That does not leave much scope for the man. As a husband he is a stranger to his wife's people, who refer to him curtly as a begetter."²⁰ The Sankhya cosmology, Chattopadhyay opines is simply a metaphysical manifestation of this attitude that was actually prevalent amongst the matriarchal people.

This observation can be supplemented by the fact that Khasis still adhere to the cult of Kupli, a female deity symbolizing the Fertilising River, and there are reasons to suppose

that Kapila, the supposed founder of the Samkhya, owes his name to this river-goddess. Historicity of Kapila as an individual human being has been doubted by scholars.²¹ Can it be possible that Kapila, as an individual, was conceived at a later date and in reality the name symbolizes and represents the deity of the people who furnished the material basis of the Samkhya?

Notes and References:

1. Ramayana (Translated in English by M.L. Sen), pp. 74-76.
2. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
3. S.K. Chatterjee, *Indo-Aryan and Hindi*, p. 36,
4. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
5. Bareh, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
6. Ray, *op. cit.*, pp., 41, 56.
7. Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
8. Ray, *op. cit.*, pp., 76.
9. W.W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, Vol. I, p. 135.
10. *Ibid.*
11. S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, p. 30,
12. Bareh, *op. cit.*, p. 352.
13. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
14. *Ibid*, pp. 177-83.
15. “Kapil Dhara” is also a name of the Ganges (M. Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 251).
16. Kosambi, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
17. Haraprasad Shastri, *Bauddha Dharma* (in Bengali), p. 37.
18. Ray, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-67.
19. D.P. Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata Darshan* (in Bengali), pp. 496-505.
20. G. Thompson, *Studies in Ancient Greek Society*, p. 153.
21. Chattopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 514.