Kharchi : The eternal festival of peace and prosperity

The author unfolds the social and religious significance of the highly popular Kharchi festival of Tripura that is celebrated on a mass scale at Agartala. The historical background that he has narrated here is highly educative and interesting.

Once the old Haveli (Palace) at Agartala was lively and gorgeous. At that time, it was the capital of the ruling dynasty. The sound of the galloping horse; the rattling sound of busy movement of the courtiers — all these were the daily experience then. Just beside the royal palace, stands the shrine of the Fourteen Gods, the ancestral deity of the ruling dynasty. The subjects used to arrive at the capital to bow to the Gods; some for pledging offerings to the Gods, while others to fulfil their vow. People used to solicit the blessing of God to get rid of their ills and evils; while others used to come to meet the king to beg justice, with numerous prayers. The capital wore a different look when enemies invaded the kingdom from outside and when any rebellion was unearthed. It was indeed a different kind of hustle and bustle in those days.

But all these hustle and haste came to an end one day. Maharaj Krishna Kishore Manikya had once been to the present Agartala for hunting. For some unknown reason, the place charmed him much. ‘How nice it will be, if the capital is shifted here!’- he thought. This shifting would be convenient for communications too. And as was thought, so was done! The capital was soon shifted to Agartala and the ‘New Haveli’ came into being. The old capital came to be known as ‘Old Haveli’. But the sacred temple of the Fourteen Gods remained on the other side of the Howrah River. The Fourteen Gods are being worshiped there since the times the capital was brought there from Udaipur.

Like most other holy shrines, this Fourteen Gods of Tripura are also rich with history and legend. From the ‘Rajmala,’ ‘Chronicles, it is known that Maharaj Trilochan introduced the worship of the Fourteen Gods, long ago. But who this Trilochan was? Rajmala says that in the ancient time, there was a cruel king here, named Tripur. He himself had named his kingdom ‘Tripura’ as per his own name. Others are of opinion that ‘Tripura’ was the son of Daitya, a king of Druhjya lineage. Having been exasperated with atrocities of ‘Tripur’, his subjects prayed to Lord Shiva, and the Lord killed Tripur with his ‘Trishul’. His queen Hirabati began to rule the kingdom thereafter. But who will be the king after Hirabati? There was no heir to the throne! The people of the kingdom naturally grew worried. How the kingdom will be governed? They therefore prayed, to Mahadev once again. Consequently, the queen Hirabati got a descendant by the grace of God. The queen worshiped God and prayed for a son. Accordingly, the queen got the blessing of the Lord and a son was soon born to her. A third eye, it is said, was seen on the forehead of the new-born baby. Hence his name became ‘Trilochan’.
Trilochan ascended the throne at the tender age of 10 years only. He established the Fourteen Gods and introduced their worship as his mother had worshiped them before his birth. That is why it is said that the Fourteen Gods are the ancestral deities of Tripura’s ruling dynasty. ‘Chantai’ is its head priest. The worship of the heads of these Fourteen Gods is still solemnised by Chantai.

Although the reign of Trilochan and the introduction of Fourteen Gods’ worship are both shrouded in the remote past history and legend, the Fourteen Gods are worshipped with sanctity and reverence till today. It is also notable that no full-body image of the Gods are there. Only fourteen heads are worshiped here. ‘Haro’ or Mahadev is the first Karitkeya, Ganesh, Brahma, Prithibi, Samudra, Ganga, Agni, Kamadev and Himadri are also there. Only the heads of three Gods, Har, Uma and Hari, are worshipped daily. But, on the auspicious occasion of the ‘Shukla Astami’ of the month of Ashad, all the fourteen heads of Gods are worshiped together.

The worship of these Fourteen Gods is popularly known as ‘Kharchi Puja’. It begins on the Shukla Astami day in the month of Ashad and continues for seven days. A great fair is held at the courtyard of the Gods ‘temple. This Kharchi Puja is now regarded as Tripura’s own and principal festivity. Thousands of pious pilgrims flock together in this worship celebration of Fourteen Gods, at old haveli during Kharchi Puja. It is believed that this worship is a wonderful culmination of the Vedic, Tantrik and other cults of worship. Buffalo, he-goat, duck, pigeon etc. are offered as sacrifice in this worship.

The worship of the Fourteen Gods is solemnised with prayers for well-being of the land and its people, specially for happiness, prosperity, bumper crops, safety from death and diseases etc. The real significance of this festivity is to be found in the legend of its introduction. This worship was first held for annihilating the atrocious king, Tripur, and also for the advent of pious Trilochan. Hence it is but a perennial war between the good and the evil; a war between the Gods and the demons. Kharchi is thus a good Omen for benevolent forces; a manifestation of man’s eternal desire for happiness and prosperity. People get worried, if there is no rain on the Shukla Astami of Ashad, during the Kharchi. They fear that it is an evil sign, since rains are indispensable for a luxuriant crop and good harvesting. The queen Hirabati worshiped the Fourteen Gods in the hope of having a son. This son was a gifted man with many virtues and the protector to his subjects. Such a fervent call for heaven’s blessings can still be heard.

Worship of God is for the well-being of all mankind. It is the same human desire, right from Trilochan’s era, till today — real good for all. With this noble desire and aspiration, tribals and general masses assemble in the Kharchi ceremonies from far and near corners of Tripura. The reverence for Gods here mingles with brotherly love and fellow-feeling amongst all sections of humanity. The dark cloud of evil is thus removed from the sky above the Howrah river. Brotherly compassion and genuine love pervade everywhere. Let Kharchi come with all its blessings — we all pray to Almighty. Let there be love and sympathy amongst all religions, castes and communities, abundantly showering its noble blessings of benevolence and well-being for all and sundry.