



SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY OF ASSAM: A BRIEF REFLECTION

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Abstract

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that the land of Assam is multicultural. It reflects that its socio-cultural history is diversity. However, nobody can deny unity among diversity in Assamese culture is composite. Even the society of Assam is a heterogeneous society. It has a unique variety of peoples of different human races. Sociological plurality is the main concept of Assamese society. In a sense, Assamese society is the outcome of different elements (castes and sub-castes), for example, between the pre-Aryan races and tribes and the Aryans etc. Different castes and sub-castes and so on makes dynamic social pattern of Assam. The present paper is an attempt to show how many ways the assimilation of various religious groups, castes and sub-castes makes composite culture or the social culture of Assam is the product of historical development. Briefly speaking, the different castes and sub-castes or classes ostensibly have made the Assamese society as a plural society before the world.

Key words: *Assimilation, culture, heterogeneous, historical, society.*

Assam has a unique variety of peoples of different human race and of culture of both hills and plains. It comprises of different races and tribes or different socio-economic groups. The Assamese society, therefore, is a heterogeneous society. The Assamese society is a multi cultural, multi ethnic, multi religious and multi lingual society. Thus, sociological plurality is the key concept of Assamese society. The present day scenary of the land reveals that the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam or Assamese society contains diverse linguistic people such as Assameses, Bengalis, Hindis, Nepalis, Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, Tiwas, Karbis and many more. According to scholars, ethnic composition of the Assamese society also important one



since Assam has a rich ethnic diversities. The various tribal communities of Assam such as Ahoms, Bodo-Kachari, Garo, Chutiya, Moran, Mech, Rabha, Lalung, Mikir, Aka, Dafla, Miri, Abor Mishmi, Naga, Mishings, Karbi, Kuki, Tiwa, Hmars, Dimasa, Deori etc. makes the Assamese society or social culture of Assam ethnically important one. Even the religious composition of the Assamese society also provides a particular type of character to social culture of Assam. Truly speaking, Assam is the land where people from all major religious groups, namely, Hindus and Muslims are live together. Equally, other religious groups like Sikhs, Buddhist, Christians, and Jains etc. are also the part of Assam's religious composition. Existence of all these diverse social groups is primarily responsible for multi social culture of Assam. Accordingly, it follows from the fact that in the process of assimilation of these different elements (castes and sub-castes), for example, between the pre-Aryan races and tribes and the Aryans, a composite culture grew up and that culture is the social culture of Assam. It is the product of historical development in which, at different period of history, different people have migrated from different directions to Assam along with their own traditions, customs and cultures. However, it is not easy to give a detail account of castes and sub-castes in the context of dynamic social pattern. Following Professor Monirul Hussain¹, a brief account of some casts and sub-castes inhabiting Assam as under:

Brahmins: The early inscriptions refer to the settlement of Brahmins in Kamrupa. Mention is made in Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plates of king Bhaskaravarman of *Brahmana* donees who used to perform sixfold duties viz., *yajña*, *yājana*, *adhyāna*, *adhyāpana*, *dāna* and *pratigraha*.² According to scholars, in 13th century onwards fresh waves of Brahmanas from Gauda, Kanauj and other parts of North India migrated to Assam. *Assam District Gazetteers*, Sivasagar reveals that the "Assamese Brahmins originally came from Mithila, Orissa, Beneras and Kanauj. There are also a few Bengali Brahmins, who in social questions usually keep themselves distinct from Assamese confreres."³ On the basis of the locality the Brahmanas of Assam can be divided into two sections viz., those migrated from western part of Bengal were known as *Rādhi* and those from Kanauj designated as *Vaidika*. The Bhahmins exercise *Sandhy* and *Yapa*. Even they rigorously observed the *Upanayana* (the ceremony of the investiture of the holly thread) and



maintain a family deity. “In spite of their pride in social superiority” the Brahmins are “liberal in their outlook regarding occupations and in their observance of other social laws. In fact the Brahmins of Assam have always followed a rather flexible system, not as strictly rigid as in other part of India; even in respect of food.”⁴ In Assam Brahmins are called as *Bamun*. Gait writes: “Among the orthodox castes the Brahmins are occupied a predominant position in society. They cultivated various sciences and arts, as custodians of the sacred scriptures, the Brahmins acted as religious teachers.”⁵ Thus, there is no question of doubt that the Brahmins were an influential social group of Assam.

Daivajñas: The Daivajñas are called Ganak. They studied astrology and so the Daivajñas are professionally astrologers. They earned their livelihood mainly by astrological calculations. The earliest reference to the Ganaka is found in the Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva of the 12th century and in the medieval literary works of Durgāvara⁶, Sukavinārāyaṇa⁷ and in land grants of the Ahom kings.⁸ Here one can name Harihar Atā, disciple of Sankardeva, was Daivajña by caste. Even some of the early poets of Vaisnavite tradition were also Daivajñas. Sagarakhari and Suryakhari are important among the Daivajñas. The Daivajñas well-versed in astrology were given the title *Khari* by the local chief of Darrang and *Daloi* or *Bardoloi* by the Ahom rulers. The Ahom kings exercised their knowledge in the court to consult either before starting war or any auspicious etc. Even the Daivajñas perform all the samskāras. Like the Brahmins, they also wear sacred thread. The Daivajñas, however, did not make matrimonial alliance with rest of the Brahmins due to their lower status in the caste hierarchy. Nonetheless, they occupied an honoured position in the Assamese society.

Kayasthas: The *Kayasthas* are originally a professional class. They were engaged in maintaining accounts and serving as scribes. The Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskaravarman mentioned both *Karanikas* and *Kayasthas*. According to Daityari Thakur⁹, Madhavadeva learnt well the *Kayasthika Vṛtti* in addition to traditional learning in grammar, *Kavya* and *philosophy*. Sankardeva himself was a Kayastha Bhuyan. A number of the *Satradhikars* of Assam are Kayasthas. They used to perform the six sacraments and so the Kayasthas were called *Sat*



Karmi. The Kayasthas are believed to be Kshatriyas. Nagendranath Basu has tried to prove the Kshatriya origin of the Kayasthas.¹⁰ They were downgraded from the Kshatriyas as the Kayasthas took *masi* (ink) instead of *asi* (sword). From Mithila, Kanauj and Bengal the kayasthas migrated to Assam.

Kalitas: The Kalitas were another high caste people of Assam. The Kalitas came to this land from places of Upper India during the reign of Dharmapal (c. 1095-1120). According to the *Katha-gurucarita* there was a Kalita desa on the Himalaya foot hills in the northern eastern region where the ancestors of Gopala Ata lived.¹¹ According to the traditional origin, they were Kshatriyas who concealed their caste for fear of Parasuram – has been rejected by some scholars of Assam.¹² Again some scholars are of the opinion that the Kalitas are of Alpine origin, whereas, according some others they are of Aryan stock. Whatever, the Kalitas used to perform the main Hindu samaskaras and purificatory rites according to smṛtis.

Keots: Next to the Kalitas, we have the keots caste. Precisely speaking, the term originated from the Sanskrit Kaivarta which became *Kevatta* (boatman) and finally *Keot*. According to the *Brahmavaivarta-Purana*, the Kaivarta originated from the *Ksatriya* father and the *Sudra* mother; as such it is a varnasankara of the *Ksatriya* and *Sudra*.¹³ The Keots are included among the caste-Hindus. They are commonly called *Kamars* in Kamrupa, Assam. Even the Keots, who are regarded as Kaivartas were an agricultural community.

Bariyas: The Bariyas are another particular type of caste of Assam. The term *Bariya* is said to have been derived from *Bari* meaning a widow. In fact, they originated from an offspring of a Brahmin widow by a Sudra husband. Here it is important to note that the children of Brahmin girls married to Sudra were called Bariya. They are commonly agriculturalist.

Suts: The Suts are a caste peculiar to Assam. The term *Sut* is said to have been derived from *Sut*, the expounder of the Puranas. He was the son of a Brahmin widow. Some people of the Bariya sub-caste call themselves *Sut*. They are generally Vaisnavas.



Yogis: In Assam Yogis are popularly known as Naths, Nath-Yogis and Katanis, a sub-caste of the Yogis. The yogis think that they are descendants of Gorokshanatha. The Yogis consider Gorakshanatha as an incarnation of Siva. “In the Ballalcharitam, a Sanskrit book supposed to be written in the 12th century A. D., we find mention of a sect of people, who lived on the banks of the Brahmaputra and were known as ‘Jungis’. They were drum-beaters, whose descendants are still found in some parts of Assam and are known as Kendra-Jogis (Yogis). Their original profession was drum-beating, palanquin-bearing, quackery, snake-charming etc. They have now taken to agriculture.”¹⁴ Unlike the Brahmins, Yogis perform their social and religious rites according to their own priests.

Nadiyals, Jaluas or Kaivartas: The *Keots* are divided into two categories, such as, the *Haloi Keots* and the *Jalai Keots*. The Halai Keots are regarded as upper class Hindus, whereas the Jalai Keots are mainly a fisherman community and are regarded as depressed class Hindus. The Jalai Keots are also known as Nadiyal who generally live on the bank of the river. In Assam, however, they are called *Dom* or *Candalas* and the term Keot is exclusively reserved for the Haloi Keots. During the Ahom rule the Kaivartas of the fishermen were tattooed on the forehead with the mark of a fish. Later on the Kaivartya community was being influenced by the neo-vaishnavite movement of Sankardeva –just mentioned above. Accordingly, they became the disciple of Sankardeva. In this day and age, they have been included among the scheduled castes as per Indian constitution.

Bodo-Kacharis: The Bodo-Kacharis, who are regarded as the aboriginal of Assam, were another dominant caste of Assam. A brief account of bodo-Kacharis in Assam has already been dealt within the chapter 3. It may be pointed out here that the term ‘Bodo’ stands for a larger identify which encompasses some other sub-identities such as Kacharis, mishings, rabhas, Tiwas (Lalungs), Hajongs, dimasa and so on. The Bodo-Kacharis are completely *hinduized*. However, a few of them are *baptised*.

Koch-Rajavamsis: The Koch Rajavamsis were another dominant backward class people of Assam have already been discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis. They were Mongoloid origin. The



Koches are related to the Bodo-Kachari group of Indo-Mongoloid stock. They have been included Hinduism since the Koches were completely converted to Hindus when a section of them after assuming the political power came under the religious influence of Brahmanas and Vaishnava priests.

Chutiyas: The Chutiyas were another caste of Assam. They were divided into Hindu, Barahi, Deori, Ahom, miri etc. Of these, the Deori remained true to their original faith. They are the representatives of the priestly Chutiya class. The Hindu Chutiyas asserted superiority over the rest and adopting the Brahmanical rites and rituals. Even they maintain their separated identity as a distinct caste, namely, *Hindu Chutiya*, in Hindu community. The Ahom and Miri Chutiya classes are the result of intermarriage between Chutiyas, Ahoms and the Miris.

Ahoms: It is needless to say that the Ahoms were major social group of Pre-colonial Assam. They are considered as a separate caste. They were the ruling dynasty for six hundred years which has been fully discussed above. They were started converting Hinduism from the sixth century. Even some of them became adherents to vaisnavism and others followed Saktism and worshipped Hindu deities and observed some principal Hindu rites.

Muslims: The Muslims were another important religious group of Assam. The earliest Muslim of Islam religion migrated to Assam in c. 1205 led by *Muhammad bin Bakthiyar Khalji* from Bengal. Since then successive Muslim as peaceful settlers who in course of time became Assamese in speech, manners, dress and customs except their religion. Thus, unlike different tribes and castes or class of people, the Muslims are remained true to their faith. They were more sympathetic towards their Hindu as well as other neighbours. In the same vain of the Hindus and others, they observed and participated in non-religious rites, ceremonies and festivals like the *Bihu*, *Majai Puja*, *Mahoho* etc. It is worthy to note here that with **Hazrat Azan Pir** a new episode has been opened up between Sufis of Islam and *Bhakatas* of *Vaishnavism*. Nobody can deny the Hindu-muslim unity in Assam. It is because present day Assam is know as *Sankar-Azanar Des*. The Muslims were capable of receiving patronage and favour from the Ahom rulers. Of course, the Muslims of Assam can be divided into two classes, i.e., General and MOBC. The



Muslims and Bengali Hindus of Assam are considered as minority people. Assamese Muslims are considered as religious minority class and Bengali Hindus are regarded as linguistic minority people. They have contributed a lot to Assamese literature and composite culture.

Sikhs: The Sikhs are also considered as a separate and small group of Assam. Here it can be said that Guru Nanak had visited Kamrupa in 1505. During his visit, Guru Nanak had converted many persons to Sikhism. As a result, the Sikh's Gurudwars are seen in a number of towns in Assam. The Sikhs of Assam claim that they are direct descendants of Chaitana Singh, the army commander of the Ahom king Chandra Kanta Singha. They performed their religious and social rites in accordance with the mandates of the *Adi Granth*. Their primary occupation is agriculture.

Nepalis: The Nepalis, although were small in size, is an influential social group of Assam. The Nepalis began to come to this land since the early part of the 19th century. They have monopolized the diary industry of the land.

Buddhist: People from Buddhism also were there in Assam. The *Khamtis*, the *Doaneah*, the *Tai-phakes*, the *Turungs*, the *Aitaniyas* and the *Naras* are small Buddhist communities. They have migrated to the north-eastern region of Assam at different times. They belong to *Hinayana* section of Buddhism practised in Burma.

Besides, there are many sub-castes and classes among the Hindus of Assam. Among the castes, sub-castes and professional classes *Tantuvaya* (tait), *Napit*, *Karmakara* (Kamar), *Kumbhakara* (Kumar), *Kamsykara* (Kahar), *Tambuli* (tamuli), *Taksaka* (silakuitya), *Swarnakara* (Sonari), *Tailika* (teli), *Saundika* (suri), *Nata* (nata), *Carmakar* (camar), *Koncha* (Koch) and *Haddi* (Hadi)¹⁵ are also found. Similarly, Marwari and Punjabi traders and bankers, Bengali clerks, doctors, Professors, lawyers and businessman, Manipuris, Singphos, Adis, and Nagas are found in Assam.

Concluding remarks: What is revealed so far from the above discussion is that Assam contains a diverse social groups or castes and sub-castes with distinct traditions, customs, culture and religion. The different castes and sub-castes or classes ostensibly have made the Assamese



society as a plural society. Finally, it can be said that the present form of multi social culture of Assamese society can be regarded as an offshoot of different castes and sub-castes.

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