



Society in Ancient Assam: A Historical Outlook

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Abstract:

Ancient Assam is known as Kamrupa or Pragjyotishpura. Kamrupa was inhabited by the Proto-Mongoloid, Proto-Astraliod, Tibeto-Burman and Alpine people. Aryan culture was assimilated with these other racial elements when they migrated to Assam. The kings of Kamrupa seem to have taken special care to preserve the traditional divisions of society, namely, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras. It should however be noted that 'Varna' had lost its original significance and become 'jati', which laid emphasis on birth and heredity. The original divisions of the Varna system submerged and numerous new castes and sub castes evolved, mainly due to the development of different arts, crafts and professions; also to be taken into account are the influence of different tribes, races and religions. A man's life was divided into four stages: 'brahmacharya', 'grihastha', 'vanaprasthin' and 'sannyasin'.

Keywords: *Proto-Mongoloid, Proto-Astraliod, Aryan culture, racial, sub castes etc.*

I. Introduction

Ancient Assam is known as Kamrupa or Pragjyotishpura. Kamrupa was inhabited by the Proto-Mongoloid, Proto-Astraliod, Tibeto-Burman and Alpine people. Aryan culture was assimilated with these other racial elements when they migrated to Assam. The kings of Kamrupa seem to have taken special care to preserve the traditional divisions of society, namely, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras. It should however be noted that 'Varna' had lost its original significance and become 'jati', which laid emphasis on birth and heredity. The original divisions of the Varna system submerged and numerous new castes and sub castes evolved, mainly due to the development of different arts, crafts and professions; also to be taken into account are the influence of different tribes, races and religions. A man's life was divided into four stages: 'brahmacharya', 'grihastha', 'vanaprasthin' and 'sannyasin'. The mixed migration of the Aryans and the Brahmanas that began in the later part of the 5th century A.D influenced the culture of Ancient Assam. The influence of Kamrupa over north-eastern India, after the fall of the imperial power of the Guptas in the later part of the 5th century A.D. caused the migration of a large number of Brahmansas to Kamrupa. They



were given land as gifts so that they could settle themselves and can pursue matters of religion. The Brahmanas was distinguished by 'gotras' and 'veda-sakhas'. Gotras originally denoted only seven or eight 'rishis' the general idea of gotra is that it denotes all persons who trace decent in an unbroken male line from a common ancestor. Both were of importance fundamentally in matters relating to inheritance, marriage, worship, sacrifice, the performances of daily sandhya prayers and so forth. The conception of the term '*Pravara*' is closely interwoven with that of the gotra. Pravara literary means "choosing" or "invoking" or *Prarthana*. It is a stereotyped list of the names of the ancient rishis. 'Deva', 'Sarman', and 'Svamin' are some of the titles of the Brahmanas. Their names generally end in Bhatta, Dama, Deva, Dhara, Dasa, Datta, Ghosa, Kara, Kunda, Mitra, Naga, Nandi, Palita, Sena, Soma, and so forth. They had to live a holy and righteous life. The Brahmanas are said to have assiduously practiced their set of '*six fold duties*'¹. They daily perform the ritual of Snana (bath). Six kinds of snana are mentioned in the smritis, viz. nitya, naimittika, kamyā, kriyā, malapakarsana and kriyasana.²

The first and foremost duty of the Brahmanas was to study the Vedas. They also discussed the various sciences and the arts. They were often appointed as high administrative officers, and even had some space in the armies. This is derived from Kautilya who is quoted as having said that the Kamrupa kings had the armies composed of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The Subhankarapataka Grant of Dharmapala refers to the Brahmana Himanga, who was not only skilled in archery, but also an expert in reading the omens implied in the movement and fall of other people's arrows. Further he was well skilled in different methods of attack and defense.

The caste system in ancient Assam was not strictly adhered to. The society rested largely but loosely on the Varnasramadharmā. Epigraphic records of the 6th century referred to classes like Kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, Vaidyas, Kumbhakarās, Kaivartas and Tantravayas. Gradually the distinction among the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were disappearing and the fourfold caste system, were gradually shrinking to a threefold system. Later on the society became broadly divided into two: the Brahmanas and Sudras, the later embracing all non-Brahmanas. Yoginītantra though not a contemporary text also provides information about the

¹Bargain Grant and in others.

²B.K.Barua: A cultural History of Assam (early period), Bina Library, Assam, 2003, p122.



social conditions of Assam. The Brahmanas occupied a position of higher prestige in the society.

Among the other non-Brahmins, the Karana and the Kayastha were chiefs. They were state officials. The Karana occurs as the name of a caste in the old Sutras and Smritis, and perhaps also in the Mahabharata. ³The Kayastha were the royal officials and their existence is recorded from the 9th century. The Kayasthas were believed to be the descendants of the 'Nagara' Brahmins. The 'Ganakas' and 'lekhakas' were associated with court. Ganakas were astrologers associated with the study of the 'grahas' or planets. The 'Vaidya' held high ranks in the society. The Kayasthas and Kalitas are now looked upon as the purest of the old Hindu people of Assam. Next to the Kalitas were the Koches, who form a large portion of the population of Assam to this day. Some of the other castes were the 'Kaivartas', the 'Kumbhakara' (potters), the 'Tantuvaya' (weavers) and the 'Nauki' (boatmen).

II. Social Institutions:

- **Family:**

The family was the smallest unit of the society. Joint family was the general practice. Joint family which comprising the patriarch of the family, his wife, his unmarried daughters, and his sons with their wives and descendants.

- **Marriage:**

Among social institution, marriage is the most important institution. The institution of marriage was considered sacred and being an important social celebration. The Hindu Shastras recognized eight types of marriages. They were (i) 'Raksasa', where the bride is carried off by force; (ii) 'Paisaca', a secret elopement; (iii) 'Gandharva', a secret informal union by copulation; (iv) 'Brahma', where the bride is freely given to a worthy bridegroom with due ceremony; (v) 'Daiva', where she is married to a priest; (vi) 'Arsa', in which the girl's father received from the bridegroom a formal gift of oxen; (vii) 'Kaya', in which the proposal comes from the side of the bridegroom; and (viii) 'Asura', when the bride was acquired by purchase.

³History of Dharmasastra,II,Pt,I,p.74



Assamese marriages followed the Vedic rites. Marriage was usually arranged after 'rahi-joracova' – the consultation of horoscopes of the pair. Sometimes, bride price (ga-dhana) was paid. The nuptial festivities begin five, three or two days before the day fixed for wedding. The usual practice was that the bridegroom should come to bride's house on the marriage day in an auspicious hour in the evening. On the evening of the third day after marriage, the conjugal couple makes an offering to two demons – this is the 'khuba-khubuni'. The marriage is consummated after this ceremony.

Chastity and devotion to their husbands were the chiefly desired qualities of Brahman women. The queens seem to have some responsibilities in matters of the state. The inscriptions suggest that they were cultured and pious women. Queen Jivada, the mother of Harjavarmana was considered to be the source of great spiritual force. Motherhood was one of the outstanding aims of married life; widowhood the highest calamity that could befall a woman. But the practice of sati was not present here. Women were usually beautiful, if we are to take into account the various historical records that make relevant references. The custom of appointing women as dancers and courtesans in connection with temple services seems to have been quite common in Assam. These women dedicated to the temple service usually known as 'Nati' or 'Daluhangana'. Brahman women were especially well educated and skilled in the arts of poetry and rhetoric.

III.Socio-Cultural Life:

- **Food**

The staple food of the people of this region was rice. Early Assamese literature abounds in description of a hundred varieties of paddy. A variety of rice called 'boka dhan' was consumed uncooked, the favorite meal during the festivals. The hill people generally opted for the shifting (jhum) method of cultivation. Besides rice, the people of Assam cultivated fruits too. Hiuen Tsang mentions the jack-fruit and coconut in reference to Kamrupa. Others known fruits were mangoes, oranges, plantains, citrons, limes, pineapples etc.

Drinking wine was common amongst the people of the upper class, while the common people drank *Lao Pani or rice beer*. Chewing of raw areca nut with betel leaf and lime was very much popular among the people.



Rice, fish, meat, fruits and vegetables were the main foods during these early days, and these habits continue. 'Payasam' was made from rice and milk, and greatly liked. The earlier literature mentions between twenty-five and fifty kinds of special dishes prepared with vegetables, pulses, fish and meat. Spices such as ginger, cumin, pepper, and mustard were used. Common edible herbs were 'mulaka', 'rajaka', 'vastuka', 'palanga', 'nalika' etc. Two popular preparations were 'Pocola' and 'kharica' made from the young banana plant and bamboo shoots. Various fruits such as 'thekera', 'cakala', 'tenteli', and 'ou' were used to make sour preparations. Fish-eating is probably a pre-Aryan custom and in Assam it might have been borrowed from the Mongolian people. Amongst meat, duck, pigeon and wild boar were consumed. It is note-worthy that unlike the other provinces of India, the Brahmans and the Vaisnavas both eat meat and fish without any social bar or comment. The sacrifice of various animals was considered very auspicious.

- **Articles of Luxury**

Perfume and cosmetics were used by the people of ancient Assam, as various sources tell us. It is noticed that *aguru, sandal, and musk* were well-known products of Assam. Anointing the body with scented oil before bath was (and still is), a common practice. Sandal paste seems to have been favourite among those who could afford it. A rich perfume was prepared with 'krsna-guru' oil, which generally preserved in bamboo tubes. 'Karpura' (camphor) which was "cold, pure, white as bits of ice" was also in use. Musk was used to prepare cosmetics. Among other articles of luxury were hand fans, garlands, and jeweled mirrors used by women. Combs were made out of ivory, bamboo, or wood. Foot-wear was fashioned out of deer-hide and wood. Umbrellas were also used in a special sense: it was the symbol of kingly authority and spread over the heads of idols of gods and goddesses. During the Ahom period, a kind of umbrella known as the 'japi' came into vogue. There were different kinds of japis for kings, queens, princes, nobles and other kinds for different classes of citizens.

Spirituos liquors and intoxicants of various kinds were used. One of these alcoholic drinks was the 'ulluka'. The Yogini Tantra highlights the worship of Goddess Kamakhya with wine, meat, and blood. 'Laopani' or rice beer is to this day one of the main locally produced beverages of the various tribes of Assam; also offered in the worship of tribal deities. Another common practice was the eating and chewing of 'tambul' (areca-nut), both ripe and unripe,



together with 'paan' (betel-leaf) and 'chun' (lime). This custom of the chewing of unripe betel-nut is unique to Assam, and is still an important feature of contemporary Assamese society. In burial, the Khasis placed betel-nuts on the pyre and bid farewell to the deceased.

- **Dress and Ornaments**

Epigraphs, literature and sculpture provide us information on the types of dress and ornaments used by the people of ancient Assam. According to the Kalika Purana, textiles are divided into four classes: 'karpasa' (cotton), 'kambala' (wool), 'balka' (bark), and 'kasaja' (silk from cocoon). Cotton clothes were extensively used and there was a special class of weavers for this material. 'Kambala', a texture of fine wools, was imported from Bhutan or Tibet. 'Balka' denotes fibers and fiber-made fabrics in general. The bark fibers were woven into cloth called the 'ksauma', and was the most important source of clothing in the ancient times. According to Kulluka (15th century A.D), ksauma was a cloth made of atasifiber. It was highly valued in the ancient days. 'Duluka' was the usual name given to the finest ksauma. The Arthasastra states that the duluka produced in Subarnakundya (in Assam) was as "red as the sun, as soft as the surface of the gem, woven while the threads were very wet and of uniform or mixed texture" and was considered as the very best available anywhere. It is, therefore evident that Assam, even in the fourth century A.D was celebrated for duluka that was fit to be kept in the royal treasury. The 'Kasaja' was the silk obtained from the cocoons of various kinds of silk worms. Commercially silk was of two kinds: the wild silk and the true silk. Wild silk was the product of silk-worms which fed on the leaves of various trees and plants growing in forests. True silk was the product of silk worms which fed on mulberry leaves. The wild silks were of two kinds, 'Eri' and 'Muga'. The Eri cloth was of a drab colour, but very durable; light, but warm. There were varieties of Muga available, like the, 'mejankari' muga. This Mejankari silk was the dress for the upper classes. 'Pat' was another kind of silk available in the early times. The art of dyeing both yarn and cloth was well known; it was very common among the hill tribes of Assam. Some of the Naga tribes in particular were very expert dyers and could produce extremely brilliant colors. The Manipuris are also known as skilful and artistic dyers. The art of embroidering on cloth was also practiced. The dress of the people was a single uncut and unstitched piece.



The male dress consisted of dhoti and an upper garment called *uttariya*, especially used by the higher classes. Men of distinction also wore a head-dress. Women used to wear two garments in the upper and lower parts of the body. The women used the ornaments like *kasturi*, *kinkini*, necklace of beads, etc. they used *kundalas* and *nupuranas*.

The ornaments worn by men and women on different parts of the bodies were of different designs. The *Kalika Purana* describes forty such types of designs. They were made out of gold and silver. 'Dugdugi', 'Kerua', 'Galpata', 'Angada' and 'Kankana' were some name of ornaments worn by the people. These ornaments are proudly sported even today. In the ears they wore the 'Kundala', on the wrists were bangles called 'Kharu'. Anklets were worn by women; they were termed as 'Nupura' and 'Kinkini'. The 'Tilaka' was a forehead ornament. An idea of hair arrangement can be had from the sculptures of the period. The simplest and most common hair arrangement was the variations of the 'khopa'.

- **Games and Amusements**

According to the *Kalika Purana*, the commonest children games were playing dolls. The Dice was the most popular indoor game. 'Bhanta', a game played with sticks was common among the children. Hunting was a favourite pastime, which was carried on in groups by people armed with spears, bows and arrows. The catching of wild elephants was a dangerous sport that has an interesting history; the Assamese elephant-drivers or 'mahouts' were great experts. Hawk-fights, elephant-fights, bull-fights were other recreational past-times for the Ahom kings.

Fishing is chiefly done by means of traps, baskets, and bamboo rods fitted with iron nails. Dancing and music were greatly enjoyed by the people. The bullock-cart, carriages drawn by elephants, horses and boats were the usual modes of conveyance. Royal boats were decorated with various ornaments, sonorous 'kinkinis' and 'camaras'.

- **Education and Learning**

It is clear that education in the sense of 'book learning' was not as widely diffused as it today. The learned classes were Brahmins. The 'Vyavaharis' (lawyers), 'Lekhakas' (scribes) and other officials were, however, educated. Education was centered round the 'guru-griha'. Schools were maintained by the Brahmanas, for whom education was the most important, and they were taught in Sanskrit. The Vedas and various other texts were taught in these



schools. The great Vaisnavite apostle Sankardeva received his education at a 'tole' maintained by Mahendra Kandali. This reveals that even non-Brahmins were admitted into schools along with the Brahmana students. According to the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, Assam was a land of men with high talent. Learning flourished in Assam and made it attractive to scholars of other countries. This is evident from the visit of such scholars as Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D), Nanaka (1649-1538 A.D), and Guru Teg Bahadur (17th century). Sankaracharya is said to have come to Assam to hold learned discussions with Sakta teacher Abhinavagupta. The courts of the kings were full of eminent scholars and poets, who were encouraged to compose and compile treatises on various subjects. Naranarayana entrusted Sankardeva with the translation of the Bhagabat Purana, Purusttoma with the completion of a Sanskrit grammar, Sridhar with the preparation of a book on astronomy and Baluka Kayastha with the translation of Lilavati's book on Mathematics. The curriculum of studies included the four Vedas, the four Upanishads, the Puranas, the Sastras and other such texts. Jyotisa-vedanga, the science which measures time by studying the movements of the planets and the stars, was extensively studied. Ayurveda, the science of medicine was also carefully learnt. There was a state medical department with the royal physician at its head. Veterinary science was also studied. Royal physician Ralph Fitch says, "They have hospitals for sheep, goats, cats, birds and for all living creatures." Elephantology, the science of dealing with the characteristic diseases, cures and training of elephants was an important field of study. Music too, was scientifically studied; with special focus on singing, dancing and playing instruments. Some kings maintained the custom of singing and dancing in the court. These songs were based on various ragas. The art of painting were considerably developed, and painting on walls was present from 14th century A.D. Sankardeva himself is known to have painted celestial figures for the China-yatra. The writing materials were earth, bark, leaves, gold, copper and silver. Writing pens were made of bamboo, reed, copper, bell-metal, gold, and iron. Ink was made out of a kind of fruit named silikha. Invisible ink was made out of the sap of the earthworm. The kings took special interest in Sanskrit literature, and the Kalika Purana is a notable literary work of that time. Assamese is actually a branch of the new Indo-Aryan speech and was developed into a distinct language out of the Eastern Magadhi Prakrta.



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