

A Social Background of Kaibarta Community in Assam

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Assam is well-known as the land of heterogeneous population with ethnic diversity. The society in the ancient days was predominantly a non-Aryan society in Assam. The people of Assam can be divided broadly into tribal and non-tribal categories from another angle. It is to be noted that the non-tribal category are included into three major groups such as the General Caste (GC), the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Other Backward Classes(OBC). There are sixteen SC, twenty seven Scheduled Tribes (ST) and twenty nine communities are listed as OBC in Assam. The people of all communities are basically honest, truthful, straightforward and trustworthy in Assam. They are more interested to maintain social peace and harmony in Assam. They have moved away more or less from their traditional social life style after independence in Assam. The members of the Kaibarta community are playing a very important role in social development of Assam. The culture of the Kaibarta community is very rich in Assam. In this context, the present study is an attempt to discuss about the social background of Kaibarta community in Assam.

Keywords: Culture; kaibarta community; scheduled caste; Assam; population; agriculture; fishing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam is one of the old states of India. The state is diverse in terms of geography, population, culture and levels of development. The state has a geographical area of 78,523 sq. km. and a population of 3,11,69,272 as per census 2011. The total ST and SC population were 38,84,371 and 22,31,321 as per census 2011 [1]. Assam is an important state of India known for its different communities since times immemorial. The people of Assam are association of various races who were migrated into this land and merged into a common harmonious whole in a process of assimilation and fraternity. The principal migrants into this land were Austro Asiatic, the Dravidians, the Tibeto-Burmese, the Mongoloids and the Aryans. All diverse ethnic groups contributed substantially to make a composite colorful Assamese culture. The culture of the state is basically assimilation and association of different races since times immemorial.

1.1 Objective

The study seeks to make modest attempt to analyze the social background of the Kaibarta community in Assam.

2. METHODOLOGY

We have tried to collect reliable data for the paper. The study is mainly based on secondary data. The secondary data were collected from both government and non-government publications. In order to achieve the objective of the present study, the descriptive research method has been used in this work. A number of discussions have been held with reliable and learned persons in order to know about the Kaibarta community in Assam.

2.1 A Historical Perspective

Like other communities, the state is well known as the home of the people of Kaibarta community since old days. The people of Kaibarta community are living with social, cultural and economic diversity in the different parts of Assam. The social climatic condition is more favorable for peaceful living of the people of Kaibarta community in Assam. The culture of this community is just like a golden garden in Assam. The change in behavioral patterns and way of living of the people is observed due to expansion

of socio-economic facilities. The community is an important segment of the greater Assamese society. The Kaibartas are one of the sixteen Scheduled Caste communities in Assam as per the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950 [2]. The people of the state belong to the Aryan, Austeroid, Dravidian and Mongoloid stocks and they entered the state at different times as per records of history. The Kaibartas are one of the populous SC communities which are of Dravidian origin [3]. The people of the community are among the oldest of the non-Aryan settlers in the state of Assam.

The Kaibartas are one of the very early inhabitation in the state. According to historical documents, they might have immigrated to the state from neighboring states Bengal and Bihar. They were living in Kamrup even before the 9th and 10th century. The Scheduled Caste community once ruled in lower part of Assam called Lohityapur and later on Matshyadesha [4]. According to C. Bhushan, "People of Dravid community-known as 'Kaibarta' or 'Banias' in modern Assam arrived and the Mongols followed them. The people of this community within the Indo-Chinese group came to be known as Tibetan-Burmese family," [5]. Regarding the origin and term of *Kaibarta* there are different opinions among the scholars. The term Kaibarta has been derived from two words *ke* and *barta*. It is a Sanskrit word where *ke* means water and *barta* means depending upon [6]. N.R. Roy and N.B. Biswas opined as "The word Kaibarta is derived from ka, meaning water, varta, meaning livelihood" [7]. According to Sunanda Sahu, "From etymological point of view, the word 'Kai' means 'Net' and 'varta' means pull on and so the whole meaning is the person who pulls on fish with the help of net" [8]. Regarding the origin of the Kaibartas, William Robinson opined that traces *Kaibartas* origin among the Keots who are no longer treated as Kaibarta in Assam [9]. Generally, the term *Kaibarta* is used to indicate people whose main profession is fishing along with their allied occupations both in the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley in Assam. Bimal J Dev and Dilip K Lahiri remarked that "The process of Sanskritisation was distinctly operative in the transition of the Doms of the Brahmaputra Valley to Nadiyals and ultimately to Kaibartas" [10]. (It is known that the Kaibarta people were earlier called as Nadiyals and all the Nadiyals people were known as Kaibartas after the formation of All Assam Kaibarta Sonmilan in 1914 in Assam. The profession of the fisherman was called Nadiyals due to their

habitation in the proximity of a river). The Kaibartas played an important role in the Ahom periods. They migrated to Majuli in the mid 17th century for their earning occupation. According to Francis Hamilton, "There are a good many Heluya-Keyots who cultivate the ground, and Keyots who fish. The forma are pure, and usually assume the title of Kaibarta." [11].

2.2 Review of Literature

There are limited numbers of comprehensive studies on the Kaibarta community in Assam. But, Kaibarta community is an important subject for research in Assam. A brief and selective study on Kaibarta community in Assam is mentioned below:

M.C. Mullan, Census superintendent conducted a survey on the exterior castes of Hindus in Assam in 1931. In this survey, he found that the Assam valley, there were only three exterior castes which were Kaibarta, Hari and Hiras [12]. It is seen that although the caste system is one of the essential features of the Hindu society of India, castism is not practiced rigidly in Assamese Hindu society. According to Ram Ahuja, "The caste system has neither disintegrated nor is it disappearing in present India despite many modifications. It continues to perform important functions legitimized by religion" [13]. The caste system has developed into a unique social system in India which has not been seen generally in Assam. B. J. Dev and D. K. Lahiri mentioned that "Caste in Assam and the system of social stratification are significantly free from rigidities and dogmatic overtones. In fact, the emergence of caste stratification in Assam took place at a much later stage compared to other parts of the country" [14]. Untouchability is vanishing due to the liberalizing influences of the time in Assam. It is seen that untouchable castes were practically absent and the problem of untouchability did not exist at all in Assam after the New-Vaishnavite religion. There were depressed castes in the state but the status of depressed castes can not be compared in other parts of India. Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) preached the New-Vaishnavism in the 15th and 16th century where caste distinction was not recognized in Assam. Caste is really a racial division and functional castes are very few in the Assam valley [15]. C.S.Mullan observed as " These people are generally speaking not now depressed classes as their society is still good enough for them but the moment they aspire to any sort of recognized

social position in real Hindu society they will probably become depressed" [16].

Out of all the depressed castes, the Kaibartas were the largest group in the Assam valley during the British period. They were politically most articulate among the depressed castes. It is known from the history of status mobility of the community that the Nadiyahs under the leadership of their caste association, Kamrup Jatiya Hitakari Sabha, demanded to be designated as Kaibartas before the census of 1901 in India. The Dehingia Adhikari Gossain of the Nogoro Satra of Golghat supported of their claim to be designated as Kaibarta before census of 1921. The Kaibarta people were earlier called as Nadial or Jalia and all the Jalia or Nadial people were known as Kaibartas after the formation of All Assam Kaibarta Sonmilan (AAKS) in 1914 of the State (The AAKS is a non political social organization in Assam). All Assam Kaibarta Mahila Sanmilan (AAKMS) and All Assam Kaibarta Tarun Sangha (AAKTS) were formed in the British period (The AAKMS and AAKTS are non political and social organization in Assam). The process of political mobilization among them had started much earlier as compared to other depressed castes in Assam. These associations had consistently worked for enhancement of their status in the state. Significantly, the AAKS decided for stopping the payment of religious tax to the Satradhikars in 1929. The size of population is an important factor to determine the social, cultural and economic changes of a community. As per census 1931 report, the total population of Kaibarta people was 149000 in Assam [17]. The people of the Kaibarta community made organized moves to raise their socio-economic status in the British period of Assam.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Kaibarta Community

The people of Kaibarta community are generally honest, truthful and hard working in nature. Regarding the physical anthropology of the Kaibartas, B. M. Das observed that among the Kaibartas, the frequency of wet type is rather low as compared to the other caste population [18]. D.D. Das writes, "The Kaibartas are mainly a short to medium statured people. Their nose is of mesorrhine type. Head is monocephalic and their face is mesoprosopic" [19]. The Kaibartas constitute about 2.34 percent and 34.05 percent of the total population and SC population of

Assam. There are about 770 Kaibarta villages in different districts of Assam [20]. The sex ratio of the Kaibarta is 955 which is higher to the national average for SCs (936) in 2001. The literacy rate among the Kaibartas is 72.10 percent which is higher than 66.80 percent the aggregated state figure of SCs in 2001. According to the 2001 census, the male and female literacy rate of the Kaibartas is 80.50 percent and 63.30 percent respectively. Individual SC wise is concerned; it is known that the Kaibartas are predominantly residing in rural areas having more than 85 percent rural population in Assam as per census 2001. The people of the community are scattered in different parts of Assam. The total population of Kaibarta community were 74,186, 5,81,559 and 7,16,893 in the year of 1951, 1991 and 2011 respectively in Assam.

The occupational distribution of population is an index to determine the level of development of a community. By occupation we mean the distribution of working force in different occupations or the persons engaged in different sectors for their livelihood. The occupational pattern of a community depends on different social and economic factors which also change with the pace of development. The Kaibarta people are engaged in different occupations in the state. Agriculture is the backbone of rural economy in Assam and the Kaibartas cannot be an exception in this regard. The main occupation of the Kaibarta people is agriculture. Next to agriculture, fishing business is the most important occupation of the Kaibartas in Assam. The fishing was an important occupation in the past of the community. There is minor change in the situation of occupational pattern among the Kaibartas in the state. They have rich tradition of handicrafts. The people of the community are associated with traditional handloom. The handicrafts and handloom products of the community have been playing a significant role for social development in Assam. The Kaibartas are the followers of Hinduism in Assam. As per the Sibsagar District Gazetteer, "They have in general been following the essential prerequisites of Hinduism. It is interesting to note that most of the members of this community are followers of the Vaisnava tenet, founded by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva" [21]. The people of the community celebrate Bohag, Magh and Kati bihu just like other Assamese people in the state.

Health status cannot be isolated from social, cultural and economic context of a community.

The SC people are living close to nature and they are influenced more by social, cultural and environmental dimensions in their health practices especially in rural areas. The Kaibarta people cannot be an exception in this regard. Some people's traditional medicines are practiced in the common diseases among the children. According to B. Dutta and I. Barua, "The Kaibarta follows traditional healing practices to cure some diseases of their children. When a baby or children suffers from Asthma, they usually go to the person who is conversant with herbal medicine" [22]. A change in attitude and ideas are necessary regarding the indigenous treatment of diseases of the people. The educated people are preferred the modern medical facilities. Their culture is similar like other Assamese people and accepted Assamese language as their mother tongue. They have been contributing valuably to political, social and cultural fields in the state of Assam.

3.2 Kaibarta Villages

It is generally seen that all the Kaibarta villages are homogeneous in nature consisting mostly of Kaibarta people in Assam. It is seen that most of the Kaibarta villages are situated near rivers in the state. The Kaibarta villages are very old settlements, the families of which had come to these villages at different times. The Kaibarta community has been the setting in which human activities have taken place since time immemorial. The villagers share the joys and sorrows of each other helping mutually in different works. The villages are surrounded by different segments of Assamese society. It is seen that due to socio-economic reasons a sizeable section of the community have switched over to cultivation, business and service. Presently, the Kaibartas prefer to be self-dependent economically and socially. This community has close links with the neighboring ethnic groups in social and economic matters. Women are well weaver and normally produce the cloth necessary for the family. It is observed that the Kaibartas do not have any inferiority complex since the caste was considered to be a lowly one in the past. During the period of economic planning, sufficient progress of the people of this community was seen in different fields. Many development schemes and programs have brought changes in the socio-economic life of the people. As a result the people of the community are getting the golden opportunity of mixing with all other communities.

The people of the Kaibarta community are at different stages of socio- economic development in the state. The social, cultural and economic scenario of Kaibarta people has undergone changes due to impact of urbanization, industrialization and modernization of the society. Krishna Jyoti Handique and Nilutpal Chutia mentioned that they have moved away more or less from their traditional socio-economic life style [23]. Majority of the children is being educated in government run primary schools in the Kaibarta villages. As we know that parental involvement is very essential for children education during primary stage. Parents play an important role in assisting their child's learning and teaching at home. To make valuable assets of the economy, the parents must play an important role. During the primary level the children are quite dependent upon the parents including other family members for their basic needs such as food, cloth, shelter and educational support in both inside and outside the home. It is duty for the parents to remind the child of the school timing, to make them ready for the school, help to put the uniform, giving them food, accompanying them to and from the school, keep uniform clean and help to do homework. It is generally seen that poor and illiterate parents are unable to provide basic items for their children in primary education especially in rural Kaibarta areas. The social and cultural aspects of the Kaibarta community as a whole are under the process of change. But over time, modern complexities have also touched them causing some change in their psychology in the state. There is no denying the fact that some educated Kaibarta people have lost their special SC characteristics in Assam [24].

4. CONCLUSION

It is to be noted that in spite of having a huge potential for development, most of the people of Kaibarta community have remained backward even after seventy three years of independence of the country. By now it is almost clear that the Kaibarta community in the state is faced with different social, cultural, and economic problems for development. It is also true that much more remains to be done in the matter of improvement in social, financial, and economic infrastructure in the most of Kaibarta villages of Assam. We sincerely hoped that the present study will draw the attention of the planners and policy makers in Assam as well as in India.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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