

COSMOGONY OF CASTE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN ASSAM



Bimal J Dev • Dilip K Lahiri

The book enlarges the frontier of our knowledge of the hitherto unknown socio-political life of the people of Assam which stands out as a glaring example of a socially more progressive society than that found in other parts of India. The traditional Hindu social order had placed different caste groups in the ascending scale of reverence and descending degree of contempt. But this iniquitous social stratification entrenched in the caste system did not flourish in Assam where the traditional heritage with its horizontal divisions underwent characteristic adaptability and became linked up with humanistic trends.

It is in Assam that a more egalitarian and liberal Hindu way of life appeared in its true manifestation and became a force of social change and progress. The process of secularisation had democratised caste relations in a spectacular way and this trend became evident in Assam much earlier than elsewhere in India.

The Brahmins, elsewhere considered as perpetuators of caste rigidity, have been broad-minded in Assam and even today are held in esteem. Today Assam is the only State in India which has been officially declared to be free from the evils of untouchability. Besides it has been singularly free from any case of atrocities on the Harijans in the recent past. In addition, social tensions arising out of the issue of conversion is conspicuous by its absence. The concept of pollution and ritualistic purity found no enchorage in the Assamese Society.

This pioneering study on the cosmogony and development of caste in Assam throws new light on hitherto unexplored processes of vertical social mobility against the background of interaction between the entrenched and the ascendant castes. The politicisation of the castes provided the motive force in ensuring the rapid interaction of the caste groups with the modernising trends. The authors have made commendable efforts in writing a book which is packed with so much information about hitherto unknown facets of caste phenomenon in Assam. It is no doubt an invaluable addition to the current literature on the strategic north-eastern region in India.

Bimal J. Dev, M.A. (Double), LL.B, Ph.D and Dilip K. Lahiri M.A., B.Ed , Dip-in-French and German languages, Ph.D., have outstanding research papers to their credit published in prestigious journals in India and abroad. Their earlier work "Lushai Customs and Ceremonies," published by Mittal Publications, Delhi is an invaluable addition to the current literature on the North-eastern region of India. Another scholarly work by the authors entitled "Khasi Political Culture" is in the press. The authors are currently engaged in a research project entitled 'Delhi Far From Kohima.'

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MITTAL PUBLICATIONS
DELHI - 110035 (INDIA)

NE
301.440954162
DEV;1

60698
10/88
RA
12-88

First Published 1984

© Bimal J. Dev & Dilip K. Lahiri
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Distributed by
MITTAL PUBLISHER'S DISTRIBUTORS
1856, Tri Nagar,
DELHI-110 035.

Published by
K.M. Mittal,
MITTAL PUBLICATIONS,
Tri Nagar,
DELHI-110 035 (India).

Printed by
B. L. Bansal for ARUN TYPOGRAPHER
at Mohan Printing Corp., Delhi-110 007.

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Preface

Caste continues to have important bearings on the socio-political life of the people of Assam. Nevertheless, the social life of Assam stands out to be relatively more progressive as compared to the other parts of India.] The present study is a humble attempt to bring to the limelight the cross-currents and undercurrents of the caste system in Assam along with a dispassionate exploration of the spectacular process of social mobility which had the dissolving effect on the rigidities inherent in the traditional Hindu Society. This original work is also intended to unfold the dimensions of social stratifications in Assam and the impact of modernisation on the various caste groups. In fact, the politicisation of castes provided the motive force in ensuring the rapid interaction of the caste groups with the modernising streams.

The various chapters have been written after an intensive analysis of valuable data which had hitherto remained entirely unexplored. Reliability of some of the data have been tested and corroborated by field studies on a limited scale. The authors have attempted to analyse an important aspect of the social history of Assam and in the process they were not motivated by the idea of maligning any caste group in relation to another. The authors firmly believe that this analysis would extend the frontier of knowledge in the area of social mobility and modernisation. The present volume also embodies a number of papers by the authors which have been published in the reputed research journals of India such as *Man-In-India*, *Social Action*, *Indian Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Social and Economic Studies*, *Folklore* and *Social Research*. The authors express their gratitude to Mr. B.N. Bahuguna, Editor of the

Mittal Publications, Delhi for his valuable suggestions in the completion of this work. The authors gratefully acknowledge the help extended by Mr. A.H. Choudhury, Keeper of Records of the Assam Secretariat, Gauhati in the matter of permission to consult all relevant records. Finally, thanks to Mr. D.B. Rai for typing the manuscript with all sincerity.

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Introduction

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. One of the important factors which affected the supremacy of the Brahmins in Assam—the torch bearer of the caste system—was that a good number of influential Brahmins were imported by various kings from Kanauj, Nadia, Oudh, Mithila and Nabadwip who only suffered from an inherent residential limitation in spreading their overlordship. Further, several other factors like the slow progress of Hinduism, the prevalence of diversity in the cultural setup, the non-adoption of many of the traditional beliefs and rituals attached to Hinduism, the emergence of tantricism in some parts of Assam, the secular preachings of Sri Sankardeva and later by Sri Madhavdeva had no less posed as constraints in maintaining their traditional supremacy. It is true that their social ascendancy was an established fact but their ritualistic influence did not penetrate in the social system. The *Kulin* system introduced in Bengal in the 12th century by King Ballal Sen could not flourish in Assam as the main patrons of the Brahmins—the converted Ahom Kings—had developed no faith in it. Significantly, for their non-dogmatic approach the Brahmins in Assam had never been put in the dock by other higher castes. The Brahmins of Assam are even today held in esteem and are not treated as an oppressor class as in states like Bengal and Tamilnadu. They had little faith in Manu Samhita and its injunctions and because of their alien origin they did not perpetuate their attachment to the

fanatic dogmas. The Census Report of Assam 1891 thus commented :

“The Brahmins of Assam proper seem to be ignorant of various caste sub-divisions which are found in Bengal and other parts of India. They have also lost sight of the rules of exogamy based on the ‘Gotra’ (this appears to be also the case in Sylhet, although there the Baidik Brahmins claim descent from one or other of the 10 Munis) and have no Kulins or Ghotoks. They are, besides, in the habit of taking money for their daughters (during marriage) and are thus much in the condition in which the Brahmins of Bengal appear to have been before Ballal Sen instituted enquiries into their positions and qualification”.

In the Brahmaputra Valley the ‘Nava-Sakha’ group as found in Bengal did not develop and as such the issue of catering to their spiritual needs was out of question. However, in the Surma Valley this nine-caste group did exist which included the Gop or Goala (herdsmen), Fulmali (gardener), the Teli (oil presser), Tanti (weaver), Modok (confectioner), Barui (betel vine cultivator), Kulala (potter), Kamar (black-smith) and Napit (barber). None of these castes are mentioned by Manu and the presumption appears to be that in his time differences of profession did not involve rigid caste distinctions. In the Surma Valley four out of these nine castes—Mali, Tanti, Modok, Kulala—did not enjoy the ministrations of the Srotriya Brahmins as it involved degradation. The priests who catered to their religious needs were known as Barna-Brahmins and were not allowed to intermarry anyone of the Srotriya class. Significantly, there also developed a caste system within the Barna-Brahmin group, which was hierarchically arranged in such a manner that between the different categories of Barna-Brahmins marriage was forbidden. For example, the priest of Kaibarta was not in the habit of marrying the daughter of a Kumar’s Brahmin. About the caste system in the Surma Valley the Census of 1891 pertinently noted :

“The Division of the better caste into sub-castes is almost unknown. Some few Brahmins and Kayasthas describe themselves as Baidik, Utkal or as Dakshin Rarhi and Uttar Rarhi but these expressions mean nothing to them and intermarriage between the different sub-castes is freely permitted. There is no *Kulinism* and very little attention is paid to the rules of exogamy based on the Gotra-system inculcated in the *shastras*. It is true that most of the Brahmins claim to belong to one or other of the eponymous sections founded by the ten Munis but they by no means invariably observe the prohibition in regard to marriage which the distinction thus made involve elsewhere. The same remarks apply to the Baidyas and Kayasthas. They have their Gotras but they do not observe them as a bar to marriage between persons bearing the same family rank”.

(One of the notable features of the caste system in Assam has been the total absence of untouchable castes. This is illustrated by the fact that even the Doms are not treated as untouchables in the Brahmaputra Valley.) The concept of pollution found no place in the web of Assamese social relationships and this tradition was further encouraged by the functioning of a number of *Satra* institutions. Even those who claimed to be untouchables for the sake of political spoils are now reluctant to be so designated.

The liberal outlook of the Brahmins was also responsible for an unprecedented social mobility in Assam towards the end of the 19th century which continued in the first quarter of the present one. Thus, Chandals became Namasudras, Bhuimalis as Malis, Haris as Banias, Swarnakars as Kayasthas, Doms as Nadiyals and even Mahimals as Sheikhs and so on. The process of status mobility received support from even the leading Brahmins and the heads of the *Satras* were particularly unequivocal in their support. In fact, the urge for legitimising social respectability was generated among the depressed castes who were then yet to receive the light of education. The fulfilment came due to the liberal attitude of the Census authorities

who readily allowed the change of caste names in order to democratise caste relations.

The liberal philosophy of the Brahmins in Assam is reflected even today. A leading Brahmin of Assam when interviewed about the caste hatred quoted a passage from the *Dhammapada* as translated by Max Muller and stated :

A man does not become a Brahmana by his plaited hair, by his family, or by birth; in whom there is truth and righteousness, he is blessed, he is a Brahmana.

What is the use of plaited hair. O fool ! What of the raiment of goatskins ? Within thee there is ravening, but the outside thou makest clean.

I do not call a man a Brahmana because of his origin or of his mother. He is indeed arrogant, and he is wealthy; but the poor, who is free from all attachments, him I call indeed a Brahmana.

Him I call indeed a Brahmana who, after cutting all fetters, never trembles, is free from bonds and unshackled.

Him I call indeed a Brahmana who, after cutting the strap and the thong, the rope with all that pertains to it, has destroyed all obstacles, and is awakened.

Significantly, caste prejudices and hatred are conspicuous by their absence even in early Assamese writings. In religious and mythological writings too one hardly comes across any eagerness to embody divine sanctification of social discrimination and pollution. This undoubtedly created a better social atmosphere which though not ideal was nevertheless full of progressive potentialities. Caste prejudices, however, flourished in places settled by the Bengalees who had inherited the legacy of a discriminatory social order tilted in favour of the orthodox Brahmins. Unlike the Brahmaputra Valley, the Surma Valley, a predominantly Bengali cultural zone, had always acted as a miniature Bengal in upholding the invincibility of the doctrine of *karma* in order to legitimise the unequal injunctions of religious scriptures. No wonder some of the mythological beliefs relate to the terrors of hell, the probability

of having low birth in certain circumstances, the penances and the divinity of certain categories of Brahmins and pollution. All this might have had some demonstration effect in the Assamese society but the same obviously received no wider acceptance.

The preaching of caste fraternity is clearly revealed in '*Haragouri Sambad*' which had greatly influenced the Assamese society. An extract is given below :

"Says the Goddess, "Oh ! God of Gods, Lord all knowing, versed in the sciences, the unknowable and the supporter of the universe ! Please tell me the origin of kings and men of all the four ages or *Yoogs* namely Satya, Treta, Dwapur and Kali. The God answered : "My beloved noble Goddess ! You have questioned me on a proper subject and I will briefly state the history of the creation. From my energy sprang out a powerful being of the male sex, whose body has been divided into two parts, namely Daivajna and Brahmin. The former sprang from the head and the latter from the mouth. In reality, both are one and the same, the division was only made for social purposes by the circular weapon of Vishnu. The being that originated from the head and who is equal to the sun and the moon in brilliance is the very eye of the universe and is called the astronomer. The star being born from the mouth is like the Brahma himself and is thoroughly versed in the Vedas, Vedangas and the sciences. The Brahmins sprang from the mouth, the Khatriyas from the arms, the Vaisyas from the thigh and the Sudras from the feet. As Vishnu and Brahma are one and the same, so are Daivajnas and Brahmins. The Brahmin is the younger brother of the Daivajnas, the Khatriya is the younger brother of the Brahmin, the Vaisya is the younger brother of the Khatriya and the Sudra the younger brother of the Vaisya. A Daivajna is equal to one hundred Brahmins in importance, each Brahmin is equal to one hundred Khatriyas and the relation is the same as regards the other castes. Where

one Daivajna is present in the *sradh* ceremony or sacrifice, it is to be understood that all the holy places and deities are present there”.

In contrast, a similar work written in Bengali speaks of ceremonial discriminations and ordains the maintenance of social disabilities and scrupulous observance of religious taboos in regard to marriage transgression of which would lead to loss of caste status. No wonder, the head of a religious institution when interviewed was eloquent in recalling the glory of the Brahmins and stated that the degradation of the society was due to the waning of respect and devotion to the ‘real Brahmins’. In his view the lower castes must carry the ‘guilt of centuries’. In defence of his stand he cited a verse from a religious text.

Daivadhinam jagatsarvam
Mantradhinam tu daivatam
Tanmantram Brahmanadhinam
Tasmat Brahmanam prapujayet

(Gods who rule the world are bound by Mantra but the Mantra is under the control of the Brahmin. So worship the Brahmin).

Caste hatred and tension wherever found in the Brahmaputra Valley is undoubtedly an imitation of Bengali Brahmin’s overjealousness. In some villages of Assam the lower castes might suffer certain minor social disabilities but the fact remains that in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Brittiyals, Kaibartas, Suts and Katonis, share with Brahmins and Kalitas the Goswamis of Auniati and Dakshinpat as their spiritual leaders.

In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam the influence of the preachings of Sankardeva, a religious saint and reformist of the Sixteenth Century, had cast a deep imprint in the socio-cultural life of the Assamese. This legacy is now a part of the social heritage of the people and has not lost its relevance even to-day. Sankardeva’s message of caste fraternity had also set the process of secularisation in motion at a time when the same

was inconceivable in the rest of India. In his religious order caste was dethroned and this liberal Philosophy of neo-Vaishnavite faith attracted people irrespective of caste, creed, religion and tribe. [The principles of equality and fraternity thus formed an imbedded part of the socio-cultural life of the people of the Valley. In contrast, the preachings of Chaitanya-deva in Bengal, a contemporary of Sankardeva, had little impact following his death and his Philosophy failed to mould people in their social pursuits. The relevance of Sankardeva’s ideas and preachings also explain the absence of untouchability in the Brahmaputra Valley. [No wonder, the process of Sanskritization took place in an unhampared manner without the opposition of the higher castes.]

[All this found expression in the political arena as well where the caste Hindus having a background in the secularisation process ungrudgingly allowed the depressed castes to enjoy the fruits of a participatory political culture which was allowed to grow under the Indian constitutional system.] Even during the British period the Congress leadership did not wish to make any political gains by exploiting the moderate particularistic loyalties characteristic of the traditional Assamese social order. The process of political modernisation initiated during the British days flourished fully in the post-independent era but in the process of political negotiation or in the process of negotiating the issue of sharing political power, the various ascriptive associations played no role whatsoever. Perhaps that was not needed as the Congress leadership had all along fostered continued secularisation through political involvement of the masses. This holds good in the context of Congress monopoly in State politics for three decades since Independence. Significantly, on several occasions in Assam a number of caste Hindu Congress nominees could win from the Ahom dominated constituencies and Scheduled Caste nominees from caste Hindu constituencies. This is indeed no mean achievement.