

The Ethnic Process in India with a Special Reference to Assam

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The Sanskrit equivalent for the Greek term 'ethnos' is 'Jana'. The earliest state formations, known as 'Sorasha-Janapada' which emerged in the pre-Christian era, were based on the Janas. A Janapada, literally, means the foothold of a Jana with an ethnonym, such as Anga, Magadha etc., These Janas were all culturally Indo-Aryan, speaking cognate Aryan languages/dialects and living in societies professedly based on the 'Varnashrama' institutions. But in the process of their organizing territory-based polities and selectively absorbing non-Aryan tribal elements, they also became distinguished from each other in many respects. A Jana apparently emerged as an ethno-territorial concept that included both the twice-born Dwija and the once-born Sudra. But it excluded, at least initially, the Kirata, Nisada, Shabara, Chandala and such other aboriginal tribes. These latter, all swidden cultivators, hunters and food gatherers, constituted the despised and suppressed populace, while the former constituted a Janapada's basic population. The early Janapadas were later submerged into imperial formations, such as the Maurya and Gupta Empires. Kamarupa in Eastern India was a late political formation - a Janapada grafted on local petty Kirata chiefs by Indo-Aryan colonists from Maghadha. This is what we gather from the legends of Naraka, Bashishtha and Parashurama coming to Kamarupa as Aryanizers. Naraka was later claimed to have founded the Bhauma dynasty and his son, Bhagadatta, was said to have joined the Bharata War with golden-complexioned Kirata and China soldiers. These myths are suggestive of the Aryanized sons of the soil forming the first state organization in Assam. Whatever be the claims contained in the 'Puranas' and inscribed 'Prashastis' such a state came into existence not long before Pusya Varman, historically known as the first Bhauma King.

Though culturally Indo-Aryan, the Kamarupa people were predominantly Mongoloid in their physical feature and included a large Mlechcha-Kirata population outside the Varnashrama mould. This is why the land was not given any ethnonym. Nor were the people known by the name of the land until the medieval times.

The early Janapadas also lost their ethnonyms in due course and old ethnoses gave way to new ethnoses in course of political turmoils and migrations. The four Varnas and extra-Varna tribes, by way of fission and fusion, brought into existence numerous en-

dogamous Jati or caste communities, arranged into a Varna-Jati hierarchy. Peculiar to ancient India, this ethnic process continued through the medieval times as well, and it was certainly closely linked with the developing regional economic and political organisation of the society. In Kamarupa this kind of ethnic differentiation was however less elaborate. Here the four-Varna system did not work. There were only two Varnas - Dwija and Sudra. The former were dominant and were entitled to hold also high administrative offices which combined both civil and military functions. Intermediate functionaries, designated as Raja, Rajanya, Rajanaka, Rajaputra and Ranaka, might have enjoyed a Kshatriya status, but we have no definite knowledge about it. In any case, the word Kshatriya is mentioned only once or twice in the corpus of Kamarupa inscriptions, while the word Vaishya is simply not there. There are also only occasional references to occupations of Banik (Trader), Sekyakara (Smith), Kaivarta, Tantri (Weaver), Kumbhakarara (Potter), Kayastha (Scribe), Veshya (Prostitute) and Karsaka (Cultivator). Of course, outside the structured Aryanised society there were also non-descript tribes and mixed peoples of the Mlechcha category. In medieval Assam, Kshatriya is conspicuously absent and the occupational groups, mentioned above, generally failed to crystallize into well-defined castes.

The people were also divided into religious sects such as Vaishnava, Shaiva, Tantrik etc. Besides the coming of Islam and the Tai-Ahoms further complicated the religious scenario. The ethnic process in the medieval times was, above all, complicated by a profound change in the linguistic situation. We have Hiuen Tsang's evidence that until the 7th century, the Indo-Aryan language of Kamarupa differed only little in its spoken form from that of Madhyadesha, India's heartland. Even thereafter, throughout the pre-Ahom centuries, the Aryanized peoples of Odra, Gauda, Bengal and Kamarupa continued apparently to speak a common language, the Eastern Magadhi. And this common language began to split up in distinct variants like Oriya, Maithili, Bangla, Kamarupi etc. not before the 14th century. They all lacked linguonyms and were designated simply as Bhasa. When Shankaradeva wrote in the 16th century in Assamiya, he did distinguish Asam from Kamarupa (as politonyms) and had no name for the language he used. Nor did the Buranji-writers have. Linguonyms for Asamiya, and for that matter possibly also for Bangla, were coined in the 19th century in the process of the formation of modern Indian nationalities. The term 'Asamiya' as an ethnic concept is also modern.