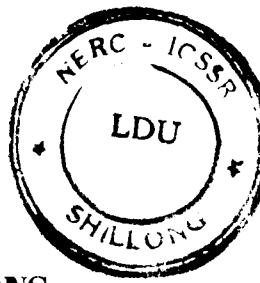


SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS
OF
THE KAIBARTAS OF ASSAM
-- A Case Study

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TRIBALS AND SCHEDULED CASTES
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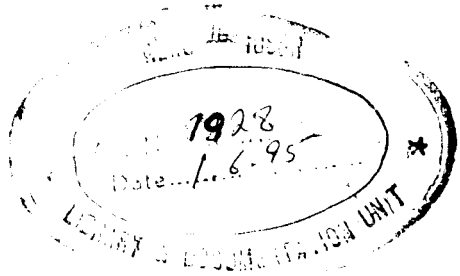
SOCIO- ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE **KAIBARTAS** OF ASSAM -
A BOOK BASED ON RESEARCH STUDY ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
CONDITIONS OF THE KAIBARTAS OF ASSAM UNDERTAKEN BY THE
ASSAM INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH FOR TRIBALS AND SCHEDULED
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CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

The Kaibartas are the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam. They are one of the sixteen scheduled caste communities of the State as per Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950. According to 1971 Census, the total population of Assam is 1,46,25,152 out of which the number of scheduled caste population is 9,12,557. In other words, the scheduled castes constitute 6.2% of the total population of Assam. Again, we find that out of the total scheduled caste population the Namasudras occupy the predominant position numbering 3,00,842 (32.9%) while the Kaibartas occupy the second largest position numbering 2,94,819 (32.3%). In the year 1981 Census was not conducted in Assam. The total population of Assam, according to 1991 Census, is 2,24,14,322, the number of scheduled caste population being 16,59,412 only. This indicates that the scheduled castes of Assam constitute 7.4% of the total population of the State. It may be mentioned here that castewise population figures as per 1991 Census are still not available.

The Kaibartas are an important segment of the greater Assamese society. For their economic upliftment various measures have been adopted under the Scheduled Caste Component Plan. In order to chalk out development plans for any community, first hand knowledge about that community, in toto, is imperative and only then a pragmatic and need based planning is possible. To fill up this vacuum the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals & Scheduled Castes (erstwhile Tribal Research Institute, Assam) undertook a detailed study on the socio-economic conditions of the Kaibartas of Assam in the year 1984.

There are about 770 Kaibarta villages in Assam. These are interspersed with other non Scheduled Caste people. There is no compact area of the Kaibartas and they are spread in urban as well as in rural areas.

METHODOLOGY :

Out of 770 nos. of Kaibarta villages, some are fully inhabited by the people belonging to this caste while others have people belonging to other castes. In fact we do not have any fully exhausted list of Kaibarta villages for the entire State since the Census Report of 1971 contains the names of the villages inhabited by the Scheduled Caste population. Under these circumstances we had to take help of the Sub-divisional Welfare Officers of the Department for Welfare of Plains Tribes and backward Classes who were kind enough to provide us with the lists of villages having 40% or above Kaibarta population within their respective jurisdictions. On verification these lists were found to be more or less correct although in some cases some discrepancies were also noticed.

For our study we have selected 77 villages (10%) on the basis of random sampling out of the total number of 770 villages. In order to obtain a true picture of their economic life, villages lying in urban, semi-urban, rural and interiormost- settings were selected. The list of selected Kaibarta villages are shown in Appendix - A. Again 10% of the Kaibarta households of these villages were selected for the study on the basis of random sampling. To elicit specific information on the existing basic amenities viz. transport and communication system, civic and educational facilities and other infrastructural facilities etc. village schedules were also prepared and used. Canvassing of household schedules to 679 nos. of respondents were done by our field staff and the interview method was utilised for filling up the schedules. One adult member of every household preferably the Head was personally contacted and interviewed for recording relevant information in the household schedule. The entire field study took a period of two and half

years starting from January, 1984 to June, 1986. After completion of the field work tabulation, analysis and interpretation of data and report writing thereon were done. The draft report was completed by the end of March, 1987.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KAIBARTAS :

Opinions differ regarding the origin of the term Kaibarta. In Assam this term is used mainly to indicate the people whose main profession is fish trade. Thus Doms and Nadiyals come within the fold of the Kaibartas. Some authors try to include the keots in the fold of the Kaibartas. William Robinson traces the Kaibarta origin among the Keots who are no longer treated as Kaibartas. "The Nadiyals or Doms are, on the whole, the most numerous tribe in Assam. That they originally emigrated from Bengal, there can be little doubt. Their original employment is that of fishermen There are a good many Keyots, or some please to call themselves, Kaibartas. They are divided into several classes, the two principal are called the Haloya Keyots and the Jaluya Keyots. The former class are chiefly cultivators of the ground ; these retain the worship of Krishna. The Jaluya Keots are fishermen and without having relinquished their name or profession, have in many points followed the tenets of Mahomed ; yet they keep themselves distinct as a caste, and will not mix with the Moslems."¹

Although Doms and Nadiyals of Assam are categorised as Kaibartas, yet traditionally there are clear cut distinctions between the Kaibartas and Keots on the one hand and Doms and Nadiyals on the other. B.C. Allen observes "The names Kewat and Kaibartta are used more or less indiscriminately for the same caste in Assam. Owing to the comparative scarcity of the higher castes, the cultivating Kewats occupy a higher position in this Province than in Bengal ; but some of them have taken to styling themselves Mahisya Vaishya, as they resent the attempt on the part of the

1 Robinson, William : A Descriptive Account of Assam,
1841, Reprint 1975, Chap VII, P. 263

Nadiyals or Doms to assume the name Kaibartta The Nadiyals or Doms are a fishing caste, and in Assam have never performed any of the degrading offices assigned to them in Bengal.”²

Montgomery Martin has also drawn similar demarcating lines between the Kaibartas and Keots on the one hand and Doms and Nadiyals on the other. “The Nadiyals or Domes are more numerous than the Koch, as they extend over both Assam proper and Kamrup. Their manners exactly resemble those of the colony, which has settled at Goyalpara Notwithstanding their care in eating, they are considered as impure. There are a good many Heluya-Keyots, who cultivate the ground, and Keyots who fish. The former are pure, and usually assume the title of Kaibarta ; the latter are impure ; but have not adopted the Muhammedan doctrine, as those of Ronggopoor have done.”³

The term Kaibarta has got currency for the fishing communities like Doms, Nadiyals and Jaluwa Keots. In the early writings of the historians and ethnographers no serious attempt was made to trace the origin of the Kaibartas. Risley, however, has provided us with some useful information. “There seem to be good grounds for the belief that the Kaibartas were among the earliest inhabitants of Bengal and occupied a commanding position. Many centuries ago, five separate princedoms - Tamralipta or Tamluk, Balisita, Turka, Sujamute and Kutabpur-are said to have been founded by them in the Midnapur district and it is perhaps not unreasonable to infer from its traditions that part of the country must have been one of the earliest seats of the tribe The simplest explanation of the relation between the Kaibarta and the Kewat appears then to be that both belonged to one and the same tribe, but that the branch

2 Allen B.C., Gait E.A. etc. : Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India, Reprint 1984, p. 51.

3 Martin, Montgomery : Eastern India, Reprint 1976
Vol V, p. 676

which settled in Bihar gradually became endogamous and adopted a Hindu name.”⁴

Risley traces the origin of the Kaibartas in Bengal. He mentions a legend to substantiate his findings. “There was a powerful tribe called Kewats who were raised to the status of Sudra by Ballal Sen conferring on them the title of Kaibarta in return for their undertaking to abandon their original profession of fishing.”⁵ The internal structure of the Kaibartas varies from place to place. Thus in Central Bengal and Maldoh the cultivating groups are called ‘Halik’ or ‘Chasa’ while the fishing groups are designated as ‘Jalik’ or ‘Jalwal’ or ‘Jaliya’. Risley further informs us that in areas like Bakarganj the cultivating Kaibartas have various names such as Halia Das, Parasara Das or Chasi Kaibarta while the fishing Kaibartas are referred to simply as Kaibarta.

In Assam eminent literateurs and scholars like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Rai Bahadur Kanaklal Barua and famous historian Rajmohan Nath tried to trace the origin of the Kaibartas. According to Bezbarua and Kanaklal Barua, the Kaibartas were Dravidians.⁶ Gunabhiram Barua in his Assam Buranji⁷ has not elaborated about the Kaibartas. It appears the Kaibartas of Assam in those days were insignificant in numbers and in later years their numbers inflated with the wholesale inclusion of the Doms and Nadiyals into the fold of the Kaibartas. However, in the said Assam Buranji the Kaibartas have been referred to while describing the Keots. ‘The Keots come within the fold of the Kaibartas.’ Incidentally it may be pointed out here that in Orissa the Kaibartas and Keots are grouped together with Dhibara. Fishing is their main profession. About the Doms and Nadiyals the said Buranji throws some light.

4 Risley, H.H. : The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, 1891, Vol I, Reprint 1981, p. 375-382

5 Ibid

6 Publication Board, Assam, : ‘Prakash’ Vol. July, 1985
Guwahati

7 Barua, Gunabhiram : Assam Buranji, 1884, Reprint 1972
Publication Board, Assam, p. 179-180.

“Doms are living in Assam since a long time. Fish catching, fish selling, boat making and boat plying, lime making and selling are their main professions. Now they are engaging themselves in agriculture and other trades. In trade and commerce they are considered as inferior caste. There is no definite source about the origin of the word Dom. The Doms of other parts of North India are very low castes. They make baskets and sell those and some are engaged in cremating dead bodies. Among them some traders are also found. When Buddhism was in full vigour the low castes embracing Buddhism tried to take revenge upon the Brahmins but later on when Hinduism was revitalized, those who did not accept Hinduism were hated by the Hindus and called them Doms. In this way they formed a separate class outside the Hindu fold. As the Brahmins did not accept them as disciples, the Doms had to satisfy themselves with the Kalita Gurus.” (Extract from original Assamese text)

Haliram Dhekial Phukan in his Assam Buranji ⁸ mentions about Doms, Nadiyals and Jaluwa Keots. “Jalui Keot and Dom practise fishing. The Doms are concentrated in Soumar Pith (Upper Assam) and Pragiyotishpur (Kamrup). There are very rich people among them also. Many are engaged in trade and commerce and they are literate. A few persons among them travel with such costly dresses that nobody can recognise them as Doms. Of late they become furious when they are referred to as Doms. They prefer to call themselves Nadiyals.”

Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri have made interesting revelation regarding the origin of the Kaibartas of Assam. “An analysis of the ancient records-Mojohor and copper plate-granted by the Ahom king Shiva Singha during the years 1135 B.S. and 1657 Saka in favour of Barpeta Satra reveal that a sect of Kaibartas, some of whom were fishermen by profession, adhered to Buddhism

8 Dhekial Phukan, : Assam Buranji, 1829, Reprint 1962

Haliram . Part – IV, p. 88-89.

in early days and that for their non-acceptance of Hinduism which was then prevalent in Assam, they were looked down upon by the Hindus of Assam and were contemptuously called Doms. From the famous Mojohor of 1135 B.S. it also appears that three persons viz. Sarva, Daika, and Saronga who happened to be the sons of one Bolo Dom were Hinduised by the illustrious Vaishnava reformers Sri Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and were declared and recognised in the Mojohor as Kaibartas and 'Bhaktas' of Barpeta Satra ... It is significant to note that there always existed a strong desire among the Doms of Assam Valley to acquire the caste name Kaibarta."⁹

B.C. Allen opines that Kaibartas are very few in numbers in Assam. The Nadiyals or Doms prefer to call themselves as Kaibartas. "In Kamrup the names Kewat and Kaibartta seem to be interchangeable. The Kaibarttas are divided into two functional groups which for all intents and purposes are separate castes, the Halowa and the Jaliya. In Assam proper the Jaliya Kaibarttas are very scarce but the Nadiyals or Doms are endeavouring to get their claims to the name acknowledged by Government. The genuine Jaliya Kaibarttas, however, marked the difference between themselves and the Nadiyals by declining to sell fish except on the river bank within a paddles throw of the boat and abstaining from the use of the Ghokota net. The 'Kewat' or Kaibartta in Assam is a clean Sudra Caste ranking immediately after the Kalita. In addition to the Jaliya there are six other subdivision- Mali, Halowa, Seoli, Neoli, Katharoa and Bhari of which the Mali ranks highest though all six have taken to agriculture."¹⁰

Dr. P.C. Choudhury opines : "Inscriptions mention a class of people called the Kaivartas or fishermen who also helped the State by collecting tolls. As found in the Tezpur Rock inscription of Harjjaravarman, the expression is kaivarta-nau (ku) ksi-svabhaksa-

9 Dev Bimal J., : Cosmogony of Caste and

Lahiri Dilip K. Social Mobility in Assam, 1984 p. 20

10 Allen B.C. : Census of Assam, 1901, Vol 1,
Reprint p. 132.

sadhani, which literally means 'the eater of the property in the interior of boats'. They are often associated with water and boats. In the Smritis, the Kaivartas are taken to be of mixed caste, and Manu uses the term to mean the offspring of a Nisada father by a Ayagava mother. The Brahmāvaivarta Purana (X. 34) states that a Kaivarta was born of a Ksatriya father and a Vaisya mother. Whatever their origin, it is certain that the Kaibartas were non-Aryans, and their economic pursuit consisted mainly of fishing. Epigraphy also indicates that some Kaibartas took to agriculture. In Assam they are now divided in to two sections : Halova (those who work with ploughs) and Jalova (those who are actually fishermen). It appears certain that they were depressed classes, who having adopted Hinduism, followed the general rules of Hindu society and were, therefore, included within the Sudras."¹¹

Dr. Dambarudhar Nath has mentioned in an article¹² that the Tezpur rock inscription of King Harjjaravarman (815-835 A.D.) of Salastambha dynasty, the Gauhati copper-plate inscription of King Indrapal (1040-1065 A.D.) and Puspavadra copper-plate inscription of King Dharmapal (1095-1120 A.D.) of Pal dynasty indicate the settlement of the Kaibartas in ancient Assam.

According to Medini Choudhury, a noted literateur of Assam, "There is no evidence that before the eleventh century i.e. prior to the invasion of Cholaraj Rajendra there was any contact of South India with North East India. During that time the kingdom of the ruling Mayur dynasty in the Tamralipti territory disintegrated and in a small territory of North Bengal, a branch of that royal dynasty

11 Choudhury, P.C. : The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the twelfth century century A.D., 1987, p. 316-317.

12 Nath, Dambarudhar : 'The Kaibartas of Assam' an Assamese article published in the 'Natun Dainik', June 30, 1994 (Special Supplementary Issue)

established kingdom which also disintegrated in the twelfth century. In these two kingdoms there was influence of Mediterranean people. Most probably these people were known as Pani Vaidya (Atharva veda) in ancient times and later on as Kaibarta. These people entered in to Assam from 8th/9th century A.D. Many people think that the Assamese language is also brought by them.”¹³

Dr. Durgeshwar Doley, an eminent Sociologist of Assam opines . Assam has always been enchanting land attracting to her hills and dales wave after wave of human migration from far beyond her borders. Swarms of migrants from distant regions have been coming here, since the beginning of human history and fought and fraternised on the banks of the red river and atop the picturesque hills. Some of the early settlers belonged to the Aryan and the Dravidian stocks and had entered the racial cauldron in course of their great countrywide movements. While the Brahmins and the Kalitas (caste Hindus) of present Assam claim their descent from the earliest Aryan settlers, the Kaibartas (scheduled caste) are believed to be the descendants of the first Dravidian immigrants.”¹⁴

On the whole, we may come to the conclusion that the Kaibartas are the earliest settlers of Assam and they are, as found to-day, a scheduled caste community following both fishing and agriculture as professions.

13 Choudhury, Medini : ‘Ancient Migration into Assam’, an Assamese article (Asamor Atitar Jana Prabrajan) published in ‘Gariyoshi’, June, 1994, p. 23-24.

14 Doley, Durgeshwar : ‘Assamese Liberalism’ an article published in the book ‘Assam and the Assamese Mind’, 1980, p. 35-36.