

Social Stratifications in the Ahom State

(A study on some aspects of social formations)

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I

In simple words social stratification means the layers of society which are formed out of differences in occupation, income, prestige and style of life acquiring rewards and privileges as well as differences in skill, education and power. But to define social stratification in a common acceptable sense is a sociological concept which refers to higher and lower differential strata of both individuals and groups in human society with some specific and generalised sets of characteristics. Marx developed this theory of social stratification based on his materialistic conception of history with the premise that human society is usually found in two strata which he termed as 'classes'. The one is the owner of means of productions and the other is the person who is employed to further productions. Thus Marx's theory is dichotomous and our empirical realities have shown that social stratification studies cannot be limited to a strictly dichotomous principle as it envisages other aspects based on lineage, kinship or ethnic affiliations. Further Marx's theory has not specified the other aspects of cultural factors such as values, religious ideas and legal norms without which it is difficult to determine the social behaviour of particular groups. ¹

To Marx's concept of 'class' Max Weber has added status and power which is of course more explicit systematic and a necessary differentiation. But Weber too like Marx, is not free from the ideological bias while admitting the fact that Marx's hypothesis is too simple to handle the complexity of the stratifications. ²

Following Marx and Weber, Parsons, ³ Davis and Moore ⁴, have added new dimensions to stratification theories by reducing the ideological bias and putting more emphasis on the prestige dimension issues which apparently manifest in all occupational structure of the society. Further in the functional approach stratification is seen as a mechanism through which society encourages men to seek, to achieve, giving way to most able people to perform the most demanding roles for smooth operation of the society itself. ⁵

Whether it is in the structural or functional systems, stratification refers to the entire complex of hierarchical differentiations,

whether group related or not. ⁶ Thus the modern trend in the study of social stratification is a multidimensional approach. As far as pre-industrial medieval societies are concerned, neither Marx nor Weber's propositions will lead us to a correct perspectives of stratification issues in its entirety. Even the thesis of Parsons, Davis and Moore fails to convince us as they undermine the conflict theory and the power dimensions of the stratification issues, favouring inequality in social systems and admits more of social stability rather than of social change ⁷ This is because each individual or group is conceived of as ranked along each of the several dimensions of social stratifications. But the problem is in correlating the dimensional factors as the combined high occupational prestige and low ethnic positions result in political liberalism. The following analysis is just an overview of the issues in social stratifications of the Ahom state based on the empirical data.

II

The Ahoms were by all means in the 'Upper Stage of Barbarianism' ⁸ with an advanced culture using the iron sword, the iron ploughshare and the axe which was important for field agriculture on a large scale and clearing of extensive forest tracts for the purpose of cultivation. Further, they were almost on the threshold of civilisation, being literate, having the capacity for surplus productions and having had some kind of political experience. Following their Tai legacy, they used to live in hot richly watered plains, practising wet rice cultivation through irrigation and water-control, using buffaloes and oxen for ploughing and lived in pile-houses with verandahs. ⁹

Hso-Ka-Hpa, the founding father of the Ahom dynasty in Assam was also accompanied by some nine thousand Paiks. They constituted the third section of the migrating Ahom populace. Thus the Ahom gentes, phratries and in totality the tribe itself suggests the stratifications to a certain degree even before Assam became their joint conquest. The three tier Ahom social organisation was in its embryonic form and burst as under when they started settling permanently in the Brahmaputra valley of upper Assam and when more conquests, expansion of territories and absorption of conquered societies for exploitation of their labour force in extending their wet rice culture, took place. The closeness of the Ahom society based on kinship affiliations and reciprocal social balance then automatically disappeared giving way to the growth of the exploiters and the exploited.

Ecologically, Upper Assam was an undulating alluvial plain, full of thick jungles and marshes with heavy rainfall during the monsoons. To make it suitable for wet rice cultivation, the land reclamation was the first task.¹⁰ The task was by no means easy. Each tract had to be cleared upplot by plot which involved the use of enormous labour force. It was simply not possible to do on an individual scale and hence large scale social organisations on whole communal basis had to be set up. This in turn, gave rise to the organisation of the Paik/Khel systems out of which an agri-based society was emerging and this provided the basic foundations of the Ahom society, polity and economy.

The Ahoms built up a small principality in the Tipam area of Upper Assam and their organisation was in the form of a military democracy with the nobles and chiefs who accompanied Hso-Ka-Hpa. Slavery was not unknown to them at this stage. Though the Ahoms had the capacity for surplus productions yet socially it was not favourable to institutionalise slavery. Later on, when permanent wet rice cultivation was settled and the agriculture progressed leading to a considerable surplus, the war captives were used as slaves. Even at that stage, a process was going on to take some of the slaves into the fold of social units.¹¹ The Ahoms absorbed many of the local autochthones and opened up a broad agri-based society which took a turn towards feudal elements effecting the very social structure. The conquered races were absorbed in the Paik system and engaged in wet rice cultivation and also in establishing royal farms in several places. Three such estates, namely, 'Gochikola', 'Borakhowa', and 'Engera' were set up during the reign of Hso-Ka-Hpa.¹²

III

Up to the close of the fifteenth century, the Ahom society had limited stratifications. There was no worthwhile surplus and exploitations were thus limited. Later on, when mostly through conquests, there was territorial and demoeographic expansions, the entire socio-economic organisation underwent a change resulting in more exploitations, and private property appeared in a diffused manner. During this period, the incipient Ahom society had small dimensions both territorially and demographically. The population was not much and the Paik system was confined more or less within the Ahom populace. The Morans and Borahis whom the Ahom confronted first, were juxta-posed to one another without particular

differentiation. The character of the society appeared as segmental as no difference was noticeable in the new sub-units that were gradually absorbed into the Paik system. Further defence and subsistence was the main concern for all, and productions continued to be a social activity, which was the basic characteristic of the period.

The Paik system was rationalised in 1611 during the reign of Hseng-Hpa (1603-41) and was further cemented in 1653 under the supervision of Momai Tamuli Barbarua during the reign of Chao Hpa Hso-Tam-La (1648-1663). By this time the traditional Ahom society was replaced by a new Assamese society which was predominantly agri-based as the mass population was put into the same basket of Paik/Khel systems. On each stage of elaboration of the paik/Khel system, new offices came into existence and the feudalistic elements appeared prominently. Extension of the bureaucracy and the hierarchical differences with status and power went on side by side. The bureaucracy was monopolised by the Satgharia Ahom Clans. From paternal bureaucracy, it landed into monopoly bureaucracy. Thus a change in the formal social structure was the natural outcome. We can agree here with Leach that in a particular locality over a period of time a political system composed of equitarian lineage segments is replaced by a rank hierarchy of a feudal type, we can speak of a change in the formal social structure.¹³

A degree of social mobility is discernible in the upper stratum. The lineage groups rose from seven to some fifteen.¹⁴ The high offices were exclusively filled up from this group. There are instances sometimes and occasionally and at times at the command of the sovereign men from lower strata were also elevated to the high offices. The case of Sukuti, known as Momai Tamuli who was a bonded labour and who rose to the high position of Barbarua, by dint of his labour, may be cited here. So also was the case of Kirti Chandra Barbarua whose rise to the high position was from an ordinary Paik without going through the Chamua ladder. However, this sort of social mobility was rare and limited and atleast it cannot be generalised.

IV

Thus in medieval Assam we find a highly stratified society. The royalty represented by the 'Konwar Mels' and 'Konwari Mels', the 'Patra Mantris' along with the Phukans, Baruas down to the Saikia and Boras, and lastly at the bottom of the social ladder

the 'kanri Paiks' constituted different classes in vertical form.

The growth of money economy and commodity production was very slow in medieval Assam. The state revenue came mostly from the exploited labour force of the Paiks. In war and peace, in maintaining the royalty, the nobility, the various 'Satras' and temple establishments, and in executing public works all these that is to say, the entire state system rested on the exploitation of this labour force of the Paiks. The status and power of the nobility both spiritual and temporal was also determined by the number of Paiks under them. As mentioned earlier, the organisation of the Paik/Khel systems continued to be the backbone of the whole state structure. As Ahom territorial expansions went on, the system was vigorously followed every where.

Below the Kanri Paiks we find the class of 'Bandi beti', 'Logua-Likchou' class who can be unmistakably classed as slaves. Above the Kanri Paiks, there was another class within the Paik/Khel system known as the 'Chamuas'. They were the relatives of the Ahom aristocracy and their position was somewhat different from that of the Kanri Paiks. They had not to perform compulsory service. Their way to higher social ladder was opened and when promoted to offices they were out of the Paik/Khel system and were known as 'Apaikon chamuas'. They appeared as the middle order class of cultivators, in the social system of the time. In addition to this, we find the class of 'Bhumidan Paiks' who were permanently donated along with the lands to 'Satras' and 'temple establishments' and also to some nobles. This class was slightly better than that of the Kanri Paiks.

These lower strata, entangled in one single organisation of the Paiks and Khels systems, constituted the greatest majority of the population. Land was allotted to them on usufruct basis. The system was so in-built that it gave no scope for the growth of a diversified economy. It was in a sense what is known as the 'asiatic mode of production'.

The Ahoms followed their traditional and conventional values dogmatically. When Mathir Bharali Barua, a Kayastha was appointed by the king to decide punishments to Ahom Officers, it was strongly objected by non-cooperation of the Ahom Officers in the battle against Mirjumla which is ascribed as one of the causes of defeat. Again Kalita Phukan, a kayastha, was wielding much influence and power under the behest of the king, Lakshmi Singha, the king was warned again and again by the nobility.

Likewise, the Hinduised Ahoms and non-Ahoms were not

admitted into the fold of upper caste Hindu's class. In spite of assimilation and identical socio-economic levels, commensality and connubium differences remained watertight between the two groups. Thus in the stratifications, religious and cultural dimensions are perceptible here, to a considerable degree. Though totally not acceptable, the religious dimension in such stratification was the spark to ignite the Moamoria rebellion. All these data suggest the operation of the ethnic and prestige dimensional variables of the stratification issues in as much as it was in an organic pattern, the relationship was not between equals but between members of the hierarchically organised units.

References

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