

‘Ksatriyaization’, Various Modes of Legitimation and Social Change in Early Assam

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Introduction

The ‘Ksatriyaization’ based on which this paper attempts to analyze the various modes of legitimation and social change in early Assam is neither a full-fledged ‘Sanskritization’ as defined by M. N. Srinivas nor the ‘Ksatriyaization’ as theorized by Hermann Kulke. M. N. Srinivas, in his path-breaking work *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) for the first time used the term ‘Sanskritization’ in a way which had prolonged impact for future research in the field of Sociology, History and Anthropology in India. Changing his earlier stand and modifying the definition of ‘Sanskritization’ in 1966, he wrote: “Sanskritization is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, ‘twice born’ caste. Generally, such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. The claim is usually made over a period of time, in fact, a generation or two before the ‘arrival’ is conceded.”¹ Defining ‘Sanskritization’ J. F. Staal wrote that it was a two way process where one may observe the influence of Sanskritic Hinduism on regional cultures and also the influence of the regional cultures on Sanskritic Hinduism.²

Defining Ksatriyaization in his article titled “Ksatriyaization and Social Change: A Study in the Orissa Setting”³ Hermann Kulke states: “Ksatriyaization has largely been considered as a process of social and cultural change following the ‘Ksatriya model’, thus being a process complementary to Srinivas’ ‘Brahmin model’ of Sanskritization. The term Ksatriyaization, however, should not be confined to those cases of Sanskritization where other castes are merely imitating the Ksatriya way of life. The term should be used in its wider functional sense rather than in terms of Ksatriya rites and status symbols adopted by other castes. In its

functional sense Ksatriyaization describes social change 'from above' which was initiated in tribal areas by the Ksatriyas, i.e., zamindars, chiefs or rajas in order to strengthen their legitimation as Hindu rajas in their own society and to broaden the basis of their economic and political power."

The 'Ksatriyaization' that we are considering here is therefore a different process. It was closely associated with the pattern of social and polity formation of early Assam. The great bulk of population of early Assam consisted of the Mongoloid, Proto-Mongoloid, Proto-Australoid and the Alpine people. Brahmanas entered this land rather late. However, it is very difficult to determine when Brahmanical faith made a foothold there. The *varna* order was most distinctly and frequently referred to in the early records of Assam.⁴ In the extant sources, Ksatriyas and Vaisyas are unheard of. Only the rulers and their family members might have enjoyed the Ksatriya status, but they were not considered to be Ksatriya in real sense. The tradesmen and merchants, who find a mention in the inscriptions, did not carry the Vaisya *varna* characteristics. Nayanjot Lahiri opines, "In trying to understand Kamarupa society in this period, the *varna* ranking system seems too simplistic a model to use. Society, by the *varna* system of stratification, seemed to be divided for all practical purposes between the Brahmins and non-brahmins."⁵ Though the early epigraphic and literary sources of Assam refer to *varna*, *varnasrama* and *aryadharmā*, it was not used for all practical purposes in its original sense. "It was rather a theoretical statement referring actually to the Brahmanas and men of other professions including the tribals all swelling the Sudra community."⁶

The earliest known historical rulers of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa belong to the Varman dynasty. R.C. Majumdar thinks that the supposed descent of the Varmans from the demon Naraka probably indicates that they belonged to non-Aryan adventurer family, converted to the orthodox Brahmanical religion.⁷ According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the Varmans were neo-Ksatriya, or Hinduised Mlechhas, of non-Hindu Indo-Mongoloid family.⁸ The contention of Suniti Kumar Chatterji seems tenable from the ethnological point of view. The *Mahabharata* and other ancient works clearly show that between 500 B.C and 400 A.D, particularly in the pre-Christian centuries, the Kirata or Indo-Mongoloid people had occupied the southern tract of the Himalayas and the whole of north-eastern India along with north Bihar, eastern Nepal and Bengal.⁹ Pusyavarman had established the Varman dynasty around the 4th century A.D. Therefore, it is highly possible that a leader of the non-Hindu Indo-Mongoloid people, who had already settled in this land, laid the

foundation of the Varman dynasty and started to claim their ancestry from the Naraka-Bhagadatta family. The Bargaon CP Inscription of Ratnapala mentions Salastambha, the founder of the next dynasty as a '*mlechchadhinatha*' (leader of the Mlechchas).¹⁰ M.M. Sarma explains the word '*Mlechcha*' as "an outcast or a very low man".¹¹ The names of some kings of this dynasty such as Pralambha and Harjara, including their tutelary deity Hataka or Hetuka Sulin¹² are of non-Aryan origin. *Mlechcha* is a Sanskritised form of the tribal name Mech.¹³ In this respect, the Hayunthal CP Inscription of Harjaravarman clearly states: "*oh parthiva* (progeny of earth), your future descendants will, for this reason be called Mlechchas."¹⁴ Regarding the origin of the rulers of next dynasty, i.e., the Pala, the Bargaon CP Inscription of Rantapala¹⁵ confirms that Brahmapala was nominated to the throne of Kamarupa because of his relationship with the Salastambha dynasty.

These 'non-Hindu Indo-Mongoloid' rulers, immediately after their accession to the throne, had begun the process of Ksatriyaization by claiming themselves as Ksatriya with a motive to legitimize their kingship and the state and subsequently, after departure from power, they had to lose their position and were again demoted to the Sudra category. This process may also be observed in those regions of India where the early states emerged from indigenous social base through a process of social categorization and stratification and the society of which consisted of Brahmana, Sudra and local non-Aryan tribes. This Ksatriyaization is akin to the Brahmanical model of Sanskritization, but we cannot identify it with the latter because of the fact that the Ksatriyaized ruler or dynasty had to give up their Ksatriyahood at particular point of time. Srinivas says that once a caste or its local section "had captured political power it had to Sanskritize its rituals and a style of life and lay claim to being Ksatriya. It had to patronize (or even create!) Brahmins who would minister to it on ritual occasions, and produce an appropriate myth supporting the group's claim to Ksatriya status."¹⁶ It is generally understood that Sanskritization is a process where one always goes upward and never comes downwards or to its original position. Therefore, it may also be defined as 'Provisional or short-term Ksatriyaization' if we consider it from the point of Brahmanical model of Sanskritization. On the other hand, it is not similar to the process of 'Ksatriyaization' that was spelt out by Hermann Kulke.

Ksatriyaization is observable in the process of seeking legitimacy of the ruler. From the very beginning of their career as a ruler (even as

Yuvaraja), they had started to adopt the lifestyle of a Ksatriya by changing their personalities, policies, religious attitude etc. The question of legitimacy was tackled from the very moment of accession to the throne by performing *rajabhiseka* of a Ksatriya king.

Various Modes of Legitimation

Divinity

The rulers of Pragjyotisa connected themselves with divinity as their Indian counterpart by claiming themselves as progeny of the boar incarnation of Visnu. H.J.M. Claessen and P. Skalnik, in their work,¹⁷ find that in almost all early states in different regions of the world, the divinity of the kings or the myths relating to the divine or totemic origin of the founder king of a dynasty was important for acquiring legitimacy of the authority and the spiritual sanction of the ruler of the dynasty. Ronald Cohen, in his contribution *The Early State*, says that "Certainly, all early states have rulers who ubiquitously believed to have supernatural powers, to stand close to the royal ancestors and to intercede between the man and the Gods for their people."¹⁸ The Bhauma-Naraka legend had played a key role in the processes of legitimation, Sanskritization as well as social change in early Assam. According to D.C. Sircar, "The divine halo attached to the personality of the ruler had a two fold objectives – to enjoin the head of the state to function in a paternal spirit affording protection to the subjects and looking after their welfare, and secondly, to demand total allegiance and devotion from the subjects."¹⁹

The legend of Bhauma-Naraka is found in *Harivamsa*, *Visnu*, *Bhagavata* and many other *Puranas*. The greatest elaboration of the story is found in *Kalika Purana*. All these legends show Naraka as born of the mother Earth, *Prithivi* through Visnu in his boar incarnation. As born of earth, he is called *Bhauma* and on the basis of his supposed divine origin all ruling families (from the 4th to the 12th century AD) of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa, claimed descent from him. Here, the Bhauma-Naraka legend was the root from where the claim of divinity by the rulers of Pragjyotisa grew up, which was clearly manifested in the institution of kingship of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. The divinity was projected through some methods, which are as follows.

First, they claimed directly their divinity in the royal charters. The kingship was no doubt hereditary, so, there is no possibility of a succession from outside the line. Despite the fact, just to strengthen the legitimacy, the rulers of Kamarupa raised their claim of lineage from Naraka over the

centuries in the genealogical sections of the copper plate inscriptions. Second, in spite of being the successors of Bhauma lineage, to give a firm shape to their so-called divinity, the kings used to perform various ceremonies from time to time. The inscriptions of early Assam speak of two important ceremonies, viz. *Abhiseka* and *Asvamedha* performed by the kings.²⁰ The *rajabhiseka* ceremonies were performed in accordance with the injunctions framed for the Ksatriyas in the ancient scriptures: "That Harjaravarma being sprinkled waters from all the holy places filled up to the brim in auspicious pitchers made of silver ascended the throne surrounded, as Indra by the Maruts (or the gods), by saluting kings and high-born princes accompanied by merchants."²¹ The *Asvamedha* sacrifice was always preceded by some conquests but it was absent in the case of Kamarupa rulers. The main motive behind these performances was to show an extra-ordinary strength to the subjects and the neighbouring states. Third, the rulers projected the divinity by personifying and comparing themselves with Gods and epic-heroes and their dynasties. In the Dubi CP Inscription, Vajradatta was compared with Indra, Pusyavarman with Indra and second Visnu, Narayanvarman with Chakrapani, Bhutivarman with Indra and Supratisthitavarman and Bhaskaravarman with Kartikeya and Ganesa respectively. In the same way Brahmapala was compared with Indra in the Khanamukhi and Subhankara Pataka CP Inscription, Ratnapala with Rama, Krsna, Purusuttama, Janardana in the Guwahati and Bargaon CP Inscription and Vaidyadeva with Varuna, Kuvera and Brihaspati in the Kamauli CP Inscription.²² This divine halo and the personification with Gods and epico-heros helped to acquire the paternal spirit for smooth conduct of the administrative machinery and to create total allegiance and devotion from the subjects. Fourth, adoption of high-sounding titles like *Maharajadhiraja*, *Parameswara*, *Paramabhattacharaka* was another method of projecting the divinity in the institution of kingship in Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. Fifth, "the divinity was also reflected in the projected appearance, qualities, character of the kings who were different from all other human beings".²³ The kings were "endowed with the best face (i.e. most beautiful), arms as large as the trunk of the best elephants ... gazzelled-eyed and lion-shouldered... he of a luster that vies with the luster of the moon" charming by all the arts as the moon (by the digits) "powerful like a lion", "the tiger like king", "white as the lily, the moon and milk" etc. Such descriptions of the appearance and personality of the kings have often been found in the inscriptions mentioned above. The king had to protect *dharma* (social order), *artha* (production) and *kama* (procreation) and to uplift social

and moral standard. "Indeed, the personal and paternal approach of the king was a great force in the administrative structure of the state and symbolic of the paramount position of the king and his extensive kingdom with a large number of subordinate rulers."²⁴ Besides these the king reflected themselves as well versed in all academic and warfare activities. His qualities included nobility, intelligence, energy and personal attainments. Vajradatta is said to have studied the *Vedas* and *Angas* and also acquired knowledge in the science of training and breeding of elephants and in the nature and excellence of horses. Samudravarman and Balavarman are described as abode of all good qualities. Narayanavarman and Sthitavarman were well versed in the *sastras*.²⁵ Bhaskaravarman has been described as abode of knowledge of politics, warfare, protector of the terrified people and above all the symbol of *dharma*.²⁶ The Tezpur CP Inscription and Hayunthal CP Inscription describe the qualities of Harjara and Vanamalavarmadeva. Brahmapala was the abode of *rajaniti*.²⁷ Purandarpala had acquired all knowledge of art.²⁸ Dharmapala possessed the knowledge of art and was the crown-jewel of poets and the sun of the Pala family.²⁹

Establishment of New Capital City

Dealing with the matter in Orissa setting, Hermann Kulke in his paper "Legitimation and Town planning in the Feudatory States of Central Orissa"³⁰ opines that "Capitals, particularly in traditional society, played a vital role for the legitimacy of political power, being the major, or even the only stage where political legitimation was continuously displayed." There may be some other factors related to the establishment of capital city and legitimation may not necessarily be the only factor. However, it ultimately led to strengthening the legitimacy of the concerned ruler. The copper plate inscriptions of early Assam speak of construction of few new capital cities by the rulers of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa. The rulers with a view to highlight their prowess, capability and resourcefulness as a Ksatriya ruler, constructed new capital cities and it was recorded and vividly described (even with some exaggeration) in the land grant inscriptions. Sthitavarman, ruling from Pragjyotisapura, the ancient capital city of the state, still preferred to construct a new capital nearby it.³¹ Salastambha, the founder of the Salastambha dynasty had shifted his capital to a new city called Hatappeswara (identified with present Tezpur town) from Pragjyotisapura (present Guwahati city). Immediately after occupation of the throne of Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa (after the death of Bhaskaravarman, the last king of the Varman dynasty), the biggest problem that Salastambha seemed to have faced was the question of legitimacy in

the environment of the royal court of the earlier rulers at Pragjyotisapura. In order to strengthen legitimacy, he constructed a new capital city at Tezpur region to which he might have belonged. Some of the subsequent rulers like Ratnapala, Dharmapala and Vaidyadeva had established new capital cities, i.e., Durjjanagari, Kamarupanagara and Hamsakunchi respectively. We have no detailed information about Kamarupanagara and Hamsakunchi but the grandeur, strength of the fortifications, natural beauty of the Durjjanaya and the nature of its inhabitants were depicted in very glowing manner in the inscriptions of Ratnapala, who sought to renew and strengthen his legitimacy on the throne as well as the state by constructing this new capital named Durjjanagari (impregnable city). The Bargaon CP Inscription of Ratnapala has the following description:

The city was very much well fortified so as to make it impregnable as indicated by the name itself. It was protected by the 'rows of the spirited elephants' presented in the form of homage by 'the kings who were defeated by the sharp swords' of Ratnapala ... it was suitable for the residence of great men. The glow of the tops of the mansions in the city were compared with the smiles of the love-drunk fair damsels ... It was also adorned by learned men, poets, religious preceptors, rich people and abode of Paramesvara (i.e. the king or the lord Siva of the local temple) ... The boundaries of the city were firmly ensconced by the ramparts furnished with a fence "strong like that used for the game-birds of the Sakas, fit to cause chagrin to the king of Gurjara, to give fever to the heads of the untameable elephants of the chief of Gauda (Gaurendra), to act like bitumen in the earth to the lord of Kerala, to strike awe into the discomfiture to the master of the Deccan country."³²

In the Domains of Temporal and Sacred Power

The rulers of Pragjyotisa had sought legitimacy for themselves and the state along with maintaining the political integration among the core area, areas ruled by the tribal chiefs, newly conquered areas and the peripheries by balancing two inter-related domains of temporal and sacred power in three ways and means. These were:

- (a) Royal patronage of important places of pilgrimage within their respective kingdoms.
- (b) A systematic and large scale settlement of Brahmins.
- (c) Construction of new temples.³³

'Royalization' of important places of pilgrimage by donating land, men and properties was an effective way of legitimation. Even the process may

have led to the gradual incorporation of cults of autochthones into the Hindu fold. It is well known to all that the Kamakhya temple of Guwahati, which originally belonged to mother goddess, a cult of the local aboriginal tribe was patronized by different rulers in different points of time. The Umachal Rock Inscription (5th century AD) speaks of a donation of cave temple in honour of Balabhadraswami located near the Kamakhya temple. Other deities worshipped in and around the temple were also able to receive patronage from different rulers. Bhutivarman (1st half of the 6th century AD) had also donated a religious asylum nearby Barganga river of the Nagaon district evident from the Barganga Rock Inscription. Vanamalavarmadeva had not only renovated the temple of Hetuka Sulin (a local cult) in Tezpur region but also provided with men and materials including dancing girls. Thus, 'Royalization' not only converted autochthonous cults into Brahmanical, but also legitimized the kingship as well as the state in the core area as well as the peripheries.

"The second counterbalancing measure against centrifugal forces of regional kingdoms was a systematic settlement of Brahmins."³⁴ The study of the geographic provenance of the lands granted to the Brahmanas through the royal charters shows that these were made in the vast tract of land, which covered North Lakhimpur in the North, Golaghat in the Northeast, Sylhet in the South, Silchar in the Southeast and North Bengal in the west.³⁵ These Brahmanical pockets (*agraharas*) had taken up the task of Sanskritizing the local tribal people and the cults on the one hand and they became the agents of legitimation for the royal authority on the other hand. This "inner colonization" counter balanced the centrifugal forces within and outside (newly conquered, peripheral non-state areas) the state.

The third means of legitimation was construction of new temples or temples on the foundation of old ones. The enormous temple ruins, figures and images of gods and goddesses belonging to the pre-Ahom period found in different parts of Assam indicate the level at which the rulers of early Assam sponsored the construction of temples, mainly in the 'nuclear areas',³⁶ tribal dominated areas within the state, peripheral non-state and newly conquered areas. The reason behind it was to renew and continue the legitimacy in the urban political centres, to earn more legitimacy from the autochthones and to legitimize the state where the non-state situation prevailed. Most of the rulers of early Assam preferred to reconstruct the older temples rather than construct new ones because reconstruction provided easy access to the local sentiments and supports. There were many examples

of reconstruction of temples not only in the pre-Ahom period but also in the medieval period mainly in the lower Assam region (greater Guwahati) which was a periphery for both the Ahom and the Koch rulers. The best example of the construction of new temples in the tribal areas is the Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts. The intention of the rulers is clearly indicated in the large number of temple ruins belonging to the period from the 6th to the 13th century AD, found in the two districts, which did not witness any formation of major political centre during this period and which were dominated by Tiwas and Karbis.

Legitimation and Social Change

Social change is a broad historical process interwoven with the process of legitimation whether of a ruler or of the state or a temple. The 'Ksatriyaization' along with the process of legitimation brought a wide range of social change in early Assam. The process of 'Ksatriyaization' was provisional at individual (or family) level, but it was continued during this period without any break and across different royal dynasties and rulers (Varman, Salastambha, Pala etc.) as its 'riding-horse'. The process through which the legitimacy was sought or renewed, set off the process of Sanskritization both 'from above' and 'below'.

The most distinct aspect of social change that came along with the activation of various modes of legitimation is the transformation of the casteless tribal society into caste society with linguistic and cultural changes through the process of Sanskritization. However, it would not be wise to identify the whole Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas as the region thoroughly influenced by Sanskritization. It is well known that until recent times some of the major tribes of Assam have remained beyond the pale of Sanskritization and some of them are still maintaining their own cultural traits. The attachment of legends with the genealogy of the ruling dynasties and with the temples to earn legitimacy for kingship as well as state led to the penetration of Epico-Puranic traditions into the tribal societies of early Assam. At times, such traditions were so widespread that there were some localized forms of the same. For instance, in the present day Karbi-Anglong district, now chiefly inhabited by the Karbi people, where a considerable number of archaeological remains belonging to the Vedic-Puranic pantheon are found, the story of *Ramayana* has also been a part of their folklore in the name of Chabin Alun. The establishment of capital cities by the rulers of early Assam goaded the process of urbanization, which not only shows the progress of

material culture but also reflects social, demographic and environmental changes. Pragjyotisapura, the capital city which was originally established by Naraka in the areas of Jatia, Dispur and Narakasurgaon of present Guwahati city, was expanded into a great city by erecting Durjjaya and Kamarupanagara during the reign of Ratnapala and Dharmapala respectively. One of the major factors for this expansion was the increasing rate of urban settlements. Hiuen Tsiang³⁷ recorded that there were a number of people from other lands who had come to the capital in search of work. Probably he referred to specialized functionaries and occupational groups who could sell their skills and wares in an urban centre. A base camp in the urban centre was always required to sell the surplus agricultural and other products for the traders from outside. So urban centres became nodal points in the network of redistributive economic integration. The recent discoveries at Ambari, in the heart of the Guwahati city, of koalin potteries, icons of Brahmanical deities, fragments of walls of dressed and undressed stones assigned to the period between 1st and 13th centuries AD³⁸ point to this development. The establishment of the capital at Hatappesvara or Hadappesvara (Tezpur region) by King Salastambha in the 2nd half of the 7th century AD led to reorganizing and regularizing agriculture, commercial products, water ways, irrigation, education, art and architecture, etc. of the region. The inscriptions issued from Hatappesvara or Hadappesvara contain revenue terms, political and administrative personages,³⁹ virtuous and learned men⁴⁰ consisting of the people of all *varnas* and *asramas*.⁴¹ The references to embankment and irrigation techniques⁴² show that large areas of cultivable land were brought under wet rice cultivation and this facilitated the process of rural settlements which were in the nature of fairly small groupings of human settlements called by specific place-names ending with the suffix *pataka* or *bhumi* or *grama*. Discovery of large number of copper coins in some places of present Kamrup, Marigaon, Sonitpur, Darrang and Goalpara (Paglatek gold coins) districts belonging to 7th to 9th century AD indicates the development of trade and commerce and monetized economy in early Assam.

The rulers, in order to earn, strengthen and maintain legitimacy, had adopted Brahmanical faiths and beliefs as most favourable medium, which led to the initiation of the process of Sanskritization in the valley. However, Sanskritization seemed to be more active in the plains than in the hills. This was probably because almost all the lands granted to the Brahmanas by the rulers of Kamarupa at different points of time were situated in the plains areas of the valley.⁴³ Some reflections on the Sanskritization of the tribal religious beliefs may also be made on the basis of the study of the geographic

provenance of the archaeological remains (which are found in a very compact manner in different regions of Assam such as Guwahati, Nagaon, Tezpur, Goalpara etc.) bearing the traits of various pantheons belonging to Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina faiths and their prominence and distinguishable marks, which reflect the socio-religious changes in the region.⁴⁴

The systematic land grants to the Brahmanas had given birth to some pockets of Brahmanical culture, which subsequently emerged as epicentres of Brahmanical religious beliefs. Again, the geographic provenance of the donated land to the Brahmanas by the early rulers of Assam show that although it covers a vast tract of land of present north-east and north Bengal of India and north Bangladesh, and does not lead us to believe that the whole region was taken over by the Brahmanical faiths, it paved the way for weaving a network of Brahmanical faiths in the region.⁴⁵ Social change that took place during this period was never a one-way traffic but was a two-way movement of Sanskritization as spelt out by J. F. Staal, which is evident from the non-Sanskritic or Sanskritized words found in the Sanskrit inscriptions and tribal cultural traits reflected in the Brahmanical faiths in the region.

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40. Parvatiya CP Inscription, vv. 25-26.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, lines 48-51, Uttarvarbil and Nagaon CP Inscription.
43. For details see Nirode Boruah, *op.cit.*, Ch. III, Sec I.
44. For details see Nirode Boruah, *Historical Geography of Early Assam*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010, Ch. V.
45. For details see Nirode Boruah, *ibid.*, Chs. III & V.