

Castes and Professions in the Fourteenth Century Assamese Society as Reflected in Madhava Kandali's Ramayana

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Madhava Kandali, a learned sanskrit scholar and distinguished poet who flourished in the middle of the fourteenth century A. D., translated the Ramayana of Valmiki into lucid old Assamese verse. Kandali was the court-poet of the Varahi King Srimahamanikya and he says that he rendered the slokas of the Ramayana at the request of his king.

Kaviraja Kandali ye amakese buliwaya

Kariloho sarvajana bodhe !

Ramayana supayar Srimahamanikya ye

Varaha rajar anurodhe !!¹

(I was known as *Kaviraja Kandali*. The verses of the Ramayana was rendered by me at the request of the Varahiraj Mahamanikya for all the people).

Again, the poet introduces himself as Madhava Kandali Vipra or Dvijaraja Madhava Kandali. There is no doubt that he was a Brahmin of eminence, that Kaviraja in his epithet is a great poet and the title was conferred on him by his patron monarch.

Madhavachandra Bardalai while bringing out the first printed edition of Kandali's Ramayana surmised that Srimahamanikya must be one of the three Kachari Kings of Jayantapura (Jaintia) with the surname of Manikya. The Kachari Kings of Jayantapura were known as 'Varahirajas' styled themselves as 'Jayantapuresvara' and ruled over a large territory extending to modern district of Nagoan from the twelfth to the fourteenth century A. D. Bardalai further seeks to connect the term Varahi in the text with Bodo or Boro.

About the identification of king Mahamanikya, opinions differ among scholars. According to some, Mahamanikya was

a Kachari King² others believe him to be a king of Tripura,³ still others believe him to be a Barahi King, who had a small territory around Sonari in the district of Sibsagar.⁴

Though Kandali's Ramayana is not an original creative work, it is a faithful rendering in Assamese of the original epic in Sanskrit, still it throws light on many facts of the then Assamese life and society. Literature is a social product and it cannot be projected without the reflection of the spirit of the age. The major traits of the tradition of a society are reflected in literature.

In the course of translation, Madhava Kandali interpolated facts of local and regional in nature; the emotion, sentiment and the mental outlook of the local people. Kandali's Ramayana thus depicts with considerable skill the contemporary society in which he lived, and we can glean into their social and economic condition, caste and professions, rites and rituals, food, drink, dress, arts, crafts, sports etc..

Now, the following information can be had on the castes and professions prevalent in the Assamese society of the fourteenth century in the light of Madhava Kandali's Ramayana.

The Brahmana

In Assam numerous epigraphic evidences record the settlements of the Brahmins with elaborate land grants since ancient days⁵. In earlier days the Brahmins were in general orthodox and observed the religious rites more strictly than in later times. The performance of the six-fold duty (Satkarma) was compulsory duty of the Brahmins. These sixfold duties were *Yajana* (worship), *Yajana* (Priesthood), *adhyana* (study), *adhyapana* (teaching), *dana* (Charity) and *pratigraha* (accepting gifts from others). The study of the Vedas and giving religious instructions to the common people were regarded as the most important duties of the Brahmins.

But in later period, however, certain amount of lapses might have crept into the life of the Brahmins. The poet observes it thus⁶

devariye devapuja Karita biecheda !

*brahmana sakale na padhaya aro veda !!*⁶

(Devari, the brahmin priest who give up the devapuja, and even the brahmana does not read the Veda now).

Occupations like religious debates, culture of astrology, match-making etc were the favourites of the Brahmin in those days.

The Brahmins were greeted very elaborately in his time and a general distinction was there between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins.

The Ksatriyas

Most probably Kandali has mentioned *Ksatriyati* as an analogy to the original epic or it may be that the Ksatriyas of Kandali's Ramayana were the ancestors of Kalitas which are mostly seen till now.

The general conception about the *Ksatriyas* in eastern India, however centred round the royal families, who used weapons. Kandali's text also indicates this very sense.

Ksatre erileka Astra sastra karma dharma ! 7

(The Ksatriyas now give up the weapons which are their duty).

Some scholars, notably Nagendra Nath Basu have tried to prove the Ksatriya origin of the Kayasthas. By discarding *asi* (sword) they took to *masi* (ink) and therefore, they were down graded from the Ksatriya caste⁸.

The Kayasthas

Kandali has simply mentioned about the Kayasthas in the Ayodhya Kanda. The Kayasthas were originally a professional class engaged in maintaining accounts and serving as scribes. Kandali has not mentioned any performance of the Kayasthas in his text.

The Vaisyas

Our poet has referred to Vaisya as engaged both in agriculture and commerce.

Vaisya erileka krsi banijara Karma !! 9

(The Vaisyas give up their occupation of agriculture and commerce).

The poet has used the term *Vaidya* in the Lanka Kanda. But the Vaidyas were never a caste in Assam. The people connected with the profession of physicians were generally known as *Vaidya* or *Bez*. A great number of manuscripts connected with the methods of treatment of diseases are still to be found in the Villages¹⁰. The same may be said in Orissa also. But in later medieval works of Bengal, *Vaidya jati* has been often mentioned as a very distinct caste enjoying considerable influence on the society.

Madhava Kandali presents us a list of professional castes in his text who accompanied Bharata to the forest with a view to fetching back Rama to Ayodhya.

Ksatri Vaisyagana *Kayastha sajjana*

nat bhat teli tanti !

thatari sonari *Kasara senkhari*

bhartarlage janti !!

baniya camar *Kamar sutara*

dhot aro kumbhakara !ⁱⁱ

The Ksatriyas, Vaisyas, Kayasthas, dancer and singers (Nat bhat), oil presser (teli), weaver (tanti), brass workers (thatani), goldsmith (sonari), bell metal worker (Kanisani), carpenter (Sutar), blacksmith (Kamar), all accompanied Bharata to the forest.

Teli (oil presser), a sect who produced edible oil, particularly the mastered oil. The *tanti* (weaver) is also a distinct sect whose occupation was weaving. In old Assamese literature it is found the profession tanti (weaver). But in later period, every Assamese woman in general did the requisite weaving as part of their household duty.

Madhava Kandali mentions *camara* (cobblers) which sect is practically absent in Assam. In the 10th century, William Robinson noticed that there is no cobbler in Assam and the technique of processing leather art became extinct in this region. Actually, the people of this sect are still now in Assam, but they have shifted their profession to agriculture or other fields from the leather. I know, there is a small territory at the Sotial mouza of Kaliabor which is known as *Camarbasti*.

In Assam, *Sankhari*, the artisan sect is now completely absent. In the pre-Vaisnava and Vaisnava literature it is found that the Hindu wife has used the *sakha* as a mark of their marital status which is continued in Bengal till now. But in Assam the use of conch-shell ornaments have ceased to exist since long. Therefore, the *sankhari*, the artisan sect are not seen in Assam. The *sonari* is also an artisan sect of the medieval Assam. The people of this sect are still present in Assam. But, they have also shifted their profession. As for example' in the Kaliabor of Nagoan district, there is a Village named sonarigoan, but the inhabitants are not engaged in that profession.

Madhava Kandali has occasionally mentioned the caste *Dhoba* (washerman). It seems this sect existed as a separate

professional sect during our period. In the 1st part of 19th century, William Robinson did not notice any *dhoba* (washerman) and he says that the job was performed by men from outside.¹² Though the people of this sect have retained their caste identity in some areas they have shifted from washing to agriculture. There are some people in the district of Nagoan who identify themselves as *dhoba-keot*. In Bausi Bajali paragana of Kamrup, there are some sects of Dhoba who use the surnames *Dhoba* and *Das*¹³.

Kandali refers to the Hadis, an untouchable, who were not allowed to read the scriptures. Sita rebukes Ravana for aspiring to her as his wife like a man of the Hadi caste wishing to study the Vedas. The poet has used the artisan sect *Kumar* (potter) and *Kumbhakara*. Most probably Kumbhakara has come from the original epic¹⁴. The Kumar is a sect of Kandali's contemporary society. In Assam, the Kumaras are divided into two groups, *Hira* and *Kumar*. Scholars are of opinion that the Hiras are of lower status than the Kumaras. Hira may have been derived from Hadi as is suggested by some scholars.

The poet has mentioned about *the Goalas*, i.e. cow-herd. Goala is a distinct caste in Bengal, Orissa and northern India, but in Assam, it probably existed in those days. At present times it is seen there is a professional sect named *garakhia* (cow-herd) whose occupation is to tend the cattles. They are not necessarily connected with the Goala caste.

The Natas were a community of musicians and dancers. They were especially engaged in temples to perform dance and music, before the deities of the temples. The Natas were of the Kalita caste, they were nevertheless socially disfavoured on account of their profession. Kandali's Ramayana also contains the reference to Natas (dancers) and Bhatas (singers).

In the list of the professional sects or castes as was presented, by Kandali there might have been some omissions. As for example, in the medieval literary works, we come across many occupational castes. In the *Uresa barnan* of Sankardeva, there is mention of the *mali* (garland maker) which is omitted by Kandali. They constituted a distinct caste in those days. The caste, however, finds place in the list of Sankardeva.

Again, Kandali has omitted the sect *napit* (barbar.) But we get references of *napit* in the literature of the Vaisnava ages. In modern times the people of this sect have completely changed their profession and accepted other jobs. In Kamrupa district of

Assam, there are some people of barbar caste in the Village Sila, Baradi and Chinga. For this reason, Dr. S. N. Sarma remarks that it is not definitely known whether all the professions mentioned in the work were in existence in the fourteenth century. Madhava Kandali also refers to a class of Yogi who with tridents in hand and wallets hanging from one of the sides ran after Rama and Sita to accompany them to the forest. Probably they were Nathpanthi Yogis about whom the poet paints a ludicrous picture¹⁵.

The early Assamese writers while enumerating the castes very often mixed them with professional communities, from which Madhava Kandali is also not exception. The professional sect, i.e. sonari, tell, tanti, nata, bhatas etc. did not constitute a group or sub-group of a broad based caste like the Kalita or Keot.

Thus Kandali gives us a picture of the castes and professions of the old Assamese society of the fourteenth century through his renderings of the Ramayana.

Notes & References

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