Advent of the Brahmans in Early Assam
(4th-13th Century A.D.)

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Abstract: Northeast (India) has been a meeting ground of various tribes with the Brahmanical faith. History of the region bears testimony of the merger of Little with Great Traditions; the broad Hindu social spectrum being largely moulded by conversion of tribal groups to the Hindu fold. In fact many of the ethnic groups referred to as non-tribal today have had tribal elements in the distant past. Assam has been experiencing the waves of population movement since the days of the Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa kingdom. In Ancient Assam, there was no caste system in the strict sense as found elsewhere in India, but there were some functional groups which in all probability gradually identified with the social differentiations in terms of varna or caste. The coming of the Brahmans and the role played by them forms an important aspect of understanding not just the religious but also socio-economic and political history of Assam.

This research aims for a reconstruction of the history of the advent of the Brahmans to early Assam (Pre-Ahom period) in the light of both literary and archaeological evidence (i.e. architectural remains, epigraphs, icons and sculptures etc.). It attempts to gain insights into the contribution made by the Brahmans in the spread of the Brahmanical faith, the implications of which may be seen in the gradual absorption of the faith by many ethnic communities like the Bodos, Mising etc. in Assam.

Key words: Brahmans, Epigraphs, Varnasrama, Tribes, Pragjyotisha, Land-grants, Gotra.

INTRODUCTION

Assam, as the part of India is known today, acquired its name in the 13th century A.D when the Ahoms came to the Brahmputra valley. Its most ancient name is Prāgjyotiṣa, by which name it is referred to in the two great epics: the Rāmayana and the Mahābhārata, as also in the principle Purāṇas. In epigraphic records, the name Kāmarūpa was first mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta of about 350 A.D. (V.A. Smith, The Early History of India, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1940, p. 383). Along with Indo-Mongoloids or Kiratas Assam is inhabited by as many as twenty-three major tribal groups, nine in the plain districts and fourteen in the two hill districts. India’s Northeast has been a meeting ground of the Indo-Mongoloids with the Brahmanical faith. History of the region bears testimony of the merger of Little Traditions with Great Traditions; the broad Hindu social spectrum being largely moulded by conversion of tribal groups to the Hindu fold. In fact many of the ethnic groups referred to as non-tribal today have had tribal elements in the distant past. In Assam the Plain Tribes particularly the Sonowal Kacharis (of Upper Assam), Lalungs of Nagaon, Barmans of Cachar district, Boro Kacharis of Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang districts are undergoing different stages in the acculturation process.

Assam has been experiencing the waves of population movement since the days of the Pragjyotissa-Kamarupa kingdom, the boundaries of which did not remain static or constant throughout but underwent changes in different ages for political or some other reasons. At various points of time the geographical boundary of Pragjyotissa-Kamarupa covered a large part of North-east India and West Bengal as also parts of Bangladesh. Natural boundaries notwithstanding, through the passes and river routes, for reasons economic or otherwise, there had been frequent intercourse between the people of the hills and the plains.

In ancient period, there was no caste system in the strict sense as found elsewhere in India. But there were some functional groups which in all probability gradually identified with the social differentiations in terms of varna or caste. Ancient Assam witnessed the coming of Puranic Hindu faith. The role of the Brāhmans in the spread of this Brahmanical faith forms an important aspect of understanding not just the religious but also socio-economic and political history of Assam.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY: The Pre-Ahom period acquires significance in that it marks the gradual information of cult worship such as that of Visnu, Siva etc. and the process of acculturation in the later periods of Assam history.

Attempts have been made in the past to reconstruct the political, social and religious history of early Assam but much is left to be dealt with. This research is an endeavour at a departure from earlier works in that its purpose is a reconstruction of the history of the advent of the Brahmans to early Assam. There is no doubt that available information on Pre-Ahom Assam gives much scope for an intensive study of its socio-political
and religious history. Yet the history of the advent of the Brahmanas in Assam has not been fully explored. This research attempts to fill this gap in Assam history.

OBJECTIVE:

The research study aims at a reconstruction of the arrival of the Brahmanas in Assam (Pre-Ahom period) in the light of both literary and archaeological evidence (i.e. architectural remains, epigraphs, icons and sculptures etc.). It attempts to gain insights into the contribution made by the Brahmanas in the spread of the Brahmanical faith, the implications of which may be seen in the gradual absorption of the faith by many ethnic communities such as the Bodos, Misings etc.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- What role did the Brahmanas play towards the emergence of a composite Assamese culture?

LITERATURE SURVEY

The history of the advent of the Brahmanas in Assam has not been given much attention till date and forms a minor aspect of the works done so far. The subject has been dealt with in the context of a general history of Assam. The first systematic history of Assam was published in 1905 and its author Edward Gait utilised the earlier writings on Assam in his book entitled, A History of Assam (E.A Gait, A History of Assam, Thacker Spink and Co., Calcutta, 1905) Inspite of its significance, being the first detailed work on the province, it passes lightly over the topic under discussion. Dr. H.C. Ray’s Dynamic History of Northern India (Dr. H.C. Ray, Dynamic History of Northern India, Early Medieval Period, 2 Volumes, Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, New Delhi, 1973), R.B.K.L. Barua’s Early History of Kamarupa (R.B.K.L. Barua, Early History of Kamarupa, Lawyer’s Book Stall, Gauhati, 1966) and Dr. R.G. Basak’s History of North-Eastern India (R.G. Basak, History of North-Eastern India, Sambodhi, Calcutta, 1967) are useful sources for the subject though all the books have focussed on political or dynastic history.

Gunabhiram Barua’s Assam Baranjia has detailed information on geography, hill tribes, political history, advent of the Ahoms, social customs, religious practices etc. S.L. Barua’s A Comprehensive History of Assam covers aspects of history and culture of the Brahmaputra valley through the ages as also contributions made by ethnic groups of both hills and plains. Pre-Ahom Assam by Nayanjot Lahiri is another work which provides socio-religious and cultural life of the people of ancient Assam in a comparative manner. H.K. Barpujari’s The Comprehensive History of Assam Vol I also contains aspects of religious history and is of some use for the study.

Local scholars such as K.L. Barua (R.B.K.L. Barua, op.cit.), R.M. Nath (R.M. Nath, Background of Assamese Culture, Dutta Baruah, Gauhati, 1948) and P.D. Chaudhury (P.D. Chaudhury, Archaeology in Assam: An Introduction, Govt. of Assam in the State Department of Archaeology, Gauhati, Assam, 1964) contributed much to the study of archaeological remains in Assam. Useful as the works are, they are mostly in the nature of descriptive accounts with little to offer on the critical analysis in religious studies. B.K. Barua’s A Cultural History of Assam (B.K. Barua, A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period), Lawyer’s Book Stall, Gauhati, 1951), Babu Nagendra Nath Vasu’s Social History of Kāmarūpa [Babu Nagendra Nath Vasu, Social History of Kamarupa, 3 Volumes, Northern Book, New Delhi, 1986 (reprint)], and P.C. Chaudhury’s The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam from the Earliest Times to the 12th century (P.C. Chaudhury, The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam from the Earliest Times to the 12th century, Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1966) although, suffers from an absence of critical analysis, form a good base as source books for this field under review. Prof. B.K. Kakati’s The Mother Goddess Kāmākhāyā (B.K.Kakati, The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, Lawyer’s Book Stall, Gauhati, 1961), is an admirable introduction to the religious history of Assam. His work however deals with the mother goddess alone and hence partial from my point of view.

Information on archaeology is found in the books written by R.D. Choudhury (R.D. Choudhury, Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, Agamkala Prakashan, New Delhi, 1985), and N.D. Choudhury (N.D. Choudhury, Historical Archaeology of Central Assam from the Earliest Period to 12th century A.D., B.K. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1985), Arun Bhattacharjee (Arun Bhattacharjee, Icons and Sculptures of Early and Medieval Assam, Inter-India Publications, Delhi, 1978), has also covered some of the pre-Ahom material remains in his book dealing only with icons and sculptures. B.N. Mukherjee (B.N. Mukherjee, East Indian Art Styles: A Study in Parallel Trends, K.P. Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1980) has studied the eastern Indian art styles, a book which is of some use to us as it helps to understand the trends in the eastern region. For epigraphic records, the contribution by M.M. Sharma (M.M. Sharma, Inscriptions of Ancient Assam, Gauhati University Publications, Gauhati, 1978), is significant. The book titled Inscriptions of Ancient Assam gives a complete list of the inscriptions and its translations, available till the year of its compilation in 1978. A few inscriptions discovered after this work is published, is available in the articles in the recent volumes of the Journal of the Assam Research Society. Earlier works such as P. Bhattacharya’s Kāmarūpa Sāsanāvali (P. Bhattacharya (Ed.), Kamarupa Sasanavali,
The introduction of varnasramadharma in Kamarupa seems to have been effected by a twofold method: first, the myths and practices of the indigenous communities were integrated in the Aryan fold, and secondly, the Aryan culture was grafted on local institutions and beliefs. It is interesting to note that myths attempt to trace the advent of the Brahmans during the Ahom period. There is a myth that the Ahoms brought the Brahmans to Assam for worshipping goddess Kamakhya, but the fact is that Brahmans were present in Assam much earlier to the advent of the Ahoms and hence also known as Kamrupi Brahmans. During the reign of Koch Kings the Kamrupi Brahmans were quite prosperous. Although Brahmans in Assam are same as per their faith and customs with that of any other Brahmana community across India but they are worshippers of Shakti and may not be adverse to eat non-vegetarian food. Each Brahmana family within the community belongs to a gotra which is unique to a family thereby indicating their genealogical origin. Many of the Brahmans in Assam also have titles conferred to them by the Ahom kings.

Local scholars and other sources show that the original four varnas i.e. Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras did not remain in their traditional position and that even the Brāhmaṇas contracted marriages with the lower classes (P.C. Choudhury, op.cit., p.334). There are some references to migration of the Brāhmaṇas to the Kamarupa especially from the 11th century onwards. However, in the epigraphic records they occur as early as the 7th century A.D. in the Nidhanpur Grant (P. Bhattacharya, ‘Two Lost Plates of Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskaravarm’, Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 19, No.19, 1927-28, p. 118f), while evidence of their existence is offered even earlier by the Baragangā epigraph (N.K.Bhattasali, ‘The Barganga Rock Inscription of Maharajadhiraja Bhutivarman,’ Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol.8, No. 4, Oct., 1941, pp. 138-139). In the Guwakuchi Grant, the donee Vasudeva was originally from Vainagrāma in Savathi, which has been identified with Śrāvasti on the borders of North Bengal. He was given land at Mandi-Visaya in modern Goalpārā district (P. Bhattacharya, op.cit. pp. 164f). Similar references to migration of Brāhmaṇas to Kamarupa are found also in the Kahanukh Copper Plates (M.M. Sharma, Kahanukh Copper Plates of Dharmapala, op.cit., VV. 16-22, pp. 232-233).

It seems likely that the Brāhmaṇas who migrated to Assam from the 6th century onwards, belonged mainly to Madhyadesa and Mithila. The reason for such migration could be the inducement offered to them by way of land grants. A section of the Brāhmaṇas were brought to this country for performance of horse sacrifice or for general educational and cultural improvement and granted
extensive areas of land by Mahabhûtivarman (R.M. Nath, op. cit. p. 35). R.M. Nath says that they were all Śaivites and were followers of various Sākhās of the Vedas. These Brāhmaṇas could have come from Kathiawar of Gujarat and were known as Nagar Brāhmaṇas. B.K. Barua opines that the fall of the imperial Guptas, coinciding with the influence of Kāmarūpa over the entire North Eastern region in the later part of the 5th century, caused the migration of a large number of Brāhmaṇas. The patronage which the kings of Assam extended to learned men and religious teachers attracted a large number of learned men into the country. The Brāhmaṇas of Assam today follow the Mithila school in matters of social law and even trace their descent from the Brāhmaṇas of Kanya-kubja (Kanauj) and the tradition says that they migrated to Assam in the time of Narakā (B.K. Barua, op. cit., p.119). It can be surmised now, that the Brāhmaṇas did migrate to Assam in the ancient period and that they were given land grants which helped them in settling down in the region and further spread the Brahmanical faith. The Nidhanpur Grant alone reveals that the kings adopted a systematic policy of settling Brāhmaṇas in the kingdom by gifts of land in the shape of agrahārās to further their religious pursuits (M.M. Sharma, Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskaravarman, op. cit. V.25, ll.34-35, p.52).

The use of the Sanskrit language in the Nagajori stone inscription of the early part of the 5th century A.D. the mention of Bhagavan and the reference to Balabhadravaswami in the Umachal rock inscription of Surendravarman, the establishment of an asrama by Aryaguna as mentioned in the Barganga rock inscription of Bhutivarman and a reference in the same inscription to the performance of the avsmadha sacrifice by king Bhutivarman prove beyond doubt that Brahmanical culture and religion had already gained a firm footing in the land. In the Harsha Charita, king Bhaskaravarman is described to have been a devotee of Siva from his very boyhood and this fact is corroborated by the copper plate grants, such as Doobi grant of Bhaskaravarman which provides a clear idea of the nature and scope of the Brahmanical religion followed by the inhabitants of ancient Assam.

“It is remarkable”, writes P. Bhattacharya, “that while in the neighbouring province of Gauda (Bengal) the alleged import by Adisura of five Brahmanas from Kanauj or mythical creation of the Saptasati (700) Brahmanas is not attributed to a period earlier than the 8th century A.D. there should be so many Brahmanas found in a single village in Kamarupa two centuries earlier”. The kingdom in his opinion “appears to have been a refuge of the Brahmanas of the neighbouring kingdoms that most of the Brahmana families in the neighbouring province of Bengal are the descendants of those Brahmanas from Kamarupa”. This, he writes on the basis of the donees of the Nidhanpur grant. The land was donated in Bengal, not in Kamarupa proper, and it is reasonable to believe that most of these Brahmanas belonged to a stock of the Alpines. It may be as held by P. Bhattacharya that, there were Brahmanas in Kamarupa as early as the 6th century A.D. or even earlier, but it is unlikely that most of the modern Brahmanas of Bengal are the descendants of Kamarupa Brahmanas. Both the Vedic and Alpine Brahmanas might have settled in north Bengal as in Kamarupa almost about the same period. Then the epigraphs also make other references to the creation of agraharas and the settlement of Brahmanas of various gotras. The epigraphic records reveal that the Brahmanas who were responsible for the propagation of the Brahmanical cult belonged to different gotras, studied various Vedas and Shastras performed Srauta Smarta rituals and worshipped diverse Puranic deities. The Brahmana donees of the Doobi plates belonged to Kausika, Mandavya and Maudgalya gotras. Some of them are described as the followers of the vajasaney samhita (of the yajurveda). It is mentioned in the Nidhanpur plates that Bhaskaravarman has been created by Lord Brahma for the very purpose of properly re-establishing the Varnaśramadharma which happened to be in disarray. The donees of this grant belonged to the gotras, such as, Agivesya, Alambayana, Asvalayana, Kavestara, Katyayana, Kasyapa, Krishnatreyya, Kautilya, Kaundinya, Kautsa, Kausika, Gautama, Gauratreya, Jatukarna, Parasara, Pracetasa, Bharadvaja, Bhargava, Mandavya, Maudgalya, Yaska, Vasistha, Vatsa, Varaha, Varhastapya, Sakatayana, Sandilya, Saunaka, Saubhaka and Samkrityayana. The father of the donee of the Tezpur grant of Vanamala belonged to the Sandilya gotra and mastered the Yajurveda with all the Angas. The father of the Uttar Barbil grant of king Balavarman III belonged to Gautama gotra. The donee of the Bargaon grant of the same king was an Agnayahita Brahmana; i.e. he maintained the domestic sacrificial fire regularly and remained engaged in the six duties (satkarma) of a Brahmana. The forefathers of the donee of the
Pushpabhadra grant were regular performers of the three sandhyas, snana, japa and the recitation of the four Vedas; they belonged to the Maudgalya gotra.

Epigraphs further prove that the performance of other orthodox rites, such as tapas, yapa, tirthha etc. formed an important part of the life of a Brahmana. The Brahmanas practised yapa thrice daily according to the injunctions of the Sastras. Tirthhas were associated both with temples and rivers. It was considered meritorious to go on pilgrimage to sacred places. Most of the tirthhas were situated either on the banks of rivers or on hill tops. Both the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra mention a number of them, such as Kamakhya, Hayagriva, Asvakranta, Urvasi, Manikarnesvari, Siddhesvari, Apunarbha, Pandunatha etc. They also mention a number of kundas, including those of Siva and Devi- ksetras: (Yogini Tantra, 11/1-9). There were others like the Kamarpatha of the Tantras and Hemapitha in Kamarupa of the Raghuvasamsa. In the Mahabharata there is the mention of Karatoya, Probhasa, Puskara, Naimisa and others among the sacred streams. The Puranas mention the Parasuramakunda. The Kalika Purana recommends snana in a number of Nadi- tirthhas (78) and states that mere both in the Lauhitya leads to emancipation. The Yogini Tantra (II, 6-9) states that it purifies all sins and also emphasises on the usefulness of snana in a number of rivers and kundas. Vrata or fasting is one of the salient features of Brahmanical religion which can be learnt from the Nargong grant of Balavarman III that king Vanamala got absorbed in the spirit of Mahesvara (Shiva) by committing religious suicide by fasting unto death. Danas (grant/ donation) is another aspect of the Brahmanical faith.

CONCLUSION

The process of acculturation between the tribal groups and Brahmanical faith has laid the foundation for emergence of a composite Assamese culture. Epigraphic records give much information on the coming of the Brahmanas who were responsible for the propagation of the new faith. The kings generally donated lands to Brahmanas; donations being regarded as religious deeds. The gradual settlement of the Brahmanas in donated lands and the patronage extended by the kings favoured the spread of Brahmanical faith and the gradual assimilation of the tribal groups to its fold.

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