CHAPTER V
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Undoubtedly, with the establishment of the Darrangi Phaid, the history of Darrang assumed new dimensions which resulted in great socio-economic change and development. The regular and significant history of the area commenced from the beginning of the rule of the Darrangi Phaid, who ruled the territory for more than two centuries. It is important to note that the rajya, which was independent during the time of Dharma Narayan was transformed into a tributary state following his death. The independent status of the Darrangi Rajya played an important role in shaping the future history of the rajya. The rule of the Darrangi Rajas came to an end after the British occupation of Assam in 1826 A.D. following the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandaboo. The ex-rama Bijoy Narayan was appointed as in-charge of Darrang under the British administration for a jama or revenue of 53,000 Narayani rupees per annum. Thus the position of the rajas was reduced to that of a mere zamindar and remained at the mercy of the British authority.

The Darrangi society was a Hindu-dominated society, with Muslims and ethnic groups coexisting and maintaining their distinct identity. The Hindu society was based on caste system and riddled with inequality and stratification. Although the chatur varna or four caste system was not conspicuous, social stratification on the basis of gender, occupation, wealth and power was clearly evident as discussed in Chapter II. The Brahmans, who were popularly known as Bamun, occupied an influential position in the society, as was the case in the rest of India, and the spiritual guides or rajgurus of the Darrangi Rajas were from this class. In this connection Robinson’s comments are pertinent. He commented that the priesthood, beyond all comparison, holds the first place

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in point of dignity, and being associated with religion, are regarded by the other classes with deep veneration. Besides priesthood they engaged in agriculture, trade, etc.

The *Daibajyans* or *Ganaks* were a category of Brahman, who had the exclusive authority to worship *Grahadevata* or planets and practiced astrology and hence performed the role of fortune-tellers. They did not practice rites and rituals related to mortality and vedic traditions as did the *Bamuns*. While there was negligible caste difference between the two, professional differences between them were prominent. However, the *Bamuns* did not enter into marriage alliances with the *Ganaks*, maintaining the social stratification in the society. Status differentiation within the *Daibajyans* was prevalent according to the work they performed. They were experts in astrology and arts for which they received titles like *Khadi* and *Biyahs* respectively and free-land grants from the rajas. Next in the social hierarchy were the *Kayasthas* or *Kaith*, formed another caste in the *Darrangi* society who by their literary skills had access to power. They worked as minister under the rajas.

Wealth determined the social and also, political status of the people. The upward social mobility of the *Jogi* or *Katanis*, for instance, was based on their economic prosperity acquired through their monopoly business of rearing of *patpalu*. This brought about important social transformation. The *Bamun*, *Daibajyan*, *Kayatha* and *Jogi* people wore sacred thread, a symbol of the twice born or *dwija*. Numerically large the *Koch* was another important caste of the *Darrangi Rajya* to which the rajas themselves belonged. It became the dominant caste in the *raiya*. They were descended from the Mongoloid stock and Hinduised from the rank of *Mech* and *Kachari*. Some of them were enlisted to the *Koch* caste through conversion and sanskritization, which gradually increased the number of people of this caste. However, social stratification was maintained within this caste, which was broadly, classified into two groups i.e. the *Barkoch* and the *Sarukoch*. The former was regarded as higher on the social scale and generally refrained from entering into marriage relations with the latter. Thus in the *Darrangi society* a process of upward mobility as well as social stratification is identifiable.

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Another interesting feature of the Darrangi Rajya was that while professions organized the society into classes, the professions became hereditary. However, it is interesting to note that the rajas had the authority to terminate certain professions if he was dissatisfied. This shows that though professions were hereditary, they were conferred as well.

Being in the minority and mainly Hindu converts, the Muslims were influenced by the Hindus and hence their manners and customs were similar to that of the Hindus. Morias, a section of the Muslims did not maintain restriction in their food habit and were debauched in character and so they were regarded as being lower in social status and other Muslims did not enter into marriage relations with them. Hence social stratification also existed in the Muslim society. There was no restriction on the Muslim people from taking active part in the Hindu socio-cultural and religious functions. In fact a Muslim Ojha performed Suknani Sanggit in the Durga puja at Houli Mohanpur, the capital city. In many respects the Muslims were influenced by the Hindus. Hindu-Muslim integration was an important aspect of the Darrangi society. The ethnic groups, basically composed of the Kacharis and Rabhas, maintained their own traditional social beliefs and usages despite the ongoing ‘sanskritisation’ in their society. The practice of bandi-golam was widespread in the Darrangi society. The maintenance of bandi-golam was a status symbol of the upper class. They could be bought or sold. Mughalbesa, under Kalaigaon mauza, was a famous place for sale of Mughal prisoners. Many economically ruined people also entered as bandi-golam. The prices of the bandi-golam were varied according to their status of caste or kul, which indicated social distinction. However, it is to be noted that their position was better than that of the slaves of Europe.

Gender differentiation and patriarchal domination was prominent in the Darrangi society. High caste widows especially the Brahman widows were prohibited from eating meat and fish. Women of both high and low caste were not allowed any formal education. Thus women were subordinated and controlled under the Brahmanical patriarchal society. Chastity or sati of the women was given priority. However, no purdha or veil system existed, even within the Muslim community. There was no restriction on women participating in public festivals. It is to be noted that although under
a patriarchal set-up, the women of ethnic groups, particularly *Kachari* women, enjoyed more freedom and respectable position than others. Divorce on very easy terms was prevalent in the *Kachari* society. Both wife and husband could easily remarry after the divorce. Widow remarriage was another significant aspect of the *Darrangi* society. It was prevalent among many lower castes especially among the *Jogi* people, indicating a liberal social ethos in the *Darrangi Rajya*. However it was restricted in the upper-castes.

**The prosperous trade and commerce probably ushered in materialism which led to social stratification on the basis of wealth.** Social discrimination is apparent from the use of particular *batghora* or entrance of the house, mode of dress, different *dolás* for different social classes, possession of cows, use of elephants etc. Sanskrit *tol* (school) was the chief institution of imparting formal education in the *rajya* and was established under the patronage by the *rajas*. But formal education was limited to the upper-caste people only; that too encompassed only the male members. However at a later date some of the common people were admitted into the *pathsalas* (school) established by the *rajas*. This marked a change in the existing system of the *rajya*. The *Darrangi Rajas* provided military training to the *paiks*, which was essential for the protection of the *rajya*. Although deprived of formal education, the common people received non-formal education in different matters like weaving, spinning, cane and bamboo works, and different craft and industries. This knowledge was handed down from father to son and mother to daughter, generation after generation. The traditional *pathparha* or reading of religious text also played a great role in imparting moral and ethical education to the rural masses. So also some arts like *Ojhapali* had a significant role in imparting moral and ethical education to rural social life.

**Religious tolerance was the guiding principle of the *Darrangi Rajas*.** Although the *rajas* were *saktas* by religious faith and majority of the Hindu population professed this cult, the *rajas* equally patronized other cults and religions. However it is important to note that the *rajas* tried to infuse *sakta* elements in the *Vaishnava* worship through introduction of *sakta malachis* into the *Biyasar Ojhapali*. By doing so they probably wanted to establish a unity and assimilation in religion and culture. No instance of
religious conflict of any kind has been found in the Darrangi Rajya. As a result, not only the different cults of the Hinduism, but the Muslims and the other believers too could retain their own religious beliefs and practices. It naturally strengthened unity and cooperation among the people and achieved communal harmony under the rajya. This communal harmony was apparent in the different festivals of significance, celebrated in the rajya, some of which became very popular and widely celebrated. Although the festivals had strong religious accents, the participation by people of other religions was a unique feature. Thus Durga puja and Deul utsav became the two important festivals of the rajya participated by the people of all ranks, castes, religions and creeds. It became a source of unity and integration for the Darrangi people.

**Significant development was made in the medical sciences.** Both human and animal were treated with great care. The ‘Arshwa Nidan’ was a masterpiece on horse treatment. The treatment of snake-bite practiced by the Darrangi people was very effective and popular, and it is used even today.

**An unprecedented development of literature** took place under the Darrangi Rajas, the details of which are discussed in Chapter II. The court was adorned by some outstanding scholars like Pitambar Sidhanta Bagis, Dwija Bhabananda Mishra, Suryakhadi Daibujyan, Sukabi Narayandev, Gobindra Mishra, etc. Almost all branches of literature developed both under royal patronage and private venture and it contributed towards the enrichment of the Assamese literature, as a whole. Members of the royal family also participated in the literary activity.

**The endeavor of the Darrangi Rajas for the promotion of art and culture is another significant aspect.** Many art and cultural practices with distinctive features developed. Ojhapali, both Biyasar and Suknani, Deodhani dance, Dhepadhulia, Nangali git, Chiya git, etc., which developed and was patronized during this period occupies a unique place in Assamese art and culture. It is significant to note that an assimilation and transformation of different traits of culture was brought about which resulted in the
popularity of the *Darrangi* culture. For instance, the *deodhani* dance prevalent in the *Kachari* society was introduced in the *Durga puja* and *maroi puja* and after receiving royal patronage it became a very popular art form of the *Darrangi* culture. So also the *Suknani Sanggit* became very popular and significant art by incorporating Mughal and Bhutia elements.

**The economy of the rajya was a self-sufficient village economy** in which the men and women made important contributions. The *Darrangi Rajya* had an abundance of forest and mineral resources which had impact on its economy. Some of the timbers, especially the *agaru*, were exported. Different kinds of animals abounded in the forest of Darrang among them elephant was very important and valuable which had great demand in Mughal India. Gold-dust was abundant in the river sands. These naturally made the *rajya* of special commercial interest to the outsiders. Agriculture formed the backbone of the economy of the *Darrangi Rajya*; almost everyone was directly or indirectly connected to agriculture and paddy was the main crop of cultivation. Agriculture was primarily for self-consumption and therefore, little surplus remained for export. Nevertheless they exported a good number of articles, particularly mustard, to the world market.

**Pond-water management technology** was yet another important feature of the time. It is significant to note that the *Darrangi* cultivators, especially the *Kachari* people, in the north had knowledge of irrigation, which contributed towards the modernization of agriculture. The ponds or *pukhuris* also provided minor irrigation facilities to the cultivators. This led to the increase in production of paddy. This was one of the basic causes of the material prosperity of the people of the *rajya*. The agricultural implements were very simple and crude and were mostly made by the cultivator himself. The iron implements, except hoe, were made by the local *Kamars* or blacksmiths. Iron hoe was generally supplied by the Khasi traders as the quality of iron which was found in the Khasi Hills, was of good quality.

Although the agricultural work was a joint endeavour of both women and men of the family, the **system of engagement of hired labour was prevalent**. Among them *sauri* or mutual cooperation, *adhi* or share-cropping, *moregia*, etc., were very common and
beneficial. These systems also increased social cooperation and unity. It is significant to note that in agricultural economy both men and women made important contributions. Several major aspects of the agrarian economy like transplanting of seedlings, husking and cooking rice was almost exclusively done by the women. Besides the paddy cultivation, the Darrangi cultivators cultivated other crops such as mustard, different kinds of pulses, vegetables and spices, etc. They produced everything except salt, which was basically supplied from Bengal. However, kalakhar, prepared from plaintain tree occasionally substituted for salt.

The people engaged in craft and industrial work as their secondary occupation. Industries like weaving and sericulture was developed. Weaving was common in every house. Women were exclusively engaged in this work. Sericulture was equally developed. Muga, pat and eri or endi were cultured. Muga and pat had high demand within the rajya and abroad. A good quantity of muga and pat silk were exported. Moreover, there were other crafts and industries. Pottery occupied an important place and met local demand. It is significant to note that women were largely employed in pottery-making. So also, brass work developed, which was carried on exclusively by the Morias and some of the brass utensils were exported to the neighbouring countries especially to Bhutan. The Darrangi craftsmen knew the art of brick-making. However it was not commonly used; it was only used for construction of temples. Even the rajas did not use bricks for making their houses. They made their houses with the things similar to that of the common people.

People of all classes engaged in craft and industries. The only exceptions are of the Jogi, Hira, Kumar and the Morias. These professions appear to be almost hereditary. The rearing of patpalu, pottery, brass industries were carried on by the Jogi or Katani people, Hira and Kumar and Morias respectively. Some craft and industrial products were in great demand outside the state and the rajya greatly benefited from such products.
Trade and commerce, both internal and external, was lucrative. The natural resources, agricultural, craft and industrial produce and extensive road and communication system were factors promoting such development. The mountain passes or duar, rivers and land roads had greatly facilitated trade. A number of marts or trade fairs (mela) such as Udalguri annual trade fair grew, some of which were popular and important. These marts were generally in the frontier areas. This was because, the outsiders were not permitted to carry on trade in the interior of the rajya or encouraged to settle in the rajya for the sake of political security. That was why the Mughal merchants turned to smuggling in the Darrangi Rajya. Nevertheless, the economic prosperity of the rajya led to the growth of the foreign trade. Particularly the trade with Bhutan flourished. The rajya became a centre of international trade and commerce and was linked, in a small way, with the world market.

The people or paik had to pay taxes to the government in the form of pecuniary services. In return they received two puras of tax-free arable land for cultivation. In addition to a hearth-tax called chooro kar was realized from the paiks. The high caste people and the learned people were exempted from paying taxes. There was no burden of taxes on the people so far concern with the Darrangi Rajas administration. However, with the advent of the Ahoms, they were burdened with tributes and taxes, which were illegally increased from time to time. It seems that economic distress due to the overburden of taxation imposed by the Ahom administration, prevailed and found clear expression in the form of revolts.

The history of the Darrangi Rajya was remarkable for the series of revolts that took place from the time of Mahendra Narayan when the Ahom government slowly established its overlordship. These revolts were, interestingly, led by both the rulers and the ruled due to territorial encroachment, political control and economic exploitation. The loss of the independent status of the Darrangi Rajas and subsequent unnecessary interference in the internal affairs made the Darrangi Rajas and the people rebellious towards the Ahom government. In this connection, it may be mentioned that non-
cooperation as a method of revolt was used by the Darrangi subjects more than a century before Gandhi adopted the strategy in the struggle for India’s independence.

The Raij Mel exercised great power and control over the people and united the people of Darrang under a single banner. None, not even the rajas, could defy its decision. The basic strength of the Raij Mel was the social unity that existed among the people irrespective of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and wealth. The Raij Mel could hence fight for justice and successfully launch a long march of about four thousand people to distant Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom and could annul the ‘unjust’ revenue settlement. This was a remarkable achievement of the Darrangi Raij Mel. Such events were rare in medieval Assam and it shows the consciousness of the Darrangi people about their rights and duties. The Darrangi Raij Mel postulated the policy of non-cooperation as a method of revolt.

The institution of gaonburha or village head was also very influential and powerful in the society. Although it was an integral part of the administration, it always sided with the people and provided leadership in times of exigency. It emerged as a savior and protector of the people. Hence the principle of ‘Raije Raja’ or people’s rule, which corresponds to the modern idea of democracy, was established in the Darrangi Raiya. Besides, the rajas too had used the medium of revolts to further their zeal for independence. Raja Mahendra Narayan or Makardhaj wanted to achieve it by joining with Mir Jumla, the Mughal General. Raja Surya Narayan and Hangsa Narayan II subsequently continued in the same path. The latter had to face defeat in the open fight with the Ahom forces. Raja Krishna Narayan introduced the new strategy of employing mercenaries from outside the state, the results of which were significant.

In the final analysis, it may be said that the economic progress under the Darrangi Phaid, impacted major social transformation. On one hand, process of sankritization set in with upward or downward social mobility in the Darrangi society, indicating that the caste-system was not deeply entrenched in the society, and on the other, communal harmony prevailed. Political power struggles began to emerge. The economic
development linked to the world market as it were, began to show signs of economic exploitation and social stratification within the rajya, which coupled with territorial encroachment led to the emergence of revolts led by both the rulers and the ruled, against Ahom hegemony in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The power of the Darrangi Phaid petered out with the coming of the British in the early decades of the nineteenth century.