CHAPTER - IV

SOME SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS UNDER THE AHOM AND DISCONTENTMENT

The study of the social structure of medieval Assam is a most striking feature. The social and cultural policy of the Ahom rulers added new dimension in this area. Early inscriptions of Kamrup and ancient Assam provide valuable references about the traditional caste and professional communities.

Among the different traditional caste and professional, the Brahman acquired the higher status. The 'Dubi' and "Nidhanpur copper plate" made the reference of Brahman, who used to perform six-fold duties viz. Yajna, Yajana, Adhaayana, Adhayapana, Dana, and Pratigraha.

It is believed that from 13th century onward fresh wave of Brahman took place from other part of India. The medieval biographies also refer the prevalence of 'Tols' or 'Chatrasala' manned by Brahmans. There were certain characteristics of the Brahman; a) the Brahmans earned their livelihood by means of agriculture, teaching, priestly duties and service to the state, b) they married off their girls before attainment of puberty, c) they didn't personally plough the field.

According to Hamilton, the Brahmans were divided into two sections on the basis of their original place. Radha- those migrated from western parts of Bengal and Vaidika- those from Kanauj.

The differences developed between them by the 18th century on the basis of the procedure of observing smrīti, rites and rituals. The followers of Krisnarama Bhattacharya, the spiritual guide of king Siva -

— Simha from Bengal were known as Smarta Brahman as he introduced the modified smitti ritual of Raghunandana of Bengal and those who followed earlier procedures were known as Pracina Brahmanas.

The Daivajanas or Ganaka, who were professionally astrologers, earned their livelihood mainly by astrological calculations. The Kamruli grant of Vaidyadeva of 12th century provides the earliest reference on them. The medieval literacy works of Durgavara, Sukavinarayana and the land grants of the Ahom kings provide the reference on them.

The Daivajanas well versed in astrology were given the title Khari by the local Chiefs of Darrang and Doloi or Bordoloi by the Ahom kings. The later Ahom patronaged the learned one in the court as royal astrologers. The Daivajana' community performs all the Samaskara and wears sacred thread like the Brahmanas. The matrimonial alliance between the Brahmana and Daivajanas not conducted because of the lower status of the Daivajanas in caste hierarchy. Even then the Daivajanas maintained a respectable position in the society.

The Kayasthas, professionally were engaged in maintaining account and serving as scribes. Their reference is available in the Nidhanpur grant of Bkaskar Varmana. During early medieval period some Kayasthas managed to curve out their principalities under the control of the Karnata kings. The Kayasthas did not plough, nor carried load on shoulders.

3. Haliram p-39
4. Dmgavara. Manasa Kavya, p-92
5. Sukavinarayana. Padma Purana p-186/196/353/357,
6. Neog M.Prachya Sasanawali 22/23
7. V V p-134/135/136
They used to perform the six sacraments for which they were called Satkarmi.

The Kalitas, who are of cast Hindu scattered all over the Brahmaputra valley occupying a respectable status in the Assamese social life. They are more numerous than Brahmans and Daivajana. Though they are supposed to be one of the earliest groups, their reference available only in the biographical works of the 17th century and royal grants of the 18th century. Katha-Gurucarita also refers a Kalita desa on the Himalayan foothills in the northeastern region.

There were two distinct divisions among the Kalitas namely Bar-Kalitas and Saru-Kalitas i.e. the higher and lower Kalitas. The Kayasthas who intermarried with the Kalitas call themselves Bar Kalita. The Vaisnavite movement provided this ample opportunity to many Kalitas to rise to the position of eminence as religious preachers. Some of them established ‘Sattras’. Gopala Ala, Narayana Das, Thakur Ata, Mathuradasa Ata were outstanding Kalita religious preachers of the 16th century.

Besides being agriculturists the Kalitas also practiced different crafts and profession without seriously affecting their caste status. Pottery, black-smithy, bell metal crafts, gold smithy, the art of dancing, dyeing and washing of cloths of religious establishment were adopted as additional professions. The Kalitas used to perform the main or principal Hindu Samskara and purification rites as prescribed in the Smritis.

In the caste hierarchy the Keots occupied the position next to —

8. Comprehensive History of Assam (edit) Barpujari H.K Vol-ll p-172
9. Katha Guru Charit p-249
10. Comprehensive History of Assam Vol-ll p-173
— Kalita. The early references to the Keot are found in the Katha Gurucarita and some royal grants of Ahom king of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries\(^{11}\). The Keots are classified into two watertight compartments. The Halai Keot and Jalai Keot.

The Halao Keots are treated as upper class Hindus. The Jalai Keots are primarily of fishermen community and considered as a depressed class\(^{12}\).

In Assam the Kaivartas living on the banks of rivers are called Nadiyal. They were enormously called "Dom" though they never performed the works of the Doms or Chandalas of other region. The medieval Assamese records have usually referred to the Kaivartas or Jalai Keots as Dom reserving the term Keot exclusively for the Halai Keots\(^{13}\).

During the Ahom rule the Kaivartas or the fishermen were tattooed on the forehead with the mark of fish \(^{14}\).

The Kaivartas have been staunched by the Vaisnavism since the middle of the 17th century, which professed no caste distinction. William Robinson mentions about Kaivartas as “they seem to serve all the rules of purity in eating and drinking with greater strictness than even the Brahmans of Bengal”\(^{15}\).

Another social class Koch or the Rajvamsi are related to the Bodo Kachari group of the Indo-Mongoloid stock. —

\(^{11}\) Katha Guru Chant p-286
\(^{12}\) Comprehensive History of Assam (edit) Barpujari H.K Vol-III p-173
\(^{12}\) Ibid p-173
\(^{15}\) Haliram p-8 Comprehensive History of Assam (edit) Barpujari H.K Vol-III p-173

Robinson; A Descriptive Account of Assam.
— They acquired political power and their conversation to full fledged Hindus after having influenced by the Brahmana and Vaisnavite preachers provided this section of Indo-Mongoloid stock a new name Koch or Rajvamsi, a higher status though not equal to those Kalita and Keot in the caste ladder of Assam. The Koches ruled over western Assam and north Bengal early from 16th century to the middle of 17th century.

Ahoms- the ruling dynasty of Assam for six hundred years is also considered as a separate caste. The community became large and gradually absorbing local people into its fold. The Ahoms gradually influenced by the Hinduism and converted largely though did not adopt all the rites and rituals prescribed by the Smrtis for the Sudra. The Vaisnavism and Saktism also became the influential cult to them. They did not totally discard their original religious beliefs and practices. As a result they were given neither the status of a high class Hindu nor treated as a lower or depressed class. But acquired great honour and respect not only by the members of the royal families, but the high-ranking officers of this community.

A sizable part of the Chutiya community evidently absorbed to the Ahom community. Another section merged into Mishing and the third section to the Barahis of eastern Assam and became known as Barahi Chutiya. However, the Deuris- the original priestly class of the Chutiyas remained true to their original faith and lost contact with other Chutiyas.

Only those who having accepted Hinduism and adopting the Brahmanical rites and rituals managed to maintain their separate identity as a distinct caste known as Hindu Chutiya neither made matrimonial —
— alliance nor inter-dined with Ahom Chutiya or Miri Chutiya. The
Hindu Chutiya used to occupy a middling status in the caste hierarchy16.

Thus, the medieval Assamese society that was caste ridden
assigned higher and lower status to the specific community and
professional class. The social policy of the royal house and the religious
institutions like Vaisnavism were the most crucial factors for the stability
and changing situation or status.

The social policy of the Ahom rulers, the caste distinction
provided by the Brahminical form of Hinduism and caste less-equal policy
of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement created a triangular crisis in the
society, which helped to emerge out a new kind of social feature by the
beginning of 17th century that gave a new shape to the medieval
Assamese society.

Along with these main castes and sub castes some other
professional people also found in Assam mostly, the Not (Dancer),
Malakar (Garland maker), Napit (Barbar), Dhoba (Washerman), Chamar
(Lime maker and Cobblers), Tati (Weaver), Sundi or Sudi (Wire maker),
Patia (Mat maker), Hari (Sweeper), Chadak, Hira and Token Telia
(Oilman).

Other minor tribes like Matak or Moran and Nara and some minor
non-Hindu communities like Muhammadan and Sikh community have
been living in the land.

The Slavery was also prevalent to a considerable extent in the medieval society of Assam. References to dasa-dasi are found in literature from the 14th century onwards.

The religious literature of the medieval time also affirmed the prevalence of slavery. "That obnoxious system was prevalent is known from the sale deeds of Slaves as well as from the number of slaves released in 1843 in the result of the act prohibiting slavery."1

Hamilton records,

“All the domestics are slaves, and they are pretty numerous, every man of rank having several. The slaves are procured from among the necessities, which mortgage themselves in the same manner as in the eastern divisions of Ranggapur. Some are exported. About a hundred of pure castes are annually sold in Bengal. They are mostly children. The girls are chiefly bought by prostitutes, and cost from twelve to fifteen rupees. A Koch boy costs twenty-five rupees, a Kalita fifty. Slaves of impure tribes are sold to the Garos, and many are said to be sent to Nara, from where they are probably exported to Ava.”2

John M. Cosh, records in 1837 the following account of slavery in Assam3.

“Slavery still continues to a considerable extent in Assam and then poor creatures are brought and sold every day for a mere trifle. —

1 Comprehensive History of Assam (edit)Barpujari H.K Article by Sharma S.N p121
— Every native on the receipt of more than ten or twelve rupees a month has one or more of them; all the drudgery of the household and the labour of the field is performed by them. Many of them have been enthralled by mortgaging their bodies for a few rupees and for want of means of accumulating the original sum increased by exorbitant usury continues in bondage for life, themselves and their descendants. Slaves are believed to be kindly treated by the masters but it must be expected they make frequent attempts to escape. They are valued in the market according to caste; high caste adults sell for about twenty rupees, boys for fifteen and girls from eight to twelve. Those of lower castes do not bring more than one third of the above estimate’. *

Again Robinson writes “In Assam most of the higher classes keep their slaves, it being difficult to procure servants especially of the female sex. The number of slaves and bonded men in Kamrup (lower Assam) alone where population is estimated at 300,000 amounts to upwards of 20000.”

David Scott is said to have released 12,000 slaves in Kamrup alone. This shows the extent of slavery prevalent in medieval Assamese society. Some scholars believed the fact that many slaves and their families were liberally treated, but their economic condition entirely depended on the mercy of the masters.

During the preceding period of fifteen century the slavery took the vicious form. —

4. W. Robinson Descriptive Account of Assam 1975 Ch-VII p-279/280
5. Gait E. History of Assam. 1983 p-242
6. N. Barua David Scott and His Times
The increasing amount of non-captives and changing form of land settlement increased this obnoxious system and created a class of politically and socially disabled persons.

The slaves enjoyed the lowest category in the social structure of medieval Assamese society. Their personal and individual life depended on the mercy of the masters. In the real sense they were the instruments of the production process of the master. The master could sell them but it was regarded dishonored to sell the household slave. Yet they were sold and the wealthy class used to buy them.

It is found that during the reign of Gadadhar Simha (1681-1695) Gangaram Thakur of Kamakhya bought Jahari's wife as a slave at Rs.8/- only at the presence of some witness.

Again the reign of Kamaleswar Simha (1795-1810) Salaguria Mahanta bought one Mohan as slave from some villagers at Rs.6/- only. During the reign of same king the wife of Kalia Bhomora Phukan bought 7 men form Gaurichanda Bujarbarua and installed them as Dewalia Paik to the Hayagrive Madhav temple.

In medieval Assam the evidences are available of a slave trade near Sibsagar where the hill tribes and other people used to transact the slave.

7. Neog M. Prachya Sasanarwalli 1974 p-72
8. Ibid p-72
9. Ibid Fali No 95 p-80
10. Ibid p-72
Evidence of giving slaves along with daughter as dowry by the privileged classes and exporting the slaves to outside the country are also available in the historical document\textsuperscript{12}.

The debt slavery was the result of the cruel exploitation of Paik system or natural calamities. The people who lost everything they had bound to mortgage himself or his family to the wealthy people\textsuperscript{*}, which increased the number of slaves in the society.

During the time of Rajesvar Simha (1751-1769) the total population of the country was twenty four lakh as estimated by Gunabhiram Barua, S.K.Bhuyan, D.A.Guha etc. Among this twenty four lakh two hundred forty thousand (2.5 lakh) were slave. Kanri Paik was more than fifteen lakh in number. Chamua, Apaikan Chamua Nobility, high caste Brahm, Kayastha were six lakh in number. Among this six lakh the privileged class nobility, religious leader and high cast ruling number not more than twenty four thousand. This small number of twenty four thousand privileged class people controlled the lion share of Paik (2.5 lakh in number) and largest area of land\textsuperscript{13}.

Thus on the eve of the Moamariya uprising the slave comprised the ten percentage of total population whereas the General Paik were sixty five percentage of the total population, Who were engaged themselves in a kind of forced labour system for —


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid p-159 Guha A. Land Rights and Social Classes in Medieval Assam, Indian Economies and Social History Review September 1966 (Vol-3 NO-3 p-217-232) Rajkumar S Itihasaa Sowanra Sasati Basar p159, Barbarua H. Ahomar Din 1983 p501
Thus in any moment twenty-seven or twenty eight percentage of common people lived under the production system in normal situation. This system greatly favored the upper section only at the cost of the common people's inconvenience.

The scholars have already dealt elaborately all the prospects of socio-cultural life of the people of Ahom age. Here efforts are made to draw the attention toward some specific social-cultural behavior during the Ahom rule. Particularly those practices, which became status symbol of the Ahom monarchy. Their behaviors gradually antagonized with sentiment of the majority of population. The concept of equality propagated by Sankardeva and subsequent neo-vaishnavite preachers attracted the masses. The high teaching of neo-vaishnavite and it spirituality along with the equality emboldened the common subjects for the change of their plight. Ultimately it got manifestation in the Moamariyas Sattras where the greater emphasis was paid on equality. The Moamariya uprising was, in fact the frontal attack to the reactionary group.

References are found in different scholarly works and Burunjia that the Ahoms strictly maintain the caste and social distinction. There were great division between higher classes and lower classes in the society. Even in some cases they have identification caste mark. The Kaivartas (Dom) and Haris had to identify themselves having a fish and a broom respectively tattooed on their forehead.15

The position of man in the society was decided by the rank and status granted by the king. The principle of maintaining distinction between the aristocrat and common people strictly enforced by the order of the Ahom king.

Gait observed "The social distinction between the aristocracy and the common people and in later times between the high and low castes was rigidly enforced. None but the highest nobles to wear shoes or to carry an umbrella or to travel in a palanquin but the last mentioned privilege might be purchased for a sum of rupees one thousand (but not to the lower castes in any circumstances). The persons of humble birth, who wished to wear chaddar or shawl, were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder but not over the right, as the upper class did. The common people were not permitted build houses of masonry or with a rounded end, and no one but the king himself allowed having both ends of his house rounded. Musalmans, Marias, Dorns and Harias were forbidden to wear hair long and members of the two later communities were further distinguished by having a fish and a broom respectively tattooed on their forehead"16.

Distinction in wearing garments was maintained. Only nobles and high officials could put on silken garment. The lower garment or dhuti known in Assamese ‘churia’ worn by common man could not go below the knee. It was the privilege of the Officers, Sattriya Gossains and such other aristocratic people to have the privilege of putting on dhotis wide enough to cover their calves. 17

17. Sarma.S.N, Cultural History of Assam 1989 p 253
The boys of the Paik used to wear “dhuti” when they became youth only, otherwise they were regarded as a member of the Paik system and had to run the service and to pay tax whatever assigned to him.18

Same restrictions were also applied in case of wearing ornaments. There was restriction in keeping long hair and the officials could only keep curly hair. The Marias had to shave their head completely. 19

Permission even required from the king to ride on horse or elephant. Even in wearing of garland and taking of marks on the forehead called righa phot, etc. In all these aspects of specific distinctions had to be maintained.20

Seating arrangement in royal house and the home of nobles also made according to strict distinction. The Brahmans accepted high status in later phase of Ahom rule but still they were not given the highest seat. The general Brahmans had to seat on the ground in the presence of the high class Ahoms and non Ahom officials21.

No one could walk equally in the royal road. The junior officers leave way for the senior officers. Common people had to move through pavement. The common people couldn’t perform Bar-Sabah (big ceremony of rituals) without the permission of the king. The lower caste people could not invite upper castes to any kind of ceremony. They were not even permitted to perform any kind of ceremony in big way. 22

20. Ibid
21. Ibid p 494
22.Ibid p495
During the reign of Jayadhvaj Simha one Sanjay Kaivarta (fisherman) found some treasures (dhanar kalah - pitch full of coin) under the earth when he was digging the earth for the construction of his house. He celebrated the occasion in a lavish way by erecting ten tents separately for Ahoms, Hindus, Kaivartas, Hari along with their ‘Gayan-Bayan’. The guests of different castes got intermingled and mixed together to celebrate the occasion. Being heard the news king killed Sanjay Kaivarta by piercing his chest with an axe and convicted a lot of people who received the invitation. Some of them were killed or punished. He also forbade them to take part in any kind of function or rituals of Kaivartas.  

During the reign of Burharaja, one Barahi man developed relationship with one Kaivartani (fisherwomen). The king was so enraged that he tattooed a pig mark (gahari-ak) and asked him to eat left-over.

During the reign of Bhagaraja or Surampha (A.D.1641-1644), A trader called Lakhtakia Mudai, constructed a house fixed with phulchati (short upper tie beam in a roof). When the news reached to the king, the king by an order had the house demolished and mutilated the nose and ears of the mudai (merchant). The king ordered that no Hindu would construct the house in this style. Further he proclaimed that beads made of gold, earring known as ‘thuria’ made of gold and ring made of gold should not be worn by them.  

24. Ibid p122  
25. Ibid p.129
Bhagaraja or Surampha (A.D.1641-1644) passed prohibitive orders not to use gold ornaments by the common lady. The use of luxurious articles were also prohibited. Scarfs having embroidery with gold threads, *nara-mekhala* (a kind of lower garment worn by the women) and *nara-chola* (a kind of shirt worn by the male) were also prohibited. The most important fact is that the common people did not have enough means to procure articles of comfort for decent living.

Dhekiyal Phukan has recorded three types of boats viz. Holong-nao, Khel-nao and Caro-nao. The first being the biggest size was capable of carrying more than one hundred persons or one thousand mounds of gold. The second one as a sleek one specially made for easy transport and boat race. The third type with both ends beautifully curved and decorated was the state burgee used by kings and highest officials of the state.

The litter (*dola*) was another means of travel on the surface, but its use was restricted within the aristocrat circle of kings and nobles. There were several types of litters meant for different grades of nobles. The king and three principal officers availed kekora dola, other dolas like athubhanga dola, parhi dola, cariya dola and khatola each having certain differences in origin and decoration and used by different grade of officers and religious heads according to their status.—

26. Sarma S.N. Cultural History of Assam 1989 P252/257 (Satsari)
   BarBarua H.Ahomar Din 1981 p129
There was a class of Paik called *dolabhari* (carries of the litter) and they were controlled by *Dolakasariya Barua*.28

Different scholars admit the fact that the Ahoms were liberal in their social outlook in the formative stage. They were basically guided by the practical necessity and political expediency in their social outlook. The number of Ahoms who came along with first conqueror Sukapha was very small. It was next to impossible with such a small number to dominate the area peopled by heterogeneous races and tribes with the powerful Muslim and Koch on the west as a source of perpetual danger. As a strategy Ahom increased their community by conferring upon the new entrants the status and privileges of the member of the ruling race. The records of these affiliations were very carefully maintained and they were checked in every reign. Swargadeu Pratap Símha carried on most exhaustive scrutiny of the records of these affiliations. From these records some leading Ahom families appeared to have been founded patriarchs belonging to some non-Ahom races, tribes and communities like Barahi, Chutiya, Garo, Koch, Kachari, Moran, Hindu Kalita, Miri, Mogul and Muslims29.

It was because of some heroic and meritorious action or their particularly attractive manners and features or indication of their potential capacity, which owed the admission of the non-Ahom —

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— families to the Ahom fold. This new families were thoroughly assimilated with the old Ahom fold.

However, the scholars\(^{30}\) agreed on the fact that the orthodox and "blue" section of the Ahoms was annoyed if too much prominence was given to the new entrants.

Thus in sum up, extreme social division, restrictions, wide gape between the high class and low class, rich and the poor, rigid social customs created dissatisfaction among the people. The royal house lost their old fame and adoption among the common people because of those above mentioned rigidity in their social behaviours in the later phase.

With the development of the Neo-Vaisnavite philosophy in Assam in the later phase of the Ahom rule the general people acquired the concept of equality and self dignity. They found the social policy of the state very oppressive and against their dignity. These all elements created discontent among the common people.

\(^{30}\) Bhuyan S. K. Anglo Assamese Relation 1974 p-15