CHAPTER XIII

Social Habits and Manners and Customs.

About habits and manners and customs, many aspects have already been discussed in different chapters of this book. In the present chapter, however, attempt has been made to discuss a few common and important aspects of the subject.

It is the custom of the Assamese people that whenever a person meets a known person, the first words of greetings are, "how are you", or, "are you in good health", or, "where are you going", or, "where do you come from". In those days, when a common man comes across a higher officer or a man of high caste, then he had to respect him by bowing down his head to him. The Brahmins were not to bow their heads to any body, on the other hand all persons were not to bow their heads down to all Brahmins. Whenever a common man or an officer, respectively met an officer or a superior officer, then they had to get themselves aside on the road, in order to clear the way for the other. Further, the Doms and the Haris had to identify themselves "by having a fish and a broom, respectively tattooed on their foreheads". Every Hindu had to have marks called 'Phot' or 'Raghā' on their foreheads with sandal paste or other allied materials; of course, as allowed by their ranks. The Hindu women took vermilion marks on their foreheads; the Mohammedan women also took vermilion marks.¹

Restrictions in offering a seat and in occupying a seat were strictly observed in this period. 'Pati-dharā' and 'Merdharā' were offered to respectable persons only. The 'Tamuli-pirā' was offered to Brahmin priests and scholars. Gunabhiram Barua says that the custom of providing a seat to a stranger was not prevalent amongst the Assamese people. Whenever an Assamese
gentleman went out, he carried with him a seat, a tray for holding betel-nuts, called 'Bata' or a piece of cloth, called 'Hachati', and a water-vessel, called 'Lota'. Betel-nuts are favourite things of the Assamese people; almost all Assamese people chew betel-nuts. The first refreshment offered to a guest in the house of an Assamese, is betel-nut; the other thing offered next, is tobacco for smoking, if the guest is accustomed to it. In those days, as regards taking of food, strict restrictions were imposed. Not to speak of people belonging to different clan and different communities, even in the same clan or same community, from the side one did not take cooked food offered by another; in this respect, from the side of the religious institutions also, there were strict restrictions enforced upon the people. In the villages, each community had their own cook, appointed by their religious head, with the approval of the elderly people to serve them cooked food on feast and festive occasions. In every village Namghar, there was an officer, called 'Deuri', to distribute 'Mah-prasad' (food offered to deity) and soft rice with curd and molasses, in the socio-religious gatherings and the people of all community took it; but such a 'Deuri' must not belong to any other low caste, than the Kayastha, Kalita, Keot or the Hinduised Koch.

Regarding caste system and profession, it has already been stated that there were no water-tight restrictions in the Assamese Society. The 'Namakirttana', that is, the recital of the name of God in the village Namghar, is a sort of public prayer. In fact all the functions held in the Namghar are public functions and in the same Namghar, people belonging to different communities, such as Brâhmana, Kayastha, Kalita, Keot Koch and Chutiâ could sit together occupying their seats according to their castes.
or ranks. In their individual chapels, known as 'Gosāighar' or Namghar, people could worship other gods or goddesses according to their religious faith. But the village Namghar was a corporate institution and therefore, it concerned the entire community or the people of the locality. As such, in the Namghar religious functions were observed according to the religious creed of the community as a whole and in almost all the Namghars, the religious functions were observed according to the Vaisnavite rites. The communities, other than Brāhmaṇa, Kāyastha, Kalita, Keot and Koch, had their separate Namghars. Participation of the Mohammedan ojā in the ojā-pāli function that accompany the worship of goddess Manasa was prevalent in the Mangaldai Subdivision.

As regards adultery, we have said above that both the Ahom rule and the Vaisnavite movement were very strict on this point. Nevertheless, there are instances of committing adultery in the chronicles. In one of the chronicles, it is stated that while the powerful Ahom king Pratap Singha was on the throne, the sons of the Bhandari-Gohain committed rape on women of the common people and the king ordered for their execution as punishment. Again, in the country of the Chutiās, during the reign of king Udayaditya, the Sadia- khova Gohain, named Pakha, "used to live with a brother's daughter, called Klingphai, as husband and wife." The king not only dismissed him from the post but also punished him severely. Some of the Ahom kings, did rather worst to this; king Chaupha Shuhum lived with his step-mother as husband and wife, at which the people became highly dissatisfied with him. Of course, up to the time of the king Chaupha Shuhum, the Ahom kings were not coming under the direct influence of Hinduism.
In the Kathā-Guru-Charit and in the chronicle we come across references to thieves; but they were not many, as capital punishment was usually awarded in such cases. From the days of king Gaurinath Singha, mercenary soldiers were introduced in Assam. These soldiers, afterwards became terror to the people. They sometimes plundered and looted the people. Besides, in the last part of the Ahom rule, a gang of robbers from Bengal had been torturing the people of lower Assam. Amongst the local inhabitants there were no robbers. Hamilton writes that "except a gang from Bengal there are few robbers and atrocious house-breakers or pirates".

Owing to the dearth of information, nothing can be definitely said about begging. As can be inferred from other circumstances, perhaps, begging was looked upon derisively in the society at the time. Particularly, the Ahom administration did not relish anybody abstaining from work. Besides, the sense of self-prestige was so very high that nobody preferred to go for begging. Therefore, on the evidences of circumstances, we may conclude that begging was highly discouraged and hence beggar was rare in the Society.

In the respectable Assamese families there were both male and female servants to do the household chores. In the houses of higher officers, the number of such servants was large. In those days, the servants became the property of their masters like indentured labours, and sometimes, servants were sold for money also. "The Chief nobles cultivated their private estates with the aid of slaves, i.e., persons taken in war or purchased from the hill tribes, and of their retainers, who were either hill men or manumitted slaves. These persons were entirely at their master's disposal and they were not required to render service to the state..... The owning
of slaves, however, was by no means confined to the nobles, and all persons of a respectable position had one or more of them, by whom all the drudgery of the household and the labour of the fields were performed. Another weak point of the Assamese society of those days in the slave system.

Gunabhiram Barna and W. Robinson have discussed thoroughly about the slave system. Discussing the plight of the slaves, Robinson writes:

"Slavery exists to a very considerable extent; and most of the domestics, both male and female, are either slaves or bondsmen, who for a few rupees have been enthralled by mortgaging their bodies, and for the want of means of accumulating the original sum, increased by exorbitant usury, continue in bondage for life. The unfortunate subjects of this disgraceful system are bought and sold, and even mortgaged like any other article of property. In the event of their death, their hard masters seize upon their descendants or their nearest relations, whom they keep in bondage, and so from generation to generation. The persons and labour of these slaves are laid claim to, from their forefathers, having been purchased by the forefathers of their masters, and on this account not only are they, themselves held as slaves, but also their children and posterity to the end of the chapter. The females among them are permitted to marry, but have no right to go away with their husbands, and when they beget children, these children become the property of their master, and neither the parents nor other relations have any claim to them. The males also by marriage increase their masters' stock and render their partners slaves with themselves. A great number of slaves are disposed of to the neighbouring states, where they are devoted in general to the most menial and degrading offices.... These poor creatures feel that they are the property of their masters, who have the power to do as they like with them, and it is their duty to submit to all. It is also their impression that any appeal to a public authority will not render them from thraldom, while on the contrary this will only bring upon them the displeasure of their masters and their connections."

Robinson further writes that after a census of slaves in the district of Kamrup, Scott released no less than 12,000 individuals from the state of bondage.
Gunabhiram Barua says that there were no professional prostitutes in this country up to the Burmese invasion. Till then, our people were quite ignorant of this evil. W. Robinson also gives a similar view while speaking about venereal complaints and gonorrhea in Assam. He says, "venereal complaints and gonorrhea are prevalent at all stations. The natives say the former disease became common soon after the Burmese invasion and the name they gave it (Maun Binar) seems to confirm the truth of this assertion." In the military department of the State many beautiful young girls, expert in singing and dancing, were employed as spies and were sent to the enemies' camps to know their plans and policies.

Of the intoxicated drugs used by the people of this country, tobacco is the most common. Tobacco was produced in plenty and almost all people smoked it. But the most clandestine evil which entered into Assam in the last part of the Ahom rule is the use of opium. According to Gunabhiram Barua, the people of this country began to use opium from the year 1796. Maniram Dewan says that poppy plant was first brought to this country by one Langl Barohukan and during the reign of Gaurinath Singha, its cultivation and use spread extensively in the country. Dewan says that not to speak of male persons but the women also became addicted to it. This notorious practice of smoking opium began to exercise its baneful influence in such a way that the Assamese people began to consider it a pious work to offer opium to invited guests. This was another reason, why the Assamese people, who was once so arduous, strong and active became weak and lethargic within a very short time. The use of intoxicating spirituous liquors was not very common in Assam. The different kinds of liquors or fermented wash that were prevalent in Assam were known as 'Lao-bani', 'Mad', 'Phatikä' etc.
about which we have mentioned above. The liquor was mostly prevalent among the non-Aryan tribes, who prepared it themselves with indigenous ingredients. The local people were ignorant of the use of palm wine.\footnote{15}

We have said above that among some sects of Hinduism, though not publicly, wine was secretly used. Though drinking was generally looked down upon, yet it did not tell upon the health of the people, as done by the more spirituous modern liquors; rather it nourished them to a great extent. So also the smoking of hemp or Ganja or bhang was an evil of the Assamese society, about which we have discussed above.

Gambling was perhaps not very known amongst the people. Our sources do not betray any evidence of its prevalence in Upper Assam. In the 'Katha-Guru-Charit', it is found that Narayan Thakur, the most favourite disciple of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, was addicted to gambling, while he was in the village 'Kupajar' (in lower Assam).\footnote{16}

We have discussed about the prevalence of ordeals in the Society, elsewhere in the book. There were different kinds of ordeals prevalent in the society. Reference of ordeals, instituted in connection with examining the chastity of women, are found both in our sources and elsewhere in the literary records. Some of which are mentioned above. In the 'Manasa Kāvyā', we find a reference of eight kinds of ordeals, instituted in connection with examining the chastity of Goddess Durgā. The ordeals are, such as fire ordeal, razor ordeal, ordeal of vermilion, ordeal of cotton etc.\footnote{17}

APPLICATIONS

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