



The Kaibartas in Brahmaputra Valley from 1901 to 1947

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ABSTRACT : Assam came under the British colonial rule in 1826 with the signing of Treaty of Yandaboo between the British and Yandaboo. The political development of 1826 brought many economic changes which ultimately led to many social changes among the different caste of the society of Assam. The Kaibartas is a fishing community in Assam also went through various socio-economic and political changes during the Colonial period. The objective of the present study is to analyse the changes among the Kaibartas from 1901 to 1947. The year 1901 has a significant in the changing scenario in social position of the fishing communities as the Kaibarta community began to analyse themselves and the Nadiyals and Doms (another fishing communities in Assam) began to introduced themselves as Kaibartas in the Census report.

Keywords: Assam, British, education, fishery, Kaibarta, law and regulation, occupation.

I. Introduction:

Assam is inhabited by different caste and communities of people throughout different age of time. If one examines the demographic pattern of Assam in different periods of time, it can be seen that many communities have enriched the state with their diverse contribution. The fishermen community which is also known as Kaibartas are also mentioned in the several inscriptions of Ancient period. In Tezpur rock inscription it is mentioned that the Kaibartas were engaged in collecting state tolls on the rivers. There were two sections of Kaibartas- Halowa and Jalowa. Halowa Kaibartas worked with ploughs and Jalowa were the fisherman. During the Ahom rule the Halowa (Keot) were included amongst the Hindu caste and other who was engaged with the fishing was included in the same satra with the Kaibartas and Nadiyals. The Kaibartas had a distinct communal identity with separate religious rites performed by their own priest. The Ahom also followed policy of isolation towards the fishermen community because of the low position of this caste in the social hierarchy. The



relation of fisherman community with the Ahom brought more miseries to them. The Satras played important role for the upliftment of the Kaibarta community by bringing them under the Kala – Samhati Satras, particularly in the Maomoriya Satra. They played an important role during the Maomoria rebellion because of their old grievances against the Ahom monarchy.

With the coming of the British many changes took place in socio-economic field along with the political changes. British introduced new laws and regulations to fulfill their economic interest. Inhabitants of Assam were affected by the new administration introduced by the foreign government. British had introduced many regulations on the rivers, ponds, fisheries to collect revenue. In 1897 ‘fishery act’ was introduced with the provisions of restriction in fishing in the government wetlands. The communities who were mainly depended upon the wetlands for their livelihood were affected by these new rule and regulation by losing their right on natural resources of their own land.

The fishermen communities in Assam during colonial period were identified with kaibartas, doms, jaladha, jalia, jhalo, keot, malo, patuni, tior etc. The fishermen communities along with the other backward classes were placed at lower position in social hierarchy. The society of Assam went through many changes under the British regime and the fisherman community also became conscious about their social position and the changing status of women within this community was also a noticeable aspect while studying the fisherman communities of colonial Assam. The act of 1935 provided reservation to the backward classes which led to a significant development in the context of the lower castes of the society of India. By the study an attempt will be made to analyse the reaction of the fishing communities’ special reference to the Kaibartas to the socio-political development during the colonial period. There are some works on the socio political development of the scheduled castes of Assam in post colonial period but to understand the present condition of the scheduled caste of Assam it is essential to study the colonial background of the castes and communities of Assam.



II. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study is to analyse the causes behind the changing socio-political situation of the Kaibartas of Brahmaputra valley in colonial Period.

III. Methodology:

Historical research methodology has been followed for the study. The paper evolves a critical use of both primary and secondary sources based on internal and external criticism. As primary source archival documents is used and as secondary sources books and articles that published in journals and magazine etc are used. To understand the changing socio-political condition of the Kaibartas; among the different causes occupation and education has adopted as attributes of analysis for the study.

IV. Result and Discussion:

K.L. Sharma in his article 'towards a framework of relevance for the sociology of stratification in India' stated that the theories of western scholars like Weber, Sorokin, Marx, Mills, Dumont, have been using without 'Indigenization' of the theories.[1] Sekhar Bandopadhyay in his work 'Caste, protest and Identity: Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947' had focused on the identity formation of the Namasudras of Bengal during the colonial period and also analyzed the class factor within the Namasudras.[2] By getting some access to education and political rights a new elite class emerged among the 'depressed caste' which led to a new development in the colonial India. In Assam also there were many depressed caste among which the Kaibartas are noticeable as they were the first among the lower castes of Assam to organize themselves to fight for their socio-political rights.

The census of 1872, the kaibartas are mentioned as the agricultural caste while Jaladhar, Jaliya, jhalo, keot, Mala, Patuini, Tior are mentioned as boating and fishing castes. The census report separately mentioned about the Nadiyals Doms engaged in Fishing and a low caste of Doms. The social hierarchy of the fishing communities were different in different district. In Goalpara, the Nadiyals were comparatively well to do by abiding their caste occupation for higher



employment. E.R. Leach(ed) book ‘aspects of castes in South India, Cylon and north-west Pakistan’ stated that ‘occupational specialization and hierarchical gradation along with the suppression of women as a class have played a no less crucial role in the formation of caste society and regulating inter communal relationship [3]. The deputy commissioner of Kamrup estimated that about a twenty-fifth part of the total population of the district lived by fishing while the census report of 1872 returned the total numbers of the members of the Hindu fishing and boating castes in Kamrup at 11,213 or 2.1 percent of the Hindu population, being only a little over one fifth of the District population.[4]In Sivsagar the Kaibartas are unquestionably a different caste, though their members and customs did not differ materially from that of Assamese Nadiyals, except in following particular – the Kaibarta decline to use the ghakata net and in theory only, sell their fish on the river’s bank within a paddles throw of the boat, where as the Nadiyals regularly take their catch to market[8]. This shows that the Kaibartas were the fishermen community not agriculturist. In lower Assam a distinction is observed between Halwa and Jalwa Kaivartas or agriculturist and fisherman, the former being held superior to the letters. A halwa Kaivarta by eating with jalwa may degrade himself to his level of the former not even by giving up fishing and taking to the plough. As one go eastward this distinction gives place to one between great and small Kaivarta, the letter being mostly washer men [6]

The British regime brought many changes in the rule and regulation regarding the wetlands which directly affect the Kaibartas who were mainly depended on the wetlands. The act of 1897 is an important regulation in this regard. The act brought many restrictions in the fishing in the rivers, ponds and other wetlands [7]. The process of licenses was introduced to fish in the water specified under the new act. The fishermen had to pay by means of nets and instruments mentioned below-

Table 1: The price of fishing instruments :

Sl. No.	Name of instruments	Fee (Rs)
1.	Bhasan darajal	6
2.	Reg jal	6
3.	Jhaki Jal	6



4.	Bhel jal	6
5.	Hepa jal	6
6.	Khuti jal	6
7.	Jhimtijal	5
8.	Bara jal	4
9.	Dao paran	6
10.	Faria	5
11.	Lar Barshi	4
12.	Chip Barshi	4
13.	Pelain Jal	12
14.	Khutbar jal	12
15.	Bara jal	12
16.	Polo	3
17.	Kucha jaghara	2

Source: abstract from file; Revenue Department, Fishery Branch, file no-12/10, Assam state Archive.

The governments fisheries were were put for auction, in Nagaon the important ponds the Kalang, the Pota Kalang Bill,the Mora Kalang bil, the Samaguri, the Rupahi, the Mecha Bill, the Kuji bill, the Udari bil, the Khanogharia bil,the Sondra bil,the Kapili,the Sonai, the Tetelisara,the Bar Ranmari bil, the Kola Duar bill were given foe lease [5]. In guwahati Rajbari,Jorpukhuri, digli, paltan, Tokobari, Day company's tank, Goalas tank, Ram Das tank, Sadar Amin tank were the government tank and looked after by the Gauhati municipality[9]. In Nagaon rs.11000 were collected by leasing the fisheries to the 'professional' fisherman who had recourse to their 'mahal' rates, varying from one to twenty rupees per net [10]. it is seen that the concept of professional fisherman and the mahal was a new development in the fishing and it shows that fishing became a Industry in Brahmaputra valley and the traditional fishermen became to a part of competition with the newly emerged so called professional fishermen who were not actually belonged to the Kaibartas and other fishing communities. In 1909, SG Hart, the director of agriculture; East-Bengal and Assam had submitted a proposal to the chief secretary; govt of east Bengal and Assam, for establishing a fishery department with the following officials-1. Kanango (Rs.125), 2.cleark(Rs.40),3.peon(Rs 8)[11].S.G, Hart also stated that the before establishing the fishery department government should take some steps because this industry was very new in the region. He recommended sending two



educated young men from each religion Hindu and Muslim to gather knowledge of the fishery. A research scholar from Bengal was sent to Europe with the Scholarship of 200 Rs. A young man did not belong to the fishing communities as there was no educated man among these communities who could fulfill the requirement of the government. It can be seen that the officials of the fishery were mainly belonged to the upper castes who were not concern about the economic condition of the fishermen. The leases of the fisheries were given to the village mahal and the, mahals were actually run by the upper castes village head men. The people of Kaibarta community complained to the government regarding the new set up where the fishing communities were losing their livelihood but their application was not entertained as the government was not concern about the livelihood of the Kaibartas but the revenue they were collecting from the Mahals. In 1925, Sadanda Das. A kaibarta from Barpeta made an application stating that the mahal were consisted of the Kaibartas in official documents but in reality the benefits of the fishery were enjoyed by the mahal heads of the upper castes [12]. The fishery officials replied that it was not their concern they were getting the benefits but they were concern only about the revenue generated from the Fishery. The revenue allotted by the government was too high to the Kaibartas. At that situation the upper castes began to give money to the fisherman that led to indebtedness of the Kaibartas and also the upper castes began to take the leases in the name of the Kaibartas.

Education played an important role in the upliftment of the communities during the British colonial rule. The Progress of education report mentioned that the low castes were far behind the main body of Hindus in matter of education. A large part of this backwardness was the inevitable result of the poverty but apart from general causes the progress of low castes education had been hindered by the attitude of the higher castes towards it. There was formerly a deep seated prejudice against the admission of low caste children to public schools, which because of partly from the dislike of the comparatively high Castes children mix up with the lower caste children of habits and morals[13]. The Kaibartas being a low Caste also couldn't access to the education which prevent them to get appointment in jobs. B.D. Roy has stated that upto 1935 in Assam not a single depressed class was appointed in any branch of Assam secretariat, In 1934 the government of India recommended the reservation of a certain percent of direct



appointment to redress communal inequalities[14].During the Swadeshi movement, consciousness for the mass education has developed. In 1910 Ghokhle introduced a Bill in legislative by suggesting council provision for free and compulsory elementary education for boys between age of 6-10 especially in those areas where 33% male children had already been receiving education. From 1912, elementary education was made free in North- West frontier province. In united provinces, the Punjab, Assam and central province also the rate of education became nominal. Despite of this the educational progress report didn't show the increase percentage of lower caste in the field of education [15] .In 1927 Hartag Commeette was appointed by the Simon commission to prepare a Report on the educational progress in India. According to the report of Hartag committee caste barrier played an important role in the spread of education among the lower castes. In Assam Kaibartas had only 36, Malos 25, and Tantis had only 10 literate per thousand [13]. The lacks of education among the Kaibartas along with the other depressed classes prevent them from joining in the government job. Education played an important role during the colonial period as the newly emerged middle class of the province were the educated middle class who were mainly from the upper castes. This led to some tension among the castes as the lower castes began to believe that they were depriving from the jobs because of the caste Hindus.

The formation of Kaibarta Sanmilan in Bharalu; Guwahati with its branches in other districts of Brahmaputra Valley, Kaibarta Shanga Conference, the Assam depressed class federation shows the growing consciousness among the Kaibartas with their distinct identity formation to fight for their upliftment in terms of education and removing social barriers[7]. While removing social barriers they were not actually uplifting their position but followed the process of Sanskritization. Kaibarta Sanmilan introduced some restriction in the women fish seller by giving advice to them not to sell fish but to concentrate on weaving at home. B.C. Allen has mentioned that the women of fishing communities shared better position that the women of the high caste [8].The organizations that had emerged as the upliftment of social reform of the Kaibartas also began to speak on the political representation as the year 1930-1935 witnessed a significant development in the context of lower castes representation in the legislative. The



general elections 1945-46 among 108 constituencies 47 were reserved for the scheduled castes.

Despite of the policy of reservation in political representation, jobs, education the Kaibartas remained as backward class after the independence. The policies were not implemented properly and the idea of filtrations of knowledge from the educated sections of the Kaibartas to the others. But in reality it formed a different 'elite' class within the Kaibarta community who changed their traditional profession of fishing. It can be seen that the educational development, occupational change has inter relation that ultimately worked as factors behind the social mobility of the Kaibartas in Brahmaputra valley in colonial Assam.

V. Conclusion:

British colonial regime brought many changes in the economic sector which effected the social relation of the various communities in Assam. The Kaibarta belonged to the lower position in the society had to face many changes in term of social relation with the upper caste Hindus. The elite class of the British regime was consist of the upper caste Hindus.the lower castes could not access to the newly introduced education because of poverty and lack of awareness. Till 1935 some consciousness grew among the depressed caste of the Brahmaputra valley and began to demand for political rights. In 1943, reservation in the jobs was also introduced. Despite of these policies for ufliftment of the lower caste,the Kaibartas along with the other caste remained economically and socialy backward after independence. Besides their relation with the colonial government was also a significant role in changing socio-political relation of the Kaibartas. A section of the Kaibartas became beneficial from the policies which again led to class formation within the caste.

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