

A Historical Study of the Brahmins of Ancient Assam

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Abstract - With the coming of the Indo Aryans, a new era had started in India in its cultural and identical history. Indo Aryans were generally known as Aryans. The Aryans were the last group of people to enter the northeastern region. From the Aitreya Brahmana, the Satapatha Brahmana, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana, and the Bhagavata Purana, the coming of the Aryans to East India can be known. In the Kalika Purana, it is mentioned that Naraka and Bhagadatta made arrangements for the settlement of the Aryans in Pragjyotish. From the copper and the stone inscription, it can be known that it was the custom of the kings of ancient Assam to donate land to the Brahmins and to the high cast people through 'Agrahara'. With the coming of the Aryans, the process of Aryanisation started in the northeastern region of India, as a result of which Aryanised manners and customs replaced the tribal manners and customs. The main objective of this paper is to study the origin of the Brahmin community of ancient Assam and how they spread Aryan culture in the valley.

Keywords - Aryans, North Eastern Region, Purana

I. INTRODUCTION

In ancient days Assam was known as Pragjyotishpur and later as Kamrupa. In the Mahabharata and in the Ramayana, the name of this kingdom was found mentioned. Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotishpur, joined in the Kurukshetra war with an army consisting of Kirat, China, and the inhabitants of sea coast. During the days of the Puranas, this Kingdom was known as Kamrupa. As in ancient days, there was no kingdom named Assam, so there were no people named Assamese. When the kingdom got the name Assam, its inhabitants also introduced themselves as Assamese.

From the remote past, the northeastern region of India was inhabited by different tribes belonging to different ethnic groups, so it has been termed an anthropological museum. These tribes were mainly Kokesio, Alpine, Negrito, Austric, Mongoloids, and the Aryans. There is no definite proof to know when and how these tribes entered into ancient Assam.

With the coming of the Indo Aryans, a new era had started in India in its cultural and identical history. Indo Aryans were generally known as Aryans. They enriched with their own culture, entered India through the northwest corner. By deciphering the copper and bronze materials found on the border of Afghanistan and the Ganges valley, it is assumed that the Indo Aryans entered India in 1200 A.D. Even before that, there was every possibility of their entering into India in small groups. Later large immigration of them was noticed from the Aral-Caspian basin. (Sarma (ed), Asamiya Jatir Itivritta 2005:20-21)

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this paper is to trace the origin of the Brahmin community of ancient Assam, and subsequently, it gives an idea of the beginning of the process of Aryanization in the Brahmaputra valley in ancient Assam.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is based both on primary and secondary data. The former is based on epigraphic sources and literary sources like Kalika Puranas, whereas the latter are collected from historical books, journals, souvenirs, magazines, booklets, newspapers, etc. Extensive surveys of internet sources were also undertaken during the pandemic period.

A. The advent of the Aryans and Agrahara Settlement

The Aryans were the last group of people to enter the northeastern region. The Aryans who had their own culture had good physique and appearance, and they were of white complexion, but due to their contact with different tribes and with different climates and surroundings, their appearance and physique had changed very much. From the Aitreya Brahman, the Sata Patha Brahman, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana, and the Bhagavata Purana, the coming of the Aryans to East India can be known. In the Kalika Purana, it is mentioned that Naraka and Bhagadatta made arrangements for the settlement of the Aryans in Pragjyotish. From the copper and the stone inscription, it can be known that it was the custom of the kings of ancient Assam to donate land to the Brahmins and to the high cast people through 'Agrahara'. With the coming of the Aryans,



the process of Aryanisation started in the north-eastern region of India, as a result of which Aryanised manners and customs replaced the tribal manners and customs. (Baruah & Baruah, Asomar Itihash, 2007:35)

In the ancient period, there was the prevalence of three-fold society, and these were Aryans, Aryanised and Non-Aryan Tribal Society.

According to B.K.Barua, "The influence of Kamrup over north-eastern India, after the fall of the imperial power of the Guptas in the later part of the 5th century A.D., caused the migration of a large number of Brahmanas to Kamrup." (Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, 2011:119-120) In ancient days before the coming of the Aryans to Kamrup, the Brahmins lived in this kingdom. At the beginning of the 15th century B.C. Narak or Narakasur, a Vaishnava hero from Videh or North Bihar came to Pragjyotish and became king. As a stern devotee of Vishnu, Narakasura brought a major portion of the Aryans and settled them at Pragjyotish. He was very pious, and he worshipped many gods and goddesses. Therefore, the scholars are of the opinion that it was Narak who first of all established the Aryans along with the Brahmanas in Pragjyotishpur. (Hussain (ed), Prantik, 2020:18) The heritage of sage Basista, built during the reign of Naraka, still remains in Guwahati, which is known as Basistasram. From a very ancient time, it was the center of astrology. The word Prag means East, and Jyotish means Star-Astrology. (Gohainborooah, Asomar Buranji, 2017:23) During the reign of king Bhisma of Kundilnagar, i.e., present Sadiya, there was the prevalence of Vedic rites and rituals performed by the Brahmin priests.

In the third century B.C. Sakdipi Brahmins coming to India gradually spread themselves in all places of India, and they initiated many people to their fold by describing the effects of the direct worship of the Sun God.

The scholars imagined that the Markendriya Purana was composed in the 5th century A.D. In Chapters 109 of this book, it is written that there is a Sun temple in the kingdom of Kamrupa, in a place full of jungle, and if people worship in this temple in the morning hours, then all their desires are fulfilled. In these ancient days, except the "Graha Bipras" none could establish a Shiva temple for worship. Therefore, it can be assumed that up to the third and fifth century A.D., there was the prevalence of the Brahmins in the ancient Kamrup Kingdom. (Nath (ed), Pratinatwik Rajmohan Nathar Rachanavali, 2002:143)

The remains of an ancient and big Sun temple are lying scattered in the Bamuni hills of Tezpur. From an archaeological viewpoint, it can be imagined that the temple was built probably in the 9th century A.D. In the later period, it was not possible to build a temple in the place of the worship of Sun God in the ancient forest named Gurubishal.

Therefore it can be imagined that the Sakdipi Brahmins came to Kamrupa in the 2nd century A.D. (ibid). The rivers, beals, places of pilgrimages, temples, heritages of the ancient Kamrup kingdom are discussed in detail in the Kalika Purana. Kalika Purana was composed probably in the 8th century A.D., and later many new things were added to it. In the beginning of the 12th century A.D., the Hindu dynasties of the Kamrup kingdom met their downfall, and it was accompanied by the great flood, predominance of the hill tribes, and extinction of the pilgrimages. Sri Jogesh Chandra Vidyanidhi, a famous scholar, made researches on the Sakdipi Brahmins of Kamrup and wrote many articles on them. He found the ancient arithmetical calculations mentioned in the Kalika Purana, and therefore he confirmed that except Grahapipta (Brahmin), it was impossible for anyone to compose such a book. (ibid:144)

In chapter 18 of the Kalika Purana, politics, saintliness, and virtue are elaborately discussed. In the chapter on politics, it is mentioned that a king sometimes invited an astrologer secretly to know the mind of another person. Among the works of the king, there were also codes regarding the worship of Navagraha. There are sufficient reasons to believe that the Sakdipi Brahmins or astrologers from the 2nd century A.D. took part in the society, religion, politics, literature, etc., in the kingdom of Kamrup, and they also developed them.

In 1100 A.D., a Khatriya saint named Dharmapal of Gitari family came from Kashmir and ruled over Kamrup. He brought several Brahmin families from west India and established them in Kamrup. (Gohainborooah, Asomar Buranji, 32) He was a great devotee of the Hindu religion.

The religion that was followed by the Aryan linguist group of people by following Vedic rites and rituals, that religion can simply be called Aryadharm. The Brahmins were the carriers and preachers of this religion. From the Aitriya Brahmana, the expansion of the Aryans culture towards Pragjyotishpur can be known. The ancient kings of Assam granted 'Agrahara' to the Brahmins, which helped to establish and accept the Sanskrit language and culture by the members of the royal family in their personal and public life. It also helped 'Aryadharm' to establish their firm footing in this area. In Doobi Copper plate grant, it is mentioned that Mahendra Varman performed many sacrifices. Balavarman, Indrapal, Ratnapal also performed several minor and big sacrifices. In the Puspabhadra grant, it is mentioned that in the Khyatapali village lived a Brahmin named Madhusudhan who performed Vedic worship and sacrifices by chanting of the mantras and the smoke that emitted from these worships and filled the sky and created an atmosphere just like the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna river. (Baruah & Baruah, Asomar Itihash, 59)

Scholars opined that the reign of Bhutivarman (510-555 A.D.) was one of the illustrious chapters in the ancient history of Kamrupa. He had conquered 'Pundra Vardhan' (North Bengal) from the hands of the Guptas and annexed it to his empire. According to historian Dr. S.L. Baruah "He was the first king of Kamrupa to extend the western frontier of the kingdom beyond the river Karatoya. In the south and east also, he made fresh conquests and could thus make his power felt in the whole of eastern India." (Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, 2007:96) In order to commemorate this historical victory, the king performed the 'Aswamedha' sacrifice and donated land to 200 Brahmins, and established them at Pundra Vardhana. According to S.L. Baruah, "Bhutivarman conquered lands in Pundravardhana to the west of the Trisrota in between 545-550 A.D. and donated lands to more than 200 families of Brahmanas in the Punravardhana bhukti (roughly north Bengal)". (ibid:95) Later Bhaskarvarman and Banamala Varman of the Salastambha dynasty confirmed this donation by inscribing on two copper plate grants. The Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskarvarman bears testimony to this historical event.

In the Nagajori Khanikargaon stone inscription of the 5th century A.D., the first mention of donating lands to the Brahmins is found. In the Tezpur copper plate grant of Banamaladev, there is the mention of donating lands to two Brahmins named Bijjat and Indu, and in the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala, donating of land to some Brahmins of Parashar Gotra is found. During the pre-Ahom age, there were instances of Brahmins becoming kings of Pragjyotish-Kamrup. It is known that Vaidyadeva, who was the king of Pragjyotish Kamrup in the 12th century A.D., was assumed to be a Brahmin. (ibid:95)

From the copper plate inscription, it is known that the kings of the three dynasties viz the Varmanas, the Salastambhas, and the Palas donated land to the Brahmins. From the copper plate inscription that has been recovered in Varanasi, it is known that Vidyadeva (1134-1145), after defeating the last Pala king of Kamrupa, brought many Brahmins and established them in Kamrup. He, in order to acclaim his supremacy, donated land in several places to a Brahmin named Sridhar. (Hussain (ed), Prantik:18)

The prevalence of the Sanskrit language in the Brahmaputra valley is worth mentioning. The language is used in the ancient Umachal stone inscription of the Nilachal hills in Sanskrit. The Nagajari Khanikor Gaon stone inscription discovered at the Dhansiri valley near Naga hills is contemporary to the above inscription, and the language used in this inscription is also Sanskrit. In the copper plate inscriptions of the Bhauma kings who ruled continuously in Kamrup from the 4th century and 12th century A.D., the language used was Sanskrit. The ancient Indian scriptures like the Vedas, the Puranas, the Upanishads, and legal

scriptures were studied in Assam, and the scholars having knowledge of scriptures were honored in other places of India. From a copper plate inscription, it can be known that a Brahmin named Vishnu Somacharya of Singari of Kamrup, who had knowledge upon Veda and Vedanta was donated land at the time of the marriage of the kings' niece (daughter of king's brother). (Choudhury, 1966:12) In one of the copper plates belonging to 987 A.D., there was the mention of donation received from king Vakpati of the Paramara dynasty of distant Malwa province by the Aryan kings of Kamrupa. (ibid:22)

Among the kings of the Varmana and Salastambha dynasty, who ruled in Kamrup from 4th to 10th century A.D., three kings of the same name, e.g., Bala Varman, are found. Among these three, the king who ruled in the last part of the 9th century was the third king. During the reign of this king, there was the mention in copper plate inscriptions of donating lands to the Brahmins at the North Borbil village of Jamuna valley and Sutorgaon near Purani Gundam. (Sarmah, Prasin Kamrupar Gaurabojjal Kahinibor, 2012:107)

In the Guakuchi copper plate grant, it is mentioned that Indrapal, the king of Kamrup, in the 21st year of his reign (Approximately 1071 A.D.), donated a plot of land to a Brahmin named Devadev who lived in Bainama village in the Sawathi area. (ibid:112) It is said that in this land, two thousand varieties of paddy were grown.

To tell the truth, the kings of Kamrup were wise and learned, so they honored the learned religious preachers. From the Nidhanpur grant, it is known that the kings, by following the 'Agrahara' system, donated lands to the Brahmins systematically and established them in the kingdom. B.K. Barua, in his book 'A Cultural History of Assam', mentioned that, "It has been shown elsewhere that besides their scriptural duties, the Brahmanas also held high administrative offices. Ministers, administrators, and court poets were mostly members of their class. Janardana Svamin was a nyayakaranika in the time of Bhaskarvarmana." (Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, 124) The Subhankarapataka Grant of Dharmapala refers to a brahmana Himanga, who was not only skilled in archery but also an expert in reading the omens implied in the movement and fall of other people's arrows. (ibid) (naraca-moksagati-pataguna-pravina)

From another source, it can be known that Vakpati, the king of Malwa of the Paramara dynasty, donated land to twenty-six Brahmins. Among these twenty-six, a Brahmin named Paundrika belonged to Uttarkuldes. Historian K.L. Barua identifies the place Uttarkuldes with Uttarkul of Assam.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that in ancient days Hinduism was the main religion of the kings and the subjects. The kings of the ancient period were the devotees of Shiva and Sakti, and in order to appease them, they performed many worships and sacrifices. Worship of these gods and goddesses was not possible without the Brahmin priests. Therefore, the kings brought the Brahmins to have knowledge of the Sanskrit language from different parts of India and established them in Assam with land and honor. Therefore, nobody can deny the fact that the Brahmins were also the early inhabitants of Assam.

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