



Revisiting North-East India

HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ETHNICITY

Edited by :

Habib Fazlul Basid
Tarun Kumar Halder



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Ph.: 09811864351, 08433295480

E-mail: balajibooks2010@gmail.com

balaji.book2010@gmail.com

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ASSIMILATION THROUGH VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM A Special Reference to Kaibartas

KARISHMA DAS*

Assam consists of diverse caste and communities of people from long time. Throughout the years apart from the aboriginals, various communities migrated to Assam and make it a diverse society. Among the various caste and communities one is the Kaibarta. Kaibartas are a fishing community of Assam. They have been engaged in this profession since time immemorial. They lived in the areas like bank of the river or the villages near to river. Ka is the first letter of Assamese alphabet. Ka means water, Ganga, Bishnu, soul, Brahma, sun etc. But here in the word Kaibarta, Kai means water and Barta means the people lives on water or the production of water. Kaibartas were said to have migrated from Bengal, Orissa and Kerala to Assam in ancient period.

Vaishnavism in Assam

It was during the medieval period of history of Assam that Vaishnavism entered Assam. During the Bhakti Movement, along with the other parts of India, it is also influenced the religious life of Assam. The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in 14th-

* Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Boko (Assam)

15th century was carried by Sankardeva to Assam from Bengal. To propagate Vaishnavism Sankardeva established religious institutions like *Satras* and *Namghars* where people gathered and listen to the divinity of lord Vishnu. Later Sankardeva wrote plays and also perform in this institution because he believed that it was easy to make understandable the illiterate people of Assam by performing rather than just by telling the stories of the great epics. The most important development brought by this religious upheaval was the equality in status to each and every caste. Because Sankardeva did not put any norms and could be his followers. For that reason the people irrespective of caste and religion became Vaishnavite like the lower caste like Kaibartas, tribes like Moran, Borahi and even the Muhammadans. In a society with a lots of diversity and when the royalty was in the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism, it was really overwhelming to see a Vaishnavism entered their life.

Kaal Samhati and Vaisnavism

After the death of Sankardeva a lot of change took place regarding who would be the next successor of the religious leader. As Sankardeva had not selected any successor, therefore a chaos among his followers and his son take place. Therefore on the base of different ideological ground four sub-sects emerged among Vaishnava followers like Brahman Samhati, Mika Samhati, Purush Samhati and Kaal Samhati. The *Satras* of the Kaal Samhati group really played important role in changing the social scenario of that time. Gopaldeva of Bhavanipur, one of the followers of Sankardeva was the initiator of this sub-sect. Under this sub-sect the most important *Satras* were- *Mayamara* (Mowamara) and *Silikhatal* (Dihing) who had a large amount of follower especially lower castes like Kaibartas and Morans. But the Brahmanas and other higher caste also became followers and assimilation through religious beliefs paved its way.

Ek-Saran Bhagawati Samaj

It was in the year 1936; another important event took place in the religious history of Assam i.e. the establishment of Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj. After the formation of a division under

Vaishnavism namely Sankar Sangha in 1935, an unwanted incident took place. In their meeting where the upper caste Vaishnava gurus were seated with the lower caste gurus; the upper castes did not like latter's presence under same roof. It led to heated argument between two castes. One among the lower castes guru Ilaram Das decided to leave the place and resulted in the formation of Ek Saran Bhagwati Samaj in the next year. Ilaram Das really had put his heart and soul to make it a successful event. Surprisingly within a span of time, a large population belonging to Kaivarta came under the influence of Ek Saran Bhagwati Samaj. There have a number of divisions among Vaishnavism in Assam like Sankar Sangha, Nam-Kirtania, Ek Saran Bhagwati Samaj and so on, but there have little ideological difference apart from some practices. Therefore though Ilaram Das formed a new division but the people are under the Vaishnavism.

Assimilation brought change in Social Structure

This religious assimilation really brought a change in the Assamese social structure. There have social discrimination prevailed among the upper caste and the lower caste like Kaibartas in Assam but it was not displayed anywhere in history thoroughly. Because the Assamese writers never showed it through their work or maybe they thought it was irrelevant in compare to the range of caste discrimination of the rest of India. Whatever be the reason, but the behaviour of upper caste Assamese towards the lower caste like Kaibartas can be considered as discrimination because the upper caste prevent any marriage relation with the Kaibartas. Moreover the Kaibartas were not allowed to enter in the houses of the upper caste or inter-dine with them. The shadow of Kaibartas was considered unholy by the upper castes.

But this degree of discrimination decreasing with time when irrespective of division under Vaishnavism, all the followers gathered under safe roof when the Sankar Mahotsav celebrated, a yearly celebration of Vaishnavite beliefs. Moreover now-a-days, inter caste marriages between Kaibartas and the upper caste gradually possible to held.

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