

Caste System in Ancient Assam: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Caste system is characterized by its exclusiveness, inclusiveness and hier-archical relations between various groups on the one hand and the system has some other features such as endogamy, commensality, and purity-pollu-tion, hereditary specialization of occupation, cultural differences and domination of power based on hereditary principles, on the other. We have examined how and to what extent these features operate in deter-mining relations between groups and individuals in Assamese society.

Keywords: Caste system, exclusiveness, inclusiveness, hier-archical, hereditary specialization of occupation etc.

I. Introduction

Caste system is characterized by its exclusiveness, inclusiveness and hier-archical relations between various groups on the one hand and the system has some other features such as endogamy, commensality, and purity-pollu-tion, hereditary specialization of occupation, cultural differences and domination of power based on hereditary principles, on the other. We have examined how and to what extent these features operate in deter-mining relations between groups and individuals in Assamese society.

II. Discussion:

Brahmins occupy the highest position in the hierarchy and are di-vided into two groups—the Vaisnavities and the Saktas. The former are also sub-divided on the basis of Vaisnava sectarian affiliation. During the last few decades, they have been attracted by modern education and occu-pations although they mainly depend on agriculture. They practise endogamy but their socio-religious life bears some social significance which has considerably reduced social distance between them and other castes and tribes.

Kayasthas occupy a position next to Brahmins, and with the latter they constitute the upper caste group. They are Gosains and are religious heads of the devotees belonging to various tribes and castes including Brahmins. Although they are Sudras, their ritual status is superior to that of Brahmins. The Gosains are required to take services of the Brahmin priests in marriage and death rituals while the latter are required to un-dergo initiation into Vaisnavism under the former.

The Kayasthas are an endogamous group, but they have hyper-gamous relations with the Kalitas. The practice of concubine age with women of lower castes is not uncommon among them. However, their children are not accorded the status of their father's caste. The next position is occupied by the Kalitas. They, along with Ro-ches, Chutiyas, Keots, Katanis and Ahoms, constitute the intermediate caste category. They have 'mixed' with various other castes and have lost in the process their traditional caste status.

They are predominantly agri-culturists, but today many of them have taken up modern occupations. The Kalitas practise endogamy, but exogamy is also not uncommon. They have marital relations with Kayasthas, Koches and Chutiyas. Mar-riage with Ahoms is not uncommon.

The Koches occupy a position just below the Kalitas. They were originally a tribe but have transformed themselves into a caste. They are agriculturists. Koches are basically endogamous, but today their marriages with Kayasthas, Kalitas, Keots and Chutiyas have

become a common feature. Katnis and Ahoms, though not frequently, are also accepted by them for marriage.

The Chutiyas, originally a tribe, come next in the hierarchy. They generally practise endogamy, but have exogamous relations with Kalitas, Koches, Keots and Katanis. The Ahom-Chutiyas have marital alliances with the Ahoms. They cremate dead bodies, and practise widow re-marriage. They observe Vedic rites and rituals in marriage and death ceremonies in which Brahmin priest presides. Occasionally, marriages between Chutiyas and Kacharis also occur.

The Keots occupy position below the Koches. Their status is somewhat ambiguous as they feel superior to the Chutiyas. They have two sub-groups—Halowa-Keots and Jalowa-Keots. The former is agriculturist and enjoys superior position by practicing exogamy with some higher castes, such as Koches. Exogamous relations with Ahoms are also socially accepted. The Jalowa-Keots have marriage alliance with Kaibartas—a fishing caste.

Next to the Keots, there are Katanis who are agriculturists. About twenty years ago, they left their traditional occupation of spinning and weaving and considerably improved their social status. Occasionally, they enter into marital relations with Chutiyas, Keots and Ahoms.

The position of the Ahoms, formerly a ruling tribe, is next to the Katanis. They think themselves superior to other castes except the Brahmins. They never practise endogamy in the true sense. During the last twenty years, they have been practicing exogamy with Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis.

Marriage with the Kacharis is also accepted. Still they have retained many of their traditional customs like the practice of widow re-marriage, levirate, burial of dead bodies, etc. Their socio-religious life represents a mixture of both tribalism and Vaisnavism. They never accept services of a Brahmin priest. These factors have, however, created an ambiguity in identifying their rank in the caste hierarchy.

The Kacharis, a scheduled tribe, are ranked next to the Ahoms, but above the Kaibartas. The Sonowal-Kacharis, a Vaisnavite section, think themselves as clean Sudras. They regard themselves as inferior to the Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kalitas and Koches, but superior to the Keots, Katanis, Ahoms and Kaibartas. Today, they have left gold-washing and have become peasants. They are an endogamous group, but exogamy is not uncommon among them. With the process of Vaisnavization they have been losing tribal characteristics. Their culture is a mixture of both Hindu and tribal cultural elements. Therefore, their status is ambiguous.

The traditional calling of the Kaibartas is fishing, but today a majority of them are agriculturists. They are an endogamous group and can accept members of any caste as affinal kin. It indicates their lowest social status. The Brahmins who serve them have lower status than their counterparts who serve the higher status groups because of the Kaibarta's lowest social status. The non-Assamese communities consist of various tribes and a few lower castes whose forefathers migrated to Assam as tea plantation labourers from Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh during the British period. Their present generation includes agriculturists or ordinary labourers.

They have lost many of their traditional customs, but have still retained their dialect and animistic religion. Culturally, they are distinct from the indigenous people and are called "collies" by the Assamese people. Though commensal and marital rules suggest prevalence of endogamy in theory but in practice dominance of inter-community marriage is found.

A combination of rigidity and flexibility dimensions of societal norms can be seen through the rules of marriage. The Kayasthas have normal marriages with the Kalitas and Koches. In Dumont's (1970: 118) words, it coincides with the "optional hypergamy".

But the Kalitas and Koches generally avoid marrying daughters of Kayasthas as the latter are their Gosains. Considerable flexibility is found in marital relations among the castes occupying middle position. The Kalitas, Koches and Chutiyas practise inter-caste marriages. The Koches, Chutiyas, Keots and Katanis also have marital relations with each other.

Under such a situation how these caste groups maintain exclusiveness and separateness? This leads to the discussion on commensal behaviour. In the case of hypergamy, a woman is raised to her husband's caste-status, and she stops commensal relations with the caste of her parents. Members of her husband's caste accept food from her, and children born out of such union enjoy the status of their paternal caste.

The rules of commensality are not very important in the society. Only among the upper and lower caste groups commensal norms are observed regularly. The intermediate castes frequently violate such norms and do not strictly observe commensal restrictions. Such a wide range of commensal relations do not permit any sharp commensal hierarchy as well as hierarchy of relative exclusiveness of caste groups.

This is not folly in tune with Dumont's (1970:43) view that in commensal hierarchy, exclusiveness is the organizing principle. He refers to "groups who are in the process of transition from tribe to untouchable caste". But in Assam, those tribes who have transformed themselves into castes have always enjoyed considerably superior status among the Sudras.

Some of the intermediate castes, namely, Koches, Chutiyas, Keots and Ahoms have gradually been able to change their status from tribes to castes. Today, they are regarded as clean castes. This fact contrasts with Dumont's view of inclusion of foreign groups into a territorial set of castes.

The wide range of commensal and connubial relations practised by these groups reflects the presence of egalitarian principle among tribes, and the concept of purity-pollution of the caste system has affected the tribal groups. Their affiliation to the Vaisnavite sub-sects has made them liberal as well as strict in their outlook regarding norms of caste hierarchy and inter-caste relations in a similar way.

III. Conclusion:

In this way, they are integrated into the caste society and maintain separateness at the same time. Therefore, exclusiveness is not the most distinctive feature of caste society as it is mentioned by Dumont. Moreover, Dumont's (1957: 7-22) thesis has always kept the Indian tribes outside the main sphere of his interest as if they are not part of the Hindu social structure. Therefore, it would be misleading if one places the tribes outside the caste system.

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