



Class and Caste-Based Social Formation: A Retrospective Study on the Kaivartas & Nisadas of Assam

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Caste system plays a significant role in the development and formation of Indian society. It is entirely futile to go through about the history and society of India until and unless caste system is taken in to consideration. The rigidity of caste system and its role albeit less found in Assam in comparison to the other states of India; but in the formation and development of her society, its role is indeed significant.

The presence of Mongolian tribal society gives the caste system a different status and character in Assam. The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being focused in to general society. This phenomenon which lies at the very foundation of the most striking Indian social feature, namely caste, is also the great basic fact of ancient Indian history. According to Kosambi, the inclusion of tribal and traditional organizations within the fold of caste gives the institution its power in social organization and is a development of the original four caste system to fill the newer conditions.¹ Irfan Habib also supports his view and says that the gradual inclusion of tribes in to the aboriginal peasant society created the caste system in India.²

Any historically born social organization in the society is the result of inequality and surprisingly, such organization again help and add fuel creating variation and inequality alive in the society. The Kaivartas are one of such ancient inhabitants of Assam who were neglected and untouched once upon a time and even today somewhere in their Hindu society. The caste system though flexible in Assam, notwithstanding that, the other castes in the society did not allow the Kaivartas to mix-up with them and even deprived them of water and fire and forced them to establish separate villages for them.³ Most of the Dhulias (drummers) of Assam once upon a time were belong to the Kaivarta family. But in the society, they were not allowed to sit and eat together with the ordinary peasants. For them, cowsheds were kept ready for sitting and eating.⁴ Thus in this way, economically backward Kaivartas were socially also exploited and suppressed in the society. Like the sixth century B.C., as many Hindus of North India converted in to Buddhism and Jainism, same condition prevailed in Assam, albeit the nature, intensity and period was different. Behind the conversion of the Kaivartas of Kamrup in to the Buddhism and Islam; their disdain and hatred were towards their traditional Hindu society who harassed and deprived them lot. Reaction against the Buddhism started in Assam from the seventh to ninth century and finally, the Buddhist Kaivartas were again brought back to their former religion. With their admission and inclusion in to the Vaishnavite religion started by Sankardev and Madhavdev, the two great saints of Assam, their stability in their Hindu society became comparatively strong.⁵

The existence of the Kaivartas are found not only in Assam, they are found scattered in some parts of East-Bengal (Bangladesh), West-Bengal and East-Bihar. The Kaivartas, the Namasudras and the Nadials- they all belong to same caste. The Kaivartas and the Nadials, they are the lone castes living in Assam from remote past. Despite of having affinity with those of the Nadials and the Namasudras; the Kaivartas, they became able to express and exert their identity historically in various ways, like socio-culturally and linguistically.⁶

In Indian perspective, the Kaivartas, they are one of the oldest castes whose ancestors were ancient inhabitants of North-India even those of the Vedic-Aryans. The Vedic-Aryans termed them as the Nisadas. They were the first whom the Vedic-Aryans met in the mainland of India. Though the Aryans respected them at the initial stage but all started evaporating as the time rolled on.⁷ Nevertheless, their social position till then not deteriorated like the further days.

There is no mention of the Nisadas in the Rig –veda and they for the first time found place in Yajur-veda which was composed about 1000-800 B.C. on the bank of the river Yamuna. It indicates that the early places of the Nisadas were West and Central North Province. The contemporary writings of Yajur-veda viz. Brahmanas, Toittiriya, Kanva-Samhita and Moitrayani also mention about the Nisadas. They mention them as the pancha-jana or five castes. In the Satapatha Brahmanas, they are said to be the inhabitant of the East North Province and river Gondak of Bihar. In the Pancha Vimsa Brahmana, they are referred as the inhabitant of Saurashtra of Gujarat.⁸

The Nisadas were not treated as untouchable though they were kept beyond the periphery of the four varnas. In the Visvajit yajna of the Panchavimsa and Kausambi Brahmanas, there was the system of three nights' food and lodging together with the Nisadas. The Nisadas they worshipped the pasupati and the Aryans in later period also started worshipping and accepting the same as their own God. In the process of Aryanisation, the Vedic Brahmanas, they accepted the Nisadas within their Brahmana class. Panini, the famous grammarian is a clear instance of this. According to Kausambi, this is only possible if the Nisada priests are incorporated in to the Brahmana class or some Brahmana class approaches as the priests of the Nisadas.⁹ Unfortunately, such high social status of the Nisadas started descending soon after the emergence of rigid caste system in the Aryan society. Most of the Nisadas because of their low social and economic background could not stand and organize against the Aryans, as the latter were comparatively more organized and much more sound and stable socially and economically than the former. Probably, the Nisada rulers sporadically enlisted their name within the periphery of the varna system of the Vedic society, but the general and ordinary Nisadas were forced to stay beyond the caste stratification of the Vedic society. In this way, social demotion and deposition of the Nisadas started and one day, they became impure and untouchable class in the society.¹⁰

Changes of professions among the lower castes were forbidden so that the higher castes in the society do not face difficulties.¹¹ Except Chandals, all others were treated as the Sudras and their duties were to serve the three high castes, viz. the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. To make the Varna system rigid with the help of royal power, the Smritikars even suggested to the king to adhere to that system and reside in heaven, otherwise in hell. The Smritikars even made certain rules to suppress the suppressed castes of the society with the help of royal patronage or by violent ways. For establishing the religious ascendancy of the caste system, there was the need of priestly suggestions and royal violence and in this way, the caste rules started to establish their supremacy in the society.

Probably, the process of Aryanisation among the Nisadas was not more successful. Except few, like the ruling and priestly classes, it was probably not possible to bring the other ordinary Nisadas within the ambit of this process. The Vedic Brahmanas at the initial stage, tried to impart some knowledges like history, Atharva-veda, Sarpa-vidya to the Nisadas, but such ventures they did away with the development of the rigid caste based society and thus, from then onward, they were left to become an untouchables in the society.¹²

The mainstay of the Nisadas was hunting of fishes and animals. In the Vishnumriti and Kathasaritsagar, they were identified as fishermen. In the Raghuvamsa of Kalidas, they were described as boatmen. Guhak was a Nisada king who helped Ramchandra at the time of crossing the river Ganges.¹³ According to Harivamsa, they collected pearls from the sand of the rivers. They caught and tamed elephants as mentioned in the Harsha Charita of Bana and in the Buddhasutra. In comparison to the cultivators and animal rearers of the Aryans, these professions were marginal. The Nisadas were forced to stick to these professions in accordance of the Varna system and this way, they were made poor and marginal class in the society. The Nisadas involved and engaged in violence activities, like fishing and slaughtering of animals, were not liked by the Buddhists and the Hindus; and they even hated them. In course of time, some sub-castes emerged from the untouched Nisadas according to their profession. The Nisadas whose profession was catching and trading of fishes were known as the Kaivartas. In addition to this profession, their other professions were of making and sailing of boats and becoming the boatmen of merchants and this way, they became more efficient in that profession. Engagements of the Kaivartas in the field of agriculture was not satisfactory in the beginning. Probably, they adopted fishing and agriculture both as their main sources of occupation in Bengal and Assam. These are also found mentioned in the pages of the Buddha Jatakas. The Kaivartas were mainly involved with these professions at the time of their arrival in Assam. At that time, some trade and commerce developed on the banks of the rivers and they entered Assam first through the river route as boatmen and boatmakers keeping as well as maintaining the legacy of their former fish catching profession.¹⁴

It is found mentioned in the inscriptions and copper plates of ancient Assam that the Kaivartas in addition to their fish catching, trading and hunting professions, were also deeply involved in some professions, like riding and making boats. Very soon in Assam, they became successful in establishing themselves as an agriculture caste. The Keots who establish themselves as a caste in the Assamese society even emerged from the agriculture based Kaivartas. In the formation of Assamese society, the role of the Kaivartas is beyond question. In addition to their economic role, culturally also they contributed lot in the caste formation in Assam. Specially,

flutes made from bamboo and buffalo horn, creation and cultivation of wild songs, some of the well known folk musical instruments are their valuable contribution to the Assamese society.¹⁵

Unlike North India and Bengal, though the rigidity of caste system was absent in Assamese society, but surprisingly, the Kaivartas were treated as untouchables in the society up to the period of independence. It is not exaggeration to say that the process of inclusion of the Kaivartas in to the mainstream Hindu society started soon after their conversion to the Vaishnavite religion started by Sankardeva, the great medieval saint of Assam. But that was not the end. In the Vaishnavite society also, there were separate temples built within the satras for the Kaivarta disciples. For them , rites and rituals were also different. This happened because of penetration of parochial Hindu conservative system in colonial period and as a result, the Kaivarta society had to alienate once again from the mainstream Hindu. The eradication movement of untouchability launched by Mahatma Gandhi became successful in Assam to some extent in succeeding years.

A silent but wide movement began after independence for establishing socio-religious equality in the society of Assam. A wide consciousness movement occurred against inequality, caste discrimination and Hindu conservativeness in Assam sticking to the teachings and religion of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, the two great vaishnavite saints of Assam. This was a wide and successful sub-altern resistance in Assam. The speedy and widespread popularity of sub-altern resistance among the lower-strata of the society and also its inherent democratic structure challenged the socio-religious position of Assam and made them weak which fetched their extinction in further days.

Institution, like the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha came to surface as a result of the resistance movement of the sub-altern group. But unfortunately, the sangha failed to fulfill the ambition of the Kaivartas who jumped in to the movement for establishing social equality in the society. As a result, Eksaran Bhagavati Samaj, another socio-religious institution was born out of the sangha. Majority of the Kaivartas of Assam made much headway with utmost confidence in their war for establishing social justice and equality through these institutions.

(Key-words: ascendancy, marginal, parochial, eradication)

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