



Caste Tribe Interaction with Special Reference to the Foothills of Assam - Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract:

Northeast India is full of diversity and there are so many areas for research which are yet to touch. Caste Tribe interaction is not a new phenomenon of India but the nature is differing from one society to another. The interaction between Caste and Tribe in foothill area of Assam Arunachal Pradesh takes place since the pre colonial period. As the administrative system has changed the scenario had also been changed. During the Ahom era the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh came to the plains of Assam and interacted with the local people through various way. the interaction was mainly an economic interaction. As British occupied the place they had introduced some new policies and rules such as inner line regulation etc. Apart from the economic interaction there was secret marriage alliance also, as that were not accepted by the local people, they had to develop their own separate village. Because of the political scenario and other aspects such as economic, education the interaction process has been changed according to the time.

Keywords: Caste, Tribe, Interaction, foothills

1. Introduction

Northeast India is always been a land of ethnic diversity, rich natural resources and complex geopolitical history. It has witnessed the movement of travellers, merchants, religious missions and different ethnic communities, all of which have created a rich mosaic of ethno-cultural roots and multiple identities. British created a divide between hill and valley, along with segregation among locals and outsiders in Northeast India, the post-independence period and the development discourse have further reinstated a certain set deeply embedded cleavage. The inner line regulations introduced by the British created a divide between hill and valley, along with segregation of local and outsiders. (Sharma, 2009)

The north-eastern part has been witnessed of different political strategies, the colonial state in India created new categories of tribes and castes. The colonial construction of tribe-caste relationship has come to permeate the socio-political Indian state too.

2. Statement of the Problem

From the Ahom periods, there is a relationship between caste of plain (Assam) and tribes of hill (Arunachal Pradesh). They had relationship of trade-commerce, marriage. As British occupied the area, they have introduced the system of inner and outer line etc., which brings changes in the inter relation process. Balipara, Nameri and Chariduar these are important, as this is the connecting road between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and so many tribes are living here. Some tribes settled by British, some for business and slowly they have settled here permanently. Also, in Chariduar there was a weekly hut, where the people from hill come and exchange goods with the people of valley, which shows the economic relation between the people of different geographic area.

So basically, this study seeks to interrogate the tribe-caste interaction process by looking at Balipara as

transit point.

3. Review of Literature

The Ahom Buranji reveals that there was a contact between Ahom and hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. During the early period of Ahom rule, there was clashes between Ahom and the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The Akas of Arunachal Pradesh used to come down to plain in order to loot or robbery, whenever there was scarcity of food. The Ahom retaliated by the Ahom armies into the hills. Violent battles were also taking place the Ahom armies were able to catch a large number of hill people. Later on, in order to settle those clashes permanently, the Ahom had provided fertile land to the hill tribe in the foothills.

In the writings of British ethnographer Hutton and Mills, Alexander's Mackenzie's The North East Frontier of India, Edward Gait's A History of Assam was another important source to understand the tribe – caste interaction.

A significant aspect was implementation of duar system. The duar was an essential aspect of the hill tribe and caste groups of plains. Each duar comprised clusters of villages and was directly linked to Ahom capital. The hill tribes come down to plain through this duars for various purpose, such as trade, exchange of goods, to meet their friends, in search of foods etc. They had carried on hill products for trade and also to exchange goods such as, cotton, ginger, species like Jabrang, King Chilly etc. and they brought back with rice, salt, silk cloth etc. in this way, the hill tribe were interacted with the caste groups of plain during the Ahom era.

Sir Edward Gait's A History of Assam is a pioneer work in the history of medieval Assam and deals with a political and administrative aspects of the time. Edward Gait in this book has examined about the emergence of Ahom dynasty.

The comprehensive History of Assam, vol III edited by H.K Borpujari also highlights about the relationship between the people of plain and hill tribe.

According to D.N. Majumdar the tribes look upon Hindu ritualism as foreign and extra religious even though including in it and in the worship of God and goddess where as in the caste these are necessary part of the religion.

But at the same time, it is believed that the tribes are isolated and generally they lived outside from the mainstream society. They are also culturally isolated.

Some thinkers show the differences between caste and tribe. They said, in caste individuals generally pursue their own definite occupations because functions are divided under the caste system. In the tribe, individuals can indulge in whatever profession they prefer as there is no fix relation between them and occupation. In such way, there are some technical differences but however, both caste and tribe have a connection and both can not be segregate totally.

It is believed that tribes are autochthonous, culturally isolated, but the plain tribals like Munda and Oraon of Bihar, the Kachari of Assam and the Gond in certain parts of Madhya Pradesh are regarded as tribal although they live interspersed with Hindu population. Many of the tribal group now speak the regional language as well as the dominant language. For example, the Bhills of Rajasthan speaks hindi, Bhills of Gujrat speaks Hindi and Gujrati too. Similarly, the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh speak Hindi, Assamese and their own language also.

Fredrik Bailey in his book Tribe, Caste and Nation: A study of Political Activity and Political Change mention that a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is an egalitarian society. But in

contemporary India both caste and tribe are being merged. This concept was inspired by Robert Redfield's idea folk-urban continuum. Bailey thought that a concept like this also needed in India. Hence, came up the concept of tribe-caste continuum. According to this concept, there are no tribes or castes in the strict sense, but various communities varying in their proximity to either of these. In such a scenario it is hard to differentiate between the two.

Another important work in this regard has been done by Eschmann and Schnepel. They talk of it in relation to religious cults and practices. This continuum can also be understood as a result of interaction between Redfield's little and great traditions. Here, Jati or caste can be taken as a part of great tradition while tribe as a part of little traditions. The presence or references of tribes like Khasi and Bhills in the epic text book like Mahabharata, which shows the connection of tribes with larger Hindu society.

Martin Orans studied on Santhals and also said that the tribe attracted towards Hinduism and they involved in the process of hinduisation.

Now, coming to the North-eastern part, there was also a close connection between tribe and caste. According to Chandan kr. Sharma the colonial ruler made the distinction between tribe-caste. The colonial construction of tribe-caste relationship has come to permeate the socio-political discourse of postcolonial Indian state.

The tribes interacted with for upward social mobility within the framework of the traditional caste social hierarchy. The rise of neo-Vaishnavism attracted the tribes of Assam as this religion was egalitarian in nature. During that era, the tribes take religious shelter (sarana) under the religious guru and in this way, they came to contact with the caste groups. Slowly, the tribes fold with Hinduism and they were known as sarania, meanwhile they adopted the food habits, customs, language and also perform the rituals.

The historical literatures and other historical evidences reveal contact of Ahom king with the people of Arunachal. Through the foothills the Ahoms made their way to hill and maintained relations with them. Many unwarranted attacks took place between the Ahom and the hilly people, especially with the Dafala people (Nyshi). The Nyshi people used to swoop down constantly and loot villages of valley lying under Ahom Jurisdiction. The Ahom retaliated by directing military forces into the hills. Violent battles ensued, killing or capturing large number of hill people. More often, however the Ahom army would find the hostile village completely deserted, as its inhabitants, not keen on confronting the superior Ahom forces, had already taken refuge in the jungles or moved to higher altitudes. The Ahom army was usually able to recapture some of their stolen goods. As a permanent solution of this attacks the Ahom introduced posa system. It is a tax paying system, which was collected by the hill from the Ahom of this area. Also, a significant aspect of this was institutionalisation of duar. The duar system was an essential aspect of the relationship between hill and valley. Later on, this system was continued by the British too. Slowly, the attacks had been resolved and a new form of interaction takes place. The tribes of hill or Arunachal Pradesh came down to valley through these duars for various purpose, such as trade-commerce, marital relations etc.

4. Research Gap

Most of the hill societies in North-East have a problem with reliable historical evidence. For the reconstruction of history of these societies, the oral sources and use of ethnography etc. will be one of the effective methods. The tribe-caste interaction especially in border area is one of the less studies or unexplored subject matter. Though the border issues of hill and valley are discussed through meetings, negotiation, newspapers etc., but to understand it from a historical perspective requires more in-depth research. The tribe-caste interaction in border areas goes through several changes or it is affected by various social, economic and most importantly political factors. This study is going to explore the

pattern of interaction between tribe-caste and how does it is affected by the political, economic, cultural and other aspects.

5. Objectives

- 1.To investigate the historical background of Caste - Tribe interaction.
- 2.To understand the present scenario of Caste - Tribe interaction.

6. Methodology

To understand the caste - tribe interaction, one must rely on historical documents, oral narratives etc. The approach of this study is historical and exploratory. To collect primary data two villages of Chariduar, namely Akabasti and Maidangsiri has been chosen as the majority of the population are tribes. This villages are near by the foothills of Assam – Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, there is frequent interaction between the inhabitants of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh from past to present.

7. Discussion

Balipara is situated 23 kilometres away from Tezpur town of Sonitpur district. This place has significance as this is the connecting road between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and plays a role as transit point. This place waws under Ahom rule then goes under colonial rule. There is a close connection between the tribe and caste. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh especially Nyshi came down to valley to loot the villages which were under Ahom control. As a permanant solution to this, they had introduced the system of posa and duar, which was carried on by the British too.

In the pre-colonial era of Assam, Assam was ruled by the Ahom rulers. During their long-lasting regime of 600 years, they had adopted unique policy of conciliation towards the hill tribes. The kingdom of Assam was bounded by various tribal groups and each has distinctive manners, customs, languages. As the hill tribes failed to fulfil their every need, they used to make inroads into the fertile foothills' plains inside the Ahom territories and sometimes forced the plain people to give their produce and services to them. The Ahom generally avoid any kind of conflict or retaliatory expeditions against the tribes. But sometimes the Ahom also involve in a fight too. In order to stop the inroads of the hill tribes to the bordering territories the Ahom government either gave them fertile lands at the foot of their hills called as khats and sometimes also an amount of money which is called as posa. Also, they had used to give goods such as rice, vegetables, silk cloth etc. In return, they do not enter to the boundary area and provide annual tribute to the Ahom.

The tribes usually loved to live in isolation but there were several occasions of contact between the people of hill tribe and people of plain or caste. When there is scarcity of food in the hill, the tribe especially the Aka tribe used to come to plain for robbery or lut. During the period of robbery several women from plain got raped. In order to stop this robbery, the Ahom introduce various administrative techniques such as posa, khat etc. It is narrated by the respondents that the illegitimised child were taken care by the society and therefore there is similarities of physical appearance between hill tribe and people of plain particularly in this region.

The hill tribe also come to plain in order to exchange goods with the plainsmen. Thus, trade was another form of interaction between the hill tribe and caste group of plain. The hill tribe used to come to plain with their traditional food items, woollen cloth, such peculiar spices such as jabrang and king chilly and in return they wanted rice, silk cloth, salt as. There was a special demand for salt among the hill tribe as there was scarcity of salt. Alos, there were only routes to come down to the plain and therefore, they had to maintain a good relation with the Ahom. The tract between the foot of the hills and the valley is vary fertile, so they used to come there for agriculture and some of them started settling down in that area for agricultural purpose. The houses are temporary initially, but later on they had settled there permanently. As, the tribes do not produce all necessary things for life, there is necessity of adequate numbers of workers to work on that land. Such tracts of land are called as duars.

The inhabitants of this duar were often the victim of cruel raids done by the hill tribes. Hence, initially they had a relation of conflict too.

The Ahom king introduces the posa system in order to stop this kind of conflict between hill tribal group and caste group of plain. The posa is kind of payment or tax. The Ahom king had selected particular villages in the plains and instructed them to provide certain goods to the hill tribe. Here, the villages nearby Chariduar and Balipara were selected as those villages. Therefore, the interaction between the hill tribe and the villagers of these particular villages was more frequent. There was exchange of women between the villagers and the hill tribe. Hence, there was interaction between hill tribe and the caste groups of plain in the form of marital relation too. In past or initially the exchange of women or this kind of marital relation was not accepted by the caste-based society of plain, so those who involved in this kind of relationship they had to develop their own village. One of the village's named as Akar gaon later as Akabasti. There was popular phrase among the locals about this village, "lota kati pota gaon, akar gaon." Which means clearing the forest and then the dwellers had settled. This village is still existed (comes under Chariduar circle). Though it is a mixed village but the majority of the population is Aka and they maintain a good relation with the so called "locals".

The contemporary scenario of tribe caste interaction is not different from the past society. The hill tribe come to plain for educational, economic and because of many more purposes. This is one of the connecting roads between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh so this area always acts as a transit point between these two regions. In order to pursue higher studies, the hill tribe come down to Assam, they had exchange of marital relations too. apart from it, there is a weekly market near by the border of Arunachal Pradesh, where every Tuesday the hill tribe women come down with their local products and exchange and sell it with people of near by this area.

8. Conclusion

Many oral traditions of the Ahoms relate to contact with Dafalas which have been proved to be a reliable source in identifying ancient sites and remains. The tribe-caste interaction in India is an ongoing process. Though there is a demarcation in the meaning and definition of both the concept, both cannot be segregate totally, there is a continuum between tribe and caste. However, the study cannot be generalised or it cannot identify the actual position.

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