



LITERARY TRADITIONS OF ASSAM DURING THE PRE - COLONIAL PERIOD: A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT The literary practices prevailed in Assam during the pre-colonial period, like other parts of the world were mostly attached with religion. The knowledge which had its utility and relevance to the day to day life situation was emphasized. As the society was divided based on activities, the people got education suited to their occupation. The curriculum was different for different groups of learners; the methods of teaching, duration of the course, medium of instruction etc. were not uniform. The people respected education and the educated, in the court there was a learned gathering of the scholars, popular discourse on common issues, literary practices like – composing the poem, recitation, writing the treatise were highly encouraged. The record keeping in the form of *Buranjis* on different issues like-administration, social conditions and other forms of historical writings like- *Ballads, Charit Puthis, Vamshaballies* signify the lore of the Assamese in the past. The practices of some secular branches of knowledge like- *Ayurveda, Dhanusvidya, jyotishsasatra, tarkavidya* etc. also were learnt in those days. The period also witnessed extensive work of translation of *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Purana, Tantra* etc. from Sanskrit to the local Assamese language. The present article is an attempt to unearth the socio-cultural root of education in Assam and the social structure prevailed during the pre-colonial period. It is hoped that this article will have immense imprint in the understanding of our glorious past.

KEYWORDS : Colonial period, Culture, Education, Society, Ahoms, Religion, Economy etc.

The state of Assam in North East India, a rich hub of the varied socio-cultural stock significantly contributed in the field of literature and literary traditions of the country. The literary practices in any society grew up in the existing socio-cultural set up of the society. As like the other part of the world, the literary traditions of Assam tightly connected with its early socio-political system. In the history of mankind when societies were simple children got socialized by imitating the behavioural patterns of the parents and other elders around them and there was no need for any formal instruction and as such there were no formal agencies of education. But as the societies got complex the patterns of interaction among the individuals became complex as each one of them had to play multiple roles in the society. As the mankind progressed economically, the division of labour got increasingly more complex and the skill and interaction patterns got more defined, it became practically impossible to acquire the complex skills and behaviour patterns just by imitating the parents and other elders. Thus, arose the urgency of record keeping, giving formal instruction to the future generation as a means of preserving and protecting the age old tradition and culture of the society, and hence develops and promote the literary practices in the society.

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL STANDING OF ASSAM

The Ahoms ruled Assam uninterruptedly for about six hundred years. They established a strong and stable government, gave peace and prosperity and happiness to their subjects and successfully resisted many foreign invasions. They had a Monarchical form of Government where Kingship was hereditary, but gradually there were deviations from the system. Instead of the eldest son a king began to be succeeded by his brothers. The king was assisted by three ministers- they were *Burha Gohain, Bar Gohain and Barpatra Gohain*. They were strictly speaking advisors of the king, but when the kings were weak they virtually ruled. In times of chaos they would make and unmake kings. Of the three, the *Burha Gohain* usually acted as the Prime Minister. To each of the *Gohains* were allotted territories and over these territories they exercised independent rights of sovereignty.

With the spread of dominion, the Ahoms appointed officers of whom the most important were the *Bar Barua* and *Bar Phukan*. *Bar Barua* was the head of the Executive and Judiciary. The *Bar Phukan* was the Viceroy, who conducted Political relations with Bengal, Bhutan and the Chieftains of the Assam Passes. The three *Gohain*, the *Bar Barua* and *Bar Phukan* were known under the collective name of *Patra-Mantri*. Of the officials, who came next in rank to the *Patra-Mantris* were the *Phukans*. Then came the *Baruas* and the *Rajkows*. There were also a number of *Katakis, Kakatis* and *Dalais*. The *Katakis* carried messages to foreign states, the *Kakatis* were writers, and the *Dalais* expounded the *Jyotish Shastras*.

To all higher posts involving military services, only Ahoms were appointed. Non Ahom natives of higher classes were eligible only for those higher posts which did not involve military service. In the Ahom

kingdom the whole adult male population was liable to render service to the state as a labourers and soldiers. In this capacity they were known as *Paiks*. Four *Paiks* constituted a squad known as *got*. In time of war the *Paiks* fought as soldiers, in time of peace they were employed on public works.

In 1609 Mumai Tamuli Bar Barua under the direction of the king Pratap Singha, organized the *Paiks* in to groups referred to as, *Khels*. The *Khels* were of different grades – the smallest unit consisting of 20 *Paiks* was placed under an officer called a *Bora*; a hundred under a *Saikia*; a thousand under a *Hazari*; three thousand under a *Rajkhowa* or a **Barua**; and six thousand under a *Phukan*. The *Khels* were organized either on territorial or occupational basis.

The social system of the Ahoms was liberal. The Ahoms who came with Sukapha were very few in number. Obviously they were compelled to increase their number by marrying from non Ahom tribes such as the *Barahi, Chutias, Koch, Kachari, Moran* and *Miri*. The non-Ahoms, thus assimilated were given the privileges and status of the ruling race. Apart from the Ahoms there were people who had migrated the West and settled in Assam permanently. As they were within the fold of Brahminical religion, their society was guided by the caste system. In this caste ridden society the Brahmins occupied the highest position of honour; next to them the Kayasthas. The caste of inferior status was *Kumara, Tati, Kamar, Sonari, Kahar, Mali, Dobi, Haris* etc. It was noticed that all these castes were formed on occupational basis. The women in Assam enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts in other parts of India. The *pardah* system was not prevalent. There was a system of having some women attached temples as dancers (*Devadasis* in the Brahminical structure). Again the households of nobles and princes held women, in addition to their wives as *Ligiris*. Some gallant women like- Mula Gabharu did actual fighting in the battle field. Women in Assam were expert weavers. In villages also they helped their partners both in sowing and harvesting seasons (Acharyy, 2007)

During the rule of the Ahoms only the kings could build houses of brick and mortar. It is interesting to note that during this period different designs were specified for construction of houses by people of different status. Clothes both uncut and tailored were used. A Muslim observer writes - They only wrap a piece of fine linen round the head and a waist-band around the middle, and place a *chaddar* on the shoulders. Some of their rich men in the winter put on a half coat like a jacket (Gait, 1994). Women appear to have worn two garments – one upper and one lower. Thus, the dress of women of those days differs from the present day dress of Assamese women.

Slavery was prevalent in the Ahom period. The chief nobles cultivated their private estates with the aid of slaves. The slaves were at their master's disposal and they were not required to render service to the state. Sons of slaves became slaves; sometimes freemen became slaves

by mortgaging their persons for loans. Slaves were bought and sold in open market.

In the society the distinction between the nobles and the common people was marked. The nobles enjoyed certain privileges which were denied to ordinary people. The nobles could wear shoes, ride on horses and travel in palanquins. Persons of humble birth who wished to wear the *chaddar* were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder, and not over the right, as the upper class did. The *Doms* and *Haris* were distinguished by having a fish and a broom respectively tattooed on their foreheads.

So far as economy of the Ahom period is concerned it was self sufficient. The people mainly lived in the self-sufficient villages. The number of towns was very small. The chief pursuit of the people was agriculture. Everyman, except the Brahmins, knew how to plough land, land being very fertile and population being very small, crop production was enough to feed the people. Industry and crafts were highly developed in the Ahom period. In this connection special mention may be made of the manufacture of silk which was of three varieties – *Pat*, *Eadi*, and *Muga*. It appears that there was a tradition of wearing, gold ornament making and gold washing was an important industry. Many people were engaged in it. Assam also made great progress in the extraction of iron from ore.

During the Ahom rule, Assam had extensive trade relations with the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Tibet, and China. Through Bhutan there was a trade route to Kabul also but Assam's largest trade was with Bengal. In the 18th century Assam's trade with foreign countries declined as the Ahom rulers then adopted a policy of isolation.

Religious life of the Ahoms was dominated by Hinduism practiced mainly through three sects- *Saivism*, *Saktaism*, and *Vaisnavism*. *Saivism* was a popular religion during the rule of the Ahoms. Most of the prominent temples for the worship of Siva and his consort came to be constructed especially during the later part of the Ahom period. *Saktaism* was also a popular religion during the Ahom period but this sect did not enjoy royal patronage till the advent of the *Tung Khungia* Dynasty. All rulers since the time of Gadadhar Singha were devout *Saktas*, and following the rulers many nobles also embraced this sect. The Kamakhya temple had a special attraction for the masses. *Vaisnavism* or to be more exact neo-*vaisnavism* was preached in to Assam by Sankardev (1449—1569), when Naranarayan and Suhungmung were rulers respectively in the Koch and Ahom kingdoms. The religion of Sankardev spread very rapidly and after his death the *Vaisnavas* became divided into many sects, such as *Mahapurusia*, *Damodaria*, *Moamaria*, etc. Many *Satras* grew up in the country and the *Gosains* of the *Satras* enjoyed great respect and prestige. Besides the *Vaisnava*, *Sakta*, and *Saiva* deities, there were the Ahom gods and goddesses known as *Deodhais* and *Bailongs* worshipped by the Ahom priests.

Assam was also inhabited by the Muslims for centuries, even before the coming of the Ahoms. The Muslims to a larger extent adopted and acquired the native culture, language etc. and mingled with the multi-ethnic social fabric of the then Assam and made themselves rooted along with their own cultural affinity. Muslim settlers were engaged by the Ahom kings as security guards, workers in kings' fire arms manufacturing as well as minting workshops (Choudhuri:1982). Muslims were good at making copper utensils and this industry was monopolized by them in medieval Assam. They were also employed to carry out finer artistic works in temples. Tailoring was another occupation which Muslims were good at. Their Bengal connection helped them to carry out trade and commerce across Assam and Bengal. In fact, prior to the arrival of Marwari traders, during the colonial period, Muslims played a significant role in this sector. Some of the early Muslim settlers also worked as musicians and singers, shoe makers and *japi* manufacturers (Barua: 1989).

LITERARY TRADITIONS OF ASSAM

The pre-colonial Assam witnessed a tremendous progress in the sphere of literature and literary traditions, which was not a matter of sudden growth rather a continuous process having roots in the past. The Brahminical system of education together with the support and patronage of the Ahom kings, ministers and nobles gave a fillip to the classical studies. The wide variety and the richness of the classical texts prompted widespread translation work in to Assamese language of Sanskrit epics and *Puranas*. The *Puranas* translated were *Vishnu Purana*, *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, *Padma Purana*, *Markandeya*

Purana and *Dharma Purana*. In case of some *Puranas*, only selected portions were translated. As the translation was meant for common people, simple style was adopted and metaphysical discussion was avoided. Metaphysical portions were replaced by devotional songs. Under royal patronage, *Harivamsa* and some portions of the Mahabharata were also translated. One Raghunath Mahanta made an abridgement in the prose of Ramayana. He also composed two long narrative poems *Adbhuta Ramayana* and *Satrunjaya*, based on some floating Ramayana legends.

Another author of outstanding merit was Kaviraj Ram Narayan Chakraborty, the poet laureate under Rudra Singha and Siba Singha. He translated a portion of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and *Padma Purana*. Among his other works mention may be made of *Sankha-Sura-Vadha*, *Gita Gobinda* and *Sakuntala Kavya*. The Ahom court encouraged the production of literature on Erotic and Sexology. Some Sanskrit texts on *Kamasutra* were translated in to Assamese. They also encouraged the development of drama and theatre. *Bhavana*, a special type of dramatic performance evolved in Assam during the Ahom rule. These *Bhawanas* were encouraged by the Ahom kings and these were held on distinguished occasions in the royal palace. Subject matter of *Bhavana* was taken mainly from the epics and the *Puranas*. During this period Sanskrit texts dealing with science were translated in to Assamese. The chief among this class of literature is *Hastividya* by Sukumar Barkat. The *Ghora-Nidhana*, a treatise on horse was compiled in this period. A treatise on training and treatment of hawks known as *Semar Vyadhi* has also been discovered.

The most important literary development took place in the field of historical chronicles known in Assamese as *Buranjis*. It contains continuous chronicles of the Ahom rule. These were compiled by men who had a comprehensive knowledge of state affairs and who held high government offices. *Buranji's* constitute an unprecedented golden chapter in Assamese literature. *Buranji's* were also written about states outside Assam as *Padshah Buranji's*, a chronicles of the Sultans and Emperors of Delhi, Tripura *Buranji* and the *Jayantia Buranji*. Apart from the *Buranji's* there were other classes of historical writings composed both in verse and prose. These were generally known as *Charit-Puthi* and *Vamsavali*. The *Charit-Puthis* are writings mainly on the life of *Vaisnava* saints. In the *Charita-Puthis* we find not only the lives and activities of the great saints but also see the social surroundings in which they lived and worked.

The *Vamsavalis*, sketch the lives and careers of important nobles. These supplement the information found in the *Buranji's*. The most notable of the *Vamsavalis* are the Darrang *Vamsavalis* composed in verse during the later part of the 18th century. Next we have historical Ballads. The Ballads present popular versions of historical events. Among the Ballads mention may be made of *Barphukanar Git*, *Bakharabarar Git*, and *Padam Kuwarir Git*. It is thus evident that, the Ahom period was very rich in historical literature-comprising of the *Buranji's*, *Charita-Puthis*, *Vamsavalis* and *Historical Ballads*.

The Neo-*Vaisnavite* movement initiated by Srimanta Shankardeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam even as it developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of *Borgeets* (devotional hymns heralding a new classical school of music), *Ankiya Natsor Bhaonas* (a theatre form introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankardeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses). It gathers themes from the *Bhagavata-purana* and the *Ramayana* as well as the *Satriya* dance as modes of conveying the principles of *Ek-Sarana-Naam-Dharma*, cantering around single minded devotion to Lord Krishna or Vishnu based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the *Namghar*. A new school of painting was also developed by Srimanta Shankardeva, just like his dance and music, came to be known as the *Sankari* School of painting. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. For most of his works, Srimanta Sankardeva used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used *Brajavali*, an artificial mixture of *Braj* language and Assamese. His work, *Kirtana-ghosha* containing narrative verses in praise of Lord Krishna was meant for community singing. A copy of the *Kirtana-ghosha* is found in nearly every household in Assam. Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments for a dramatic effect in his songs and dramas. All these were innovated indigenously. Two of the most important of these instruments are the *Khol* (a form of drum with a unique acoustic property) and the *Bortal* (big cymbals).

Besides, the literary traditions includes the studies in politics, tactics of warfare, astronomy, mathematics, scriptures reading etc. there was in existence a practice of giving land grant by the kings to the reputed scholars / institutions/ centres for the purpose of propagation of learning in their respective branches. The ancient *gurukula* system was in vogue, the curriculum consisted of *sruti*, *smriti*, grammar, religious scriptures and literatures. The *pundits* earned high respect and reverence as well as the honour of sharing and showcasing their talent by opening *tols* under the royal patronage. This period attained high degree of excellence in the field of technical and vocational training, the art of archery, swords and spears, the manufacture of gun-powder and gun etc. However, like other parts of the country, the reach of the formal education was confined to the children of well-to-do families and selected few and peoples' education was mainly informal and traditional.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the socio-cultural system prevailed during the pre-colonial Assam upon which the system of education as well as the literary practices of the period was grown. The literary tradition discussed above has its inspiration and root on the existing socio-cultural footings of the then society. The literary practices practiced in Assam during the pre-colonial period, like other parts of the world were mostly attached with religion. The knowledge which had its utility and relevance to the practical day to day life situation was emphasized. As the society was divided based on activities, the people got education suited to their occupation. The curriculum was different for different groups of learners; the methods of teaching, duration of course, medium of instruction etc. were not uniform. The people respected education and educated, in the court there was a learned gathering of the scholars, popular discourse on the common issues, literary practices like- composing the poem, recitation, writing the treatise were highly encouraged. The record keeping in the form of *Buranjis* on different issues like- administration, social conditions and other forms of historical writings like-*Ballads*, *Charita Puthis*, *Vamshaballies* signify the lore of the Assamese in the past. the practices of some secular branches of knowledge like- *Ayurveda*, *Dhanushvidya*, *Jyotishsastra*, *Tarkavidya* etc. also were learnt in those days. The period also witnessed extensive work of translation of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Purana*, *Tantra* etc. from Sanskrit to the local Assamese language.

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