

# LABOUR PROCESS AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN PRE-COLONIAL ASSAM

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present work is to study the labour process and to analyze how it molded the social framework of pre-colonial Assam. Another objective of the study is to search for the organizational and specialization approach of labour process in social context in pre-colonial Assam. Hence, the significance of the study lies in the fact that it attempts to bring in light to the mainstream historical narrative of the labour process and its interrelation with social phenomena in pre-colonial Assam with the application of time tested historical methodology. The approach of the study is historical and exploratory in nature. The methodology used in this work is conventional and analytical. Best effort is made to make the method of treatment on the subject historical and analytical, taking into account of all the available sources, whether primary or secondary.

**Index Terms:** Pre-colonial Assam, labour process, social formation, Neo-Vaishnavism, *paik* system

## INTRODUCTION

As labour is the prime and basic condition of human existence, it is stressed that it was labour that helped man to rise from the animal world, to master the forces of nature and put them at the service of his interest. It was during this process of labour that man succeeded in developing his capabilities and accumulating knowledge, and this determined the subsequent progress of social development. The labour process played a determining role in invention, discovery and development of various tools and technologies, which finally became the crucial factors in the social formation processes. It is needless to say that there are much of existing works on social formation in pre-colonial Assam, but the approach of the proposed research work is a new kind, as it aims at study the labour process and how it influence and enhance the process of social formation in pre-colonial Assam. The term 'Pre-Colonial', here, denotes the period from the very beginning of the historical times to the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD.

## DISCUSSION

The social life of the Indians were fundamentally based on *Varna* and *Asrama dharma*, i.e. on the system of caste and division of works and the duties and rites to be performed in different stages of life. But in case of Assam, there were neither these four *Varnas* nor the *Varna* and *Asrama* were properly observed in other parts of India. In spite of the fact that the outlook in Assam as regards caste system and occupation

were more liberal than any other parts of India, its social life was based on *Varnasrama dharma* to a certain extent.<sup>1</sup> In case of Assam, instead of diverse racial and cultural elements, as a result of an attempt to form a homogeneous society and a synthetic culture, certain freedoms were given in respect of caste rules and social observations. In the copper plate grants, issued by the kings of the ancient Kamarupa, references to four *Asramas* and four *Varnas* are found. For example, in the copper-plate of Valavarma, Bhagadatta is mentioned as the controller of all the *Varnas* and *Asramas* and an unequal hero. In the Nidhanpur copper plate<sup>2</sup>, it is said that Bhaskara was created by Lord Brahma for the proper organization of the duties of the four castes and stages of life that had become disordered. In the Gauhati grant of Indrapala<sup>3</sup>, it is said that during the reign of Indrapala, the laws of the four classes and stages were observed in their proper order.<sup>4</sup>

Though there were caste distinctions among the Hindu population of the entire valley, the caste rigidity was not enforced in Assam.<sup>5</sup> Particularly in upper Assam where the substructure of the society was basically tribal, the caste rules which were quite flexible in the area. It became more rigid since the coming of the Bengali priests who strongly upheld these rules.<sup>6</sup> Some of the early inscriptions of Assam have praised the donor kings as sustainers of *Varnadharmas* and in this connection reference to Brahmins affiliated to different *Vedas*, *Vedasakhas*, *Gotras* and *Pravaras* are observed because they were the donees of the land-grants made by the kings. Some of the professional castes, such as *Kumbhakara*, *Karana*,<sup>7</sup> *Kayastha*,<sup>8</sup> *Kaivarta*, *Vaidya*, *Daivajnas* are mentioned in early Assamese inscriptions.<sup>9</sup>

It is stated that the origin of all caste and sub-castes directly or indirectly is connected with some professions like *Karana*, *Kayastha*, *Vaidya*, *Daivajna*, *Kumbhakara* which mentioned in early inscriptions were professional classes and later they formed into distinct castes.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, the nature of a particular profession determined the position in the social hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> So far as the principal four *Varnas* are concerned, no concrete evidence either inscriptional or literary, is available about the existence of the *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. There are only two castes the *Brahmana* and *Sudra*. The intermediary two castes are practically absent in Assam.<sup>12</sup> Even though *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* are noted occasionally in literary works, their actual existence as distinct communities is very much doubtful.<sup>13</sup> The evidence of these two castes is not very frequently noticed even in the sources.

Some corroborated evidences mention of the professional castes and sub-castes appears in the early inscriptions of Assam are *Karana* (keeper of records and accounts), *Tantuvaya* (weaver) and *Napit* (barber), *Karmakaras* (ironsmith), *Kumbhakararas* (potter) and *Kamsyakaras* (bell-metal worker) are mostly sub-groups of the *Kalita* caste which occupies almost equal position with that of the *Kayasthas*.<sup>14</sup> So far as the professional castes are concerned, some of them are mentioned in medieval Assamese literature and inscriptions. Occasional mention of the profession of washing and dyeing cloths (*Rajaka*), *Suvarnakara* (goldsmith), *Abhira* (*Gowal*), *Tailakaraka* (*тели, телия*), *Taksaka* (*Silakutiya*, stone cutter) is noticed in some early literature and each of them were considered a group or sub-group of a broad based caste like *Kalita* or

*Keot*.<sup>15</sup> The *Kaivartas* formed a caste by themselves and were relegated to one of the lowest social orders of the society during the period.

The society under the Ahoms was broadly divided into the aristocracy and the peasantry. The former comprised of the king, the nobility and the religious heads. The ruling Ahom aristocracy considered of the progenies of the seven chief Ahom *phaidis* or clans called *Satghariya* Ahoms factually meaning 'the Ahoms of the seven houses', whose descendants accompanied Sukapha from Maulung and assisted him in laying the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in Assam.<sup>16</sup> In between the aristocracy and the *paiks* was a class of gentry called *chamua*, who depending on their skill as well as caste and tribal identities enjoyed junior offices in the military and administrative establishment. A few among them, usually of the high-caste group enjoyed offices of civil *Phukans* and *Rajkhowas*. They constituted the middle class in the society, but they were not form as an active social group.<sup>17</sup>

The common people, peasants and artisans were called *paiks* and formed the laboring class, who also constituted the militia of the kingdom. Amalendu Guha<sup>18</sup> states that the *paik* system succeeded in creating a highly centralized militia. The aspect of *paik* system was a structured labour utilization mechanism that was significant in consolidation and proliferation of the Ahom rule in Assam. The requirement of tremendous labour inputs to establish their settlements in the valley areas of Upper Assam as it involved draining of swamplands and water control for rice cultivation, which included effective flood protection.<sup>19</sup> It is through the *paik* system that the huge requirements of labour process and manpower of the Ahom state could be proficiently met.

One of the most important developments in the later Ahom period was spread of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. The movement was not only evident in the socio-economic sphere of the times but was also significantly responsible for ordering the flow of events during the period. Maheswar Neog,<sup>20</sup> who during his review of the literature of the *Vaishnava* saints and their biographies found many references that are indicative of the socio-economic conditions of the time. For instance, the biographies of the saints found mention of numerous professional castes of Assam, such as, *Baniyas* or goldsmiths, *Sutars* or carpenters, *Carmakaras*, *Candalas*, *Kamars*, *Kumbhakarars*, *Natas* and others.<sup>21</sup> There are also mention of professional oil pressers, snake charmers (*Yogis*), goldsmith (*Baniya*), silk worm rearers (*Jogi* and *Katanis*), weavers (*Tantis*), potters (*Kumars*), *Camars*, *Hiras* and *Kamars*, *Candalas* or *Carols*, *Kaivartas*, *Dhobas*, *Napits* and *Salais*.<sup>22</sup> Some of the non-caste specific professionals mentioned are the ploughmen, boatmen, fuel sellers, alkali sellers and traders in various commodities and others. Some Muslims were mentioned as working as tailors.<sup>23</sup> It reflects the proliferation of professional groups, and significantly, many of these were caste specific. Hiren Gohain has also made an analysis of socio-economic background of the *Vaishnavite* movement.<sup>24</sup> The *satra* institution occupied an important space in the socio-economic scenario of the later part of Pre-Colonial Assam. The growth of the *satras* appeared as a serious leakage on the *paik* system and

also responsible for considerably degenerate the state wealth by reducing its revenue base.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the *satra* institution provided a space for the accommodation of newly emerging social classes and the emergent socio-economic order.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It was the inability of the ruling power to suitably regulate the organizational pattern of labour process according to the needs of the social changes that proved to be its undoing. For instance, the newly emerging professional classes and occupational groups could not be readily accommodated into the *paik* system as they were not efficiently cope with the Ahom labour utilization system. On the other hand, the *satras* provided adequate space for accommodation of the new social order and relations that were emerging. These so weakened the state, that it left the field open for foreign invasion in the subsequent period and finally resulting to the British colonial expansion in Assam.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES :

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