

A Brief Study Of An Existing Traditional Occupation Among The Scheduled Castes People Of Assam Including Handicraft

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Abstract

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) were officially designated socio-economic groups in India. The Constitution of India recognizes sixteen sub-castes in the group of Scheduled Castes community of Assam. Each of the Sub-Caste falling under Scheduled Castes community of Assam practices its own occupation, it is being distinct in type, for livelihood. From the very trade and occupation, one can easily identify one sub-caste from the other. In modern literature, the Scheduled Castes are sometimes referred to as Dalit (Broken / Dispersed) having been popularized by B.R Ambedkar, a Dalit himself, an economist, reformer, Dalit leader during the independence struggle and also the chairmen of the Constituent Assembly of India. Language is the distinguishing character of Assamese Scheduled Castes and non- Assamese Castes. The present study is an attempt to examine the identification of existing traditional occupation of Scheduled Castes (SC) people.

Keywords: Assam, Existing, Identification, Scheduled Castes people, Traditional Occupation

I. INTRODUCTION

Castes in Assam had begun to be recognized in official records since 1872. Even prior to that, we find names of some castes in histories, chronicles and descriptive accounts of castes in Hindu Society such as Assam Buranji (Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah), Gait's History of Assam, Descriptive Accounts of Assam by Rabinson, Mill's District Gazetteer of Kamrup and the like. India gained Independence in 1947 and an Indian Constitution was adopted which greatly improved the political and social positions particularly of those castes who were designated as 'Scheduled Castes' (S.C) taking them out from the general rein of the communities along with the Tribals who were also scheduled as Scheduled Tribes (S.T). Other Backward Classes (O.B.C) came late. In Assam 16 Scheduled Castes were created. Among them all are indigenous to Assam except Dhobi, Mehtar, Muchi, Lalbegi, Bansphor and Mahara. If we noticed the appearance of Scheduled Castes population in Assam, then we can see the caste of Jalo-Malo and the Namosudras have registered sharp rise in 1961 and 1971 (as census report) which may be attributed to their large scale migration following partition of the country and Indo-Pak conflicts. The Banias have, however, registered a slight fall presumably because, many of them have returned themselves as 'Baishya' an alternative Caste name for them though 'Baishya' generally denotes another caste name. While the Muchis have shown a decline, the Mehtars have increased due to inter-state migration. Other increases are due to natural growth.

The social status of Namosudras, Kaibartas and Patnis- these three castes is also higher than other in the list with the possible exception of Brittil Banias. In the Assam Valley, the indigenous Dhobis and Malis also enjoy a better social status.

The Scheduled Caste population is not found in large compact blocks like the Scheduled Tribes but are interspersed in small population, clusters of villages in some areas. Thus uneven distribution of population renders it difficult to taken up any worthwhile area development schemes or projects, not to speak of any integrated Sub-Plan. This has obviously been alluding the visible economic impact on the Scheduled Castes people in any piece-meal projects. They have no alternative except to hurt their lots with the general population unlike the Tribal. So, it has been devised to provide for separate quantification of funds in the general plans.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have tried to devise an occupational scale to study the occupational mobility among the societies. The meanings offered by English dictionaries for the word occupation are many, the first meaning refer to a person's job or profession, Chamber's Dictionary (1947). North and Halt (1961) have formulated some basic aspects like income, education, training or the combination of all these three for studying the occupational mobility of a community. They have found that the rating of an occupation depends on public opinion. It is difficult to judge the public opinion of an occupation in time and space. Moreover, the status of occupation may also change from time to time. Therefore, the author's opinion about the occupation mobility does not hold well in our present study. Huges (1958) calls it group mobility. He has shown how the transfer of dirty work to lesser dirty occupation has caused an upward mobility of an occupation. Miller and Form (1964) stated that the changeover of an occupational group to another depends on the market demand. Davidson and Anderson (1937) have studied occupational mobility of an American Community. They found that in the United States, there was less occupational mobility among the communities. Saraswati and Behura (1966) have studied some of the potter castes in India. They found the social status of the potters is not uniform all over India. They further referred that the diversity in the social hierarchy occurs not only in different linguistic areas but difference occurs in the same linguistic zone. Majumdar and Datta Ray (1984) have studied the occupational mobility among the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias of Meghalaya. All these three tribal groups are matrilineal and trace their descent through the female line. But in the occupational structure, females occupy a less important position. Further, the authors have pinpointed that in all the three major towns (Shillong, Jowai and Tura) of Meghalaya there is a scramble of the moderately educated people for the office jobs. While studying the occupational change among the scheduled castes of Assam, Sharma Thakur (1985) opines that the Kaibartas, major Scheduled Caste of Assam, are basically fisherman but at present, they have switched over to agriculture. Mrinmoyee Bhattacharyya (2014) reflects socio-economic condition of Hira Community in his research thesis titled "Socio-Economic condition of Hira Community-a case study of Kamrup district of Assam". Chandana Sarma did research work on "Aspects of socio-economic life of the Kaibartas in three villages of lower Assam". However, the above works help us to understand the socio-economic problems of different communities.

III. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

3.0 IDENTIFICATION OF OCCUPATION

Each of the sub-castes falling under Scheduled Castes community of Assam practices its own occupation; it is being distinct in type, for livelihood. From the very trade and occupation one can easily identify one sub-caste from the other. For example, the 'Mudoi' an important group of the Scheduled Castes people, are traders by profession, the 'Hiras' are the potters, the 'Banias', the traditional goldsmith, the 'Kaibartas' the fisherman, as a whole. The other minor sub-castes also practice one or another profession.

The name of the sub castes along with their occupation is highlighted in the following lines.

A glimpse of the sub-caste of S.C people along with their traditional occupation.

TABLE- 1

Sub-caste	Traditional Occupation
i) Kaibarta	Fishing and Cultivation
ii) Namasudra	Boating and Cultivation
iii) Bania	Making gold Ornaments and Jewellery
iv) Hira	Pottery Making
v) Patni	Cultivation, Fishing (Secondary occupation)
vi) Sutradhar	Carpentry
vii) Malo	Boating and Fishing
viii) Dhobi	Washermen by Profession
ix) Mahara	'Palki' (Palanquin) bearing
x) Dholi	Drummers
xi) Muchi	Cobbling
xii) Bhuimali/ Mali	Flower gardening and cultivation
xiii) JalKeot/ JallaKeot	Selling of fish
xiv) Bhangi	Scavengers
xv) Bansphor	

Source: Author's own collection

All India Policy of Planning for Development of the country as a whole keeping an eye on the wellbeing of each and every community fitting in the professions traditionally followed by their fore-fathers. In this respect, it is seen that 16 Scheduled Caste of Assam categorized by the constitution of India as early as in 1950 only 10 Castes practice caste avocations of the above mentioned castes again, all of them do not belong to Assam such as Bansphor, Jalo-Malo, Lalbegi, Mahar, Mehtor or Bhangi, Muchi or Richi. Rest of the castes such as Brittial-Bania, Kaibarta, Hira, Namasudra, Patni, Sutradhar, Mali / Bhuimali, Dhoba, Jalkeot mostly live permanently in Assam following their traditional occupations.

3.01 TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS OF SCHEDULED CASTES PEOPLE

India is an agricultural country and Assam is no exception, though small in size and not rich in economy. Agriculture is the first and foremost occupation of the Scheduled Castes. But it appears that not more than 10 of the 16 SC are engaged in agriculture. They are Brittial- Bania, Dhopi or Dhoba, Dhuli or Dugla, Hira, Jalkeot, Kaibarta or Jalia, Namasudra, Patni and Sutradhar. They engage themselves in cultivation during the cultivation season keeping other months in other business.

Non-agriculturists are not indigenous to Assam and as such have no scope of acquiring any land for agriculture, even if they wish to convert to agriculture. They are Bansphor, Lalbegi, Mahara, Mehtor or Bhangi. They are from Bihar, Madras, Andhra or Orissa during the later parts of the 19th century and are non-agriculturists. They are generally under the employ of Municipal Bodies and small towns. Muchis or Rishis have however taken to their traditional occupation of leather made things such as shoes and shoe repairing. They generally move from place to place and do their daily business fixing themselves at certain convenient place and return to their residence in the evening. The Mehtores (Sweeper) are by profession cleaners. The Dhobis (Washer men) mainly earn their income by washing cloth of others. The Malis (Gardeners) were the source of supply of flower garlands in the temple or other occasions. The Banias are by profession goldsmith and traders. But they are mostly so known because of their involvement in ornamental works of gold and silver. It is a respectable occupation adopted by the Caste Hindus alike. It is on record that the profession was encouraged even by the Ahom Kings and the Brittial-Bania, Duti Ram Hazarika, a reputed goldsmith and a Bania Historian, author of 'Padya-Buranji' in 1875 was allowed access to the inner apartment of the Ahom Kings and the Queens.

The Hiras are traditionally an occupational caste who makes pottery by means of hand. They engage in the manufacture of earthen utensils required for day to day use by the people of Assam. Fishery is a traditional occupation of the Kaibartas and Namasudra. They are living mainly in the river banks and beels. The Kaibartas on account of enjoying exclusive unchallenged occupational right over fishing in the society ought to have come out as a socio-culturally prominent and economically sound and affluent community.

The Hira community which comprises a certain number of Scheduled Castes people mainly engaged themselves in the manufacture of earthen utensils required for day-to-day use by the people of Assam, in earlier times. They usually manufacture the potteries as per the demand.

The common products are – jhonga (pitcher), kalah, tekeli, ghata (round bottomed water vessels of different sizes), charu (wide mouth bowl) mota (small round and wide vessel used for eating food), gilasa (drinking water vessels) and different kinds of lid and stands. In earlier times they were the source of earthen utensils to the rural people, when metallic utensils were meant for richer section of people. But with the use of different metals and steel as a source of supply of utensils has fallen considerably. It is to be noted that unlike the Kaibartas the Hiras have not taken up agriculture as a prime mode of occupation. However, along with the pottery making they have also taken up jobs in private or non-private sectors. In 21st Century occupational mobility has been observed among the Scheduled Caste. Now a days they are in various sector like- Teacher, Doctor, Engineer, Lawyer, Businessman, actor etc.

IV. DISTINGUISHING CHARACTER OF ASSAMESE SCHEDULED CASTES AND

NON-ASSAMESE SCHEDULED CASTES:

One distinguishing character of Assamese Scheduled Castes and non-Assamese Scheduled Castes is the language. The mother tongue of the Assamese Scheduled castes is Assamese. In all walks of life they carry Assamese language and Assamese culture. But non-Assamese Scheduled castes have their own mother tongue and also their own culture of their state of original, which

is quite different from Assamese culture. The Dhubis, the Harijans, the Barbers speak Hindi (Bihari). The Namasudras speak Bengali but somewhere we find Namasudras using Assamese language too. Other distinguishing character between Assamese Scheduled Castes and non-Assamese Scheduled castes is that just like all other Assamese women, the Assamese SC women are expert weavers. But the non-Assamese Scheduled Castes women are quite ignorant regarding weaving.

V. PLACE OF HANDICRAFT AMONG THE SCHEDULED CASTES:

Just like all other Assamese people, Assamese Scheduled Castes people are very expert in cane and bamboo works and women are very expert in weaving. Here it is to be mentioned that these two trades are not peculiar to Scheduled Castes community alone. Still it is to be mentioned that this is the source of income to them also. Over and above the domestic requirement, the excess production are sold out in the market, and these give them an additional income for livelihood. Those who have neither land nor any other source of income, the Scheduled Castes women support their family by weaving. It is to be noted, whether rich or poor, whether educated or uneducated, whether in town or city or in village, an Assamese women knows weaving.



Weaving Gamusha



Weaving Sador



Weaving Mekhela

VI. THE PLACE OF SCHEDULED CASTES PEOPLE IN SERVICE AND

INDUSTRY:

Before independence, the opportunities for education were very few and schools and colleges being situated in big towns, being economically backward, the SC people could not avail the opportunities of higher education. Also these people were not allowed to take education freely as they now can avail. The life of Dr. Ambedkar will speak for itself how these people were deprived of education.

But after independence, there was change in the outlook and SC people can now avail education freely. As a result the number of educated SC people have been increasing day by day and are getting opportunities for employment in Govt., Semi-Govt., and individual organization. It is to be praised that Govt. policy towards the SC people, safe-guarding them for employment opportunities has given them place in Govt. service. Reservation system has been given to Scheduled Caste people. It is now seen that SC people both men and women have found a place in government and private services and they have taken it as a source of livelihood.

Also the industrious Scheduled Castes people have ventured in the field of industry, weather cottage and small scale industries or in some medium scale industries. But their number is very small. Some are engaging themselves in business, big or small according to their financial capacities.

VII. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i) To study the economic condition of the SC people which include their identification and existing of occupation.
- ii) To study the relation between the traditional occupation and the social status of SC people.
- iii) Distinguishing character between Assamese and non-Assamese Scheduled Caste people.
- iv) To study the place of SC people in various sector.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

This study relies on data collection from primary and secondary sources and bringing out a theoretical analysis of collected resources. Data for the present study have been collected through intensive fieldwork. During fieldwork, data have been collected by employing various methods and techniques. In the beginning some places have been visited in order to gather information about the dwelling places of Scheduled Caste people. On the basis of their information, some village of Assam have been visited frequently. Thereafter some reports have been made with the help of library books, village leaders and some influential persons in order to interact with the local people of Scheduled Caste community.

IX. RESULT OF THE STUDY

The result of the study is to identify the existing occupations of the Scheduled Castes people. They have been carrying their occupation and maintaining their livelihood since the past. The back-bone of Assam economy is agriculture from time immemorial and as such, Scheduled Castes people being a part and parcel of the greater Assamese community have adopted agriculture as a main source of income. Rearing of birds and animals are also practiced. Though agriculture has been taken as source occupation of income by all the Scheduled Castes people, there are certain occupation or trade, which are performed by a distinct sub-caste of the Scheduled Castes. The sub-castes can easily be identified from the particular profession or trade they follow. Besides the traditional profession in the present time number of educated Scheduled Caste people have been increasing day by day and are getting opportunities for employment in government, semi-government and private organization.

X. CONCLUSION

Socio-economic backwardness is an important feature of entire Scheduled Caste community of Assam as they still follow the age old traditional profession to meet their daily needs. But now they are engaged in other sectors also by doing hard work and achieving proper education. Government also should take some kind of action for improving their occupation. Incentives to pisciculture on scientific and organized way be given to the fishermen class. For this the practice of leasing beels for one or two years be replaced by leasing beels for long period say for fifty years. This will encourage fishermen to take improvement works of the beel like construction of boundary, adoption of scientific methods of pisciculture, investment of capital whereby the production from the beels will increase and the economic condition will be better. The fish trade of the fishermen class is going out of their hands due to the influx of some non-scheduled caste people. These people have already captured the market of fish trading and fish rearing. Unless the fishermen class themselves come forward and enter into the trade whole-heartedly, one day, they will lose the trade totally, bringing untold sufferings to the community as a whole. There are constitutional safeguards, government organizations and institutions, social and voluntary organizations, there are subsidies and grants for both technical and general education, which are meant for up gradation of this community as a whole.



Fishing by Ashara Jal



Boating & Fishing



Fishing by Dheki Jal



Making Gold Ornament & Jewelry



Handcrafters



Cultivation

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