



Korokatali: A Case Study of the Social Change of Assamese Brahmins

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Abstract: Brahmins are one of the minority castes of India, with a very less population. Assam is also not an exception to this rule. In Assam, just like mainland India, OBCs form the majority, while the Brahmin as a caste are the minority community. It is observed that the minority communities try their best to keep their traditions alive, as it is a matter of identity crisis for them. This paper is based on the 80 Brahmin families living in the village of Korokatali, of Baligaon in Jorhat district of Assam, as part of anthropological fieldwork in the area. In the fieldwork, it was observed that although being the minority caste in Hinduism, they have maintained their cultural identity well as they are the priest caste. As a result, they are continuing their culture, and at the same time, social changes and the problems have also been observed in the fieldwork well.

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Introduction

Assamese Brahmins are one of the oldest settlers of Assam, within the Hindu castes. It is found from the historical evidence that they settled in Assam during the time of Varman dynasty (350-650AD) (Shin, 2011). There they promoted learning, Vedic religion and astrology, as well as imparting general Vedic knowledge to the public (Shin, 2011). The Brahmins of Assam are the descendants of early migrants from the Gangetic valley and a succession of influences, ideas and cultures entered Assam with them. The Brahmins and Kayasthas came to Assam from Videha (Mithila) and Kannauj (Witzel, 1993).

Brahmins are considered to be one of the oldest Hindu settlers in the region and held the highest positions in society. Assamese Brahmins are the community in that state who are considered to have Caucasoid origins (Shin, 2021).

The earliest historical evidence of settlement of Brahmins in Assam comes from epigraphic sources of the Varman dynasty (350–650). In the late medieval period beginning with the early 16th century, a number of Brahmins from Mithila, Benaras, Kanauj, Bengal and Puri, were settled in western Assam by the Koch kings for performing Brahminical rites (Shin, 2011). During the reign of Nara Narayan (1554-1587) of the Koch dynasty, two Brahmins named Siddhantavagisa and Vidyavagisa were brought from Gauda and Siddhantavagisa was responsible for the spread of Hinduism in the Koch Kingdom. Even during the reign of Koch king Prannarayana (1633-1655), Brahmins were brought from Mithilia to serve in the Koch kingdom and this process was later continued by the Ahom state especially under the Tungkhungia Ahom kings with Siva Singha donating 19 out of the 48 landgrants by the Ahom kings to Brahmins. The migration of Brahmins into Assam took place from Central Himalayas as well. Most of these migration took place due to the foreign invasions in North India and on the invitation by the local rulers (Das, 2014).

Later on, however, when it comes to the Brahmins of Jorhat and entire Upper Assam, they are considered to be of recent times migrants from North India, i.e. Kanauj, who are believed to be brought to the place by Ahom King Rudra Singha in the 16th century AD. As this work is based on current trend of social change in Anthropology, so the work has been done on the basis of the data collection from the following points:

1. Socio- economic status and current condition
2. Reservation policy of the Government and the Brahmins
3. The concept of forward caste
4. Various programs by the Government: Are Brahmins become beneficiaries too?

The fieldwork was conducted by myself with 5 MA students from Rajiv Gandhi University, Mukesh Natung, Pinky Kaji, Songio Tayo, Bengia Ono and Abo Nabum. As all of them belong to Arunachal tribal communities, and myself belonging to the Brahmin community, so the data collection was found to be very interesting from both etic and emic perspectives. Before going to discuss about the work, the concepts, aims and objectives and methodology are discussed first.

Concept

As opposed to the stereotype that Brahmins constitute the highest pyramid of the caste hierarchy has been proved to be wrong at present. Many sects of Hinduism don't follow Brahminism, nor invite any Brahmin priest perform

any religious rituals. Such sects are found almost all over India, and these sects include Srimanta Sankardev Sangha of Assam, and various other socio-religious movements of the Dalits in entire India. So, on such bases, the fieldwork was conducted to know the real problems and to find out the actual solutions related to it, in relation to the social changes.

Aims and Objectives

Following are the aims and objectives of this paper:

1. To find out the social change of the Assamese Brahmins at present with special reference to Korokatali, Jorhat
2. To find out the problems faced by the Brahmins at present due to various Government policies
3. Changes in relation to Sanskrit education at present.

Discussion

Originally, the fieldwork started in Baligaon on 28th February 2023 and ended on 14th March, 2023. While conducting the census data collection on the Assamese people by the students of Rajiv Gandhi University, in terms of the clan system, it was found that non Brahmin people are mostly belonging to the Kashyap clan, and the Brahmins have several clans. As a result, the interest was changed to the village Korokatali, where 80 Assamese Brahmin families reside. Now, the entire field data based on the fieldwork has been described below:

Socio- economic status and current condition

Historically and traditionally, the economic condition of the Brahmins ranges from middle class to poor, not rich. However, there is a stereotype that Brahmins are affluent. But it was observed in the fieldwork that this is only a stereotype. Even today, in the list of Billionaires of the world and India, no single Brahmin billionaire exist. In the ancient Sanskrit stories also, reference of poor Brahmins and the stories of poor Brahmins are very much. During the time of the fieldwork, it was observed that majority of the old men had Government jobs, but now, their children are mostly working in private sector. Salary in private companies is very low compared to the Government sector. This has affected the economic condition and frustration among them.

Reservation policy of the Government and the Brahmins

The most discussed issue about the problem faced by the Assamese Brahmins, while collecting data was the policy of caste and gender based reservation. In

fact, Brahmins have been affected very much due to this reservation policy. Moreover, Assam is one of the first states, which implemented gender based reservation for women in 2006. This reservation was included as 30% for women in Government jobs, in business license and also in contract, 10%. As a result, as Government implemented reservation was already 53% earlier (including 3% reservation for handicapped), the inclusion of 30% women reservation increased the risk of getting jobs for Brahmin males a lot. At present, in Assam, caste and gender based reservation is 83 to 86%, and only 14% remaining vacant. However, there was a major initiative by the Government to implement EWS (Economically Weaker Section), but this is also facing problem in the Supreme Court of India, and at present.

The concept of forward caste

At present, Brahmins are considered as Forward Caste, as opposed to Backward Caste. Because of this, they are only allowed to compete in the unreserved category of Government jobs and also in the admission processes of schools and colleges. **Forward caste** (or **General caste**) is a term used in India to denote castes which are not listed in SC, ST or OBC reservation lists. They are on average considered ahead of other castes economically and educationally. They account for about 30.8% of the population based on Schedule 10 of available data from the National Sample Survey Organisation 55th (1999–2000) and National Sample Survey Organisation 61st Rounds (2004–05) Round Survey.

Those groups that qualify for reservation benefits are listed as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Other backward class and Economically Weaker Section. They can avail defined quotas amongst other benefits for education, special government schemes, government employment and political representation. The lists of Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward class are compiled irrespective of religion. The lists are subject to change from time to time, dependent upon educational and economic factors due to which a number of so called forward castes have been classified as Other Backward Class.

Various programs by the Government: Are Brahmins become beneficiaries too?

Government takes various special initiatives for the reserved castes, women and minorities, but no such special scheme has been seen for the Brahmins and other unreserved category castes like Kayastha/ Rajputs. In some cases,

like the distribution of free rice, Brahmins are getting benefitted, if they are below poverty line. However, it has been observed that in many cases, names of Brahmins are sometimes removed from the list in cases of widow pension or senior citizen pension which was observed by the author in various villages so far.

Analysis

While discussing the social change of the Brahmins, at first, my team thought that the Brahmin people are very rigid and conservative in nature, and they do not mix up with other castes and tribes. But after meeting the people, my team concluded that the rigidity of the Brahmin people and their concept untouchability is actually a myth, formulated by hate speech groups. The team was welcome very well by them in their homes, and eventually, tea, snacks were also provided together. While discussing the issues about their cultural continuity, though they have continued their socio cultural traditions through changes, yet large numbers of Brahmin youths have no formal training of education, where I am also not an exception. Due to lack of scope, today, parents don't encourage children to choose the subject Sanskrit, and as a result, the Sanskrit Tol, which was earlier run by the Brahmins are now being run by other castes, based on Graduation in Sanskrit. While discussing this matter with them, they could not provide any solution to it. However, after going through the discussions based on social changes, it was found that:

1. The community is educated, in every household, minimum education qualification was found to be graduation,
2. Despite education, it was observed that priestly works are usually not done by the educated people, actually it requires a different level of training either in Veda Vidyalaya or in Satras like Kuruwabahi or MukolimuriaTol.
3. Other than Sanskrit, they have studied in other streams more now, from management to science and arts as well.
4. The only problem they face after education is the Government policy of reservation, due to which, they are compelled to work in private sector in low salary, compared to the Government sector.

Suggestions

As the community is educated, so the following measures can be taken by them at present, at the time of caste based reservation, where it hampers the Brahmins to get jobs:

1. Temples are mostly run by the Brahmins. Along with religious practices and traditional practices, they can form a trust board of the temples, and these temples can start private schools and colleges. This will help them in earning, educated Brahmins will also get jobs. It will be similar to the Christian Missionaries, as Churches always get the funds from their schools and colleges, as along with Church, they always establish a school or college along with it.
2. The Sanskrit teaching schools, traditionally termed as Tol, may be converted to private schools, where, all modern subjects will be taught along with Sanskrit as a subject.

Conclusion

The fieldwork shows that the Assamese Brahmin community, despite being a caste based minority group in Assam has maintained their socio religious traditions alive, especially by wearing sacred thread, marrying within their own caste, and finally, continuing education as a whole. This makes the community a part of forward caste, but it is creating another problem faced by caste based reservation as well. As a result of this, if the above mentioned suggestions can be followed by them, it will be a good milestone for the community to establish a link between their temples and education, just like the minority Christians, who are just 3% of the Indian population are dominating the Indian education scenario for a long time. Such good steps may be adopted by the Assamese Brahmins too.

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Photographs

Some photographs on the basis of the fieldwork is provided below, depicting the cultural continuity and change among the Assamese Brahmins at present.



Figure 1: With the Goswami family of MukolimuriaTol. The couple is a combined faith of Shakta and Vaishnavism. The husband belongs to the Shakta sect, the worshipper of Goddess Kali, while the wife is from AdharSatra, Golaghat, of Vaishnavite sect



Figure 2: A Vaishnavite Brahmin doing the Geeta Path on the day of Holi



Figure 3: Mesh dah, equivalent to the concept of scapegoat



Figure 4: the statue of Krishna worshipped by Assamese Brahmins



Figure 5: Holi celebrated by Assamese Brahmins at Burhi Goswani Devalaya of Jorhat, Assam



Figure 6: Holi celebration by Assamese Brahmins



Figure 7: A worship house in a Brahmin household



Figure 8: Collecting data from the Brahmin family



Figure 9: the Shiva idol at Gorokhiadol



Figure 10: Doba, a traditional percussion instrument at GorokhiaDol



Figure 11: Lion statue is very common in Hindu temples



Figure 12: The team working among Assamese Brahmins





Figure 13: Our team observing Bhumi Pujan at Korokatali (L-R: Pinky Kaji, SongioTayo, local priest, MukeshNatung, Abo Nabum and Bengia Pinky Ono)



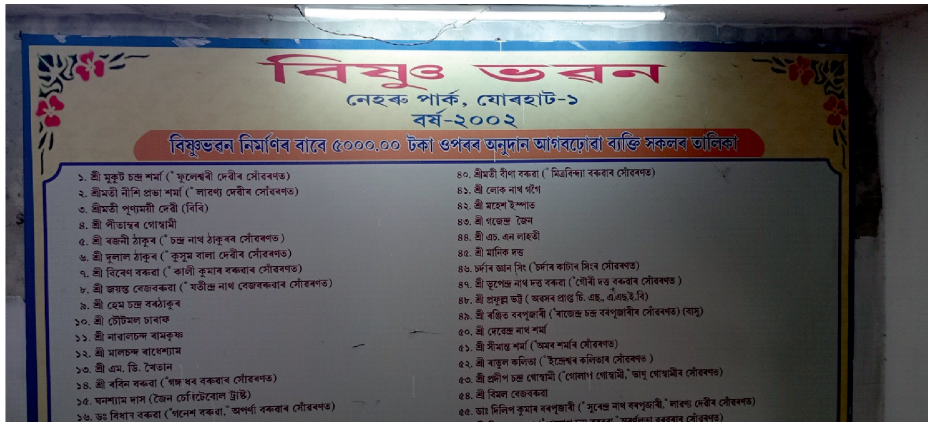


Figure 14: Upanayana ceremony at Yagya Mandir, Jorhat



Figure 15: Brahman barana, before beginning the ritual. Below, the food that will be provided to the boys are shown



Figure 16: Upanayana ceremony (above) and head shaving (surakoron) (below) going on simultaneously



Figure 17: The Brahmachari is provided money (above) and the Upanayana ceremony is going on (below)



Figure 18: The end of Upanayana ceremony



Figure 19: The author with ManasPratimGoswami, a key informant at BorkoliaSatra, Jorhat



Figure 20: Although Brahmins are not traditional businessmen, this pharmacy is run by an Assamese Brahmin with the surname Goswami