

SOCIETY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL AND ASSAMSk Manirul¹Dr Dikshita Ajwani²Ph.D Research Scholar of History , Singhania University¹Assistant Professor at JNV University, Jodhpur²**Abstract**

For long, the predominant view has been to look at early medieval society and economy as being characteristically 'feudal' in nature. The roots of such an interpretative framework go back to the writings of D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma in the 1950s and 1960s. Society in general is seen in terms of proliferation of castes, the emergence of certain new groups and incorporation of the tribes into the sudra-varna of the brahmanical fold, the lowest rung in the varna order. In the following decades many other scholars used the same analytical framework of 'feudalism' to account for the changes during the early medieval period, like for example Suvira Jaiswal, who argues for the absence the two middle orders in the varna scheme in eastern and south India.

Key words: predominant, decades, feudalism

1.Introduction:

Another important scholar is by B. N. S Yadava, who in his later works has focused on the emergence of several peasant groups, characterized by differential economic competence across regions in northern India.² Though basically emanating from the pioneering works of R. S Sharma and others, who did a very meticulous survey of the epigraphic sources, the feudal framework soon paved way for those scholars who located the emergence of caste society in the regions in the wider context of contemporary processes of societal change, viz- state formation, detribalization, peasantization and cult-appropriation.³ Noteworthy in this regard are scholars like B. D Chattopadhyaya and others. B. D. Chattopadhyaya locates the emergence of caste society in the regions in the wider context of contemporary processes of societal change, viz- agrarian expansion and state formation at the locality and sub-regional levels. These studies constitute the background to our analysis of the regional source material. The point is, within the feudal framework or not, many of these studies were primarily engaged with issues addressing agrarian expansion, the hierarchisation and subordination of the peasantry, forced labor, heightened levels of taxation, etc. The recent researches have shown that the early medieval time was a dynamic period of Indian history when the regions took shape. Society also evolved in a certain manner. The sources of the period give a glimpse into the way society came to function. This chapter shall look into the ways in which early medieval society took shape in the regions of Assam and Bengal. For convenience, the data has been analyzed in terms of the sub-regions of Assam and Bengal.

2. Discussion and Major Finding**Assam****Greater Guwahati, Kamrup Region**

The first epigraph belonging to this period is the Umacal Rock inscription of Surendravarman, and says nothing on the varna categories. It records the construction of a (-cave) temple dedicated to Lord Balabhadra.⁴ The 11th century Suwalkuchi and the Guwahati copper plate

inscriptions mention the donees as Brahmin scholar Bhatta Baladeva⁵ and Brahmin Desapala⁶, respectively. The 13th century Pushpabhadra inscription also talk of the brahmana varna, but most importantly it mentions pravaras⁷(namely, the Autathya, Maudgalya and Angirasa pravaras). The Kanaibarashi rock inscription dated to around 1206 CE also does not mention any varna as such. It talks about the annihilation of the turuska army.⁸ Though not directly, this inscription does indeed throw light on the ways in which ‘the other’ was perceived in the then Kamarupa society.

The Tezpur Region

In this region almost all the charters gave lands to individual Brahmins except for the Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva which donates land to ‘an alms-house’⁹ for its up-keep. From this group of about 06 inscriptions one feature that could be deduced is the near absence of actual reference to the varna scheme (the sastraic varna order). The only varna category which appears without fail is the Brahmana varna, owing largely to their predominant position in the society as the largest receiver of land–grants. Not only that, they are also paid due compliments by the king while intimating the different groups regarding the grants.¹⁰ There is also the possibility that the other bodies and officials who were intimated had people from this varna category, though the group of epigraphs in this region does not through much light on that aspect.¹¹ The other varna categories of the ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras are conspicuously absent in the epigraphs.

To cite a few examples one can talk about the Bargaon plates of Ratnapala in which a Brahmin Devadutta¹² of the Parasaragotra was given land. Similarly the Tezpur, Ulubari and Parbatiya copper plates talk about the Brahmin donee. The Tezpur Rock inscription is an exception because herein the a few Brahmins like Bhattajiu and Lahidi Jha¹³ appear to be a party in a certain dispute.

Nagaon Davaka Region

For the Nagaon Davaka region, the same trend stands true. The Brahmana varna appears without fail in almost all the land-grant charters and is again the only constant feature. For example, the Nagaon/ Nowgong Copper plate donates land to a Brahmin of the Kapila gotra who was a follower of the Kanva Sakha.¹⁴ The Carat Bari grant gives land to a person named Siddhapala, whose father was ‘Bhatta’¹⁵ Nidhipala, ie, a Brahmin. Similarly, the Gachtal copper Plate Inscription does not throw light on who the donee were (as the last plate is not available), but it does talk about the Brahmin Balabhadra who composed the eulogy section.¹⁶ No other varna category finds mention in the epigraph. The Khanamukh plate of Dharmapala talks about the donee as being a Brahmana called Mahabahu.¹⁷

The Doiyang- Dhansiri Valley

In this region of Assam, the incomplete 5th century Nagajari Khanikargaon Rock inscription says nothing on varna categories. The next epigraphs belong to the 8th century. The Deopani Visnu Image Inscription mentions categories like ‘dvijavarna,’ ‘sudra’ and ‘nari’.¹⁸ The said image is marked by a lot of syncretism, and though invoking ‘hara’ at the outset it goes on to say that ‘devi’ (Bhagavati) was identical with Visnu.¹⁹ For the purpose of social history this epigraph makes it clear that in the 8th century the Kamarupa society was marked by a broad division of people into dvijas on one hand, and advijas or sudras on the other. In the religious

sphere also it denotes a stage where Bhakti is clearly gaining some ground. The stone image of Narayana is clearly stated to have been installed for the 'bhaktas' ('..pratima bhaktanam')²⁰ which includes, dvijas, sudras and women alike.

The Śankara-Narayana stone image inscription has nothing on varna affiliation, but has a few terms to denote the 'priests' and 'preceptors'²¹ who definitely had priestly functions to perform. Another 8th century inscription, called as the Hari-Hara stone image inscription which mentions nothing on varna.

The Goalpara Region

The seventh century Dubi copper plate is the first inscription which appears in the region and it is the first of a total of two inscriptions which have been found here. The second epigraph is the 11th century Guwakuchi plate of Indrapala. The Dubi plate talks only about the Brahmana varna while renewing an old charter, and enlisting the names of the donees all of whom happen to be belonging to the said varna.²² The Guwakuchi plate also mentions only the Brahmana varna and no other varna as such. While throwing light on the family of the donee, it mentions a Brahmana named Somadeva, who was a follower of the Kanvasakha of the Yajurveda.²³

The afore-mentioned makes it very clear that in all the regions of Assam, the Brahmana varna is the only varna category which appears consistently. This sub-regional analyses shows the 'unworkability'²⁴ of the theoretical four-fold varna order, and points towards a situation where in the concept of jati becomes important. As Nayanjot Lahiri says, "Jatis were the professional or occupational groups which may have been encompassed broadly within a theoretical varna scheme but which often worked against what is normally understood as the supposed or required varna duties".²⁵ Our survey of the sources shows that broadly there were two sub-divisions in society. On one hand there are the Brahmanas, belonging to the only constant varna category, and on the other hand we have various sections with no clearly defined varna category. What we have are various occupational groups, many of which were in the process of forming a caste/jati group. The intermediate ksatriya and vaisya varnas are also conspicuously absent. There are some clear examples of transgression of varna duties as well.

Bengal

In the context of Bengal also, there is a similar unworkability of the ideal four-fold varna order in society. The following section does a similar survey of inscriptions pertaining to the sub-regions in Bengal and seeking discernible trends.

The Pundravardhana Region This region provides a heterogeneous mix of land transfers,²⁶ in which Brahmanas, both individually and in groups, as well as religious establishments got land. From the group of about 25 inscriptions in the region transferring land in the region, one discernible feature that comes up is the near absence of actual references to the varna scheme (the sastraic fourfold division of Hindu society). The only varna category which exists as almost a constant is the Brahmana caste, largely owing to the group's predominant position as the largest receiver of the grants, sometimes individually, and sometimes in groups. Not only that, they also formed part of the group which was regularly paid obeisance, and addressed to while intimating the different groups. These included kutumbins or householders, prominent persons or Mahattaras, and the village jury (gramastakulādhikarana), a very important component of the process of granting lands. Their prominence, thus, surely emanated from the fact that they held a socially dominant position vis-à-vis other sections of society.

To cite some examples of individual and group of Brahmanas being recipients one can name a few of them, which prove the point that they were surely an important integral part of the whole process. Varahasvamin, a Chandogya Brahmana was the recipient in the Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta.²⁷ The Brahmana-trio of Devabhata, Amaradatta and Mahasenadatta, belonging to the Vajasaneya shakha were the recipients in the Kalaikuri Sultanpuri plate of Kumaragupta.²⁸ The early inscriptions are a mix assemblage of land grants to not only individuals and groups belonging to the Brahmana varna, but also to various religious establishments, across sects, Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist. This happens till the Mohipur plate of Gopala II, the time being the ninth century, which donates land to a Buddhist vihara²⁹. Thus, Barrie M. Morrison's view that all the plates after c. 950 were grants to individual Brahmanas does not hold good in the light of newly discovered inscriptions like the Mohipur plate which clearly dates to c. 875. Clearly, the date is shifted to c.875.

But, as said, whatever be the nature of the donated land, and who so ever was the donee, Brahmana varna does appear regularly without fail. The next two varna categories of ksatriya and vaisya are conspicuously absent from all the inscriptions, except the fact that the Senas did call themselves the Karnnata-ksatriyas. The issue of absence of the former has been dealt with in the third chapter which is on polity, and it is very clear that early Pala rulers did not try to forge any Ksatriya origin. In place of the vaisya category per se which is also unheard of in the extant sources, one does find reference to tradesmen, and merchants. Inscriptions like the fifth century Damodarpur #1, Damodarpur #2 plates of Kumaragupta talk about the chief merchant (nagara-sresthi), and the chief caravan trader (sarthavaha)³⁰ etc. This is to be found in almost all the plates till the Damodarpur plate dated c. 543. However, this changes from the Khalimpur plate, ie, ninth century onwards, and sarthavahas and nagarasresthis do not appear any more.

In this region, inscripational evidence points towards only one clearly defined varna category, that of the Brahmanas. All other groups come within the Sudra varna. There is another group, which is completely outside the varna order, and form the group of adham-sankaras. Textual sources like the Brahmavaivarta Purana and the Brihaddharma Purana give ample evidence on this.³¹ The latter divides all the upavarnas, or, mixed jatis into three groups: the uttama-sankaras, the madhyama-sankaras and the adhama-sankaras.³² The former on its part, divides the different jatis into sat and asat, ie, pure and impure sudras.³³

Our inscriptions also talk about various sections of society, forming different strata, and part of the larger picture as found in the textual sources. In the Pundravardhana region inscriptions up to the sixth century talk about different groups like mahattaras (prominent persons), kulikas (artisans), kayasthas (clerk-writers), pustapalas (recordkeepers), nagara-sresthis (chief-merchants) and sarthavahas (chief caravan traders). The term karana occurs very late in this region, from the Indian Museum Copper Plate inscription of Dharmapala, as addressees in the grant along with visayavyaharins.³⁴ Even then, karana does not appear regularly after that. Administrative groups like the kayastha and the karana may have had the status of castes. The earliest evidence of the use of the term has been found in the Yajnavalkya Smrti and the literary and epigraphic records of the Gupta period. Kayastha occurs for the first time in the Kalaikuri Sultanpur plate³⁵ (c. 440) in Varendra, making it one of the earliest reference to the group probably in Bengal as well. This term appears in all the inscriptions of the time of Kumaragupta I, except the Baigram plate which mentions only the record keepers (the pustapalas)³⁶. This happens till Damodarpur #1 plate of Budhagupta (c. 482). Then again the term appears from the Damodarpur #2 of Budhagupta. karana and kayastha both stop appearing completely from the time of Gopala II.

Allusions to the above-mentioned administrative and occupational groups in our records are

more than mere appearance and disappearance of certain sections. More than anything else, many of the occupational divisions seemed to inter-penetrate the varna distinctions. Brahmanas, on the one hand performed the traditional role assigned to them: they performed ceremonies like Visuva-sankranti, as seen in the case of the Belwa plates of Mahipala I and Vighrapala III. 37 The Madhainagar plate of Laksmanasena donates land to a Brahmana as his fee for the performance of Aindri Mahasanti.³⁸ Yet, one finds a number of instances when, their role did not necessarily adhere to sastric injunctions. One of the earliest inscriptions of the region, the Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta I, mentions one Brahmana Devasarman as a mahattara (elder).³⁹ The Kalaikuri Sultanpur plate, similarly mentions names of a few Brahmanas, who were vithi-mahattaras (the vithi-elders)⁴⁰. They were Ramasarman, Maghasarman, Harisarman, Guptasarman, Susarman, Alatasvamin, Brahmasvamin, Bhattasvamin, Rupasarman, Rustasarman, Ahisarman, Laksmanasarman, Kramasarman, Sukkrasarman, Jayasvamin, Kaivarttasarman, Himasarman and Ramasvamin.⁴¹ All of these instances show that the Brahmanas were not only engaged in works ascribed to them by the śāstras, but many more. Another case, though not relating to this particular region, and not even a land grant charter, is the eulogy of Bhatta Bhavadeva, who was a minister, as well as a learned Brahmana who saw the ‘ends of the Oceans of Siddhanta, Tantra and Ganita’.⁴² In all these cases the theoretical or the ideal role of the Brahmanas limited only to the religious realm does not always match with what they actually did.

Groups like Candalas, Medas, Andhras etc, who undoubtedly formed the lowest rung of society are also absent in the earliest inscriptions. These start appearing from the time of Gopala II. The Gopala II #1 inscription mentions medas, andhras, candalas, kaivarttas along with Brahmanas, mahattaras and their followers as addressees.⁴³ Mention of Kaivarttas along with the untouchables is an exception in this particular inscription. Otherwise, Medas, Andhras and Candalas keep appearing in almost all the inscriptions except the Ramganj plate of Isvaraghosa and the two plates of Laksmanasena - the Tarpandighi plate and the Madhainagar plate. This is very surprising because if the Senas are taken to be the dynasty which adhered very strictly to the brahmanical norms, and during whose period brahmanisation of Bengal as a process caught enormous speed, it is expected of them to show this in the inscriptions by referring to the varna order as well.

The Samatata Region

Along with the ever constant Brahmana varna, the different occupational groups that occurred in the region are, as in other regions, Kayasthas and Karanas. The Gunaighar plate (c.508) names one Kayastha Naradatta (kayastha Naradattena), who wrote the document.⁴⁴ The Tipperah plate of Lokanatha (c.663 CE) calls him a karana born in a Brahmana family,⁴⁵ thus proving that many such mixed castes were formed of coming together of different varnas. Also, his maternal grand-father has been called as a parasava, meaning a person born of a Brahmana father and a sudra mother.⁴⁶ This shows that such anuloma marriages did take place. The two plates of Ladahacandradeva, and one of Govindacandradeva at Charpatra Mura mentions Brahmana donees, but mentions no jāti. The Mehar, Shobharampur and Nasirabad plates of Damodaradeva, all belonging to the 13th century, similarly mention the donees as Brahmanas, but provides no information on jāti. The Govinda Kesavadeva does not mention the varna of the donee, who are merely said to be “attendants belonging to subject races”⁴⁷ given to Siva. Though the ksatriya varna has not been mentioned, yet there is clear allusion to it by linking the donee to the “..(Moon’s) well known dynasty”.⁴⁸ None of these plates, not even a single one, mentions

groups like Candalas, Medas, Andhras, though as has been seen, few references to Karanas, Kayasthas and a certain other groups are surely present.

The Rārha Region

All the inscriptions in the region, numbering around six, represent a homogeneous group, of which all the donees were Brahmanas. The Brahmana factor, as in other parts, remains constant. The purpose of the grants, when legible and stated, shows that to be the performance of religious rites by individual Brahmanas.⁴⁹ Since the concentration of land transfers in this region is low as compared to other regions, only a few things can be noticed in this region. Thus, the only varna category that appears is the Brahmana varna. The sixth century Mallasarul Plate of Vijayasena, which is quite lengthy when compared to the sixth century plates in other regions, is the first to transfer land here. It mentions village-heads (agraharina), different officials like ministers in charge of princes (kumaramatya), or of collection of taxes, but does not mention any group which indicates any jati affiliations, or even groups which later coalesced into caste groups (like kayasthas and karanas). This is no different in the two Sasanka plates issued from Tavira, and not even in the Mallia plate of Jayanaga, as well as the Irda plate of Nayapala. The twelfth century Barrackpur plate of Vijayasena also has nothing to say anything on jati. But it does speak about the rajaputras being born in the family of the Moon,⁵⁰ and Vallalasena being “the very parasol (protection) of the Ksatriyas”.⁵¹

On the transgression of varna duties by Brahmanas, who regularly engaged in works they were not supposed to do, one finds a few examples in this region as well. The Mallasarul plate mentions a few Brahmanas, who along with their designation as village heads, were also bestowed with the task of looking after the gift lands to gods and Brahmanas⁵². Two such Brahmanas were Dhanasvamin and Bhattavamanasvamin⁵³, looking after such lands in the village of Kapisthavataka⁵⁴, and superintending the gift lands in the village of Koddavira, respectively. Very probably, their Brahmana varna made it easier for them to be associated with such land, but looking after such land and supervising them does show bestowal of administrative work on them.

The Vanga Region

This region has around 12 inscriptions, in all of which individual Brahmanas appear as donees, thus making the Brahmana varna again a constant factor in the country-side.

The sixth century Faridpur plate of Gopacandra is the first inscription, which mentions, along with the Brahmanas, groups like the chief-clerk (prathama-kāyastha), chief traders (pramukha-vyāpārinah) and pustapāla (record-keeper)⁵⁵. These do not remain constant in the later inscriptions, but the term pustapala does occur in the two plates following the Gopacandra Faridpur plate, namely the Dharmaditya Faridpur #1, and Dharmaditya Faridpur #2. The latter mentions a Kayastha also, who headed the board of administration. The Ghagrahati plate Samacaradeva (6th century) mentions two Karanikas, Nayanaga and Kesava.⁵⁶ Inscriptions after that do not refer to any other group except the Brahmana varna, and other usual addressees like the Ksetrakaras (or tillers of land) along with -rājñi-rānaka-rājaputra-rājāmatya⁵⁷ etc. This is the norm in all the three plates of Sricandra, namely the Dhulla, Rampal and Madanpur plates. Harivarman Samantasar is incomplete. The next two plates, ie, the Madanapada plate of

Vishvarupasena, and the Idilpur plate of Kesavasena refer to Karanas, or clerks. Since the last plate is incomplete, one thing which could be said about the rest of the plates is the complete absence of groups like the Medas, Andhras and Candalas from the records. The last of the plates, ie, the Adavadi plate of Dasarathadeva is not complete. But it provides information on a few of the ganis (a technical term denoting the social status of a brahmana determined by his original connection with a particular village in Bengal) of the Radhiya Brahmanas. Like in other plates, there is also no reference to those sections which came at the lowest rung of society.

As in the Pundravardhana region which showed the actual role that the Brahmanas played, which did not always conform to sastraic injunctions, a few examples could also be seen in this region as well. The Faridpur plate of Gopacandra mentions one Vatsapalasvamin, a Brahmana who was the administrative officer in the region of Varakamandala This is no doubt a case of a Brahmana being a high ranking administrative officer. Similarly, the Faridpur plate#1 of Dharmaditya has a Brahmana Kulasvamin⁵⁹ as a village head, and the Faridpur plate #2 of Dharmaditya has another Brahmana Gopalsvamin as the administrative and customs officer of Varakamandala, a very high rank.

3. Conclusion

Besides these groups, there are certain other groups also which we witness in the different sub-regions while studying the sources. Engravers or silpins were one such group who appear in some of the epigraphs, and Pundravardhana has near about ten plates with the names of the engravers: the Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta, the Khalimpur and Indian museum plates of Dharmapala, the Biyala, Belwa and Bangarh plates of Mahipala I, the Amgachhi plate of Vighrahapala III, the Mohipur plate of Gopala II, Manahali Plate of Madanapala, the Jajilpara plate of Gopala III, etc. Notably, names of these engravers are not legible in some of these plates. In regions other than Varendra, frequency of the term is comparatively less, though one comes across some other groups like artisans who both composed and wrote,⁶¹ and the copper smith as well who made the plates.⁶² What is seen is that the Candra and Sena plates conspicuously lack any reference to engravers or other such artisanal group.

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