



## CASTE, MARGINALITY AND 'KAIBARTAS' IN ASSAM: A READING OF HOMEN BARGOHAIN'S 'PITA PUTRA'

**Deepsikha Barman**

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Kamrup College, Chamata, Assam, India

Email: [deepsikha.barman14@gmail.com](mailto:deepsikha.barman14@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT :

*Pita -Putra (father- son) is an Assamese novel written by Assamese author, critic and journalist Homen Borgohain portraying the socio-economic and political changes took place within two generation. The time frame of the novel is just after the independence of India which followed immense changes not only politically but socio-economically to every interior part of the country. The plot of the novel is a small village named Mahghuli near the river Mohghuli in present Dhakuakhana .The protagonist of the novel Sivanath Phukan represents the land owner class of that period who use to have a luxurious lifestyle depending on the other underprivileged caste and class of the society. The novel beautifully portrayed a picture of the condition of people belonging to Kaibarta caste residing nearby the Mahghuli Gaon. They did not have land ownership and was dependent on the landlords like Sivanath and on the other hand Sivanath was also dependent on the Kaibarta people for cultivating his lands. Every section of the society had their own kind of dream of emancipation with the attaining freedom from the British ruler but eventually the society had to face other challenges and as describe by the story the condition of the Kaibarts caste along with the other depressed castes were not changed despite of the constitutional safeguard given to these castes. The objective of the paper is to analyse the changing economic dimension of caste in post-independence period highlighted by the author with special reference to the Kaibarta caste.*

**Keywords:** Novel, Pita Putra, Caste Dynamics, Kaibarta, Socio-Economic freedom, postindependence, Assam

### I.Introduction:

*Pita-Putra* (Son and father) is a significant social novel in Assamese language written by Homen Borgohain depicting a very crucial time juncture right after Independence of India (Bargohain, 1978). The plot and story line of the novel speak how the changing political scenario brought new socio-



economic dimension to the existing norms of the society in the post-independence period. As the title of the novel *Pita-Putra* represent the two generation, one living in the colonial period and the other in postcolonial period in Assam. Caste which is consider as one the basic characteristic of Indian society also went through various changes in the colonial period (Dirks, 2001). The emergence of lower caste movements was one of the significant dimensions of the caste during the colonial rule. Assam along with the other parts of India witnessed lower caste movements to attain socio-economic and political rights for their social upliftment. Every section of the Indian society was eagerly waiting for the freedom from the colonial rulers and the Kaibartas of Assam were also not exceptional who were primarily anticipated for land rights to improve their economic condition through which they could improve their social position also. Sekhar Bandopadhyay mentions that there is a myth that there is no caste prevailed in Bengal (Bandopadhyay, 2011). The same myth is prevailed in the context of assam and it is generally said that the caste discrimination is not so acute in Assam. But if one examines the society the caste is visible in the society of Assam with some regional characteristics. The socio-religious dimensions of the caste special reference to Kaibartas have discussed in many academic works from the Anthropological perspective but the work from the Historical standpoint are very less. The paper has highlighted the changing caste dimensions under the new political set up in post-colonial period through the lens of socio-economic analysis of the plot and character of the novel *Pita-Putra*.

## **II. Objectives of the Study:**

The objective of the study is to analyse the changes of caste dimensions in Assam special reference to the *Kaibarta* through the plot of the Assamese novel *Pitra- Putra*.

## **III. Methodology:**

A Qualitative Research methodology has employed for this research paper. The research follows a textual analysis of Homen Bargohains's novel *Pita-Putra* focusing on the protagonist's depiction on the *Kaibartas* and the changing caste dimension in a country learning freedom (Bargohain, 1978). The analysis mainly focused on the Kaibarta characters, their socio-economic condition and the new developments with time in the context of caste in post-independent period. The primary source of the paper is the novel *Pita-Putra* with the special attention to the episodes involving the *Kaibartas*. As secondary source for the study is various books and articles related to caste studies. The perspective of Ambedkar on caste as a structural system of inequality (Ambedkar, 1936) and Marxist literary theory focus on economic subjugation of lower caste has used through the postcolonial lens to see how the colonial legacies continued to affect the caste dynamic in postcolonial period in India in general and in Assam in particular. The methodology enables an understanding of how the Assamese novel *Pita-Putra*



portrayed the caste based socio-economic injustice in Assamese society, contributing to broader discussions on literature and social marginalisation.

#### **IV. Results and Discussion:**

Caste is considered one as the basic characteristic of the Indian society. Nicholas Dirks argued that despite of being the static nature of the caste it has changed through ages (Dirks, 2001). With the coming of the British in India caste has also undergone the changes due to the introduction of new administrative measures like unified administrative structure for the government, census etc. It was not only that the during the British period the census had changed its characteristic but in Ancient and Medieval period also witnessed the caste as institution along with the other social changes. In the early Vedic period caste was an occupational classification and it was not hereditary. But in later Vedic period with the changing social norms the caste also began to consider as close structure associating with hereditary nature. In India the concept of private land was well established in the Gupta period. There are many literary evidences like *Manu Smriti* which acknowledge the existence of the concept like individual land rights including the ability to sell, gift and mortgage the land between 300 to 600 CE in India (Manu, trans. 2005).

The system of land grant by the king to the individual and religious institutions brought a new dimension to the existing caste system as the lands were mainly granted to the Brahmins who has been placed at the highest position in the caste hierarchy. Being the supreme power in political arena the Kings had to maintained cordial relation with the Brahmin who were the religious head so that the King could receive support from them. The kings who were the owner of the whole lands began to share land rights with Brahmin by donating tax free lands to them. It is said that the concept of caste was solely associated with the Aryans and as they lived mainly in the North India it is seen that the caste system is more prominent in North India. But, with the discovery of Harappa civilization a new narrative began to emerged that the indigenous people of India are associated with the pre-Vedic Harappan culture while the Aryans were the foreign invaders. The Dravidian identity related to the depressed classes of South India is the influence by this theory. Sekhar Bandopadhyay pointed out that there is a myth that caste does not exist in Bengal which is also applicable in Assam (Bandopadhyay, 2011). There are many research related to the Caste studies in Assam that concluded that the caste discrimination is not so acute in this region. Here, the argument of the paper is that the caste also prevailed in Assam with many regional characteristics.



One cannot deny the influence of the Aryanization in Assam though many scholars argued that the influence is very minimal. Banikanta Kakati has assumed that the Aryanization has started in Assam during the reign of Indrapala of Pala Dynasty of ancient Assam (Kakati, 1954). The practice of donating lands to the Brahmins has started during the Barman dynasty. The process of *Sanskritisation* or *Aryanisation* of the Kamrupa society has started from the 5th Century BC (Bora Mayur In Medieval period Assam was mainly ruled by two dominant power the Ahom and the Koch. The Ahom administrative structure was centrally based on *paik* system. Paik was consisted of the people from the age group 16 to 50 years. They were supposed to work in agricultural field, military, construction work force in rotation among the groups form by the state. In exchange they were given lands by the state. Though all the people from the said age group was compelled to work for the state but there were two division of the Paik one of which was exempted from doing the manual work. The name of the two group was the *Karhi* and *Chamuwa*. *Chamuwa* was further divided into two groups- *Paikan* and *Apakan*. The *Apakan* group was consisted of the higher classes of the society including the Brahmins who were totally excluded from doing any manual work. In the socio-religious aspect one of the significant developments of the Medieval Assam was the emergence of Vaishnavism by *Sankardeva* challenging the caste discrimination prevailed in the society. One of the major concerns off this socio-religious movement was spreading brotherhood among the different social group of Assam. Though the Vaishnavite Movement stood against the caste discrimination but the *satras* developed in Assam to continue the legacy of Vaishnavism were seen in emphasising in the caste discrimination by not allowing the lower caste to enter the premises of the *satras*. The rulers of the Medieval Assam also continued to donate lands to the temples and *satras* to maintain the statuesque with the religious leaders. Assam came under the British rule in 1826 which brought not only political fluctuations but also socio-economic and religious changes and the legacy of those changes are still prevailed in the society of Assam. The coming of the missionaries and the conversion of the depressed classes to the Christan religion gave a new dimension to the existing caste structure. Like the British colonial rule the anti-colonial National Movement under the leadership of Gandhi addressed the caste issues of India but a divisive lower caste movement also developed to fight for the socio-political and economic rights of the depressed classes. In Assam also the downtrodden people like *Kaibartas*, *Namasudras*, *Baniyas*, *Ahoms* and many other organised themselves under the banner of their respective groups. Devabrat Sarma has pointed out that the *Satradhikars* continued to receive privileges from the British administration also.(Sarma,2023) The *satra* had a huge portion of lands even after the Independence. In the process of making the Indian constitution also special privileges were included for the depressed classes. In 1947 India attained its freedom which marks a new beginning for the entire nation. Homen Bargohain, through the novel *Pita-Putra* portrayed some significant socio-



economic developments from the colonial period to the four decades after Independence. Along with many other phenomena the novel addressed the issue of Caste system and its changing characteristic throughout the novel though caste is not the central theme of the novel.

The Novel *Pitra-Putra* starts with the date 14<sup>th</sup> August which is just one day before the Independence of India. The protagonist of the novel Sivanath who was a Zamindar never participated in the freedom struggle but he closely observed the all developments around him. He himself was doubtful whether the freedom struggle could bring real emancipation for the *Kaibarta* people living nearby his village. Through the *Kaibartas* he actually addressed the other downtrodden people who were placed in the lower strata of the society. He symbolically questioned the rigidity of caste system when he thought that the *Kaibartas* he himself would not be able to accept the idea of the socio-economic emancipation and uplift of the *Kaibartas* as Sivanath had to depend on the *Kaibartas* for cultivating his lands and the *Kaibartas* were also dependent on him as they did not possess any land other than their residential area. In the staring of the novel there is a scene where a conversation between Sivanath and his wife discussed the pathetic condition of the Brahmin widows who were not able to eat anything for many days due to the rainy weather because the widows of the Brahmins were not allowed to take food without seeing the sun rise.

There is another conversation between a *Kaibarta* man named Katiya (the meaning in English is thin) and Sivanath. The *Kaibarta* people living in the nearby village of *Mahghuli* were traditionally a fishing community but it was not possible for them only to live by selling the fishes so they chose to work as *halowa* in the agricultural fields of the other people. Katiya also used to work as halwa in the paddy field of Sivanath but Sivanath had to replace him with another *Kaibarta* man due to the Katiya's addiction to opium. Through this character the novelist beautifully depicts the picture of a usual *Kaibarta* village. It was not only the Katiya who worked as *halowa* in the agricultural field of Sivanath but almost the all the male members of the *Kaibartas* worked as *halowa* in the paddy field of the other landlords. The people like Sivanath never like to visit the *Kaibarta* village but once he was compelled to go to Katiya's home to remind him his duty to complete the agricultural activities in Sivanath's paddy field. Sivanath explained how dirty was the village and the household area of Katiya. They did not have any provision for defecation in his house in *Kaibarta* village. So, they use their front yard which was an unclean area with trees and vines for defecation. The condition of the house of Sivanath was also pathetic. He had four children who never thought to go to the school. Katiya's family did not get to eat for many days which led his children to roam here and there in the jungle. They even compelled to eat various poisonous seeds out of hunger. Despite of this economic condition Katiya was addicted to opium to that extend that he



used to sleep for whole days. Sivanath said that this economic condition and dirty nature of the Katiya's house represent the whole *Kaibarta* people residing in the nearby village.

After describing the economic condition of the *Kaibartas* along with their 'impure' life style the writer further focus on the social discrimination confronted by the *Kaibartas* in their every step of life. Sivanath described a story from his childhood that reflects the social behaviour towards the *Kaibartas* by the other people. Once Sivanath's mother threw a huge amount of rice as a *Kaibarta* boy stood behind the area where the rice was kept under the sunlight. He has mentioned another incident from his childhood when a *Kaibarta* teacher of his school was not allowed to sit inside his home by his father. The act of not allowing his teacher to enter his home showed that despite of being in a position like teacher the social acceptance of the *Kaibartas* was not changed. Sivanath remembered another incident to show the attitude of the other people living by the surrounding area of the *Kaibarta* village. A Brahmin boy committed suicide as he was bitten by a *Kaibarta* boy which was considered ultimate humiliation for the Brahmin. Sivanath did most of his thinking by soliloquy and the questioned himself whether the freedom from the foreign rulers could bring socio-economic freedom for the depressed classes. Though he raised the question and showed his concern for the *Kaibartas* but in the next moment he was afraid of the emancipation of the *Kaibartas* through having lands for themselves as it would be disadvantage for him due to his dependency on the *Kaibarta halowa* for cultivating his lands. Here he himself asked a question if he was ready to give freedom to the *Kaibarta* people though he wants freedom of India for all.

The story of the novel turned to an interesting twist when Sivanath's elder son Gaurinath who was perusing his study in an engineering college in town developed a romantic relationship with a *Kaibarta* girl named Urmila. When Sivanath came to know about this relationship he strictly ordered Gaurinath to end the relationship and threatened Gaurinath of declare him a disowning son. But, Gaurinath did not listen to his father. He wrote a long letter to his father to inform his decision of not leaving Urmila only because of her caste. The letter written by Gaurinath to his father Sivanath is a significant one where many dilemmas and human emotion has reflected. Gaurinath wrote to his father that he is no gong to leave Urmila who was an educated girl. Gaurinath mentioned about an event from his childhood where the conversation between Sivanath and *Garmuriya Gosain* (Pitambar Deva Goswami) revealed the mission against untouchability along with the freedom struggle. There were many people present in that conversation and most of them supported *Garmuriya Satradhikar*. The one person whom Gaurinath address as father of Prabhat who did not agree with the *Gaururiya Satradhikar* and asked Sivanath if he would accept a *Kaibarta* girl as his daughter in law. Sivanath promptly replied that he would ready to accept a *Kaibarta* girl as his daughter in law if he would be capable by all side along



with education. Gaurinath stated that he knew that it would not be easy for Sivanath to accept Urmila though he once said that he would stand against caste discrimination as many of the people of that era who deliver progressive speech in the public meeting but in personal life, they could not follow those progressive thoughts. He claimed that his father was also not exception from those so -called modern people who would not materialise their progressive thoughts. Though the letter emotionally devasted Sivanath but he continued to send money to his son. Gaurinath denied to accept those financial aids from his father and showed his determination of marring Urmila.

There is another significant development noticed by Sivanath in the later period of his life when the caste rigidity began to lose its grip in the *Mahghuli* area as in course of time a large number of people from other community began to reside in the *Mahghuli* area. The fear of social boycott was slowly declining as people now can mix up with the people from other communities. There is another reason observed by Sivanath was that the new generation began to choose new opportunities as livelihood other than depending on the lands. They now do not fear of abandon by their parents for inter caste marriages as the losing of land does not impact on their life. On the contrary the parents now had to depend on the job holder children to run their home.

## **V. Conclusion:**

The novel *Pita-Putra* won *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1978 for its excellence contribution towards exploring identity and social change on post-independence Assam in particular and India in general. The study of the novel *Pita-Putra* through the caste lens shows how the many socio-economic dimension of caste has changed but the concept of caste still remains relevant. The response to the caste discrimination was also changes with time. Though the central theme of the novel was not caste but the writer beautifully describes the changing caste dimensions from the colonial period to the post-independent period of India. The writer has use the *Kaibarta* people as representative of other depressed classes. The most significant aspect the writer has highlighted in the novel is the impact of economic changes of the post- independence period also affected the caste norms prevailed in the society. The novel especially focused on the land rights of the depressed classes and also showed the feudal nature of the Assamese society through the character of Sivanath. The many pages of the novel are dedicated to discuss the socio-economic condition of the *Kaibartas* and the writer gave new angles to the caste study though this novel.

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