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THE DHOBIS IN ASSAM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Industrialisation and urbanisation have contributed to the migration of Dhobis in Assam, the growth of tea, oil, coal, gas and several other small and large scale industries led to the large scale migration of labourers in Assam. The Dhobis have experienced several ups and down in their lives in the region. Therefore, this paper discusses socio-cultural life of Dhobis in the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods. The historical perspective includes migration of Dhobis in Assam that comprised of: (i) the Dhobis migrated in Tea gardens during the colonial period; (ii) the Bengali Dhobi migrant from East Pakistan and (iii) Dhobis from different parts of the country.



KEYWORDS: Dhobis, Migration, Continuity and Change.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Dhobi (washermen), a caste primarily found in India and Pakistan, is specialized in washing clothes. The word 'dhobi' derived from the Hindi word 'dhona' means 'to wash'. According to a legend, Lord Mahadev created Dhobi to serve mankind (Singh 1995:446). In India, the caste is recognized as a scheduled caste 1950 as per the scheduled castes related order of Government of India 1950. The Constitution of India provides them with benefits and quotas in various government schemes and jobs. They are widely distributed across the northern, central, western

and eastern India.

II. OBJECTIVES:

- i) To study the historical perspectives of Dhobis in Assam.
- ii) To understand change in socio-economic status of Dhobis through migration.

III. METHODOLOGY

The approach of the study is historical, analytical and critical which helps us to explain the attitude of the respondents about their socio-economic status. A complete objectivity and purely scientific outlook can be maintained in the study. Random sampling and Non-participant observation method is also employed in this study. Both primary and secondary data are

collected on the basis of various direct or indirect sources.

IV. THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In Assam, Narkasura, the mythological Kirat king of Kamarupa, brought some people from northern part of India to promote Aryan culture in the region (Das 1980:2). In 1228 A.D, Ahoms entered Assam from upper portion of Irrawaddy valley. They defeated local tribes and ruled Assam for about 600 years. They encouraged some people for lower jobs. During the Ahom period certain lower caste people, particularly Kaibratta, were engaged as washermen. They washed clothes of royal family and other high caste people. Later on,

Mughals attacked Assam but were defeated by the Ahom rulers. The Mughal fighters did not return to their home; they settled down in the region. Most of them were engaged in lower jobs such as Dhobi (washermen), Lohar (blacksmith), Sonar (goldsmith), Kumhar (pot maker), Fisherman, Barber, Mochi (shoemaker), Painter, Mason, Kathmistri (carpenter), daily wage earner etc. In Anglo-Burmese war of 1826 AD, Burma (Mynmar) was defeated by British East India Company, resulting in signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo- a significant moment in the history of Assam. Gradually, The Britishers established their empire in Assam and led to the end of 600 year old Ahom rule in Assam. The Britishers brought stability, peace and order in Assam. They annexed Assam with a purpose to expand trade and commerce to the region. They began tea plantation in Assam. It was an alternate source of tea supply because they had lost their monopoly in tea trade of China. The Britishers had two objectives; namely, revenue maximisation and resource exploitation. Assam had poor economic structure with less population during the British period. The Ahom rulers paid less attention to trade and commerce in the region. As there existed Barter system in the society and monetary system was absent in the region, local people failed to respond positively to the structural changes. Therefore, the Britishers encouraged migration to the region. They encouraged those occupations, for which local population provided less supply in the region. The migrant Dhobis were engaged not only as washer men but also in other jobs. Streams of Dhobi migration were therefore comprised of: (i) the Dhobis migrated to tea gardens in the colonial period, (ii) the Bengali Dhobi migrants from East Pakistan after partition of India in 1947 and (iii) the Dhobis from different parts of the country (Gogoi 1984:63). These are discussed below.

(i) The Dhobi migrants in Tea Gardens: Britishers began tea plantation in Assam in the mid of 19th century. They faced several problems, particularly scarcity of skilled labour. In the beginning they brought skilled labourers from China for tea plantation. But the high rate of wages compelled them to search for option. At the time, Britishers also needed washermen, sweepers, night watchmen, barbers, shoe makers and other lower job holders. Gradually, the tea plantation expanded in the region and, they were compelled to recruit a large number of labourers in the region. So they turned to the local population. But the local labourers were lazy, indolent and opium addicted; they remained absent from the work on simple reasons of illness, stomach disorder, religious festival, domestic work or other ritual function (Singh 2006:13). Besides, the local population had self-sufficient economy and, therefore, the people did not like to work under the British, considering labour employed as washermen and in other lower jobs below their dignity and status, as is evident from the following folklore:

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Angrezor chakori nalage | We do not want jobs under the Britishers |
| Na lage thakibo dhan | Our wealth will not be reduced |
| Ghorote bohibo Ramayan pohibo | We will sit at home, read Ramayana |
| Take huni thakibo man | And console our heart and soul |

(Dosadh: 2010)

Therefore, the Britishers failed to employ them. The Britishers then turned to see famine and poverty-struck areas for labourers. They brought labourers from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh for tea plantation in the early part of 1853. Gradually, a large stream of migrants came to in the tea garden up to 1937. They came in Assam in the hope of good food, clothes, shelter and, finally, good life, as it reflects in the following folk song:

| | | |
|-----|----------------------------|--|
| i. | Chal mini Assam jaibo | Come let's go to Assam my girl |
| | Desh boro dukhre | As there is great misery in our country |
| | Assam Deshre | Let's go to Assam the land of |
| | Cha bagan hariyal | Lush green tea plantations |
| ii. | Gach Hilale paisa jhare | Money falls from the trees if shaken |
| | Whoa kono Dhukhna Naike ba | There is no misery |
| | Whoa bahut paisa ba | A tree in Assam gives fruit in the form of money |

(Dosadh: 2010)

It reveals that the people who were brought to tea plantations were in extreme poverty, debt, social disorder and inhuman torturing of Zamindars which compelled them to migrate to Assam. Large scale of migration changed the demographic pattern of Assam whose population in 1951 is estimated to be less than 10 lakhs (Census of India, 1961). Nonetheless, the migration of people from different parts of India was required (a) to save Assam from Burmese insurrections in the latter part of 18th and the early part of 19th century; (b) to meet the economic requirement of landless labourers, self sufficiency and supply of cash and (c) to stop inhuman treatment of the garden labourers by the planters (Goswami 1975:44-45). At present, the Dhobis who have settled near tea garden areas and they work in offices, tea factories, hospitals and tea factory residential area. They identified themselves as permanent residents of Assam and to some extent they have assimilated with the greater Assamese society. Most of them have no connection with their homeland.

(ii) The Bengali Dhobis in Assam from East Pakistan: After the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 AD, the British felt the need of a repair of the administrative arrangements in Assam. David Scott, agent to the Governor General, Northeast Frontier, realised that if they employed Bengalis instead of Ahoms in the administration then it would destroy Ahom's status, but he was also aware of the difficulty to employ local people to serve the company due to two reasons: (a) The educational status of the indigenous population of the region was deplorable as Captain John Buttler remarked that he did not find 30 educated individuals in Nagaon in 1838 AD and (b) the structure and function of Ahom administration was different from the company's administration. Ahom did not keep any written record in their day-to-day business and, therefore, company preferred Bengalis for better administration. The company also observed the incapability of locals for revenue collection which led them to remove more than 100 Kheldhars who were in charge of revenue collection. The British introduced Tehsildars for revenue collection, all, natives of Bengal (Barooh 1970:130). They recruited most of the Bengalis in various administrative departments, among whom a section consisted of Bengali Dhobis. This practice of recruiting of Bengalis in various administrative posts continued and when Francis Jenkins, agent to the Governor General, North-east Frontier, arrived in the region he found that almost all departments were filled by the Bengali bureaucrats from Sylhet, Mymensingh and Racca. Gradually Bengalis including Dhobis secured a major share in the employment opportunities; they also brought their relatives and friends from Bengal for employment in various government departments. Britishers brought the Bengalis, including Bengali Hindu Dhobis, for their offices and other professional works. The Bengali Dhobi migrants were accommodated in new railway lines, post and telegraph offices, tea and petroleum offices. Some of them worked as sweepers, security guards, drivers, domestic servants, carpenters, masons etc. However, a large section of people did not relinquish their traditional occupation and they settled in different urban centres of Assam. During the early decades of 20th century, the colonial authorities occupied their mind to collect revenue from the vast waste land area of Assam. In 1853-54, AJM Mills stated that Assam had vast area of alluvial waste lands, but there was shortage of labour to develop them. The local people did not have the capital to use these lands. Therefore, he recommended for bringing people from another region to utilise waste lands (Mills 1984, 17 & 102). In 19th century some notable Assamese middle class person realised that Assam was not to be developed until some migrant cultivators and labourers were brought to develop vast fertile waste lands. Though they favoured immigration from Bengal but there were some obstacles such as different climate and language, lack of better communication between Assam and Bengal etc.

In the beginning of the 20th century, they entered in the region through Goalpara district. The population of the district increased normally in the year 1881-91 by 1.4 percent and in 1891-1901 by 2 percent. But the population suddenly increased by 30 percent in 1911 (Census of India 1961:249). They were mostly Dhobis, sweepers, tailors, shopkeepers and clerks in different offices. They were only in a few thousands (Census of India 1961:249). The economic condition of East Bengal was good during 1793-1900, but gradually it deteriorated and became unbearable to poor and landless labourers in the earliest part of 20th century (Census of India 1891:67). Price rise of food grains, indebtedness, and rapid growth of population and oppression of the Zamindars were responsible for their migration. The Hindu

refugees in Assam were 2, 74,455 till 1951 (Gogoi 1984:70). They spread into almost all the districts of Assam. The number of migrants settled in Cachar district was 93,177, followed by Goalpara (44,967), Kamrup (42,871), Sivasagar (7,514), Darrang (18,833) and Lakhimpur (13,965) (Gogoi 1984:70). The coming of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan did not stop altogether. It continued till 1971 surreptitiously because of deteriorating law and order situation and economic condition in East Pakistan. Even after the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, a large part of the population did not go back. Rather, they settled among their kiths and kins in India, particularly in West Bengal and Assam. In the census of 1961, out of 9.13 lakh urban people, 3.5 lakh were Bengali speakers, 3.4 lakh were Assamese speakers and 2.59 lakh were Hindi speakers, i.e., 38 percent Bengali speakers, 13 percent Hindi speakers and 33 percent Assamese speakers respectively in the urban areas of Assam (Gogoi 1984:71). On the other hand, Bangladesh had no significant progress during the period of its union with Pakistan. The standard of living was very low. Certain traditional and small scale and cottage industries declined, due to negative policies and negligence of the government. Therefore, large sections of population emigrated from the country. Assam had better land-man ratio than Bangladesh. Therefore, they migrated to Assam with the help of their relatives who came in Assam during the colonial period. Certain political parties which were interested in this migration provided them shelter to get vote bank in elections (Gogoi 1984:145). Their names were enlisted in the voters list through different political parties. In the process, most of Dhobis and other caste people too settled in the uninhabited areas of Assam as cultivators. Some of the Dhobis worked as cultivators and part time Dhobis in the rural areas while a section of Dhobis which did not want to leave their traditional occupation settled in urban centres of Assam, taking up to petty business in laundry shop, grocery shops, stationary shops, cotton goods shops, sweet meals shops etc in every towns of Assam.

iii) Dhobi Migrants from Different Parts of the Country in Post-colonial Period: During post-colonial period, Dhobis from different states migrated to Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Assam. A large number of Dhobis had come to Assam from other parts of the country and have settled permanently. They were from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Punjab etc. However, a small number of populations from other parts of the country were also found in different parts of the state. During 1951- 1971, more than 42 percent migrants came from Bihar (Gogoi 1984:153). Most of them were temporary and seasonal wage earners and manual labourers. They also left their families behind and came in Assam to earn money for their families, as (i) the density of population of Bihar was comparatively higher than any other states, therefore, a large number of people migrated to the region to seek employment and (ii) there was limited opportunities in non-agricultural sector in Bihar. Therefore, every year seasonal unemployed youths migrated to the region in the period of December to April. Most of them pursued their traditional caste occupations which they were occupied with in their state such as washermen, sweepers, cobblers, barbers, porters, fishermen, malis, woodcutters, venders, blacksmiths etc. Some people were also engaged as road builders, hotel boys, chowkidars, rikshaw pullers and daily wage earners. They settled in the urban areas and commercial centres which highly required these works. Some of them left their traditional occupation, but a small section of these people still pursue their traditional occupation and they have settled in urban centres of Assam. The local people did not like these occupations, due to their better economic condition and feeling of superiority in the early 1950s. They were very much conscious of their social status. Therefore, they did not like these manual jobs. However, the economic condition of local people gradually deteriorated during 1960s and consequently, a small number of local people entered into these occupations. At the same time, several new industries were established in Assam. As a result, certain migrants from different parts of the country came to Assam to capture the market. The local people did not take this advantage. They preferred government jobs rather than private jobs to secure their life. During post-Independence period, some central government offices, organisations and institutions were established in Assam such as several bank branches, various regional offices of different private companies, and establishment of N.F. Railways Head quarters, Gauhati Refinery, Hindustan Fertilizers Corporation Factory, tea gardens and Oil India Limited etc. As a result, Dhobis and

other people were attracted to the region. Through these jobs, they got better accommodation and other facilities with higher salaries which were rarely found in other states of India. The recruitment facilities were also responsible for this migration. They came to Assam to seek economic opportunities in trading, construction works and white collar job. Construction of railways in the state engaged workers mostly from outside Assam. For white collar job workers were mostly appointed from Bengal. The railway and postal services in Assam were pre-dominated by employees from Bengal till recent past. In banking and other commercial establishments also the white collar jobs were occupied mostly by employees from Bengal. It is also a fact that modern education came to Assam very late. Therefore, a large number of professionals such as medical men, lawyers and technicians were encouraged to migrate to Assam from other states. At present, this stream of migration has not stopped. Of those Dhobi and others who still migrate to the region in search of better life, most work as washermen, daily labourers, rickshaw pullers and small traders. They are also spread over all the towns of the state (Field survey conducted during the period 25th Oct-3rd Dec 2015).

V. CONCLUSION:

Dhobis in Assam came as part of migrant population migration of people including Dhobis has played an important role in population growth of the region. The migrants are engaged in different activities in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the state. The geographical location and limited basic infrastructure has resulted in the backwardness of the region. The establishment of petro-chemical complex and paper mills at Jagiroad and Panchgram along with several governments and private companies and government's safeguards has helped them to settle with different occupations.

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