



RESEARCH ARTICLE

BRAHMANS AS CATALYST IN THE PROCESS OF SANSKRITISATION IN THE TRIBAL KINGDOM:  
A STUDY OF THE DIMASA KINGDOM IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

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ABSTRACT

In medieval times different tribal kingdoms emerged in the North Eastern region of India. The Dimasa Kacharis, Ahoms, Jayantias, Tripuris and the Koches experimented with the task of state building which reoriented their kingdom from a tribal to that of a Hinduised kingdom. Sanskritisation which has been used to describe the process of socio-cultural changes occurring in India has been used to study this process of assimilation of the tribals into the Hindu fold. In this process the Brahmins acted as catalysts of change by exercising their influence among the kings through their expertise in Vedic rites, playing the role of religious advisers in state affairs and by providing the tribal kings with a genealogy tracing their descent to a Hindu mythological hero.

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INTRODUCTION

The term Sanskritisation refers to a process between people of lower castes who collectively tries to adopt upper caste practices and beliefs as a preliminary step to acquire higher status. Thus it indicates a process of cultural mobility that is taking place in the traditional social system of India (Sankar Rao, 1990). The term Sanskritisation was first used by Srinivas to describe the process of cultural mobility in traditional social structure of India (Yogendra Singh, 1994). Through this process a caste or a group of people move up the social hierarchy by adopting the style of life associated by tradition with the upper caste. The beaconstar in Sanskritisation process was the Brahman with traditional authority and respectable position accorded to him by Hindu law givers, and a way of life that was highly esteemed by all the others not only because it was brahmanical but because it was regarded as an esteemable way of life and conduct (Srinivas, 1966). However in 1971 Srinivas redefined it as a process by which a low caste, a tribe or other groups change its customs, rituals, ideology and a way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice-born caste who need not necessarily be Brahman.

The following points have been stressed in Sanskritisation:

- By Sanskritisation a caste or a tribal community ventures to gain higher status in society. This usually results in the tribe undergoing Sanskritisation claiming to be a caste and therefore Hindu.
- In Sanskritisation a low caste takes to the conducts, customs and rituals of the higher caste. In Sanskritisation Brahmins alone are not the objects of imitations. Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are also taken as models of socio-cultural changes.
- Economic betterment is not a necessary precondition to Sanskritisation nor does economic development necessarily

lead to Sanskritisation. However sometimes a group (caste, tribe) may start by acquiring political power and this may lead to economic development and Sanskritisation. Economic betterment, the acquisition of political power, education, leadership, and a desire to move up in the hierarchy, are all relevant factors in Sanskritisation, and each case of Sanskritisation may show all or some of these factors mixed up in different measures.

Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee had written that the progressive Sanskritisation of the various pre - Aryan or non- Aryan peoples in their culture, their outlook and their ways of life, form the keynote of India through the ages. In the course of this Sanskritisation the affected people also brought their own spiritual and material values to bear upon the Sanskrit culture which they were adopting and thus helped to modify and enrich in their own circle. The Dimasas (of the Tibeto-Burman stock) are at present recognized as a Scheduled Tribe by the Constitution of India. But during the medieval period they were a great ruling race whose domain covered a large area in Assam as well as the Dhansiri valley in present Nagaland. They had undergone through the process of cultural assimilation due to years of contact with non-tribals which has been termed as Sanskritisation. This process not only altered their ethos but also changed the notions of kingship in the tribal domain.

DISCUSSION

Sanskritisation took place among the Dimasas from the time they were ruling at Maibang if not earlier. While ruling at Dimapur they were free from all Hindu influence (Edward Gait, 2008) Madan Kumar, the son and general of Detcha or Dersongpha, after establishing himself at Maibang in 1540 A.D took the Hindu name of Nirbhaynarayana. Undoubtedly this is the first instance of a tribal king adopting a non-tribal name which became a precedent for future Dimasa rulers to adopt (Bhattacharjee, 1991). The reign of Nirbhaynarayana seems to be peaceful though uneventful. But his origin is more important from

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the point of view of the beginning and development of a new social and political order in the Dimasa kingdom based on brahmanical Hinduism. At Maibang, the process of state formation and structure of the Dimasa state entered into a crucial phase due to the growing influence of Brahmanical Hinduism (Bhattacharjee, 1991). How the Brahmans gradually crept into socio-political system of the Dimasas has been cited with the help of legends and traditions by Prof. Bhattacharjee in his valuable work, '*Social and Polity Formations in Pre-colonial North-East India*'. According to legends mentioned by him the prince (son of Desongpha) during his escape met a Brahman Sannyasi who predicted that he would have soon a very good fortune. Being charmed by his divine qualities Nirbhaynarayana offered him a position of honour in his court and accepted him as his Dharmadi Guru (Dharmadyaksha). This Brahmana guru who had won the confidence of the royal family asserted that the Dimasa heritage was as old as the Hindu Epic Mahabharata and that Hidimba, the ancestress of the Dimasa tribe was married to the Pandava prince Bhim during his exile and a son named Ghototkoch was born out of the wedlock. Ghototkoch who was their first ruler died at the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The Brahman pundits thus provided the Dimasa royal family with a genealogy which started with Bhimsena. J.B Bhattacharjee is of the opinion that the facts and fictions mingled together had a strong impact in inspiring the Dimasa rulers and aristocracy with intense pride in their Hindu origin and they turned to be champions of their new faith. The government in the Dimasa kingdom was similar to those of ancient or medieval Indian system based on monarchy. The Raja or the King for all practical purposes was aided by a Council of ministers. The Rajpandit was the chief inspector of Hindu Law and the Qazi, a Bengali Muslim, well conversant with Muslim Law helped taking in the administration of justice

The Dimasa kings used Hindu symbols or legends in these recorded materials such as Herembeswara or Herembadhiswara in order to project the might and majesty of the Raja, the title of Maharajadhiraja, Rajendra Nripakulachuramani and Prochanda Pratapa were prefixed by several Sri even sometimes numbering to the extent of 108 (Bhattacharjee, 1984). The coins and inscriptions issued by the Dimasa kings is a strong indication of the growing influence of Sanskrit, Bengali and Assamese languages among the royalty. In line with the Hindu kings of other parts of the country the Dimasa kings not only issued coins but also assumed high-sounding Hindu titles. In a coin of Nirbhaynarayana issued in 1481 saka (1559 A.D) he is described as Haragauricharanaparayana Nirbhaynarayana Hedemba Vamsaja and on the reverse Sri Sri Nirbhaynarayana Devasya Saka 1481 A.D (Rhodes and Bose, 2006). This coin is still regarded the first among the coins of the Dimasa kings. The earliest evidence of the use of Bengali in the Dimasa state is found in a stone inscription issued by Meghanarayana at Maibang in 1498 saka (1576 A.D) on the occasion of the construction of the masonry gateway. It is inscribed in Assamese/Bengali character, but the text is in Bengali. The inscription of the rock cut temple at Maibang was issued during the reign of Raja Harishchandranarayana in saka 1683 (1761 A.D) and also another inscription issued by the same ruler at Khaspur in 1693 saka (1771 A.D) revealed similar features. Raja Kirtichandranarayana (1735-45 A.D) issued two sanads on 29 Bhadra, 1658 saka (1736 A.D) which were written in Bengali prose style betray words similar to the Barak Valley dialect.

Due to political exigencies the members of the royal family and a large number of aristocracies left Maibang and moved to the plains of Cachar where they set up their capital at Khaspur. Raja Krishnachandra from the very beginning pursued the course of a true Hindu ruler by extending patronage to the worship of Ranachandi, Kachakanti, Siva, Madan Mohan, Ghora Chandi and Lakshminarayan. For the propagation and veneration to the Vedic religion, he undertook various measures for construction of temples, excavation of tanks, appointment of Sevaitis with adequate grants of Devottara and Brahmottora lands. Raja Krishnachandra being influenced by Vedic orthodoxy involved himself in religious pursuits. Although a devotee

of both Siva and Devi, after his marriage with the Manipuri princess Induprova he is said to have developed leaning towards Vaishnavism. Since his acceptance of Vaishnavism, he undertook a number of pilgrimages to sacred places such as Navadwip, Varanasi, Mathura, Prayaga, Haridwar etc. He was interested in the study of Sanskrit as well as Bengali.

Notwithstanding the Herambo rulers' proclivity towards Hinduism, the orthodox Brahmans continued to treat them as untouchables on the ground that their genetic mother was non-Vedic in her creed. Therefore, the crafty Brahmans suggested to Krishnachandra to undergo the ritual of Hiranyagarbha ceremony for getting a proper place in the Hindu society (Barpujari, 1997). Accordingly in 1790 A.D, both Krishnachandra and his younger brother Govindachandra with other members of the royal family were made to enter into the womb of copper effigy of a cow coated with gold (Sen, 2003). After coming out of it, they were proclaimed to have taken rebirth as pure Hindu of the Kshatriya caste. At the close of the ceremony, the Brahmans divided the plaited gold among themselves, in the feast which followed the ceremony both Krishnachandra and Govindachandra served water to the Brahmans. The aristocracy which settled in Cachar formed a Hindu caste called Barman and was proclaimed as Kshatriya by the Brahmans and allowed to put on the sacred. The acceptance of the title Barman signifies their identification with the ruling Kshatriya caste, but their social and religious functions remained consistent with the dictum of the Vedas in collaboration with Brahman priests.

It is known from reliable records that the Herambo rulers patronized the brahmanas for the propagation of learning and literature. The new statutes issued in Bengali reveals that these were drafted under the influence of Brahmans. Sanskritisation is prominent in respect of literature. A portion of Cachar bordering North Cachar Hills, however, remained under the rule of Tamradhvajnarayana (1695-1708 A.D). During his time the Maibang court was adored by a galaxy of Bengali scholars who were well-known for their literary talents. Some Puranas and a portion of epics were rendered into Bengali and some more were also written on the basis of the Shastras, either in Bengali with parallel Sanskrit as administrative manuals etc. Rani Chandraprabha, queen of Tamradhvajnarayana, was an admirer of Bengali literature. During the rule of her son Suradarpa, Maibang court was a centre of literary works in Sanskrit and Bengali and religious discussion. Some of the Dimasa rulers like Suradarpanarayana, Ramachandra, Krishnachandra and Govindachandra composed devotional songs dedicated to Goddess Ranachandi in the tradition of Shyama Sangit (Malsi songs), which are still popular in Cachar.

The Dimasa kingdom at Maibang was a powerful one. Jasanarayana and Tamradhvajnarayana who ruled at Maibang were powerful rulers, but their successors Krishnachandra and Govindachandra (the last two Dimasa rulers) were weak and imbecile. The latter kings were inclined towards religious activities and seemed to have neglected state affairs. Undoubtedly, their proclivity towards Brahmanical Hinduism as well as Vaishnavism and cultural equation with the contemporary Hindu rulers of Bengal and their own Bengali subjects were no less responsible for the decline of their kingdom. In their difficult days the Raja took refuge in religious avocations and expensive pilgrimages to holy places outside their kingdom with their royal paraphernalia, with a large number of retinue. It was a precarious time for the Dimasa kingdom as it was going through turmoil. The Burmese incursions in Assam, the adventure of the Manipuri princes in the Dimasa kingdom and the growing dependence of the king on the British proved to be the Achilles heel which resulted in the British annexation of Cachar in 1830 A.D. In 1882 A.D Sambudhan revolted against the British rule. Whatever the character and impact of Sambudhan's revolt in North Cachar, it proved beyond doubt that the people living in the hills of North Cachar were apprehensive of the loss of their identity due to the increasingly brought into contact with two great civilizations-the western civilization of the British and the Sanskrit civilization of the Hindu brahmanical community.

## Conclusion

During the course of their migration from Dimapur to Maibang and thence to Khaspur in present Cachar the Dimasas came into contact with many tribes with whom they cultivated friendly relations. In the plains of Cachar the Dimasas who accepted Hinduism came to be known as Barmans (aristocracy) and were allowed to put on the sacred thread. The Kshatriya status was acquired by the ruling clan and the tribal aristocracy. Here the Bengali culture had a great influence upon them. Likewise, the Dimasas living in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam show close affinity towards Assamese culture. Sanskritisation in the Dimasa society has been taking place without any interruption from the time they ruled in Maibang in Dima Hasao (erstwhile North Cachar Hills); a process which accelerated during the time of Raja Krishnachandra and Govindachandra, the last two kings among the Dimasas. In historical perspective it will not be incorrect to say that Sanskritisation of the Dimasas took place in both Brahmanic as well as Kshatriya models.

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