UNIT 11 : DEVELOPMENT OF NEW SOCIAL IDEAS

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will able to-

- understand the emergence of caste and class in ancient Assam,
- analyse aryanisation in ancient Assam,
- discuss the key aspects of Varnasramadharma.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

Ancient Assam was known as Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa. The name Pragjyotisha is mentioned in both the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The earliest reference of the Name Kamrupa dates back to 4th Century C.E. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta refers to an eastern frontier of the Guptas as Kamrupa. As we have discussed in the previous units, ancient Assam was the homeland of different linguistic and racial groups who have migrated from different parts of South east Asia. It was inhabited by different non-Aryan tribal groups prior to the Aryan migration to the Brahmaputra valley. The reference of Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa in both the epics

and in Allahabad Pillar Inscription indicates connections between ancient Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa and the other parts of the Indian subcontinent. The use of Sanskrit as the language and Brahmi as the script in the earliest inscriptions datable to 5th century C.E., discovered in Assam further establishes the Aryan influence in ancient Assam. Moreover, the large scale land grants made to the Brahimns in the following centuries too strengthen the view.

As we know, in ancient India the society was divided into four Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Within the four varnas, the society was further divided into numerous subgroups known as caste or jati based on occupation, social status, birth etc. With the Aryan migration, ancient Assam too witnessed the influence of the Varna and Jati system which was a major component of the Vedic or Brahmanical religion. In this unit we will discuss the emergence of these new social ideas in ancient Assam and how the society was reshaped through the process of Aryanisation.

11.3 EMERGENCE OF CASTE IN ANCIENT ASSAM

Before discussing the emergence of caste in the context of ancient Assam, let us briefly recall the emergence of a caste based society in Indian context. The origin of the caste system in Indian society dates back to the 1500 BCE which refers to the early Vedic period in Indian history. With the advent of the Indo-Aryans in the Indian sub-continent after 200 years of the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation brought tremendous changes in the socio-political and economic life in the sub-continent marking the beginning of the Vedic civilisation. During the period the four vedas and other literatures based on the vedas were composed which outlined various norms for society and individuals. The Rig veda, earliest among the vedas was composed between the period 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE, which is known as the early vedic period. The Rigveda mentions about the four Varnas based on birth which later become the base of caste system in India. However, the Rigvedic period did not show a caste based society as the society was a pastoral society and segmentary in nature marking the simple division of labour and low surplus. The later vedic period show significant changes in the society.

From 1000 BCE onwards the beginning of settled agriculture resulted in increase in surplus, monarchical development and expansion in trade and crafts. With an advance mode of production, the society to entered into a complex phase braking the prevailing tribal ties and making distinct social distance among different groups. The division of labour became complex and hierarchical. Groups of people who were not directly involved in production could now appropriate surplus due to their ritual status or control over the means of production. This period saw the emergence of both caste and class in their full forms, with the brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras forming the dominant castes and the practice of untouchability.



LET US KNOW

A segmentary society refers to a social structure characterized a number of autonomous segments or groups that are linked by kinship ties. The Rigvedic society was segmentary in nature consist of different small autonomous groups.

Due to lack of evidences it is difficult to date back the caste system in ancient Assam. It was probably unknown to the mainland Indian civilizations till the third BCE. As mentioned earlier it was only in the great epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which mentioned about Pragjyotishpura for the first time. Inscriptions from the Gupta as mentions about Kamrupa as *pratyanta* which means a peripheral kingdom. The above mentioned earliest sources mentioned ancient Assam as the land inhabited by the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids, Cheenas or people belonging to the regions beyond the Himalayas and Mlecchas or barbarians who were outside the Aryan race. Apart from the epics and Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta the other sources to reconstruct the history of caste and class in ancient Assam are religious texts such as the Kalika Puran and Yogini Tantra and available copper and stone inscriptions of different ruling dynasties of ancient Assam.

11.3.1 Indo-Aryan Migration to Assam

As we have discussed, the earliest inhabitants of ancient Assam were alien to the Brahmanical or Aryan traditions. They were regarded as the Kiratas, Cheenas, Mlecchas etc. in the vedic literatures. Till today, Assam and the Northeastern part of India is the homeland of different tribes of different linguistic and racial groups with their distinct social and economic practices. It was only after the Aryan influence a caste based division gradually came up in the social life of Assam.

Let us now briefly look at the Aryan Migration to ancient Assam. According to the Puranic legends Narakasura, a revered figure in Vaishnava tradition, is credited with settling Aryans and Brahmins in Pragjyotishpur, a move that marked the beginning of Brahmanical influence in the region. His devotion to Vishnu and the widespread worship of various deities further solidified the influence of Brahmanical religion. However, historic records of large scale the Aryan migration to ancient Assam is dated back to the 5th century C.E. Accoring to scholars following the decline of the Gupta Empire in the 5th century C.E., there was a notable migration of Brahmins to Kamrup. The Umachal Rock Inscription and Nagajari-Khanikargaon Rock Inscriptions of 5th century C.E. written in Sanskrit language and Brahmi script indicates that Sanskrit became an official language in ancient Assam by 5th century C.E. marking the process of Aryanisation among the ruling elites. In the following centuries, land grants made to the Brahmanas by the rulers of Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa manifest the migration of people of highest caste hierarchy to ancient Assam. Under the Varmana rulers Brahmanas were attracted to migrated to Assam from North Bengal by making land grants and other gifts. The Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription of Bhaskaravarmana records land grants made to Brahmins from Bengal by king Bhutivarmana during the latter part of the 5th century C.E. According to sources, king Bhaskarvarmana brought

Brahmanas from Kanyakubja or Kanauj to settle in Gauda. The land grants of succeeding dynasties in Pragjyotisha-kamrupa records the donation of lands and Brahmana settlement under different rulers.

According to some scholars the kayasthas were another group of Aryans who migrated to ancient Assam. The Kayasthas were identified as decedents of Nagara-Brahmanas who migrated to eastern India. Moreover, the Kalitas are regarded as the first Aryans to be settled in ancient Assam by some scholars. However, some scholars believe that they belonged to the Alpine groups and not a pure decedent of Aryans.



LET US KNOW

The Alpines or Alpine-Armenoids is a group of people who had migrated from central Asia. They entered India during the period 3rd to 2nd millennium B.C.E. The Alpine people are characterized by brachycephalic or board-headed. According to K. L. Barua, the Alpine people migrated and settled in East India prior to the advent of the Vedic-Aryans. The Kalitas of Assam supposed to have been of the Alpine origin.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Which Inscription of Gupta age mentions about Kamrupa for the first time?

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Q 2: The Umachal Rock Inscription was written in which script?

a) Brahmi Script

b) Devnagari Script

c) Kharosthi Script

d) None of the above

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Q 3: The Nidhanpur Copper Inscription belongs to…… .

11.3.2 Aryanisation and Varnasramadharma in Ancient Assam

The Indo-Aryan or Aryan migration to Ancient Assam resulted in significant social change in the North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. With the influence of the Vedic culture the pre-Aryan tribal society went through tremendous changes. The tribal people lived beyond the influence of Vedic customs and manners were gradually incorporated to the Vedic customs. Many scholars use the term 'Aryanisation' to define the process of incorporating the non-Aryan tribes to the Brahmanical system. Another term used to denote the process is 'Sanskritization'. As we have discussed earlier in this unit, this process was patronized by the different ruling dynasties of Ancient Assam. The settlement of Brahmana families through '*Agrahara*' settlement in different parts of the region by rulers of different dynasties resulted in spread of Brahmanical influence including use of Sanskrit language, acceptance of vedic rituals and customs among the subjects. The prevalence of Sanskrit language further reflects the deep-seated influence of Brahmanical religion in ancient Assam. As mentioned above, Sanskrit was used in official documents and religious ceremonies, indicating the integration of Brahmanical practices into the region's cultural fabric.

The expansion of *Aryadharma* or Brahmanical religion in ancient Assam was a gradual process. Historical records suggest that this process began with the Aryanisation of the northeastern region, where tribal customs were gradually replaced by Aryan practices. Royal patronage significantly contributed to the spread of Brahmanical religion. Kings such as Bhutivarman (510-555 A.D.) expanded the kingdom's territory and donated land to Brahmins, which helped establish *Aryadharma* as the dominant religion in the region. The integration of Brahmins into administrative roles and positions of influence further bolstered the spread of Brahmanical religion. Brahmins served as ministers, administrators, and court

poets, influencing various aspects of society and governance beyond religious matters.

Varnashramadharma is the ancient Indian system of hierarchical social organization based on *varnas* (castes) and *ashramas* (stages of life). *Varnashramadharma* played significant role in shaping the societal structure and cultural practices in the ancient Assam. This social order, characterized by the division of society into four varnas i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras and four ashramas i.e. Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa, was prevalent in ancient Assam by the 7th century C.E. The 7th century C.E. Nidhanpur copper plate of Bhaskarvarman indicates that the king was a follower of *Varnashramadharma*. The spread of Varnashramadharma in ancient Assam can be traced through the royal patronage extended to Brahmins, land grants made to them, and the prevalence of Sanskrit language. The rulers of Assam, including the Varmans, the Salastambhas, and the Palas, claimed descent from *Varaha Vishnu* and *Bhumidevi*, through their offspring Naraka. The land grants made to Brahmins by successive rulers of Assam, starting from the 6th century C.E., played a significant role in the spread of Varnashrama dharma. Brahmins, enjoying royal patronage and near-monopoly over formal education and learning, became influential in Assamese society. They held administrative posts, performed coronation ceremonies, and contributed to the preservation of cultural and religious traditions. However, despite the active royal patronage, the varnasramadharma remained more of an ideal in Assam, as evidenced by the absence of strict occupational specialization among the people.



LET US KNOW

According to Puranic legend, Naraka or Naraka Asura is believed to come to Pragjyotishpura from Videh (Present day North Bihar) and became a king. He was born of the earth (Bhumi) by Vishn, in his pig incarnation. The Kalika Purana explains that Naraka's mother, Bhumidevi, conceived him when she was menstruating, making him impure. Despite this, Naraka was believed to have been offered to King Janaka of Videha and later brought to Pragjyotisa, where he settled many Brahmins and granted them land. However, scholars argue that Naraka was non-Aryan ruler. The Kirata origin king was linked to the Vedic line to assimilate the non-Aryans to Aryan tradition.

11.3.3 Caste System

The emergence of caste (jati) in ancient Assam can be traced through historical and mythological sources, particularly in relation to the process of Aryanisation. The Aryan influence in ancient Assam divided the society into three categories- the Aryans, the Aryanised and the non-Aryans. The first category was consisting of mainly by the Brahmans. As stated earlier, the land grants made by the rulers led to the Brahmanas' prominence in Assamese society. They not only became landowners but also held administrative positions and performed important rituals.

However, despite the active patronage of the ruling dynasties, the varnasramadharma remained more of an ideal than a practical reality in Assam. Occupational specialization was not clearly defined, with references to Brahmanas skilled in various professions like charioteering and archery.

In ancient Assam, Brahmins occupied the highest position in the social hierarchy. The Dubi and Nidhanpur Copper Plates of king Bhaskarvarmana mentions about six fold duties viz., yajna,

yajana, adhyana,adhyapana, dana and pratigraha performed by the Brahmanas. In Ancient Assam the Brahmanas were divided into two groups—the Vaisnavites and the Saktas. The Vaisnavites were further sub-divided based on their sectarian affiliation within the Vaisnava tradition.Epigraphic evidence also mentions Brahmanas of different gotras and belonging to different Vedic schools and pravaras, indicating the diversity within the Brahmana caste in ancient Assam. The Nidhanpur grant mentions about 64 gotras among the Brahmans. The Brahmanas practiced endogamy, marrying within their own caste. As mentioned earlier, the Brahmanas enjoyed a higher social status by performing religious rituals and engaging themselves in education and learning. They lived on the surplus production produced in the lands donated to them. The Brahmans also joined the higher administrative posts.

The kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, Daivajnas (Ganakas), Vaidyas etc. hold hierarchical position next to the Brahmans in the society. These castes were often associated with specific professions or administrative roles in ancient Assam. The Kayastha caste, as mentioned in the Nidhanpur Copper plate was a group involved in marking boundaries and settling disputes. They were considered officers and professionals, and their status may have evolved into a distinct caste over time. The Karana caste performed similar duties as the Kayasthas and might be absorbed into the Kayastha caste later. The origin of the Kayastha caste in ancient Assam is still debatable. Some historians link the Kayasthas with the Nagara Brahmans while others with the Kshatriyas. The Lekhakas were another important caste in ancient Assam who performed duties as a scribe and is often associated with the Kayastha caste. The Daivajnas or Ganakas as mentioned in the Smriti Candrika of Brihaspati, were associated with justice in courts. They were known for their expertise in astrology and planetary worship.Vaidyas or physicians, mentioned in various inscriptions, held a prestigious position in society. They were respected for their knowledge and

skills of medicine. The Kalita were another important caste in Assam who is dated back to the ancient times. The Kalitas probably hold similar position as the Kayasthas next to the Brahmanas. However, there is no direct references in inscriptions about the Kalitas. As mentioned above, some suggest that they were descendants of the Alpines who assimilated into the caste system in Assam while others believe that that they were Kshatriyas.The Koches were probably another important group within the caste system. They might consist of people converted from non-Aryan tribes. Kaivartas (Fisherman), Kumbhakaras (Pottery Makers), Nauki (Boatman), Nishadas etc. were some lower professional groups who held comparatively lower positions in society.

In ancient Assam the Caste or Jati system was not so rigid as compared to the other parts of India. Though the society was influenced by Brahmanical customs the caste based society was mainly divided into two groups – the Brhahmans and the shudras (consist of all non-brahmans). Moreover, as we have already discussed the Brahmans also performed other duties like charioteering and archery.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 4: What were the six fold duties performed by the Brahmanas?

Q 5: Who were known as Vaidyas in ancient Assam?

11.4 EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS

Social class refers to hierarchical social stratifications based on socio-economic and political factors. In simple, it means the division of the society into distinct groups based on resource distribution, occupation, social status etc. Tribal societies are often regarded as classless societies with limited division of labour and limited scope of surplus production. In ancient Assam, the process of Aryanisation resulted in de-tribalisation of the society to a

certain extent leading the society to a new phase with division of labour, emergence of distinct castes and occupational groups and introduction of surplus production. Land grants made to the Brahmans in large scale from the reign of the Varmanas indicates the emergence of a class based society in ancient Assam.

Based on the epigraphic records it can be assumed that the society was divided into different social classes. The first group was consisting of the ruling elites. This include the king and the higher officers including the governors and vassal chiefs. The land owners consist another important social class. In ancient Assam particularly the Brahmans hold large tracts of tax free lands donated as form of royal patronage. As epigraphic records mention, wealthy merchants played important in ancient Assam. The other social group was made of the peasants, artisans, lower occupational groups including the blacksmiths, fisherman, pottery makers etc.



LET US KNOW

Detribalisation refers to the social process by which tribal communities lose their traditional or tribal identities and adopt customs, beliefs and identities of mainstream societies.



11.5 LET US SUM UP

After going throug this unit, you will learn-

- Ancient Assam was referred to as Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa, with mentions in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta.
- Aryan influence in ancient Assam is evident from the use of Sanskrit language and Brahmi script in inscriptions.
- The Aryanisation process in ancient Assam led to the emergence of the caste system, with Brahmins occupying the highest social position.
- Other castes in ancient Assam included Kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, Daivajnas, Vaidyas, and Kalitas, each with specific roles

and status.

- The caste system in ancient Assam was not as rigid as in other parts of India, with more fluid social divisions.
- The varnasramadharma system, with its four varnas and four ashramas, was prevalent in ancient Assam by the 7th century CE.
- The society in ancient Assam was divided into Aryans, Aryanised, and non-Aryans, with Brahmins forming the highest category.
- In ancient Assam, the process of Aryanisation resulted in de-tribalisation of the society to a certain extent leading the society to a new phase with division of labour, emergence of distinct castes and occupational groups and introduction of surplus production.



11.6 FURTHER READING

1) Baruah S.L., A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers 2003, New Delhi.
2) Choudhury, Pratap Chandra, The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D. Spectrum Publications. 1987. Panbazar Guwhati.
3) Gait, Edward, A History of Assam, LBS Publications 2005. Guwhati.
4) Barpujari, H.K. (ed), The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. 1, Publication Board Assam, 2007, Guwahati.



11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The fourth century Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta.

Ans to Q No. 2: a) Brahmi Script

Ans to Q No. 3: Varmana ruler Bhaskarvarmana

Ans to Q No. 4: The six fold duties performed by the Brahmanas are yajna, yajana, adhyana,adhyapana, dana and pratigraha.

Ans to Q No. 5: The physicians were known as Vaidyas in ancient Assam.



11.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very short questions (Answer each questions in about 50 words)

Q 1: What are the two names by which ancient Assam was known?

Q 2: Which inscription mentions the eastern frontier of the Guptas as Kamrupa?

Q 3: What term is used to define the process of incorporating non-Aryan tribes into the Brahmanical system?

Q 4: Name the four varnas as per the Vedic or Brahmanical religion.

B) Short questions (Answer each questions in about 150 words)

Q 1: How did the Aryan migration influence the social structure of ancient Assam?

Q 2: What role did royal patronage play in the spread of Brahmanical religion in ancient Assam?

Q 3: Describe the emergence of caste (jati) in ancient Assam.

Q 4: Write a short note on emergence of social class in ancient Assam.

C) Long Questions (Answer each questions in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the influence of the Aryan migration on the emergence of social classes and the caste system in ancient Assam.

Q 2: Explain the process of Aryanisation in ancient Assam and its impact on the socio-cultural life of the region.

Q 4: How did the varnasramadharma shape the societal structure and cultural practices in ancient Assam?

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