

Socio-Economic Profile of Kaibartta (Fisherman) Community – A Case Study in the Naduar Block of the Undivided Sonitpur District, Assam

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Abstract:

The caste system is still prevalent in Indian society which reflects a shameful picture in today's modern World. The constitution of India, however guarantees several provisions for Scheduled Caste to safeguard and promote their cultural, social, educational and economic rights in order to bring them in the mainstream of the greater society. The Kaibarttas are one of the major communities of Scheduled caste population in Assam. Their main occupation is fishing followed by agriculture. The entire study is based on extensive household survey in the Kaibartta and General Caste Assamese Hindu villages of the study area. In this paper a sincere effort has been made to study and explore the socio-economic status and living conditions of Kaibarttas. To find out the extent of poverty and ill being among Kaibarttas compared to General caste Assamese Hindu, a statistical measure called Household Deprivation Index (HDI) is used. On the basis of HDI values estimated, it is found that there is very little number of households of General caste Assamese Hindu village of the study area where deprivation and ill-being is very high. Majority of these households suffer from medium level of deprivation index range of 0.4 to 0.6. But the level of deprivation is remarkably high among Kaibarttas. The overall analysis gives a dismal picture of the socio-

economic status and living conditions of the Kaibarttas inhabiting in the rural areas. Moreover it is also found that the extent of deprivation is more or less similarly spread across all the rural households in the study area. Biasness in the allocation and as well as implementation of developmental policies in favour of urban areas is the main reason behind such disparity.

Key words: Kaibartta, Deprivation Index, Poverty, Disparity and Backwardness

Introduction:

The presence of caste based social divisions among population is probably the most disgraceful and darker side of Indian society. The prevalence of caste system in Indian society is one of the most discriminatory forms of social stratification. This stratification and hierarchical divisions is based on birth rather than occupation. This process determines the individual's type of occupation that he/she will adopt to carry out livelihood and entitlements in Indian society, irrespective of his/her interest, need, initiative, aptitude, educational attainment or skill and capability acquired. In this way the Indian society is grouped into two sections the privileged and the unprivileged on the basis of the individual's belongingness to the family type and caste lines. The privileged section belongs to the upper castes (General) while the unprivileged section belongs to the downtrodden or low castes. The lower castes were suppressed and exploited by the upper castes since time immemorial in the history of Indian society. In order to overcome these social differences and to raise these suppressed section of the society the Constitution of India identified the marginalized classes as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) respectively. The Constitution of India, guarantees several provisions for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes to safeguard and promote their cultural, social, educational and economic rights in order

to bring them in the mainstream of the greater society. Under Article 341 (I) of the Constitution of India listed and declared the Schedule Castes as socio-economically backward and downtrodden. The total population of Assam in 2001 Census has been 26,655,528. Of them 1,825,949 persons are Scheduled Castes (SCs), constituting 6.9 per cent of the total population of the state. The state has registered 10 per cent decadal growth of SC population in 1991-2001. There are sixteen notified (Under Amendment Act, 1976) SCs, and all have been enumerated in 2001 Census. *Kaibartta* (31.8 per cent) and *Namasudra* (30.4 per cent) are the two major SCs in the state sharing more than half of the total population. *Patni* (8.3 per cent), *Jhalo* (4.2 per cent), *Muchi* (3.9 per cent), *Sutradhar* (3.4 per cent), *Bhuinmali* (3.2 per cent), *Hira* (3 per cent), *Dhupi* (2.7 per cent), *Brittial Bania* (2.6 per cent), and *Jalkeot* (1.3 per cent) also have sizeable population in the state. SCs namely *Lalbegi*, *Mahara*, *Dugla*, *Mehtar*, and *Bansphor* each accounts for less than one per cent. All of these communities follows Hinduism.

Out of these sixteen SC communities some are indigenous and they are distinguished as Assamese SC, while rest are non-Assamese. The Assamese SC communities are- *Kaibartta*, *Brittial*, *Banka/ Bania*, *DhupiDhobi*, *Hira*, *Jalekeot/Doam* and *Mali*. While the *Bansphor*, *Lalbegi*, *Mahara*, *Mehtor/ Bhangi*, *Munchi/Rishi*, *Patni*, *Namasudra* etc. are non-indigenous SC community of Assam. They are mostly migrated from different states of India like- Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa. But the Bengali Muslim Fishermen are mostly migrated from Bangladesh and are not included under SC.

Among a number of indigenous SC communities of Assam the *Kaibarttas* particularly pursue agriculture as their major occupation apart from fishing. Most of them devote their times in agriculture during cultivation season mostly paddy while rest of the months they are involved in fishing and its

trade. For those who do not have their own agricultural land or have limited cultivable land takes land on lease from the landowners and cultivates on the land with his own expenses and on return gives half of the share of the harvested crop (paddy) to the landowner. This system is known as 'Aadhi' in local Assamese term i.e., half to half harvest share. But this system is also gradually vanishing as the landowners themselves are cultivating their lands with improved variety of seeds, fertilizers and financial assistance provided by the Rural Banks and Agricultural Department.

Table 1: Scheduled Caste Population of Assam, 2001 Census

SL. No.	Name of the Scheduled Caste	Total population	Proportion to the total SC population
1	All Scheduled Castes	1,825,949	100%
2	Bansphor	14,760	0.8
3	Bhainmali	57,974	3.2
4	Brittial Bania	47,974	2.6
5	Dhupi	49,929	2.7
6	Dugla	6,364	0.3
7	Hira	55,106	3.0
8	Jalkeot	23,511	1.3
9	Jhalo	77,533	4.2
10	Kaibartta	581,559	31.8
11	Lalbegi	552	0.0
12	Mahara	1,725	0.1
13	Mehtar	12,715	0.7
14	Muchi	70,954	3.9
15	Namasudra	555,621	30.4
16	Patni	151,992	8.3
17	Sutradhar	62,032	3.4

Source: Census of India, 2001, Basic Statistical Abstract, Assam 2001

Fishing is another important occupation of indigenous Assamese SC community i.e., *Kaibarttas*. Earlier fish catching and selling was exclusively done by the indigenous Assamese fishing communities. But now the fishermen from other states have taken over this age old trade from the indigenous fisherman communities of Assam threatening their existence

and livelihood. It is been also noticed that some affluent persons (big traders) from the non-indigenous fishing communities began to patronize this trade and has taken over the wetlands (beels), rivers etc in auction. Thus a sizeable share of the catch has to be given to the *Mahajans* (big traders) who provides the capital. The *Mahajans* lend money to the fishermen, the fisherman in return have to pay 40 percent for small catches and for bigger catches 60 percent to the *Mahajans* and the middlemen. The poor fishermen have no alternative but to agree with the terms and conditions of the *Mahajans*. The big traders or *Mahajans* generally prefers the fishermen from other states rather than to the local ones. Consequently the indigenous Assamese fishermen are being exploited in the hands of big traders and are suffering from acute poverty due to financial constraints and are living in deplorable conditions devoid of minimum basic amenities of life like- drinking water, sanitation, electricity, poor housing etc. More than 50 percent of the total populations of the SCs communities are living in below poverty line.

In this paper an effort has been made to understand the problems of the *Kaibrattas* of Rural Assam who are living in the grip of extreme poverty and backwardness which will definitely help the planners to formulate strategies for their development.

Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic profile and level of deprivation among the *Kaibrattas* of Assam.
2. To understand the status of drinking water, sanitation, electricity and living conditions in the *Kaibrattas* and Scheduled castes dominated villages.
3. To suggest measures for the upliftment and improvement of the conditions of *Kaibrattas* in order to bring them within the mainstream of developmental process.

Study Area:

The Sonitpur district is located on the North bank of Brahmaputra River; within longitudes 92°16'E-93°43'E and latitudes 26°30'N-27°01'N. The district is bounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the North, river Brahmaputra in the South, Lakhimpur district in the East and Darrang district in the West. The total Geographical area of the Sonitpur district is 5324 sq.km. The district headquarters is Tezpur and there are three sub-divisions -Tezpur, Biswanath Chariali and Gohpur. On 15th of August 2015 on the eve of Independence Day, the Biswanath Chariali is declared as a separate district of Assam officially. But for the administrative set up as a district will take some time. So the earlier undivided Sonitpur district is considered for study. There are 1615 number of villages (including 19 under BTAD), and 5 towns (Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Rangapara, Biswanath Chariali and Gohpur). It has 14 community development blocks. It stands among the largest districts of Assam. In terms of area Sonitpur is the second largest district of Assam after Karbi Anglong district. The Brahmaputra River forms the South boundary of the district. A number of rivers which originate in the Himalayan foothills flow southward and ultimately fall in Brahmaputra River. There are number of River Island in Brahmaputra River locally known as Chars or Chaporis. They are generally sandy. Some chars are large enough and fit for habitation and cultivation. Different communities like *Bodo*, *Mishing*, *Kaibattra* (fishing community), etc. residing in these Char (river bank) and forest village areas are living in a deplorable conditions without having good education, health care, sanitation and minimum basic amenities of life.

Fig.1: Administrative map (Red spots indicate the sample community development block)



According to 2011 census, Sonitpur has the population of 19,25,975, while according to 2001, total population was 16,77,874, which indicates a growth rate of 15.67% over the decade. The population density is 365 inhabitants per sq. km. The sex-ratio is estimated as 946 females for every 1000 males. The Scheduled tribe population constitutes 6.50 percent of the total population of the district. Around 86.76 percent of the scheduled caste population of the district inhabits in the rural areas while only 13.22 percent resides in urban areas. The literacy rate of Sonitpur district is not satisfactory. The literacy rate of Sonitpur according to 2001 census was estimated to be 59.07 percent while in case of Assam it was estimated to be 63.25 percent. According to 2011 census the total literacy rate of the district is 67.34 percent while the literacy rate among the SCs is 57.76 percent, which is below the total literacy rate of Assam which stands at 73.18 percent and 74.04 percent as national average. The gender gap in literacy rate among SCs is quite high which signifies the low status of women among the Scheduled caste communities.

Table 2: Literacy Rate among Major SCs of Sonitpur District (2001)

Sl.no.	Name of the Scheduled Caste	Total	Male	Female
1	All Scheduled Castes	52.7	73.7	58.1
2	Bhuinmali	70.2	79.8	64.0
3	Brittial Bania	76.0	88.6	73.0
4	Dhupi	77.0	83.1	68.3
5	Hira	72.5	82.7	61.8
6	Jalkeot	69.3	78.9	58.8
7	Jhalo	52.8	64.3	40.3
8	Kaibartta	72.1	80.5	63.3
9	Muchi	47.9	60.4	34.2
10	Namasudra	60.2	70.1	49.4
11	Patni	74.9	81.5	69.9
12	Sutradhar	61.2	76.6	57.2

Source: District statistical handbook, 2001

Methodology:

As the *Kaibrattas* are mostly concentrated near the river banks, so the southern part of the Naduar block is considered for study. A village is considered to be a Kaibartta village if more than 50 percent of the total households in the village belong to *Kaibratta* community. Similarly a village is said to be a General caste *Assamese Hindu* village if 50 percent or more households in the village belongs to the same as mentioned. For primary survey, two Kaibratta villages viz., Chengelimara and Diplonga and two General caste Assamese villages viz., Niz Borbhogia and Murhadol located at four different corners of the study area were considered for intensive study. The sample of the study comprises of total 300 households, of which 120 belongs to the *Kaibratta* community (SC) and rest 180 belongs to the General caste *Assamese Hindu* Community. The entire study is primarily based on the field survey data collected from sample households with the help of a series of questionnaire prepared for the purpose. The sample units are selected on the basis of purposive random sampling technique. The secondary data on the other hand is collected from the authentic sources like the

District Statistical Handbook, Primary Census abstract, Population Census Report, journals, books, articles of online and offline sources etc. for study. To find out the extent of poverty and ill being among *Kaibarttas* compared to General caste Assamese, a Simple descriptive statistical measure, Household Deprivation Index (HDI) is being used on the basis of selected indicators of socio-economic development. These indicators are named as X_1 ($i= 1, 2, 3, \dots, 10$) and defined as follows:

- 1) Households without electricity and drinking water within the premises: X_1 , if it is found to be lacking in such facilities then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 2) Households without sanitary facilities and practices open defecation: X_2 , if it is found to be lacking then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 3) Households where living conditions are extremely bad (congested, Kutcha Structure, does not have separate kitchen): X_3 , if it is found to be lacking then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 4) Households where dependency ratio is very high and have only single earning member: X_4 , if it is found to exist then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 5) Households lacking cultivable land, livestock, farm equipments: X_5 , if it is found to be lacking then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 6) Households lacking food security: X_6 , (If the rice stock at home is found to be less than 10 kg, the family is defined as food insecure), if yes then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 7) Households having monthly income less than Rs. 3000 in rural areas can be defined as under below poverty line: X_7 , if yes then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.

- 8) Households being unable to send their children to school (if the children of school going age are not schooled): X_8 if it is found to be yes then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 9) Households unable to bear medical expenses due to which any member died a premature death due to lack of proper treatment: X_9 , if it is found to be yes then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.
- 10) Households compelling their school going children below 14 years to earn as child labour: X_{10} if yes then the value is assigned as 1; otherwise 0.

All these socio-economic attributes are quantified in the aforesaid manner to estimate the Household deprivation index (HDI), which represents the extent of deprivation from minimum essential amenities of life and as well as poverty. Equal weightage is attached to all the socio-economic attributes. Therefore, the Household Deprivation Index (HDI) is estimated as:

$$\text{HDI} = 1/n (X_1) + 1/n(X_2) + \dots + 1/n (X_n),$$

where n is the number of attributes that together define the level of deprivation. As each variable assumes a value either 1 or 0, the value of HDI ranges between 0 to 1. The maximum value 1 of HDI signifies very high extent of deprivation. While the minimum most value 0 of HDI signifies absence of deprivation at household level. In other words, higher the value of HDI, higher will be the level of deprivation and vice versa. On the basis of HDI values estimated, the households can be distributed in the following ranges which symbolize the extent of deprivation among the rural households of both *Kaibratta* (SC) and General Caste *Assamese Hindu* Communities in the study area respectively. Very low ($0 \leq \text{HDI} < 0.2$), Low ($0.2 \leq$

HDI<0.4), Medium ($0.4 \leq \text{HDI} < 0.6$) and High ($0.6 \leq \text{HDI} < 0.8$) and Very High ($0.8 \leq \text{HDI} \leq 1$).

Results and Discussion:

Socio-economic status among the Kaibrattas and General caste Assamese community in the study area:

Status of Literacy:

From the field study it is revealed that the trend of literacy among the *Kaibrattas* (SC) and the General caste *Assamese Hindu* Community in the study area is not satisfactory as it is found to be lower than the district's average literacy rate. But the literacy rate of General caste *Assamese Hindu* Community in the surveyed households is found to be higher in comparison to the *Kaibrattas* (as shown in Table 3 & 4). In addition to this the rate of school dropouts and gender gap in literacy rate is found to be higher among *Kaibrattas* in the study area. This indicates about the low status of female in the *Kaibratta* Community. Early age marriage among girls is a common practice even today. When a girl attains adolescence stage she is considered to be a burden for a family in *Kaibratta* society. Effective planning for the upliftment of the female population through spread of literacy is much needed at this point of time in order to ensure women empowerment

Table 3: Households where at least one school going aged is not schooled

Category	No. of Households	No. of persons	Total Percent
Kaibratta	25	42	20.83
General caste Assamese	12	14	6.66
Combined	37	56	27.49

Source: Based on field survey

Table 4: Literacy status of the surveyed households:

Education	No. of households in Kaibratta community	No. of households in General caste Assamese	Total percent among Kaibrattas	Total percent among General caste Assamese
Illiterate	18	11	15	6.12
Just literate but no schooling	11	9	9.17	5
Primary school completed	30	45	25	25
High school dropout	36	35	30	19.44
10 th pass but under graduate	20	55	16.66	30.55
Graduate	5	24	4.17	13.33
Post-Graduate	0	1	0	0.55
Total	120	180	100	100

Source: Based on field survey

However, the close analysis has revealed that the percentage of population pursuing higher education among both the communities in the study area is found to be negligible. But interestingly the percentage of children pursuing primary school education is found to be satisfactory among both the communities in the wake of Sarba Shikha Abhiyan (SSA), a mission of the Government to provide free education to all is operating successfully. When interacted with the respondent parents of the children of *Kaibratta* community most of them said that they wanted to send their children to school because of the mid-day meals provided to their children at schools. But most of them are also aware about the importance of educating their children, although majority of them are illiterate or school dropouts.

Status of Drinking water, Sanitation and living conditions of *Kaibrattas*:

The provision of drinking water, electricity and sanitary facilities is very poor in the *Kaibratta* villages of the study area. 65.83 percent do not have drinking water within the premises and only 34.17 percent have either tube well or well within their premises. No household is found to have the provision of tapped water within their premises. There is no provision of Government water supply till now within the *Kaibratta* villages. However in some places Government has provided few community wells but it is not sufficient to serve the entire village. It is also found from the field survey that the *Kaibrattas* are little aware of health and hygiene due to lack of awareness and massive illiteracy. There is no provision of filtering the drinking water in the majority of households. Only 32 percent of the surveyed households are found to have the provision of filtering the drinking water before consumption with the traditional method of charcoal and sand. Around 44 percent of the total surveyed households believe in boiling the water before consumption. Thus the incidence of number of households suffering from the water borne diseases is found to be higher. Similarly so far the provision of sanitary toilets is concerned the picture is far more disgraceful among the *Kaibratta* community of the study area. Around 74 percent of the total surveyed households practices open defecation mostly at the river banks or backyards of their houses which is very unhygienic. While 18 percent of the surveyed households have pit latrines within the premises and only 8 percent have sanitary toilet facility. Contrary to this the picture of sanitation is better in the General caste *Assamese Hindu* villages.

Table 5: Provision of basic amenities and living conditions in the surveyed households

Basic amenities	No. of households in Kaibratta community	No. of households in General caste Assamese Hindu	Total percent among Kaibrattas	Total percent among General caste Assamese Hindu
Without drinking water within the premises	79	68	65.83	37.77
No sanitary toilet	85	37	70.83	20.55
Without electricity within premises	46	18	38.33	10
Kutcha and congested dwelling	75	87	62.5	48.33
Semi- pucca dwelling	25	52	20.83	28.88
Pucca dwelling	20	41	16.66	22.77
No separate kitchen	77	12	64.16	6.66

Source: Based on field survey

Table 6: Monthly income of the surveyed households

Monthly income	No. of households in Kaibratta community	No. of households in General caste Assamese Hindu	Total percent among Kaibrattas	Total percent among General caste Assamese Hindu
1000-2499	47	28	39.16	15.5
2500-4999	39	35	32.5	19.44
5000-9999	17	58	14.16	32.33
10,000-19,999	13	44	10.8	24.44
20,000 and above	4	15	3.33	8.33
Total	120	180	100	100

Source: Based on field survey

The economic status of the *Kaibrattas* is also very low, which is the root cause of poverty among the households in the study area. From the table 6 it is revealed that the monthly income of the majority of the households is low. Around 71.66 percent of the surveyed households belong to low income group as they are

mostly depended on small fishing trade, agriculture and small business. Due to extreme poverty they are deprived to fulfill the minimum needs of life. It is also found in the study that around 43 percent of the households are vulnerable to face food insecurity. It is an undeniable fact that the households whose monthly income is low they are unable to avail proper medical treatment as well.

Table 7: Distribution of the surveyed households on the basis of HDI values

HDI	Degree	No. of households in Kaibratta community	No. of households in General caste Assamese Hindu	No. of households combined
0 to Less than 0.2	Very Low	2(1.66)	18(10)	20 (6.66)
0.2 to less than 0.4	Low	9(7.5)	54(30)	63(21)
0.4 to less than 0.6	Medium	52(43.33)	82(45.55)	134(44.66)
0.6 to less than 0.8	High	45(37.5)	22(12.22)	67(22.33)
0.8 to 1	Very High	12(10)	4(2.22)	16(5.33)
Total		120	180	300

Source: Based on field survey

The extent of deprivation at household level is estimated on the basis of the Household Deprivation Index (HDI) comprising of a set of ten socio-economic variables as shown in table 7. As already mentioned that higher the value of HDI, higher will be the level of deprivation and similarly lower the value of HDI, lower will be the extent of deprivation. From the estimated values of HDI it is clear that majority of households in both *Kaibratta* (52 percent) and General caste Assamese Hindu (82 percent) communities suffers from medium level of deprivation. But the number of households suffering from high and very high level of deprivation is more conspicuous among *Kaibrattas*

in comparison to the General caste Assamese Hindus. Thus it is clear that the *Kaibrattas* are the most deprived and backward economically and as well as socially compared to the forward sections of the society.

Conclusion:

The entire study aims to judge the extent of deprivation on the basis of deprivation index of both Scheduled Caste *Kaibratta* and General Caste *Assamese Hindu* communities. From the study it is revealed that the status of *Kaibrattas* is still very disgraceful and backward socio-economically. The access to minimum basic amenities of life is very poor among the *Kaibrattas* compared to the General Castes. Apart from this, the gender gap in literacy is also found to be higher. Education is the main agent of socio- economic change of any group of a society. Thus the Government should stress on formulation of effective policies to eliminate gender gap in literacy among *Kaibrattas* which will definitely ensure female literacy and as well as women empowerment. In order to improve their financial conditions skill based training must be provided to the local youths for self employment. As they belong to the fishing community they are accustomed to their age old tradition of fish trade, but now they are been exploited in the hands of the big traders and middle men. So, the Government should frame policies in order to safeguard the interest of the indigenous fishermen of Assam from the clutches of big traders from outside by imposing high taxation and strict regulations on them. At the same time emphasis must be laid on scientific fish farming in community tanks through awareness, training and support from Government. All these steps will finally lead to the improvement in the financial position of this traditional *Fishing Community* of Assam which will lead them to participate in the main stream of greater society and as well as in the nation building process.

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