

# The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in North-East India



Edited by  
B. DATTA RAY

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of papers is the outcome of a seminar held in Shillong under the joint auspices of the North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and North-East India Council for Social Science Research on 4 and 5 December 1978. The seminar was intended to generate a discussion on the middle class in North-East India. The participants in this seminar comprised academicians of various disciplines like Sociology, History, Anthropology, Political Science, Economics. The seminar was also attended by a large number of administrators having field experience in different areas of North-East India. The participants represented these areas of North-East India: Assam (Brahmaputra valley), Assam (Sarak valley), Meghalaya (Garo Hills), Meghalaya (Khasi Hills), Tripura and Nagaland and some from other States.

North-East India is known for its unique geographical and ethnic situation. In historical times, this area was almost cut off from the rest of India. During most part of British rule in India also this area almost remained at the periphery of the Indian scene. This is true about North-East India as a whole and more true about hill areas surrounding the two river vallies, the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. Though the population of these two valley areas represented the Greater Indian Civilization, the population in the hill areas were only at the periphery of the Greater Indian Civilization, and actually were a conglomeration of numerous cultures which developed more or less independently of the Greater Indian Civilization. So, in respect of the rise of the middle class the valley areas broadly followed the lines of the middle class in other areas of India, while in the hills the middle class was an independent development, growing mostly as a result of western education, changed economy and Christianity. However, as the papers will show, the middle class in the hills could not remain entirely out of touch with the middle class among the plains peoples as by that

time better contacts were established between the hills and the plains of North-East India.

Going through the papers it will be observed that there has been a search for a definition for the middle class. Some authors have taken some academically accepted definition and have cast their discussions around those definitions. While some others have devised their own definitions to suit the needs of their subject matters. It is important to note here that a section of the authors based their discussions on the Marxist interpretation of class.

Though the theme of the seminar was middle class in North-East India, papers show a wide range of foci. One of the paper deals mainly with the theoretical problem of defining middle class and tracing its role on the society as a whole. Two papers make an assessment of the middle class in North-East India as a whole, particularly in the hill areas. The other papers included in this volume are more or less case studies about the history and role of the middle class in particular areas of North-East India.

Bani Prasanna Misra's paper "Middle Class—Concepts and Issues" is a general one examining the significance of the middle class from Marxist point of view. While in the same author's paper "Society and politics in the Hill Areas of North-East India" an assessment has been made of the tribal solidarity movements. In this paper the author has tended to develop his theory about the vested interest of the tribal middle class who, according to Misra have joined hands with the bourgeoisie of the other parts of India. To him tribal movements spear-headed by the new elite are for the interest of a 'special class' only. Shibani Kinkar Chaube in his paper 'The Middle Class in the Northeast Indian Hills, Retrospects and Prospects' discusses about the rise of the middle class in the hills of North-East India in the broader perspective of middle class in general and middle class in India in particular. However, he takes a closer look at the Khasis, probably due to his personal experience among them. In general, he arrives at the same conclusion as

other writers that the middle class in the hills has emerged as a result of British administration and has played a vital role in the political scene. Another paper dealing with North-East India as a whole is Biman Kar's paper "The immigrant Middle Class and the North East". This paper has a wide scope in geographical area but limited scope of the subject matter as it deals with the immigrant middle class only. He only gives a broad outline for studying the problem rather than directly approaching the problem. Another paper which deals with the situation in North East India but is peripheral so far as the focus of the seminar is concerned is Aurobindo Mazumdar's paper "The Emergence and Role of Journalists in North-East India". Mazumdar has shown how the Assamese elites took up the cue from Christian missionaries in taking up Journalism. Two of the papers deal mostly with the situation in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Manorama S. Baruah's paper "The Assamese Middle Class: Its role in the Peasant Uprising of 1893-94" considers the formation of Assamese middle class in the Marxist framework. According to her in pre-British economy of Assam the conditions were not conducive for the growth of a middle class (in her sense) which condition also continued in British times. She differs with Amalendu Guha, in this respect. She would not consider the "western educated extension of the rural gentry<sup>1</sup> as a middle class of her definition. However, she admits that Assamese 'petty bourgeois' had an important part to play in the socio-political life of the pre-independence period. Another paper which deals with Assam as a whole is K. Alam's paper "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam." Alam discusses about only a particular category of the middle class, the Industrial middle class. According to him though industries, mainly tea industry, started to develop during British rule under British patronage, the participation of the Assamese in such industries was only nominal so an industrial middle class could not grow in Assam. Sandhya Barua and Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharjee's paper 'Middle Class and the Language politics in Assam during the Colonial period' is a paper which though deals with Assam as a whole is a paper peripheral to the theme of the seminar. It discusses mainly the role of Assamese and Bengali intellectuals in the

language politics. It interestingly shows how in Assam two middle classes, the Assamese middle class and the Bengali middle class were reacting to each other. Jharna Datta's paper 'The Middle Class in the 19th Century South Cachar' has limited scope in temporal and spatial sense as the title shows. This paper discusses about the time when the present middle class in south Cachar was taking shape as a result of colonial rule, western education and the impact of the middle class of Bengal. She states how this class took up political Leadership. Two papers discuss the emergence and role of middle class in Tripura. One is by Jyotirmoy Datta and the other is by J. Gan Choudhuri. Both the papers have the same title, 'The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in Tripura.' Gan Choudhuri emphasizes more on the political consciousness of the tribal elite than on the formation of the middle class. Jyotirmoy Datta's paper only touches the fringes of the problem of the emergence of the middle class in Tripura. While discussing the problems of Tripura he says how a middle class grow under the patronage of the tribal king and how the upper class tribal aristocracy of Tripura, Thakurs and Deb-Burmans were under the influence of Bengali literary culture and modern English education. Three papers devote themselves to Nagaland. Udoyon Misra's papers 'Naga Nationalism and the Role of the Middle Class' while tracing the origion of the middle class among the Nagas think that Christianity and modern education have been the main factors in the emergence of a middle class among the Nagas. It is interesting to note that he has shown how among the Nagas land has not acted as a factor in the growth of the middle class. B.B. Ghosh's paper "Emergence and role of Middle Class in Nagaland" covers almost the same areas as done by Udoyon Misra. Ghosh accepts the fact that there can be a middle class without an upper class. Ghose has shown how in Nagaland money and education went in cyclic order and these two together created a middle class among the Nagas, who in their traditional stage were classless. The formation of the middle class has caused a lower class of poor uneducated persons and the author has been led to think that this disparity between a monied educated class and a poor uneducated class will continue. He has also shown how the traditional leadership has been

practically ousted and their place in the socio-political sphere has been taken by the new middle class. It is interesting to note in Ghosh's paper that he has correlated the Naga middle class with the urban elite. However, members of this class are very rapidly spreading in the rural areas, and hence, unlike in other parts of India, the Naga middle class has not remained entirely urban based. Ghosh has also shown how this class is gradually breaking away from traditional Naga norms and is changing over to western norms. N.K. Das's paper 'The Emergence and role of Naga Elite in Independent India' asserts that primarily at the village level a class of political elites developed during British rule. English educated, Christianized and modernized sections of the Nagas formed another class of elites who were at the background of the Naga movement. The situation in Meghalaya finds place in three papers. D.N. Majumdar's paper 'The Emerging Middle Class among the Garos' discusses about the vagueness of the concept of class. However, taking the criteria of class as outlined by many authors he feels that the rise of middle class among the Garos is out and out an urban phenomenon, the class of people itself coming into existence mainly as a result of spread of modern education side by side with Christianity. The number of this emerging middle class has grown due to accretion of a number of village based landed gentry who have migrated to the town. Majumdar asserts that the upper class is yet to come into existence among the Garos and he has taken the bold step to arrange the elements of the Garo middle class in an hierarchical order. In his paper 'Emergence and Role of middle Class in Meghalaya' B. B. Datta tries to trace the field from which the tribal middle class in Meghalaya has risen. He has examined the role of middle class in the societies as a whole in the light of social interaction between the urban middle class and the rural masses. P.N. Dutta's paper 'Emergence and role of the Middle Class in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, 1824-1950—A Critical Review' traces the history of the Khasi middle class. He states how the traditional elites, comprising the ruling class and the priests were replaced by a new class of elites who came to the forefront as a result of spread of modern education, Christianity and due to the changed economy. This middle class became the leaders in the develop-

ment of language and literature, infusing new ideas in religion and also became instrumental in bringing about political and revivalist movements.

I take this opportunity to thank Dr. A.R. Khan, Vice-Chancellor, North Eastern Hill University and Chairman, North Eastern Regional Centre of ICSSR who inaugurated the seminar and Dr. E. Pakem, Minister, Government of Meghalaya and a former President of North-East India Council for Social Science Research. Dr. Khan maintained that the middle class in our society was yet to play an effective role. Dr. Pakem held that the tribal society in the region having no caste system and social stratification did not have a middle class or for that matter any class at all in the conventional sense. They had, however, a governing elite.

Dr. A.K. Barpujari, Dr. Amalendu Guha, Dr. G.S. Arora, Dr. B.P. Misra and Dr. Swarnalata Barua presided over different academic sessions. We thank them all. The presidential address of Dr. Barpujari is published as an Appendix. I would like to record also my gratitude to Dr. D.N. Majumdar, J.B. Bhattacharjee, Prof. B.B. Dutta, Dr. S.K. Barpujari, Prof. S. Sen, Dr. I. J.S. Jaswal, Mr. P. Gupta, Mr. B.K. Gupta, Dr. G.S. Arora and Rev. Brother M.G. Shannon for their support and help at every stage of the programme. It is needed difficult to select only a few of the vast community of friends who helped us. But to mention all of them will make an enormous list.

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### 5. *Middle Class and Language Politics in Assam during the Colonial Period*

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9. *The Emergence and Role of Middle Class Meghalaya*

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14. *The Middle Class in South Cachar in the 18th century*

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15. *The Emergence and Role of Journalists in North-East India*

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16. *The Immigrant Middle Class in the North-East India : Some Observations*

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17. *The Emergence and Role of Naga Elite in Independent India*

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## Appendix

1. *The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in Assam : Early Phase*

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