

SOCIAL FORMATION IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION

History has been characterised by a succession of social formations, the classical sequence of which has been established as Primitive Communism - Slavery - Feudalism - Capitalism. The Orthodox Marxists have been criticized for holding a mechanical unilinear view of history by the ideologues of Historical Materialism who have time and again refuted that Marx or the later Marxists have not been firm on the issue. Historical evolution according to them was not and need not necessarily be unilinear. It was multilinear or plural¹. Social formation, as a concept has come into vogue in recent times - only with the modern structuralists. The introduction of this new concept was necessitated by the limitation of the concept of mode of production.

History can be studied from structural as well as functional perspectives. Ideally, it should be 'total history' - a combination of both structural and functional explanations. But present day Indian historiography relies more on functional aspect of history. But 'functions' have to be seen against the backdrop of the 'fabric' (structure in which it is taking place),

1. Refer U.Melloti, *Marx and the Third World*, (Ed.) Malcolm Caldwell, (London, 1977); Eric Hobsbawm, *Introduction in Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, (Trns) J. Cohen, (Reprint, 1975); Sholmo Avineri, *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (New York, 1969), pp. 1-31.

or one gets only partial history. For, as Levi Strauss has pointed out 'history's only distinctive position is a heterogeneous collection of chronological codes. Yet chronology only attains meaning as a method of formulating the historical character of structures. Hence in a minimal sense at least, all great history is structural history². In fact the new progressive discovery of another dimension of the Marxist method was the study of the complex structural dynamics of every social formation³. In fact Marx's own concern and interest was also in this particular aspect of human history⁴. And the study of structures inevitably necessitates the use of the conceptual tools like mode of production, class, conflicts, consciousness etc. History being an objective record of the development of

2. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'History: The Poverty of Empiricism' in Robin Blackburn (Ed) *Ideology in Social Sciences*, (Fontana Publications, 7th Impression 1979), p.115.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Karl Marx's contribution to Historiography' *Ibid*, p.265,

*This implies the recognition of societies as systems of relations between human beings, of which the relations entered into for the purpose of production and reproduction are primary. It also implies the analysis of the structure and functioning of these systems as entities maintaining themselves, in their relations both with the outside environment - non human and human - and in their internal relationships. Hobsbawm *ibid*, p. 273.*

4. *Ibid.*, p.265.

to higher social formations - these tools help us to explain why societies change. In other words, the facts of social evolution. In fact the immense strength of Marx has always lain in his insistence on both the existence of social structures and its historicity, or in other words the internal dynamics of change. Today when the existence of social system is generally accepted, Marx's emphasis on history as a necessary dimension is perhaps more essential than ever⁵. From Primitive Communism to Capitalism and Socialism, from stone tools to nuclear weaponry has been a long road of development for mankind. It is also a story of specific structures developing into higher specific structures. As Louis Althusser wrote, there is no such thing as history in general, there are only specific structures which have specific histories. In other words, there is no abstract thing called history which bestows significance upon events in time. Time is not a unitary flow that subsumes all classes, structures and epochs within it⁶.

Mode of Production vis-a-vis Social Formation: The Debate

The concept of mode of production is central to the materialist conception of history. The classicalists are mostly agreed that the term constitutes the core element of the systematic account of history as a succession of the modes of production. What constitutes a mode of production? A mode of production is

5. *Ibid*, p.274.

6. G.S. Jones, *op.cit.*, pp. 113-114

defined as an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the relations of production⁷. A mode of production then constitutes the structure which determines what form the growth of the productive forces and the distribution of the surplus will take place, how society can or cannot change its structures and how at suitable moments, the transition to another mode of production can or will take place⁸. In short the mode of production is basic to our understanding of the variety of human societies and their interaction as well of their historical dynamics⁹. Although it forms the core of Marxian theory, the concept of mode of production is not free from controversies. Not used in any single consistent sense by Marx himself, the ongoing debate on the concept of mode of production shows that it is far from being a clearly understood analytical tool. The view which sees epochs of history as being 'economically determined', the model of 'base and superstructure' as a simple dominance and dependence between the 'economic base' and the 'superstructure' mediated at most by 'class interest and the class struggle' and the succession of social formations as a rigid and imposed regularity have led to the abundant misuse of this otherwise scientific conceptual tool. It has also resulted in the reduction of Marxian theory into a crude, deterministic and

7. Barry Hindess & Paul Hirst *Precapitalist Modes of Production* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Rep. 1979) p.13.

8. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', *New Left Review*, No.143, Jan.- Feb. 1984. p.146.

9. *Ibid*

economistic theory. In other words, it has led to a type of vulgar Marxism.¹⁰ But the most glaring criticism against mode of production has been (1) that seldom a society is made up of one single mode of production. Historical experiences have shown that there can be one dominant mode of production and other less articulated modes of production in a society; (2) Although mode of production establishes the range of superstructural possibilities¹¹ it does not really include superstructural features of a society e.g. State, Law, Ideology within its purview. In other words, strictly speaking a study of the mode of production does not necessarily inform us about the polity, legal system etc. of a particular given society¹². It is here, considering the inadequacy of mode of production to encompass an holistic study of society that the concept of social formation becomes pertinent.

10. Hobsbawm, *op. cit.* n.3, p.270.

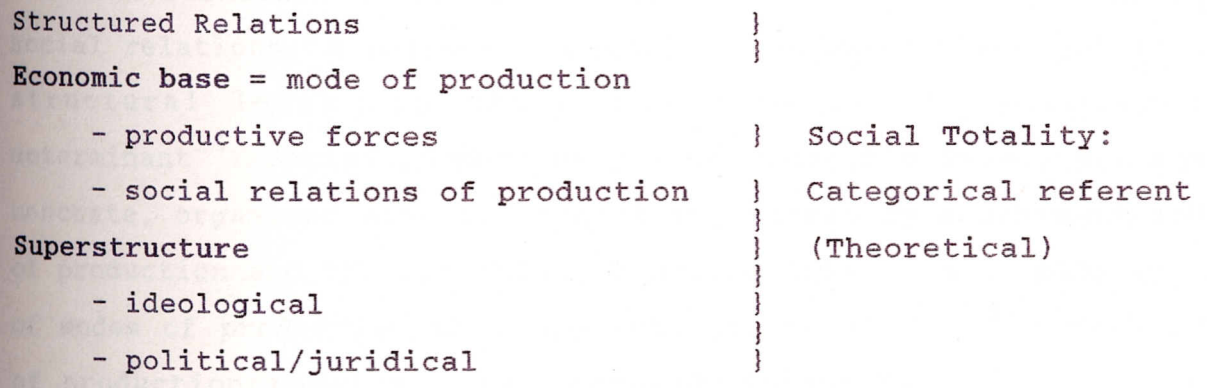
11. Hobsbawm, *op.cit.* n.8, p.46.

12. Sometimes the features of society as are usually treated as part of its superstructure are also included within the mode of production. See for instance Asok Sen's 'The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, Review of Political Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (July, 1984) wherein he speaks of 'Marx's category of the mode of production with its techno-economic, juridico-political, and ideological dimensions. However, increasingly it is being recognised that one cannot understand history without taking into account all kinds of superstructural features.

A social formation has been defined at two levels - at the general and specific. In the general sense social formation is an analytical construct. It represents the social totality of which the mode of production is but a part. In the latter sense, social formation represents a specific historical reality. The analytical construct provides the categorical referents necessary to analyse an historical situation but at the level at which *structured relations* assume precedence over individual actions. Hence at the level of historical abstraction consideration centres on *lived relations* in the form of practices. Schematically these might be considered as illustrated below in Figure 1 and 2¹³.

Figure 1

Level of Conceptual Abstraction



13. Andrew Davidson, *Mode of Production: Impasse or Passe?*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.19, No.3, 1989, pp. 259-260.

Figure 2

Level of Historical Abstraction

Lived Relations	}	
Economic Practice: form of production	}	Social formation:
- productive forces	}	Empirical referent
- social relations of production	}	(Historical)
Non-economic practices	}	
- ideological	}	
- political/juridical	}	

This discernment of the term in both its conceptual and specific historical sense recognises the validity of both *structured* and *lived relations*, of both *form* and *content*. After all form devoid of content is meaningless while content without form lacks identity.

A social formation therefore, designates a complex structure of social relations, a unity of economic, ideological and political structural level, in which the role of the economy is determinant¹⁴. Social formations (at its specific level) are thus concrete, organised structures that are marked by a dominant mode of production and the articulation around this of a complex group of modes of production that are subordinate to it.¹⁵ The mode of production remains a key concept in so far as it is the

14. Hindess and Hirst, *op.cit.*, p.13

15. Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*, (New Delhi, 1979), p.16.

economic level, the mode of production which 'determines' which of the different levels is 'dominant' in the inter-dependent structured totality. The concept of social formation is therefore, a much broader and wider concept than mode of production, and registers the reality of a plurality and heterogeneity of possible modes of production within any given historical and social reality¹⁶.

Social formation was a term used rarely by Marx¹⁷ who referred more frequently to society. In the 1859 *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* he used the two terms interchangeably. After discussing the conditions in which bourgeoisie society as a 'last antagonistic form of the social process of production' will disappear he concluded that 'with this social formation the prehistory of human society comes to an end. The term then became fashionable in the works of recent structuralist Marxists. At all events social formation in actual usage refers to two phenomena - namely to types of society (e.g. feudal, capitalist etc.) and to particular societies (e.g. France or Britain).¹⁸

16. Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974), p.22.

17. The term *Gesellschafts formation* appears three times in the *Preface of 1859*. Each time the standard English translation renders it differently: *Social order, formation of society, social formation*. Literally the German word means 'Society formation'. Ross Gandy, *Marx and History* 1979, p.150.

18. T.B. Bottomore, (Ed.) *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Delhi, Rep. 1987), p.444.

A further development is seen in the rise of the term social and economic formations (socio-economic) preferred by Godelier¹⁹ who says that it 'seems useful above all in the analysis of concrete historical realities' and applied it in the study of the Inca Empire in the sixteenth century²⁰.

To sum up, in recent years there has been a ready acceptance among historians (influenced by other social scientists) of the dictum 'no theory no history'. There are however models and models. We have to decide on the most suitable (for our study) and which can be used as effective tools of analysis. Insights from the neighbouring disciplines are a necessity. Advance in historical knowledge during the last one hundred years, from Gurdon Childe to Hindess and Hirst via Althusser has occasionally altered the model of social formation provided by historical materialism. However the core remained intact. Here, we use social formation to categorize real society as a system of different structural levels containing a number of practices -

19. Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, 1977, Chapter II.

20. The term social and economic formations may have a certain value in so far as it expresses explicitly the idea present in the Marxist concept of society that economic and social elements are interrelated and articulated in a structure; but it still does not mention the ideological elements, and in short, like all concepts, it does not provide a comprehensive description. Bottomore, *op.cit.*

economic, political and ideological²¹, organized in an intricate relationship. The Economic practice requires a transformation of nature into social products through the methodologically organised use of means of human labour, Ideological practice exists as a transformation of subjects lived relations to the world through means of ideological struggle and Political practice exists as a transformation of existing social relations into new social relations²². Social practice is the sum total of these practices as reflected in the class/caste structure. The unity of the above practices constitutes the structure of the social formation wherein the economic practice is the dominant, though not the exclusively determining factor which structures the interrelation of various practices. The entire structure is thus conceptualised in a holistic fashion. However, owing to the constant dialectic of conflict and contradiction between opposing social structures and social groups - given historical expression in class struggle, the social formation is always in transition and hence cannot be equated with a pure or ideal type.

21. *The Theoretical practice also constitutes a component aspect of social formation. But owing to the impossibility of procuring relevant data in our field of study we have not included this aspect. Theoretical practice is defined as a practice 'which by working on raw material constituted in theoretical or philosophical ideologies transforms them into systems of scientific knowledge which then enter into the reproduction of other practices'. John G. Taylor, From Modernization to Modes of Production, (London, 1979), p.107.*

22. *Ibid, pp.106-107.*

The Indian Scene

Indian historiography has been strongly influenced by British historiography²³. As a result, until recently, Positivism exercised a decisive influence over historical writing in our country²⁴. Positivism as a tool for conceptual in history and in social sciences has however, proved inadequate to understand human society. The realization that history in order to be scientific must move out of the shallows of traditional methodology with new concepts, new models and interdisciplinary approach, has resulted in the adoption of new approaches. In

23. *In Britain the progress of British historiography during the last one hundred years has been characterised by 'arrested intellectual development' and 'conceptual poverty.'* Unaffected by the intellectual revolution which Europe experienced between the 1890s and the 1920's in the human sciences, the Whig interpretation of history remained unchanged in essentials. Most British historians have never aimed to construct historical totalities. Every attempt to reconstruct the structural foundations of history has been assimilated by dissolution into discrete specializations. Gareth Stedman Jones. 'History: The Poverty of Empiricism', *Ideology in Social Sciences*, (Ed.), Robin Blackburn, pp.96-115.

24. Ravinder Kumar, 'Social History and the Historical perception of Modern India'. Presidential Address, (Section 111) I.H.C.P. 41st Session, (Bombay 1980), p. 422.

India, the Marxian approach has provided the necessary impetus for a fruitful historical research.

An important task before Indian historians dealing with social formations has been to distinguish the succession of social formations in India. This is because we have yet to clearly delineate the fundamental characteristics of various phases of development of Indian society. This has generated considerable debate over issues like fixing the time span of the ancient medieval period and of characterising the mode of production that prevailed. The characterisation of the mode of production in the light of available data on medieval Indian social formation began by testing Marx's writings on Asian societies, as he had found a contrast in Indian situation as against the social formation of medieval Europe. While the former was termed as 'Asiatic',²⁵ the latter was called 'Feudal'.

Indian historians have by and large found the concept of *Asiatic*

25. Marx and Engels never clearly formulated the paradigm of *Asiatic Mode of Production* but only made scattered references to its components such as state-controlled irrigation, essence of private property in land, autarkic villages, absence of towns, etc. so as to explain the phenomenon of *Oriental Despotism* and often expressed divergent views on their relative importance. Marx did not think that pre-colonial India was 'feudal: it lacked serfdom and there was identity between tax and rent.

Mode of Production as being unapplicable to Indian Society²⁶.
Irfan Habib brushed aside the concept of A.M.P. showing that even
Marx and Engels gave up this concept after 1867.²⁷

26. R.A.L.H. Gunawardhana, 'The Analysis of pre-colonial Social Formations in Asia in the Writings of Karl Marx'. *Indian Historical Review*. Vol.II, no.2, Jan, 1976. pp.265-88.

D.D. Kosambi, 'The Basis of Despotism' *The Economic Weekly*, IX, 2. Nov., 1957.

R.S. Sharma, 'The Socio-Economic Bases of Oriental Despotism in Early India' Mimeographed 1976.

Irfan Habib, 'An Examination of Wittfogels Theory of 'Oriental Despotism' Enquiry Old series No.6 (1962), pp. 54-73;

S. Naqvi - 'Marx on India's Pre-Asiatic Society', M.Kurien, (Ed.) *Indian State and Society* (Madras, 1975), pp. 56-84;

'Marx on Pre-British Indian Society and Economy', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, No.4, Dec, 1977.

S.N. Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian relations in Mughal India*, (New Delhi, 1983).

I.A. Khan, 'The Middle Classes in Mughal Empire', *Presidential Address (Section II)*, I.H.C.P. Aligarh, 1975.

Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice* (New Delhi, 1975).

Bipan Chandra 'Karl Marx, His Theories of Asian Societies and colonial rule' (mimeo).

27. Habib, 'Problems of Marxist Historical Analysis' in M. Kurien (Ed.) *India-State and Society*, (Madras, 1975), pp. 20-32.

The view of Habib is that they did so because both had come to recognise the obvious limitations of their theory. In a later period Marx himself questioned the notion of a continuing and total absence of private property in land. Another reason put forward by Habib is that both Marx and Engels recognised the fact that their concept of A.M.P. would render their theory of class struggle and social change as being only a European phenomena²⁸. The concept of A.M.P. has however been accepted by Amalendu Guha with some reservations. He accepts the concept of A.M.P. as applicable to pre-colonial Asian societies but rejects the accompanying characteristics of these societies being static, unchanging and classless²⁹.

The periodisation of Indian history within the model of Primitive Communism - Slavery - Feudalism - Capitalism has also not found acceptance with Indian historians. Indian historians with the exception of S.A. Dange are agreed that there never was a slave mode of production in India. There was slave trade at different times, mostly in ancient and medieval India, but mostly domestic slavery, not productive, not agrarian or industrial.

R.S. Sharma has recently characterised ancient Indian society

28. *Ibid*, p.23.

29. Amalendu Guha 'Marxist Approach to Indian History - A Framework' in M. Kurien, (Ed.) *India - State and Society*, *Op-cit.*, pp.33-54.

The Asiatic Mode has recently been resurrected as the 'Tributary Mode' by Samir Amin. see note 14.

i.e. from the 6th century B.C. to 5th century A.D. as a *Vaishyashudra* society in the sense that vaishyas were peasants, and shudras were artisans, slaves and hired labourers³⁰.

Writing in the fifties D.D. Kosambi had for the first time expressed reservations about Marx's concept of Asiatic Mode of Production. The characterisation of Indian society as unchanging with an isolated self-sufficient village economy and based on state ownership of land was rejected by him³¹. According to him, the simple structure of the closed village economy was disturbed during the early period of the Christian era. A new avenue to land ownership emerged and gradually by the post-Gupta period became so predominant that it changed the nature of land relations. When the kings began to transfer their fiscal and administrative rights over land to their subordinate chiefs the latter came into direct contact with the peasantry - a process which Kosambi termed as Feudalism from above³². At a later stage a class of landowners developed within the village as intermediaries between the state and the peasantry and gradually came to acquire hold over the local populace - a process termed by Kosambi as 'Feudalism from below'³³. Kosambi thus regards these as successive phases, the latter succeeding

30. R.S. Sharma, 'Problems of Social Formations in early India' *Presidential Address, I.H.C.P., 36th Session, (Aligarh, 1975), p.10.*

31. D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, (Bombay, 1975) pp.10-11.*

32. *Ibid*, p.295.

33. *Ibid*.



the former. This feudal system broke down around the middle of the 17th century.

The credit for a systematic and pioneering work on Indian feudalism goes to R.S. Sharma whose view has been strongly reinforced by B.N.S. Yadava³⁴. According to Sharma, Indian Feudalism originated during the second half of the first millennium A.D. when kings started granting lands - secular and religious, and reached its peak during the eleventh and twelfth century A.D.³⁵. Both Sharma and Yadava have showed the subordination of the peasantry to the landed interests and the development of almost all the components of West European feudalism in India. These were serfdom, manor, self-sufficient village units feudalisation of crafts and commerce apart from declining trade and urbanisation. The undermining factors of feudalism in India such as the revival of trade and towns, the mobility of the peasantry to the towns as a result of impoverishment at the hands of the landlords and the process of commutation of forced labour into monetary payments have been shown to be similar to those of Western Europe. Yadava added to it the factor of foreign invasions to India - particularly the Hun invasion which shattered the Gupta Empire and contributed to

34. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, (Calcutta, 1955)

B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and culture in Northern India in the Twelfth century*, (Allahabad, 1973)

- *Presidential Address (Section I)*, I.H.C.P., p.47.

35. Sharma, *ibid*, pp. 1-76, 210-262.

the growth of feudalism. The most critical element of Indian Feudalism in both the scholars' view consisted in the growing dependence and subjection of peasants to the landed interests owing to the state patronage, dependence manifested in terms of increasing restrictions on peasant mobility and their subjection to forced labour which in turn was becoming increasingly intensive³⁴.

Irfan Habib while not disagreeing with Sharma and Yadava cautions against jumping to a definite conclusion. A large number of gaps are still needed to be filled, and it is not established that serfdom, an essential element in European feudalism, was as prevalent in India though there was some existence of individual bondage³⁷. According to Habib while secular land grants (emphasized by Kosambi and Sharma) were a device for dispersal of power, these cannot by themselves be regarded as the key causative element in 'Indian Feudalism' - these were rather a consequence of it. The decline of internal trade had led to the rise of the supremacy of village (a phenomenon which both Marx and Engels noted in European feudalism) which was characterised by social stratification. The rise of cavalry by the 8th century enabled the control over villages to be concentrated in fewer hands, and the new knights i.e. the *rajputas* (who formed the

36. Sharma, *ibid* pp.50-53, 121-22, 243, 283; Yadava, *Society and Culture, ibid.*, pp.163-173.

37. Even Sharma and B.N.S. Yadava are led by their evidences to conclude that serfdom was far from being the dominant feature in India. Yadava, *Presidential Address (Section 1) I.H.C.P.*, p.47.

warrior class over northern India and large parts of the Deccan) were possibly established in many areas owing to clan conquests, a kind of 'Feudalism from Above'. Once stratification had already developed the *rautas* could easily replace or lord over the upper elements already established in the village. So long as internal trade remained sluggish, political power could not spontaneously centralize, and the evolution of local despotisms (winning recognition through hereditary land grants in the later period) would be natural³⁸.

On the basis of a study of the labour process and extraction of surplus during the medieval period, Irfan Habib finds it justifiable in classifying the medieval Indian economy as a separate social formation. But he cautions against designating this society 'feudal' preferring instead the term 'Indian medieval economy'. Habib's rejection of the Mughal period as feudal is based on his argument that the Mughal society did not possess the potentialities of the kind of industrial and capitalist development that European feudalism gave rise to³⁹.

Arguing also against the notion of an 'Indian Feudalism' Harbans Mukhia finds it debatable that the assignment of land grants by the state and the action of the grantees in subjecting the

38. Irfan Habib, 'Interpreting Indian History' Zakir Hussain Memorial Lectures, N.E.H.U. Shillong 1985, p.27.

39. Irfan Habib, 'Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in Mughal India' *Journal of Economic History*, Vol.29, No.1, 1969.

peasantry by means of legal rights assigned to them by the state could give rise to feudalism and the establishment of such complex social structure⁴⁰. That landed assignments could be treated as the counterpart of European benefice has been found absurd by Ashok Rudra⁴¹. The concept of peasantry's dependence as manifested in an extraneous control over the peasants process of production, is yet to be proved in Indian context⁴². A 'free peasant production was thus characteristic of Indian medieval economy⁴³. Free peasant production according to Mukhia, being formed from the post-Mauryan times, continued to characterise the agrarian economy of ancient and medieval India⁴⁴. That production process in early medieval India was different from the production processes in medieval Europe which was characterised by serf occupied *manse*s in contrast to peasant families in India who constituted the units of production and seigniorial taxation and developing close economic ties of interdependence has also been emphasized by D.N. Jha⁴⁵.

40. Harbans Mukhia 'Was there Feudalism in India' Presidential Address, (Section 11) I.H.C.P. (Waltair 1979), p.24.

41. Ashok Rudra 'Some Problems of Marx's Theory of History, R.C. Dutt Lectures on Political Economy, 1985, C.S.S.S.S. 1985, p.44.

42. Mukhia, *Ibid*, p.248. 43. *Ibid*. 44. *Ibid*, p.256.

45. D.N. Jha, Presidential Address, (Section I), I.H.C.P. (Waltair 1979), p.24.

The above study of the major works done on early and medieval Indian social formation reveals that consensus on characterisation of pre-colonial Indian social formation is far from being achieved. The paucity of historical data has compounded the problem. While it is generally agreed that India bypassed the Slave Mode of Production and the concept of Asiatic Mode of Production is unapplicable, the characterisation of precolonial India beginning from 5th Century A.D. as feudal is a subject of controversy.

Need for Regional Studies: Filling the Gaps

In brief, the above works constitute an outline of the major works that have been done an early and late medieval period of India. But all the above mentioned works are generally based on an all India level study. To be more specific most of the works on the economy of medieval India reflected the conditions of northern India. Such all India level study has led to some perilous generalisations without taking into account the regional specificities. A recent study sponsored by Cambridge is a significant attempt in this direction⁴⁶. However, it is limited by its scope of Economic History. To fill this gap regional studies which would take into consideration the regional peculiarities becomes essential. This work is an attempt in this

46. T. Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.I, c.1200 - c.1750*, (Cambridge, 1982); Dharma Kumar (Ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.2, c.1757-c.1970*, (Cambridge, 1982).

direction only, because Assam, the eastern most state of Indian economy is of theoretical and practical relevance.

The need to study the medieval social formation of Assam separately, occurs because Assam had maintained its political isolation from the rest of India till it was annexed by the British in 1826 A.D. Moreover, with few exceptions a scientific study of medieval Assamese socio-economic system has been lacking. Pioneering attempts to reconstruct the history of early and medieval Assam have been made by many⁴⁷. All these efforts culminated into Edward Gaits' monumental work⁴⁸ which has now become a source of reference for research studies. Gait devoted a substantial portion of his work to the medieval history of Assam (13th to 19th century) called the Ahom period. Though essentially a political narrative, Gait had made useful references to the socio-economic and political structure of society in the Ahom state. However, the work does not satisfy the present need of a scientific study of Assam from the point of political economy and social history. Following Gait, major works that have emerged includes the pioneering works of

47. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Deser Itihas*, (1982, in Bengali); Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, (Sibsagar, 1984); Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, (1875) and Hemchandra Goswami, *Purani Assam Buranji*, (Gauhati, 1932).

48. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta, 1906).

S.K. Bhuyan who came up with a number of publications⁴⁹. In addition Bhuyan has also edited a number of Assamese *Buranjis* or chronicles⁵⁰. Mention must also be made of some other important studies by Golap Chandra Barua, P. Gogoi and N.K. Basu⁵¹. Some new studies deals elaborately with the political, revenue and social history of Assam during the medieval period. But again these works fall in the Gait category as the authors were a

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49. S.K. Bhuyan, *Ahomar Din*, (1918 in Assamese); *History of the region of Rajeswar Singha 1751-1769*, (1925-26 in Assamese); *An Assamese Nurjahan, Queen Phuleswari Devi 1714-1744* (1926); *Lachit Barphukan and His Times 1662-1681*; *Anglo-Assamese Relations* (Calcutta, 1947) and *Studies in the History of Assam* (Delhi, 1965).
50. Bhuyan (Ed) *Assam Buranji*, (originally written by Harakanta Barua, D.H.A.S., 1930); *Kamrupar Buranji* (D.H.A.S. 1930); *Deodhai Assam Buranji* (D.H.A.S., 1932) and *Tungkhungia Buranji*, (D.H.A.S, 1932).
51. G.C. Barua, *Ahom Buranji*, (1930); P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms* (Guwahati, 1968); N.K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, (Calcutta, 1970).
52. N.N. Acharya, *The Medieval History of Assam*, (New Delhi, 1983); S.L. Barua, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, (New Delhi, 1985); Atulya Sharma, *Tai-Ahom System of Government*, (Delhi, 1986); S.K. Goswami, *A History of Revenue Administration in Assam, 1228-1826 A.D.* (Guwahati, 1986); Sarbeswar Rajguru, *Medieval Assamese Society 1229-1826*, (Guwahati, 1988).

product and trained in the School headed by Gait⁵³.

Serious scientific work on medieval Assam in conformity with the requirements of present day historiography began only with Amalendu Guha. Though mostly written as research articles they are exhaustive works. His 'Land Rights and Social Classes in Assam',⁵⁴ demolished the notion of Assam being a classless society and tried to show the class contradiction that developed in Assam. In his next paper 'Tribalism to Feudalism in Assam: 1600-1750',⁵⁵ he has exhibited the process of transition from tribal mode to feudalism, and the trauma and crisis that the structure faced in this transition. This structural crisis manifested itself in the form of Moamaria Rebellion which he termed 'peasant uprising in religious garb'. Elsewhere in his other paper 'The Ahom Political system: An Enquiry into the State formation Process in Medieval Assam (1228-1714)',⁵⁶ he has analysed the evolution of the Ahom tribal polity into a full fledged state by the seventeenth century and the factors behind this transition. His 'The Medieval Economy of Assam',⁵⁷ deals in elaborate detail

53. J.B. Bhattacharjee and Sajal Nag, 'Assamese Historiography in the Twentieth Century: Pattern and Trend in its Growth', in Tarashanker Bannerjee (Ed) *Historiography in Modern Indian Languages*, (Calcutta, 1987).

54. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.9, 1966.

55. *Indian Historical Review*, Vol.I, 1974, pp.65-76.

56. *Social Scientist*, Vol.II, No.12, Dec, 1983, pp.3-34.

57. Appendix, in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.I (Ed.), Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Cambridge, 1982).

the socio-economic structure of medieval Assam which establishes further his earlier views about the social formation in Assam. Among the more recent studies, Sajal Nag corroborating Guha's findings as well as his own, argues that early medieval Assam was more in an advanced stage of *Asiatic Mode of Production*⁵⁸ (a Marxian concept which has almost been given up). He argues after all A.M.P. is to be equated with tribal mode of production rather than with medieval social formations. He then equates an advanced stage of A.M.P. with early stage of feudalism. The later part of medieval Assam has thus been characterised by him as an advanced stage of A.M.P. Though there is no basic quarrel between Guha and Nag, while the former characterised late Medieval Assam as 'quasi-feudalism' without reference to any particular phase of its, the latter prefers to call it an advanced stage of A.M.P.⁵⁹. In his recent work⁶⁰ he has characterised the late medieval Assam as advancing feudal social formation. The rise of the Vaishnavite *satra* institutions is seen as a manifestation of the development of the feudal forces of production⁶¹. The view that medieval Assam was advancing

58. Sajal Nag, 'An Enquiry into the Socio-Economic Structure of Medieval Assam in the Light of Marx's concept of A.M.P', paper presented in Political Economy Club, NEHU, 1983. 59. *Ibid*.

60. Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North-East India* (New Delhi, 1990).

61. *Ibid*, p. 30.

towards feudalism is also upheld by Manorama Sarma⁶² who has characterised it as being semi-tribal, semi-feudal. The Moamaria Rebellion and the imposition of British rule is seen by her as halting the development towards feudalism.

The objective of this study is to examine the Social Formation of Assam during the eighteenth century in the light of regional variations and the validity of the assumptions regarding Feudalism or Asiatic Mode of Production etc. The limitations of this work is obvious. The study covers only the period eighteenth century when major crisis in the system became evident. Hence the conclusions that are arrived at will have to take that time constraint into consideration. Lastly, most of the source materials though of primary nature are almost all published. Hence this work is more in the nature of an analytical study. Extensive use has been made of the Reports and Accounts written in early nineteenth century by British officials and administrators referring to the period of our study. Though sometimes they do not impart information specifically about 18th century Assam, they have been used as such after testing their validity.

62. Manorama Sarma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony* (Delhi, 1990).

CONCLUSION

The eighteenth century social formation in Assam represented not only a continuation of the system which was initiated with the beginning of Ahom rule but was also partly a result of the evolution that had been going on prior to the advent of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century. But what we witness during the eighteenth century was a developed and mature version of this socio-economic evolution.

By the eighteenth century Assam under its ruling class the Ahoms was a compact political entity encompassing the largest geographical area in its historical period and within it a heterogeneous composition of diverse ethnic groups. Being blessed by a favourable physiography and climatic conditions, the fertile river valley of the Brahmaputra provided excellent conditions for the emergence of a prosperous rice economy. The Ahom conquest of the Brahmaputra valley had represented an improvement in the productive forces. As advanced wet-rice cultivating group, with the knowledge of the use of animal drawn ploughs, the Ahoms were successful in bringing the disparate tribal groups who still cultivated through slash and burn, using mainly the hoes, within their mode of production. The resultant increase in productivity enabled to sustain a larger population and a rising state apparatus which helped to carry out the dominant functions of the state namely security, appropriation and distribution of the surplus. The control over the distribution of land and labour enabled the state to intervene actively in the production process. The requirements of the wet-

rice economy such as of reclamation of lands through cutting down of thick monsoon forests, soil leveling and construction of river embankments for flood protection were carried out under the initiative and supervision of the Ahom state. Indirectly, these functions enabled the state to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects.

Land, the dominant mean of production in an agrarian economy, theoretically belonged to the state, who also undertook its distribution but not on any equitable basis. In the prevailing context of land abundance and scarcity of labour, the Ahom state was heavily dependent on the labour services of its subjects - the *kanri paiks*. Hence, in Assam not only the land but the subjects were also considered the property of the state. Appropriation thus took the form of compulsory periodic labour services to the state. The state therefore, not only gave in kind but also received mostly in kind and services. The surplus thus went in for direct consumption by the ruling class. At the peasant micro-economy, most of the consumption needs of the peasant and his family, who possessed their own means of subsistence, were satisfied within the household itself. Handicrafts constituted a secondary occupation of the peasant and his family.

With hired labour for production virtually impossible and land abundant, the volume of agricultural and non-agricultural production was totally dependent on supplies of labour. Hence, the state also imposed curbs on the size of peasants holding of wet rice lands. With outputs limited by the supply of labour and

with peasants output circumscribed by state restrictions and forced labour services, by the eighteenth century the economic system was characterised by stagnating productivity.

Although there is disagreement among scholars over the relative freedom the peasants enjoyed, the fact is that the peasants were under bondage to render compulsory periodic labour services to the state. The *likchoos* were reported to be under worse situation than the slaves. It must be pointed out that though slavery was prevalent in Assam and in the context of labour shortages slaves were used for productive purposes by the higher classes/castes, however appropriation by the state did not take the form of slave labour. The restricted amount of wet rice lands and the burden of state service made it difficult for the peasants to go for any extensive surplus production. Production was thus mainly for immediate consumption. Items like pepper, stick lac and silk etc., were produced by the peasants to satisfy the exchange needs of the state. The marketing network that developed was largely to satisfy the exchange needs of scarce goods. Villages were thus more or less self-sufficient economic units with their artisan and craftsmen needs satisfied within the unit. In other words, there was a unity between agriculture and craftsmanship brought about by the division of labour which was not yet strict.

The mode and extent of appropriation by the Ahom state in the form of forced labour therefore, not only determined the level of production and the development of a marketing network it also eventually determined the level of trade and commercial activity

within and outside the region. Because of the limitations imposed by the mode of appropriation, the range of trading activities at various levels was also limited. Within the peasant micro-economy most of the demand for crafts and artisan services were satisfied within the household itself. With a self-subsistence economy and a division of labour in the form of occupational castes still in the process of emergence, the marketing network and trade that developed were essentially rudimentary in nature. Private trade was also not encouraged by the Ahom state who exercised an overall control over trading activities through its agents and officials. The major trade ventures with outside states were regulated and controlled by the state itself.

As wet rice cultivators requiring collective efforts at cultivation, the economic needs provided the rationale for a political organisation of the *Mung* type as far as the *Tai* Ahoms were concerned. Economic appropriation and distribution being the dominant activities of the state, the political structure was responsible for the smooth functioning of the economy and largely dependent on its successful organisation. Owing to his successful role in the organisation of production and distribution of surplus, kingship had acquired despotic powers. The Hinduisation of the polity added to the sanctity and ideological indispensability of his role. But in the effort to legitimise itself, the extension of patronage to religious functionaries and institutions in the form of land grants and *paiks* resulted in contradiction within the power structure. The

resulting feudalisation of the political structure was also manifest in the creation of numerous vassal states linked to the Ahom state by ties of patronage and political dependence.

The Hinduisation process after the sixteenth century introduced a further hierarchical element in the class based social structure. The Brahmins came to occupy a very high status position. The Ahom aristocracy along with the high state officials because of their political status and power enjoyed a position of prestige. But as new converts to Hinduism the Ahoms in general were relegated to occupying a low status position as sudras. However, the spread and consolidation of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement with its call for egalitarianism brought in a certain flexibility in the social order. While on the one hand, the Vaishnavite ideology posed as a challenge to the existing caste ideology, on the other hand the emergence of a new class of spiritual lords or *Gossains* resulted in undermining the social pre-eminence of the royalty.

An integral aspect of Ahom social formation was the perpetuation of the ideology of kingship. The king was not only seen as the guarantor of welfare and protector of his subjects but also as the guarantor of fertility and higher returns of land. Since the king was above his people he also had great responsibilities towards his subjects. These were, security, distribution and redistribution of land resources, irrigation and to ensure the economic prosperity of the community. The kingship ideology was reinforced by the sanction of the priestly class. Perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by the priestly class this ideology

came to have an hegemonic effect on the people. The ruling class also found it politically expedient to give sanction to the caste ideology to reinforce its own claim to rule and monopolise the high offices of the state. The high castes were confirmed and consolidated in their privileged position by generous grants of land and high positions. However, the emergence and consolidation of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith posed as an alternative and stronger ideology to the existing concept of kingship and caste ideology. Specially, the concept of 'Swargadeo' or the king as god was given a jolt by the Vaishnavite ideology of considering the *guru* as being only next to god. The resultant effect of the weakening of the old ideology was to weaken the basis of the monarchy and in general the economic and political foundations.

A major contradiction that had emerged during the eighteenth century was the low level of surplus. Whereas the state political hierarchy and administrative structure continued to grow, the basis of surplus continued to remain narrow. The nature of the dominant mode of appropriation in the form of services had a restrictive influence. The withdrawal of a large number of *paiks* - source of potential surplus to religious functionaries and large scale evasion of *paik* duties by peasants cut at the very basis of the economy. The remaining *paiks* were subjected to intense exploitation. Hence during the latter part of the eighteenth century attempts were made to break free of the state service by commutation and going for *Chamua* status. But the state could grant *Chamua* status up to a particular point and no more. The *paik* system however, had enough loopholes for those

wanting to escape the forced labour. Large scale evasion of *paik* duties which had become fairly widespread during the second half of the eighteenth century represented a structural crisis in the prevailing situation which manifested itself in the form of the Moamaria rebellion.

For the successful perpetuation of the social formation what was essential was a large base of labour manpower in a natural economy, a small ruling class attached to the Ahom crown by ties of loyalty and a strong ideology of kingship. The latter meant the success of the Ahom king in providing security, and success in the appropriation and distribution of the surplus. However, the state curbs, on the growth of landed property and withdrawal of *paik* labour was not possible during the eighteenth century. The political expediency of aligning the priestly class on its side resulted in the growth and development of the *satra* institutions which emerged as strong contenders to challenge the state's interest in respect of the surplus and prestige.

Owing to the nature of the system secular landlordism in Assam failed to emerge. Since the power of the nobility depended on their offices and their estates were resumable by the state, their growth could be watched and checked by the state. The growth of landed estates visible in the development of the religious institutions notably that of the *satras*, was sought to be suppressed as well as patronized by the Ahom state at different times. But eventually the growth and consolidation of the *satras* as landed proprietors and alongside the emergence of the *gossains* as a new class of spiritual lords whose influence

extended beyond their domain cutting across geographical and caste barriers, could not be prevented by the state. The *paiks* assigned to the *satras*, in course of time came to constitute a body of tenantry with hereditary occupancy rights. The grant of *satra* lands to its disciples on favourable terms was also gradually leading to a new land relationship and private ownership within *satra* lands. The parallel economy witnessed here represented a progressive development of the relations of production.

But the stumbling block in the further development of the forces and production relations was the Ahom state itself. As was seen, the state intervened actively in the production process - from mobilising labour for land reclamation etc. to supplying scarce consumption items to its subjects. This was aimed at perpetuating the system by preventing the growth of any developments detrimental to the perpetuation of the system. In fact the Ahom kings based on the concept of divine kingship, concentrated theoretically all the powers of the state unto themselves.

The existing regime then prevented the growth of powerful social classes. Whenever the state perceived any signs of such emergence, it tried to curb it. In other words, by checking such manifestations of the development of productive forces and production relations in the social structure (emergence of powerful social classes) the state tried to restrict the growth and further advancement of feudalism. In trying to maintain its status quo it gradually lost its vitality without being able to

curb the growth of the progressive forces. Taking advantage of the crisis the nobles and spiritual lords strengthened themselves and peasants either commuted or evaded their labour services to the state. The Vaishnavite *satras* not only attracted more and more Ahom subjects it also became a refuge for discontented *paiks*. The Vaishnavite ideology also cut at the Ahom ideology of kingship and provided an alternative to the people, who so far had only the state patronized religious ideology available. In fact, the Moamaria rebellion resulted apparently from a clash between the religious practices of the *sakta* kings and its Vaishnavite subjects although it was a manifestation of other rising inner contradictions of the structure.

In the ultimate analysis the eighteenth century social formation of Assam represented the peak of 'Ahom feudalism' although by European as well as Indian parameters it still remained as Amalendu Guha called it 'quasi-feudal'. It was by and large a type of its own - in a category by itself. The Ahoms had occupied Assam when it was still by and large tribal. In the subsequent centuries the tribal mode advanced but not to the extent where it could become overwhelmingly feudal. Therefore, it is not very surprising that some features which are characteristic of the controversial Marxian concept of Asiatic Mode of production were traceable in Assam. After all A.M.P. is only an advance stage of the tribal mode in transition to feudalism (A.M.P. is not an Asian variety of European feudalism as sometimes believed). Therefore, although feudalism in Assam was gradually maturing, with its features becoming strongly manifest, the Ahom state's

persiste in checking its further development held back some traces of tribalism from disappearing altogether. This structural dilemma gave rise to the crisis which ultimately brought about the collapse of the system.