

**EMERGENCE AND ROLE OF THE
ASSAMESE MIDDLE CLASS**

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ABSTRACT

Submitted in Fulfilment
of the requirement of the
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

To



**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG**

1985

The analysis of the Colonial and Post-colonial period gives the picture of origin and development of the Assamese middle class.

Existence of classes in society dates back to centuries. In ancient society masters and slaves existed. Under feudalism, there existed feudal lords and vassals. Modern capitalist society is divided into two broad classes- bourgeoisie and proletariat. In between these two antagonistic classes there exists another class- the middle class. Though the term middle class is used frequently in social sciences, it lacks a precise definition, because it is a heterogenous social strata consisting of different functional and occupational groups. Modern middle class consists of lawyers, managers, technocrats, professionals and other white-collar workers, and such other ranks which occupy a middle ground between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

After Industrial Revolution, the Western society got divided into upper, middle and lower classes on the basis of their economic strength. Middle class emerged in the west, particularly in England, in the wake of

Industrial revolution, which resulted in large scale mechanical production and joint stock business where place of artisans, handicraftsman were replaced by middle-class group comprising office workers, managers of business establishments, technocrats -etc.

Origin of middle class in India as well as in Assam cannot be understood outside the colonial context. In the west, middle class emerged when traders crystallised as a separate functional category in the fourteenth century. But unlike west, middle class in Assam originated mainly in the administrative, educational and legal system established by the British and not in industrial sector because of the slow growth of industrial economy in the state.

In the pre-colonial Assamese society (in Ahom society), there existed two major classes - the nobility and the paiks. Nobility was the privileged group comprising King and the Councillors. Paiks were the unprivileged group and had to render manual services to the state. In between nobility and the paiks, there were some petty officials who acted as scribes in the Ahom system of administration. A superficial observation

leads us to conclude that there was no middle class in pre-British Assamese society and it emerged only during colonial era. It is true that Assamese middle class took a well defined shape only by the later part of colonial era through their participation in the major issues which came up in the socio-political scene of Assamese society. Their origins are rooted in the pre-colonial era. The officials including Hazarika, Saikia, and others acted as scribes in the Ahom system of administration. It formed the basis during colonial era on which modern Assamese middle class emerged. The officials and clerks of Ahom nobility took the advantage of education which was introduced by the British. Initially, this group was appointed as Mauzadar (revenue collectors), Kakati and others in the British administration. Appointments were confined to persons coming from rich and influential families belonging to upper caste Hindus. Obviously, these posts were cornered by people like Hazarikas, Saikias, Boras belonging to the upper caste Hindu category of the society.

The Assamese middle class is the most articulate section of the society. It has been providing leadership in all major socio-economic and political

issues of Assam since colonial era till today. Middle class occupies an important place in Assamese society because they voice the demands of the Assamese people in general. Almost all the movements of pre and post-colonial period of Assam were led by middle class section of the society.

Major problems faced by Assam are problem of immigration, language controversy and economic backwardness of the state. These problems are the legacy of the British imperialists. Unfortunately, even after thirty eight years of independence the problems remain unresolved.

Migration of outsiders started with the British annexation of Assam in 1826. The population of Assam is heterogenous. First, there were the indigenous tribal people viz., the Bodo Kacharis, Koches, Mikirs etc. In the 13th century, Ahoms came from Thailand via Burma and established a powerful kingdom. When the British established their rule in 1826, they brought in Bengalees as teachers, clerks etc. Biharis and Nepalis came as labourers and tea garden workers. Marwaris came as traders and gradually monopolized trade and commerce.

Muslims from neighbouring Bengal were brought in as cultivators. In Assam, migration has been a continuous trickle. The demographic ratio of Assam has been badly affected to the disadvantage of the Assamese people culminating in the on-going agitation.

Various factors were responsible for this large scale immigration. Along with the Britishers local politicians as well as Assamese zamindars were in favour of immigration. Britishers brought in Bengalees to man their administrative services. Local Assamese politicians encouraged immigration to build their 'vote-banks'. In fact, many Assamese legislators are elected by the citizens of neighbouring country. These immigrants get their names enrolled in the voter's list and thereby increase the number of voters in the state. The Assamese middle class has been agitating since colonial era to stop this large scale immigration but no steps have been taken by the concerned authorities at the state and central level, and the border is still wide open which facilitates intrusion of outsiders. This problem can never be solved until and unless the border is sealed.

Like immigration, language controversy is also of colonial origin. After British annexation of Assam, Bengalee language was introduced in courts and schools. This provoked the Assamese intelligentsia of that period. The untiring efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, a prominent Assamese middle-class figure, led to the introduction of Assamese in schools in 1873. However, the language tangle continued unresolved. It got revived in 1960 with the demand for making Assamese the official language of the state. Assam is composed of various linguistic groups. When demand for giving due place to the Assamese language was raised, the legitimate interests of various linguistic groups, which formed a part of the state of Assam at that time, were not taken into consideration by the leadership. This was one of the main reasons for the creation of the separate hill states. The language controversy got revived in 1972 for making Assamese the medium of instruction at the University level.

Assam is economically backward inspite of abundant natural resources—minerals, agriculture and forests. The main reason for the economic backwardness is that most of the raw materials of the state are siphoned

off for feeding industries outside the state. Even after Independence, Assam was largely neglected in regard to central investments and industrialization.

The Assamese middle class has been playing a vital role since colonial period in ventilating the needs and aspirations of the Assamese people in these major problem areas. In this dissertation an attempt has been made to analyse the role played by Assamese middle class in these and other important issues in the pre and post-colonial period. The contribution made by Assamese middle class (both individually and collectively) in various spheres of the Assamese society has been analysed.

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