

THE ASSAMESE MIDDLE CLASS : ITS ASCENDENCE
TO HEGEMONY

(1860-1910)



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(An Abstract)

The present study on the Assamese middle class was undertaken because this very important phenomenon of the Assamese society has not been given its due importance in historical research, and there has been very little attempt at studying the middle class from the right prospective. The Assamese middle class has played a very dominant role in the development of the Assamese society, not only during British rule but also in the post independence period. In the various phases of the development of a society a particular class always comes to hold the dominant position in the society. Usually it is the ruling classes that play this role, but sometimes in exceptional circumstances even a non-ruling class might rise to this dominant position and maintain a hegemony over the society. The importance of the Assamese middle class also stems from the fact that though not a ruling class during the colonial period and even after independence, yet it was able to maintain a dominance, both ideologically and even otherwise, over the Assamese society. Therefore, it is necessary that the background, emergence and rise to hegemony of the middle class

should be studied as exhaustively as possible in order to understand the complexities of the social, political and economic development of Assam and to make an objective and scientific evaluation of the processes of historical development in Assam.

A class analysis of any society requires a break-away from the orthodox narrative approach to the study of history, but the interpretative approach to Assam history is still a very conservative, orthodox approach and as such a class analysis of Assamese society, particularly a study of the middle class has not been given its due importance in historical research. Scholars who have done some work on these lines are Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain. Both these scholars have done some significant work on the Assamese middle class and have thus opened up the field for research on the subject. Their works are however not exhaustive enough and there are certain lacunae particularly in their conceptualisation of the middle class and the socio-economic roots of this new class. To fill up these shortcomings, one has to undertake a theoretical conceptualisation of the middle class, and also enquire into the economic viables for the origins of a new class in

Assam's economy of the nineteenth century. Did the agrarian sector provide the conditions for growth of a new class? Or was it the commercial sector which formed the basis of new class formations in Assam? Or was the development of the bureaucratic system under the British responsible for the growth of economically viable new classes? Only after enquiring into these questions will it be possible to assess the role of the middle class in the socio-political superstructure of Assamese society.

An understanding of the Assamese middle class must, however, begin with a conceptualisation of the term middle class. But this conceptualisation can be attempted only on the basis of a clear understanding of the concept of class itself. This study therefore begins with the search for a definition of class. The concepts of social class and social stratification are as old as social thought itself and had existed from the time of Plato and Aristotle, but the meaning of these terms have changed with time to cover different connotations in different ages. The most scientific and at the same time the most controversial, perspective of social classes was presented by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century and his writings on class set forth a whole chain of intellectual activities. In fact, all that has been

written on class after Marx are attempts either to disprove his formulations or to support them, and thus a whole new mass of writing and knowledge was added to social research. The two main theoretical trends which can be seen in the study of social classes emphasise either change or stability in the social system. The first trend stems from the writings of Marx, and the second trend was set by Max Weber which was later followed by functionalists like Emili Durkheim, Kingsley Davies, Wilburt Moore, Talcott Parsons etc. The followers of Max Weber tried, in all their writings to build up a theoretical system which could be an alternative to Marx's analysis of society. From the Voluminous writings of Marx it is possible to arrive at an almost accurate Marxist definition of class. In Marxist theory social classes can be defined as groupings of social agents defined practically but not exclusively by their position in the processes of production, i.e. the economic sphere. Though the Marxist concept of class emphasises the economic sphere as having a principal role in class formations, but it does not follow that classes are mere economic entities. The Marxist concept of class views class as a total entity encompassing in it the economic, ideological and political aspects as the crucial components of class formations. All

these strains of class formation must be viewed in their totality and not split into separate parts as non-Marxists have done. A class, to be a class in the Marxist concept, must be both a class in itself and a class for itself. The Marxist concept of class was therefore a call to action, particularly in the capitalist mode of production, because a class is always aware of its class position and organised enough to defend its own interests. This was a danger to the bourgeois social scientists beginning from the structural functionalists to the even apparently progressive theorists like Ralph Dahrendorf who tried to find an alternative to the concept of class as given by Marx. But the analysis of these social scientists suffer from a highly conservative status-quoist bias because they view class more as economic entities and occupational groups than as a political phenomenon dependent on contradictions. These theorists therefore could not interpret change in society, particularly revolutionary changes.

On the basis of a definition of class arrived at on these lines, in the next chapter we have tried to conceptualise the idea of the Middle class and we have viewed this middle-class as a combination of the new and traditional

petty-bourgeoisie, and in the process we have rejected the definition of Middle class given by B.B. Misra who had borrowed it totally from G.D.H. Cole's definition which was formulated for an advanced industrial society. The term middle class is being deliberately used in this work in preference to petty-bourgeois, first because it is a term which has been used by Marx himself and secondly because this term, owing to its wide currency, has come to acquire a particular connotation in the context of historical developments in Assam.

The Assamese middle class can be properly understood only against the background of developments that took place in Assamese society with the advent of the British. In the third chapter we have therefore discussed the process of disintegration of the old order. An analysis of this process reveals that at the time of British occupation of Assam the Ahom nobility was not in a position to exercise much influence in the Assamese society and the Ahom economy disintegrated with the introduction of a new economic order by the British. With the development of British administration a set of new forces also began to develop and these new forces began to play a very vital role in the shaping of the economic developments in the history of Assam.

The impact of the introduction of a totally alien economic system into the semi-tribal bases of Assamese economy was not a very healthy one for the growth and development of the Assamese economy, and this fact we have analysed in the fourth chapter through an analysis of the economic developments of the period 1870-1910. The examination of the economic data for this period has shown that in a given period of thirty years there was very little development of the Assamese economy either agriculturally or commercially, and the period showed a definite trend towards the stagnation of the economy. There was a very low level of stratification, with no indigenous rich classes emerging agriculturally or commercially. The British administrative set up was creating a new force.

In this stagnating economic condition, the British government aggravated matters by constantly increasing the land revenue. In chapter five we have discussed this point while exhaustively analysing the re-assessment of land revenue in 1893 which was based on very unscientific grounds and did not consider the important factors which should be taken into account before raising the land revenue almost cent-per-cent. The peasants objected. Sent in memorials and petitions. Here we see the role of the new force.

This re-assessment and enhancement of land revenue was not accepted by the peasantry and they took up the cudgels against this unjust increase. The sixth chapter discusses in details the course of the peasant rebellions the organising force of which was the Rajmels which were much more than village panchayats and were an intrinsic part of the Assamese society. In these uprisings, the new forces created by the British which had by the end of the nineteenth century begun to emerge as a class — the middle class — played a significant role, and brought in the character of a constitutional agitation through petition and memorials, into the course of the rebellions. Here we have also discussed the fact that the middle class as a class did not exist during the course of the nineteenth century and begins to emerge only towards the last decade of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain both hold that a middle class existed in the nineteenth century but we have shown that the possibilities of a viable new class existing in the nineteenth century were very remote. What they have called a class is actually the newly emerging western *educate elite and not a class. This confusion has crept into their work mainly because of their confusion over*

the definition of the term middle class, which is described as the regional bourgeoisie by Gohain and as a combination of bourgeois and petty bourgeois by Guha. Through a discussion of these issues we have also shown that the Assamese middle class played a conflicting role in the later decades --progressive on the one hand but having profound conservative undertones on the other. This peculiarity can be understood only if the social roots of the middle class are clearly analysed.

In the seventh chapter we have studied the early beginners of the middle class and analysed their social origins. In analysing the background of the various sections of the middle class we have found that their roots can be traced back either to the early Mauzadars and high revenue officers of the British administrative set up, or to the institution of vaishnava Satras. These two affluent sections of the Assamese society during the period of early British rule in Assam, have been examined very closely to show that these were the sections which could afford to give a good education to their children, dependents, supporters and disciples. The Satra institution and the land system of the Satras have been discussed in details to show that a more developed system than that

of the Ahom system existed in the Satras and the patronage they received from the Ahom Kings and later from the British enabled the Satras to help in the emergence of the Assamese middle class.

Finally, we have concluded that after the disintegration of the old order in Assam with the advent of the British there was a period of such economic stagnation that the possibilities of a new agricultural or commercial class emerging under these conditions could be almost ruled out. In the almost stagnating economy the processes of a healthy development of the economy were further retarded by the British policy of constantly enhancing the land revenue. The re-assessment and enhancement of the revenue that took place in 1893 was highly resented by the Assamese peasantry and objections and memorials began to flow in highlighting the injustice of the enhancement which was based on a very unscientific method of assessment. When these objections failed to move the British Government, the peasants began to resist the collection of revenue at the new rates. In these uprisings against the British Government the Rainals played a very important role, and in these anti-British uprisings we also find that the newly emerging forces in the colonial set up had begun to crystallise into

a class -- the Middle class and this middle class added a new dimension to the peasant rebellions. To understand the actual character of this middle class it is necessary to see where in the society its roots lay and in searching for those roots we found that the two important elements which contributed to the emergence of the Assamese middle class were the Mouzadars and high revenue officials on the one hand and the Satra institution on the other.

The Middle class was not the ruling class in Assam, yet because of the specific conditions of Assamese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century this class was able to play a very dominant role in the society. This hegemony of the middle class could be better seen in the post 1910 period. The Congress party in Assam was swayed by the economic interests and the ideological dominance of the middle class, and in fact the leadership of the Congress party lay in the hands of this middle class that we have identified, and it was this same middle class which later dominated the area of parliamentary politics in Assam. In the post-independence period in Assam, not only did the middle class pull the strings of governmental politics, but

when movements were launched over economic issues and for the protection of the cultural identity of the Assamese people, it was again the middle class that came to the forefront to voice the grievances of Assam and to give a leadership to these struggles. In all these struggles, whether it was the demand for an oil refinery in Assam, or the demand for Assamese as the medium of instruction, or the food riots of the 1960s and more recently the agitation launched for the expulsion of foreign nationals, the Assamese middle class has been able to mobilise the majority of the Assamese masses because of its hegemony over the society.

DATA

This work has been based on a theoretical discussion on the concept of the middle class and an interpretation of relevant socio-economic data of nineteenth century Assam. The Primary Sources comprise of:

1. Census Reports, 1870-1910.
2. Government administrative Reports of the period.
3. Government Land Revenue Records.
4. Reports on Assessment of Land Revenue.
5. Agricultural Statistics of the relevant period.

6. Government Home Dept. and Revenue Dept. Files
7. Native Newspaper Reports.
8. Ahom Buranis
9. Autobiographies of leading personalities in Assam in the 19th century.
10. Classical Marxist texts on the concept of class.
11. Recorded Conversations with the Gossains of the three principal Satras of Majuli, and with three Mauzadars of Assam in the tradition of Oral history.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

1. Commentaries and writings on the concept of class and middle class.
2. Published biographies of some leading personalities of Assam in the 19th century.
3. Published secondary works on the social and political history of Assam and India.
4. Published works on the Satra institution.
5. Published articles in Assamese journals like Mou, Arunodoi, Asom Bandhu, Awahan, Banhi etc.
6. Published articles in journals like Comparative Studies in Society and History, Economics History Review, Peasant Studies, Indian Economic and Social History Review, Indian Economists, Frontier etc.

METHODOLOGY:

As this study has been mainly an interpretative work it has entailed an analysis of relevant literature and an analysis of the primary and secondary data mentioned above. On the basis of such an analysis the work has attempted a class analysis of Assamese society in the nineteenth century based on the economic data of the period, and the ideological and political factors of class composition have been interpreted by an analysis of the secondary sources.

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