
**STRATIFICATION
HIERARCHY
AND
ETHNICITY
IN
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

Eds.
**R. K. BHADRA
S. R. MONDAL**

The manuscript is a collection of 22 indepth research papers of a U.G.C. National seminar. The papers were written by Sociologists, Social Anthropologists, Economists, Geographers and Political Scientists which provide a comprehensive multi-disciplinary view of the social stratification system of societies of North-Eastern India.

The beginning papers deal with some fundamental questions in relation to the study of social stratification and mechanisms of survival of various ethnic groups in the competitive societal situation. While studying social stratification in Assam ethnicity as one of the dimensions of stratification is needed to be taken into consideration. This has also emphasised caste and tribal mobility in the rigid Hindu hierarchical society. In Assam Udayachal movement has consolidated the ethnic factors. A process of historical development of ethnicity in Manipur has also been discussed in connection with the tribal movement. It is also seen that the role of ethnic groups in the emergence of political development in Sikkim is very conspicuous. At the same time an emergence of inequality among the tribes is an important feature. Such inequality is still having feudal character.

In Meghalaya the Hinduised tribes have been facing identity problems. A few papers deal with the dynamic process of stratification among the tribal workers of tea plantations. These have considered the ethnic factors for maintenance of group distinctiveness and stratification. The emerging stratification in agriculture in Arunachal due to various factors has also been discussed. In Darjeeling hills economic disparity among the various ethnic groups has strengthened the stratification factors. Role of the National Anti-poverty Programme in economic development of Jalpaiguri district has been studied and found to be inadequate for rural development. In two other papers nature of stratification among the Muslims of West Bengal and Assam has been discussed assuming the impact of Hindu caste principles.

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PREFACE

The Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology of University of North Bengal has its objectives, among others, to do research among the societies of North-East India. With this view in mind the department offers a course on "Regional Study of North-East India" at the Post-Graduate level, and time to time, organizes seminars on various sociological perspectives of this region. The present volume is an outcome of such a seminar where scholars of various disciplines of social sciences contributed in-depth research papers on various aspects of stratification and ethnicity among the societies of North-East India. Ethnicity is, now-a-days, a burning problem and thereby an important subject matter of sociological studies. As a matter of fact the study of ethnic groups, ethnicity and their reflections in social structure is an emerging field of social science research. Scholars from various disciplines who have examined in-depth the factors of social stratification and ethnicity from different perspectives have given an inter-disciplinary orientation to this volume. Altogether nineteen research papers on different aspects of social stratification and ethnicity are included in this volume of which theoretical issues have been discussed in two articles, six articles have dealt with societies of Assam, other six with societies of the northern districts of West Bengal, two each with societies of North-East India in general and Sikkim, and one each with societies of Meghalaya and Manipur. Most of these articles are concerned with various ethnic groups or tribals while others have devoted to Hindu castes and Muslims of North-East India.

The social structure of North-East India is characterised by various ethnic groups having different religious affiliation. The complex social structure of the societies of North-East India possess a unique type of social stratification which is greatly influenced by the factors of ethnicity. Understanding of these unique features of social stratification is very important to understand the nature and trends of social dynamics of the region. The focus of this book is on stratification and ethnicity of North-East India. The authors discuss the features which are generally associated

with the social stratification and analyse their association with caste and ethnicity.

Grateful thanks are due to the scholars who have contributed valuable research papers for this volume. The merit of this volume owes a great deal to them. Thanks are also due to Dr. Mita Bhadra for her enthusiasm and cooperation to organize the seminar and to make this volume ready for publication. Shri Prasenjit Debbarman has helped very much of this endeavour and thanks are also due to him. Shri Mridul Goswami with his secretarial skill has made this academic effort a success and therefore he is extended cordial thanks.

R.K. Bhadra
S.R. Mondal

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INTRODUCTION

The scholars, who are engaged in sociological research in north-eastern part of India, are struck by a totally different nature of stratification prevailing in the region which other parts of India have never experienced. The region of north-eastern India lies at the periphery of the Hindu civilization where primarily three kinds of ethnic groups are found, such as, Hindu castes, partially Hinduised or Christianised tribes and animistic tribal communities who still adhere to their traditional tribal traditions. The majority of the population of the plains of Assam, Manipur and Tripura are Hindus. The tribes of Assam and Manipur have been greatly influenced by Vaisnabism. The traditional tribal social organization, which was dominant in the region, has considerably changed. In Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya approximately 85 per cent, 60 per cent and 40 per cent of the tribes respectively have been converted to Christianity. The Christian missions functioned actively in this part of India alongwith the consolidation of the British power in the 19th century. The rest of the tribal communities of north-eastern parts of India still cling to their traditional religion and culture.

The dominant culture of the north-eastern region is characterised by tribalism. One of the important features of social stratification of this region is the role of various Hindu and non-Hindu tribal groups who contribute to a greater extent some important elements in the stratification system. This has generally been neglected in most of the studies which have predominantly focused on the hierarchy, interdependence and exclusiveness—the major fundamental parameters of the caste system. The mode of absorption of the various ethnic groups, their emerging identity crisis and changing status in the system of stratification have some important consequences in modification of some of the principles of stratification. The evaluation of this aspect perhaps can give us a new dimension to the study of social stratification of the societies in north-eastern parts of India. However, ethnicity which appears as an important

aspect of the stratification system in this region has not yet been studied properly. The contribution of ethnicity in determining the stratification system should be considered as one of the various dimensions of the system. Stratification should be studied in terms of ethnicity and possession of wealth and power. There are a number of encysted communities particularly in Assam, Manipur, Tripura, northern districts of West Bengal, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh who maintain their socio-cultural identities rather distinctly, though they are subsumed under the general Hinduised tradition. This is very often true in the rural society where both castes and tribal groups live together constituting the system of stratification within the Hindu civilization. The collection of papers emphasises all these dimensions of the stratification system, i.e., caste, class and ethnicity. It focuses on determining the parameters of stratification, interethnic relationships and relation between caste or ethnic organization and hierarchy. It also explores the new bases of stratification which could have been the dominating factors in the societies of North-East India.

The book is an outcome of the UGC sponsored national seminar held in the Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology, University of North Bengal. A good number of scholars from various disciplines, such as, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, Geography, Political Science and History, who have been working in the field, have contributed papers based on in-depth study. Their contributions will certainly provide a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary view of the stratification system in north-eastern region of India. Since most of the papers are concerned with the dimension of ethnicity they could not be arranged under different sections. However, the papers are arranged in a systematic way to have a clear sociological perspective.

The first two papers deal with the concepts of caste and class in general and mechanism of survival of ethnic groups within the caste society. In the paper "Some Consideration towards a definition of caste and class" K.L. Sharma has projected theoretical questions to the study of caste and class in India. He briefly discusses the main issues in Sociology of social stratification, nature of social formation in terms of its dominant causality, ideology and change, and sources of distortions of social reality. While studying social stratification in India in multidimensional perspectives a heuristic distinction between caste and class serves only a limited purpose, and the effort

becomes futile when in reality - caste and class are found in inseparable form. Caste in both infrastructural and superstructural phenomenon. Cooperation and competition within a caste and with other castes are found simultaneously. A sort of class structure within a caste can be seen which in fact indicates the process of differentiation and mobility among its members. Thus caste and class are not polar opposites. They are inseparable parts of India's social formation, continuity and change. This change is not from caste to class. There is a caste basis of class and a class basis of caste.

The very notion that caste and class are polar opposites had obstructed from thinking caste and class in terms of historicity of India's social formation. Studies of downward social mobility and proletarianization, upward social mobility and embourgeoisement, etc. explain that caste and class have imhered each other as an inseparable mix.

P.K. Bhowmick, in his paper "Ethnicity, ethnic groups and survival strategy", has explained the process of survival strategy of ethnic groups. In a multi-racial society where the spirit of homogeneity faces confrontation with many groups having vested interest over power and resources, some feeling of group identity crop up and nucleate in a concept of ethnicity. The interacting groups or powers in question try to prove their uniqueness in socio-cultural and linguistic issues and ultimately solidifies the group identity which is expressed in various ways. Sometimes a fear of extinction is projected where the question of survival becomes uppermost. In course of time various steps are taken by the group as survival strategy and the spirit of ethnicity gets impetus in this field.

S.K. Chauhan's departure from the conventional researches on caste stratification in India provides a new light for understanding social stratification in Assam. In "Caste, status and ethnicity: a non-hierarchical view of the stratification system" he says that in the conventional studies caste and class have attracted attention of the scholars whereas the ethnic aspect has remained neglected. The historical development of the Assamese society in terms of compressions and depressions has tended to juxtapose the various communities in the network of cooperation as well as of conflict per force necessitated the redefinition of the communities in terms of the ethnic groups and the consequent development of the ethnic stratification. Since the ethnicity becomes salient in the process of politicization and the social mobilization the ethnic stratification is

by nature horizontal than hierarchical in nature.

R.K. Bhadra has argued that mobility in the caste system was widespread in the traditional society in India. From the case study of the Assamese society he has shown the occurrence of both individual and corporate mobility in the medieval society. In the past social mobility at the individual as well as family level was possible due to the Vaisnabite movement which opened various new channels of such social mobility. The Vaisnaba *gosains* belonging to Kayastha and tribal groups and their families enjoyed socio-religious position equal to that of the Brahmin priests. The Sudras, as respected and integrated members of the society, occupied an important place; even today they successfully retained their status as before. The corporate mobility was also found among some castes and tribes where an entire jati or ethnic group successfully moved up in the social hierarchy and enjoyed higher social status. Under the process of Vaisnabisation many tribes transformed themselves into castes. In Assam among the Ahoms, Chutiyas, Koches and Sonowal Kacharis corporate mobility was found. The Koch tribe and a section of the Chutiya tribe known as Hindu-Chutiyas are today recognised as higher Assamese castes. A section of the Kachari tribe—known as Sonowal-Kacharis became Hindu. The Ahom embraced Hinduism and was elevated from their tribal status. In this way process of Hinduization, fission and corporate mobility took place among the various communities in medieval Assam. The fixity of hereditary status in the caste society did not remain as an unchallengeable norm.

In "Movement and social structure : a case study of Udayachal movement in the Brahmaputra valley" M.C. Paul considers the Udayachal movements as an ethnic movement of Assam which has a long historical root of origin in the pre-colonial social structure. The tribals during the pre-colonial period gradually came within the fold of the peasant society and economy. The anti-feudal rebellions by peasants, oppressed tribals and artisans along with the unemployed soldiers rose against the Ahom rulers.

During the colonial period land tenure system gradually alienated and pauperised the vast majority of the tribals. In the post colonial period Indian government decided to follow the policy of mixed economy. By and large the tribal economy has remained at the low level of peasant economy without the benefit of industrialization. The planning for industrial development had

displaced thousands of tribals from their land. The deprived tribals became conscious of their unprivileged position and polarization of social groups in terms of religion, language, ethnic groups, etc. gradually took place. Such polarization was strengthened by politicization and emergence of Udayachal movement demanding for separate state.

R.K. Kar and J.L. Sharma in their article "Tea and Ex-tea Labourer in Assam : A preliminary appraisal of social stratification and ethnicity" highlighted the dynamics of social stratification and nature of ethnicity among the tea plantation labourers of Assam. The study reveals that the tea plantation labourers of Assam are maintaining a dual cultural identity. In one hand, they are very conscious about their ethnic identity, while on the other, they are also participating in the way of life of plantation system. The ethnic identity and group distinction are maintained by the labourers through endogamy, commensality and limited social interactions among them. The authors argued that, in spite of heterogeneity (ethnic differentiation), a sense of homogeneity in economic context is an emerging trend of life activities of the tea plantation labourers.

P.K. Dasgupta in his paper "Ethnicity, Boundary maintenance and Hierarchy in a polyethnic Situation" has highlighted the nature of social stratification among the tea plantation labourers of North Bengal. He has analysed the polyethnic situation of tea gardens on the basis of prevalent ethnic groups among the plantation labourers. In this study he has discussed about the inter-ethnic hierarchy as well as the organizational hierarchy of the tea plantation labourers. To find out the pattern of social stratification among the tea plantation labourers the issues of ethnic groups, ethnic crisis, ethnic identity and ethnicity are also highlighted by him. The author is of opinion that in the context of tea garden though the different ethnic groups are maintaining their respective boundaries, yet at the same time, they also signify an interethnic solidarity to give the shape of a viable society in polyethnic situation.

In the paper "Some Observations on the Dimasa Ethnic Identity" D. Ghosh-Danda has described the process of ethnic identity among the Dimasa Kacharis of Assam. In 1931 the major bulk of the population of North Cachar was formed by the Dimasas of Hill Kacharis and up to 1961 they were clubbed with the Kacharis. The North Cachar National front was formed in 1972 having reformistic welfare-oriented and politically motivated objectives.

Number of Dimasa organizations grew up to protect their culture and identity. These Dimasa National organizations in strengthening their solidarity movement tried to generate some kind of consciousness among their community members emphasising the heritage of tradition and language, values and other symbols of the culture to crystalise ethnic identity. The ethnic unity and solidarity are the basic forces of such demand. In north Cachar they demanded for a separate hill state consisting of two hill districts, viz., Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. However there is no basic contradiction between ethnic identity and the Indian Nationality.

M. Hussain in the paper "Caste among the Assamese Muslims: An essay in social stratification" has examined the nature of caste and social stratification among the Muslims of Assam. He has observed that among the Assamese Muslims, similar to their Hindu neighbours, there is existence of loose kind of caste-like elements. He has identified several caste-like groups among them and a system of social stratification on the basis of ethnicity, descent, occupations, etc. He concludes that the caste system has been operating as an institution of regularised exploitation in Muslim society. A section of Assamese Muslims who are placed in the higher position in the caste-like hierarchy dominates over the lower and weaker sections of both the Muslims and the Hindus.

In "Profile of Economic Disparity among ethnic groups in the Terai region of Darajeeling district" S. Sur has studied the profile of economic disparity among the Rajbansis, Nepalis and tribals of the Terai of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. He finds that while the tribals are least developed, the Nepalis are comparatively better in terms of economy. The Rajbansis in general are found to put more importance in their traditional enterprise and the Nepalis put emphasis on dairying. But the tribals are found to put little importance on any enterprise. Small size of holdings, much leasing-in and leasing-out among tribals and Rajbansis, less intensive agriculture, absence of enterprise among tribals, sometimes large family size, less man-days of employment of Rajbansi females in general, causes general prevalence of poverty among them. Man-days of employment are highest among the Nepalis and lowest among the Rajbansis.

P.C. Sarkar and S.C. Kar in their paper "The impact of anti-poverty programme on the structure of a regional rural economy" have shown that the anti-poverty programme has a decisive role in

the increase of productivity through the straight pumping of resources into the lower sector of Dinhat region of Jalpaiguri. When the flow of resources is stopped, the productivity goes down. There is no planned improvement in the economy either of the input markets or of the output markets. The goal of the anti-poverty programme for the poor is far away in the economy of Dinhat. They suggest that the theory as well as the techniques involved in the designing and execution of national plans have to be remodelled making the concomitant institutions and infrastructure consistent with the avowed goal of development with freedom.

In the paper "Emerging Inequality among the Lepchas: A study in a village of Kalimpong" P. Debburman has tried to explore the nature of inequality which exists among the Lepchas. From his empirical study among the Lepchas of Kalimpong he has observed that the Lepchas under study have been individualistic in contemporary situation owing to the impact of various factors. This individualistic attitude among them has helped in the emergence of inequality in Lepcha society. He concluded that in spite of emerging trend of inequality in Lepcha society a cooperative motive still persists among them.

Mita Bhadra in her article "Ethnicity, hierarchy and inequality among the workers of tea industry in West Bengal" examines the pattern of cultural boundary maintenance in the multi-ethnic plantation society of North Bengal emphasising the nature of emerging social stratification. The plantation society can be considered as a "plural society" due to its ethnic heterogeneity. The system of stratification of this 'plural society' can be explained in combination of economic, racial, cultural, ethnic and organizational criteria. This plural society, as a whole, is regarded as "Coolies" or labourers against the "babu" or managerial class of the plantation organizational hierarchy. In Multi-ethnic plantation society group boundaries may become wider or narrower, and this can be understood by the process of ethnic-fusion and-fission. Ethnic-fusion is a process of assimilation where Munda, Oraon, Kheria form a common status group superior to the other tribal groups of plantations. The ethnic-fission has occurred due to religious affiliation of Hindu, Christian and *Saosar*.

A sense of hierarchy has also been noticed among the tribals of tea plantations which is commonly based on the criteria of traditional occupation and dietary habits. Generally agriculture is

considered as superior to non-agricultural occupations and beef-eating is looked down upon. Therefore beef-eaters are considered as inferior to the beef non-eaters. These are some of the caste like principles gradually gaining importance among the tribals of tea plantations. Oraon, Munda, Santal and Kheria who form a superior status group are gradually restricting their commensal relations with other tribal groups. Living side by side with the Hindus the tribes try to follow the Hindu ways of life and system of hierarchy. But except in case of commensality the principle of hierarchy is not clear to them.

S. Rahim Mondal in his article "Segments of society and patterns of social stratification among the Muslims or rural North-Bengal : A case study" has highlighted the dynamics of social segmentation and the patterns of social stratification among the Muslims of West Bengal. He has analysed the Islamic great tradition with particular reference to the concept of ideal egalitarian society and the emergence of social segmentation among the Muslims. The patterns of social stratification has also been analysed on the basis of empirical findings. All these have been interpreted through ordering of social relations in the formations of groups and subgroups and the nature of interaction among them. The groups and subgroups found among the Muslims are sects, sub-sects, endogenous groups (jat) and status groups etc. This study reflects the nature of traditional social stratification among the Muslims and the changes that have taken place in the contemporary situation. In his view the Muslim social segments are not castes. He has termed these segments as endogamous groups of *jatis*. In this study author has concluded that the social stratification among the Muslims is a situational development which is open and flexible in character.

Anima Bhattacharya in her article "Ethnicity and resource competition, ethnic organization, ethnic movement Vs. Political role of ethnic groups, emerging sub-nationalism" has discussed the dynamics of ethnicity and socio-political system of north-east India. She has tried to find out the role of ethnic group in the emergence of various socio-political movements in the region. In dealing with these, the political role of various ethnic groups of north-east India and the growth of sub-nationalism have also been discussed. In spite of some political competition based on ethnicity the region is linked democratically with the Indian national tradition.

Ranju Dhamala has discussed ethnic dimension of social,

political and administrative development in Sikkim in the paper "Ethnicity and development in Sikkim". She has investigated the ethnicity and resource competition in multi-ethnic Sikkimese society. The interethnic relations have influenced the political and administrative structure of the state in the process of its development. There exists an ethnic balance in the political system of Sikkim and this was contributed to the process of smooth development of the state.

M. Dasgupta has discussed that agrarian structure of Sikkim is essentially feudal in character. His article "Agrarian structure of Sikkim: A study of the land revenue system" shows that the land laws, which have been passed in the state to abolish the feudal structure, have failed to bring necessary changes in the agrarian system. The old feudal lords are still maintaining their feudal estates. The land ceiling acts on the other hand indirectly forced the tenants to be evicted from the land by the feudal lords. This, as a result, will create migration of people to urban centres and consequent increase of unemployment.

B.K. Roy Burman in his paper "Ethnicity, Ethnohistory and stratification among the tribes of Manipur" has described the ethnic processes among the tribal communities of Manipur. In looking into the ethnic processes he has gone into the historical aspects of the tribal groups of the region. The Pakan and Mon movements had ethnic dimension. Besides there were several ethnic movements in Manipur. Ethnicity and stratification within the ethnic groups are important features of this process. This process helps in the understanding of dynamics of ethnic movement in Manipur.

Alokananda Nath and D.N. Majumdar have shown the problems of identity of the tribal communities of Meghalaya who have converted themselves to Hinduism. In their article "Problems of Identity among the Hinduised communities of Meghalaya" they have described how the identity is maintained among the Rabhas, Hajong, Koches, Dalus and Banias of Meghalaya.

S.B. Chakrabarti in his paper on "Agrarian situation and the emerging situation in North-East India: Preliminary note" discussed the social and agrarian structure of the region and their relations with the emerging socio-political situation. In course of his discussion he had highlighted the relations between ecology, mode of production and social situations of the north-east part of India.