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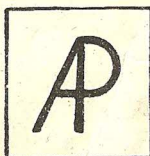
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN ASSAM:

Middle Class Hegemony



MANORAMA SHARMA

1990



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Introduction

The aim of historical research is not merely to narrate the phases of development of a society, but to establish a proper analysis and comprehension of those phases. The total understanding of the various forces at play in the development of a society, can, however, be achieved through an analysis of the position and role of the various classes in it. In the case of historical research in Assam, little work has been done on the lines of a class analysis of Assamese society, and, therefore, the importance of various classes, particularly of the Assamese middle class, in the shaping of the socio-economic development of Assam, has not been examined from the right perspective.¹

In every phase of the historical development of a society, a particular class always comes to hold the dominant position in it. It is usually the ruling class that exercises this dominance, but sometimes, in special circumstances, even a non-ruling class might rise to this dominant position and maintain a hegemony over society. The concept of hegemony as developed by Antonio Gramsci is: "...linked to the way in which the interests of the dominant class are represented ideologically as those of society as a whole, and, to the organisation of consent to that end."² The importance of the study of the Assamese Middle Class also stems from the fact that, although not a ruling class in British ruled Assam, it was still the most dominant class in Assamese society. This dominance came to be seen in the first decade of the twentieth century, and it became more and more apparent in later decades and also in the post-independence period in Assam.

1. Assam, has traditionally been understood to comprise the areas now forming the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. But for the purpose of this work Assam will be taken to mean only the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley viz. Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.

2. G. Leversha, "Beyond Spontaneity" in J. Bloomfield (ed.), *Class Hegemony and Party* (London, 1977), p.117.

It is evident from the history of the freedom movement in Assam, that towards the end of British rule, the value premises of the Assamese middle class acquired an almost universal character in the Assamese society. This ideological dominance which began to be established from about the last years of the nineteenth century, continued to hold sway in the post-independence period, and even in present day Assam, social and political values are determined to a great extent by the ideological preferences of the middle class. Not only does the middle class dominate in the realm of ideological practices of society, but more important, because of this dominance, it has continuously been playing a crucial role in almost all struggles of the Assamese people, and so the course of these movements have been deeply influenced by middle class characteristics, prejudices and values. Thus, in the anti-British peasant rebellions of the late nineteenth century, the Assamese middle class was able to make common cause with the peasantry, and gave it leadership for some time. In the twentieth century, when Assam plunged into the mainstream of the freedom movement, it was again the middle class which held the ideological dominance, and whose economic interests swayed the Congress party in Assam. Even after independence, it was the same middle class which dominated the arena of parliamentary politics. In post-independence Assam, not only did the middle class pull the strings of governmental politics, but it was in the forefront of the struggles launched by the Assamese people on economic issues and for the protection of the identity of the people of Assam. In fact, these were demands which served the interest of the middle class more than anyone else's. In all these struggles, whether it was the demand for an oil refinery in Assam, or the demand for introduction of 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 from Assam, the Assamese middle class has been able to mobilise the majority of the Assamese masses.

Thus, it is evident that whether it was in the sphere of ideological influence, or in the sphere of parliamentary politics or in mobilising support for movements launched for various demands, the

dominant role has always been that of the middle class. It is, therefore, necessary that the background, emergence and rise to a dominant position of the middle class in Assam 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.

British imperialism had retarded the normal development of the Indian economy and so a new alignment of forces took place on a very important role in colonial India. It is, however, unfortunate that little comprehensive work has been done on the middle class. Consequently, there has not emerged a proper conceptualisation of the middle class. The one piece of work on the subject is that of B.B. Misra.³ He makes a detailed study of the Indian situation during the colonial period. But, as we propose to show, it becomes difficult to accept his work on the Indian middle class as comprehensive because he draws too heavily from the writings of G.D.H. Cole,⁴ who had written about a middle class in a situation very different from that of a dependent Colonial economy like that of India. Recently, some other scholars like S.V. Pande, V. Balasubramaniam, Rajesh Misra, and Panchanan Saha have written on the Indian Middle Class,⁵ but their works are not exhaustive studies on the subject, and there is little attempt to theoretically conceptualise the middle class. Sumit Sarkar realises the problem of the absence of a proper theoretical concept of the middle class, but since the work in which he raises this issue⁶ is not exclusively on the middle class, he does not take up the exercise of conceptualising the middle class. He does, however, try to give a definition by saying that the middle class groups were

3. B.B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (New Delhi, 1973).

4. G.D.H. Cole, *Studies in Class Structure* (London, 1955).

5. S.V. Pande, "Social Stratification, Elites and Indian Society", *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 23(2), August 1982; V. Balasubramaniam, "Middle Class Attitude in Free India", *Mainstream*, 18(51), 16th August, 1980; R. Mishra, "The New Middle Class", *Emerging Sociology*, No.2, 1980; P. Saha, "Middle Class Radicalism in Bengal", *Mainstream*, 20(15), 12th December, 1981.

6. S. Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspective and Problems of a "History from Below"* (Calcutta, 1983)

those groups which asserted "some kind of regional or national leadership from the 1870s".⁷ He qualifies it by saying that it is valid only for the work cited, and so it is clear that it is not a theoretical assumption. Bani Prasanna Misra in his paper "Middle Class: Concepts and Issues",⁸ does try to arrive at a definition of the middle class by quoting widely from various writings of Marx and Engels. But, the totality of the concept of the term 'middle class' has to be looked at from a much deeper perspective than the one taken by Misra, and this must begin with the concept of class itself.

The idea of class has existed from the time of Aristotle, and even today it is a controversial and widely debated concept. From Aristotle onwards, class has been defined in different ways, by different groups of scholars, to meet different ends. For example, some like Max Weber have tried to explain class on the basis of status groups and the hierarchy of esteem,⁹ while others have taken a totally structural and functional view of class. However, it was Karl Marx who gave a coherent expression to the concept of class, and was followed by V.I. Lenin. The classical Marxist position on class explains class formulations in a capitalist economy. But the development of the colonial economy and the various economic, social and political forces which were let loose by that economy complicated the whole process of social formations, and the fact that the colonies were controlled by capital from outside changed the whole socio-economic and political milieu of these countries. So, as Ralph Miliband has surmised,¹⁰ Marxism has to be adapted to these new circumstances, which are very different from the conditions prevailing in the bourgeois-capitalist countries. Thus, in the colonial development of India too, because of the new alignment of forces under British rule, the middle class, which Marx had not considered to be a very important force in a capitalist society, took on a very important

7. *ibid.*, p.2.

8. B.P. Misra, "Middle Class: Concepts and Issues", in B. Datta Ray (ed.), *The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in North-East India*, (New Delhi, 1983).

9. See Max Weber, "Class, Status and Power" in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (ed.), *Essays in Sociology* (London, 1967).

10. R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford, 1977).

role in the Indian society. But, as we have said earlier, there has been no theoretical conceptualisation of the middle class in India. In the first Chapter, we propose to examine relevant theoretical literature on class formation in capitalist and underdeveloped societies, and arrive at an acceptable definition of class, and then go on to conceptualise the middle class and arrive at an operational definition.

The class analysis of any society requires a break from the orthodox approach to the study of history, but the interpretative approach to Assam history is still very conservative and orthodox and as such a class analysis of Assamese society, particularly a study of the middle class has to be given its due importance in historical research. The only studies on the Assamese middle class are those which have been undertaken by Hiren Gohain, Amalendu Guha, and on a journalistic plane, by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjee.¹¹ A recent addition to these existing works has been the publication of a collection of papers presented at a Seminar on Middle Classes in North-East India.¹² The book contains a series of articles by various scholars who make an attempt at evaluating the role of, and accounting for the emergence of the middle classes in the entire North Eastern Region. There are three papers in this book which deal exclusively with the middle class in Assam, and one of them specially with the emergence and role of the middle class.¹³

As far as the emergence of the middle class is concerned, both Hiren Gohain and Amalendu Guha hold that a middle class,

11. H. Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", *Social Scientist*, Annual Number (No.13) August 1973; A Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947* (New Delhi, 1977), pp.56-64; "Making of the Assamese Middle Class 1825-1905", paper presented at a Seminar on Resource base and problems of Regional Development of North-Eastern Region of India, at Geography Department' North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1977; B.K. Bhattacharjee, *Dersha Basoror Asomiya Sanskritik Abhumuki* (Guwahati, 1973).

12. B. Datta Ray (ed.), *The Emergence and Role of Middle Classes in North-East India* (New Delhi, 1983).

13. M.S. Baruah, "The Assamese Middle Class: Its Role in the Peasant Uprisings of 1893-1894"; S. Baruah and J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Middle Class and Language Politics in Assam during the Colonial Period"; K. Alam, "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam" in B. Datta Ray (ed.), *ibid.*

as a class, existed in Assam in the nineteenth century. We, however, propose to show in the course of our third and fourth chapters that the economic condition of Assam in the nineteenth century did not make the growth of a viable new class possible. There has also been a lot of controversy over the issue of the role of the middle class. Two distinct lines of thought exist on this question. One section of scholars hold that the Assamese middle class was not really a progressive force in the Assamese society, and that its role in the peasant rebellions of the nineteenth century amply proves this point. The other section holds that the Assamese Middle Class played a sympathetic role in the peasant rebellions, but it continued to play a compromising role because of the pull of British capital and its own economic insecurity. Recently, a third group of scholars have stressed the comparatively progressive aspect of the role of the middle class in Assam.¹⁴ There is, however, evidence to show that the *Rajmels* which gave leadership to the peasant rebellion of 1893-94 had a considerable amount of support from the nascent Assamese Middle Class. In the fifth chapter of this work, we, therefore, examine the origin, class character and role of the *Rajmels*, in order to assess the importance of the middle class and to determine its position in the Assamese society, its role in crucial issues such as the peasant rebellions has to be analysed. This role can however be correctly evaluated only on the basis of a proper determination of the class character of the middle class. Therefore, while discussing the Assamese middle class, its socio-economic roots have to be located. This is one important aspect which has not been dealt with in detail by Gohain or Guha. Both have shown in their writings the development of the middle class (according to their definition); its

14. This is evident from the discussion on the recent agitation against the foreign nationals in Assam and the Assamese nationality question. See, Gail Omvedt, "Aspects of the Assamese Problem" *Frontier*, Vol.12, No.41; Tilottam Misra, "Assam and the National Question", *Nationality Question in India* (Hyderabad, 1982), pp.41, 66 (In this article Misra agrees with many of the conclusion we had arrived at regarding the Assamese peasantry and *Rajmels* in a paper presented in 1978; See N.S. Baruah, "The Assamese Middle Class", *op.cit.*); "Apurba Baruah, Assamese Middle Class and Xenophobic Tendencies in Assamese Society", *Frontier*, Vol.14, No.11.

economic interests and its sources of income, but neither of them has specifically analysed where its social roots lay.¹⁵ In the light of the economic development of Assam discussed in the earlier chapters (in the sixth chapter) we trace the roots of the Assamese middle class, to help us understand why this middle class was able to play a dominant role in the history of Assam.

Thus, in this work-an attempt is being made to 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 the growth of a new class? Or was it the commercial sector which formed the basis of a new class formation in Assam? Or was the development of the bureaucratic system under the British responsible for the growth of economically viable new classes? It is only after an inquiry into these questions can we really comprehend the role of the middle class in the socio-political superstructure of Assamese society. Such a study, however, will have to be made on an understanding not only of the socio-economic system in Assam during the British rule, but the pre-British system will also have to be understood clearly in order to grasp the process of class formations in Assam in the later periods of development. The second chapter of this work deals with this aspect and analyses the disintegration of the old order in Assam with the advent of British rule.

In the last chapter, we have summarised our formulations and findings on the Assamese middle class, and also take up the question of hegemony and analyse the reasons the middle class in Assam came to play a hegemonic role in Assamese society in the twentieth century, even though it has not been the ruling class.

15. Refer H. Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", *op.cit.*; A.Guha, "Making of the Assamese Middle Class", *op.cit.*, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, *op.cit.*