

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

By

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ABSTRACT

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

To



**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
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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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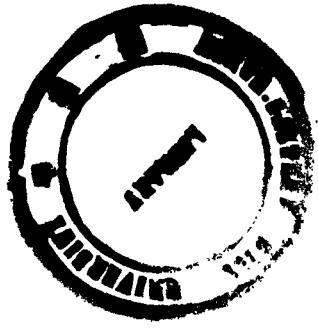
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submitted by Miss Sabinu Nong to the North-Eastern
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Doctor of Philosophy, is a bonafide research work
prepared under my supervision, it has not, either
wholly or in part, been submitted to any other
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This Dissertation may be placed before
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P R E F A C E

The present study aims at examining the emergence and role of the Assamese middle class in Political and Economic changes in the Brahmaputra Valley during Colonial and Post-colonial period. Assam comprises of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley. For an intensive analysis only the Brahmaputra Valley has been brought in as the area of focus.

The present study is divided into seven chapters and the conclusion. The appendix at the end of the thesis shows the socio-economic background of some of the leading middle class personalities of Assam.

This study is based on sources which include such primary sources as (a) official records, (b) Government reports and memoranda, (c) Assam Legislative Assembly debates, official reports of Budget Session, (d) Census reports of Government of India, Assam (1891-1971), (e) Gazetteers, and such secondary sources as books, journals, periodicals, newspapers (both in English and Assamese language), memoirs and autobiographies.

The Dissertation attempts to analyse the role played by the Assamese middle class in the major issues which cropped up before and after Independence. An attempt has been made to survey the important contributions, individual and collective, of the various leaders through various forums- both Political and non-Political- to persuade the concerned authorities at the state and central level, to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Assamese people in the vital economic and political matters.

For this Dissertation, I express my sincere gratitude to my Supervisor, Prof.R.L. Walli, Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, for his guidance, assistance and valuable suggestions which he provided throughout my Research work.

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Dated Shillong,
The 17th June 1985.

S. Nessa
(SAIDUN NESSA)

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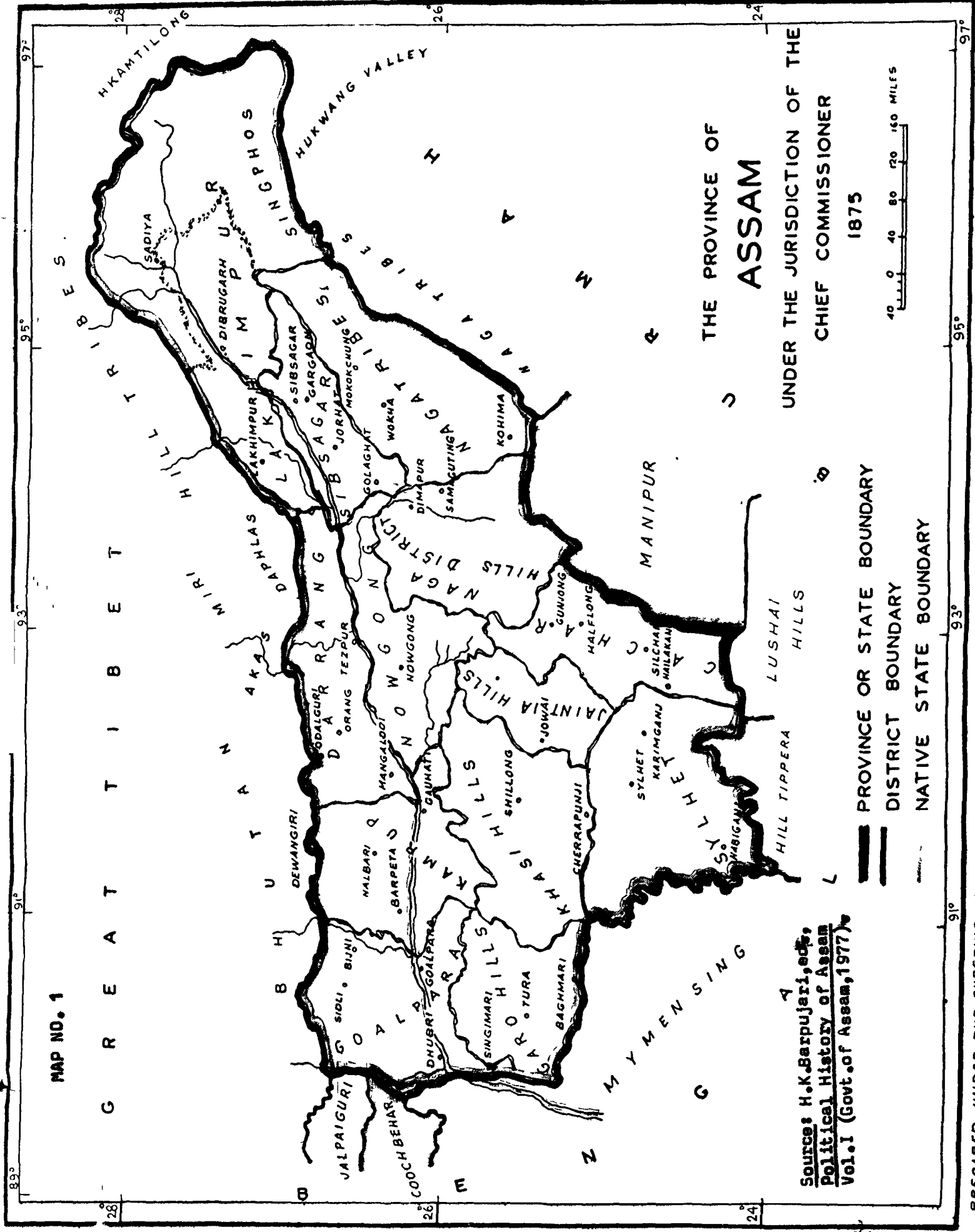
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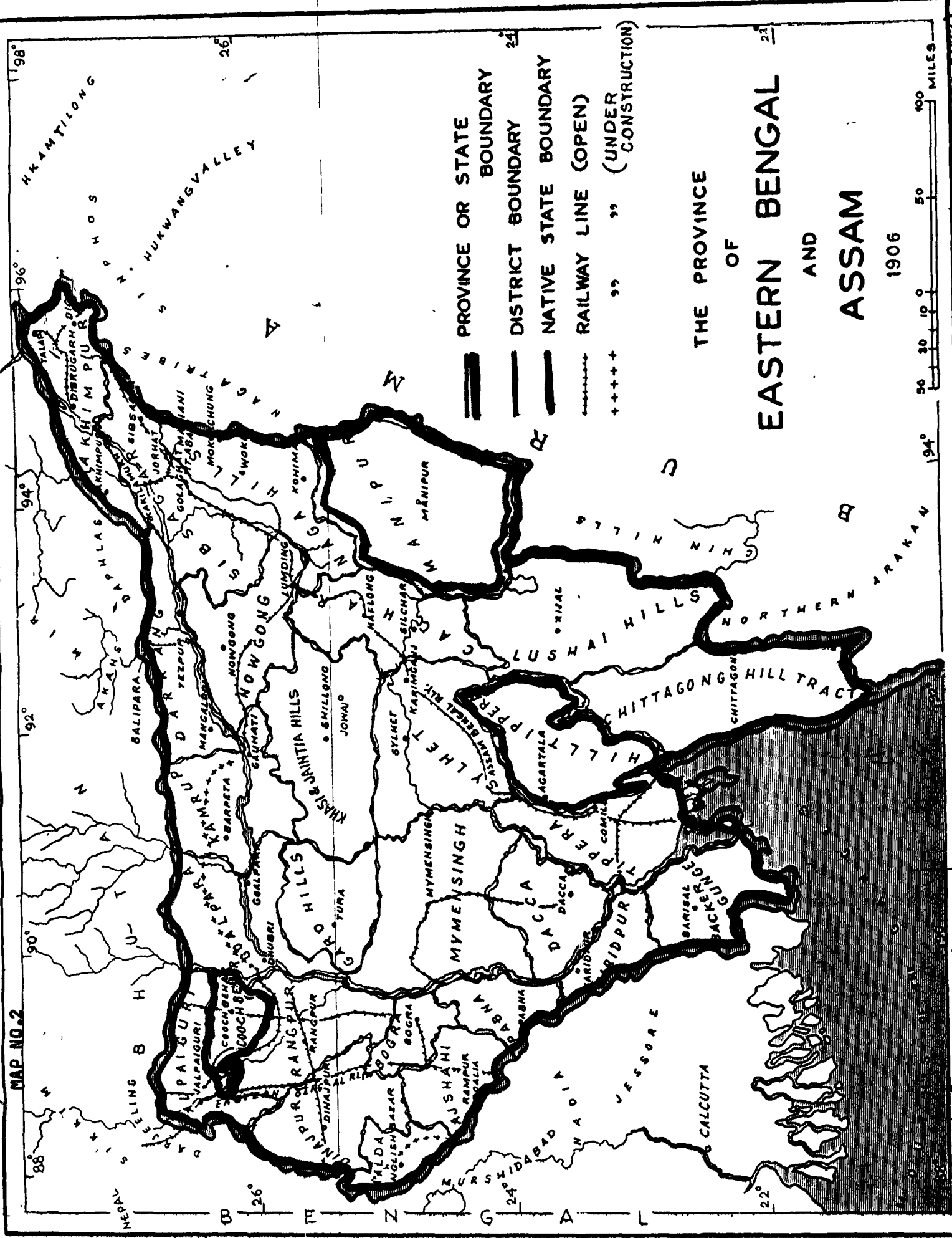
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THE PROVINCE
OF
EASTERN BENGAL
AND
ASSAM

1906



MAP NO. 2

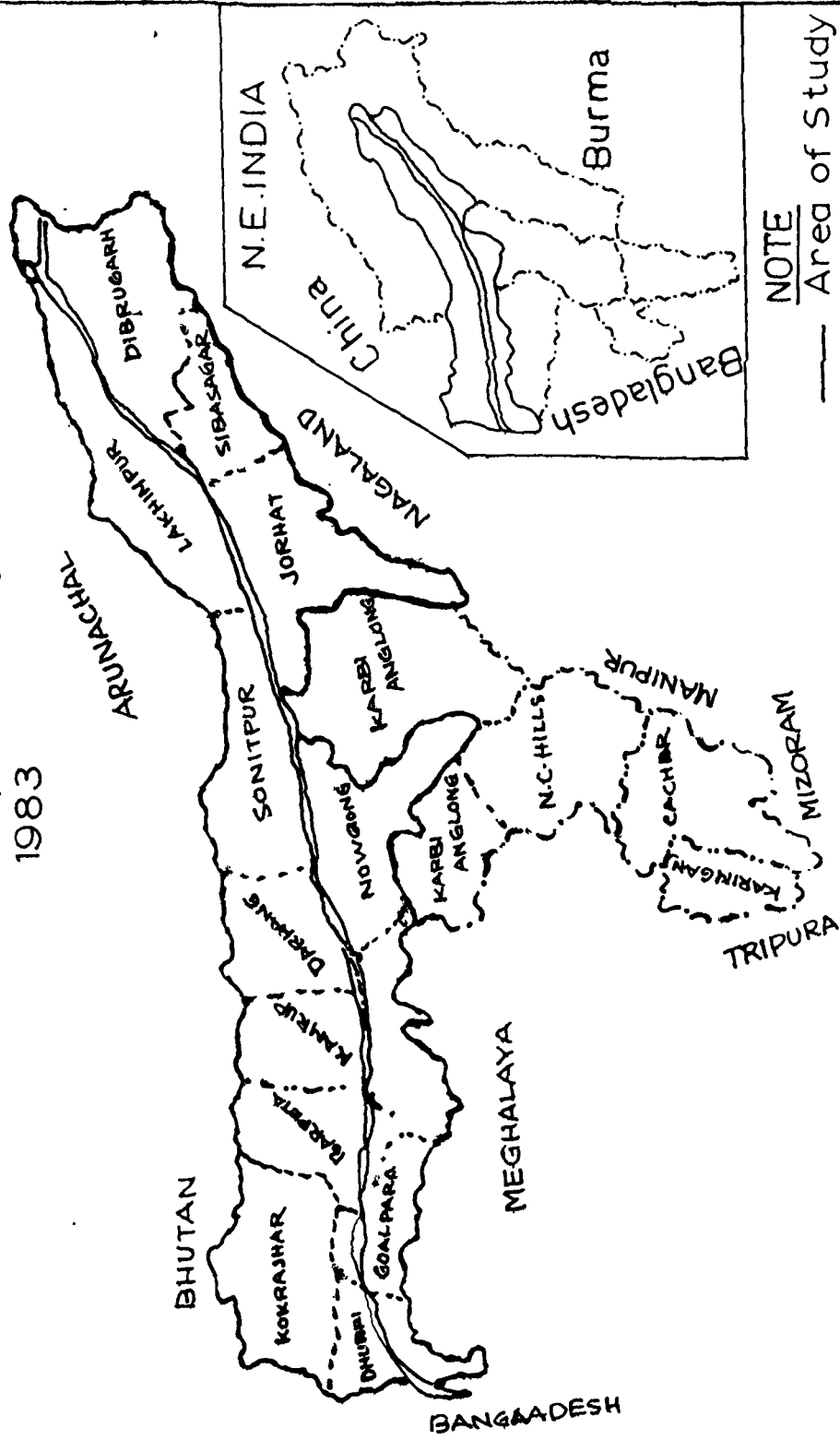
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PREPARED UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF DR. M. TAHER SOURCE: H. K. Barpujari, ed., Political History of Assam Vol. I (Govt. of Assam, 1977).

MAP No. 3

ASSAM

STUDY AREA
(The Brahmaputra Valley)
1983



NOTE
— Area of Study
..... Districts

Not to Scale

MAP SHOWS THE DISTRICT BOUNDARIES OF ASSAM AFTER THE CREATION/SIX NEW DISTRICTS ON JULY '83'

CHAPTER - I

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social inequality gives rise to social classes. In order to discuss the origin of social classes, we have first to understand the existence of inequality in society. Inequality of the modern world is manifested in the division of society into innumerable social classes. Concept of class is as old as Greek Philosophy and as a social phenomenon it exists in almost all societies.

Unequal distribution of wealth, power and property leads to the formation of various strata in society. In a social system, the capacity of men differ from one another in reaching their respective goals. This capacity of men can be defined as 'power.' Again, different persons have different ways or sources for accumulating wealth or earning their income. "The problem of social inequality has two aspects, a distributive and a relational aspect. The first refers to the ways in which different factors such as income, wealth, occupation, education, power, skill etc., are distributed in the population. The second refers to the ways in which individuals differentiated by these criteria are related to each other within a system of groups and categories".¹

1. Andre Beteille, ed., Social Inequality (England, Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 13.

However, income cannot be taken as the sole criterion for differentiating one group of people from the other. A person's status cannot be judged on the basis of income alone. Those who are in business line may earn more than those who are in professional line. Again, 'education' also cannot be considered as the only factor of social inequality. People with higher education may have limited sources of income.

There is an interlinkage between social inequality, social stratification and social class. Existence of one is impossible without the other. In the Western World, a different type of stratification system existed. "In the Western World, the different forms of stratification or institutionalized systems of inequality have been, in chronological order, estate systems, caste systems and class systems. The estate system of western medieval feudalism was supported by a system of legal categories and rights expressing and supporting the sense of important social differences. The levels from high to low included the clergy as the first estate, the nobility as the second estate and the common people as the third estate".²

2. Acuff, Allen & Taylor, From Man and Society (Oklahoma, 1973), p.173.

Existence of social inequality is a common feature of all human societies except primitive societies, which display classlessness; These societies were characterised by harmony. Whatever they got was distributed among themselves. Collective and Co-operative production from nature by man was prevalent in such societies. As property was limited, it could not create differences of wealth. Man was the owner of means of production. Process of interaction between nature and man was symbolized by the 'Concept of labour'. When 'Capital' became an important factor in the means of production, the concept of private property came into being. With 'Capital', man purchased more and more resulting in the introduction of private property. Unequal distribution of property and introduction of 'division of labour' were some of the factors which resulted in inequality in society. Patterns of inequality or the system of stratification vary from country to country.

With the establishment of the institution of private property, people became unequal and this can be said as the beginning of class society. Concept of private property continued to dominate the system of social stratification for a longer period. "The assumption of an original state of equality and the

explanation of the origin of inequality in terms of private property, remained unchallenged from Rousseau to Lorenzovon, Stein and Karl Marx".³ Rousseau, Miller, Stein and Marx put emphasis on 'Property' as the main cause of inequality. But some non-Marxist writers of later part of eighteenth century emphasized the importance of another factor in addition to property i.e., division of labor. By the beginning of twentieth century, "Division of labor" dominated the discussion about the formation of social classes.

Division of labor reinforced social inequality.

"The division of social production into its broad categories leads to the creation of private property and splits society up into haves and have-nots, rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited".⁴ Social division of labor led to the formation of professional groups. In industry or in educational institutions or in other government services, each worker performs only a special task which is meant for him. This is possible with the division of labor, which destroyed the unity among people and created inequality in society.

3. Andre Beteille, op.cit., p.23.

4. Ernst Fischer, Marx in His Own Words (England, Harmondsworth, 1973), p.38.

RISE OF CLASSES

The tribes living in primitive society did not experience the existence of social classes. They worked to earn their livelihood in order to survive. They were not concerned with establishing their superiority over others. Some sort of equality of rank prevailed among them. When these tribes acquired military strength, they started conquering their enemies, thereby establishing their superiority over others. Initially, these conquered enemies were either killed or tortured. But subsequently, they were enslaved by the conquering tribes. These slaves were deprived of all privileges and rights. Socially, they were alienated. They were compelled to work for their masters. System of slavery gave rise to a privileged group who depended on the work of slaves. "Along with the emergence of slavery, there also appears an aristocracy of some kind, which lives upon slave labour".⁵

Marx referred to four types of mode of production in the context of Europe :

- i. Primitive Communism,
- ii. Slave based mode of production,
- iii. Feudal mode of production,
- iv. Capitalist mode of production.

5. T.B. Bottomore, Sociology : A Guide to Problems and Literature (Bombay, 1972), p.186.

In the first stage of human society, people did not have the idea and the means of accumulating wealth. It was a communist society but primitive. In the second stage, slave became the central factor in mode of production. When civilization marched on and reached the third stage, King became the head but he had some feudal lords with him. The owners of land were feudal lords. In every mode of production, there is an urge for increasing production which resulted in improvement of forces of production. New forces of production are not in harmony with the old relations of production. With the change of each mode of production, there is a change in the ruling class, and a new society is established. The fourth stage is the stage of capitalism which is the result of industrial development. Under capitalism, exploitation prevails due to the existence of antagonistic classes.

In the medieval society, nobility or royalty was at the top of social hierarchy. But government power was vested in the hands of the nobles. Ecclesiastical supremacy prevailed at that time. In those societies, conflict arose between feudal lords and serfs. Serfs were bound to soil and they were exploited by lords. The commodities, which were produced by serfs, were taken away

by lords. There still existed 'theow class'* consisting of slaves who could be sold or pawned. Feudal lords were at the top and serfs were at the bottom of social hierarchy. Another group consisting of household servants soldiers and handicraftsman formed an in-between class. Around eleventh century, the artisans along with some small tradesman became powerful and independent and did not remain under the control of feudal lords. This in-between class which emerged independent of the control of feudal lords and kings in the towns, organized themselves in guilds.** The guilds became the basis of economic structure of medieval period.

Modern classes have evolved from the class structure of medieval period where feudal lords were at the top and serfs at the bottom of social ladder. In modern society two distinct classes can be found- the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Owners of means of production are known as the bourgeoisie. Workers who live on the wages by selling their labour power are known as the proletariat. The bourgeoisie of eighteenth and nineteenth century were the direct offspring of the town workers and handicraftsmen of medieval period.

* a slave.

** a medieval association for mutual aid.

Industrial Revolution brought a change in the class structure of medieval society along with the change in the socio-economic sphere. Prior to industrial revolution, society was simple and there was self-sufficient village economy. After Industrial Revolution, men started coming to the towns to work under the capitalists. The capitalist class occupies higher status in society. Proletariat, the workers, stand at the lower stratum of the society.

Social classes arise out of relations of production. Some are owners and some are workers in the system of production. Status of a man in society depends on his relation to the system of production.

"Classes are that which permit one section of society to appropriate the labour of another section. If one section of society appropriates all the land we have a landowner class and a peasant class. If one section of society owns the factories, shares and capital, while another section works in these factories, we have a capitalist class and a proletarian class".⁶

Social classes are not legally sanctioned groups.

"They are not constituted or supported by any specific legal or religious rules, and membership of a particular

6. V.I. Lenin, Selected Works, Vol.3 (Moscow, 1977), p.417.

class confers upon the individual no special civil or political rights".⁷

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Many theorists have attempted to formulate general theories of class formation. There have been two major attempts to formulate theories of social stratification. These are the 'conflict' or 'dialectical approach' and the 'functionalist approach'. Karl Marx, Lewis Cozer, Simmel, Ralf Dahrendorf and some other writers were the exponents of conflict theory when the people living in the society came into contact with each other, ideas, values, cultures ~~are~~ exchanged among them. Conflict arises when there is exchange of ideas or cultures.

In the nineteenth century, theories of social classes were formulated along with the gradual development of modern social sciences. Concept of class is articulated by some ideologies, among which Marxism occupies an important position.

7. T.B. Bottomore, Classes in Modern Society (London, 1965), p.17.

Existence of inequality in societies was recognized by some writers even before eighteenth century. But they could not find out the root cause of such inequalities. Though social inequalities were recognized, no theories were formulated. Classes and class struggles were recognized long before Marx formulated his theory of class. Therefore, Marx renounced any credit for discovering the existence of class. He remarked:

"no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society, nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle of the classes and bourgeois economist the economic anatomy of classes".⁸

That classes and class struggle exists in society was known to 'Livy, Machiavelli, Adam Smith, Sismondi, Thierry, Guizot, Thiers, Carlyle and many other historians, economists and sociologists'.⁹

In all societies, basically two classes exist oppressor and oppressed. In the agrarian sector, there are the landholders and the peasants. In the industrial sector, there are the Capitalists and the Proletariat. Conflict arises between these two groups.

8. Quoted in Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.16, p.946.

9. Ernst Fischer, op.cit., p.61.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, Patrician and Plebian lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes".¹⁰

Marx talked about the existence of two mutually antagonistic groups involved in the process of production. One group differed from the other on the basis of their relation to the means of production i.e., ownership or non-ownership. He also identified some other classes like landlord, petty bourgeoisie etc., on the same criterion i.e., relation to the means of production. To Marx, concept of class is pertinent to all levels of analysis. Marx used the term class in different senses. Sometimes its defining feature is the role a group plays in production, sometimes it means common mode of life, including culture and tradition, sometimes again it refers to source of their income.¹¹

10. Karl Marx and F. Engels, The Communist Manifesto (England, 1967), p.79.

11. Sidney Hook, Marx and Marxists-The Ambiguous Legacy (New York, 1955), p.39.

Marx's notion of class was connected with class conflict. Hostile relationship between different groups results in social conflict and finally brings a change in the society. Marx defined the concept of class through system of production and social development through class conflict. Marx believed that class societies passed through a particular phase of historical development and would be succeeded by socialist or communist type of society, which represent classless society. Class societies were also preceded by classless societies of primitive type.

Land was the main sources of production in the past. Due to the alienation of land, some people are landless and some are landowners. Landless labourers work as wage labour for earning their livelihood. Under feudalism, the most important relationship was the ownership of land. In capitalism, ownership of capital is most important.

In Marx's writings, the phrase which is more capiously used is 'modes of production', which consisted of two elements- (1) forces of production and (2) relations of production. Forces of production included

equipments, tools, technical skills or in other words science and technology which is used in production. Relations of production means the relationship of different classes of society to the means of production. In 'Capital', Marx outlined three main classes. These three classes are different from one another on the basis of their relationship to the means of production. "The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land owners, whose respective sources of income are wages profit and ground rent, in other words, wage labourers, capitalists and land owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production".¹² In the system of production, some are owners of land, some are tenants, some employers, some employed. When the social structure of production is examined minutely, it becomes apparent as to who is dominated by whom.

Marx was primarily concerned with the development of classes and role played by various classes in bringing changes in the social and political sphere. He did not give a systematic analysis of class. In the third volume of 'Capital', he started clarifying the

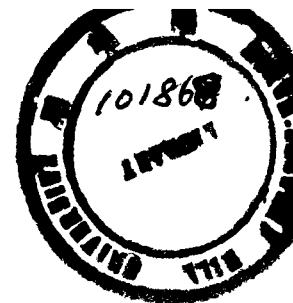
12. Karl Marx, Capital, Vol.III (Moscow,1959,Reprint 1978), p.885.

concept of class but he died before finishing the chapter. In this unfinished chapter, he tried to give a formal analysis of class.

A class can be considered as a class only when the people of that class become politically conscious and organize into a group to defend themselves against the attack of opponents. Here the distinction between 'class in itself' and 'class for itself' is important. When there is lack of political consciousness in a group, they form a 'class in itself'. But when they develop political consciousness and when there is some unity among the people of the group in furtherance of their class interests, they form a 'class for itself'. "Marx first distinguishes the proletariat as a 'class in itself', an aggregate of individuals who are in the same economic situation, and then tries to show how it becomes a 'class for itself', i.e., how its members become aware of their common interests and political aims".¹³

Though Marx's theory occupies central place in modern social thought, its main drawback is that it

13. T.B.Bottomore, Sociology : A Guide to Problems and Literature (Bombay, 1972), p.199.



discerns the polarization of society into two classes i.e., capitalist class and the working class. Of course, he did not deny the existence of other classes. Marx put more emphasis on social class and class conflict. He showed that social transition is possible only through class struggle. He underestimated the influence and importance of nationalism.

Marx's concept of class on the basis of relation to mode of production cannot be considered to be correct. It fails to explain many social situations, viz., survival of traditional social organizations, viz., the caste system cannot be explained with it. There are many castes in society, specially in Hindu society which are not based on economic differences. The Brahmins, though not generally wealthy, occupy a higher position in the social hierarchy. The Vaishyas are the wealthiest class but they occupy a lower position in the social ladder. Those people who indulge in manual labour are looked down upon by the society as belonging to an inferior class. White collar jobs carry with it greater prestige but do not yield greater income. Besides wealth, there are various other factors like occupation, education etc., for determining the status of people.

Non-Marxist sociologists have also attempted the study of working class, middle class and upper class as distinct groups. But the class theories, which were developed in the post-Marxian era, aimed at revising or refuting the Marxist theory.

Max Weber was the first Sociologist who tried to refute Marxian theory of social stratification. He criticized Marx on the ground that Marxist model is too simple to deal with complex social stratification. Weber's definition of class is wider in scope than that of Marx. He viewed ownership and non-ownership of property as an important factor which leads to social inequality. He put emphasis on the importance of 'value' which is a combination of many factors and economic factor is only a part of that. Those who possess property and those who do not possess property form two distinct classes. Each class can again be further subdivided into various other classes on the basis of what type of property they possess. Possession of property is an important factor for determining class.

Weber's social stratification system was based on three things viz., class, status and power. He

defined 'class' as a group of people who have the power to distribute goods and skills for earning money. He described 'Status' as the prestige received by individuals, and 'power' as the ability of person for achieving goals in social systems. A distinction between 'class' and 'status' was made by Max Weber. Status of a person is judged by evaluating honour or prestige of occupation. Sometimes it is evaluated on the basis of one's family descent. Status refers to a person's position in society. Individuals who have same status and same style of life form status groups. Nobility and other top ranking officials enjoyed high esteem in the medieval period. The status groups of modern era have originated from them.

To Weber, both class stratification and status stratification exist side by side in a modern society. The third group in Weber's analysis of stratification consists of those people who always seek power.

"Max Weber distinguished three orders of stratification: (1) the economic or class order based upon class situation defined in a way similar to Marx. (2) the social order based upon the distribution of social honor or status, (3) the political order based upon the distribution of power".¹⁴

14. Leonard Broom & Philip Selznick, Principles of Sociology (New York, 1968), p.154.

Weber includes in his definition of class not only those aspect of class which are related to means of production but all cases where there is market situation. According to Weber, market economy is based on Capitalism. This finally gives rise to class status. In the market for material property, owners or possessors of property can acquire highly valued goods. On the basis of that they are better placed in society. To Weber, social inequality arises from the unequal distribution of honour or status. Privileged property classes live from property income.¹⁵

In theory, Weber talked about keeping separate the three orders of stratification viz., the economic, social and political. But in practice, it is never possible. Since there is an interrelationship among all those orders, they can never be kept analytically separate. No group is cohesive.

While ideas of Marx and Weber have been quite influential in social and political thought, the functionalist approach also occupies an important place. Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Malinowsky,

¹⁵. Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, translated by Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1964), p.425.

Redcliffe-Brown and Robert Merton were some of the exponents of this theory. According to the functionalists, stratification is an innate aspect of society. Division of society into various strata is immutable. Work is expected according to ability of persons. A person gets salary or reward for his work depending on the type of work which he does. Advocates of this approach explain class through functional differentiation. The function of a particular social usage is to contribute to the functioning and development of the total social system.

In explaining social stratificational situation, the term 'function' refers to the role of organic processes which contribute to the maintenance of a living organism. Redcliffe-Brown follows organismic analogy in visualizing society. He compares animal organism with social organism. According to functional theorist, all parts of the social system work together with sufficient degree of harmony without producing any conflict. The theory of functionalism as propounded by Malinowsky and Redcliffe-Brown is based on three main principles. To them (i) All social and cultural items have some role to play in society, (ii) These functions are positive in nature, (iii) Therefore, these items are absolutely necessary for

the survival of a social system.¹⁶

Different groups existing in society perform different roles and according to the functional theorists, those roles are positive in nature which finally contributes to the maintenance of the social system. Hence, role performed by each of the groups becomes indispensable. Here the functional theorists contradict conflict theorists, Conflict theorists visualize development of society in terms of conflict of interest and antagonistic relationship among various groups while functional theorists visualize development of society in terms of positive and integrative function of various groups. "The Marxist theory emphasizes conflict between large and stable groups, with strong community sentiments, while the functionalist theory emphasizes the integrating function of social stratification based upon individual merit and reward".¹⁷

Merton's theory of functionalism is based on ideas of earlier thinkers like Malinowsky and Redcliffe-Brown. He tried to modify the earlier views on

16. Robert K.Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New Delhi, 1968), p.79.

17. T.B.Bottomore, Sociology (Bombay, 1972), p.202.

functionalism. Merton was of the view that any postulate should be open for further research. Every assumption should have 'heuristic value' i.e., capacity to explain further phenomena. His analysis is important because he tried to explain every statement with empirical situation. Whether cultural items uniformly fulfil functions for the society viewed as a system and for all members of the society, is presumably an empirical question of fact, rather than an axiom.¹⁸

Merton raised the question that whether cultural item, uniformly fulfil, function for the society or not. Cultural items are believed to perform integrative function. Degree of integration is an empirical variable. It varies from society to society. Sometimes it is even different within the same society.

Further, if cultural item plays only integrative role then divisions in society would not have existed. Therefore, social groups may or may not have integrative function based on harmony. Social stratification, whether it is caste or class, according to this approach, is based on the notion of division of
18. Robert K.Merton, op.cit., p.80.

labour which leads to solidarity. But division of labour may not necessarily be based on harmony. It may be based on antagonistic relationship too. Cultural item functional for one group may be dysfunctional for another group, e.g., Religion, a cultural item may not play an integrative role.

Neither the conflict theory nor the functionalist theory is sufficient for explaining empirical reality. "Indeed, most functionalist or conflict theories of social stratification too do not fulfil the strict scientific norms of a theory."¹⁹

The recent trend among the Sociologists is to analyse theory of social stratification on the basis of a pluralistic conceptual framework by taking into consideration both conflict and functional theory as two sides of the same reality. Since neither of these two theories has the universality which they claim, it is difficult to rely on any one of them.

19. Y.Singh, "Sociology of Social Stratification", in ICSSR, A Survey of Research in Sociology & Social Anthropology, Vol.1 (New Delhi, 1974), p.313.

MIDDLE CLASS - A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Middle class is a very enigmatic word. Though its meaning is obscure, it is frequently used in social sciences. Different writers have given different opinion on the meaning, implication and dimension of this term. The concept of 'middle class' is extremely loose and ambiguous, because it carries the popularized sociology of 'social stratification' with it, in which groupings of individuals are ranked on various dimensions like income and social prestige.²⁰ Middle class of society is ideologically heterogenous group. This group of society undergoes change frequently. In the medieval period middle class was a homogenous group comprising mainly tradesman. Modern middle class consists not only of tradesman but also includes doctors, lawyers, technocrats and many other white collar workers. It is a heterogenous social order consisting of different functional and occupational groups.

The middle class of the society is comprised of those groups who are not required to produce surplus value i.e., they are not manual labourers. They have to

20. Dale L. Johnson, "Class relations and the Middle Class", in Dale L. Johnson, ed., Class and Social Development : A New Theory of the Middle Class (New Delhi, 1982), p.93.

work as supervisors, technocrats or managers in the system of production. . .

"...the middle class is made up of technical, administrative, and professional employees who are not, in the main, hired to produce surplus value as such. Their places in the social division of labor are to perform functions appropriated from deskilled workers, to exercise coordinative and developmental activities as delegated by managers, or to supervise the labor of workers who do directly produce surplus value".²¹

In almost all societies, three broad segments can be found - one class very rich, another poor, and a third in the middle.

"There are three major classes dominated by capitalist mode of production - the working class, the middle class (petty bourgeoisie) and the capitalist class in terms of their class determination. Poulantzas arrived at this understanding of class determinations that - (a) the productive managers and the top engineers are in the capitalist class (b) workers and technicians in the sphere of production are in the petite bourgeoisie class and (c) those who labor in the capitalist mode of production are the working class".²²

Classes are arranged in a hierarchy of upper, middle and lower depending on the degree of control

21. Ibid., p.98.

22. Scott M.Lash, "Productive Labor, Class Determination and Class Position", Science and Society, Vol.XLII, 1978, p.65.

over wealth, political power etc. Boundary of social classes can never be precisely defined. Class is considered as an open system, where individual has freedom to move freely from one class to another which is known as 'social mobility'.

The division of society into 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat' was not however the final division of society. Existence of an in-between strata or the middle class obscured the capitalist-working class dualism and brought a change in the system of social structure.

Middle class has been divided into two groups- 'old' and 'new' middle class. The old middle class possessed a little land and capital and performed labour on its own. But the 'new middle class' does not perform manual labour. This group comprises office workers, supervisors, managers etc. The nineteenth century writers including Marx, talked about old middle class which consisted of small independent producers and professional men. The new middle class of twentieth century comprises employees in public services and in business establishments and office workers. The old middle class took no direct part in the capital accumulation process. They were also not politically

conscious. But the new middle class take active part in capital accumulation process. They are politically more conscious and form political organizations to articulate their interests.

Middle class has again been sub-divided into various sub-classes in terms of their income and standard of living like upper middle class, middle class, and lower middle class. However, there is no clear cut definition of these sub-groups. The middle strata is that strata of society which is neither privileged nor unprivileged. This strata consists of literary groups, professionals and trading elements. Small shopkeepers and farmers also belong to this category. Middle-class people participate in the decision making process of the country through some political organizations. They also play an important role in electing their political leaders.

In the western society, especially after the Industrial revolution, the classes were divided into upper, middle and lower classes, on the basis of their economic strength. Karl Marx however, talked about petty bourgeoisie which is used interchangeably with modern middle class. Karl Marx did not put much

emphasis on the role of middle class because in the early years of capitalism, modern middle class did not take a well defined form. He talked about that type of middle class comprising small producers and craftsman only.

Marx and Engels used the term 'middle class', but not in consistent ways. Both Marx and Engels did not make a systematic distinction between different sections of the middle class, especially between the 'old middle class' comprising small producers, artisans, farmers and peasants and the 'new middle class' comprising clerks, supervisors, technicians and government officials.²³ When capitalism developed, then petty bourgeoisie consisting of artisans shopkeepers etc., gradually decayed. In its place there arose the 'new petty bourgeoisie' consisting of mainly office workers, managers of business establishment and civil servants. "In countries where modern civilization has become fully developed a new class of petty bourgeois has been formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie and ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeoisie society".²⁴

23. T.Bottomore, et al, eds., A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (England, 1983), p.333.

24. Karl Marx and F.Engels, op.cit., p.108.

Though Marx's social thought centered round mainly two classes i.e, bourgeoisie and proletariat, he did not totally neglect the existence of an in-between strata.

"Marx did not deny that between capitalists and proletarians there are today a number of intermediate groups- artisans, petite bourgeoisie, merchants, peasant landowners. But he made two statements. First, along with the evolution of the capitalist regime, there will be a tendency towards crystallization of social relations into two groups and only two: the capitalists on the one hand, and the proletarians on the other. Two classes and only two represent a possibility for a political regime and an idea of a social regime".²⁵

Marx referred to several social classes like the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat and rich, poor and middle peasants in his writings. In Revolution and counter revolution in Germany,

"Marx distinguished the following classes: the feudal nobility, the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, the upper and middle peasantry, the free lower peasantry, the slave peasantry, the agricultural labourers and the industrial workers. In The Class Struggle in France, the list is as follows: financial bourgeoisie, Industrial bourgeoisie, Petite bourgeoisie, Peasant Class, Proletarian class, and finally what he calls the lumpen proletariat, which more or less corresponds to what we call the sub-proletariat".²⁶

25. Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, (England, 1965), p.117.

26. Ibid., pp.164-165.

In the early stages of industrialization in Britain, there were on the one hand 'Petty bourgeoisie' class comprising petty producers, and big bourgeoisie' consisting of big industrial capitalists. The big bourgeoisie controlled large scale capital whereas petty bourgeoisie controlled small scale capital. "In England modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, even here the stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form. Middle and intermediate strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation".²⁷

It is relevant to discuss middle class in India against the backdrop of the emergence of middle class in England.

MIDDLE CLASS IN ENGLAND

In ancient times, different types of social stratification existed in Europe, like Knights and slaves. However, the middle ages witnessed the existence of feudal lords and barons. New classes appeared in modern bourgeois society.

27. Ernst Fischer, op.cit., p.69.

In England, origin of middle class can be traced back to the advent of traders as a separate group of people in fourteenth century. "In England in the fourteenth century the emergence of the trader as a separate social and functional category formed the first step in the rise of a middle class".²⁸ Introduction of capitalist mode of production resulted in the emergence of middle class. Industrial revolution helped in the crystallization of the middle class. In the course of time along with traders, manufacturers emerged as a separate group. Middle class originated in trade and industry and later on in other fields like education, legal system etc. Economic and technological changes led to the emergence of middle class.

Establishment of colonies and trade with colonies encouraged commerce and trade and finally broke feudal system. With the discovery of America, precious metals were imported from there. "Manufacture and the movement of production in general received an enormous impetus through the extension of intercourse which came with the discovery of America and the sea-route to the

28. B.B.Misra, The Indian Middle Classes Their Growth in Modern Times (New Delhi, 1961), p.4.

East Indies. The new products imported thence, particularly the masses of gold and silver which came into circulation had totally changed the position of the classes towards one another, dealing a hard blow to feudal landed property and to the workers".²⁹ World market was established by modern industry. The market led to the development of commerce. This development led to the extension of industry and growth and development of the industrial bourgeoisie. "The discovery of America, the rounding of the cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie".³⁰

Under feudal social structure, production was the monopoly of guilds. But with the expansion of new markets, guild masters were replaced by manufacturing middle class. "The feudal system of industry in which industrial production was monopolized by closed guilds now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class".³¹ This manufacturing middle class performed intermediary role between owners of the means of production and workers.

29. Marx & Engels, The German Ideology (Moscow, 1976), pp. 77-78.

30. Bottomore & Rubel (ed.), Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (England, 1956), p. 137.

31. Ibid., p. 137.

INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS

Middle class emerged in India during British Colonial Rule. Emergence of middle class in India as well as in Assam, cannot be understood outside the imperialist context. It emerged in India during Colonial period with the establishment of legal and educational institutions by the British. The intention of the British colonialists was to intensify their economic exploitation in India. Their advent led to a change in the then existing political and economic system of the country. The Britishers transplanted into India their own administrative and legal institutions. "Ideas and institutions of a middle-class social order were imported into India. They did not grow from within. They were implanted in the country without a comparable development in its economy and social institutions".³²

Initially, the Britishers left the administration in Indian hands through 'dual system'. Gradually dual system was abolished and company brought under its control almost all aspects of administration. The British rule in India was mercantile in character, and it aimed at fulfilling the interests of its merchants.

32. B.B. Misra, The Indian Middle Classes Their Growth in Modern Times (New Delhi, 1978), p.11.

Introduction of new revenue system and private property in land, brought into existence landlords and peasants. First group of landlords came into being in the year 1793 along with the introduction of permanent Land Settlement. It was introduced by Lord Cornwallis. Under this system, zamindars and revenue collectors became landlords and they had to give 9/10th of the rent to the state which they received from the peasantry. They kept only 1/10th for themselves. The Britishers made the Indians to pay taxes. Those who acted as tax collectors in Pre-British society, turned into landlords during Colonial rule. The change which was brought by the British in the then existing land system, made the intermediaries or revenue collectors the owners of land. Earlier on, a village as a whole, paid to the state a specific portion of its produce. But the Britishers introduced money payment system.

They established courts for settling disputes among various groups, which in the Pre-British days was done by Village Panchayats. With the establishment of Civil and Criminal Courts, a new middle class group comprising lawyers (Waqil) emerged. Writers, publishers and printers emerged along with the setting up of Indian Press. Thus, during colonial era educated middle

class and middle class in Commercial and Industrial sectors evolved. Creation of an educated class was a part of their colonial policy, which they thought would help them in running the administrative machinery. Establishment of educational institutions resulted in the evolution of a group of educated people who, aimed at grabbing positions in offices or in big establishments. Educated middle class in India refers to that group of people who got the opportunity for educating themselves through the medium of English. Bengal was the first presidency in India to get exposed to the Western influence. Therefore, the group of educated people first came out in Bengal and later on it spread over to other areas of the country. This group took active part in all sorts of political movements, including nationalist movement.

Almost all the leaders of nationalist and other reformist movements in India belonged to educated middle-class group. "The new middle class of educated Indians had by the 1880's begun to emerge as an alternative to the aristocracy".³³ During colonial era middle-class groups included lawyers, office clerks,

33. B.B.Misra, The Indian Political Parties : An Historical Analysis of Political Behaviour upto 1947 (New Delhi, 1976), p.40.

teachers, writers, traders, journalists, and professionals.

In the thirties of the nineteenth century, various political organizations like the 'Zamindar Association of Calcutta' (1838) and the 'British India Society' came into being. Indian branch of this society which was known as 'Bengal British India Society' was also formed by some Bengali educated people. An Association comprising the educated landlords was formed in 1851, which was known as 'British Indian Association'. All these associations and organizations were formed by the middle class of the society. In the absence of political parties, at that time these associations acted as a link between the colonialists and the Indian masses.

The earlier organizations encouraged higher education and had a moderate attitude. But the associations which emerged in the 1870's differed from earlier organizations on the ground that these organizations had a reformist attitude. By 1870's, the Indian middle class became politically conscious, especially the Bengalee middle class (the baboos) or the bhadralok (respectable people), consisting of the

higher castes of Bengal. The upper middle class, and highly educated people had a tendency to collaborate with the British. But the lower middle class, on the other hand, demanded Independence. The lower middle class with their revolutionary attitude, participated in the party politics of the country in a different way than that of the upper middle class, which had a collaborative attitude. Middle class played an important role in national movement.

CHAPTER - II

EARLY INHABITANTS OF ASSAM

The history of Assam can be divided into three periods- the ancient, medieval and modern. The medieval period starts with the advent of the Ahoms. And the modern period began roughly from the time of consolidation of British paramountcy over Assam in the nineteenth century. In order to understand the life and conditions of the people of medieval and modern period, it is necessary to give a brief reference to the inhabitants of ancient Assam.

Assam, the easternmost state of India was earlier known as Pragjyotisa. In the medieval times it was known as Kamrup. The modern name of the state is Assam. It was after the arrival of the Ahoms that Kamrup came to be known as 'Asam' which means unequal.

Population of Assam is heterogeneous consisting of peoples of different races and tribes. People from North, West and East have come to Assam and settled. People belonging to different ethnic groups like the Austroics, Dravidians, the Aryans and the Tibeto Burmans, entered Assam at different intervals, from times immemorial. For several centuries, valleys

and hill areas of north-eastern India were exposed to large scale invasion. Due to this invasion, the province of Assam turned into a museum of nationalities.¹

The Austriacs from Indo China, the Dravidians, the Indo-Aryans and the Siamese-Chinese section of the Mongoloids, the Thai tribes of the Ahoms and such other diverse elements became Indianised specially in the Brahmaputra Valley.² The mutual interaction among these diverse elements contributed much in building up Assamese culture and society.

The cultural synthesis of various tribal groups like the Bodos, the Rabas, the Tiwas, the Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas, Chutiya, Moran, Miri, Naga (some of these groups belonged to the different branches of Mongoloids, ~~tribes~~) led to the development of Assamese culture. Assamese nationality is a heterogeneous community comprising these tribal groups. Different ethnic groups came, settled and mixed with the local tribal people at different times and merged into a community known

1. S.K.Chaube, Hill Politics in North-East India (Calcutta, 1973) p.1.
2. T.C.Sarma, "Assam Through the Ages" in Pankaj Thakur, ed., India's North-East (Tinsukia, 1982), pp.114-115.

as 'Assamese'. For about 450 years, the Bodos and the Ahoms contended for supremacy and ultimately this led to a gradual merger of both the races into a single Assamese speaking people. "The late medieval period of Assam saw the formation of an Assamese speaking nation with independent existence in the Brahmaputra Valley with its own regional individualities. During the period the autochthonous Bodo race together with the Austic elements and the Ahoms were finally welded with the Aryan Hindu settlers of the valley into a single people - the Asamiya or the Assamese people".³

In the medieval period, Assam was known as Kamrup. The kingdom of Kamrup was established by Pusyavarman in the fourth century. It gained strength during the reign of Bhaskarvarman in the seventh century. Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsiang, paid a visit to India during his reign. The varman dynasty came to an end with the death of Bhaskarvarman who lived until at least 650 A.D.⁴ Since his successors were not competent enough, this led to the downfall of the varman dynasty. It was replaced by Pala dynasty in the later part of tenth century with

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3. T.C.Sharma, "The Culture and Civilization of Assam" in Nagen Saikia, ed., Assam and the Assamese Mind, (Jorhat, 1980), pp.29-30.
4. E.Gait, A History of Assam (Gauhati, 1905, Reprint 1981), p.29.

Brahmapal as its king. Around the beginning of the twelfth century, the Pala dynasty also came to an end. The first Muslim invasion of Assam took place at the end of that century. After the departure of the Muslims, some petty independent chiefs ruled the land. This type of administration continued for a few years until the Koches came to power.

Prior to the advent of the Ahoms, the state of Assam was ruled by various dynasties which included Koches, Bhutiyas, Kacharies, Kamata etc. The territory now known as the province of Assam was not always ruled by kings of the same dynasty. Different kingdoms such as Pragjyotishpur, Kamata, Sonitpur, Chutiya kingdom, Kachari kingdom etc., comprising different geographical areas, flourished at different times. However, a stable government could not be formed at that time due to constant struggle among the princes.

THE AHOM RULE

Prior to the advent of the British, the Brahmaputra Valley was ruled by the Ahoms. Around the end of twelfth century, the Ahom power was rising in northern Assam. In the early part of thirteenth century

along with Ahoms, the chutiyas and kacharis and numerous petty chiefs who were known as Bhuyans ruled some parts of Assam. The Ahom rule in Assam dates back to thirteenth century.

The Ahoms, a Mao-Shan branch of the Tai race of upper Burma, ruled over the Brahmaputra Valley for about 600 years, came to Assam in the early part of thirteenth century under the leadership of Sukapha and founded the Ahom kingdom. The small states, which emerged after the decline of Kamrup, were brought by them under a single government. They succeeded to some extent in bringing back the political unity of Brahmaputra Valley.

The Ahoms brought with them their own culture, religion and civilization. The 'Sino Tibetan Thai Speech' (a new speech) was brought to India by the Ahoms. They first introduced the system of keeping records of events. They had a deep sense of history. "The Ahoms had the historic sense very fully developed, and many of the priests and nobles maintained Buranjis or Chronicles, which were written up from time to time and which contain a careful, reliable and continuous narrative

of their rule".⁵ They accepted Assam as their own land. They adopted Hinduism as their religion and accepted local Assamese language as their language. "The Ahoms were Buddhists but married local girls and adopted local language and religion".⁶ However, they did not totally discard their own religion and customs even after accepting Hinduism. "Even after their acceptance of Hinduism, the Ahoms did not completely give up their religion and their customs. On ascending the throne every king assumed two names, one in Assamese Hindu form and the other in Ahom".⁷ But, gradually, by seventeenth century, they gave up their own language and religion. They absorbed what was best amongst the conquered race and, in course of time, they became a part and parcel of the Assamese people.

Sukhapha, the founding father of the Ahom kingdom and his descendants ruled over Assam from 1228 to 1826 A.D. Despite many powerful challenges, the Ahoms retained their control over Assam till the advent of the

5. Ibid., p.70.

6. A.K.Das, Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1982), p.12.

7. S.K.Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826 (Gauhati, 1949), p.14.

British. From thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, they engaged themselves in conquering the neighbouring tribes such as Morans and Borahis. The Ahoms brought them under their domination along with some sections of Nagas and Kacharis.

From sixteenth century onwards, the Ahoms started expanding their empire with the annexation of the kingdom of the Chutiyas by the Ahom king Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja. They brought under their control the Bhuyan chieftains also who at that time were ruling the North bank of the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms brought under their sway rivals like Chutiyas and hill people, including the Nagas and the Mikirs, and gradually they conquered the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1708 A.D., the Kachari and the Jaintia Kingdoms were annexed by the Ahom Kingdom.

DOWNFALL OF AHOM KINGDOM

From the middle of eighteenth century, the Ahom Kingdom began to crumble due to many inefficient rulers.

The Ahoms did not have capable and competent monarchs after Rudra Singh. From the middle of eighteenth century, contradictions started developing between the ruling nobility and the peasantry because the later was harassed by the nobility through imposition of heavy tax on them. This increasing exploitation compelled the peasantry to revolt against the nobility. Revolts by the peasants destroyed the Ahom Kingdom during the years 1770-1809. Again, contradictions developed among the ruling class itself.

In the middle of eighteenth century, the Moamoriahs (a religious sect) gained strength and revolted twice against the Ahoms. Gradually, rebellion broke out all over Assam. Finally, the British sent troops under Capt. T. Welsh for controlling the rebellion. The Moamoriahs were defeated in 1792. Capt. Welsh felt that people may again revolt because of the over oppressive nature of the King. He realised the need for keeping a brigade of British troops in Assam and it was done according with the consent of the then prevailing nobility group. Lord Cornwallis was the Governor General at that time. But the Governor who succeeded Lord Cornwallis ordered the British troop to return to Calcutta in 1794.

The withdrawal of British troops led to confusion and disorder. In the midst of general disorder and a chaotic situation, an Ahom noble, Badan Chandra Barphukan, sought help from the Burmese. This led to the destruction of Ahom Kingdom. After his death in 1819 A.D., Ahom Kingdom was invaded and occupied by the Burmese. A reign of terror prevailed during the Burmese rule and some Assamese even left the country and took shelter in Goalpara and Rangpur which were under British territory at that time. "The oppressions of the Burmese became more and more unbearable ... not only did they rob everyone who had anything worth taking, but they want-only burnt down villages, and even temples many fled to the hills and to Jaintia, Manipur and other countries".⁸ In the wake of Burmese and British invasions, Ahom rule in the country came to an end. The Britishers ousted the Burmese and brought the valley under their dominion in 1826.

The advent of Muslims in Assam also brought a fundamental change in the social system. Social stratification could be found in the medieval period with the nobility at the top, traders at the middle and

8. E.Gait, op.cit., pp.231-232.

peasantry at the bottom of social hierarchy. The Assamese society underwent transformation in the middle of seventeenth century during the Ahom-Mughal conflict. The Mughals brought a change in the socio-cultural sphere of Assamese society. When the Mughals invaded Assam, the Ahoms adopted many aspects of the culture of the Mughals. Many cultural elements of the Mughals percolated into the Assamese way of life.

The Ahoms tried to restructure their socio-political system on the line of the Mughal system. The system of arranging paiks into different Khels with some officers, had some similarities with Mansabdari system of the Mughals. The history of the Ahoms of the seventeenth century was mainly the history of Ahom-Mughal conflict. The Mughals invaded Assam to extend their territories further to the east.⁹

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION DURING THE AHOM PERIOD

Traditional Ahom society was stratified into numerous categories. There were seven clans (Phoids) of the Ahoms. The first three were (1) Raja (of royal

9. S.K.Bhuyan, op.cit., p.4.

lineage), (ii) Buragohain (minister senior) and Borgohain (minister junior). There is difference of opinion about the last four clans of the Ahoms.

Three categories of people could generally be found in the pre-British Assamese society. The Varna system shaped and moulded the social system of the then Assamese society. Accordingly, higher caste constituted the upper class of the society. "Prior to the coming of the British this area was archaic in character and feudal in structure. There were three main strain in Assamese society viz., priests or Brahmins, Gosains (including some Kayasthas and Kalitas), Dangorias (nobility and high ranking officials) and Paiks or laguas (commoners and slaves)".¹⁰

During Ahom rule, Kingship was hereditary. In the administrative echelon, the king was the supreme head. "The king had to be selected from one of the following royal lineages- Dāhingiya, Charingiya, Tungkhungiya, Namrupiya, Samaguriya, Tipamiya and Parvatiya".¹¹ King had a council of three ministers who were known as

10. S.M.Dubey, ed., North East India - A Sociological Study (Delhi, 1978), p.21.

11. Indira Barua, Social Relations in An Ahom Village (New Delhi, 1978), p.18.

gohains. The office of each of the Gohains were the monopoly of particular family or clan. These posts were to be filled up only with the men of their own respective dynasties. The representation of different Ahom clans or phoids was an important factor in the grant of appointments.¹²

The king had a council of three ministers- the Gohains. They performed advisory functions and king was assisted by them. The king had to consult them on all important matters. But some kings such as Pratap Singh, Gadadhar Singh and Rudra Singh appear to have followed their own wishes ignoring the opinions of the nobles. While some other kings like Sudaipha and Kamaleswar Singh, acted according to the advice of council of ministers.¹³

The advisors to the king in the Ahom system of administration were known under the collective name of 'Patra Mantri'. The most important offices were those of Buragohain, Borgohain, Borpatragohain, Barbarua and Barphukan who were popularly known as 'Dangoriyas' or in other words the privileged class. The king could be enthroned or dethroned by the first three. Though the

12. S.K.Bhuyan, A History of Assam, 1601-1826 (Delhi, 1933 reprint 1983), p.xxix.

13. Edward Gait, A History of Assam (Gauhati, 1905 reprint 1981), p.233.

king was the head of the whole edifice, he hardly enjoyed absolute power. In case of misuse of royal prerogative, the council of ministers could even remove the monarch.

Originally there were only two high offices- Buragohain and Borgohain. In the reign of Suhungmung (Dihingia Raja) a third i.e., the Barpatra gohain was incorporated. "During the period from 1603 to 1648, the militia system was thoroughly reformed with a view to confronting the Mughal invasion. The state became more centralised in that process. Two new offices- those of the Barphukan and Barbarua were created, thus raising the number of Patra-Mantri to five".¹⁴

The Barphukan had a council of six subordinate phukans. Each Phukan like Chutiya Phukan and Deka Phukan had different functions to perform. These Phukans were consulted by Barphukan in all important matters. Second highest position were occupied by the Baruas. The Barbarua wielded great power being the head of judiciary. The Barbarua was the Chief Justice of the entire Ahom Kingdom. There were numerous other officials in the Ahom system of administration like Rajihwas, Katakis,

14. A. Guha, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam", Social Scientist (December 1983), p.9.

Kakatis and Oclois. The appointments for the posts like Barbarua and Barphukan were not hereditary and were open to persons of any lineage. Higher classes of non-Ahom citizens were also appointed in some posts which were not connected with military service. All the positions of military system were occupied by the Ahom Kings and their descendants. Generally only minor posts were offered to non-Ahom. Baruaship was offered to non-Ahoms be he a Hindu or a Muslim.

During Ahom rule ~~the~~ adult male population in the 16-50 age group was registered as state paiks* to render services to the state. However, nobles, priests and people belonging to high castes were excluded from these. These paiks in normal times had to serve as labourer and had to serve as soldier during time of war. Families emerged along with the introduction of paik system. Paiks were organised into 'gots'.** Consisting generally of four paiks. Paiks were further arranged into 'khels'.*** Each khel had to render specific services to the state as revenue collecting, arrow making, house building etc.

* Paiks were the manual servants. They enjoyed rent-free tenure in return for their services to the state.

** Three to four paiks constituted a 'got'.

*** Khel was an administrative unit under the Ahoms headed by a Phukan or a Barua and commanded by officers viz., Rajkhowas, Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras.

The important khels were placed in charge of a Phukan, and those khels which were not of much importance were placed in charge of a Rajkhowa or a Barua. Barua was a administrative head. "The military-cum-civil- officers- they had control also over the administration of justice in respect of the men under them- formed a chain of command from the top downwards. A Phukan was in command of a division (khel) of 6,000, a Hazarika of a thousand, a Saikia (centurian) of a hundred and a Bora (headman) of 20 militiamen."¹⁵ The power on the part of the paiks to nominate or dismiss their Boras, Saikia's or Hazarikas, helped them to save themselves from the oppressive elements of the state.

During Ahom rule, the aristocracy consisting of Rajas and nobles, had hereditary estates on which the slaves and bondsmen **** carried on cultivation. In the lower echelons of aristocracy there were the Chamua Paiks, who were not required to render manual service of any kind to the state because of their good birth. Men of good castes including traders, artisans, scribes could be clubbed into this Chamua paik category. They, unlike

¹⁵. Ibid., p.8.

**** Bondsmen refers to that group of people who mortgaged their labour.

the paiks, had a different status and rendered non-manual service to the state in accordance with their skills and status or had to pay taxes in lieu of such services.¹⁶ Though the main occupation of these Chamua paiks were trade yet sometimes cultivation was also carried on with the help of slaves by the Chamua paiks. They had neither the status of privileged nobles nor labouring paiks. Apparently, it seems that this Chamua paiks* had an in-between strata in society. But they did not form a separate class in Assamese society. These Chamua paiks of pre-British Assamese society did not get salary in return of their service to the state. They got land or slaves in return for their service. They could be considered as lower cadre of nobility and not middle class, though they occupied a middle position in the socio-economic hierarchy. Because they were not salaried employees in state service "In pre-British Assamese society, practically there was no middle class standing between the nobility and the peasantry. Even the literati and petty officials in the state service were not employed on a salaried basis but were instead rewarded with lands, slaves and serfs. They, therefore,

* Chamuas were the respectable paiks.

16. Ibid., p.23.

constituted the lower echelons of the nobility i.e., the Chamua status group within it, not a middle class".¹⁷

The Chamuas could work in petty offices in the militia and bureaucratic establishment. Sometimes even some peasant paiks were exempted from manual service by virtue of their holding petty offices and thereby promoting them to this Chamua group. Some Chamuas even did not have to render non-manual service or in other words they were freed from doing this. They were known as a-Paikan Chamuas (non-Paiks). The 'Chamua Paiks' as well as the 'Kanri Paiks'^{**} were allotted to different khels viz., Naubaicha (the clan of boatman), hilaidari (the clan of gunman) etc. The peasantry known as 'Kanri Paiks' was the largest group during Ahom period. Services were rendered by the Kanri Paiks as ordinary soldiers and labourers. Though cultivation was their main occupation they were also engaged in weaving, spinning etc. They carried on cultivation in their own land holdings. During Ahom period a person's social status was determined on the basis of his position in the Paik system.

17. A. Guha, "Making of the Assamese Middle Class (1825-1905), An Unpublished paper Presented at the Seminar in Geography Department, NEHU, 1977.

** Kanri Paiks rendered services as ordinary soldiers and labourers.

The social hierarchy of traditional Assamese society was feudal in nature. In the pre-British Assamese society between the Dangoriyas (privileged nobles) and the labouring Paiks, there was a group of people which included officers like Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras. They could not aspire to the hereditary privileges enjoyed by the nobles. But they did not have to do any state labour like the paiks. Therefore, their status in the society was such that they formed neither the upper class nor the lower class. In a sense they formed the basis of middle class in Assamese society. But they failed to emerge as a viable educated middle-class group at that time, since there was no scope in the old society for that. Though by and large they built up the foundation of middle class during Ahom rule, they were in a dormant stage at that time. During British rule, this group gathered more strength, became more articulate and emerged as a viable middle-class group.

The ranks of Bora, Saikia, Hazarika could be found not only among the Hindus but it could be found among the Muslims also. Even in the present day Assamese society the Muslims take these titles. Generally, higher posts in the Ahom system of administration were filled up

by people belonging to nobility of the Ahom community. There were some posts which were occupied both by Ahoms as well as non-Ahoms. Many war prisoners of the Mughal wars were absorbed in the military and civil administration, of the Ahom government. They were given new ranks of Bora, Saikia, Hazarika along with their Islamic title.

A feudal social structure prevailed in pre-British Assamese society, inspite of its semi-tribal characteristics. As soon as the Ahoms entered Assam, they turned into feudatory lords. Only their descendants could occupy the institution of Kingship.¹⁸ People belonging to high caste formed upper stratum of the society and exploited and oppressed the lower class comprising mass of the people. The Servitors (likchaus or laguas) were allotted as personal attendants to royal officers. There was a great gap between nobility and common people - the higher caste and lower caste, forming the upper class and lower class respectively.

18. S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations 1771-1826 (Gauhati, 2nd edition 1974), pp.250-251.

THE BRITISH RULE

The entire Kingdom including the eastern and western half of the Brahmaputra Valley formally passed into the hands of the British after the conclusion of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. King of Ava surrendered his claim over Assam, Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur to the British government. But the British did not take over the direct administration of the whole country at once. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Burmese, the British government restored Manipur to Gambhir Singh who became their vassal. The Calcutta authorities "declared on the eve of the Anglo-Burmese war that they would retain no part of the Brahmaputra Valley and that they would establish in Assam a Government adapted to their wants and calculations".¹⁹ But despite their commitments, they brought lower Assam under their dominion in 1826, and by 1899 they succeeded in bringing the whole of Assam under their control.

During the early years of the British rule, the Ahom nobility protested against them when they lost almost all privileges. The group of people, who formed the upper stratum of the society in pre-British era

¹⁹ R.M.La-hiri, The Annexation of Assam 1824-1854 (Calcutta, 1975), p.121.

lost all their privileges and powers during colonial era. The estates of the nobility were taken away by the British. They were offered pension and offices of lower rank in lieu of that. Since the position of the nobility was lowered, they started revolting against the new regime. In 1828 A.D., Ahom Prince, Gomadhar, and some other Ahom nobles and officials after him made unsuccessful attempts to drive out the British from Assam. The status of the Paiks was raised to some extent with the abolition of the feudal privileges of the Ahom nobility by the British. The paiks were emancipated from their service. "By taking away their Pykes and landed estates the upper classes in society had been reduced to poverty and brought down to the level of other poor people".²⁰ The Ahom nobility were adversely affected by the abolition of their privileges by the British.

The Britishers annexed lower Assam first because it was fertile and its agriculture was in improved condition. They took seven years (1826 to 1833) to arrive at a decision regarding the administration of upper Assam. During 1824 to 1833, neither the Britishers nor the old Ahom rulers administered upper Assam. In fact,

20. K.N.Dutta, Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam (Gauhati, 1958), p.16.

the system of Government during these nine years was neither wholly British nor Ahom. An admixture of both prevailed which led to a disorganized state of affairs.²¹ This was a critical period for the people of upper Assam. However, this uncertainty ended with the installation of Purandar Singh as the King of upper Assam in 1833. But after a few years, the British Government began to find fault with his administration and dethroned him in 1838. Purandar Singh was pensioned off in 1838 and that area was also brought under British rule.

A few years after annexation of upper Assam, Sadiya and Matak states of the Khamtis were also brought under direct administration of the British. Both the states were clubbed together as district of Lakhimpur. Gradually, whole of Assam including the plains as well as the hill areas passed under the direct rule of the British. Assam was administered by Government of Bengal through a Commissioner till 1874.

21. Ibid, p.161.

CHAPTER - III

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION UNDER COLONIALISM

Colonial era experienced the growth and development of various social classes which were not there in pre-colonial era in India as well as in Assam. Emergence and role of classes became meaningful during colonial period due to the basic social change in which they had to play a crucial role in regard to various political and social issues. The process of class formation in Assam during colonial period was bound up with the general process of class formation all over India.

The British annexed India as well as Assam for commercial purposes. With the advent of the British, different parts of the country became economically transformed along with political subjugation. New social classes came into being earlier in those places which were the first to come under British influence. Since the Britishers first entered Bengal, new social classes emerged in Bengal first. "As a result of the alliance of British rule with landlordism a new 'social basis' was created in Bengal. Within a few years of its introduction the permanent settlement had stimulated sub-infeudation. It became a marked feature in the land system of Bengal

by 1806-1807. One of the objectives of the permanent settlement was stated to be the creation of Bengali middle class".¹

The Britishers created private property in land in the form of Zamindari system. In agrarian sector landlords or zamindars occupied top most position. Introduction of the system of leasing land created the class of tenants and sub-tenants. With the grant of the power to purchase and sell land, a class of absentee landlords emerged. Absentee landlords were connected with collection of rent. Absentee landlords, merchants and money lenders formed an intermediary group. Money lenders acted as intermediaries between the peasants and the market. Zamindars, absentee landlords, tenants under zamindars, peasant proprietors divided into upper, middle and lower strata, modern middle class money lenders etc. were some of the new classes which evolved in the agrarian sector of Indian society in Colonial period.²

In the beginning, the number of big zamindars was small. There was, however, a very large class of

1. Amalendu De, "Bengali Intelligentsia's Attitudes to the Permanent Settlement", Social Scientist, No.56, March 1977, p.19.
2. A.R.Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism (Bombay 1948 reprint 1981), p.176.

small zamindars and tenure holders who formed a middle class. These tenure holders and other middle-class people, who stood between the zamindars and the cultivators, formed the socio-economic structure of Bengal during Colonial rule.

With the establishment of educational institutions, professional classes with a job seeking motive emerged at the all India level. Professional classes generally emerged out of those who had higher positions in caste hierarchy also. High caste Hindus got the benefit of higher education much earlier and formed the educated middle-class group. Educated middle class refers to those people who received higher education through the medium of English and engaged themselves in various professions which came into being as a result of British rule. They engaged themselves either in government offices or in business. The Brahmins were the first to acquire modern education and to emerge as ^a group of modern intelligentsia.

New type of political and administrative system, education, cash economy were some of the factors which helped in the emergence of new classes in India as well as in Assam. These new classes emerged with the advent

of the British. "The emergence of new social classes in India was the direct consequence of the establishment of a new social economy, . . . a new type of state system and a state administrative machinery and the spread of new education during the British rule".³

Various factors were responsible for the emergence of classes among which cash economy was one of the most important. Monetization of the economy brought changes in the society by replacing the old practice of trade and exchange. with a new system. With the monetization of economy, the barter system was replaced by money. When money came to the scene, inequality increased among the people. Those who had money became the owners of means of production. Whoever possessed more money acquired more wealth and thereby occupied higher position in society.

Education was another important factor in the growth of middle class. With the establishment of educational institutions by the British a few people

3. Ibid., p.174.

with good financial background, got the chance of educating themselves. Assam witnessed the growth of a educated middle class by the turn of the nineteenth century. They formed a distinct group. They availed of the opportunity of working in newly established tea plantations. Their social status was such that they were neither the ruling class nor the labouring class.

The British rulers selected political and administrative personnel from among the local people for smooth running of the administrative machinery. These local agents enjoyed power, status and wealth on the basis of which they were differentiated from the masses. 'Rai Bahadur' and 'Rai Saheb' were the titles conferred on the Hindu political agents. 'Khan Bahadur' and 'Khan Saheb' were the titles bestowed on the Muslim political agents. Knighthood was also conferred on some local people who distinguished themselves in serving the imperial interests.

The social structure of pre-British Assamese society was feudal in nature with the king at the top and the labouring masses at the bottom of social ladder. Hinduism was the main religion during Ahom period.

Therefore, division of society on the basis of caste system prevailed. But caste system had not evolved in Assam to such an extent as in the rest of India. It was super-imposed on another social structure based on compulsory labour service and bureaucracy. Caste system prevails in Assam but it is not as rigid as in other parts of India because the tribal rulers in earlier ages did not maintain any caste differentiation. Caste system again failed to effectively penetrate into the Assamese society due to the influence of Islam and also due to the influence of Vaisnavism. The Vaisnavite religion was initiated and propounded by Shankardev (1449-1568). "The Vaishnavite religion, which cuts across caste and creed distinctions and is distinguished by catholic and liberal (sic) attitudes, is the main religion of the Assamese even very recent sociological studies conducted by the Dibrugarh University among the rural communities have indicated that education, occupation and wealth are more important than caste or creed in determining one's social status and influence".⁴

During the days of feudal Ahom rule, a privileged microscopic minority formed the upper stratum

4. D. Doley, "Assamese Liberalism", in Nagen Saikia, ed., Assam and the Assamese Mind (Jorhat, 1980), pp. 38-40.

of the society. Prior to the advent of the British, the ruling nobility and the Brahmins were the holders of distinct status in society, and they enjoyed many privileges. First of all, the British abolished the privileges of nobility. Consequently the king and the nobility of the Ahom society lost their social and political status. They lost their political authority as well as their social privileges as soon as the British assumed political power. The social status of the Ahom nobility deteriorated with the abolition of the paik system.

"The abolition of the paik system, the main stay of the aristocracy, had a further deteriorating effect upon the social and economic life of the nobility of Assam who suffered most of all at the turn of events".⁵ The paiks were emancipated from their bonds-ge. They were no longer required to serve their masters as before. Reform measures adopted by the British freed Assamese society to some extent from the shackles of traditional practices.

5. R.M. Lahiri, The Annexation of Assam (Calcutta, 1975), p.21.

Emergence of middle class in Assam cannot be explained outside the imperial context. British Colonization restructured the Assamese society. Emergence of the new social classes in Assam was the consequence of the new type of economic, administrative, legal and educational system introduced by the British.

"The process of Colonization aimed at restructuring this society and monetizing its economy with a view to making both more relevant and useful to imperial interests. The administration, the Land revenue and taxation policy as well as super and infra structural growth - all were geared during the 19th century to the major task of transforming the valley into England's agricultural estate. It was in that process that the Assamese middle class, consisting of businessman, professionals and salaried employees was born from within the given class structure of the old society".⁶

Classes emerged in Assamese society during the British rule out of the old class division. They included rich, middle and poor peasants, landholders, and new middle class comprising tea garden owners, lawyers, teachers, owners of business establishments and

6. A.Guha, "Making of the Assamese Middle Class 1825-1905" (A paper presented in the Seminar on North East India), NEHU, September-October 1977, (unpublished).

service holders. Assamese middle class as a class came to the socio-political scene of Assam very late. Due to Colonial constraints and other socio-economic factors growth and development of middle class throughout nineteenth century remained feeble. The Britishers did not allow local entrepreneurs to develop, Maniram Dewan's case is illustrative of this. Initially, he collaborated with the British. But later on, when he started his own tea garden, Britishers discouraged him. In 1857, Maniram was executed, when he plotted to overthrow the British. "It will be an exaggeration to say that the British fostered the growth of the middle class without restriction. In fact, anything that disturbed the tenor of their colonial exploitation was destroyed".⁷

The British rule in Assam Valley integrated the area into their colonial empire. Politically and culturally, Assam came under the immediate impact of the Bengal renaissance. "The impact of Bengal on the life and culture of the Assamese was also not small. The process which began since the closing years of the Ahom rule continued without any break till the close of the

7. Hiren Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class", Social Scientist, No.13, August 1973, p.15.

nineteenth century. In spite of their animosity against linguistic domination, the intelligentsia was not slow in adopting Bengali dress, customs, usages and even food habits".⁸ The Assamese middle class since then had grown in line with the middle class in Bengal and elsewhere in India. At that time the middle class in India was under the strong impact of its counterpart in England.

The present century started with a challenge to the old social order where aristocracy was the mainstay of government. Ascription and not merit was the basis of the Ahom/ Administrative machinery. A group of scribes carried on official work during Ahom period. People belonging to the nobility group of Ahom period did not form the middle-class group of the British period. The landed caste Hindus, who had served the Ahom rulers as their scribes got the privilege of educating themselves during the colonial era. "The new middle class was not formed from the ranks of the former nobility. The advantages of British education and the new avenues of employment and trade were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the former rulers as their clerks and bureaucrats".⁹

8. H.K. Barpujari, ed., Political History of Assam, Vol. I (Gauhati, 1977), pp.126-127.

9. Hiren Gohain, op.cit., p.14.

The Britishers wanted to establish in Assam a new administrative system different from that of the earlier one. They needed educated men to run the administrative machinery efficiently. Since number of such qualified people in Assam was insignificant at that time, they brought in Bengali middle class or baboo class (bhadralok) to Assam for meeting their administrative requirements. The Bengali middle class was the first group in India to have the privilege of educating itself in British established educational institutions. Educated Bengali middle class got a chance to work as clerks and bureaucrats not only in Bengal but in the neighbouring areas too. By the beginning of the present century these educated people of Bengal got an easy access in the job market of neighbouring areas of Assam, Bihar and Orissa. This embittered the local youths of these places. "The enthusiasm with which the Bengal bhadralok accepted and promoted English language education, in marked contrast to the response of the landed elites in the surrounding provinces, gave them the lion's share of the new opportunities for professional, administrative and clerical employment throughout eastern and northern India".¹⁰

10. J.H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society (California, 1968), p.8.

In medieval society of North-East India, generally three broad categories of people could be found. First group comprised the privileged aristocracy. The peasantry, including the artisans, formed the second group. The servile class consisting of slaves, formed the third group. Cultivation was the primary and sometimes an auxiliary occupation of the peasantry. It was the major source of their income. Initially, traders and artisans did not form a distinct social group. Slowly and gradually, they emerged as a separate group.

High caste landowners and rich peasants, who were not much affected by the British rule, formed the base on which the modern middle-class businessman emerged. Some of the privileges enjoyed by these landowners were no doubt curtailed by the British but not all privileges. "Privileged high caste landowners, other big landowners who managed to survive, and those peasants who exploited labour or combined crafts and trading activities with agriculture they all constituted the potential seed-bed for new middle class businessmen to emerge".¹¹

11. A.Guha, op.cit.

With the establishment of industries in Assam by the British a class of industrialists and proletariat emerged. Initially, growth and development of industrial middle class in Assam was very slow. "The middle class in Assam originated mainly in the administrative, educational and legal system established by the British rulers and not in trade and industrial sector. The growth of the industrial middle class in Assam was very slow and tenuous because of the slow growth of industrial economy in the state and low degree of local participation in economic and industrial pursuits".¹² In the urban sector, traders, shopkeepers, doctors, engineers and professors emerged. The basic economic transformation brought by the British government resulted in the emergence of these new classes. "Primarily, the new classes came into existence as a result of the basic economic transformation brought about by various Acts of the British government (such as the new type of land relations), the penetration of Indian society by commercial and other forces from the outside capitalist world, and the establishment of modern industries in India".¹³

12. K.Alam, "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam", in B.M.Datta Roy, ed., The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in NE India (New Delhi, 1983), p.90.

13. A.R.Desai, op.cit., p. 176.

In Assam, a merchant class emerged in the commercial sector whose primary function was mainly import and export of goods. This numerically small and financially weak commercial middle-class group had to contend with strong Marwari competition. Establishment of factories and tea plantations resulted in the emergence of industrial middle-class group. The educated middle class comprised doctors, teachers, professors and managers. Thus, British Colonialism led to the emergence of middle class-educated, commercial and industrial in the Assamese society. Assamese society witnessed a structural transformation under Colonialism.

Until the 1850's, the Assamese middle class did not participate in any major contemporary issue. Middle class in Assam emerged as a politically conscious group by the later part of nineteenth century.

When Britishers established tea plantations and other such establishments, they needed some people to work there as labourer. But only a few local businessmen came out with the needed capital to start such business. The Ahoms were also not business oriented. Nobility did not even have capital to start business

due to their pauperisation by the British. Paucity of capital was an important factor which hampered the growth and development of enterpreneural group in Assam in the initial stage of the Colonial era. Most of the tea gardens in Assam were owned and managed by European planters.

Tea industry attracted a few Assamese middle-class businessman, who had experience of cultivation. Maniram Dewan opened up two small tea gardens by 1853. Between 1859-60, the number of tea planters in upper Assam rose to six. Towards the end of nineteenth century the number rose to over two dozen. The leading Assamese tea planters of that time included Hemdhar Barua, Jagannath Barua, Dinanath Bezbarua, Kaliprasad Chaliha, Jadav Chaliha, Devicharan Barua, Heramba Prasad Barua, Malbhog Barua and many others. They along with some others emerged as middle-class group by the end of nineteenth century. Though many Assamese people established their own tea plantations, yet they had to depend on the British for technical know-how and processing of tea. Britishers discouraged those, who tried to come up as planter. It was only since late nineteenth and early twentieth century that small and independent Assamese enterprises started growing.

Lack of capital, British discouragement, competition from non-Assamese traders, distaste of Assamese for petty trades and addiction to opium were some of the important factors for the slow growth of Assamese middle class, during colonial period. Petty trades were carried on by a group of people from Bengal which the local Assamese people generally hesitated to do. Some people belonging to lower class in the Brahmaputra Valley, especially, in Barpeta, Sarthebari, Sualkuchi, engaged themselves in petty trades as blacksmiths, potters etc. But the high caste Assamese Hindus had a distaste for trade.

Trades in Assam during the British rule were dominated by outsiders, especially, the Marwaris of Rajasthan. The local traders, however, failed to compete with the Marwaris who were financially stronger than the Assamese petty traders (popularly known as Soud or Moodoi). "The Assamese merchants and traders were represented by the title Soud or Moodoi. But the operations of these Assamese traders were of limited value and quantity and even in the early British period they could not stand in competition against the powerful Marwari traders and in course of time their successors

gave up the trading profession and took to agriculture and other pursuits".¹⁴

Assamese people in general were addicted to opium. Towards the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the present century a high per capita opium consumption persisted in the Brahmaputra Valley. "As such as 1,557 maunds out of the provincial consumption of 1,686 maunds in 1880-81 and 1,201 maunds out of 1,291 maunds in 1900-01 were consumed there alone".¹⁵ But gradual enhancement of its prices reduced the number of opium eaters. When the evil effects of opium consumption was widely felt then poppy cultivation was prohibited. "Prior to 1860, no restriction was placed upon the cultivation of the poppy. But the evil effects of unrestrained indulgence in opium were undeniable ...".¹⁶

Assamese middle class as a class, came up late onto the Assamese political scene. Middle class of the

14. K. Alam, "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam", op.cit., p.96.

15. A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi, 1977), p.55.

16. B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteer Vol. VI (Calcutta, 1905), p.196.

Assamese society emerged during the British Colonial Rule. The nobility group of the Ahoms did not emerge as the middle-class group during colonial era, because it lost many of its privileges with the advent of the British. During Ahom rule paiks were the manual labourers who rendered services to the state. The emancipation of the paiks by the British gave a severe blow to the Ahom nobility.

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.

CHAPTER - IV

MIDDLE CLASS IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE
ASSAM

The Assamese middle class started playing, significant role in the socio-political sphere of Assamese society only in the later part of Colonial era. In the beginning of twentieth century, the Assamese people participated in political activities through the formation of various political organizations and associations. Initially, the high caste educated Hindus alone participated in the political process.

The coming of the British was greeted with joy by many Assamese people. Before the advent of the British there was chaos and disorder all over Assam. Misrule by some inefficient rulers brought untold misery to the people. "The raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviours of the people suffering from a situation of chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770's starting with the Moamoria Civil War and culminating in the Burmese occupation of the Assam plain: (1817-1824)".¹ People of Assam expressed their gratification at the coming of the British at this critical juncture.

1. A.Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947 (New Delhi: 1977), p.2.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan remarked "Our countryman hailed the day on which British supremacy was proclaimed in the province of Assam and entertained sanguine expectations of peace and happiness from the rule of Britain. For several years antecedent to the annexation, the province groaned under the oppression and lawless tyranny of the Burmese, whose barbarous and inhuman policy depopulated the country and destroyed more than one half of the population".² Assamese society experienced political instability and chaos during the rule by the Burmese from the year 1819 to 1826. The Britishers restored normalcy to some extent.

With the advent of the British along with spread of education, mass media and urbanization, Assamese people became politically more articulate. The system of imparting education which was prevalent in pre-British Assamese society failed to make people articulate. Instead of making them politically conscious, they were made religious minded. "The indigenous system of education continued to exist in Assam even after the period of Civil Wars and invasions

2. "Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam" by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, in A.J.Moffat Mills, Report on Assam (Delhi, 1854, Reprint 1980) Appendix J.

in a number of Satras, Tols and Pathsalas where instructions imparted were mostly of religious nature leading to a pious life and not so much for any useful purpose or widening the mental horizon".³ Indigenous educational institutions like Pathsalas, Tols, Madrassas were on the decline and new pattern of education was introduced by the British.

.. After seeing non-Assamese in almost all government offices, Major Jenkins, Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General for Assam and North East of Rangpur, felt the need for training Assamese people so that they could also man positions in government offices. Jenkins therefore "strongly urged the government of India in his letter of 21 June 1834 for the establishment of English schools under supervision of European functionaries at the sadar stations - Goalpara, Gauhati, Nowgong, Darrang and Bishwanath. For necessary training, a number of Assamese youths of rank should be sent to Calcutta and provisionally teachers capable of teaching English and Bengali would have to be procured from Bengal".⁴

3. H.K.Barpujari, ed., Political History of Assam Vol.I (Gauhati, 1977), p.103.

4. Ibid., p.104.

The Britishers found a backward peasant economy in Assam. The whole of Brahmaputra Valley remained extremely backward and economy of Assam registered very little development under British imperialism. Excepting tea plantations, development in all spheres was slow.

Revolts by the peasants during the early British Rule in Assam were the earliest popular mass based movements. Under the leadership of educated middle class, the poor peasants reacted against the land revenue measures of the British by organizing peoples' assemblies. Middle class at the end of the nineteenth century included some western educated lawyers and intellectuals. Leading middle-class men like Dinanath Bezbarua, Ghanashyam Barua, Manik Chandra Barua and others had strong rural links. Generally, they belonged to Mauzadar families and had private landed property. Land revenue measures adopted by the British affected their landed interests also. Therefore, they collaborated with the peasants to fight against British. "... middle-class could make common cause with the peasantry in the assessment question because their landed interests were

also suffering under it. They joined hands with the peasantry in the initial stage and tried to keep the uprising moderate through petitions and memorials".⁵

Between 1868 to 1871, land revenue rates were doubled. The increase in the land revenue led to peasant uprisings in many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The ryots tried to resist this enhancement in land revenue. The increase in land revenue in 1861 by the British on the dry crop lands provoked the peasants. "A raij mel (Peoples' assembly) was there upon held at Phulaguri in October. The assembly was scheduled to be in session for five days to ensure participation of men even from distant villages. Approximately, one thousand people assembled by 15 October. Five to six hundred people in that assembly were armed with lathis".⁶ The rural elites consisting of Brahmins and Mahantas took part in the peasant uprisings. The peasants protested against government's fiscal policy through the organization of

5. M.S.Barua, "The Assamese Middle Class: Its Role in the Peasant Uprisings of 1893-94" in B.D.Roy, ed., Emergence & Role of Middle Class in NE India (New Delhi, 1983), p.63.

6. A.Guha, op.cit., p.7.

various raij mels.*

The peasants again protested when the Britishers imposed ban on poppy cultivation in 1860. Peasant economy of Nowgong was worst affected by this ban because it was one of the opium producing districts of Assam. Again, the revenue policy adopted by the government led to dissatisfaction among the agricultural ryots. The peasants, under the leadership of educated Assamese middle class, protested against land revenue and taxation policy of the British. Disregarding the peasants' protest the Britishers continued to exploit the peasantry by increasing taxes. "As soon as the news of enhancement became official, objections from all the five Brahmaputra districts Valley/began to pour in. The maximum number of objections about 14,000 came from Kamrup, followed by Jorhat with 436, Nowgong with 311 and the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang with 293".⁷ The agitation by the peasants succeeded as it forced the government to reduce the taxation rate. "...the militancy of the peasants had

* Raij mel reflects the characteristic feature of the then existing Assamese society. Mel originated from the Khel system of the Ahoms.

7. M.S.Barua, op.cit., p.57.

alarmed the British Government and it brought down the assessment rate slightly to pacify the peasants".⁸ But the peasants continued to suffer for sometime due to delay in the implementation of this order.

In the middle of nineteenth century, the formation of various sabhas and associations marked the growth of political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley. Generally, most of these organizations were of cultural and literary nature, where people assembled together in order to take some important decisions for the welfare of the people or community as a whole. Of course, some associations aimed at arousing political consciousness in the minds of the people.

The 'Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha' was one of the various political organizations which was formed in 1875. Jagannath Barua was the Vice President of this Sabha for nearly five years. He got educated at the Presidency College, Calcutta. He felt the need for

8. Ibid., p.63.

forming some organizations in the Brahmaputra Valley, on the lines of Indian Association and British Indian Association which had been formed by middle class in Calcutta. This Sabha opposed the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886.

'Tezpur Ryot Sabha' was formed by Haribilas Agarwala around 1884. This Sabha was formed mainly to express the grievances of the agricultural ryots against the increase of land revenue by the British. 'The Shillong Association' and the 'Nowgong Ryot Association' were also formed for the same purpose in 1886.

'Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha' (a welfare association) was formed in 1855 at Sibsagar to study the then prevailing political situation. Purnananda Deka became its secretary in 1856. In 1872, Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta. Jagannath Barua and Manikchandra Barua, belonging to Assamese middle class, submitted memorandum to the Viceroy, Northbrook, in 1872 on behalf of this society. They stressed, inter alia, the need for constructing a Railway line connecting Assam with Bengal.

The 'Gyan Pradayini Sabha' (Society for Disseminating Knowledge) started functioning in Nowgong in the fifties of the nineteenth century under the guardianship of Dhekial Phukan. The aim of this Sabha was to spread knowledge amongst the people.

Leadership of these organizations was restricted to the educated middle class and landed aristocracy. Emergence of these organizations and associations indicated the growth of political consciousness among the people of Brahmaputra Valley in general and middle class in particular. In the absence of well established political parties, these associations and organizations performed these functions which were later taken up by political parties. These organizations acted as a link between government and the masses, because the masses ventilated their grievances to the government through these organizations.

The first group of Assamese middle class which emerged at the end of nineteenth century was high caste Hindus with a background of modern education. The

educated middle class of that period were generally owners of either tea gardens or saw mills or some similar establishments. In course of time, these entrepreneurs involved themselves in various political activities. Representatives of the Assamese intelligentsia included Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemdhar Barua, Manikchandra Barua, Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ghanashyam Barua and some others, who owned private landed estates and small or big tea gardens (see appendix).

In the last quarter of nineteenth century some sections of educated Assamese middle class agitated for 'sons of the soil' being given preference in government services. Because at that time high offices in the state were mostly the monopoly of non-Assamese. The number of educated Assamese was less in the state for which non-Assamese (mainly Bengali middle class) were brought from outside to man the administration.

The first and foremost task before the educated Assamese of the period was to educate more and more

Assamese youths for qualifying them to occupy high offices in government services. Due to the consistent effort of the middle class, a number of educational institutions were set up by the end of nineteenth century. "The agitation centered in the beginning not so much in capturing a number of posts but in acquiring the means of getting the requisite qualification for them. The last quarter of ^{the} 19th century, therefore, saw not only an increase in the number of English schools on private enterprise, but also an organized move for the promotion of Collegiate education".⁹ Assamese middle class agitated for collegiate education and also for setting up of Gauhati University.

Government, however, did not respond to these demands until Manikchandra Barua, a member of middle class and a distinguished personality of that period emphasized the need in his memorandum of 28 March 1899 for establishment of a college at Gauhati to provide opportunity for higher education to the Assamese youths.

9. H.K.Barpujari, op.cit., p.116.

The agitation by the Assamese middle class for collegiate education led to the establishment of Cotton College at the beginning of the twentieth century. The College was named after Henry Cotton, the then Chief Commissioner.

The dawn of 20th century witnessed the progress of English education which produced many English educated Assamese youths. Female education was neglected at that time as it was commonly considered to be pernicious to the society. But the educated Assamese realised the need of educating the females. In "an anonymous letter, which is supposed to have been written by him in Samachar Darpan (25 August 1832, p.203), it appears that even in that age of extreme conservatism, Haliram advocated the cause of Women's education".¹⁰ Haliram's son, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, sub-assistant, Nowgong, was the true representative of this new awakening.

Christian missionaries tried to set up a few schools for girls. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan acted as a

10. H.K.Barpujari, Assam in the Days of Company 1826-1858 (Gauhati, 1980), p.316.

pace setter by educating the female members of his family. However, the progress of education in Assam throughout 19th century was slow due to various reasons. An important political factor which hindered the growth of education was that the rulers of that period instead of contributing for the growth and development of education, they had to remain busy in suppressing the insurrections of the tribal people.¹¹

Another important factor for the slow progress of education was the medium of instruction in schools. In Assam, education was imparted through the medium of Bengali, which thwarted the spread of education among the Assamese. For this reason also, educational system in Assam could not develop properly throughout nineteenth century. Those who had good financial background could afford to go to Calcutta for higher studies. They emerged as the educated middle-class group.

This group of educated middle class played significant role in eradicating the then existing social

11. R.Devi, "Education in Assam During Nineteenth Century", Journal of the University of Gauhati, Vol. XXVIII-XXIX No.1, Arts 1977-78 (Gauhati, 1981), p.250.

evils. Practice of Polygamy and the wide spread addiction to opium were prevalent at that time. The plight of Hindu widows attracted their attention. Some of these intellectuals supported remarriage of widows. Despite then existing orthodoxy of Assamese society, Jaduram Barua himself married a widow. Gunabhiram Barua and Memchandra Barua, both representatives of Assamese middle class, were eminent social reformers. They formed various societies for disseminating the ideas of social reforms. Benudhar Rajkhowa propagated against polygamy.

It was due to the persistent effort of the middle class that a University was established in Assam shortly after independence. Sarat Chandra Goswami struggled for a separate University in Brahmaputra Valley. Gopinath Bordoloi contributed a lot for the success of this movement, which gathered momentum before independence and culminated in the establishment of Gauhati University in 1948. "The movement for a University... in Assam was a part of the freedom movement".¹²

12. A.C.Bhuyan & S.P.De, ed., Political History of Assam Vol.III (Gauhati, 1980), p.230.

The demand for the setting up oil refineries in Assam was also articulated by the Assamese middle class. The oil refineries in Assam were set up after independence mainly towards the later part of second plan period i.e, from 1956-61. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, a literary organization, also played a significant role in the agitations for establishment of oil refineries in Assam. "During the popular agitation in 1956 over the demand for a refinery in Assam, the Sabha played a major role in mobilising public opinion".¹³ Peaceful hartal was also observed throughout Assam as part of the agitation for the establishment of oil refineries. Due to the effort of the middle class, the Noonmati Refinery was set up during the third plan period.

The people of Brahmaputra Valley became politically more conscious from the fifties of nineteenth century with the establishment of various associations and organizations. These associations were formed under the leadership of educated middle class to make the people of the Valley politically conscious. Maniram Dewan

13. U.Mishra, "Assam Sahitya Sabha, Retreat from Populist Politics", Economic and Political Weekly, April 14, 1984, p.622.

and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, both belonging to middle class, were the most active men of the time. When A.J.Moffat Mills came to Assam to enquire about the condition of the people, it was Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who submitted their memorials to Mills for improving the condition of the Assamese society as a whole. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan even made some suggestions to Mills for all round improvement of the Assamese people. In the article 'Inglendar Vibaran', Anandaram highlighted the backwardness of India as well as Assam by comparing India with England.¹⁴

Though at the beginning of the British rule, most of the Assamese people had a collaborative attitude, gradually most of them became militant and started playing anti-British role. In the beginning, Maniram Dewan collaborated with the British. Politically many Assamese people had similar attitude. Discouragement of his tea garden enterprise by the British turned Dewan against them. He was executed for participating in the 1857 revolt against British. When Britishers appointed

14. A.D.Phukan, 'Inglendar Vibaran' in M.Neog,ed., Orunodoi 1846-1854 (Gauhati,1983), p.28.

the Bengalees from the Sylhet district as Mauzadar in Assam, Maniram Dewan protested against it. However, he was appreciative of the constructive aspects of the British rule in Assam.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the representative of educated Assamese middle class. He was deeply influenced by Bengal renaissance. Some people in Assam also followed its good aspects. This delighted Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. He even wrote to Hemchandra Barua (1835-96), a social reformer of that time about it.¹⁵ The process of Bengal renaissance began around 1823-24 and continued till the end of nineteenth century. Despite their hatred for linguistic domination, the Assamese intelligentsia adopted Bengali culture, dress and food habits. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, father of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, played an important role in this process. He wrote a number of articles in Bengali periodicals of that time. The Bengali periodicals like Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika and Masik Patrika had wide circulation in Assam. Haliram Dhekial Phukan also wrote Assam Buranji (or Assam Desher

15. Padmanath Gohain Barua, ed., Jibani Sangraha (in Assamese) (Gauhati, 1969), p.22.

Itihas) in Bengali in the year 1828.¹⁶

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had a modern outlook and a progressive ideology. He realized the need for importation of technical know-how from Britain and other industrialised countries for the industrial and economic development of Assam. In the 'observations on the administration of Province of Assam' which Dhekial Phukan submitted to Mills during the latter's visit in 1853, "...Phukan not only brought home the authorities the existing evils of the government, but strongly urged reforming measures like the lowering of the taxes, increase in number of the mofussil court, and the native judges ...the supervision of the religious and charitable institutions by the Government and the stoppage of the importation of the Abkari Opium".¹⁷

The group of educated Assamese who emerged by the end of nineteenth century sought to express themselves through the use of Mass Media. With the establishment of

16. A.Guha, "Impact of Bengal Renaissance on Assam, 1825-1876", Indian Social & Economic History Review Vol.No.3, 1972.

17. H.K.Barpujari, Assam in the days of Company, op.cit., pp.317-318.

printing press, around 1840's, journalism developed in Assam. Assamese journalism took a well defined shape by the end of 19th century. 'Orunodaya', a monthly magazine, started in 1846, was the pioneer of journalism in the Assam Valley. Numerous monthly and weekly journals, which were mostly edited by educated middle-class people of Assam, appeared by the end of 19th century in order to disseminate scientific knowledge and for giving information to the people on current issues. These journals included 'Assam Bandhu' (1885), 'Jonaki'(1889), Anglo Assamese Weekly Assam News, 'Bijuli'(1891) and some others. The editors were Gunabhiram Barua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Hemchandra Barua and Padmanath Gohain Barua respectively. They all belonged to middle class category of the society. They aimed at communicating latest information to the people to increase their awareness.

In order to reuse the spirit of nationalism among the people, sometimes political articles were also published in these journals. Though the articles published were usually moderate in nature, yet, occasionally policies of government, considered

unfavourable to the masses, were condemned through these journals. Hence apparently, though these journals were non-political in character but in reality they aimed at politicizing the people.

The Assamese middle class participated in the electoral politics and legislative process of the country by the beginning of 20th century. The second session of the Indian National Congress which was held in Calcutta in 1886 was participated by representatives of various associations from Assam. 'Shillong Association' was represented by Kalikanta Barakakati. 'Upper Assam Association' was represented by Devicharan Barua and Bopinath Bordoloi. Ghanashyam Barua and Manikchandra Barua were some of the most prominent members from among the Assamese middle class to attend the Congress sessions during the years 1888-1905. The various sessions of the Indian National Congress also inspired the Assamese middle class. On 16th December, 1886, a meeting was held in Sylhet where it was decided to reconstitute the Legislative Councils, with not less than two third members to be elected by local bodies. The meeting also

demanding that Indian Civil Service examination be held simultaneously in India and England.

In 1906, Assam was given the right to have two representatives in the 15 member Provincial Council. Because only then it became an integral part of a Lieutenant Governor's province with a Legislative Council. Two seats were allotted to Assam and the members were to be recommended by local bodies and not elected. Thus Assamese community went unrepresented upto 1909. With the enlargement of Provincial Council under the Indian Council^{Act} of 1909, the membership of the Council was increased upto 42, of whom five members represented Assam. Majority of Provincial Council's members were Europeans.

In the early phase of the British rule, Assam was administered by a Commissioner under the Government of Bengal until 1874. Assam was formed into a separate Chief Commissionership in 1874. Again in 1905, some Eastern districts of Bengal were amalgamated with Assam under the name 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. This partition of Bengal, however, led to a great agitation because of which East and West Bengal were re-united after annulment of the partition in 1912. Assam

Legislative Council was formed in 1912 and elections to it were held in 1912 and 1916. Assam was reconstituted again as a separate province under a Chief Commissioner after 1912. Under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, Assam was raised to the status of a Governor's province. Montague-Chelmsford Reforms created Executive and Legislative Council in every province. By the Government of India Act of 1935, provincial autonomy was introduced in all the Governor's provinces including Assam. It was put in force in 1937, and continued in existence till 1947.

Twentieth century heralded a new awakening in Assam. The 'Assam Association (1903)', 'The Assam Chatra Sanmilan (1916)' and the 'Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917)', were some of the organizations which were formed for preserving socio-cultural identity and protecting the linguistic-cum-demographic majority status of the Assamese.

In Assam in the year 1903, the educated gentry including Manikchandra Barua, Ghanashyam Barua, Jagannath Barua and others formed an All Assam Political

Organization called the Assam Association. Since its inception, the Assam Association, served as a spokesman of the people of Brahmaputra Valley for placing their grievances before the government. It was the sole political organization of the valley in early 20th century. Manikchandra Barua,* who started his business in European partnership, was the general secretary of Assam Association. Initially, he collaborated with British but later he protested against unemployment and various other problems of the Assamese. Initially, political views of the members of the association were moderate. But "from 1916 onwards younger men of advanced political views began to enrol themselves as members of the association and give it a new tone and vitality".¹⁸

Assam Chatra Sanmilan was another similar organization. Through these associations and organizations, the Assamese people participated in the various political activities of the state in the later part of Colonial Era.

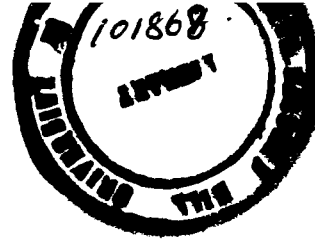
* See appendix.

18. K.N.Dutta, Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam (Gauhati, 1969), p.42.

STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

In the pre-Independence era, Assamese middle class played significant role for wresting Independence from the British for India as well as for Assam. They participated in the freedom struggle at the all India as well as at the regional level. Various factors were responsible for developing the spirit of nationalism in the minds of the Assamese people. General economic stagnation and various measures adopted by the British government for their own interest and at the expense of the Assamese were some of the important inputs in the rise of nationalism in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The monopolisation of jobs by Bengalees and the language controversy served as a catalyst in generating the spirit of nationalism among the Assamese people. Assamese nationalism expressed ~~itself~~ in different forms of which linguistic nationalism is the earliest. "Of all nationalisms in North East India, the Assamese nationalism is the oldest with a chequered career. It manifested itself in different forms at different times since 1837, linguistic, regional, racial and economic.



The oldest of them was linguistic nationalism".¹⁹

Thus the freedom movement in Assam gained momentum in the beginning of the present century with the establishment of various new associations. 'The Assam Association', formed in 1903, demanded self-government for India. T.R.Phukan and N.C.Bordoloi were the active politicians of that time. Presiding over the Goalpara session of the Association in December 1918, T.R.Phukan openly criticized the government. As the leading political organization, the Assam Association sent some members to give evidence before Mr.Montague, Secretary of State for India, during his visit to India in 1917. T.R.Phukan, N.C.Bordoloi, Chandranath Sharma, Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi and "many others who later distinguished themselves as leaders of the freedom struggle under the Congress received their first training in political leadership under the banner of the Assam Association".²⁰

Representatives of the Assamese middle class were at the fore front of the nationalist movement in

19. V.V.Rao, "Assamese Nationalism", Proceedings of the NE India History Association (Dibrugarh, 1981), p.262.

20. K.N.Dutta, op.cit., p.43.

Assam. The various journals which were published at that time succeeded in making the people politically conscious. 'Assam Bilashini' edited by Krishnakanta Bhattacharya which appeared in 1914, stood for Swaraj. With the development of journalism in Assamese and English, in the beginning of twentieth century, newspapers and periodicals like the 'Assam Bilashini', 'the Assam', 'the Advocate of Assam', 'the Assam Mihir', 'the Times of Assam', 'the Usha', and the 'Banti' appeared to rouse the national mind. But only a few of these journals, actively supported the Gandhian movement. These were the 'Assam Bilashini' (1916-38), 'Asamiya' (1918-48), 'The Advocate of Assam' (1904-7) was the protagonist of swaraj, social reform and educational upliftment.²¹

Spirit of nationalism gained momentum with the foundation of Indian National Congress in the year 1885, the impact of which was experienced by the people of Assam. Under the banner of Congress and leadership of Gandhi, people of India as well as Assam fought for independence. Representatives from Assam attended various Congress Sessions. These sessions helped in rousing

21. A.C.Bhuyan & S.P.De, ed., op.cit., pp.202-203.

national consciousness in the minds of the Assamese people. They felt the necessity of swaraj and struggled for India's Independence. N.C.Bordoloi, T.R.Phukan and Chandranath Sarma were the champions of nationalism in Assam.

The leaders of Assam were influenced by Gandhi. In Assam, N.C.Bordoloi supported the non-co-operation movement in 1920. T.R.Phukan, N.C.Bordoloi, Md.Taibullah, Chandranath Sarma and many other leaders of non-co-operation movement in Assam underwent imprisonment for participating in this movement. Students of Assam Valley joined the non-co-operation movement by abstaining from their classes. Phukan* and Bordoloi induced the students to work for the country. Labourers in tea gardens and other industrial sectors, participated in the non-co-operation movement in Assam. Bordoloi and Phukan involved themselves in the active politics of the Brahmaputra Valley in the 30's of the present century. Both of them were moderate politicians in the beginning. Gradually, they became militant. Their discontentment against the British rule became apparent from the

* See appendix.

speeches which they delivered before the public. They blamed the British for not allowing Indians to rule by themselves. In December 1918, T.R.Phukan presided over the annual conference of the Assam Association at Goalpara. The trend of radicalisation amongst the Assamese middle class got manifested in his speech, in which he blamed the British Government as bad and bureaucratic. At this session Phukan was appointed the new General Secretary. "The replacement of G.S.Barua by Phukan as the new General Secretary and the election of Chandranath Sarma (1889-1922) as one of the Assistant Secretaries at this session indicated the trend of radicalisation within the Assamese middle class."²²

When Gandhi launched his salt Satyagraha in 1930, Assam Congress also launched the civil disobedience movement simultaneously. In Assam, salt regulations were violated by making salt in the indigenous way. Bishnuram Medhi, President of Assam Provincial Congress, led this movement. The agitation of 1930-32 in Assam followed the pattern of All India movement which included boycott of British goods.

22. A.Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op.cit., p.115.

On 8th August, 1942, the Congress Working Committee adopted the 'Quit India' resolution. The next day, leading figures of the Congress like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru of the Congress were arrested. Assamese people participated in the historic struggle of 1942. Leading Assamese political figures like Md. Tayebulla, President of Assam Provincial Congress Committee, Fakhuruddin Ali Ahmed, Bishnuram Medhi and some other top ranking leaders took part in the 'Quit India Movement'. The Assamese people under the leadership of Assamese educated middle class participated in all phases of the freedom movement.

CHAPTER - V

THE LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY
IN ASSAM

In this chapter an attempt has been made to analyse the role played by the middle class in Assam in the language issue which cropped up during Colonial Era and remains essentially unresolved till to-day. The language controversy in Assam needs to be understood against its historical, economic and socio-cultural background.

The word 'Assamese' is an anglicised form of the word 'Asamiya' which is derived from the name of the State 'Asom'. "The word Assamese is an English one, built on the same principle as Cingalese, Canarese, etc. It is based on the English word Assam by which the tract consisting of the Brahmaputra Valley is known".¹ Assamese language became standardized by thirteenth century.

People with different language and culture came at different phases of history and dwelt in Assam. They contributed to the growth and development of Assamese language and literature. The principal non-Aryan sources

1. B.Kakati, Assamese: Its Formation and Development (Gauhati, 1972), p.1.

which contributed words to Assamese were (1) Austro Asiatic (Khasi, Kolarian and Malayan), (2) Tibeto Burman (Bodo), (3) Thai-Ahom.² When the Ahoms came to Assam they brought with them their own language and culture. The Ahoms did not want to create confusion by introducing and imposing their language on the people of Assam. They gradually adopted Assamese language.

The language tangle in Assam is rooted in the Colonial Era. Conflict involves two major linguistic groups- Assamese and the Bengalee. Several factors account for the Assamese-Bengalee rivalry in Assam.

Bengal was under British rule since 1765. Taking Bengal as their base, the East India Company extended its territory upto Assam. In 1874, Assam (including Cachar, Goalpara and some hill districts) was made a Chief Commissioner's province under direct control of the Governor General in Council (Map No.1).

After few months, Sylhet was also incorporated into it. Inclusion of Sylhet into Assam caused disorder

2. Ibid., p.25.

since people of this district are mostly Bengalee speaking. This was disliked both by the people of Sylhet as well as the people of Assam, because of their linguistic differences. This, led to Assamese-Bengalee rivalry on linguistic basis as Sylhetis (People of Sylhet) were not willing to accept Assamese as their language. Thus, the transfer of two Bengalee speaking districts to Assam viz., Sylhet and Cachar and also incorporation of the district of Goalpara* in 1874, intensified the language controversy. Assamese is the predominant language of Goalpara district.³ Since this is a border area, an intermixture of both Bengalee and Assamese culture can be found here.

Again in 1905, the Governor General and Viceroy Lord Curzon issued a proclamation amalgamating some eastern districts of Bengal with Assam which came to be known as 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. (Map No.2) 'Partition of Bengal' was a part of the divide and rule policy of the British government in order to weaken the combined effort of the ruled against the ruler. This amalgamation of some districts of Bengal with Assam was not liked

* The district of Goalpara is a marginal area and remained a constituent part of Bengal for nearly two hundred years from 1639 to 1822.

3. Census of India 1961, Vol.III, Assam, General Report, p.211.

by the Assamese people in general and Assamese middle-class in particular. Jagannath Barua, President of Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, felt that due to this amalgamation Assam would get less attention from the Chief Commissioner. The Assam Association feared that this would gradually obliterate the historic name of Assam and that Assamese language would suffer. The intelligentsia in Surma Valley also opposed the partition and considered it as a policy of the British Government to divide the Bengalee people.

The conflict between the Bengalees and the Assamese over language began around the middle of nineteenth century. Initially, the court language was Persian. When Assam was a part of Bengal, the court language of Bengal Presidency was also Persian. In 1831, Persian was replaced by Bengalee. In April 1836, the Government of Bengal replaced Persian with Bengali as the court language of Assam. The services of Bengalees became indispensable in the schools for imparting education in Bengali, which became the medium of instruction also. "The social dominance of Bengali speaking people in Assam, Orissa, Chotanagpur and parts of Bihar was

reflected in the dominance of their languages. As these areas, backward in the new education and professional training, came slowly to produce their own educated, eager for a share of opportunities snapped up by Bengalis, they attempted to redress the balance by stressing the claims of their own languages to be recognised as the languages of administration and the law courts".⁴

When services of Bengalees became indispensable, then many members of the Bengali educated middle class (bhadralok or the baboo) were brought by Britishers to Assam. These educated Bengalee, whom the Britishers brought from outside exercised great influence over the British officers in the matter of administration. The Bengalee bureaucrats carried on administration through their own language. They persuaded the Britishers that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali and, therefore, Bengali should be the official language. Accordingly, Bengalee was used as official language and also medium of instruction in schools. Due to the introduction of Bengali language, local Assamese people were put to

4. Anil Seal, Emergence of Indian Nationalism (London, 1968), p.47.

inconvenience in matters of administration and education. Introduction of Bengali in schools of Assam hampered the progress of education among the Assamese people.

The attitude of Bengalees agitated the minds of Assamese people. Some Assamese people struggled hard for the rehabilitation of their language in concert with the missionaries. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan along with the Christian missionaries worked for the development of Assamese language. "Phukan helped the Missionaries and the Missionaries propped up Phukan in the matter of the native language, and both could now exert themselves together in the cause of the vernacular",⁵

Since English was not a popular language amongst the Assamese, the Christian missionaries found some difficulty in propogating christianity and this compelled them to learn the language of the local people. Besides religious books, they wrote grammer, distionaries and other useful books in Assamese. In 1839, William Robinson published the grammer of Assamese language. The missionaries published the journal 'Drunodoi', the first

5. Maheshwar Neog, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan: Plea for Assam and Assamese (Jorhat, 1977), p.9.

Assamese monthly, in January 1846 in order to rouse an intellectual awakening. Phukan started contributing articles in this journal from 1846.

Dhekial Phukan did not want Bengali to be used as medium of instruction in Assam for instructing Assamese people. He, along with some baptist missionaries, said that continuation of Bengalee medium will hinder the progress of education in Assam. Dhekial Phukan and the Baptist missionaries, however, did not want the complete abolition of Bengali language. They said,

"By the substitution of the Assamese we do not mean to suggest that Bengalee should be altogether abolished from the schools. On the contrary, we are of opinion that it should be cultivated as a language indispensable to complete the course of vernacular education, and that the standard Bengali works, should likewise be introduced in the higher classes. We are only opposed to its exclusive adoption as the medium of instructing the people in literature, science and other useful branches of knowledge".⁶

For more than forty years, Assamese language remained suppressed in its homeland. The Calcutta authorities had an idea that Assamese had no literature of its own. This was, refuted by many natives of the state.

6. A.J.Moffat Mills, Report on Assam (Delhi, 1854, Reprint 1980), p.XII.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan refuted the theory that Assamese is a dialect of Bengali and substantiated his argument by pointing out that in one Assamese passage "out of 287 words, 112 are in no way connected with the Bengali; 98 have been derived from Sanskrit, the common source of both the languages; and only 77 words are either derived from or have a resemblance to the Bengali".⁷ Though the script of both the languages is same yet there is a difference between the two. In 1855, Dhekial Phukan published a booklet refuting the theory that Bengali and Assamese are the same language. Grierson described "Assamese as the sister and not a daughter of Bengali. It comes from Bihar through Northern Bengal and not from Bengal proper ...there is a considerable difference in the conjugation of the verb in the idiom, the syntax and even in the vocabulary".⁸ The view that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali, as Gait notes in his Report on the progress of historical research in Assam, was refuted by the natives of Assam. Phukan joined the agitation by writing 'few remarks on the Assamese

7. Maheswar Neog, op.cit., p.131.

8. B.C.Allen, Assam District Gazetteer Vol.IV, Kamrup (Allahabad, 1905), p.73.

language and on vernacular education in Assam, under the signature of 'A native'. He got hundred copies of it printed at the American Baptist Mission press at Sibsagar by A.H. Danforth. These were sent to government of Bengal and distributed among the leading persons in Assam.⁹

The tempo of the agitation subsided for some time due to the premature death of Phukan. Yet it was due to his untiring efforts that subsequently the restoration of Assamese to its former position became possible. After the death of Phukan, the struggle for rehabilitation of Assamese language to its former position, was carried on by the American missionaries- the Bronsons and Danforths.

Besides the Christian missionaries, several renowned personalities of Bengal also contributed to the development of Assamese language and literature. They included Asutosh Mukherjee due to whose efforts 'Assamese' became a subject of Post-Graduate study in Calcutta University.

9. M. Neog, op.cit., p.8.

Consequently, the Lieutenant Governor, Sir George Campbell, decided on 9th April 1873 that Assamese should be introduced in the schools and courts of Brahmaputra Valley. Initially, Assamese was introduced in primary schools only. Due to lack of books in Assamese language, middle schools were still conducted in Bengali till 1880's. Due to the paucity of books written in Assamese, a provision was made that where books written in Assamese language were not available, teaching could be done either in Bengali or in English.

Though Assamese was introduced, the Lieutenant Governor put some limitations on the use of Assamese language: "(1) For teaching the higher classes of the schools, when Assamese school books were not available, Bengali books must be used. (2) When Assamese technical terms are not available, and when English words cannot be conveniently used, Bengali words may be employed. (3) Where in the upper classes of higher schools Assamese books did not exist, every subject can be taught in Bengali or in English".¹⁰ The Commissioner of Assam was asked to implement this order on 9th April, 1873 in the five districts of Brahmaputra Valley. This cooled down

10. Ibid., p.23.

the language conflict to some extent. Now the main problem of the Assamese people was to enrich Assamese language and literature by producing literary works particularly books for school going students. Due to the numerical weakness of the Assamese literataure and educated people, their contribution towards the development of Assamese language and literature was slow and inadequate.

A few people belonging to Assamese middle class like Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiraam Barua and Anandaram Barua* and some others laid the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature. 'Assamiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' (Assamese Language Improvement Society) was formed in 1888 in Calcutta by some Assamese students. Its main objective was to promote Assamese language and culture and it helped in arousing a spirit of patriotism among the Assamese. Laxminath Bezbarua, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Gohain Barua and some other middle-class people were its leading members. 'Jonaki' a monthly journal published in 1889 acted as a mouthpiece of the Assamese society.

* See Appendix.

Through several journals, the educated middle-class people succeeded in bringing about a renaissance in Assamese literature by the end of nineteenth century. They got the stimulating influence from their counterparts in Bengal like Hemchandra Chattopadhyaya, Nabin Sen, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Michael Madhusudan Dutta who were in turn influenced by English culture and literature. The age of renaissance in Assamese literature is known as 'Jonaki age'. The missionary zeal of the Baptists effected a rejuvenation of the Assamese language. They published periodicals, grammar and also compiled dictionary. In order to continue this, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua started new journals, which really ushered in the modern period of Assamese language and literature.¹¹

Activities of American Baptist missionaries and Bengal renaissance helped in bringing a new awakening in Assamese literature. Gunabhiram Barua, who along with some others laid the foundation of Assamese language and literature, was considerably influenced by this new awakening.

11. M. Neog, Laxminath Bezbarua: An Introduction (Jorhat, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1968), p.1.

POST-INDEPENDENCE TREND

The language controversy has become a major political issue after independence in Assam. When some Indian states adopted their regional language as state language, middle class of Assam also agitated for making Assamese the official language. The demand for declaration of Assamese as state language came from Assam Sa-hitya Sabha which was the premier literary organization in the state. The Sabha contributed much for developing national consciousness among the people. Initially, the Sabha's functions were non-political in character and the members of the Sabha also kept the organization free from Congress politics. But gradually, the Sabha has shunned its non-political character and has become a highly political organization. Ever since the achievement of Independence, controversy started over the declaration of Assamese as the state language of Assam. But this controversy gained momentum since April 1959, when, Assam Sahitya Sabha, demanded that within 1960 the Assamese language must be declared as the state language of Assam.¹²

12. "Report of the Inquiry Commission into the police firing incident of 4th July, 1960", by C.P.Sinha, Chief Justice, Assam High Court (unpublished), Shillong 1961, p.4.

When the Assam Sahitya Sabha demanded that, Assamese should be made the state language, the then Government headed by Bimala Prasad Chaliha did not act speedily. The Chief Minister, Sri Chaliha, declared that demand for making Assamese as the official language of the state should come from the minority linguistic communities of Assam. Chaliha made a statement "on the floor of the Assembly on 3-3-60, that the demand for Assamese as official language should come from the minority".¹³ In a democracy minority is entitled to protection and safeguards from the Government. Answering a question in the Legislative Assembly on 3rd March, 1960, Sri Chaliha said that he appreciated the enthusiasm with which the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the state language has been made, by the Assamese speaking section of the society. But Government would wait till they get the same demand from the non-Assamese speaking population for the declaration of Assamese as state language. Government felt that this question should be judged more from the point of view of acceptance than from the point of view of majority or minority.

13. K.C.Barua, Critical days of Assam (Gauhati, 1972), p.112.

People of Cachar district, with a overwhelming majority of Bengalee speaking people, were very happy with the stand taken by Chaliha. From 1959-61 strong movement was geared up under Assam Sahitya Sabha's leadership. The students of Assam did not have any powerful organization at that time. Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) suggested that, while introducing Assamese as official language, government should not impose it on the non-Assamese districts. Accordingly, on 23 June 1960, Chaliha declared that official language bill would be introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly. People of the Brahmaputra Valley welcomed it while the people of Cachar district opposed it. Thus, amidst opposition, official language bill was introduced on 10th October, 1960 and passed into Law as the Assam Act XXXIII of 1960. Accordingly, Assamese became the state language. It was, however, declared that English would continue to be used in secretariat and in all state government departments till its replacement by Hindi.¹⁴

14. V.V.Rao & N.Hazarika, A Century of Government and Politics in NE India: Assam 1874-1980 Vol.I (New Delhi, 1983), p.244.

The discontentment of the Bengalee speaking parts of Assam over the language Act was manifested through the formation of 'Nikhil Assam Bangabhasa Raksha Samity' (All Assam Bengali Language Preservation Committee). They submitted a petition to the President of India on April 5, 1961 for protection under article 347* of the Constitution.

In 1960, Assamese was accepted as official language. Official language Act of 1960 created misgivings in the minds of different groups of people. Assam is composed of various ethno-linguistic groups. When demand for giving due place to the Assamese language was raised, the legitimate interests of the various linguistic groups which formed a part of the state of Assam at that time, were not taken into consideration by the leadership of the movement. At that time, various hill people formed a part and parcel of the population of

* Article 347 : Special provision relating to language spoken by a section of the population of a state- on a demand being made on that behalf the President may, if he is satisfied that a substantial proportion of the population of a state desire the use of any language spoken by them to be recognised by that state, direct that such language shall also be officially recognized throughout the state or any part thereof for such purpose as he may specify.

Assam. "According to the 1961 Census, the total population of Assam is 1,22,09,330. Assamese speakers constitute 57.14 per cent of the population. The speakers of Bengalee, Hindi, Khasi, Bodo/Boro, Garo, Nepali, Lushad, Mikir, Oriya and Miri constitute 17.60, 4.41, 2.97, 2.82, 2.47, 1.77, 1.76, 1.26, 1.18 and 1.12 per cent respectively, of the population".¹⁵

Passing of the Assam State Language Act of 1960 caused the dismemberment of Assam through the formation of separate hill states. It was the Assam Sahitya Sabha's language policy which led to the emergence of organizations of the tribals like the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. Earlier, the Bodos identified themselves with the Assamese mainstream. But gradually they drifted away from it and formed their own organization. The continued insensitivity of the Assamese middle class towards the legitimate aspirations of the Plains tribals of Assam, led to the formation of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) which is currently voicing the demand for the creation of a separate state for the Plains Tribals of Assam. PTCA raised the demand for a separate tribal

15. Eleventh Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India - July 1968 to June 1969. Published by Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

state 'UDAYACHAL' to be carved out of the present state of Assam. "Sabhas stand on the Assamese and the emergence of the small but influential middle class among the plains tribal speeded up the process of separation of sizable sections of these people from the Assamese mainstream".¹⁶ The plains tribal movement, led by Plains Tribal Council of Assam, is of recent origin. Conflict arose between Assamese and the Bodos over the language issue. The Bodos demanded recognition of Bodo language. Assamese script had been used as the script for Bodo language for decades. PTCA fought for replacing Assamese script by Roman Script. Finally, Devnagri was accepted as script for Bodo language.

The language issue got resurrected in 1972. In accordance with the national educational policy, Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities also decided to adopt regional languages. In 1971-72, the Assam Sahitya Sabha organized and led another mass movement in the Brahmaputra Valley and demanded that Assamese should be made the medium of instruction at the College and University level. The movement even turned violent in

16. U. Mishra, 'Asom Sahitya Sabha, Retreat from Populist Politics', Economic and Political Weekly, April 14, 1984, p.622.

several places. On 12 June, 1972, a teacher and a student of Gauhati University, both Assamese were assaulted inside the campus. They protested against the University Courts decision to adopt Assamese as the medium of instruction at the Under-Graduate stage.¹⁷

Subsequently, both Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction at the Under-Graduate level. However, safeguards were provided for the linguistic minorities by the Gauhati University: "(1) Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in Colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University. (2) English shall continue as alternative medium of instruction ... (3) The students shall have option to answer either in Assamese or in English in the University examination".¹⁸ This decision of Gauhati University had justification. An alternative medium of instruction is necessary in a state like Assam where according to 1971 Census "2,882,039 persons or 19.71% of the population of the state speak Bengali as L/MT.

17. S.K.Dass, "Assam's Bengali Unit-I Protection for Cachar Education", The Statesman (Calcutta), May 9, 1983.

18. B.K.Bhattacharya, "Language Controversy in Assam", The North Eastern Research Bulletin, Vol.IV, 1973, p.13.

Other important languages spoken by more than 1% of the total population of the state are Hindi (5.42)...¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, apprehensions of the Plains tribal people were aroused with the adoption of Assamese as the medium of instruction. They were afraid of the stand taken by the Assamese to convert Assam into a unilingual province by neglecting various tribal languages, among which Bodo language was an important one. After the creation of hill states by dismemberment of Assam, the Bodos remained as the only major tribal group (plains tribal) of Assam. In his Presidential address to the first convention of the All Assam Tribal Youth League in 1979, P.K.Mushahary, a Bodo lawyer, said: "Now the plains tribes are left to suffer alone after the dismemberment of hill areas. The first attempt was made by the resolution of the Gauhati University Academic Council dated June 12, 1972. It has expressed their naked aim to convert Assam into a unilingual state neglecting the various tribal languages".²⁰

19. Census of India, 1971, Series 3, Assam Part I-A, General Report, p.29.

20. S.K. Dass, op.cit.

The plains tribal demanded that English be retained as the medium of instruction and that they should be given education at the primary level in their own mother tongue. A deputation of the Mishing Agon Kebang (Mishing Sahitya Sabha) met the Minister of Education, Assam, on August 20, 1984 and demanded ~~introduction~~ of the Mishing language as a ~~medium~~ of instruction at the primary stage of education. The Minister, accepted the demands and agreed to introduce Mishing as a language subject in Class III and IV from the next academic session.²¹

The language tangle has become a major issue in the contemporary Assamese society. Language is one of the factors for the conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalees. The century old language conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalee communities is still going on. Assamese is the medium of instruction at the under-graduate level while English is the medium of instruction at the post-graduate level which has created a state of confusion in the academic sphere.

21. The Assam Tribune (Gauhati), August 21, 1984.

CHAPTER - VI

CHANGING ECONOMY AND ASSAMESE
MIDDLE CLASS

India is an agricultural country. Self-sufficient village economy was the basis of pre-British India, society. "A self sufficient village, based on agriculture carried on with the primitive plough and bullock-power and handicrafts by means of simple instruments, was a basic feature of pre-British Indian society".¹ This situation changed drastically with the advent of the Britishers. The foreign power brought a change in the economic scene of India. They carried on loot and plunder of India's wealth, in the name of trade and commerce, and sent to England vast treasures year after year. This plunder was a powerful driving force which led to the Industrial Revolution in England.

With the changes in the economic structure in England, they needed raw materials, manpower, resources, and market to sell their finished products. They started extracting raw materials from India, discouraged Indian manufacturer, ruined India's cottage industries and thereby caused systematic destruction of Indian economy.

1. A.R.Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism (Bombay, 1948 reprint 1981), p. 7.

They took large part of the produce of the peasantry of India, which led to the deterioration of their economic condition. The industrial bourgeoisie became the most powerful class in British society. Britishers colonised Assam because of good prospects of economic exploitation.

Industrial capitalism led to the transformation of medieval period into modern period. First of all, Europe came under the influence of capitalism. Subsequently, capitalism spread to other parts of the world through European Colonial empires. By the close of nineteenth century, most of the countries of the world were integrated into the world capitalist economy. Around 1860, certain changes took place in the world economy. Other countries also became industrialized because of which United Kingdom had to face serious competition from other European countries.

Some nations, especially Britain and France, controlled their colonies economically as well as politically. Those nations, which occupied dominant position in the world capitalist system became affluent by exploiting the resources and manpower of the places

where they established their colonies. Colonial masters were responsible for the poverty of the people of the colonies. This was also true of India. "A significant fact which stands out is that those parts of India which have been longest under British Rule are the poorest to-day".² The British dominated the affairs of the country for over two centuries (1757-1947). "The British became dominant in India, and the foremost power in the World because they were the heralds of the new big machine industrial civilization. They represented a new historic force which was going to change the world, and were thus, unknown to themselves, the forerunners and representatives of change and revolution; and yet they deliberately tried to prevent change, except in so far as this was necessary to consolidate their position and help them in exploiting the country and its people to their own advantage".³

The Britishers brought a change in the agrarian sphere of India's economy. During the two centuries of British imperialist rule, Indian agrarian economy was characterised by stagnation and ruin. India was reduced

2. Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (New Delhi, 1946), p.296.

3. Ibid., p.312.

to a mere supplier of raw materials for British industry. Raw materials were extracted from India for the manufacture of goods and in return, India was flooded with goods manufactured in Britain. They wanted India to remain a consumer of goods manufactured in Britain and as a supplier of raw materials to British industrial concerns. Britishers adopted a policy of retarding the growth of any industry in India. Railways and other means of communications were introduced in India only to serve their imperial interests. Every measure adopted by them contained germs of destruction. "...the Indian national economy was a subordinate Colonial adjunct of the British Imperialist Economy. By her economic and political policies, Britain had obstructed the free and rapid industrialization of India. She particularly did not permit the development of heavy industries, the vital pre-requisite for the rapid industrialization of a country and for the building up of an independent national economy".⁴

However, along with her destructive activities, Britain also played a regenerative role in India.

4. A.R.Desai, Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism, (Bombay, 1960), p.28.

Apart from improving the administration and communication system, they eradicated some social evils like Sutte and Child marriage. Britishers introduced English education in India which helped the Indian intellectuals to understand liberal ideas and scientific achievements of other countries.

Britishers brought changes in the socio-political, educational and economic sphere of India. By the beginning of nineteenth century, it seemed that the Britishers had established a pattern of control and they had brought a new India into being. The next century witnessed the rise of an increasingly powerful independence movement which culminated in the independence of India.

Assam's colonisation by Britain, prevented its economic development. It is primarily the colonisation of the state and its domination by a landlord class and the Marwari merchant bourgeoisie which led to its economic backwardness.

Even after Independence, economic condition of Assam remained the same. During the period of British

Colonialism agriculture was (and still continues to be) the mainstay of Assam's economy. Majority of people, directly or indirectly, depend on agriculture. The Assamese middle class too has got strong rural links as middle peasants. "Agriculture is the main occupation of 92 per cent of the people living in rural areas. About 72 per cent of the total population of Assam depend directly on agriculture for their livelihood. Another 10 to 15 per cent depend indirectly on agricultural profession for other source of income".⁵

Technologically also Assam remained backward throughout nineteenth century. There was no industrial establishments except primitive handicrafts like home spinning and hand weaving. Growth of trade and commerce was hampered due to lack of infrastructural facilities.

Among the industrial undertakings in Assam, tea industry is most important. From the commercial point of view, it is the most important crop of Assam. Tea was discovered in Assam by Robert Bruce in the early

5. K.C.Talukdar & P.C.Goswami, "Food Accounts for Assam - A Critical Appraisal", Assam Economic Journal No.1, Vol.IV(March, 1978), p.1.

part of nineteenth century. By 1859, it began to flourish when Assam Company started massive production of tea. Many British tea companies were established, towards the middle of the century. It is the main industry in Assam producing half of the total Indian tea. It is practically the only industry based on agriculture and contributing about 17% of Assam's 21% income from factory establishments. Earlier, nearly 90% of the gardens were British owned. Some of these are now passing into the hands of the Marwaris. Assam tea earns about Rs.65 crores in foreign exchange.⁶

The following table indicates the area, production and yield of tea in Assam from 1961 to 1977.

TABLE NO. 1*

Year	Number of tea estates	Area ('000 hectares)	Production (million kgs)	Average yield in kgs/hectares
1961	744	162	182	1,123
1964	747	166	196	1,117
1967	752	174	191	1,096
1968	758	177	203	1,146
1969	758	179	205	1,141
1970	751	180	212	1,178
1971	750	182	224	1,227
1972	751	184	239	1,298
1973	751	185	252	1,360
1974	754	187	265	1,416
1975	756	189	263	1,396
1976	-	189	276	1,459
1977	-	-	291	-

6. K.C.Barua, Critical Days of Assam (Gauhati, 1972), p.157.

* Basic Statistics of NE Region, Shillong: North Eastern Council, 1980), p.85.

Growth of tea industries in Assam and export of tea to other parts of the country resulted in the extension of railways. With the growth of tea industries, planters needed better system of communications. This led to the construction of railway line in 1881. The tea industry, owned by the British, registered tremendous growth. "With the demand from the tea factories and the railways rising, the out put of coal increased from less than 50 tons in 1872 to more than 277,000 tons by 1905-06. The oil fields developed by British capital in the 1890's increased their annual production of crude oil from 882 thousand gallons in 1900-01 to 2733 thousand gallons in 1905-06".⁷

Britishers not only owned tea gardens but they also had a monopoly over distributio-n, processing and marketing of tea. During Colonial Rule, the Assamese tea planters like Manikchandra Barua, Jagannath Barua,* had no factories for processing the tea leaves. The Assamese planters sent their tea leaves to the neighbouring European gardens for processing. Therefore, even the wealthy Assamese tea planters had to depend on Britishers.

7. A.Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj (New Delhi,1977),p.35.

* See appendix.

The local Assamese entrepreneurs were lagging behind all the time. Since plantation was in the hands of British and trade in the hands of Marwaris, practically the whole economy was in the hands of non-Assamese. Therefore, the Jatiyatabadi Dal, a regional political party of Assam, which came to the political scene after independence, demanded that economy of Assam should be in the hands of Assamese and it should not be controlled by outsiders.

Jute industry is another important industry of Assam. Immigration of peasants from Bangladesh to Assam is directly linked up with the establishment of jute industry in Assam. With the growth and expansion of jute cultivation in Assam, expert jute cultivators from East Bengal started coming in. These peasants taught techniques of cultivation to the people of Assam. Gradually, jute production also increased in the Brahmaputra Valley. The acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased from less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-06 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20.⁸

8. A.Guha, Ibid, p.102.

Assam is also rich in mineral resources like oil and coal. Assam was the main oil producing state in India before the discovery of oil in Gujrat. Earlier, Assam alone produced 2½ lakh tons a year while the total production of India was about 95 lakh tons. Now Assam produces 58% of the total oil of the country. Rest is produced by Gujrat.

Around 1868, a considerable amount of oil was extracted but there was no provision in Assam for refining the raw products. In 1899, the Assam Oil Company was formed and a refinery was established at Digboi. The Oil Company was formed with a capital of £ 310,000. In 1903, this company gave employment to 10 Europeans and 569 natives.⁹

After the discovery of oil in Gujrat, both Assam and Gujrat contributed almost equally to India's total output. Production of Petroleum of Assam increased from 4.19 million tonnes in 1975 to 4.30 million tonnes in 1976. "The production of Petroleum rose by 2.5 percent

9. Provincial Gazetteer of Assam (1906, reprint 1983), p.59.

from 4.19 million tonnes in 1975 to 4.30 million tonnes in 1976. Gujrat and Assam contributed almost equally to the total output. For the country as a whole, the production of natural gas (utilised) during the year 1976 (848 million cubic meters) was higher by 37 per cent than that in the previous year. Except for the years 1971 and 1975, Assam's production was higher than that of Gujrat".¹⁰

The state of Assam has rich forest resources. Forests of Assam contain various kinds of timber, bamboo etc., which are required for the industries like match, paper and plywood factory. Its mineral resources include coal, oil, gas and limestones. Land of Assam is fertile and suitable for the cultivation of tea, jute, rice and cotton. Though these resources are available in abundance, yet the economic condition of Assam has not improved much even after independence. "Assam presents a paradox of industrial backwardness in the midst of abounding resources. This state has substantial proved potential for industrialization based on minerals, agriculture and forests".¹¹

10. Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Assam, Index of Mineral Production, Assam (1971-77) (Gauhati, 1977), p.2.

11. Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Assam, Assam - Some Aspects of Her Problems (Gauhati, 1971), p.12.

Prior to independence, little attention was given to the development of industry in the state. Assam continues to be industrially backward till to-day. "In spite of its varied natural endowments, Assam still continues to be industrially backward for a variety of reasons, the chief ones being its geographical isolation from the rest of the country, poor and undependable communications, lack of adequate infrastructure, lack of entrepreneurial, technical and managerial talents, poor capital formation and poor purchasing power in the hands of the people",¹²

In other states of post-independent India, process of industrial development started along with the initiation of the national planning in the year 1951. But process of industrial development started in Assam in the beginning of sixties i.e., during the later part of the second plan period. During the third plan period (1961-66), more industries in the public sector started coming up. These included gas distribution project (The Assam Gas Company), mixed fertilizer plant, cotton spinning mill, sugar mill,

12. Assam Legislative Assembly Debate, Official Report of Budget Session, Address of Governor of Assam, L.P. Singh, Vol. I, No. 1 (March 1978).

Namrup Fertilizer Plant, Noonmati Refinery and some other such type of industries. During the fourth plan period (1966-71) steps were taken for rapid industrialization and speedy economic development of Assam. "The fourth plan of Assam reiterates the need for rapid industrialization of the state in order to break away from the present economic stagnation. During the fourth plan period the pace of industrialization is expected to be accelerated with the introduction of a number of resource based industries mostly in public sector..."¹³

With the laying down of the foundation stone of Oil Refinery-cum-Petro-Chemical Complex at Bongaigaon in January 1972, the number of refineries in Assam has risen to three.

In spite of a rich resource base, especially, coal, oil, jute, tea and forests, Assam still lags behind economically, compared to other advanced regions of India. The profit extracted from these industries is taken of the state and not reinvested therein. It fails to contribute to the economic development of Assam. Further, most of the raw materials of Assam like

13. Department of Economics & Statistics, Government of Assam, Economic Survey, Assam (Gauhati, 1972), p.57.

oil, timber and tea are taken out of Assam to feed industries in other states like Bihar and West Bengal.

The finished products of Gauhati and Digboi refineries are taken to Siliguri through product pipe line. Even Kerosene Oil is released from Siliguri. The sales depot for the petroleum products of Assam is located in Siliguri in West Bengal. Therefore, the sales tax, amounting to around Rs.60 crores per annum goes to the Government of West Bengal.¹⁴ The registered offices and head office of tea board are located in Calcutta. The sales tax, thereof, goes to the Government of West Bengal. Tea is produced in Assam but the sales tax thereof is derived by the Government of West Bengal.

Center also takes away major share of income of Assam. Royalty for oil which Assam receives is quite meagre. "Present real value of Assam oil at world price Rs.70,000,000,000 ... Assam receives Rs.54/- a tonne (royalty Rs.42 + sales tax Rs.12) and the Government of India receives Rs.991.03 a tonne".¹⁵

14. N.Pator, "The Neglected North-East", The Assam Tribune (Gauhati) April 27, 1980, p.5.

15. A.K.Das, Assam's Agony: A Socio Economic And Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1982), p.228.

The outflow of revenue from the state is a major cause for the stagnant economy of Assam. Assam produces raw materials but the revenue accruing from these does not go to Assam. In fact, the percentage of revenue earned by Government of Assam from its resources is only 6%. Major part of the income from Assam's resources goes to the neighbouring states. The total revenue created by oil, tea and plywood of Assam is "approximately Rs.8,725 million. From this the Government of India gets Rs.6,908 million, which is 79 per cent; West Bengal Rs.720 million (8%); Bihar Rs.600 million (7%); and Assam, only Rs.498 million (6%)."¹⁶

Various factors are responsible for the economic backwardness of Assam. During Colonial Era little attention was given to the development of the state. Investments were confined to tea industry only and other sectors were totally neglected. Even the profits derived from tea industry were repatriated to Britain, instead of spending it for the development of Assam. Prior to Independence, Assam was neglected in regard to Central

16. Ibid., p.239.

investments on industrial projects. Besides this, due to lack of infrastructural facilities, private capital was also not attracted. In Assam, business communities were also not attracted or reluctant to invest money due to poor communication system, as compared to other parts of India. In the initial phase of post-independence period also central government was neglectful and indifferent to the need for industrializing the state. Only during the third plan period (1961-66), many industries in public sector came up. It is the Assamese middle class which voiced the demand and led the struggle for development of Assam.

CHAPTER - VII

IMMIGRATION : ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC
SPHERE OF ASSAMESE SOCIETY

Assam has been bearing the brunt of the problem of immigration over many decades which in turn has spawned several other problems. Influx of illegal immigrants into Assam has been continuing since Colonial Era. During the British rule, people from erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) entered Assam illegally and settled in those areas where early migrants had already settled. This large scale immigration brought a change in the demographic structure of the then existing Assamese society. "The population of Assam has included a large number of migrants at any point of time ever since 1872 and not merely from the beginning of the present century as is evident from available census records".¹ This large scale immigration has changed the socio-cultural structure of Assam.

Besides Assamese, the Valley of Brahmaputra (Map No.3)* is inhabited by tribal inhabitants and a large number of immigrants from Bengal, Bihar and

1. Census of India, 1971, Assam, General Report, Series 3, Part 1A, p.9.

* Map No.3, shows the Valley of Brahmaputra.

Orissa. Most of the Assamese speaking Hindu people reside in the Brahmaputra Valley. The tribals reside in hill areas and speak diverse languages. There were other migrant communities like tribal labourers from Bihar and Orissa, Bengali Muslims from Mymensingh district of East Bengal and educated Bengali middle class from Bengal. The educated Bengalee middle class were brought in by the British to facilitate their administrative work.

The immigrants can broadly be classified into two groups. "...those who come from the neighbouring districts of Bengal to take up land for cultivation in Sylhet, the Garo Hills and Goalpara (who belong to the category of inter, rather than of ultra migrants) and those who leave their more distant homes for purposes of trade or to meet the demands for labour on tea gardens and elsewhere".² Tea gardens attracted coolies from such places as Bihar, Orissa, Bhagalpur. Traders, garden coolies, clerks and other educated men came to Assam in search of employment. People coming from

2. Census of India, 1891, Assam, Vol. I-Report p.192.

Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and the Presidency are mainly cultivators, clerks and traders.³

Generally, most of the traders come from Rajasthan and they have a monopoly of the trade in the Brahmaputra Valley. They are the Marwaris (popularly known in Assam Kayas). Their numbers had risen from 12,000 in 1911 to 16,000 in 1921 and to 22,000 in 1931.⁴ People from the Punjab come as contractors and skilled mechanics. But immigration from other parts of India to Assam was negligible compared to immigration from erstwhile East Bengal.

Immigration to Assam has been continuing unabated since Colonial Era. Before Independence, some sections of the Assamese people protested against such large scale immigration. Realising the seriousness of the problem some Assamese people under the leadership of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury raised their voice against it, by the beginning of the present century. Assamese people ventilated their grievances through 'Assamiya

3. Census of India, 1901, Assam, Vol.IV, Part I, Report, p.33.

4. Census of India, 1931, Assam, Vol.III, Part I, Report, p.45.

Samrakshini Sabha' (Assamese Preservation Association) which was formed in 1926. "The Assamese press and platform were equally vociferous on the issue. The Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha under the leadership of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury mounted a propaganda campaign that Assam's identity was threatened owing to large scale infiltration of Mymensinghies from East Bengal to Assam".⁵ This Sabha held meetings at different places of Assam for preservation of socio-cultural identity of Assamese people. Assamese middle-class leaders like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nilmoni Phukan played significant role on the immigration issue. On November 28, 1937, both Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Nilmoni Phukan, submitted a memorandum to Nehru in Rangia on behalf of 'Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha'. Another memorandum was submitted on behalf of 'Asamiya Deka Dal'. Through these organizations, they demanded separation of Sylhet and Cachar from Assam and complete ban on Bengalee immigrants.⁶ Roychoudhury tried to highlight the differences between indigenous people and immigrant

5. A.C.Shuyan and S.P.De, ed., Political History of Assam Vol.II (Gauhati 1978), pp.291-92.

6. A.K.Das, Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1982), p.27.

on linguistic basis through, the platform of 'Assam Jatiya Mahasabha' and its mouthpiece 'Deka Assam'. The 'Jatiya Mahasabha' demanded deportation of immigrants.

THE LINE SYSTEM

The large scale immigration led to a conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalee immigrants because of difference in linguistic and cultural background. The authorities therefore, had to introduce 'line system' in 1916 to confine the immigrants in a clearly defined areas segregating them from the Assamese.⁷ It was implemented in 1920 in Nowgong and Barpeta Sub-Division in order to restrict the indiscriminate settlements by immigrants in the Assamese inhabited areas. Immigrants included any one who came from outside the province for taking up land for cultivation. Inhabitants of Sylhet and Cachar migrating into the Assam Valley were not considered as immigrants.⁸ People of Sylhet were not included in the 'immigrant' category since it was a part of Assam at that time. Many Sylhetis entered and

7. Government of Assam, Report of the Line System Enquiry Committee (Shillong, 1936), p.3.

8. The Assam Gazette extraordinary, No.33, extract from the proceedings of the Government of Assam in the Revenue department, No.5216-R, dated the 4th Nov., 1939.

settled in Assam during that period. Line System was introduced for restricting the settlements of East Bengal peasants so that identity of Assamese people remain undisturbed.

The 'Line System' created friction between the Assamese Hindus and Assamese Muslims. The Assamese Hindus were in favour of 'Line System' while Assamese Muslims demanded its abolition. Leading figures among the Assamese Muslims like Khan Bahadur Nuruddin Ahmed and Maulana Munawar Ali wanted the abolition of this system. Muslims of Assam in general welcomed immigrants with the hope that in course of time this will help in strengthening the base of Muslim communal politics in Assam.⁹

The genuineness of the 'line system' regarding the legitimate settlement of the immigrants became ungovernable because the authorities failed to ensure its strict observance. Finally, inter-cultural conflict arose between immigrants and the indigenous

9. A.C.Bhuyan & S.P.De, ed., Political History of Assam Vol.II, op.cit., p.313.

people. Conflict arose over petty issues such as, music before mosque, cutting down the branches of papal tree, held sacred by the Hindus, which obstructed the long pole carried in the Muslim Tajiya procession, killing of cows in public places during Idd and such other minor issues.¹⁰

The line system failed to achieve its objective. It created a gulf between Hindus and Muslims and ultimately created schism between members of the Muslim League and Assam Congress leaders. The problem of immigration which was hitherto considered as socio-economic turned into a communal problem.

In 1937 government appointed Line System Enquiry Committee under the Chairmanship of Hockenhall to examine the issue thoroughly. "...the Assamese fear of being turned into a minority even on their own home ground, the Brahmaputra Valley, and of getting culturally submerged attained a certain legitimacy both in British official and Congress quarters. As early as in November 1937, Gopinath Bordoloi (1890-1950)

10. R.C.Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India Vol.3 (Calcutta, 1963), p.274.

had written to Rajendra Prasad that, if immigration went unchecked, the linguistic problem would become 'a source of constant friction resulting in violence, incendiarism and crimes of all kinds...'¹¹ This problem of immigration has resulted in the upsurge of linguistic chauvinism in the province.

In a letter to Bishnuram Medhi (an Assamese Congress leader and later Chief Minister of Assam) in December 1, 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru, admitted the seriousness of the problem of Assam. He conceded that the demands of the Assamese middle class were legitimate. While admitting the legitimacy of the demand, Nehru, however, felt that, in a sparsely populated and land rich state like Assam, immigration was bound to take place as an economic necessity. To him, the real problem was how to control and organize this immigration.¹² However, the argument of Nehru was not liked by the Congress leaders of Assam. Nehru unequivocally declared that effective steps must be taken against foreign

11. A. Guha, "Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective", Social Scientist, No.129, February 1984, p.56.

12. A.K. Das, op.cit., p.27.

infiltration. But no steps have been taken till to-day, and immigration from erstwhile East Pakistan to Assam did not stop owing to the weakness of government and vested interest of some politicians.

Along with the Britishers, the Assamese middle class and their representatives in the Assembly and local politicians were in favour of influx of outsiders into Assam. Political leaders who depend mainly on the votes of immigrants, have been encouraging immigration from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) for their political gain. "The Muslim League Ministry in Assam, under Syed Sir Muhammad Saadulla, helped immigration of Bengal Muslims in a planned manner to convert Assam into a Muslim majority province to be subsequently included in Pakistan".¹³ The Muslim League Ministry in the 40's was mainly responsible for bringing large number of Muslims to Assam. Under the 'grow more food' campaign launched by the Saadulla Ministry, lakhs of Muslims migrated to Assam. Lord Wavel, the British Viceroy called it 'grow more muslims'. He wrote in his journal in 1946

13. Memorandum submitted to N.S.Reddy (President of India) by Assam Sahitya Sabha, 4th November, 1979.

that Saadulla's grow more food campaign invites peasants from East Bengal which would finally generate social tension in Assam.¹⁴

The flow of Muslims from East Bengal reduced to some extent with the installation of Congress Party Government in 1946. Immigration of Muslims "...came to a halt only in 1946, when the Congress Party Government began to enforce revenue laws and evict unauthorized trespassers. With partition in 1947, the flow of Muslims from East Bengal subsided, while the flow of Hindu refugees from East Bengal increased".¹⁵

Various factors account for this large scale emigration from Eastern Bengal into Assam. The fertile land in the char areas (Sandbar) of Brahmaputra Valley was the main attraction of these immigrants. Large number of people migrated into the char lands of Goalpara from Eastern Bengal districts specially Mynensingh. The Census Report of 1911 for the first time mentioned the extraordinary influx of outsiders from eastern

14. A.K. Das, op.cit., p.28.

15. Myron Weiner, Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India (Delhi, 1978), p.101.

Bengal into the char areas of Brahmaputra Valley.

The Census reports prior to 1901 disclosed decrease of population in the Brahmaputra Valley due to the high mortality rate from Kalazar, a disease which broke out around 1888. The decrease of population in 1891 was mainly due to deaths caused by Kalazar. During the intercensal period, prior to 1901, especially in 1892, 1896 and 1897 the mortality rate from fever and Kalazar continued to be high. All these ailments resulted in the serious decrease of population in the valley from 1881-1901, which is revealed in the following table-

TABLE NO.2*

Year	Population	Percentage variation
1881 -	644,960	+ 14.8
1891 -	634,249	- 1.6
1901 -	589,187	- 7.1

Abnormal rate of growth of population in Assam was mainly due to immigration, not only from the

* Assam District Gazetteers, Vol.IV (Kamrup, 1905), pp.68-69.

beginning of twentieth century but since the 70's of the nineteenth century. The population of Assam has included large number of migrants which is revealed in decennial censuses.

Throughout eighteenth and even by the close of nineteenth century the economic condition of East Bengal remained fair. But by the beginning of the present century, the prices of foodgrains increased in such a way that it became unbearable for the landless peasants of Bengal. The gradually deteriorating economic condition of East Bengal compelled the landless and poor peasants of Bengal to emigrate from there.

Improvement in railway system helped in large scale immigration. Before the introduction of railway system, Assam Valley and Bengal was connected with navigable river transport system through the Brahmaputra. Assam Valley was connected by railway with West Bengal through East Bengal in 1902. After two years, Assam Valley was connected with East Bengal through Surma Valley in 1904.

Immigration was officially encouraged by the British. They opened the doors of Assam to the immigrants to suit their colonial interest. They brought cheap as well as skilled labourers to Assam to work in the newly established tea plantations. With the development of tea plantations after 1855, the problem of labour supply encouraged immigration since local Assamese people were unwilling to work. Therefore, Government had to bring labourers from other parts of India. Besides tea garden labour, other people also started coming to Assam. Traders and bankers from other Indian provinces poured into Assam which led to a rapid growth of population of the Brahmaputra Valley from an estimated one million in 1826 to about two millions by 1872.¹⁶

Some districts of East Bengal like Pabna, Mymensingh and Rangpur (specially Mymensingh) were overcrowded because of which large number of landless peasants from these districts migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley in search of land. Besides, the British also brought in lakhs of Bengali peasants

16. A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977), p.19.

(mostly Muslims) to settle down in the uncultivated lands on the two sides of the river Brahmaputra, which culminated in the present day serious demographic problem. The Muslim peasants settled in the rural areas of Assam. "In 1911, Muslims constituted 0.1 percent of the population of the Barpeta sub-division; but by 1941, they constituted nearly 49 per cent. The number of East Bengal settlers increased from 300,000 in 1921, to over half of a million in 1931".¹⁷

Census superintendent, C.S.Mullan, remarked in 1931 "...wheresoever the Carcass, there will the vultures be gathered together. Where there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny".¹⁸ Rate of increase of population of Assam since 1901 to present day has always been higher than that of the country as a whole. The following table shows the trend of population growth, in India and Assam from 1901-80.

17. A.K.Das, op.cit., p.26.

18. Census of India, 1931, Assam Vol.III, Part I, Report, p.51.

TABLE NO.3*

Year	I N D I A			A S S A M		
	Number (Lakhs)	Variation (Lakhs)	Variation (Percent)	Number (Lakhs)	Variation (Lakhs)	Variation (Percent)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1901	2383	-	-	32.90 (1.38)	-	-
1911	2520	137	5.73	38.49 (1.52)	5.59	16.99
1921	2512	-8	- 0.30	46.37 (1.85)	7.88	20.47
1931	2789	277	11.00	55.61 (1.99)	9.24	19.92
1941	3185	396	14.23	66.94 (2.10)	11.33	20.37
1951	3610	425	13.31	80.29 (2.22)	13.38	19.94
1961	4391	781	21.64	108.37 (2.47)	28.08	34.97
1971	5479	1088	24.80	146.25 (2.67)	37.88	34.95
1981	6609	1130	20.60	181.00 (2.89)	44.75	30.60

Column 8 is shown below.

Column - (8)	
ASSAM	Excess over India Col.4 & col.7
1901	-
1911	11.26
1921	20.77
1931	8.92
1941	6.14
1951	6.63
1961	13.33
1971	10.15
1981	10.00

Note: Figures in the parentheses in column 5 are percentages to India's population. Figures for 1981 are projected on the basis of 1979 data.

* Source: S.K.Das, "Immigration and Demographic Transformation of Assam, 1891-1981", Economic and Political Weekly, May 10, 1980, p.851.

As mentioned earlier, initially immigration was considered as an economic necessity in a state like Assam where fertile lands were available as against the shortage of labour. Landed gentry of Assamese society encouraged immigration of cheap labour for working in their paddy fields. They sought the services of these hardy peasants. The zamindars of Goalpara district employed the Muslim peasants from East Bengal in their paddy fields. Instead of employing the Muslims, the orthodox Assamese Hindu middle class encouraged immigration of Nepalese and employed them for their household and agricultural works. Those Nepalese who entered at that time permanently settled in Assam.

This large scale influx has continued unabated. This has given rise to several problems and those who were initially in favour of it have turned against it. There has been tremendous increase in the rate of growth of population in Assam in the post-independence era which was manifested in the 1971 Census. "...taking the whole population of 3.29 million of Assam in 1901 as 'indigenous' and applying the all-India rate of increase

of 129.67 from 1901 to 1971, its population in 1971 should have been 7.56 million instead of 14.63 million".¹⁹ The surplus population i.e., $14.63 - 7.56 = 7.07$ millions are immigrants.

However, Census figures are also not reliable and accurate. Pakyntein, the Census superintendent remarked in 1961, that most of the people especially those coming from East Pakistan (Muslims) conceal their birth place and language and show 'Assam' as their birth place and 'Assamese' as their language. This created a lot of confusion for arriving at a reliable conclusion. In 1951, the people who showed their birth place as Pakistan during enumeration numbered 831872. But in 1961 the number of such immigrants came down to 774869. From this it appears that real migration is deflated by giving incorrect statements during enumeration by the immigrants. Because of this it becomes difficult to rely solely on Census data.

19. Census of India, 1971, General Report, Series 3, Assam Part 1A, p.10.

East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) continues to be an over populated country. In spite of high birth rate, a slow rate of growth of population is found there. It is because most of them migrate to Indian border states of Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. The very young or very old cannot afford to migrate. Pakistan Census figures have shown that people belonging to the age group of 15-59 have migrated to Indian border states of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal in search of job opportunities. The table below gives the relevant figures -

TABLE NO.4*

Increasing during 1951 - 61

District	Percentage		60 +
	0 - 14	15 - 59	
BOKARGANJ	30.0	5.9	23.5
BOGRA	39.2	10.0	41.6
CHITTAGONG	40.8	19.0	48.5
CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS	33.0	29.6	200.7
COMILLA	20.1	7.6	79.3
DACCA	39.0	13.4	35.1
DINAJPUR	37.7	16.9	40.3
FARI DPUR	28.5	7.4	24.1
JESSORE	46.1	15.5	26.6
KHULNA	26.5	11.5	16.0
KUSHTIA	51.1	17.1	31.9
MYMENSINGH	35.0	8.7	50.4
NOAKHALI	12.1	(-) 5.5	70.5
PABNA	42.8	7.4	35.3
RAJSHAHI	40.2	16.7	38.1
RANGPUR	46.0	16.7	50.2
SYLHET	19.7	5.9	70.4

* Influx, Infiltration from East Pakistan, published by the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, August 1963, p.4.

From the above table it appears that in the district of Noakhali of East Pakistan there was a decrease in the population by 5.5%. District of Sylhet, from where largest number of people have entered Assam, has shown an increase of only 5.9% between the age group of 15-59, most of whom generally migrate to India. Such a slow growth rate in a over-populated district is quite impossible. "This is a demographical absurdity but a statistical fact",²⁰ These immigrants got their names enlisted in the voters list of some bordering states of India. Many politicians in Assam were willing to enlist their names in voters list to build up their own vote banks. The politicians as well as the political parties encouraged immigration to inflate the number of their supporters during election time. Many Pakistani nationals who left Tripura in their own stated on return to Pakistan that they had voted for the candidates of a particular political party of India. These foreigners were rather assisted in enlisting their names in the voters list.

20. Ibid.

The problem of immigration which cropped up in the nineteenth century has not yet been solved, even after thirty ~~eight~~ years of India's Independence. At the time of partition in 1947, Assam was proposed to be united with East Bengal to form a Muslim majority state. However, this was not achieved due to the untiring effort of Gopinath Bordoloi along with some other leaders belonging to Assamese middle class. The Cabinet Mission's proposal to group Assam with Bengal for creating a Muslim region was vehemently opposed by the people of Assam led by the middle-class leadership. All sections of people except the Muslim League protested against the plan.

The continuous stream of immigrants have posed a threat to the socio-cultural identity of the Assamese people. The issue is rooted in the Colonial Era but it was raised in the form of a movement only in 1979 which is, obviously too late to reverse a trend that has continued for more than a century. The international boundary between Assam and Bangladesh is still ill-guarded. There is no line of demarcation between Assam and Bangladesh except some pillars to

identify the border. The district of Karimganj (in Assam) and the district of Jhaliganj (in Bangladesh, just the opposite of Karimganj) is divided by the river Kushiara. Whoever gets the chance easily crosses the river and goes to Bangladesh or come to India. On 21 September, 1984, when bandh was observed in Bangladesh for withdrawal of Martial law, the people of Karimganj also observed 'bandh'. The unguarded boundary has rather complicated the situation. People of Jhaliganj and Karimganj are living like the people of one district.

The immigrants have failed to assimilate with the local Assamese which in turn, has created several problems in Assamese society. The immigrants have accepted the language, dress, etc., of the host country. But ethnic distinctiveness remains. Some Bengali immigrants speak Assamese fluently which indicates that they have linguistically assimilated with the Assamese. But in their family, they speak Bengali, which shows that assimilation is possible at the superficial level and not intrinsically. Though outwardly, they accept some cultural features of the people of the host country, yet they retain their identity.

The assimilation of these immigrants is more superficial than real. Equally serious is the 'economic crisis' aggravated by the influx which manifests itself in the deepening poverty and unemployment among the Assamese people.

IMMIGRATION - ITS IMPACT ON THE
ECONOMY OF ASSAM

The unabated influx of immigrants from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) to Assam has put pressure on the economy of Assam. The large scale influx has created landlessness of the indigenous people. Impact of immigration can be felt not only in the economic sphere but also in the socio-political sphere. "The presence of these migrants has shaken the foundations of Assamese social structure and created solidarity among the Assamese even while generating cleavages between the indigenous Assamese and the indigenous tribes. It has influenced the educational social and economic aspirations of countless Assamese..."²¹

²¹. Myron Weiner, op.cit., p.81.

Initially, immigration was welcomed because the immigrants (from Eastern Bengal) were generally hardy peasants and they converted marshy lands into cultivable lands and produced paddy and jute. But taking the advantage of the need of the Assamese people, these landless people entered Assam in such a big way that it led to the rise in the population, both rural and urban which, ultimately, put pressure on land and resulted in the landless ness of the local peasants in the rural areas.

Immigration of peasants put pressure on economy, especially, on the rural economy. The per capita availability of cultivable land decreases with the increase in population. This is noticeable in case of Assam. "The total area of land in Assam is 78 lakh hectares and the population was 146 lakhs in 1971 as per Census. The land per capita therefore, comes to 0.5 hectare only ... the land available for cultivation is found to be 29 lakh hectares only. Thus the available agricultural land per capita was 0.27 hectares in 1961 and 0.20 hectares in 1971 as against 0.30 and 0.25 hectares respectively for the

country as a whole".²² The per capita availability of cultivable land in Assam is one of the lowest in 1971 i.e., only 0.20 hectares. In a single decade, viz., 1961-70, the per capita agricultural land in Assam declined from 0.27 hectares to 0.20 hectares. This gradual decrease in the per capita availability of cultivable lands can undoubtedly be attributed to the rapid growth of population in Assam, which is caused by large scale immigration.

In Assam, the average size of holding is lowest in the country. When communal disturbances broke out in East Pakistan in 1951 and 1964, there was influx of refugees into Assam. Again during the liberation movement of East Bengal in 1970-71, there was also a big influx, mostly of Bengali Muslims. Population increase led to the reduction of size of average land holding in Assam. The average size of holding declined from 1.47 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.37 hectares in 1976-77".²³

The following table shows the per capita agricultural holding in rural areas of the districts of Assam in 1971-

22. World Agricultural Census, 1970-71, Assam (Published by Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 1970).

23. Atul Goswami, "Assam's Industrial Development- Urgency of New Direction", Economic and Political Weekly, 23 May, 1981.

TABLE NO.5*

State/District	Total agricultural land in rural areas (in hectares)	Total rural population	Per Capita agricultural holding (in hectares)
ASSAM	- 2,831,590	13,630,561	0.21
GOALPARA	- 463,226	2,052,809	0.23
KAMRUP	- 591,148	2,519,028	0.23
DARRANG	- 371,529	1,632,445	0.23
NOWGONG	- 318,120	1,561,558	0.20
SIBSAGAR	- 355,621	1,682,665	0.21
LAKHIMPUR	- 347,576	1,869,839	0.19

Immigration has again resulted in the chronic unemployment problem in Assam. Number of local youths looking for jobs have increased tremendously. The immigrants get their names registered in the various Employment Exchanges of Assam. In 1976, the number of job seekers in Assam was 214,270 as recorded in the Employment Exchanges. The number increased to 250,000 in January 1980. The Bangladeshi Hindus give "Care of (C/O)" in their addresses for communication which

* Census Atlas, Census of India, 1971, Series 3, Part IX, Assam, p.116.

indicates that they have migrated recently.²⁴

The immigrants have a very strong hold over opportunities of employment and occupation. The Hindu Bengalees monopolised white-collar jobs in the province. By the beginning of the present century, lawyers, doctors, clerks in government offices and banks were almost all educated Bengalee Hindu migrants. In middle-class occupations in Assam, these Bengalees occupy a dominant position.

That the immigrants occupy a dominant position in the job market has been revealed by the Employment Review Committee of the Government of Assam. In its third report, the Committee stated that in 28 units comprising seven public sector industries, 16 private sector industries and 5 banks, with a total strength of 29,537 employees, only 14,368 or 49% had their birth places in Assam and only 10,473 or 35% had Assamese as their mother tongue. Out of the 2095 employees in the Class I and II only 762 or 36% had their birth

24. A.K. Das, op.cit., p.47.

places in Assam.²⁵ The eighth report of the Committee reveals the fact that in the plywood industry, out of 87 senior officers 66 persons or 76% were from outside Assam.²⁶

Tea garden labourers of Assam mainly consists of people belonging to Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. Generally, the local labourers during Colonial Era were reluctant to work. But those few who were willing to work did not get a chance due to the presence of innumerable labourers from outside. "In 1901 the total number of labourers stood at 6,54,000. After 1911, great expansion took place in the tea gardens as a result of which in the decade 1911-21 alone about 7,69,000 labourers were imported into the state. In the decade 1921-31 about 1,69,000 labourers were imported into Assam".²⁷

In the agricultural sector, more or less the whole agricultural economy was and still continues to be dominated by labourers from Bengal. In the commercial

25. Assembly Secretariat, Report of the Employment Review Committee (Gauhati, December 1973), p.50.

26. Assembly Secretariat, Report of the Employment Review Committee (Gauhati, 1979), pp.10-13.

27. T.K. Chaudhury, Demographic Trends in Assam (Delhi, 1982), p.32.

sector also, outsiders dominate. Trade is entirely in the hands of Marwari merchants. They appropriate the wealth which is generated in the state; with the hope of economic gains. The indigenous people find themselves lock up in an unequal competition with the Marwari traders;

The landlords in Assam cannot be compared with their counterparts in any other state of India; Not a single millionaire can be found among the Assamese people. Most of the people do not even own 10 hectares of land.

The number of immigrants are increasing in such a way that, in course of time, they will capture political power and dominate the Assamese in their own home land. Trade, industry, cultivable lands, white-collar jobs all are passing into the hands of outsiders. Thus, the continuing influx of the illegal emigrants have not only cultural but also political and economic implications. The growing awareness among the Assamese population has resulted in the generation of mass resentment against the outsiders, as is evident from the recent agitation against foreign nationals in Assam.

CONCLUSION

The present study has unfolded the origin of the Assamese middle class and the role played by it in the socio-political sphere of the Assamese society. Both Colonial and post-colonial period have been covered in it.

In pre-colonial Assamese society mainly two classes could be found - nobility and paiks forming the upper and the lower stratum of the society respectively. Besides these two major groups, there were another group of people who acted as scribes and officers under Ahom system of administration. They did not have the privileges enjoyed by the nobles. But they were also not required to render manual service. This group of people formed the basis on which modern middle class could emerge during Colonial Era. Though middle class in Assamese society emerged during Colonial Era, the basis for its emergence lay in the pre-colonial period.

Establishment of educational institutions, spread of modern education and economic changes led to the crystallization of the Assamese middle class. Facilities for formal education during British Rule were

mostly cornered by High Caste Hindus with a good financial background.

After the annexation of Assam the Britishers brought ⁱⁿ middle-class people from Bengal to help them in administration. Since Bengal came under British contact first, this was the first group to have the benefit of English and higher education. In fact, early British administration was run by these immigrants. Bengali language was introduced as court language and also the medium of instruction for the benefit of these Bengalees. The fear of linguistic and cultural domination agitated the minds of the Assamese and this caused their opposition towards Bengalees. Although, Assamese was restored to its former position in 1873, the linguistic sentiments continued to provide the basis for political agitation by the middle class, in late colonial as well as post-independence period. Such sentiments also provided the rallying point for their powerful rivals, the Bengalee middle class.

Existence of Assamese middle class as a 'class' made its presence felt only by the middle of

nineteenth century, In 1857, Mani Ram Dewan, who initially collaborated with British but later on he turned against the raj, made a covert attempt to overthrow the British Rule. Gradually Assamese middle class started participating in all the major contemporary issues of the then Assamese society.

Revolts by the peasants during the early British Rule in Assam, were the earliest popular mass based movements of Assam. The peasants protested against ban on poppy cultivation in 1860 and also against government's fiscal policy through formation of raj mels (people's Assemblies).

Formation of various sabhas and associations marked the growth of political consciousness amongst the people of the Brahmaputra Valley from the middle of nineteenth century. These associations and organizations were led by leaders from the middle class of Assamese society. Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha was formed in 1875 through which Assamese middle class demanded that 'sons of the soil' should be given first preference in matters of recruitment in government services.

In the absence of political parties, these associations and organizations acted as a link between government and the masses. Though most of these organizations were cultural and literary in nature whose primary function was to spread advanced knowledge among the people, they created awareness of contemporary major issues and sought to arouse the spirit of national consciousness amongst them. Monthly and weekly journals, edited by high caste educated middle-class people of Assam, appeared by the end of nineteenth century to disseminate knowledge and information among the people of the valley. Political articles were published in these journals to rouse the spirit of nationalism in the minds of the people. Though the articles published in these journals were moderate in nature, sometimes even articles condemning some of British Government policies were also published. These journals and newspapers aimed at asserting legitimate rights of the Assamese people.

With their educational qualification and awareness of the contemporary political issues, the

middle class of Assam had already established a link with the Indian mainstream by 1920. During Colonial Era, the Assamese people had to carry on two struggles simultaneously- fight for preserving their own socio-political identity and fight for wresting independence from the British in concert with the rest of India. Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Tarun Ram Phukan were two of the important figures in this struggle. By the thirties of the present century, both Phukan and Bordoloi got themselves involved in the active politics of the valley. Assam played significant role in non-co-operation, civil disobedience and quit India movement along with the rest of the country.

Assamese nationalism manifested itself through linguistic and socio-economic issues. Due to Colonial constraints the growth and development of Assamese middle class remained feeble throughout nineteenth century. Since the Assamese middle class were at the mercy of British rulers, initially they were unable to participate in the contemporary issues. But subsequently, they came forward and vehemently opposed the raj.

Assamese nationalism took a well defined shape when various issues like language, immigration, jobs for locals, movement for collegiate education began to be articulated by the educated Assamese middle class.

Large scale influx of peasants from present day Bangladesh in search of waste lands and middle-class Hindus in search of white-collar jobs has aggravated unemployment among the locals. Most of the white-collar jobs have been monopolised by the Bengalees. The language controversy and the immigration issue provided the springboard for the Assamese middle class to assert itself. The absence of a viable Assamese bourgeoisie brought the middle-class leadership in sharp focus in the struggle for realisation of the legitimate aspirations of the Assamese people.

The state of Assam has witnessed a marked change in its demographic structure due to the influx of different groups of people from outside. Assamese landlords and zamindars employed the peasants from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh in their agricultural

field and fully utilised the services of the peasants. Assam's availability of fertile land, its immense economic potential, and the reluctance of the local people to hard work were some of the factors responsible for large scale immigration culminating in present crisis.

There were several unorganised attempt by the Assamese people against immigration during British days which proved unproductive. After independence, people of Assam started a broad based movement against continued influx of foreigners under the banner of AASU and AAGSP. Since the inception of the movement, the Assamese people have been agitating against the threat to the identity of the Assamese people. They are scared of losing their identity.

In Assam, an equally important problem is the economic crisis which is intensified by the influx of foreigners. The economic crisis is aggravated by the domination of outsiders in the field of trade and commerce, white-collar jobs and in agricultural sphere. This economic crisis has created xenophobia in the

minds of Assamese people, who have been worst hit by the problem of Unemployment.

Given the historical background of the state, it is not easy to find a solution to Assam's manifold problems, especially, the problem of foreigners. In Assam, diverse religio-linguistic groups exist including Assamese Hindus, Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus and Muslims and tribals. In short, the whole population of Assam is an incongruous combination of diverse religio-linguistic and ethnic groups, overlappings in such a confusing mosaic which gives rise to manifold problems.

Assamese middle class played crucial role in articulating the needs and the concern of the Assamese people in these major problem areas and also in the matter of social reforms like widow remarriage and education for women. Establishment of various vocational and and technical educational institutions, establishment of Gauhati University, High Court, Oil Refineries were the result of persistent effort of the middle class. Leadership of all these various movements was

drawn from this section of the society. This class remained at the forefront of all vital social and political developments before and after Independence. Middle class of Assam also have an aspiration for emerging as the dominant bourgeoisie of the region. But the absence of capital hinders them in fulfilling their aspirations.

Major problems of Assam relate to issues of economic development, immigration and language. Assam is an economically backward state compared to other advanced regions of India. The British established tea plantations and extracted maximum profits which were repatriated to UK and these were not invested for development of Assam. Prior to independence, little attention was given to the development of industry in Assam. Investments were limited to tea industry and other sectors were utterly neglected. In the post-independence Assam, the process of industrial development started only towards the later part of second plan (1956-61). Hitherto, Assam was neglected in regard to central investment on industrial projects. The British Colonialists' main aim was to take away surplus generated in the state. But

Assam's development continued to be overlooked in the initial phase of post-independence period. While intensifying the exploitation of Assam's rich natural resources, the Central Government was neglectful and indifferent to the need for industrialising the state. Besides, private capital was also not attracted due to lack of infrastructural facilities. It is the Assamese middle class which voiced the demand for industrial development of the state and led the struggle for it. Consequently, during the third plan period (1961-66), many industries in public sector started coming up.

The roots of language tangle in Assam lie in the Colonial Era. After their annexation of Assam in 1826, the Britishers introduced Bengali language in courts and schools. After repeated protest by middle-class leadership, 'Assamese' was again introduced in schools in 1873. However, the language issue has remained essentially unresolved since then. It led to language riots in 1960 over the question of making Assamese the official language, and again in 1972 over the question of making Assamese the medium of instruction at University level. Various ethno-linguistic groups

form a part of Assam. When demand for giving due place to the Assamese language was raised, the legitimate aspirations of various linguistic groups, which formed a part of the state of Assam at that time, were not taken into consideration, by the leadership of the movement. This was one of the important reasons for the dismemberment of Assam and the creation of the Hill states. The insensitivity of the Assamese middle class towards the legitimate aspirations of the plains tribals of Assam has led to the formation of tribal organizations like Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), which is demanding a separate state for the plains tribals of Assam.

Migration started with the British annexation of Assam in 1826. Initially, the Britishers as well as the local politicians were in favour of immigration. Because the immigrant peasants laboured in the fertile lands of Assam and increased agricultural productivity thereby, contributed to Assam's agricultural development. But subsequently, continued and increased flow of immigrants started putting pressure on land resulting in the decrease of per capita availability of cultivable

land in Assam.

The state of Assam has got a rich resource base. Had center not neglected the development of Assam, the magnitude of unemployment and landlessness would have been considerably less than what it is to-day.

A P P E N D I X

- (1) ANANDARAM DHEKIAL PHUKAN (1829-1859): He was born in an enlightened Brahmin landowner family and educated in the Hindu College of Calcutta. Chagrined at the continuance of Bengali language in the schools of Assam, he took up the cause of Assamese and wrote series of books and articles in journals in Assamese language. He believed in the regenerative role of British rule and remained a loyal government servant until his death.
- (2) ANANDARAM BARUA (1850-1889): He was born at North Gauhati, a Kayastha by caste. Educated at Government High School of Gauhati and Presidency College, Calcutta, since there was no college in Assam at that time. After taking graduation in Science he went to England. He was the first graduate, first barrister and first civilian of Assam. He was appointed District Magistrate.
- (3) GUNABHIRAM BARUA (1837-1894): A Brahmin by caste, educated himself at Calcutta and Presidency College. He was a Government servant and a social reformer and married a widow. He left a legacy of Rs.50,000/-. He settled in Calcutta after retirement.

- (4) GHANASHYAM BARUA (1867-1923): His father was a Mauzadar and a Kalita by caste. He was matriculated in 1882 and took his higher education in Calcutta. He was the member of Imperial Legislative Council, 1913-16; Member Assam Legislative Council 1916-23. He started his Dolowjan Tea Estate in the 1880's.
- (5) HEMCHANDRA BARUA (1835-1896): A Brahmin by caste and a social reformer. He was the editor of an English weekly 'The Assam News'. He had a share in the Assam Printing Corporation.
- (6) JAGANNATH BARUA (1851-1907): He was a Brahmin by caste. He graduated himself from Presidency College, Calcutta. He owned several tea gardens. He was the Vice-President of Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha.
- (7) KALIPRASAD CHALIHA (1862-1914): He was a Kayastha by caste. He was the son of a tea garden employee of Assam Company. Matriculated from Sibsagar High School in 1878; Employee of the Assam Company. He started four tea gardens with encouragement from European Patrons. Jadav Prasad and Bimalaprasad, both distinguished Congressmen, were his sons.
- (8) LAKSHMINATH BEZBARUA (1868-1938): He was born in 1868 (as he states in his autobiography). He was the son of Dinanath Bezbarua, who owned two small tea gardens. Passed his Entrance Examination in

1886 and securing government scholarship he read in the Ripon, City and Assembly Colleges in Calcutta. He graduated in Arts in 1890. Bezbarua entered into timber business first in partnership with Bholanath Barua then with Bard & Co. and finally on an independent scale at Sambalpur in Orissa, where he stayed till the last day of his life. He was the doyen of modern Assamese literature.

- (9) MANIKCHANDRA BARUA (1851-1915): He was a Kayastha by caste. Educated at Gauhati High School and Presidency College. He started business in European partnership. He owned tea gardens, a small steamer, an icefactory and saw mills. He was the business partner of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and member of the East Bengal and Assam, later Assam Legislative Council, 1909-1915.
- (10) NABIN CHANDRA BORDOLOI (1875-1936): He was the son of a high ranking government servant, Rai Bahadur Madhav Chandra Bordoloi. N.C. Bordoloi was chosen by the Assam Association to carry out its political mission in England.
- (11) TARUN RAM PHUKAN (1877-1939): He passed the Entrance Examination in 1892; Passed F.A. examination from the Presidency College, Calcutta; Returned to India in 1905 as the third barrister of Assam; Chairman of Gauhati Local Board in 1923 and 1936. Phukan was representing the

landholders of his valley on the Assam Legislative Council, ever since 1912. He participated in the non-co-operation movement.

(12) BIMALA PRASAD CHALIHA (1912-1971): Born in March 1912. He was educated at Government High School, Sibsagar and City College, Calcutta. He left studies to participate in the National Movement, 1930. He was appointed as the Chief Minister of Assam in December 1957. He was elected to Assam Legislative Assembly in Bye-election in 1958 and continued as Chief Minister till 1962 General Election; again re-elected to Assam Legislative Assembly 1962 and became the Chief Minister for the second term; re-elected to Assam Legislative Assembly 1967 and took over the office of the Chief Minister, Assam for the third consecutive term. He owned tea-gardens.

(13) BISHNURAM MEDHI: Born at village Hajo (Assam) in the year 1888. Educated at Gauhati and Calcutta. Joined Gauhati Bar 1915. Participated in the non-co-operation movement 1920. Elected to Assam Legislative Assembly, 1938; re-elected to Assam Legislative Assembly, 1946; Deputy Leader and Finance and Revenue Minister, Assam 1946-50; Succeeded Gopinath Bordoloi as Assam's Chief Minister on 5th August 1950 and continued till 1957; Governor of Madras 1958-64; Elected to Assam Legislative Assembly in 1967.

- (14) MOINUL HAQUE CHAUDHURY (1923-): He was born in the District of Cachar. He was educated at Silchar, Gauhati, Calcutta and Aligarh. He started practising Law at Silchar in 1948 and later on became an Advocate of Assam High Court. He was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly (ALA) in 1952. He was again elected to Assam Legislative Assembly in 1957 and was appointed as Minister. He was included in the Cabinet again as a Minister when Shri Chaliha formed the Cabinet towards the end of 1957. He was re-elected to ALA again in 1962. He was associated with various socio-cultural and political organisation.
- (15) SARAT CHANDRA GOSWAMI: Born at village Kapahera in the district of Nowgong. He was closely associated with the activities of the Assam Students' Federation till 1942; was a member, executive body, All Assam Students' Union and subsequently Assam Students' Congress till 1949. It was Sarat Chandra Goswami who inspired the move for a separate University in Assam. He was elected to Assam Legislative Assembly in 1967. Appointed as Minister of State, Education in 1971.
- (16) SIR MD.SAADULLA(1885-1955): Muhammad Saadulla was born on 21st May,1885 into an orthodox Muslim family of Gauhati. Saadulla, after obtaining Master's degree, went to Calcutta in 1908 to study law. In 1920, he enrolled himself as an advocate at the

Calcutta High Court. In 1923, he stood for election to the Second Reformed Legislative Council and returned with majority. In the elections to the third Reformed Council in 1926, Saadulla won by a large majority. Knighthood was conferred on him in 1928. He was the Premier of Assam with a few interruptions for nine years.

Source: Compiled through personal interviews of leaders and families of deceased and through Jiban Charit (life sketches in Assamese), published biographies, who's who of fourth Assam Legislative Assembly 1971 and Sixth Assam Legislative Assembly 1978.

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