

**HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES AMONG  
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ASSAM:  
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**DECLARATION**

I, Syeda Jolly Kazi, declare that the dissertation entitled '*Higher Education Choices Among Undergraduate Students in Assam: A Sociological Study*', submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is my bonafide work. I further declare that the dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.

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**CERTIFICATE**

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**To My Late Father**

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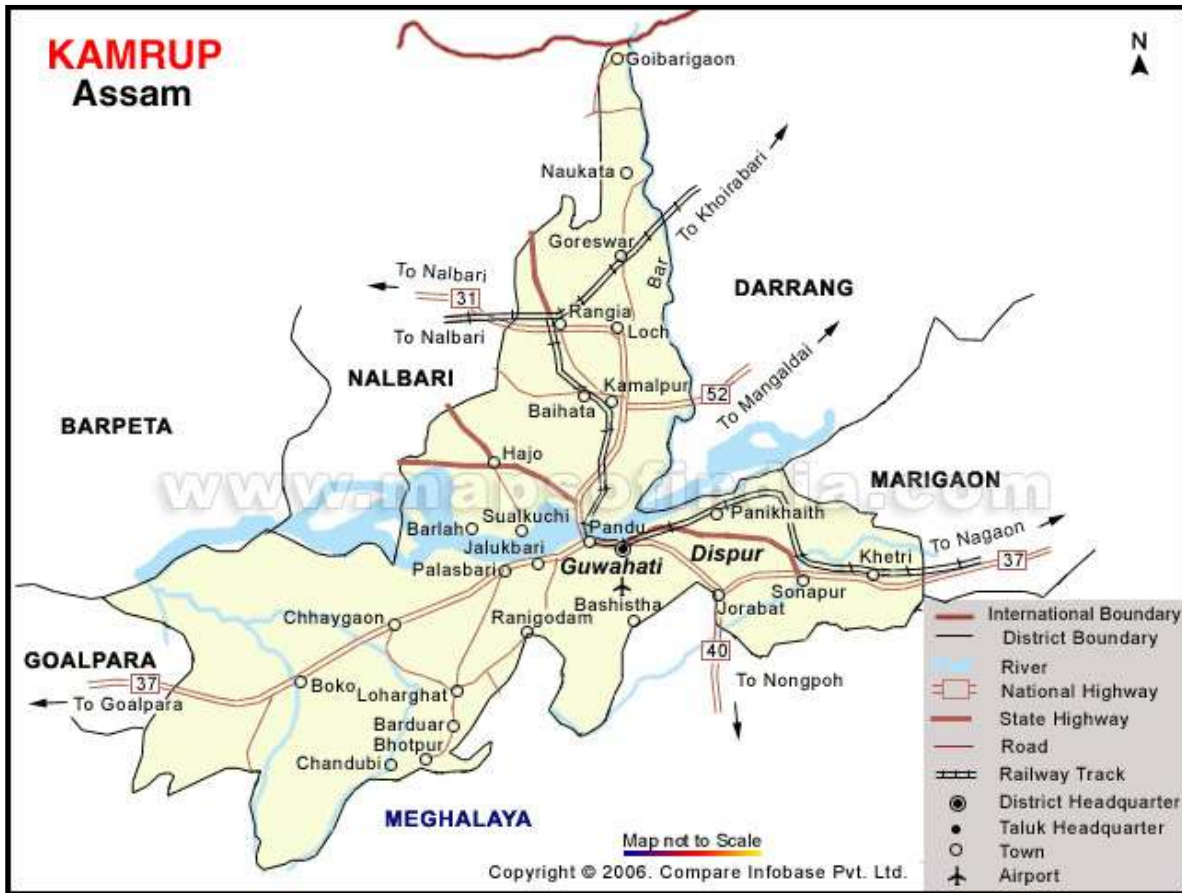
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# Map of Assam



Source: Mapsofindia.com, accessed on 24.07.12, at 8.00 pm

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The reorganization of work and occupational opportunities in the context of neoliberal globalization had widened choices<sup>1</sup> for students aspiring to access higher education in the emerging areas across the world. In India too, these changes have impacted to a large extent the professional and techno-scientific areas of work and therefore, these were the same areas of higher education that became the most preferred<sup>2</sup> destinations or choices for students as they lead them to employment and therefore to better living standards. Further, not only are the areas of study in higher education are preferred, but the institutions of a particular type and nature are also preferred. The aggressive neo-liberal expansion of higher education has split the choices between the private and public/government institutions, besides those that are already existing hierarchy of institutions of various kinds within the government/ public sector, namely, the central/state or colleges/universities.

Some of these considerations of choice are rooted in the prestige and value attached to particular courses<sup>3</sup> and institutions and makes them aspire for those courses as well as institutions of higher education. Within a programme of study, hierarchy of preference exists in terms of courses and, similarly, in terms of institutions as well. Thus, the system of higher education itself is hierarchised and differentiated in multiple ways in terms of the choices students exercise. As Marginson (2004) argues, in the minds of students, their families, and employers of graduates, the degree offered by different institutions are ranked hierarchically on the basis of institution and fields of study. The credential attached to a degree from a particular institution is valued compared to that of the same degree from yet another type of institution. Not only are the institutions preferred, but the particular courses within the

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<sup>1</sup> Choice is understood as the opportunity to choose

<sup>2</sup> Preferred/preference is understood as the setting of things before another

<sup>3</sup> Courses /subjects /branch /programme /discipline are interchangeably used. Within the programme of study like B. Sc may have three different subjects and so on.



institutions may also be preferred. This makes particular courses within the specific institutions sought after leaving out others. Industry and employers are also at times particular about who has graduated in which course and from which institution. One may thus argue that this is due to the differential process of education imparted in that institution, enhancing the credential acquired from that institution as the institution may meet the requirement of the employment market more than the other institutions of similar nature.

However, the process and experiences of acquiring credentials may not be similar for all social groups as there may be differences in the way social groups mediate and access choice that may lead them to achieve desired social mobility. In this study we will see how the social groups in terms of their socio-economic background such as gender, ethnicity and various aspects of socio-economic background access choice and preferences in higher education in the state of Assam. Though it may be well known that students do make choices in terms of streams of education and the institutions, there have not been any empirical studies to show how students actually make choices and preferences in higher education, how do they choose courses and institutions<sup>4</sup>, do they make a choice or do they select a course and an institution by chance with some predispositions. To what extent, does the employment and credential consideration guide students to choose a particular stream and area of study and how these preferences/choices vary in terms of their social backgrounds? In other words, are there any differential patterns in the way students from various socio-economic background, gender, and ethnicity access streams of study or institution? The study, therefore, attempts to understand the way students make choices before their admission into present level through their own perceptions and experiences.

### **Review of Literature**

The field of higher education is abundant with multiple opportunities in terms of course selection, institutional preferences. Exercise of choice, or alternatively decision making around education in general and higher education in particular, is an interplay of a number of factors. To Ball *et al* (2002), choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'Institution' and 'College' has been interchangeably used

preferences, whereas decision-making alludes to both power and constraint (p.52). Research in the past had attempted to look at and make sense of these patterns and effects in a variety of ways. It also suggests that there are myriad ways of defining choice and decision-making in higher education. Psychologists emphasize the psychological environment, or climate of an institution, its impact on students, and student-institution fit. Sociologists view the formation of college-going aspirations as part of a general status attainment process. Economists view college attendance decisions as a form of investment-like decision-making behavior.

Sociologists of education have highlighted the fact that choice to participate in higher education has social dimensions and far-reaching effects on many levels. Choice is important for the following reasons. It is related to both what students expect from their actual studies in higher education and also their views of employment prospect in relation to material and symbolic benefits. There are unequal opportunities for choice and participation because the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by a more differentiated and stratified higher education sector (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Various studies show that the increase in participation in higher education has benefited mainly the middle classes and ‘the most privileged students’, and that class inequalities in higher education choice have been persistent (Metcalf, 1997; Reid, 1998; Pugsley, 1998; Iannelli, 2007). This contrasts sharply with the official rhetoric according to which the expansion of higher education is assumed to result in an increase of opportunities for choice, meritocracy in job distribution, increased employability and social mobility, and an increase in the earnings of higher education graduates (Blundell et al., 2000).

The expansion of higher education has been accompanied by endemic credential inflation, which increases the competition for credentials from elite universities and decreases the potential value of a university degree (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003). Higher education choice is thus a crucial decision since students need to choose the ‘correct’ higher education institution and field of study required for privileged occupational trajectories. Most importantly, there is a relationship between choice and social class. Social class influences students’ choice to participate in higher education, choice of institution and

field of study (Ball, Maguire and MacRae, 2000; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). The correlation between choice and social class has been the focus of a great deal of research and has led to different theoretical frameworks on choice processes.

Dictionary meaning of choice is understood as choosing from the availability or scarcity of opportunities and this has been interpreted in academic writings as the role played by ones' subjectivity within the given constraints. Choice as synonymous with agency where 'agency' has an inventive connotation and 'choice' is between things already invented (Kumar, 2010). Preference is the set of ordered choices that may alter under different conditions. In the context of higher education, scholars have variedly looked at the different dimensions of choice and preference. Stephen Ball *et. al.* (2002) make a point that higher education choice takes place within two registers of meaning and action. There is one aspect of cognitive or performative that is related to the matching of performance to the selectivity of institutions and courses. The other aspect is social or cultural and has its relation to social classifications of self and institutions. Based on Bourdieus' conceptualization of 'habitus'<sup>5</sup>, Ball *et al* (2002) sees the role of 'habitus' in the relationships between practices and judgments in particular 'fields'. In other words, such relationship reflects the notion of choice in higher education (whether institution or course) as a choice of lifestyle and a matter of 'taste', depending upon the privileges of social, cultural and economic factors.

Applicants make choices in different ways, and some does on a better informed basis than others (Connor and Dewson, 2001) from different backgrounds and with different needs and aspirations, when applying for a place in higher education. Specific issues relating to choice about subjects varied in their relative importance for different student groups. There are groups who are influenced in their choice of course by their intrinsic interest, enjoyment and exposure to the subject (Roberts and Allen, 1997). And the other takes interest in employment outcomes than the finer details of a course, and is also influenced by families in

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<sup>5</sup> Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions or acquired pattern of thought, behaviour and taste which individual agent develops these dispositions in response to the objective conditions of social, economic and cultural capital it encounters. In other words, it refers to class differences in knowledge and disposition

arriving at decisions about what or where to study. Some research studies have linked students' subject choices to occupational returns (Hearn and Olzak, 1981; Wilson, 1978; Wilson and Smith-Lovin, 1983). In other studies, effects of field of studies in many aspects of life have also been found to be playing an effective role such as parents realizing similar occupational opportunities for their children (Kalmijn and Van der Lippe, 1997), and developing socio-political orientations in terms of educational level and class interests (Van de Werfhorst and Kraaykamp, 2001).

Studies have also highlighted the persistence of a high degree of choice variation in terms of class, ethnicity and gender (Pugsley, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Ball *et al.*, 2002). Young people, from very similar social locations, came to understand the structure of the higher education market in very different ways and seemed to possess quite diverse 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). The present study suggests that an equal degree of diversity may be apparent within the middle class. In a study by Hatcher (1998), there was reference to considerable variety in the ways in which young people from a particular class background made educational choices and approached points of transition. Besides, earning differentials among fields play a strong role in a student's choice. Jonsson (1999) and Brooks (2003) find that men are much more likely than women to select fields that may bring high economic returns. Although the young people involved may come from diverse or from broadly similar social backgrounds, they differed considerably in their knowledge of and engagement with the arena of subject choice, at higher education level.

In fact, there are varied dimensions that facilitate or determine the process of choice or decision making in higher education. However, mapping of the transition from choice to decision becomes too important to comprehend. The perceptions and choices of prospective students in higher education are constructed within a complex interplay of social, economic, cultural and political factors that are underpinned by social class, social groups, gender, ethnicities and so on. However, entering and enrolling into an educational institution and any discipline of study is not about mere matching of fulfilling the criteria. As various general social patterns and other effects are also evident, this is a complex decision-making

process (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003) examine the impact of ability on subject choices through linking rational choice perspectives on educational decision-making with cultural reproduction theory. The 'ability' means prior attainment in a specific test, i.e. grade or marks. Here they found that social background is associated with ability, which in turn is associated with subject choice.

It is understood that the perceptions, distinctions and choices of higher education institutions used and made by students play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in higher education. Several empirical studies of higher education choice have demonstrated such distinctions between institutional choices that are made by students (Hatcher, 1998; Moogan et al, 1999; Ball et al, 2005). These distinctions have been interpreted largely as a result of the mass expansion of the sector and the supposed need for the middle classes to find new ways of ensuring the reproduction of their class advantage (cited in Ball *et al*, 2003). Although the young people involved may come from diverse or from broadly similar social backgrounds, they differed considerably in their knowledge of and engagement with the higher education choice. They may not construct identical types of hierarchy, nor did they attach the same importance to attending a 'highly ranked' institution. The proposed study would look into some similar assumptions and experiences as to how much and what kind of knowledge would lead the students and their families towards the choice making in higher education.

Also the research on young people's higher education choices has paid close attention to familial influences and has provided compelling evidence that class positions have a strong bearing on both how young people understand the higher education field (Pugsley, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Ball *et al.*, 2002), and their decisions about whether to go on to university or college (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). In a study of the subject choice process, Woods (1976) finds that the parental definitions of the situation differ along class lines, and thus the parental influences brought to bear on children in making their choices. Robbins (cited in Ball *et al*, 2005) within the notion of middle class suggests that 'students have become self-selectively homogenized' and that 'the social ethos of students

and institutions are mutually reinforcing' (p.53). Ball *et al.* (2000), in their study in London, argue that different choices of university youth applicants are due to the varied dimensions of social, material, spatial and perceptual preferences. In other words, choice is related to cost on the one hand, and confidence, awareness and expectation, community and tradition on the other (cited in Ball et al, 2002, p.55). Hansen (1997), Davies and Guppy (1997) and Van de Werfhorst et al. (2001) argue that students' choice of subject must be understood within the system of both economic and cultural stratification, as they choose subjects that correspond to their parents' positions in both the economic and the cultural hierarchy.

The role of non-rational aspects of choice and strategy is recognized and documented by Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997). To them, decisions are based on partial information located in the familiar and the known. The decision-making is context-related, and could not be separated from the family background, culture and life histories of the young people. Decisions are only partly rational, being also influenced by feelings and emotions (p. 33). Similarly, Ball *et al* (2003) argues that though a young individual boy or girl rationally considers the pros and cons of different educational alternatives, and then decides in favour of the alternative which he/she can reasonably believe maximizes his/her 'utility', but certain factors like class, peer, gender, institutional procedures can act as closure. There are different kinds of contexts, opportunities, and non-rationality in play. The process of choice making in higher education could also involve social closure along the lines of class, social group and gender. As stated, different kinds of practical knowledge are at work in choice-making. Alongside the academic and social selectivity of higher education institutions, cultural and social capital, material constraints (Reay, 2000) social perceptions and distinctions, and forms of self-exclusion (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977) are all at work in the processes of choice. Higher education is thus organized primarily by different disciplines and institutions, and these are unequal with respect to power, prestige, and economic payoffs (Clark, 1983; Rumberger and Thomas, 1993).

Other practical aspects may also mediate the process of closure in the selection of course as well as institution (Brooks 2003). It is studied that preparation in pre-enrolment may work differently across various category like preparatory coaching, teachers' guidance, score better on standardized tests, and have various "home advantages" facilitating success that may lead to intra-class variation. There are extra familial mentors and youth advocates, peer groups that have been educationally and occupationally successful, and geographic centrality that may permit feasible commutes to a wide range of choice.

Scholars have conducted a wide range of studies regarding the factors that influence the college selection process. Regarding the college selection process, many researchers refer to the pre-disposition stage as the college aspiration formation stage (Paulsen, 1990). It is said to be characterized by students determining whether they would like to attend college or not. During this stage, certain background characteristics influence students (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Martin and Dixon, 1991). These influences include socioeconomic status, race, gender, ability, achievement, attitudes, and educational background of parents and peers (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). Student's socioeconomic status is identified to be a strong indicator of college attendance (ibid.). In general, the socioeconomic status of a student can open doors of access or limit their ability to even consider attending college. Students with high socioeconomic status are more likely to go on to college than students with low socioeconomic status (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

The interpersonal influences of others, such as parents and peers, have been involved in students' aspirations to attend college (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen, 1990). Students whose parents begin to encourage them to consider college early in their educational career are more likely to attend college (Melanie, 2000). Studies have found that parental encouragement to attend college has a direct effect on college attendance. Students who have friends interested in attending college are more likely to pursue an undergraduate degree as well. Peers who plan to pursue a college degree positively reinforce college choice decisions (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen, 1990). The most important of these other factors, as found, were: quality of teaching, facilities and academic support; the overall

image and ‘reputation’ of the institution such as given from siblings, parents etc.; graduate employment prospects; and location and distance from home. Other studies have also shown that deciding about subject(s) generally comes earlier in the choice process than deciding about institution, though the two are often intertwined.

Researchers have found that a wide variety of colleges are chosen to create an applicant’s choice set. The colleges differ in net cost of attending, size of the institution, and institution type (public or private). Students will have different approaches to making their ultimate decision (Matthay, 1989; McDonough and Antonio, 1996; Paulsen, 1990). McDonough and Antonio (1996) described three basic approaches that have been used to study the college selection process; social psychological studies, economic studies and sociological status attainment studies. All three approaches focus on decision-making influences.

The cost of attending an institution is also found to be a consideration for students when choosing a particular college such as Jackson and Chapman (1984) studied high ability students who were in need of financial aid to attend college and the factors that influenced them to attend college. They noted that when deciding between a first choice institution and second choice institution students consider the availability of financial aid as being very influential to their college choice decision. This suggests that financial aid was a major consideration for students and those large amounts of financial aid can move a second choice institution to a first choice institution (Jackson and Chapman, 1984).

Some studies focus on the individuals who were most influential in helping students with the college selection process such as high school guidance counselors, parents, college faculty members or alumni from a particular college (Loewith, 1998). Studies have also been conducted on other factors that motivate students to attend college such as students being motivated by their aspirations to become an authority in their field, to own their own business, and to be financially stable when they enter the workforce (cited in Melanie L. Hayden thesis, 2000). The academic reputation of an institution is also considered to be very



important to students as they expect to acquire knowledge and skills in a particular field so they will be marketable for the jobs they want to pursue. As observed, attending a college that has an excellent reputation for a specific academic program such as engineering or business will assist them in achieving their goal (Canale et al., 1996). Students also see academic reputation as leading to more job opportunities for them (Freeman, 1999).

There is also documentation of personal issues that affect students' decision to attend college. In some of the studies, it is found that friends and former students tend to encourage African American applicants to attend a certain university (Abraham and Jacobs, 1990). As found, opinions of friends and former students pertaining to the college atmosphere weigh heavily in the minds of African American college applicants when deciding upon a college. Family influences are another personal issue that African American students deal with when selecting a college (Horvat, 1996). These students, as observed, were persuaded to enroll in a particular college because their parents or other family members attended the same school. They were found to be encouraged to attend a particular institution because the family wants the student to achieve at a higher level than they did (Abraham and Jacobs, 1990; Freeman, 1999; Sevier, 1992).

### **Studies in the Indian Context**

Many of the earlier studies in higher education provide data on the attitudes, values and aspirations of students (Jayaram, 1987). In fact few studies have looked at the differential background having an impact on the participation rate of the students. They are related predominantly to a variety of objective factors gathered from a sociological perspective. In general, preference to pursue higher education and various factors influencing it have been examined by few research studies, by sociologists in 1960s and 1970s in order to understand the role of education in relation to social stratification and mobility. Some studies have focused on social background of students in institutions of higher learning by scholars like V.K.R.V. Rao (1961). Besides, there are other aspects analyzed like the students of higher caste enrolled in higher learning institutes (Shah, 1961; Sharma, 1979),

hierarchical representation (Sharadamma and Parvathamma, 1968). Rajagopalan and Singh (1968), in their study, make an analysis of the social background of the first-year students at one of the Indian Institutes of Technology, where certain kinds of schooling tends to act as a handicap in securing admission to a particular or demandable stream like mechanical engineering. A broader analysis of the relationship between education and social stratification have been done in one of the metropolis, Bangalore, by Jayaram (1987) based on stratification - education paradigm. Based on personal interviews with students in higher and professional education, this study looked at the reproduction of status in terms of ascriptive nature.

However, under the influence of the so-called economic liberalization and the market demand there is increased enrolment in general courses as well as shifts in preferences/ choices especially for courses like management, engineering and other professional. Some trend analysis of this era has been done by few studies. Karuna Chanana (1993, 2000) makes a descriptive analysis of women's representation in the higher education system. She demonstrates the trends in the enrolment of women in different subjects/disciplines and what happens to them after they enter the system. Here she also locates the societal and institutional factors inhibiting women's access to higher education. As part of the economic liberalization and the market demand, she analyses the shifts in the subject/ disciplinary choices of women as well access to higher education. There was perceptible change seen in the choices of women belonging to upper class strata, of the metropolitan cities as women enrolled into new professional courses such as management, fashion designing etc.

Besides, through informal discussion in a self-financed college affiliated to Madras University, Chanana finds that about 30% students' choice to pursue college education had a link to their career goals. Others simply join to get a degree but degree like management is valued as it enhances the marital value of a young women. In general, she also mentions that choices of women being limited due to factors like absence of role models for career options and academic leadership at home, lack of counseling for subject choice and career

options in the colleges and universities, several of the women students are first generation of women in the families who are receiving higher education and so on. Social and economic disparities as reflected through caste and tribe also affect disciplinary choices. Scheduled castes and tribes are less represented in higher levels education and in professional courses and programmes because these require longer investment of resources in terms of time and finance and also socialization support and role models at home (Chanana, 2000).

Within the engineering profession, the study by Parikh and Sukhatme (2004) analyzed the trends in preference across the states of Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. In this study, electrical engineering and electronics are the most preferred branches followed by civil engineering. Across the states, there is significant drop in preference for civil engineering and electrical engineering and spectacular increase of preference for electronics engineering and computer science/engineering. It is also noticed that women enrolment in these preferred courses in the IITs are less in comparison to regional engineering institutes.

Rao (1997) in his study of engineering institutes analyses that disparities in course preference as well as institutions lies in the social background of the students. It is found that students make order of choice, like first choice and so on. However, the preference level is not uniformly distributed among the different social strata (cited in Rao , 1997). Hassan and Mehta's (2006) analysis of *NSS (National Sample Survey)* data finds the under-representation of disadvantaged classes like Muslims, Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in colleges.

Some economic analysis regarding the choice / preference has also been done in the application of market logic to higher education within the concept of 'freedom'. Chattopadhyay (2009) says that students' freedom to choose depends primarily on command over resources and market capacities. Because a student with adequate resources will gain access to any institution of her choice, while the most deserving may not get similar access due to inadequate resources. Besides it is also mentioned that freedom to choose the

institution depends on the decision of the student as to whether the institution or the stream/discipline should get priority, it may be the reputation of the institution as a “brand” matter or the skills of a course which sells more in the job market (p.57). Chattopadhyay mentions that the students’ option to exercise the freedom to choose arises in case of top institutions followed by the choice of course or discipline. Moreover, for professional courses, the freedom to choose course/discipline comes first and not the institutions other than the top ranking ones.

These few studies lead to understanding that the trend for higher education preference is dynamic and has a credential attached to it. In most cases, family background has a larger influential role to play. Even the preference is multiplied due to new social change like economic liberalization; there is unequal preference level across various social strata and unequal distribution across the institutions. However, the studies have dealt with the issue of choice in a limited way and there remains a gap in understanding the complexity in choice making among students. At best these studies cursorily mention the existence of choice among students and the changing trend of preference, how they make and what goes into their decision making is largely unraveled. The studies have also not explored the differential patterns and processes of choice in terms of social class, gender and ethnic background. It is this precisely the proposed study aims to explore.

### **Higher Education Scenario in Assam**

The higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way, particularly in the post-independence period, as claimed, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. There has been an increase of several folds in terms of the number of educational institutions as well as the enrolments and rates of participation. There is a growing size and diversity of the higher education sector particularly in terms of courses, institutions and enrollment.

The role of Higher Education for the growth and development of human resource has been demonstrated time and again. Its capacity to introduce responsibility for social, economic and scientific development of the country among the youth is well understood. More importantly, its growth has been linked to the changing socio-economic environment of the country (Agarwal, 2009). Independent India inherited a system of higher education which was an integral part of the colonial set-up. However, the policy makers understood the relevance and criticality of higher education in India immediately after independence. Higher education was considered as a critical input to achieve the goals of socio-economic development, which the awakened people of an emerging nation had set before themselves<sup>6</sup>.

Post 1947, focus on higher education reform became one of the earliest problems of nation building that caught the attention of the education policy makers especially. This was so because of the significance of higher education for the growth and development of the country and to make the nation truly 'independent'. This was initiated partly to its basic significance for the development of the country and partly to the fact that no comprehensive survey of university education had been held after 1917-19<sup>7</sup>. As recorded in various documents, it is stated that the University Education Commission (1948-49), under the Chairmanship of S. Radhakrishnan, gave the foundations of the future of Indian Higher Education. Under the Chairmanship of D.S. Kothari, the report of the Education Commission (1964-66) symbolized the symbiotic relationship between education and national development. Since then, there has been number of initiatives upon initiating a number of development linked strategies for promotion of higher education<sup>8</sup>. The latest of these include the Report of the 'National Knowledge Commission' (NKC), the Report of 'The Committee to

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<sup>6</sup> Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher Education, 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan 2012-17  
[http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315\\_12FYP.pdf](http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315_12FYP.pdf), accessed on 20.07.12 at 4.00 p.m.

<sup>7</sup> The Government of India appointed a commission for holding a comprehensive and searching character into the problems of the Calcutta University. It was expected to study the organization and policy of the other Indian universities to help it to formulate the policy of the Calcutta University (India, 1950:25:26).

<sup>8</sup> Inclusive and Qualitative Expansion of Higher Education, 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan 2012-17,  
[http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315\\_12FYP.pdf](http://www.ugc.ac.in/ugcpdf/740315_12FYP.pdf), accessed on 20.07.12 at 4.00 p.m

Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education' and the Conclave of Vice-Chancellors and other Forums of Educationists.

The trends in Higher Education in Assam are a part of the continuity of the national efforts and objectives. The limited pre-independence scope and set-ups have gradually expanded in post-independence period. The State Education Commission in 1960 has founded the basic framework for expansion of Higher Education in the State. Now the efforts have resulted into expansion of scope of learning and institution choice for students. The formation of the Higher Education Mission has been the latest effort of the State Government in Assam.

The higher education scenario in Assam has been a gradual process of evolution since independence. This has been guided by the contemporary needs based on existing social and economic context. The scenario notably has witnessed key important developments in the higher learning environment with many new institutional set ups along with new and diverse offerings in courses and interests. The significance of this development is the advent of mix scenario of government and private sector role in promotion of higher education. The government intervention has been both at central and state levels. Moreover, there are already proposals to set up many new set of universities and institutions to cater to higher education needs in Assam. There are short-term and long-term merits to a comprehensive plan for establishing more higher education institutions and transforming Assam into a Mecca of higher learning<sup>9</sup>. As compared to earlier situations, higher education has become easier due to credit facilities available from the banks in terms of educational loans to pursue higher studies. Thus investment in higher education has become an accepted reality. However, one set of growing concern has been regulatory and qualitative nature of higher education scope and opportunities.

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<sup>9</sup>Nath, Hiranya K , A few thoughts on higher education in Assam, [http://www.shsu.edu/~eco\\_hkn/highereducationinassam.pdf](http://www.shsu.edu/~eco_hkn/highereducationinassam.pdf) , accessed on 21.07.12 at 12.00 p.m.

The quality versus quantity debate persists and is surely going to rise. The quality concern is pointed out at both governments run as well privately operated institutions. It is here, that the demand for more screening, regulation and monitoring of quality higher education is justified.

Overall, there is a gradual shift in the society's attitude towards higher education. Unlike the traditional view that education is an end in itself, it is now considered as a means to an end. This change in attitude would be crucial for the success of any comprehensive education policy that would cater to the twenty first century demand for higher education. The current focus of the Assam government to launch a higher education mission in order to revamp higher education system and make it career and job-oriented is seen in this context.

Since Independence there has been a phenomenal growth of Higher Education in Assam. In Assam the first University was established at Guwahati on 26th January, 1948 and the second one at Dibrugarh on 1st July, 1965. Since then there has been increase of colleges and Universities catering to higher education needs of youths. The number of Universities has increased to 10 while 2 Central Universities have been established. Currently, there are 8 State Universities including the lone K K Handique State Open University. On the basis of regional balancing, 5 State Universities were set up general area, and 1 in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) under the sixth schedule. There are two private universities at present which have been opened up for private players to cater to higher education in Assam.

The State has 7 government colleges and 194 provincial colleges. There are 175 non-government colleges. To cater to special law education there are 5 law colleges in the State. Table 1.1 highlights the status of higher educational institution in Assam.

**Table 1.1: Status of Higher Education in Assam**

Serial No.	Institutions	Quantity
1.	Universities	10
2.	Central University	2
3.	State Universities	8
	- Under General Area - 5 - (BTAD) under sixth scheduled –1 - Private University – 2	
9	Govt. Colleges	7
10	Provincial Colleges - Under General Area – 181 - Under BTAD - 8	189
11	Non-Govt. Colleges	175
12	Law Colleges (Adhoc)	5

Source: Directorate of Higher Education Assam;  
<http://online.assam.gov.in:8080/education-in-assam> , accessed on 21.07.12 at 3.00 p.m.

Post independence, there were efforts for a rapid expansion in the field of education including higher education in Assam. The government emerged quite alive to the requirement, improvement and expansion of education in the state. The state government has followed policies and decisions taken at the national level for implementation in the state. As such it follows the mandate of National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1986, revised in 1992) in terms of intervention in Higher Education. The University Grants Commission and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) play a major role in the quality aspect of it.

Thus, corresponding to rise in enrollment there has been increase in number of higher education institutions to meet rising demand. From 5,439 enrollments in 1947-48 the numbers have increased to 1, 11,075 in 1980-81. The enrollment figure went up to 2, 09,967 in 1990-91 and further to 6, 10,091 in 2010-11. Correspondingly, the number of colleges also went up. From 16 colleges in 1947-48 the number went up to 139 in 1980-81. The number reached 186 in 1990-91 and further went up to 194 in 2010-11. Table 1.2 gives an overview of higher education enrollment in Assam since 1947.



**Table 1.2: Higher Education Enrollment in Assam**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Colleges</b>	<b>Enrolment</b>	<b>Teaching Staff</b>
1947-48	16	5,439	-
1950-51	19	7,149	271
1960-61	35	25,243	855
1970-71	99	58,575	2,854
1980-81	139	1,11,075	4,291
1990-91	186	2,09,967	5,585
2000-01	189	5,16,651	7,258
2010-11	194	6,10,091	8,121

*Source: Directorate of Higher Education Assam 2010-11;*  
<http://online.assam.gov.in:8080/education-in-assam>,  
accessed on 22.07.12 at 10 a.m.

For long time Calcutta University used to cater to the higher education needs of Assam and North East India region. Naturally the seats of intake and enrollment were limited. Resentment was obvious among students from Assam for not getting enough seats. Agitations were launched demanding provision of avenues for higher education in Assam. After enormous efforts and demand, the Gauhati University was established under the Gauhati University Act. 1947 on 26th January 1948. Gauhati University started functioning as a teaching, affiliating and residential university with K. K. Handique as the first Vice-Chancellor. Currently, Gauhati University has 38 Post Graduate Department with a satellite campus at Kokrajhar, Post Graduate Correspondence School and a constituent Law College. It has more than 205 affiliated colleges offering undergraduate courses in the faculties of Arts, Science, Commerce, Law, Engineering, and Medicine. A few colleges under Gauhati University offer Postgraduate courses<sup>10</sup>.

Subsequently Dibrugarh University came up in 1965 under the provision of the Dibrugarh University Act 1965. The University is a teaching, affiliating and residential university. The territorial jurisdiction of Dibrugarh University covers seven districts of upper Assam i.e, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur , catering to more than 5000 students.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/higher\\_education.html](http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/higher_education.html), accessed on 20.07.12 at 4.00 p.m.

In 1994 the Tezpur University was established by an Act of Parliament as a Central University. The University offers undergraduates, post graduate and doctoral programmes in the following academic divisions – School of Science and Technology, School of Humanities and Social Science, School of Energy, Environmental and Natural Resources, School of Management Science, School of Engineering. Assam Agricultural University was established in 1969 under the provision of Assam Agricultural University Act 1968. The jurisdiction of the university extends to the entire state of Assam with regard to teaching, research and extension education in the field of agriculture and allied sciences<sup>11</sup>. This university has a number of campuses with its headquarter at Jorhat. Assam University was established in 1994 in Silchar in Barak Valley under the provision of Assam (Central) University Act of 1989. The University provides a multidisciplinary approach to higher education. The five districts under the jurisdiction of Assam University have as many as 51 undergraduate colleges. Assam University is a teaching cum affiliating University catering to more than 4000 students.

The growth of technical education, on the other hand, has been a slow and gradual process. It must be noted that the focus of higher education in Assam by and large had limited scope for focus on technical education. The Assam Engineering Institute was established on 16th January 1948 as one of the premier institution in the North East catering the needs of technical manpower in various fields of engineering. It started as society run entity and continues to do so<sup>12</sup>. The Assam Engineering College was established in 1955, the first under graduate engineering college in North-Eastern India. It started with Civil Engineering, and within a few years other departments came into existence.

There are at present three Engineering Colleges in Assam. At lower level there are Polytechnic Institutes of which one is for women, Two Junior technical institutes and 27 ITIs in the state. Presently the Assam Engineering Institute admits students for three years Diploma in Civil, Mechanical, Electrical, Electronics & Telecommunication, Chemical and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aei.org.in/index.html> , accessed on 21.07.12 at 6.00 p.m.

Computer Engineering Department with total capacity of 240 students<sup>13</sup>. A post polytechnic Diploma course on computer application is also being offered with intake capacity of 30 students. All the courses are under the state council for Technical Education, Assam and recognized by All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE).

The enrollment in technical education has been increasing over the years. The enrollment has reached 1545 in 2010-11 in as many as 29 disciplines. At degree level (government) the enrollment is 975. At degree (government and public) level the enrollment is 2421 while at degree (government, public, and private) level, the enrollment is 4151. This shows that there has been some choice for students in terms of their preferences in higher education in Assam. And this is precisely what the present study explores and provides a sociological context to such an environment of choice in higher education. The study aims to explore primarily as to how the students determine the choices in terms of their (1) Streams of study; and (2) Institutions/colleges.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.aei.org.in/index.html> , accessed on 21.07.12 at 6.00 p.m

**Table 1.3: Enrollment of Students in Technical Education 2010-11**

<b>Technical Education in Assam: Annual Intake of Diploma and Degree Courses</b>				
<b>Courses</b>	<b>Diploma</b>	<b>Degree [Govt]</b>	<b>Degree [Govt+pub]</b>	<b>Degree [Govt+Pub+Priv]</b>
Civil Engineering	520	165	275	395
Mechanical Engineering	210	150	352	652
Industrial & Production Engineering		20	20	20
Auto Engineering	60			
Electrical Engineering	220	150	240	240
Electrical and Telecommunication Engineering		60	60	60
Electrical and Electronics Engineering				240
Electrical and Instrumentation Engineering			60	60
Instrumentation Engineering	40	50	110	110
ETC	150	60	220	340
Applied Electronics & Engineering				60
Electronics & Com Engineering			142	472
Power Electronics Engineering		60	60	60
Computer Science & Engineering	110	80	342	642
Computer Engineering		60	45	165
Information Technology			130	190
Chemical Engineering	35	60	60	60
Chemical Process Control		60	60	60
Petroleum Engineering			100	100
Textile Technology	30			
Textile Chemistry & Design	30			
Garment Technology	20			
Fashion Technology	20			
Modern Office Mgt	40			
Arch Asstt	40			80
Agri Engineering	20		30	30
Food Processing Technology			60	60
Food Engineering			15	15
Biotechnology			40	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>1545</b>	<b>975</b>	<b>2421</b>	<b>4151</b>

Source: Directorate of Technical Education, Assam, 2010-11;

<http://online.assam.gov.in:8080/education-in-assam> , accessed on 23.07.12 at 2.00 p.m.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine whether students exercise choice in selecting a course / area of study and the institution in higher education.
2. To study how choices are reflective of socio-economic background variables such as parental occupation, educational level, ethnic and gender background.
3. To understand the differences in the way students from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities and gender, exercise their choices and preferences.

### **Rationale for the study**

The present study has been undertaken at Guwahati city in Kamrup Metro District of Assam. There are a few reasons for undertaking the study within the geographical confines of the state of Assam. First, although Assam finds mention in various research studies of political science, economics (for instance, Lyndem and De, 2004; Saikia, 2005), within the sociology in general and sociology of education in particular, studies on higher education are literally nil or none. Assam has not been the focus of much research within sociology of education in India that could have concentrated on the diverse education. Partly blame lies with the underdevelopment of sociology subject in this region itself that discourages undertaking educational studies.

With the dawn of twentieth first century, the social, economy and cultures of urban spaces are immediately and directly influenced by globalization in the context of consumption patterns and tastes, whether education, fashion, architecture, media and new forms of material culture (Clammer, 2003; Yeoh, 2005). In India and in Assam, education structure, particularly higher education has adapted to the changing situations that has enabled to carry out macro research on inequality and quality. Micro researches like choice in higher education have been carried out in a limited way or are none. Thus, the paucity of literature on higher education choices in the context of Assam provides a clear rationale for the current study.

Another reason for studying Assam relates to the region's sub-culture within India. India is a land of unity in diversity with 28 states and seven union territories. This sub-continent is home to a heterogeneous population distinguished by diverse languages, traditions, life-styles, food habits and customs. Any aspects of these societies are important themes for research including the choice in higher education as virtually every region or state has its own organization of education system. In this context, the higher education choice of young students, considering gender, ethnicity in Assam is an important aspect of study.

## **Methodology**

The main purpose of the study has been to explore the experiences of young undergraduate students from four areas / streams of study in terms of their choices of courses and colleges. Besides gender and ethnicity, the study looks at elements of class to study to effects of socio-economic status on the way students make choices. Class is anticipated to have had an impact on student's choices cutting across gender and ethnicity<sup>14</sup>. The study research is designed to explore empirically how these students make choice of higher education.

The study employed following instruments for data selection: Semi-structured Interview Schedule for students with both open and closed ended questions on the specific research questions. The field study was carried out between the months of October - November, 2011 and April – May , 2012. There were two visits to the field. The first visit to the field could not be satisfactorily completed due to methodological deficiencies and the college schedules. The second visit became a necessity. Nonetheless, the researcher made an

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<sup>14</sup> Class, caste and tribe are considered to be an existing system of social stratification in Assam. But they were not considered to be important variables in the analysis of students' choices. Nonetheless, data on caste and scheduled tribes was sought implicitly as a contingent variable and through this it is possible to confirm the percentage of students making choice in higher education irrespective of caste and tribe. Although it is true to say that the majority of the students questioned come from an upper caste background , it is also true that a sizeable percentage of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are represented among the students.

attempt to visit the colleges, located in Guwahati, the city considered to be the gateway of the North East India.

We have identified students for the study based on areas of study in cutting across different educational institutions within the state of Assam, namely the Henry Cotton College, B. Baruah College, Gauhati Commerce College, and Assam Engineering College. These institutions have been selected because these institutions are the prime ones in respective fields of study in Assam and in the North East. Since the study aimed to understand the choice of students in higher education, the emphasis was placed in interacting with students who would be from four areas of study.

### **Sample selection:**

For the study, sampling procedure selected was ‘non-probability purposive sampling. Twenty students each from four streams of higher education, namely, engineering, sciences, commerce and the liberal arts were chosen. Special attempt was made to select equal number men and women students in from each of these streams.

Following example would help us to understand the pattern of choice making and the rationale for selection of the sample. For instance, a student of mathematics in the 10+2 would aim to go for engineering or pure sciences or any other degree programme at the under-graduate level. A student of engineering may aim to get into IITs or NITs or state level/ university colleges of engineering or the private colleges or to a college/ institution outside the state as well. Similarly a student aspiring for medicine may aim to get into the AIIMS or State University Colleges of medicine or private colleges in the state or outside of the state. Since it is difficult to track and access students who are studying outside the state, this study focused on only those who are currently studying within the state of Assam. But, the study attempted to examine if some of the responses of students cover the different types or degrees of choice.

## **Interview Schedule**

One of the first tasks of the research process included the design of an appropriate interview schedule with respect to the research questions. The questions were designed to be comprehensive, mainly with close-ended questions but also to include a few open-ended questions where possible.

The schedule was divided into three sections. The first section was devised to generate the background information of the respondents and their family status. For this purpose 9 questions were framed, most were close-ended. The second section was to generate data regarding the choice of courses post higher secondary. The final section was related to the choice of colleges. Before going to the field, in order to validate the interview schedule, a pilot survey was conducted among few students belonging to Assam on the JNU campus. However, on second visit, the interview schedule was reframed and changed accordingly making it more flexible with suggestions from my supervisor.

## **Recording of interviews**

Consent was sought from potential participants and those electing to participate to use the data purely for academic and research purposes. None of the interviews refused to have their interviews tape recorded. The importance of recording in-depth interview is well established (Longhurst, 2003; Valentine, 1997). Also, tape recording the interview rather than taking notes allowed me to gain a rapport with the interviewee throughout each interview by the use of encouraging phrases, comments and eye contact. The rapport was achieved in part by my ability to speak other Indian languages such as Hindi and English, in addition to native Assamese. Nevertheless, I did not restrict the respondents in using standard language like English and they were free to speak in their vernacular (native) language. However, all of the respondents were comfortable speaking in either mother tongue or in English.



After recording the interviews, the next step was to transcribe them. Since the interviews were in native (Assamese) language as well as Hindi, so while transcribing each of these interviews into English; every effort was made to make a full literal translation of the same instead of summarizing it.

Further, time was an important constraint in the conduct of the interviews. Most of the respondents were students attending full-time classes. That is, whether it is the 'time' taken out of a class or during a break in between their classes or during the lunch break, it is always 'time' away from study/work or from peer socialization. Therefore, after arranging the time, date and place for the interview, the researcher had to keep the interviews as brief as possible, as she did not want to lose any quality data. On average, the length of each interview was in between forty five minutes to one hour.

## **Chapterisation**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Introduction forms the first chapter. It comprises of the review of literature on higher education choices and it gives an account of the higher education in Assam. It also describes the objectives, methodology and its limitations. The second chapter provides a theoretical background to the study. Chapter three provides a description of the social background of the students included in the study. Chapter four makes an analysis of students' choice of courses and colleges. The chapter four analyses the dimensions of course and college choices in terms of various socio-economic background variables. Finally, chapter five provides a summary and conclusions of the study.

## Chapter 2

### **Credentialism and Higher Education Choices: Theoretical Framework**

Higher education as a source of mobility has contextual significance. The credentials generated by higher education achievement and the subsequent acquisition of jobs through it have multidimensional aspects. The credentials may be achieved in accordance with one's status or without any status; credential may enable increased occupational and social mobility in terms of income and prestige in society. Credentialism is thus determined by multiple factors of social, economic, political, cultural and economic which vary in time and space. It is this credentialism that drives those seeking higher education to opt, prioritise and seek those areas of knowledge and the institutions that may offer them better life chances, social status and prestige. In order to study the issue of higher education choices the study explores the Weberian and neo-Weberian notions of credentialism as a theoretical framework. The chapter also presents the relevance of credentialism for studying higher education attainments and choices; it also discusses the limitations of such a perspective and the conflicting theories of that stand in contrast to the Weberian or neo-Weberian perspectives.

#### **Credentialism and the Weberian Perspective**

The study of education using the methods of Weber enables us to combine the voluntarism of phenomenology and its important stress on the subjective meaning of social action, with the structural constraints on social action which are emphasised in functionalism and some kinds of Marxism. Such situations led to development of new sociology of education, in which Weberian perspective has been included to analyse the education system. The arguments for the use of neo-Weberian perspectives in sociology in general have been made most persuasively by Collins<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Collins, R. (1975). *Conflict Sociology*. London, Academic Press. Neo-Weberian sociology takes into account developments since Weber's death in 1920.

There are certain mechanisms for allocating people to jobs and it is prevalent in all kinds of societies, and credentialism or educational degrees is considered to be one such mechanism. By credentialism, it is meant, the necessity for individuals to hold certain educational credentials, usually formal degrees or certificates, in order to obtain particular kinds of employment. Such a mechanism leads to monopolisation of access to more rewarding jobs and economic opportunities by the holders of educational degrees and certificates. Though the classical origins of credentialing theory are traced to Weber's work, it was resurrected, against prevailing individualistic, economic accounts of education and jobs as decidedly a social and political theory.

The taproot of credentialing theory lies in Weber's stratification analysis, specifically Weber's treatment of education-based status-group domination. However, Weberian credentialing theory has some accordance with the Marxian analysis – the association of power with educational credentials and struggles between groups, not individuals, are central to understanding credential inflation. Difference with Marxian analysis lies on the issue of manipulating the educational system by several (not just one, as in Marxian notion) groups which, and that the capitalists are often losers in this set-up, especially with regards to higher level degrees (Brown, 2001, pp. 21-22).

Elaborating his perspective, Weber (1922/1978) observed:

“The elaboration of diplomas from universities, business and engineering colleges, and the universal clamor for the creation of further educational certificates in all fields serve the formation of a privileged stratum in bureaus and in offices (that serves to) limit the supply of candidates for these positions and to monopolize them for the holders of educational patents” (p. 1000).

Weber traces historically the nature of credentialism in China with the operation of the Confucian examination system which was based on the mastery of esoteric texts that granted administrative offices, rather than on technical competence. Another dimension of

educational credentialism put forth by Weber (1920-21/1958) was admittance to sectarian religious communities and the various forms of economic and political credit that one afforded were predecessors to the formalized educational credential requirements for employment in the modern era.

Weber's ideal type like status group had initial linkage to such *traditional* status groupings as pre-modern European estates and Indian castes, where religion, law and morality reinforced socio-cultural strata. However, he also mentioned briefly, a different type of status inequalities and groupings, namely, those emerging out of educational, occupational-professional and bureaucratic hierarchies in the processes of rationalization and the spread of "credentialism"<sup>16</sup>.

The formation of a privileged stratum in job market becomes possible with universal demand for educational certificates in all fields. Such certificates support their holders' claim for intermarriages with notable families, claims to adhere to "codes of honour"... claims for a "respectable" remuneration rather than remuneration for work well done, claims for assured advancement and old-age insurance and, above all, claims to monopolise social and economically advantageous positions (Weber, 1958: 241- 42).

With credentialising occupations, it is not only possible to legitimize socio-cultural conventions (backed by values), but also enables to secure sponsorship of large organizations, principally with states' willingness. Such process, as it is claimed, plays a crucial factor in their social reproduction and their capacity to give rise to distinct social strata, operating in the secular, legal-rational context and the liberal ideology of equal opportunity cum merit.

In modern times, the work demand for credentialism and technical competence may be different from the educational credentials viewed by Weber, which was cultural-political construction of competence and organizational loyalty. Educational credentials

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<sup>16</sup> This is a point subsequently elaborated by Harold Perkin (1989) and Frank Parkin (1979).

and the status-honour attached to its holder become institutionalised consciously, unconsciously, rationally-irrationally. Instances have been cited like self-interested occupational groups (e.g., physicians or journalists), organizational recruiters (e.g., the higher civil service), school authorities, and governmental over-seers unlike the Marxian structuralist theories of education where the capitalists, with minimal opposition, manipulate the educational system to their ideological and economic advantage.

A new scenario was developed with the revival of Weber's credentialing theory by the work of Collins (1971, 1979, 1981), which was about credential stratification. Collins's (Ben-David and Collins, 1966) early work on intellectual markets and his critique of structural-functional models of education (1971) laid the groundwork for *The Credential Society* (1979), which became the seminal work in analyzing the modern educational system, particularly in America. Some aspects of the book deal with the politics of educational credentialing being dominated by status-groups, who are "concerned with the accumulation of cultural capital and social exclusion". In this book, Collins argued that status-groups, "concerned with the accumulation of cultural capital and social exclusion" dominate the politics of educational credentialing.

In another article, "*Credential inflation and the future of Universities*", Collins (2002) argues further that the expansion of the educational system "palliates the problem of class conflict in the United States by holding out the prospect of upward mobility somewhere down the line, while making the connection remote enough to cover the system's failure to deliver" (p. 20). Furthermore, he argues that, in a poor job-market, colleges play the role of a "hidden welfare system," delaying the entrance of people into the job market, while supporting them with student loans and work-study programs (ibid.). Quoting Weber's view, he held that in the modern world educational qualifications are being used to 'limit the supply of candidates' for 'socially and economically advantageous positions', and to monopolise such positions 'for the holders of educational patents'<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Collins, *The Credential Society* (Academic Press, New York, 1979), p.vii.

Contextualizing in contemporary America of his times, Collins believes that the system of educational credentials had developed as a way to occupational opportunities. But the occupational opportunities of lucrative nature are monopolized by the holders of the appropriate credentials of certain occupational groups. As pointed out by Collins, the rise of credentialism in the United States did not develop as a result of economic changes. Before the rise of credentialism the American economy was more controlled and in fact credentialism developed later in the backdrop of multiethnic conflict. The various ethnic / cultural groups used education to suit their own purposes with establishment of various educational institutions. With a chance of attaining the highest social positions through occupation, American schools thus came to form a unified hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> There was imitation of each other's programmes, whereby the content of education became less and less important. Further, the pursuit of academic and professional qualifications had also consequences on social stratification.

As argued, the principal beneficiaries of the credential system have been the professions and those who work in the expanded bureaucracies of industry, government, education and the trade unions. On professions, Collins takes the view that the lucrative professions by the use of educational credentials have closed their ranks and upgraded their salaries, and it has been in imitation of their methods that other occupations have "professionalized"<sup>19</sup>. Further, he believed that occupations in modern bureaucracies form the sinecure sector of the modern economy which are well rewarded, permanent and involve little effort or work. Such occupations are "the work put into creating or defending conditions to avoid work."<sup>20</sup>

Further, he argues that the educational credentials which had same value at one time whether acquisition of academic and professional certificates has transformed into credential crisis in the wake of market forces of supply and demand. Besides dissimilarity in 'pay off' for individuals, there is also contrast between supply and demand. Further he

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.93.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.129.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.57.

argued that the accumulation of cultural capital and social exclusion, are the consequences of the struggles and the resultant occupational monopolies rather than with meritocratic competition for school-taught technical skills that are "needed" in jobs.

Although Collins has generally pointed to the internal dynamics of credentialing systems (schools and workplaces) as the source of credential crises, some market-related crises may actually be forestalled by state intervention. His status competition model was the specific point of departure for Brown's (1995) *Degrees of Control* and Murphy's (1988) *Social Closure* was a major influence on many other discussions of credentialing processes ( Kingston, 1981; Labaree, 1988, 1997; Parkin, 1979).

### **Trends Conflicting Weberian Credentialism**

Within the sociological analysis, debates confronting the credentialism theory have also emerged gradually. Yet other than them, the economic interpretation of credentialism also holds importance in the process of comparison. In the mid-twentieth century, human capital theories, being predominant tend to focus on the individual as the source of higher demand for educational credentials. The prevailing notion was that people choose to invest in "human capital" (loosely defined as job skills) in order to make themselves more attractive to prospective employers (Brown, 2001, p. 22). There developed two parallel theories within the human capital framework in 1970s - educational signaling theories saw students "as engaging in 'defensive' degree posturing in labor market queues; that is, they sought to keep from losing ground relative to degree holders" (Brown, 2001, p. 22). On the other hand, employers' needs to narrow down large pools of applicants and make predictions about future employees' capacity for productivity was focused by "filtering" and "screening" theories.

Some of the scholars in Marxian perspective have striven to show the linkages where corporate capitalists controlling the economic market for material production also control other economic markets (e.g., labor markets and financial markets), along with

dominating cultural production, and monopolizing politics. The subsequent Marxian critiques of education, led by early socialists, such as Veblen (1918; 1975) and Sinclair (1922) voiced against capitalist ownership and control of universities through trustees who were members of the business elite. According to Marxian theorists, social group, particularly the business elite, are driven and benefitted from credential inflation, i.e., educational degrees are about power. With technical innovations, as argued, there is “deskilled” workplace. Education, as a result, does not deal with the skills learning that are useful on the job, rather education teaches workers to be good capitalists.

Gramsci's (1928; 1971) propagation of the idea about schools as centers for the production of cultural hegemony, had influence in the recent followers of Marxian arguments. To them capitalists manipulate the content of schooling to create docility in the labor force (Brown, 2001, p.21). Here, corporate philanthropy is seen as a key vehicle in the implementation of Taylorism and related capitalist ideologies in schools (Arnone, 1980; Barrow, 1990; Callahan, 1962). In Bowles and Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) and Apple's *Education and Power* (1982), there are explorations about capitalists' infiltration of education and their forging of a match between exploitative school and work cultures.

In Marxian perspectives, compulsory education and neo-compulsory credential requirements for work merely serve to pacify the masses (Hogan, 1996). The “deskilling” of jobs through technical innovations proletarianize workers, leaving education a void of its true historical function as a repository of marketable skills and expertise for workers (Braverman, 1974). As argued, in capitalist system credentials through education are of no utility in the interest of workers.

Unlike the Marxian arguments, in the Weberian perspective, educational degrees, particularly of higher level, have a powerful role. In the process, they are manipulated by a variety of occupational groups and educators, often to the detriment of capitalists'



desires (e.g., where degrees limit labor market supply and drive up the price of labor or give workers greater control over the politics of work itself).

In the mid-20th century, the structural-functional theories have had a positive notion about the interdependence between education and the economy, where the educational expansion provided job skills for increasing technical sophistication in employment. Meanwhile, microeconomic theory developed a complementary model of hyper-individualistic decision making, in which people chose to increase their investment in school-taught "human capital" (job skills) to maximize opportunities for selection by employers who valued productive capacities (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). However, the dominant thrust of sociological analysis, status attainment research, sought to explain large-scale, stratified, social outcomes within the individualist rubric of rational choice theory (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Sewell and Hauser, 1975).

Several important early studies of the limits of education-based mobility presaged the outpouring of critical research (Clark, 1961; Turner, 1960; Wilensky, 1964) about the accepted economic value of schooling for job performance, particularly in late 1960s and 1970s. A study by Berg (1971) about firms' recruitment of graduates held that the selections were irrational employers' preferences for credentials which had little or no relationship to employees' productivity. The outcome was the "overeducated" youths, warehoused in schools where they often bore the brunt of the oscillating effects of the over- or underproduction of specific types of degrees (Freeman, 1976). Dore (1976) also while putting forth the over education idea had led to a critique of global modernization efforts. It assumed that through exporting to the Third World Western educational models would help in increasing economic growth.

In similar ways, others argued that schools and educational practices were "loosely coupled" systems with structures that were frequently copied in ritualistic fashion, and so failed to match up with the exigencies of new environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Both Boudon (1974) and Jencks et al. (1972) challenged the purportedly positive effects

of further education on persistent social inequalities, arguing that economic reforms would be more consequential in eradicating social differences than would increasing educational opportunities. The study bearing radical orientation like Illich (1970) called for the "deschooling" of society. In fact, the scenario prevailing in this period was about the faith regarding the credentials of education system that led to massive debates.

One may argue that Weber may have underestimated the fragmenting power of rationalization (and the accompanying forces of occupational differentiation and egalitarian ideologies) to erode established social conventions and status distances, including those engendered in social classes and traditional estates. He also underestimated the capacity of education to become an autonomous source of status distinction. Socio-cultural class theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, reputation stratificationists such as Edward Shils, human capital theorists such as Gary Becker, and students of post industrialism such as Daniel Bell, also noted the impact of education on inequality and stratification. To all of them, the relevance in occupational allocation is associated the endowment of skills through the source of education, further determined through the market mechanism.

Unlike Weber in particular, both Bourdieu and Bell sees an independent role of education as a potent source of social esteem and a legitimator of privilege in liberal capitalism. Rather than the source of mere marketable skills, education (higher and certified education in particular) derives special status from its privileged role as "knowledge supplier". Education, especially higher education, on being articulated as the universalistic "meritocratic principle" of achievement, marked by lifestyles of intellectual pursuits is inherent, also reinforced by the dominant liberal ideology that identifies education with merit.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Educational categories become not only important status positions but also potent matrices of social formation – a fact confirmed by the strength of educational homogeneity, friendship networks and political mobilization (King, Ronald, 1980)

To Frank Parkin, credentialism which is monopolized is a form of ‘exclusionary closure’. It attempts to close off social and economic opportunities and rewards to ‘outsiders’. In modern capitalist societies, property ownership as another form of exclusion restricts access to the benefits of industrial production. The basis of such closure in Communist states is party membership, and in countries which practice apartheid it is race.<sup>22</sup>

The empirical relationship between educational attainment and credentials with socioeconomic attainment is well established, but why this relationship arises remains in doubt<sup>23</sup>. There are complexities involved while tracing the social and historical roots of educational credentialism. After examining the historical records from 1870 to 1930, Brown (1995) wrote in conclusion: “Credentialism was produced by several factors, including educators’ conscious (and sometimes unwitting) expansion of higher education, changes in labor market recruitment patterns, and other circumstances with less direct bearing on job training, such as land speculation interests tied to college-founding and the initial absence of government regulation of education” (p.xvii). The overview of the development and intellectual context of credentialing theory prepares the way for more in-depth consideration of several key issues in the perspective.

Most societies are moving towards credential-based systems of social selection. The changes brought by credentialism are of complex nature. Studies like Berkley shows the kinds of changes being typical over three generations, i.e., more white –collar jobs and higher educational requirements, but not necessarily more economic security in recent years. Claude Fischer and his colleagues (1996:208-9) in their study of three generations of different times shows the relationship between educational and income level. The person from the first generation in his times, a school dropout had a stable job. His son with higher educational level had higher status and was economically more advanced than the father during his times. His grandson although highly educated had no well-secured

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<sup>22</sup> Parkin, F (1979), *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, ch.4.

<sup>23</sup> Bills B. David. (2003). Credentials, Signals, and Screens: Explaining the Relationship Between Schooling and Job Assignment , *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 73, No. 4, pp. 441–46.

job and was working in lower position unlike his father at the same age during his time. Therefore, higher educational credentials are important only in certain spheres of the job structure. Some people without educational qualifications continue to start successful small business (Steinmetz and Wright, 1989). Some studies like Bailey and Waldinger (1991) shows access to jobs in quite a few skilled trades (e.g., plumber or electrician) is regulated more by family networks than by formal training structures.

Some jobs that are not very intellectually demanding and prestigious also requires higher education degrees as credentialism advanced such as a health records technician degree from a community college has become necessary for those helping in keeping track of their patient, doctor and insurance records. Such works were earlier learned while helping, but now prior to joining, two years of post secondary study in the field has become mandatory.<sup>24</sup>

It is argued that the notion of credentialism over the years has developed in the backdrop of various aspects like nation building, economic development and so on. In the United States, the competitive, decentralized educational system gave rise to the first modern version of mass tertiary credentialism. The U.S. system is, at least nominally, a "contest" or "tournament" mobility arrangement, in which all individuals participate in the same forms of education and one, must succeed at one level to advance to the next (Rosenbaum, 1976; Turner, 1960).

Other nations developed similar arrangements somewhat later, in many cases by way of initially more centralized, governmental directives (Archer, 1979). Over the 20th century, mass education at the primary and secondary levels became a worldwide institution that was closely linked to ideologies of nation building (Fuller and Rubinson, 1992; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal, 1992; Meyer et al., 1979). The effects of lower-level educational expansion on economic productivity have been inconsistent, and the

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<sup>24</sup> Brint, Steven (1998), *Social Selection: Opportunity*, p.178-179, Schools and Societies, Pine Forge Press, London

expansion of higher education has had practically no relationship to economic growth (Benevot, 1992; Walters and Rubinson, 1984).

So the apex of evolutionary educational hierarchies' results with an expanding "educational welfare state" that helps in averting chronic unemployment crises. It is also related to status group credentialism, i.e., defensive credentialing, middle-level technical-vocational certification, and lower-level mass literacy education. In the literature there are debates regarding the utility of credentialism, i.e., degrees in terms of its content and meaning. Though the economic argument specifies technical skills oriented degrees as productive in workplaces, the problem is with the assessment of precise economic meaning of skill. Some literature like Spenner (1983) dealt with the underlying problems in the mismatch between people endowed with particular skills contrasting positions actually requiring specific skills.

It is argued that the contrast between the nature of skills and criteria required for jobs are outcomes of organizational politics, as suggested by Bourdieu (1996). In the study done by Miller and Rosenbaum (1997), the high school graduates are hired by the employers on the basis of interviews or personal contacts despite their educational qualifications.

In sharp contrast to the technically efficacious view of skills, credentialing theorists highlight cultural and political aspects of skills as "monopolizable" claims of competence that are not directly tied to productivity. To Collins (1971) schools seldom teach specific job skills and, in concurrence with Berg (1971), held that employers do not do a good job of assessing skill competencies, because on-the-job training works better for learning specific skills. Murphy (1988) had contended that access to on-the-job training is monopolized by educational credentials. When educational skills are valued by employers, as suggested by Brown (1995), general language and communications skills are desired primarily. In fact, the abilities themselves are deeply embedded in exclusionary language cultural codes of the sort also noted by Bernstein (1971-75).

Bourdieu's (1988, 1996) and Bourdieu and Passerson's (1977) work on cultural capital and Cookson and Persell's (1985) study of elite preparatory schools had showcased a similar cultural competencies in language and social rituals induced by education that flow in restricted social networks and lead to differential economic capital.

The significance of credentials in ensuring compliance, particularly when workers' autonomy is pronounced, is a much-over-looked matter. Discretionary positions in private and public sector bureaucracies favor the recruitment of trust-worthy, credentialed workers who have been steeped in appropriate organizational cultures that schools or, more precisely, disciplines emulate (e.g., the ethos of business, technical, scientific, aesthetic, and public relations work) (Brown 1995; DiPreto, 1989; Kingston and Clawson, 1990).

As argued by Weber (1922/1978), under conditions of social uncertainty credentials are a form of social credit that symbolically facilitates exchanges. Members' trustworthiness and its certification by a group are to underestimate individuals' malfeasance that may threaten the legitimate authority of the entire credentialing body. Employers' selection of similar others thus ties trust to larger alliances of authority (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). As observed by Shapiro (1987), schools are "agencies for the production of agents"; i.e., they produce graduates who work as fiduciaries. Further, other guarantors of trust that emerges are chains of organizational surveillance and certification, as in the case of the historical development of educational accrediting associations (Wechsler, 1977) and in the general proliferation of surveillance and testing practices surrounding employment (Foucault, 1977; Hanson, 1993; Nock, 1993).

The increasing homogeneity of schooling - the formal rationalization of education - has been the object of much discussion (Kamens, 1977; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Murphy, 1988; Weber, 1922/1978). Credential routinization is a critical part of this process. Weber himself recognized that part of the significance of formal rules of organizations is the ability of these rules to obscure the substantive bases of social power

relationships. The formal nature of educational degrees or standardized degrees enables degree holders to claim competence and also obscuring the substantive bases of social power relationships, with institutionalization of educational credentials.

The formal abstractions representing and standardizing educational credentials like 3 credit or holder of MBA degree are also determined by relevant parties like former teachers examining and questioning particular areas of graduates' competence and loyalty, that determines the recruitment and promotion criteria. So, the educational standardization process is itself embodied in myriad of difficulties (Beadie, 1999; Wechsler, 1977). Bourdieu's (1984, 1988, 1996) and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) understanding of the symbolic role of credentials in social reproduction stresses this same formal character of degrees, in contrast to actual abilities or proclivities.

The criteria for recruitment in labour markets also vary with specific organizational politics like bureaucratic and professional, with a range of intermediary types. In bureaucratic hierarchies, two basic forms of social control are associated with educational credentials. The lower-level credentialed bureaucratic positions is linked to credentials "signal" (as economists from the signaling school would have argued) technical competence in performing routine tasks such as those having high school diplomas; technical education certificates; and, to an increasing extent, lower-prestige college and university degrees. The authority of credentials for placement in lower levels of bureaucracies may be incomplete, and further non-educational forms of assurance commonly supplement, or even supplant, preferences for degree holders (Bills, 1992). The second kind of credential based bureaucratic position is associated with more compliance and loyalty of particular positions, when structurally induced doubts about performance exist, and/or when it is difficult to monitor performance in these jobs by other means (Etzioni, 1961; Kantor, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Zucker, 1986).

It is argued that in professional labor market, professional mobility is thus a collective, rather than an individual pursuit (Larson, 1977; Parkin, 1979) determined by

self-recruitment and self-regulation. In order to control the recruitment process and to legitimate labor market monopolies in private practice and across professional work in firms (rather than as individual promotional criteria within internal labor markets), standardized degrees are employed by professional groups.

As Murphy (1988) noted, the individualistic pursuit of credentials that idealizes skills is an occupational "class" utilization of degrees, in contrast to collectivist, professional status-group monopolies that infuse credentials with obscured culture. There is more self-regulation with professionals having more direct control over the production, distribution and so on, with minimal accountability to external parties. Within a particular professional group like in health care there is competition over the jurisdiction of practices having distinctive formal educational qualifications such as physicians, nurses, psychiatrists and so on (Abbott, 1988). The cultures of professions, including their public ideologies, also vary across sectors of professional employment (e.g., business, applied science, human services, government, and culture industries) (Brint, 1994).

### **Relevance of Credentialism**

The global economy, market forces, competition, and increasing completion rates of secondary and postsecondary education in contemporary times may well have created reliance on qualifications, and the qualification escalation phenomenon, which has been labelled as 'credentialism', discussed by Dore (1976, 1997) in his influential book, *The Diploma Disease* (1976). In *Qualifications Use for Recruitment in the Australian Labour Market* (Keating et al., 2005), it was demonstrated that VET qualifications are commonly recognised by employers. The report suggests that most employers prefer vocational education and training to university qualifications; and that VET qualifications appear to score more highly in the categories of job stability, reduced training, job skills and general skills (p. 27). However, such phenomenon has its contextual significance.



Many studies have shown that credentialism discriminates against people who have capabilities to do jobs, like those possessing degrees. The economic resources to obtain the required credential might act as an obstacle for the capables. In other studies, it is shown that for some jobs education may be a disqualification, example aloof and cerebral psychoanalysts may do less good for patients than untrained people who are able to show empathy and act like understanding friends (Hogan, 1979)<sup>25</sup>. In another argument, credentialism is usually considered unnecessary and continues primarily because people in positions look at highly educated people as similar to themselves, as a kind of cultural kin (Collins, 1979, chaps.1-3). Credentials must therefore be unrelated to job performance. Neither course knowledge nor grades in schools are more modestly correlated, if at all, with success in work life ( Capelli, 1992; Dye and Reck, 1989).

Another crucial argument is related to nature of educational credentials, i.e., public financed educational credentials are more valuable or the private financed educations, which also determines the relevance of their curriculum in the job market in general and acquiring particular job positions.

### **Indian Context**

Credentialism in India today directly feeds into cadre-creation for the global economy as a whole, in response to the economic restructuring and de-regulation. Though literature is scanty in the Indian context, some studies suggest that educational credentialism has increased because of the cultural opportunity and caste privilege that becomes neutralized through “merit” based state rewards conferred on the educated middle class. If earlier the resource movement effect was for trained middle-class doctors and engineers to enter the civil services (Beteille, 2003); in recent years, it is the engineering graduates in particular, or move to management, software and financial services irrespective of the technical ‘stream’ they have trained in (Joseph and Harilal, 2001). Such phenomena is experienced differently in different parts of India.

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in “ Schools and Societies” by Steven Brint (1998), p.179.

The inequalities generated by educational credentialism could be seen in the upsurge of demands by particular ethnic groups for more opportunities for themselves to acquire credentials, with rhetoric of socialist-egalitarian notion or ethnic cultural nationalism. For instance, in India, certain regions have become volatile due to multiple of factors. And regions like northeast, where ethnic diversities and relative deprivation has propelled various demands, among them educational credential stands significant, in Collins terms, a kind of patronage credentialism or ethnic-patrimonial credentialism could be experienced. In recent years, the upsurge in violence between the upwardly mobile Meena, a Scheduled Tribe of Rajasthan, and the Gujjars, demanding quota for acquiring value-added technology training and lucrative careers , created recently in the middle *castes* (the Other Backward Castes or OBC's), shows the modern nexus between caste and class privilege. Such incident also indicates that education credential could lead to conflictual situations between groups.

M.S.A Rao (1985) observed that the education system function in the process of selection and differentiation among different groups. Educational credentials functions in consonance with economic, social, cultural and political structure. The demand for IT degree in India was started in 1980 during the time when the nation was gearing towards higher economic growth. Since then IT professions has become one of the demandable carriers with the expansion of the knowledge economy. Yet the access of IT educational degree is not uniform across regions and groups from diverse socio-economic background. Although with modern education system, an open sphere to all groups could be seen but accessibility issue still governed by social, economic, cultural and political factors.

Gender dimension of credentialism is another crucial dimension. Yet some studies undertaken in states like Kerala show some positive correlation between higher educational credential and higher position women were acquiring in the job market. But this is only a part of the explanation displaying gender equality, as the larger social reality

continues to be of complex nature as the demand for higher credential in the job market restricts the entry of capable women. Specialized "professional" and "technical" activities are reserved for separate labor pools by the same means. Thus it is not only ethnic and sexual segregation that produces "dual labor markets" (Edwards et al., 1975), but above all educational requirements that have become built into the definitions of "positions" themselves.

### **Summary**

Thus, the credentialing theory, with Weber being its proponent and its gradual development over a period by the neo-Weberians like Collins, Frank Parkins, etc., enables us to explore the dynamic nature of the education system. The social reality today in higher education that it is this credentialism that drives the parents and students to choose a particular course and a particular institution for the enhancement of their prestige, status and access to employment market.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Socio-Economic Background of Students**

#### **Introduction**

Socio-economic background includes social as well as economic factors which may be known in various ways, as for instance, 'social class', 'family background', 'home environment', etc. in sociological literature. Infact, it is constituted by a vector of measurable social and economic variables, such as parental schooling, occupational status, or income, along with race, caste, ethnicity, family size and structure, and geographic location. It is, thus, a broad term which includes those factors which are external to the educational system, but influences the educational prospects of the learner.

#### **Review of Literature**

There are a number of studies which relate socio-economic status of students in higher education to access, achievement, performance, etc., (Wolfe, 1961; Sewell and Shah, 1968; Violato and Travis, 1990; etc). The question of who goes to college has been one of the perpetual aspects of enquiry for sociologists of higher education across the world. According to many of them, the relationship is not just an issue of social indicators such as gender, cultural background, geographic location, caste, ethnic and religious background, but it is also the social class background of the students. A study by Violato and Travis (1990) of social background and the reasons for entering higher education through a sample of 583 students from the Canadian Universities shows that the student's socio-economic backgrounds were representative of the broader Canadian society, although slightly advantaged and most students were off springs of parents who had not attended university and their expectations of social interaction and material benefits led the list of reasons for entering higher education. Blackledge and Hunt (1985) observe that wherever children fail to take advantage of schooling, it can usually be traced to an unstable home social background.

Considering class dimension, Floud et al (1961) had noted that the social class of a child may either offset or reinforce a child's tendency to learn. As identified by them, a child's attitude towards education is likely to be favorable in accordance with good material conditions of family. On the other hand, a child from poor material conditions is more likely to be unfavorable to education. Mare (1980) argues that socio-economic status (SES) affects the likelihood of progressing from one education level to the next, except for the transition to post-baccalaureate study. Broadly, it was also noted that among college graduates, the conditional probability of continuing on to graduate school is largely unaffected by parental SES. Interestingly, the study by Mare (1980) suggests that the impact of parental SES on individual educational attainment ceases with the transition to postgraduate study. In support of Mare's claim, Stolzenberg (1994) found that graduate students tended to be "liberated" from their status origins. In the study by Dearden et al. (1997) and (1999), father's years of education, mother's years of education, birth order, type of school, father's occupation, and the financial state of the household were found to be significant in explaining completed years of school for both men and women.

In the Indian context, particularly in 1960s and 1980s, sociologists were preoccupied with contextual analysis of social background of students in institutions of higher learning. Some of these studies have focused on caste and its interrelation with occupational status and income of the father. Surveys were conducted on the social background of students belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Desai, 1966; Shah, 1961; Ahmad, 1974, Chitnis, 1977, etc.). In a study by Rao (1962) at University of Delhi, it was observed that the students came almost entirely from the middle and upper classes, and there were almost no graduates from the working classes or among the very poor of the middle classes. Shah (1961) found that the Hindu Gujarati male students of the University of Baroda largely belong to upper and middle socio-economic strata. In Mysore, Siva Kumar (1982) found that undergraduate women students from the upper strata had greater opportunities for higher education than those from the middle or lower social strata. Other research studies have also shown that the children of higher castes are able to take full advantage of educational opportunities (Shah, 1961; Sharma, 1979; Jayaram, 1987).

In some studies, the educational background of the family or father's occupation has been found to be significant. For instance, Karuna Ahmad (1974) found a predominance of university educated parents or at least fathers in her sample of undergraduate women students in Delhi. She found that an overwhelming majority of her sample women students came from families of senior administrative and managerial personnel, senior professionals, industrialists, etc. Similar observations have also been made of university students in Delhi (Khusro, 1967) and Baroda (Shah, 1961), medical students in Mysore (Sharadamma & Parvathamma, 1968). Rao (1997) found that higher education, specifically technical education, is urban based and caters mainly to the children of higher occupational status. The occupation of parents, or specifically of the father is found to be the most significant factor in influencing admission into higher education, because of its close relationship with education and income.

Thus, various studies suggest that the social background of the students exert influence on their route to higher education, either implicitly or explicitly. Further, the social class and ethnic and caste backgrounds of the students do not only influence the access of students into higher education but also their pathways within the higher education system. Firstly, the parental/familial social and economic background influenced the preparation of aspiring students into the post-secondary or tertiary sector of education. Secondly, it plays a vital role in the choices the students make in terms of the streams of higher education they choose and are ultimately able to realize or not realize the choices of courses. Thirdly, the socio-economic background comes to play a vital role in the way the students opt for various institution. Thus, the study explores before presenting the way the students responded to the questions of choice, their social and economic background which may help us understand the perceptions within a social context.

Perhaps, the very impact of socio-economic background of parents can also be extended to understand an individual's choice in higher education, be it subject choice or college choice. Socio-economic background may also be a source of dispositions in explaining choice of higher education and a significant number of studies have found that

parental occupational status structures educational and occupational choices. In a study by Munk (2011), it was found that children with higher parental occupations are more likely to choose an academic path while children with working class parents are more likely to choose a vocational education or no secondary education at all. However, in general, the study found that more parental education is associated with higher odds of choosing either academic or business/technical gymnasium. A father with high school education is almost three times more likely to have children enrolled in business/technical gymnasium than a father with only elementary education. Students having a father who graduated in vocational education are one and a half times more likely to enter an academic gymnasium, and two times more likely to enter a business/technical gymnasium, or then also one and a half times more likely to enter a vocational education(p.15).

There are also studies which explore the relationship between individual space and choices in higher education such as Ball et al (2001). In this study, using the concept of habitus, they documented experiential accounts of young students' choice of higher educational institutions, in terms of class position, ethnicity and gender. Therefore, socio-economic status may direct towards understanding of students' participation in higher education but it may also act as mediating factor when one relates to the choice dimension in higher education. Simply, choice in higher education may also be mediated by dispositions about one's socio-economic position.

In some of the earlier studies (Hearn, 1984; 1988), socio-economic variables such as parental educational level, parental occupation and family income- have been found to be strongly related to college choice. An early study based on a comparative socio-economic analysis of 18,378 prospective college students found that students from higher income homes were more likely to have given major consideration to the social opportunities available and they were also relatively more concerned with developing their intellect while students from less affluent homes were more concerned with vocational and professional training (Baird, 1967). Further, Flint (1992) reported that , “of the background characteristics, father's education and family income exhibit the strongest effects, such that

higher levels of education or family income are associated with higher levels of selectivity , degree offerings, and greater distance from home(pp.702-03).

However, it may be noted that there is no single uniform measure of individual or family socio-economic background. The variables most commonly identified in the literature for understanding socio-economic background of students comprises of parental education, parental occupation and family income. This chapter presents the differential socio economic backgrounds of students who were interviewed for the study. The specific aspects covered are gender, ethnicity, educational level of the father and the mother, occupational status of the father and the mother, family income per month and students' type of schooling attended prior to entering higher education.

### **The Present Study**

#### **Gender and Ethnicity**

Out of a total sample of 80 under-graduate students interviewed, the researcher purposefully chose 20 from Engineering, 20 from Sciences, 20 from Commerce and 20 from Liberal Arts. Out of those 80 students, 40 are male and 40 are female. As mentioned in the methodology section in Chapter 1, the researcher consciously took an equal and purposive sample of students in terms of the streams and gender.

Distribution in terms of ethnicity, however show that 36 of the students are Assamese speaking, 10 are Bodo, 16 are Bengali and 18 are from the other ethnic groups. Other ethnic group comprises of Hindi and Nepali speakers. In the study, the ethnicities attributed to the students are those used by the students themselves. Besides, the researcher has identified them on the basis of the language spoken, primarily the mother tongue. The rationale for inclusion of this variable is that the study has been conducted in an urban space and coincidentally showed the prevalence of ethnic mix across the four streams of study.



### **Educational Status of the Father and the Mother**

Studies have revealed that education of the parents influences the educability of children, i.e., if the father or the mother is educated, it is more likely that he/she will send his/her child/children to an educational institution. Similarly, if the father or the mother is not educated, it is expected that he/she will not insist on his /her child/children's education. Floud (1961) considers the father's educational level in her analysis of the influence of social class factors in the educational achievement of the school children. Similarly, Wolfe (1961) described the importance of educational background at home. Whether a girl or a boy starts school with an interest in learning depends primarily upon the kind of home he/she comes from. Some studies have also examined the relationship of the future educational level to gender of the student and parental educational level (Isaac et al, 1992; DeGraaff, 1986). Ermish and Francesconi (2001) found a strong relation between parental educational attainment and the educational attainment of young cohorts, and especially individuals coming from the bottom income quartile have much lower educational attainments. Fathers' educational level was significantly related to adolescents' likelihood of attending university (Marjoribanks, 1998).

In this study, the educational levels of the father and mother are classified into 6 categories. They are:

**1. High:**

- a. Postgraduate (Pure Science/commerce/arts)
- b. Professional degree which includes a degree in engineering and medicine.
- c. Graduation (Pure Science/commerce/arts)

**2. Medium:**

- d. Higher Secondary

**3. Low:**

- e. Matriculation and below
- f. No schooling

Table 3.1 shows the distribution of sample in terms of their fathers' educational status. It is observed that fathers of 59 students received higher education, i.e., graduation and above. It may also be observed that the fathers of 21 students have not received higher education. Thus, they are the first generation students who are receiving higher education in their families. Here it is worth noting that an overwhelming number of students in higher education come from families where fathers have gone to colleges and universities and that the students in the sample are largely second generation higher education seekers.

The distribution of fathers' educational status in terms of the students' areas of study reveal interesting findings. Firstly, almost all students in the engineering (professional) stream have their fathers as graduates or those who have been to higher educational institutions. Further, fathers of 4 out of 20 engineering students are professional degree holders. Two of the fathers of engineering students are also post- graduates. Fathers of students in other streams of higher education, though largely are graduates, have also been educated up to higher secondary or simply the school educated.

**Table 3.1**  
**Father's Education Status**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	High	9	6	7	6	28
	Medium	-	3	2	2	7
	Lower	1	1	1	2	5
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	High	10	7	8	6	31
	Medium	-	3	1	1	5
	Low	-	-	1	3	4
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

*Note:* Only frequency distributions are given. The same would be undertaken in all the tabular presentations as the percentages to the total seem to be misleading at times. For instance, 1 out of 20 students in a particular of education would match up to 5% which is significant proportion in terms of percentage, but in real numbers it is negligible

In terms of gender, it is interesting to note that the fathers of all women students and almost all except one, men engineering students have gone to colleges and universities or are educated till graduation. Fathers of more women (3) than men (1) are professionally educated. That means, the higher the education of the father, the higher are the chances of a girl student to enter into higher education or even the professional education. On the other hand, fathers of more men than women students are school educated and are largely in the general streams of education like science, commerce and liberal arts.

### **Mothers' Educational Status**

Mothers' education also influences child's prospects in higher education. There have been a large number of studies which throw light on how mother's educational status helps in preparing a child into different pathways in education in general and higher education in particular. The effects of mothering on the educational fortunes of children are now well documented within disciplines like social-psychology, sociology of education across the world, though studies in India are limited. Some research studies (e.g. Johnston et al, 2005; Korupp et al, 2002; Beller, 2008) argue that the more the mothers are educated the more likely they are to make higher contribution and provide inputs of time and goods into the production function of their children's cognitive achievement, both in terms of quantity and quality of inputs. Further, it is noted that the more educated the mother is, the more efficient her use of time spent with the child. Also it is argued that the impact of each parent may differ for sons and daughters, due to differences in aspirations and expectations, for example a well educated mother acting as a role model for her daughters. Haveman and Wolfe (1995) conclude from their survey in US that 'the human capital of the mother is usually more closely related to the (educational) attainment of the child than is that of the father.'

**Table 3.2**  
**Mothers' Educational Status**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	High	5	3	4	2	14
	Medium	1	2	3	3	9
	Low	4	5	3	5	17
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	High	7	4	6	5	22
	Medium	3	2	2	1	8
	Low	-	4	2	4	10
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

In this study, we tried to elicit the educational background of the mother of students included in the sample. The data are presented in Table 3.2. It is found that 36 of the mothers of students are either graduates or have been to colleges and universities. Another 17 have been to the senior higher secondary level of education. That means, a significant number (53) of the total 80 students are either high school or college educated.

Further, it may be noted that mothers of more than half of the students of engineering stream are graduates or postgraduates. Also the mothers of 6 out of 10 women students in commerce stream are also graduates. If we look at the distribution of mothers of women students, we find that more than half (22) of the mothers of women students are graduates and another 8 are senior secondary educated. On the other hand, we find that a large number (26) of mothers of men students are school educated (including senior secondary level). Mothers of only 14 men students are higher educated. Thus, it may be noted that the mothers' education plays an important role in the higher education of the women students and their prospects of getting into higher or professional education.

### **Occupational Status of the Father**

Occupational status of the father is one of the important determinants of social background of a student. It is said that there is a very close correlation between the father's educational status and his occupational background. According to Duncan (1967), the career of a

student is dependent on the circumstances of the family of origin which provide a set of initial conditions whose effects are transmitted through subsequent stages of attainment and achievement. Among employed parents, for instance, both parents' occupations independently shape children's educational outcomes (Kalmijn, 1994) just as both parents' education levels do (Mare, 1981). In fact, father's occupational status is described as one of the important 'circumstances' in the analysis. Floud (1975) also takes father's occupation as an indicator of the socio-economic status in an analysis of social factors in educational attainment. She finds a significantly closer relationship between father's occupation and success in school. The occupational status of the father is a prime determinant of the social class of the children/ students.

In the present study, the occupations of father are grouped into six categories as adopted from the studies of Ahmad (1968) and Rao (1997). The classification is more or less similar, though marginal changes were made to match the kind and pattern of data. The categorization of occupations in terms of high, medium and low occupational level was made keeping in mind both the prestige and socio-economic gains associated with occupational status. In Weberian terms, the occupational status signifies both a persons' prestige in society and also his/her access to life chance for his / her family members' socio-economic access and opportunity. Weber listed three elements that determine the life chances in a person: economic factors, status and power (Crompton, 2008). Thus, higher economic status is linked directly proportional to higher status in society and improved live chances. According to Weber, the key three elements of life chances need not necessarily go together. It is when the three elements are combined that members of a society are ranked. This method of stratification would be altered and adjusted to form various modern day methods of measuring social class<sup>26</sup>. The positioning of an individual on this scale of

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<sup>26</sup> Weber made distinction of classes in to three categories based on education level and types of occupational skills. The lower class (often referred to as "working class" or blue-collar workers) is generally associated with people with low levels of education, unskilled or semiskilled occupations, and low income. Middle-class people (often seen as "white-collar" workers) generally have more education, usually having graduated from high school or college, hold technical or mid-level managerial positions, and earn average to above average incomes. Upper-class people tend to have high education, the highest salaries, and the most prestigious occupational positions.

social stratification based on economic conditions certainly influences key aspects of his/her life.

At the heart of all methods of social stratification is education. And occupations are ranked on the basis of level of skill or qualification. This is because good education can be the key to many other desirable aspects of society, and like these other commodities, education is affected by a person's life chances. In general, access to higher levels of education is controlled by economic factors, like money can buy a better quality education, especially some of the elite private education, which in turn can lead to a better quality higher education. Furthermore, it can buy the equipment and resources that allow individuals to achieve. Wealth generally correlates to social class which is based on occupation and better life chances like education. In this case, child's education is therefore dependant on the father's occupational status.

The six categories are as following:

**1. High**

- a. Senior managerial and administrative positions in the government and in the private sector and senior liberal professions like engineers, doctors and researchers.
- b. Self employed persons in business such as contractors and wholesalers.

**2. Medium**

- c. Middle / junior administrative and technical positions in public and private sectors and junior liberal professions such as teaching.
- d. Retired from government/ private sectors.

**3. Low**

- e. Petty Business: Seasonal construction contractor, Furniture shop, vegetable shop, and grocery shop.

Table 3.3 presents the distribution of students in terms of their parental occupational status. It may be observed that a large number of fathers of students in the sample are in middle level of occupational status, namely, those who are primarily in services-both private or government and that to at the medium or junior levels of service or are retired from the government or private service. For a city like Guwahati, this seems to be a middle class. Another 12 are from families whose fathers have higher occupational status, namely, those who are at the senior managerial or administrative positions in the government and the private sector or are senior professionals like doctors, engineers or researchers. It also included a few fathers who are big contractors or businessmen. What is interesting to note is that a few (16) of the fathers do have lower occupational status.

**Table 3.3**  
**Father's Occupational Status and Areas of Study**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	High	2	-	1	-	3
	Medium	8	8	5	7	28
	Low	-	2	4	3	9
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	High	1	4	2	2	9
	Medium	6	6	6	6	24
	Low	3	-	2	2	7
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

If we look at the occupational status of father in terms of streams of study, we find that the fathers of students in engineering stream are mostly at the middle or higher occupations. Contrarily, we find that those who are from families whose fathers are from lower level of occupations are in liberal/ general higher educational streams such as science, commerce and arts.

Gender distribution suggests that while the fathers of all men students in engineering stream are either in middle or higher status occupations and a few (3) of fathers of women students are from the lower occupations. But among those women students who

are going to general courses are mostly from the middle or higher occupational status families.

Overall the data suggests that the fathers of students in the sample are either in middle or higher level occupations. And the father's educational status seems to be an important marker of children's entry into professional courses as fathers of almost all men and a majority of women students in engineering are from the higher status occupations.

### **Occupational Status of the Mother**

There is a concern that eventhough the number of educated women is increasing in post-independence India, their presence is not as widespread in the world of work. One of the reasons seem to be that women tend to remain as 'home makers' and support their children's upbringing, education and their well being .At another level, an employed women/ mother tend to play a crucial role in motivating, encouraging the children to do well in education, particularly higher education. They in fact tend to act as role models for children.

There are a few studies to establish that the occupation of mother is vital to the understanding of the student's social background (Pimpley, 1980). Some studies have also brought out significant findings in relation to mother's occupation and child's education. Chitra Ramachandran (1989) makes a comparison between the children of working and non-working mothers with respect to their socio-economic and educational development. It was found that the employment of mother had neither any positive or negative effect on the educational development of the children within the high socioeconomic class (Ramachandran, 1989). Further, the children of working class mothers did not differ in any way from the children of the non-working mothers in terms of their achievement. Bogenshneider and Steinberg (1994) also examined whether and under what conditions maternal employment affects school achievement among high school students.



In this section, the occupation of mothers is grouped similar to that of fathers. However, an additional category of 'homemaker', which is the invisible domain of women's work, is included in the occupation of mothers. It must be noted that there has been confusion as to where to fix the occupational status of mother who is a homemaker. Thus this category does not fit in to the categories of high, medium and low occupational status. There are no visible measureable economic returns to the occupation of homemaker.

Rao (1997) suggests in his study that there are streams of thought so far as Housewives' as an occupation is concerned. One view sees the housework as the production of use values rather than exchange values. If a man hires a woman housekeeper, he pays for her services. Her labour, therefore, has not only use value but also exchange value. The work she does is still socially necessary work, but as a housewife she is no longer paid for it. The real exchange value (as determined by the price the use of her labours would have to pay were she not his wife) is taken from her (Eichler, 1980). Another view holds that housework is necessary but unproductive labour according to which labour is productive if it is conducted in direct relation to capital and if it produces surplus value. However, Eichler refutes this by saying that it is not anything inherent in the product or in the work process that makes housework non-productive. It is, therefore, incorrect to say that housework is unproductive; rather the work performed by a housewife is (1980: 113).

The distribution of students in terms of their mother's occupation is presented in Table 3.4. It may be seen that an overwhelming numbers (62) of mothers are homemakers. Only 18 mothers are working for income in various kinds of occupations. Only one mother of an engineering student is in higher occupations such as senior engineering professional. Most (13) of the working mothers are at the middle level occupations such as middle/junior administrative and technical positions in public and private sectors or junior liberal professions such as teaching or retired from government/ private sectors. It may be noted that 4 mothers are in lower level occupations such as petty business or seasonal construction contractor or furniture shop, vegetable shop, grocery shop, etc.

Further, mothers of slightly more number of women students (10) are working than men students (8). Beyond this, one may not find much difference in terms of the types of mother's occupations of both men and women students.

**Table 3.4**  
**Mother's Occupational Status and Areas of Study**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	High	1	-	-	-	1
	Medium	2	1	1	1	5
	Low	-	2	-	-	2
	Homemaker	7	7	9	9	32
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	Medium	3	2	-	3	8
	Low	1	-	-	1	2
	Homemaker	6	8	10	6	30
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

If we read the tables 3.3 and 3.4 together, we find some relationship between mothers' occupational status and fathers' occupational status. One may find that if father's occupational status is middle or higher then there may be a tendency for mothers to be 'homemakers' (though the current presentation of the data in both the tables may not suggest direct relationships). But this tend to be a general scenario as the middle and higher class families tend to discourage mothers/ wives (or mothers may themselves make a choice) to stay home to help children in their educational (higher educational) pursuit even if they (mothers) are highly educated. The table 3.2 clearly shows that a considerable number of mothers are graduates and they would probably be employable in terms of their eligibility to at least the government /private sector administrative / teaching services.

### **Family Income**

The family income provides more accurate measure of economic condition of the families of students rather than their father's income alone. Parents' economic resources, especially family income, have been major focuses of research on inter- generational educational

mobility. Several empirical studies have identified family income as one of the strongest predictors of children's educational outcomes (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Kane, 2004). Research studies, however, have not reached agreement on the mechanisms by which parents' economic resources affect their children's educational attainment.

On the basis of field study and even from the data on occupation of mothers, it is found that among students across all the areas of study there are earning members other than the father in their families. As described before, 18 of the mothers are employed and are earning members of the family. In this study, the monthly income is grouped into three categories. The categories are:

1. **High:** Above Rs. 40000
2. **Middle:** Rs.20000- Rs. 40000.
3. **Low:** Up to Rs. 20000

Table 3.5 shows the data in terms of monthly family income. It may be seen that an overwhelming number (50) of students, i.e. more than half of the total students, are from families whose monthly income falls in the middle level income, i.e., Rs. 20000-Rs. 40000. Almost an equal number of students are from higher income group (say 14 of them) and the lower income group (say 16 of them). Thus, the social structure of the sample is largely skewed in favour of middle class composition. It is also interesting to find that the so called lower class/ income families are also sending their children to higher education. Given the context of the city of Guwahati, the lower is not too low in the income hierarchy, but may also safely be called as lower middle class. Thus, it may be assumed that the low income is in a way lower middle class income. This gets further established when we see the occupational categories of both fathers and mothers, most of these occupations are of lower middle class nature.

**Table 3.5**  
**Monthly Family Income**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Income (In Rupees)</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	Above 40000	1	1	1	-	3
	20001-40000	7	7	5	9	28
	Up to 20000	2	2	4	1	9
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	Above 40000	-	3	3	5	11
	20001-40000	9	7	4	2	22
	Up to 20000	1	-	3	3	7
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

It may be seen that the number of students coming from high income group does not have difference in terms of students from science, commerce and liberal arts stream. Further, there is not much difference between in terms of the areas /streams of study when we locate the distribution of lower middle class nature.

In terms of gender distribution, it is seen that men (27) students are coming more from middle level income groups than women (22) students. It is interesting to note that women students are also coming in large numbers from higher level income groups (11) in comparison to men students who comprise of only 4 of the total number of students. This may indicate that higher education of women students depend on the higher level of family income. Broadly, the data on income variations thus shows that the choice of higher education is realized mostly by students from middle income families.

### **Type of Schooling**

Family social and economic background helps the student/ child to go for better quality educational institutions. Generally, it is found that the children / students in lucrative professional courses and also good quality higher education institutions tend to go to good quality schools and that in turn depends on the family's social and economic background. Parents tend to place their children in the so called good quality institutions, mostly private in

the school education sector by paying/ spending a lot of money and so that their wards can secure seats subsequently in the lucrative or professional institutions of their choice.

There exists a hierarchy of educational institutions in terms of the medium of instruction, ownership and location. In this study, there are four categories of school identified according to the nature of management and the medium of instruction:

1. **Public / Central:** Schools which are established and run by central government and has English as medium of instruction.

2. **Public /State<sup>27</sup>:** Schools which are established and run by state government and has vernacular medium (Assamese) of instruction.

3..**Private/ Aided:** Schools which are managed by a trustee and receive state government funds and generally has English as the medium of instruction.

4. **Private/ Unaided schools:** Such schools are established by individuals or group of individuals that do not receive any aid from state government and generally have English as the medium of instruction.

The data in terms of type of schools attended by the students is presented in Table 3.6. Surprisingly, we find that a large number (51) of the students had gone to private unaided schools. Of the remaining, another 13 have gone to private aided schools. That means, about 64 students have gone to private schools, whether aided or unaided and these schools in the sample are found to be English medium schools. If we add the central schools which offer education in English medium, the number goes upto 73. It means, almost except 7

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<sup>27</sup> This category of schools also has English as medium of instruction. But only vernacular medium as instruction has been identified among the sample students. Conversely, private/aided and private/ unaided schools have also Assamese as the medium of instruction. The aforementioned medium are those identified among the sample students. So the types of school should not be generalized at broader level.

students, had English medium schooling in some kind of good or elite schools of the state. Only seven students, who are found in the provincial (state level) government schools, have had vernacular medium of instruction.

**Table 3.6**  
**Type of Schools**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	Public/Central	2	2	1	-	5
	Public/State	1	2	-	1	4
	Private/Aided	-	-	3	5	8
	Private Unaided	7	6	6	4	23
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	Public/Central	-	1	2	1	4
	Public/State	-	1	2	-	3
	Private/Aided	2	-	-	3	5
	Private Unaided	8	8	6	6	28
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

Further, if the data is seen in terms of the streams of study, it shows that most of the engineering students have gone to the private English medium schools. In fact, all 10 women engineering students have gone to private English medium schools. Similarly, it is the more or less similar for Science, Commerce and Liberal arts students as well.

The socio-economic indicators of the students do reveal some interesting insights about its possible impact on students' route / pathways to higher education. However, they may not explain the complexity of the relationship as there could be a number of interrelated factors simultaneously influencing students' choice in higher education. This may be applicable in all circumstances, whether a student comes from rural or an urban setting. Therefore, in order to get an overall view of the influence of various indicators on the higher education choice of students, the correlational analysis is undertaken. The general correlation matrix of the learners' socio-economic background is shown in table 3.7.

The general correlation matrix shows some differential tendency, both positive and negative, of the influence of variables with one another. It is observed that areas of study

are significantly correlated to fathers' education level at 1% level of significance which shows that higher the education of father, higher would be the location in the general streams of education. That means, the data reflects the point that the students in professional and science streams generally come from families where fathers' educational level is higher. Further, though the relationship between areas of study, mothers' education and occupation are also found to be positively correlated but the correlations are insignificant. The relationship of areas of study with father's occupation is also highly significant at 1 % level which shows the better or higher the occupation of fathers, students from such occupational backgrounds would be more present in higher educational streams such as engineering and sciences. That also means that if the fathers' occupations are lower, than those students tend to be represented in the liberal arts and commerce streams.

**Table 3.7**  
**General Correlation Matrix**

	<b>Areas of Study</b>	<b>Father's Education</b>	<b>Mother's Education</b>	<b>Father's Occupation</b>	<b>Mother's Occupation</b>	<b>Family Income Monthly</b>	<b>Type of Schooling</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Areas of Study	1.000								
Father's Education	.264*	1.000							
Mother's Education	.146	.175	1.000						
Father's Occupation	.455**	.548**	.196	1.000					
Mother's Occupation	.146	-.106	.076	.031	1.000				
Family Income Monthly	-.037	.249*	.028	.477**	.148	1.000			
Type of Schooling	-.054	.076	-.070	-.020	-.200	-.033	1.000		
Gender	.000	-.074	-.213	-.211	-.047	-.204	.097	1.000	
Ethnicity	.136	.165	-.049	.325**	.008	.043	.047	-.163	1.000

*Note:* \* - Significant at 0.05 level.  
\*\* - Significant at 0.01 level.



Interestingly, the correlation between fathers' education, fathers' occupation and family income are found to be high and significant. That means, higher educational level of father is related to his higher occupational status which also brings higher income for the family. The correlation between fathers' occupation and mothers' educational level is positive but not significant.

The correlation of gender with areas of study and income is positive but not significant. Surprisingly, gender shows negative or inverse correlation with level of fathers' education, mothers' education, fathers' occupation, mothers' occupation and family income. That means the higher the educational and occupational levels of fathers and mothers, the better are the chances of women students for higher education participation. Those from lower income parental education and occupational background may prefer men's education in comparison to women's education.

Ethnicity wise it is seen that fathers' occupation is positively related and significant at 1% level of significance. This may indicate that pursuit of higher education in terms of ethnicity is determined by the occupational level of father. It also shows positive correlation without any significance with areas of study, fathers' education, mothers' occupation, income and schooling. However, it shows negative correlation with mothers' education and gender. That means, certain ethnic groups tend to promote women's education in comparison to others, and vice-versa.

To study this further, apart from the understanding of general correlation analysis, an attempt has been made to show gender wise correlation matrix. This may help us to ascertain the effect of correlations of various variables of socio-economic status for men and women students which are shown in Table 3.8 and 3.9.

Table 3.8 shows that correlations between areas of study, education level of father and mothers are positive but not significant. Further, the relationship between areas of study and fathers' occupation is positive and significant at 1% level of significance which shows that higher the occupation level of father, the higher would be the presence of the child in higher

level of stream/area of study. In other words, we may suggest that the children from higher occupational backgrounds tend to be sending to streams like engineering. Conversely, the lower status fathers tend to send their sons to lower level streams such as liberal arts, commerce, etc.

**Table 3.8**  
**Correlation Matrix for Men Students**

	Areas of Study	Level of Fathers' Education	Level of Mothers' Education	Level of Fathers' Occupation	Level of Mother's Occupation	Level of Family Income	Types of Schooling
Areas of Study	1.000						
Fathers' education	.175	1.000					
Mothers' education	.115	.151	1.000				
Fathers' occupation	.340*	.570**	.246	1.000			
Mothers' occupation	.239	.106	-.067	-.104	1.000		
Family Income	.042	.165	.084	.550**	-.223	1.000	
Types Of Schooling	.074	.140	-.072	.074	-.167	-.060	1.000

Note: \* - Significant at 0.05 level.

\*\* - Significant at 0.01 level

Types of schooling is positively correlated to areas of study , fathers' education and fathers' occupation, but shows negative correlation with mothers' education, her occupation and family income.

Interestingly, the relationship between fathers' occupation, his education and family income seems to be positive and significant which shows that pursuit of higher education for men students is determined by level of fathers' occupation, his education level and income

**Table 3.9**  
**Correlation Matrix for Women students**

	Areas of Study	Level of Fathers' education	Level of Mothers' education	Level of Fathers' occupation	Level of Mothers' occupation	Income	Type of Schooling
Areas of Study	1.000						
Fathers' education	.363*	1.000					
Mothers' education	.186	.087	1.000				
Fathers' occupation	-.035	.468**	-.122	1.000			
Mothers' occupation	.056	-.055	.206	-.044	1.000		
Income	-.101	.308*	-.143	.526**	.290*	1.000	
Type of Schooling	-.191	.018	.092	.113	-.229	.064	1.000

Note: \* - Significant at 0.05 level.  
\*\* - Significant at 0.01 level.

Table 3.9 shows that areas of study are positively correlated to fathers' education level at significance level of 5%, while it is positively correlated to mothers' education and occupation without any significance level. But it is negatively correlated to fathers' occupation, income and type of schooling. Similarly like male students, it also shows positive and significant correlation between fathers' education level, his occupation and income. Interestingly, income level shows positive and significant correlation with mothers' occupation at significance level of 5%.

### Summary

The chapter described the socio-economic background of the students from four streams of higher education, namely - Engineering, Science, Commerce and Liberal Arts. It is seen from the data that higher education of parents has an influential role in their wards to participate in higher education. As observed, most of the students are second generation higher education seekers who come from families where fathers have gone to colleges and universities. In fact,

the education of mothers seems to be more influential in case of women students either as motivators or facilitators.

The data also suggests that the occupation level of fathers along with their educational status seems to be an important marker of children's entry into professional courses as fathers of almost all men and a majority of women students in engineering are from the higher status occupations such as senior managers, big contractors, etc. It could also be observed that a majority of the students come from families whose fathers are in the middle level occupations such as junior positions in public / private sectors, etc. Further, with father's occupational status either in middle or higher, there may be a tendency for educated mothers to be 'homemakers' which might signify that the role of mothers is influential in helping their children in their educational (higher educational) pursuit. Particularly, parental role specially that of mothers, or in other words, mothering is very relevant in women student's route/ pathways to higher education. The highly and moderate educated mothers becomes the role model to women students and thus their greater participation in higher education.

The data also revealed that pursuit /goal of higher education is realized mostly by students from middle income families. English medium schooling may be one of the significant ways to determine students' aspiration for / achievement of higher education. One may suggest that English medium schools mostly help students to participate in higher and professional education.

Overall correlations indicate clearly the middle class nature of higher education participation. Further, it may be safely said that the degrees of higher education participation do depend on the gender, parental educational and occupational status and even the ethnic background of the student.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Social Determinants of Higher Education Choices**

The chapter is organized into two parts. The first part of the chapter discusses the perceptions of students on choices they exercised and why. It tries to examine the student perceptions in the light of their social and economic background variables. Similarly, the second part of the chapter discusses the perceptions and social determinants of college choice. In both the parts, the researcher aims to situate the findings of the present study in the literature available in sociology of education.

#### **PART I**

##### **Course Choices**

Research studies from time to time have focused on the factors that influence subject or course choice decisions of students in higher education. The techniques or methods or procedures students use to make those decisions, and the social, psychological, and economic explanations for the impact of these factors and processes are some of the areas covered by these studies. However, within the course choice, issues such as access and equity in terms of course selection, gender and ethnic segregation, class inequality, etc are also crucial. One might assume that choosing a course represents a major decision in life requiring extensive decision-making over a period of time, especially considering the commitment of time and resources and expectations.

Although the sociological literature on subject choice at post secondary level is relatively small, studies have sought to estimate how individual, academic and parental characteristics shape students' decisions<sup>1</sup>. Understanding the determinants of subject choice has been an area of interest across different disciplines. However, the methods employed and the subject classifications used vary from study to study, having a slightly different focus. A

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<sup>1</sup> The review of literature presented here is largely taken from studies conducted across the world, more particularly, from the ones conducted in the United States. Studies, in the Indian context, of similar nature are found to be nil or none.

general review of the literature suggests two primary research emphases in the area of course choice (Beggs, 2008). First and most directly related to the current research, is a body of knowledge identifying specific factors that influence the choice of course selection (DeMarie and Aloise-Young, 2003; Kimweli and Richards, 1999). Second, there is a subset of the general research that focuses on the relationship between specific individual demographics (e.g. race and gender and years in school) and course choice ( Malgwi, Howe & Burnaby, 2005). A long list of factors have been shown to influence students' subject choice, but the factors themselves and the name terms used for each factor have varied from study to study.

Sociological studies have focused on three key inquiries: gender and race disparities in the selection of fields of study, factors influencing entry into various fields, and the occupational outcomes associated with different subject majors (Goyette and Mullen, 2006). Gendered patterns of choosing majors have been extensively documented (Jacobs, 1986, 1995). Men have traditionally been concentrated in fields such as business, engineering, chemistry, and physics while women have studied education, humanities, nursing, and psychology. Studies examining the choice of major by race reveal that African American students are more likely than white students to choose major in education, the humanities, and the social sciences, fields that offer lower incomes to college graduates than the natural and technical sciences (Thomas, 1985).

In a study by Simpson (2001), fields of study were coded into five broad types and found that most of the differences between racial and ethnic groups were between Asian Americans and other students. Considerable attention has been focused on the factors predicting the selection of science majors. Studies have found that women and non-Asian minority students are underrepresented in these fields compared to their White male counterparts (Barber, 1995; Mullen, 2001). Researchers have also explored the labor market returns to undergraduate fields of study. Because the economic returns to fields of study vary widely, some studies (Rumberger and Thomas, 1993; Smart, 1988) have shown the differential choice of fields leading to lucrative employment. It is found that earning differentials among fields play a strong role in a student's choice (Cebula and Lopes, 1982), and that male students differentiate between those fields offering the greatest future

earnings and those with the highest entry earnings, showing a preference for the former (Berger, 1988).

Davies and Guppy (1997) found that men much more likely than women are to select fields with high economic payoffs, but found no significant effects for race (in analysis comparing Asians and Whites to African Americans and Hispanics). They used micro-level data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the United States to examine the factors which lead to students entering relatively “lucrative” fields. They define “lucrative” fields in terms of the expected earnings of graduating students. They estimate the expected return to a degree subject and examine how gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and ability affect the probability of a student choosing to study in a relatively high-return field. They conclude that male students and students with higher measures of ability are more likely to enter lucrative fields. However, they did not find any evidence of significant ethnic group effects. Moreover, after controlling for academic ability, they found that socio - economic status held a slight negative effect on the selection of a lucrative field of study. However in a study by Xie and Goyette (2003) it was found that race does influence choice of a profitable major. Asian Americans, many of whom are recent immigrants, in their times, may choose fields with high earnings potential as a way to ensure upward social mobility.

In some of the earlier studies, students’ major choices were linked to more nuanced measures of occupational returns (Hearn and Olzak, 1981; Wilson, 1978; Wilson and Smith-Lovin, 1983). Rather than limiting measures of fields of study strictly to future income, in 1978, Wilson ranked fields of study by their probability of “feeding” into high-level occupations (occupations with a high authority index). Scaling the views of 13 informants from Texas, Wilson ranked fields such as engineering, medicine, business, and commerce quite highly, with fields such as social sciences, literature, and religion on the bottom end. He found that including this measure of educational attainment in statistical analyses considerably improved previous efforts to predict income. His research also revealed that, after controlling academic ability, father's occupational authority and prestige did not

significantly influence a student's likelihood of selecting a curriculum that would likely to lead into an occupation with high authority.

In a later study, Hearn and Olzak (1981) by building on Wilson's scale, made an effort to explain gender differences in choice of field. They coded 21 fields of study along two dimensions: how closely the field was linked to specific occupations and the likely status and power rewards of a major. Using data from a small sample of students from one university, Hearn and Olzak found that departments in fields that provide higher status rewards tended to have less supportive social climates, and that “men tend to opt for unsupportive departments conferring higher rewards while women tend to opt for supportive departments with lower rewards” (p. 202). Their findings also suggest that women are more likely than men to receive bachelor's degrees in vocationally linked areas. Hearn and Olzak, however, did not include analyses of social background differences.

In terms of students' social background, studies show that socioeconomic status (SES) plays a negligible role in the selection of fields that lead to high incomes after graduation (Davies and Guppy, 1997) or high status occupations as defined by Wilson's informants (Wilson, 1978). Most importantly, the conducted research uncovers how the selection of fields of study becomes a significant component of stratification after college. Study by Goyette and Mullen (2006) takes account of the historical role of arts and science fields in educating elite students, and inquired into the selection of these fields providing clues further about how higher education stratifies students. They looked at the role of social background in the selection of Arts & Science fields. Student's choice of any subject cannot be isolated from its relation to socio-economic background. There are researches examining the extent to which children are likely to choose subjects that are associated with their parents' characteristics has been carried out in Norway (Hansen, 1997), the Netherlands (Van de Werfhorst et al., 2001), Sweden (Dryler, 1998) and the U.S. (Davies and Guppy, 1997). In general, this research finds that parents' interests are communicated to children, and the children are therefore likely to choose subjects that correspond to their parents' interests. In addition to this, Hansen (1997), Davies and Guppy (1997) and Van de Werfhorst et al. (2001) argue that students' choice of subject must be understood within the system of both economic



and cultural stratification, as children choose subjects that correspond to their parents' positions in both the economic and the cultural hierarchy.

In another study, Van de Werfhorst et al (2003) assess subject choice among British students and find that their choices are conditional on family background, ability, prior academic attainment and measures of "economic" and "cultural capital". They conclude that students choose subjects in which they have performed comparatively well, that students who perform well in reading tests are more likely to take degrees in Social Studies or Arts and students who are relatively good at maths are more likely to take Engineering, Science or Economics degrees. Van de Werfhorst et al (2003) also find that although students from wealthy backgrounds are more likely to take degrees in Law & Medicine, there is little other evidence of large and significant differences by socio-economic class. Montmarquette et al (2002) in their Canadian study examine the factors which determine college major among a choice of four subject areas -Business, Liberal Arts, Science and Education. They conclude that gender and expected income are important determinants of degree choice.

However, Simpson (2001) focuses explicitly on trends in subject choice among students from different ethnic groups. Using the "High School and Beyond" national longitudinal survey in the United States, Simpson estimates a series of multinomial logistic regressions separately for Asian, African, European, Hispanic and Native Americans who choose among five broad subject areas. Conditioned by gender, family background and income, prior academic training and some measures of "cultural capital", Simpson finds significant differences in choice of college major between ethnic groups. Asian Americans are more likely to study Health and Life Sciences than European and Hispanic Americans, and less likely to study Business or Public Service majors than African Americans. Besides, European Americans are more likely to take a Liberal Arts major than African Americans. He also finds that females are significantly less likely to take a Technical major such as Computer Science, Engineering, Mathematics or Physics than males and that prior academic attainment, parental income and type of school attended all influence subject choice in different ways for each ethnic group.

The question of social class inequality in educational opportunities and outcomes has also been the focus of sociological attention. Most of the research on educational inequalities focuses on educational level, and acknowledge the importance of field of study, or subject. There is recognition that field of study affects many aspects of people's lives, such as labour market outcomes (Kalmijn and Van der Lippe, 1997; Marini and Fan, 1997), life styles (Van de Werfhorst and Kraaykamp, 2001), and political orientations (Crotty, 1967; Nilsson and Ekehammar, 1986).

Men and women from similar background may not value a course in similar way and this may lead to different pathways. Some studies show important gender differences in the fundamental value orientations and their subsequent implications in the choice of courses. Women are found to be more likely than men to express concern and responsibility for the well-being of others and less likely to emphasize material benefits and competition (Beutel and Marini, 1995). Studies have found that women integrates with men in their emphasis on extrinsic values such as income and prestige, yet more women than men are found to emphasize intrinsic values, such as helping others and benefitting society (Marini et al, 1996). This difference in values is understood to lead women to favour course choice that prepares them to help others, such as the social sciences and education, and lead men to orient towards lucrative courses, such as business and the technical fields. Besides, family socio-economic status may have an asymmetrical effect on course choice for men and women (Ma, 2009). Men from a high socioeconomic status may still expected to choose a lucrative career, whereas women from comparable backgrounds may not. Green's (1992) descriptive analysis found that more male from wealthy families is from business course than female. It is observed that men from wealthy families were more likely to be motivated by monetary incentives in their choice of courses than women from comparable family backgrounds. On the other hand, men as well as women may be equally motivated to study more lucrative courses as the route to achieve social mobility, for themselves as well as for their families, in case they belong to lower socioeconomic status.

The body of research on the selection of undergraduate fields of study reveals strong gender differences and modest race differences in students' choices (Goyette and Mullen,

2006. As observed, the future economic returns to fields of study play a role in a student's choice. In racial context, it is evidenced that men and Asians are much more likely than women and students of other races and ethnicities to enter fields with high earnings or status potential, while women are more likely to select an applied field of study. The studies cited thus show that the higher education system is of stratified nature and the social, economic and cultural factors are at play that transform into the processes of selection of college major or choice of subjects or courses.

### **The Present Study**

A range of factors affect higher education (HE) entry, including aspirations and expectations. The value of, and benefits from, higher qualifications remain a significant positive 'driver'. This combines with greater parental and family influence to play a more significant role in encouraging HE participation for their wards, and also in choices of what and where to study. Thus, the present study focuses on identifying the aspects by which undergraduate students select their subject post secondary and the factors that play a role in such course choices. It recognizes the influence of pre-college experience on initial course choice and also brings social contexts into the framework, i.e., family influence, gender and ethnicity.

Choosing a subject represents a major life decision and is associated with subjective belief. There are many factors and contexts that students consider integral to the process of selecting a course. Such as being from highly educated family may have more advantage in choosing the best course, in terms of employment prospects. There could be other possibilities like as part of family tradition to study similar courses as it might have brought economic and social prestige over a period of time. Similar pattern may be observed between men and women. At the same time, there is a pattern that signals the link between ethnicity and choice of majors towards profession.

The data shows that all except 18 students out of 80, have noted that they chose the course of study they preferred most, i.e., Engineering, Science and Liberal arts. The 18 students who said they are not in their most preferred choice were from science stream and

they preferred medicine mostly, with only two male students of those preferred engineering course, but could not make it due to a variety of reasons. The reason cited for not able to make it to their choice of course is that they have not qualified for their initial choice. All these students have scored 70% and above, and had coaching for the respective exams. Yet, they could not get through the entrance examination conducted for the course, at state and national levels. However, one men student perhaps presents an interesting insight that although he had coaching, his lack of fluency in English never helped him to understand what was taught in the coaching. He cited this as one of the reason for not able to clear the entrance examination and achieve what was his choice of course:

*“I was in the first batch and was placed along with the toppers of high school level. All these students came from English medium schools and had more grasping power than an average student like me. By the time, I finish writing from the board, they already would have solved the problem given. I never understood what was being taught.”*

Perhaps this one case may help us to understand that disadvantages may be faced by the regional vernacular non-English medium students have had problem in clearing the entrance exams to enter their respective choices of courses in higher education. Though these students could have studied their initial choice in some private colleges, they preferred to study in government colleges and admission budget of private colleges deterred them mostly. It is the science students mostly who did not get the course of their first choice. There is not much difference between the men and women students regarding not exercising the initial course.

In order to assess the reasons for the choice of the present course, four factors are found to be influencing their choice of the courses. They are:

1. The prestige/ status of the job;
2. Liking for the subject/ course;
3. Motivated by others;
4. Financial security.

The distribution of data in terms of reasons for course choice is shown in Table 4.1. It may be observed that an overwhelming majority of students (35), i.e., nearly half of the total students have cited prestigious nature as well as job status as the reason for their current course choice. About 20 of the students have considered subject liking for the subject behind their respective choice. For another 23 students, their choices are motivated by either their father or mother or any other. Only 2 students have cited financial security as a reason for their choice.

**Table 4.1**  
**Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Prestigious profession/job status	15	14	6	-	35
Likeness for the subject	1	1	8	10	20
Motivated by Others	3	4	6	10	23
Financial security	1	1	-	-	2
Total	20	20	20	20	80

Further, it is interesting to find that only engineering and science stream, students cited that they made a choice because of the prestige and status of the profession that may be aspired for in future. Particularly, students from engineering stream are more conscious that their choice of course would fetch an advantage as engineering is considered to be the elite and sought after profession among all other professional streams. Broadly, it may be seen that the engineering is considered to be guarantor of jobs and there is surety of one's' job prospects after passing out of the college. These kinds of beliefs perhaps motivate students towards orienting themselves to choose something that brings dual advantage in future.

On the other hand, it may be noted that most of the commerce and liberal arts students stated that they chose their subjects either due to their liking for the subject or due to the fact that they were motivated by someone around them. What is interesting here is a clear distinction that marks the perception of students of engineering and sciences on the

one hand and those of commerce and liberal arts on the other. However, a few commerce students did mention that they too were attracted towards commerce because it may land them in a prestigious job or profession subsequently. Combining the three streams of engineering, sciences and commerce, the prestige of professions in later life seem to guide them through their choice making process.

Thus, the students who cited those reasons are conscious enough as to why they have chosen something they have not studied before. To a large number of students, characteristic of job prestige is an important or main consideration in choosing their course of study. Examples of these job characteristics are stated as availability of jobs, flexibility in jobs and career paths, and job security over the course of a career. This category appears to focus primarily on the functional/utilitarian outcomes associated with the selected course and subsequent career path. If we look at the articulations of various students, we will understand the complex, but well thought out and socially conditioned process of making choices.

According to a boy of engineering stream, it is important to gain a market degree and also the future location of his professional life. He notes,

*“In choosing engineering, I considered how marketable the degree would be, and what city or area I wanted to be in. I wanted a degree that I could take me anywhere and find a job.”*

Another student of engineering, again a boy, argues,

*“Professionally engineering has job status like I would be known as an engineer, which now a days is more popular. The more popular a profession the more it would be of prestigious nature. In fact, I just want to be such a professional. Such course shortens the duration of struggle in finding a job and I believe it would help me to be placed well. I need not worry for money. In that case I would say it is more prestigious.”*

The student worldviews of the future prospects for their course of choice seem to cut across the gender barriers too. A woman student argues,

*“Why I chose engineering is because its work nature is such that it reflects its demanding nature. In our place, engineering is more desired course because there is lot of works /jobs related to it here. New construction works are taking place and would continue to come. So I thought its better if I equip myself with the skills which would fetch a nice job latter.”*

What this girl is putting forth is that the courses are selected not just because they are prestigious, but also because they offer jobs as soon as they complete their education. This seems a welcome change as sociological literature on girls’ higher education suggests continuing constrains of women’s access into technical and more lucrative fields of higher education. Even other professional courses such as commerce do endorse such a view. For instance, according to a boy in commerce stream,

*“Choosing a subject that brings professional prestige and has job status is important for me. It would help me to experience something new since none in my family have studied such a course before. Everyone likes to be known among friends, in neighborhood and so on.”*

In addition to the prestige and status of a job, the opinion of this student reflects the social status and prestige attached to such courses / choice of courses.

What is interesting to note is that it is not just the prestige or status of being a science student which is determines a student’s choice for science, but it also fulfills the gendered aspirations of girls. As a girl student in sciences argue,

*“I chose science after medicine and was conscious enough to figure out the advantage of it like academics as which would be reflective of my individual personality. There is also something about it that suit girl’s personality. Both professional prestige and job status continues to remain at place.”*

For some others, doing commerce is like dealing with the real world. For instance, according to a boy in commerce stream,

*"I was looking for a course that I could use in the real world. This major provides me with lots of opportunities and lots of variety."*

For others liking for the course is what influenced them in commerce stream to choose the courses. No doubt, a number of the students emphasized the importance of how well the course, and the likelihood of job prospects that will follow upon graduation, guided them towards a course but their likeness for the subject that made them to choose the courses. These students appear to focus primarily on efficacy. A boy from liberal arts stream argues, *"This course seemed like the best match for me. It's easier and fit my personality"*.

As discussed in the literature review, some participants in the current study did mention that they were influenced by the direct or indirect recommendations of people they knew. Advice from family members and others appeared to be the predominant sources of information in their course choice. A girl student from engineering stream observes,

*"I got a feel for this course from my sister, who is six years older and working as a junior engineer."*

Another boy from engineering stream also notes,

*"Familiarity with the profession since childhood motivated me so. My father himself has been an example to me. So it is like following his footsteps."*

Yet another girl from sciences points out: *"I am the only child to my parents. And as usual my parents, particularly my mother feels that I should be trying some best courses, if not medicine, like becoming a professor so to have a good career. In fact, she has been my motivating force all the time."* Another boy from liberal arts notes,



*“My parents felt since there is none from science or commerce background in our family. The best option they felt that I should be doing some easier course like liberal arts. And they are more familiar with it as my elder sister and brothers are already from this course.”*

Thus, the qualitative analysis helps us to understand that course like engineering, sciences and commerce are prestige driven courses. These courses are also considered so as they would be ensuring future job prospects.

### **Family ‘class’ characteristics and their influence on Course Choices:**

The following section would look at in what way educational level and occupational level of father impacts in influencing student beliefs about their course choice. The rationale for taking fathers’ educational and occupational level is that most of the mothers are homemakers. So, there is greater chance for the fathers to be more informed and exercising influence on their wards than the mothers, though such a view may have some limitations. It would look into the dimension of stratification pattern through the reasons of choice. In other words, is there any differential impact of socio-economic background in enabling students to construct their choices?

The distribution of gender in terms of course of study and reasons are shown in Table 4. 2. It is interesting to note that the reason of prestigious profession as well as job status is cited more by the men students (20) than women students (15). This may be interpreted as that men student may be more prone to securing a job that may fetch prestige than the women students, given the patriarchal structure of Assamese as well as Indian society. Further, it may be seen that liking for the subject and motivation drawn from the others is mostly cited by the women students than men students. This means that the women students have their choice of stream through influenced / informed sources more than their men counterparts. In this case, it may be observed that the hidden meaning of prestigious profession as well as job status emerges out of cultural values. Being the only son or the

eldest child in the family may make them prone to choose something that may bring positive financial outcomes.

**Table 4.2**  
**Gender, Areas of Study and Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	Prestigious profession/job status	10	7	3	-	20
	Liking for the subject	-	-	3	5	8
	Motivated by Father/Mother/other	-	2	4	5	11
	Financial security	-	1	-	-	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40</b>
Women	Prestigious profession/job status	5	7	3	-	15
	Liking for the subject	1	1	5	5	12
	Motivated by Father/Mother/other	3	2	2	5	12
	Financial security	1	-	-	-	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40</b>

The findings reveal interesting aspects from the gender perspective vis-à-vis choice of professional streams. Firstly, the choice of engineering profession is seen as prestigious by more men than the women students. All the 10 men students gave their choice for engineering as a prestigious profession as compared to only 5 female students. The reason for this variation is that engineering profession is seen as a high end and complex profession, or, by and large, seen as a domain for the men rather than women. Traditionally, this profession has been dominated by the men compared to women. The complex nature in terms of work environment, safety and security due to technical nature of the engineering jobs and high energy physical strength oriented tasks have also limited participation of women in this profession. However, this trend has been changing over a period of time as the study reveals. Women students are now getting motivated and are even stating that they like the profession, and are motivated to pursue engineering as it gives them financial security as well.

Secondly, with regard to the choice of science course, both the men and women students have laid equal emphasis on the prestige factor. Out of 10, seven students each in both men and women categories highlighted the choice as a matter of prestige. The reasons cited have less to do with liking, motivation or financial security. It may be observed that science has a greater social value for women and female students. Further, it is seen that for women, others mainly siblings/father/mother play encouraging role to see their daughters or siblings to gain such social value along with belief that it provides economic security. From the societal view point, especially for the parents, science courses have greater suitability for women than engineering courses. There is more workplace safety and security and have less of complications of time and place of work.

Thirdly, with reference to the choice of commerce course, it is a mixed bag. Both prestige and liking of the course determined the choice of the course. An equal number of men and women students stated that they chose commerce because of prestige of the course. Parental motivation also seems to have influenced equally men and women students. However, it is interesting to note that five women students went for commerce because they liked it.

Fourthly, the choice of liberal arts has also shown some interesting trends. Out of 10 students each in men and women categories, 5 respondents each have cited that they liked the course and therefore they chose liberal arts and another 5 respondents each chose because of parental motivation. The prestige or financial security seems to have no role to play. It is observed that for many students, liberal arts courses are less complex, more easy going courses to pursue. It has no complexity in terms of theory or practicals. Parents also find it easier for their wards to continue their higher education without much fear of failure or withdrawal.

#### **Father's Educational & Occupational Status and Choice of Course**

Choices of courses have also been analysed in terms of socio-economic variables such as the education and occupational levels of the father. The table 4.3 shows the distribution of students in terms fathers' educational level and their reasons of course choices.

The data reveals that almost all men students from higher fathers' educational status (FES) families stated that it is the prestige attached to the engineering profession which made them a choice for engineering. A significant number of women students from higher FES did offer a similar rationale. What is interesting to note here is that a few higher FES women students were also motivated by the other members of the family and friends, which is not found among the men students. A significant number of men and women students in science courses also stated agreement for the prestige and status of the future occupations that may come their way.

Among those who stated liberal arts and commerce as their choice argued that the liking of the subject was a crucial determinant of their course selection even though their parents had higher FES.

**Table 4.3**  
**Fathers' Educational Status and Reasons for Course Choice**

Fathers' Education	Gender	Reasons	Engineering	Science	Commerce	Liberal Arts	Total
High	Men	Prestigious profession/job status	9	4	2	-	15
		Liking for the Subject	-	-	3	3	6
		Motivated by Others	-	1	2	3	6
		Financial Security	-	1	-	-	1
		Total	9	6	7	6	28
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status	5	4	2	-	11
		Liking for the Subject	1	1	4	2	8
		Motivated by Others	3	2	2	4	11
		Financial Security	1	-	-	-	1
		Total	10	7	8	6	31
Medium	Men	Prestigious profession/job status		2	1	-	3
		Liking for the Subject		-	-	1	1
		Motivated by Others		1	1	1	3
		Total		3	2	2	7
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status		3	-	-	3
		likeness for the subject		-	1	1	2
	Total		3	1	1		
Low	Men	Prestigious profession/job status	1	1	-	-	2
		likeness for the subject	-	-	-	1	1
		Motivated by Others	-	-	1	1	2
		Total	1	1	1	2	5
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status			1	-	1
		Liking for the Subject			-	2	2
		Motivated by Others			-	1	1
	Total			1	3	4	

Further, in case of students with medium level fathers' education, the choice of engineering as prestigious option is not reflected adequately. It only partially reflected among those who opted for science and commerce. In other words, students from families whose father is educated upto middle level, may be less driven by prestige factor than by other considerations in a course like engineering. Career and job prospects are key considerations in such situations. However, investment capacity to take this course may not be ruled out.

In case of students, whose father has lower educational qualification, there is a marginal consideration for the prestige factor, in choosing courses like engineering and science .This is contrary to those with the middle educational levels of their father. This may have to do with first generation men learners who are guided by the desire to earn a good name and position and emerge out of marginal social and economical background. For the parents also, the urge may be to fulfill the desire to see their children pursue a course that is considered prestigious in terms of prospective job opportunities. The same is the case in choice of science stream.

In the case of women students with low educational qualification of father, their chance of choosing courses of prestige seems to be negligible. But their chance in choosing course like liberal arts is more. In the case of men wards, on the other hand, choice of course may be seen as agency of change and transformation and therefore push them to pursue a course which is considered more prestigious for its future job prospects.

**Table 4.4**  
**Fathers' Occupational Status and Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Fathers' Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
High	Men	Prestigious profession/job status	7		-		7
		Liking for the subject	-		1		1
		Total	7		1		8
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status	4	2	1	-	7
		Liking for the subject	1	-	-	-	1
		Motivated by Others	1	2	1	2	6
	Total	6	4	2	2	14	
Medium	Men	Prestigious profession/job status	3	5	2	-	10
		Liking for the Subject	-	-	1	3	4
		Motivated by Others	-	2	2	4	8
		Financial security	-	1	-	-	1
	Total	3	8	5	7	23	
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status	1	5	1	-	7
		Liking for the Subject	-	1	4	3	8
		Motivated by Others	2	-	1	3	6
		Financial security	1	-	-	-	1
		Total	3	6	6	6	22
Low	Men	Prestigious profession/job status		2	1	-	3
		Liking for the Subject		-	1	2	3
		Motivated by Others		-	2	1	3
	Total		2	4	3	9	
	Women	Prestigious profession/job status			1	-	1
		Liking for the Subject			1	2	3
	Total			2	2	4	

### **Father's Occupational Status & Course Choice**

The distribution of in terms of fathers' occupational status and reasons of choice is presented in table 4.4. It is seen that the respondents with higher occupational status of father opted for prestigious streams like engineering, followed by science. Out of 10 men respondents, 7 are of the opinion that they choose professional courses given their higher occupation status of their father like senior administrative officers, engineers, doctors, big contractors, etc, and the desire to continue this lineage or status. Out of 10 women respondents, 4 were of the opinion that they chose a particular stream due to their fathers' high occupational status and family pride. However, for women respondents the choice of their courses is also determined by parental motivation which is directly or indirectly linked to their parental occupation.

Further, it is seen that students whose fathers were in the middle level occupations also made choice mostly due to the prestigious nature of professions in order to raise their family status and position.

Science is more prestigious, followed by engineering and commerce. In the case of students with lower occupational status of fathers, they too opted for courses based on prestige. The factor of prestige is strong for men as they are the hope to bring changes to the family fortune in a situation of lower occupational status of fathers. This is less relevant for women as in a marginal economic situation, the women have limitations to raise the bar of hope and expectation for the family with low occupational level of fathers. Also, the low capability and capacity to invest in higher education leads to 'man / boy hope' factor and the stress is on men to take up courses that may bring prestige by securing a job and a chance for family empowerment.

### **Ethnicity and Course Choice**

The distribution of students in terms of ethnicity and reasons of choice is presented in Table 4.5. It is seen from the table that students from the Assamese community opted for courses



more based on prestige, followed by liking for the subject and parental motivation. Out of 36 Assamese students, 18 opted for courses in engineering, science and commerce based on prestige, but consideration of prestige in engineering and science is more than the commerce streams.

**Table 4.5**  
**Ethnicity and Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Assamese	Prestigious profession/job status	8	8	2	-	18
	Liking for the subject	1	-	3	4	8
	Motivated by Others	2	1	3	4	10
	Total	11	9	8	8	36
Bodo	Prestigious profession/job status	1	3	-	-	4
	Liking for the subject	-	-	2	-	2
	Motivated by Others	1	-	1	2	4
	Total	2	3	3	2	10
Bengali	Prestigious profession/job status	2	1	3	-	6
	Liking for the subject	-	1	-	2	3
	Motivated by Others	-	3	-	2	5
	Financial security	1	1	-	-	2
	Total	3	6	3	2	16
Any other	Prestigious profession/job status	4	2	1	-	7
	Liking for the subject	-	-	3	4	7
	Motivated by Others	-	-	2	2	4
	Total	4	2	6	6	18

For 10 Bodo students, prestige of the courses led them to choose science courses than the engineering courses. The motivation by others is more relevant to choose liberal arts and the liking for the subject to choose commerce stream.

For 16 Bengali students, the prestige of the course led them to choose commerce courses, followed by engineering and science courses. Motivation by others is also a relevant reason to choose science stream, followed by liberal arts. The liking for the subject is strong a reason to choose liberal arts, followed by science for some Bengali students. Interestingly, financial security is also a factor to choose engineering and science streams.

For other ethnic groups, the prestige attached to engineering, science and commerce courses, followed by liking and motivation by others in case of liberal arts and commerce were the reasons.

Fathers' education level and its link with choice of courses and reasons there in are presented in table 4.6, in terms of students' ethnic background. As seen from the table, in the case of Assamese students, higher the status of fathers' education, higher is the stress on prestige as a factor that led to choice of particular courses.

In case of the Bodo students, the higher the fathers' education, the higher were the choices of students to get motivated by others to choose a particular course of study. Moreover, in case of medium educational level of father, prestige of the profession is more likely to be the reason. Interestingly, among the Bodo students there were none from families where father were of lower educational level.

**Table 4.6**

**Fathers' Educational Status, Ethnicity and Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Total</b>
Assamese	Prestigious profession/job status	15	1	2	18
	Liking for the subject	6	-	2	8
	Motivated by Others	9	1	-	10
	Total	30	2	4	36
Bodo	Prestigious profession/job status	2	2		4
	Liking for the subject	2	-		2
	Motivated by Others	3	1		4
	Total	7	3		10
Bengali	Prestigious profession/job status	4	1	1	6
	Liking for the subject	2	1	-	3
	Motivated by Others	3	1	1	5
	Financial security	2	-	-	2
	Total	11	3	2	16
Any other	Prestigious profession/job status	5	2	-	7
	Liking for the subject	4	2	1	7
	Motivated by Others	2	-	2	4
	Total	11	4	3	18

In the case of Bengali students, those with fathers' educational level as high stated that prestige is a key factor, followed by motivation by others, liking for the subject as other reasons. In case of medium level, prestige attached to profession, liking for the subject and motivation by others equally worked as key reasons.

The overall analysis thus suggests that the higher the fathers' educational level, the higher is stress on prestige as a factor in choosing courses across all the students. Same is the with those whose fathers had medium educational level of father.

Table 4.7 presents the distribution of students in terms of fathers' occupational status, ethnicity and the reasons for choosing a particular course. In the case of Assamese students, the higher the level of fathers' occupational status the greater is their stress on the prestige, followed by motivation and liking for the subject. It's true even for those with the medium level occupation of the fathers. The lower the fathers' occupation the higher their tendency to state liking for the subject, followed by prestige of profession. For them, the least important reason is the factor of motivation of others in the family or friends circle that played a key role in choosing a particular course. For these students, immediate family may not work as a motivating factor as they are from lower educational and occupational status.

Further, it may be seen that in the case of Bodo students, the higher the father's occupation, the higher are their motivation to choose a course of prestige. The medium is the level of father's occupation, the higher is the focus on prestige of the profession, followed by liking and motivation by others. In the case of Bengali students, prestige and motivation by others are key factors for the students whose fathers are in higher status occupation.

**Table 4.7****Fathers' Occupational Status, Ethnicity and Reasons for Course Choice**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Total</b>
Assamese	Prestigious profession/job status	11	6	1	18
	Liking for the subject	1	4	3	8
	Motivated by Others	3	6	1	10
	Total	15	16	5	36
Bodo	Prestigious profession/job status	1	3		4
	Liking for the subject	-	2		2
	Motivated by Others	2	2		4
	Total	3	7		10
Bengali	Prestigious profession/job status	1	4	1	6
	Liking for the subject	-	3	-	3
	Motivated by Others	1	4	-	5
	Financial security	-	2	-	2
	Total	2	13	1	16
Any other	Prestigious profession/job status	1	4	2	7
	Liking for the subject	1	3	3	7
	Motivated by Others	-	2	2	4
	Total	2	9	7	18

In the case of medium level occupations of fathers, prestige is the key consideration followed by motivation by others, liking. In the case of low occupational level of father, prestige is the only key factor in choice of course. In order to get an overall view of various indicators in the choice of courses, the correlation analysis is undertaken. The general correlation matrix of the students' course choice is shown in the Table 4.8.

**Table 4.8**  
**General Correlation matrix**

	Did you make any course choice?
Did you make any course choice	1.000
Areas of Study	.151
Father's Education	.062
Father's Occupation	.019
Family Income Monthly	.005
Gender	.113
Ethnicity	.073

The above correlation matrix reveals that all the variable show positive correlation but those correlations are not significant. That means, the choice is made by almost every student in higher education irrespective of their socioeconomic variables. Only difference is that same factors of influence to a larger degree than the others. For instance, in this correlation table, it may be seen gender and ethnicity are correlated stronger than the other variables in terms of the very fact of making a choice. It also suggests that, clearly the higher the fathers' education, higher is the choices for making a choice of higher education course.

## **Part II**

### **Determinants of College Choice**

#### **Review of Literature**

Sociological studies of higher education across the world have noted that several factors influence those seeking higher education, particularly when they decide on which colleges to go to and what factors to consider when deciding which of the colleges or universities they wish to attend (Ranero, 1999). Many a times each preference of college by the students makes certain institutions most sought after and are placed high and prestigious. This also leads to structuring of higher education into hierarchical system into which then allows their (formal and informal) rankings and reputations (Kang, 2004). Individuals intending to enter higher education in those institutions are likely to decide of which course may have individual significance and under what situations. In the words of Litten (1982), college choice is a complex process involving many factors and variables. The choosing patterns may however reflect the differential criteria adopted those spread across different areas of study.

Scholars have conducted a wide range of studies regarding such factors that influence the college selection process. Many researchers refer to the pre-disposition stage as the college aspiration formation stage (Paulsen, 1990). It is said to be characterized by students determining whether they would like to attend college or not. During this stage, certain

background characteristics influence students (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Martin & Dixon, 1991). These influences include socioeconomic status, race, gender, ability, achievement, attitudes, and educational background of parents and peers (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). Student's socioeconomic status is identified to be a strong indicator of college attendance and choice (ibid. ). In general, the socioeconomic status of a student can open doors of access or limit their ability to even consider attending college. In one of the earlier study by Hearn (1984), it was observed that college destination<sup>2</sup> involves mixed influences of the ascriptive factors of race, ethnicity and sex. Blacks, women and lower socioeconomic status students were less likely to attend more selective institutions, and lower socio-economic status students were less likely to attend higher resource and higher cost institutions. Further, it was observed that educationally relevant factors do influence destinations' selectivity in predictably powerful ways. Students whose parents had lower incomes and lower educational attainments, and students who had a larger number of brothers and sisters were all somewhat less likely to go to highly selective institutions.

The interpersonal influences of others, such as parents and peers, have also been found to be involved in students' aspirations to attend college (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen, 1990). Students whose parents begin to encourage them to consider college early in their educational career are more likely to attend college. Students who have friends interested in attending college are more likely to pursue an undergraduate degree as well. Peers who plan to pursue a college degree positively reinforce college choice decisions. There are also personal issues that affect students' decision to attend college. In the study by Abraham & Jacobs (1990), it was found that friends and former students tend to encourage African American applicants to attend a certain university. Family influences are another personal issue that African American students deal with when selecting a college (Horvat, 1996). These students may be persuaded to enroll in a particular college because their parents or other family members attended the same school/college. They may even be encouraged to attend a particular institution because the family wants the student to achieve at a higher level than they did (Abraham and Jacobs, 1990; Freeman, 1999; Sevier, 1992).

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<sup>2</sup> Hearn used the concept of college 'destination' as to him choice assumes a degree of individual control over placement that may not be present for all students.

Studies have also found that a wide variety of colleges are chosen to create an applicant's choice set. The colleges differ in net cost of attending, size of the institution, and institution type (public or private). Other factors are: quality of teaching, facilities and academic support; the overall image and 'reputation' of the institution (as given from siblings, parents, etc.); graduate employment prospects; and location and distance from home. Students' college choice may not be a unilinear process. Students will have different approaches to making their ultimate decision (Matthay, 1989; McDonough and Antonio, 1996; Paulsen, 1990). McDonough and Antonio (1996) described three basic approaches that have been used to study the college selection process; social psychological studies, economic studies and sociological status attainment studies. All three approaches focus on college decision-making influences.

In some other studies, it is found that the cost of attending an institution is also a consideration for students when choosing a particular college. In this regard, Jackson and Chapman (1984) studied high ability students who were in need of financial aid to attend college and the factors that influenced them to attend college. They noted that when deciding between a first choice institution and second choice institution students consider the availability of financial aid as being very influential to their college choice decision. This suggests that financial aid was a major consideration for students and those large amounts of financial aid can move a second choice institution to a first choice institution (Jackson & Chapman, 1984). Paulson made similar observation about college choice in one of his studies. To him (1990),

College becomes less attractive to students when tuition expenses, room and board expenses, and distance from home increase. However, these effects are significantly greater for students at lower income levels and for those with lower aptitude. At higher levels of student income and aptitude, these effects become less important . . . . College becomes more attractive as the availability of financial aid increases, particularly scholarship aid.

However, this effect is reduced for students at higher income levels because they have less chance of receiving financial aids. (pp. 27-28).

Some evidence indicates that financial considerations are weighted differently among diverse groups of students. Further Paulsen (1990) points out that a person is “more likely to apply to, or attend, a high-cost institution” when the “student is female,” the “students’ parents have greater educational attainment,” the “student’s family income is greater,” the “student’s academic aptitude is greater,” the “student academic achievement is greater,” the “student followed a college preparatory curriculum in high school,” and “student educational aspirations are higher” (pp. 55-56). Canale and Dunlap (1996) found that “teacher attributes, areas of study offered, costs and academic reputation were ranked the highest in terms of importance among the list of college characteristics investigated,” after surveying 543 high school senior and juniors in order to determine the relative importance of certain college traits in the choice of a prospective institution.

Some studies focused on the individuals who were most influential in helping students with the college selection process (e.g. high school guidance counselors, parents, college faculty members or alumni from a particular college) (Loewith, 1998; Sevier, 1992). Research has also been conducted on other factors that motivate students to attend college such as being motivated by their aspirations to become an authority in their field, to own their own business, and to be financially stable when they enter the workforce (Wenglinsky, 1996).

The academic reputation of an institution can also be very important to students. They expect to acquire knowledge and skills in a particular field so they will be marketable for the jobs they want to pursue. Attending a college that has an excellent reputation for a specific academic program such as engineering or business will assist them in achieving their goal (Canale et al., 1996; Sevier, 1992). Students also see academic reputation as leading to more job opportunities for them (Freeman, 1999).



In order to ascertain the various factors associated with choice of colleges, students from all the streams/course were asked to reflect upon their reasons for choice of colleges. They were asked whether they exercised any choice of colleges post higher secondary. It is interesting to note that all the students responded that they did exercise a choice of college. They were asked further the reasons about the choice of present colleges. In all, four factors – reputation/brand name, better academic facilities, Location, and Affordability - are found to be influencing their choice of the colleges. The colleges considered by the students are all located within the locality of their residences. Emphasis was placed on knowing the reasons in choosing their respective choice of colleges and the differential patterns, in terms of socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity.

### **The Present study**

The general distribution of sample in terms of their reason behind college choice is shown in table 4.9. The data reveals that academic reputation and the brand / label attached to a college was the reason for choosing a particular college. Many argued that the college of their choice was popular and well known in the region and therefore it was the first choice.

**Table 4.9  
Gender, College Choice and Areas of study**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Reason for College choice</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	Reputation/Brand name	5	8	9	5	27
	Better academic facilities	4	2	1	3	10
	Location	1	-	-	2	3
	Total	10	10	10	10	40
Women	Reputation/Brand name	6	7	9	5	27
	Better academic facilities	1	1	-	2	4
	Location	2	1	1	1	5
	Affordability	1	1	-	2	4
	Total	10	10	10	10	40

Secondly, the colleges seem to have been chosen because there were better facilities for study in those colleges in comparison to other colleges in the neighbourhood. A few have also noted the location of the college was the prime determinant in their college choice.

The stream-wise distribution of students in terms of their reasons for college choice reveals that across streams, reputation of the college was the major determinant. A majority of science and commerce students chose the college because it was a reputed college in the region. Most of these students were attending colleges like Assam Engineering College, which have traditionally been regarded as 'good' or 'reputed' colleges in the city of Guwahati. About half of the engineering students stated that they chose the college because it was a reputed college. A considerable number of students in the sample from engineering, science and arts chose the college as the facilities were better in the college.

An equal number of men and women students did suggest that it was reputation that matters. Gender-wise distribution, however, brings out a very interesting finding that more girls than boys pointed out location of the concern for college choice. A few women students have also stated affordability as the reason for their choice of a particular college.

The perceptions of students are worth noting. According to a boy from engineering stream,

*“There is no loss in studying any college, as degree is priority after passing out. But somehow a reputed college having popularity does have assurity of some kind like future job placement. Engineering is an area where value of its degree is determined by a good salaried job.”*

While the student suggests that the aim of going to the college is priority to gain a degree, he also is conscious of the relevance of such degree. For him relevance of a degree get enhanced with the reputation of the college. In the words of another male student from commerce,

*“After passing out from a good college, one expects to try for jobs. In the process, one feels satisfied with the fact wherever one tries at least certification from a reputed college would ensure ones valuability.”*

In fact, liberal arts students believe that there is cultural prestige about reputed colleges. They believe that their significance lies in being the oldest and surviving since long. They are the gateways of shaping personalities, as they believed that the same colleges have produced some famous intellectuals. In the words of a boy in liberal arts stream,

*“There is something about the atmosphere of such colleges. They have been in existence for so long and some of the famous intellectuals have been part of such colleges. It is about feel good factor in being a part of such reputed colleges.”*

The best in the school leaving class ideally begins to think about securing a seat in the most reputed college in the region. According to a girl from science stream,

*“Since school I have known some of the reputed colleges which are good from all sides. And my parents also expected me to study in such popular colleges. Having been a good student definitely suits me to study in reputed colleges. Since the performance has been consistently good, the expected choice becomes the most reputed college. There are also future benefits as the name of the college would definitely bring professional recognition”.*

Another boy from commerce thus points out:

*“My parents’ were particular about the atmosphere. They expected me to study where there is study culture. They just do not want me to waste time with students who are not serious about their study. I should befriend with those who are good at studies. And because of this , they wanted me to study in some good college, where*

*there prevails study atmosphere. For them, the good colleges are the one which are reputed for their academic results.”*

For some, affordability makes an impact in their choice of colleges. It may be understood as time taken to travel from home to college and the expenses incurred on travelling. A liberal arts girl student reveals,

*“It is always an aspiration to be part of a college. When one gets a chance one definitely is not going to leave the opportunity. When everyone is trying for the same, I don’t want myself to be left behind and enjoy the opportunity. So, I chose a college which is affordable in terms of travelling and also closer to home”.*

Another girl from commerce points out:

*“When I informed my parents about the colleges, my mother particularly showed concern about the atmosphere of the colleges. My parents were not bothered whether the college is reputed or not. Only worry shown is whether I would be able to adjust with the college atmosphere. They are too much possessive about me for being the only child.”*

Such arguments indicate that college choice may also be gendered. But this gendered choice of college shows the constrained choice for women students, even when they aspire to study in a college. Thus, a number of factors do influence a student’s choice of the college.

When it comes to the location of a college, students see the opportunities of being a part of a city located college. Infact for students from smaller towns or semi urban areas, the connection between city located college and the chance for future avenues for shaping a better career is what makes them aspired to study in such colleges. A boy from science stream, in this regard thus points out,

*“No doubt, in my town also there are colleges where I could have continued my higher studies. But there is always a difference in locations of the colleges. The motivation to do something new in a small town never arises. There are fewer facilities for career making after passing out from a college. Whereas, being a part of a city located college opens up many avenues. One could avail many facilities like preparing for competitive exams, accessing study material easily, and so on. The motivation about newer things is always high.”*

On the same reason, another boy from liberal arts, argues:

*“My parents felt that I should be exploring better opportunities by studying in a good college in a good place. They feel that there are greater chances of making a better future by getting best education in city located colleges.”*

From this student statement, it appears that choosing a college is also about its goodness and this is seen in relation to a good location where opportunities could be explored for a good future. It also indicates that parental role is influential when a student makes choice about college. As a whole, the college choice involves different negotiation processes, at individual as well as familial level. It is also interesting to find that making choice about colleges takes place within certain contexts.

### **Father’s Educational & Occupational Status and College Choice**

An attempt has been made to see whether certain variables of socio-economic status of the student influence the reasons for college choice. The table 4.10 shows the distribution in terms of fathers’ educational level and reasons for college choice.

It is observed that the higher the fathers’ educational level the greater is the reliance on the reputation of colleges in choosing a college. This is true for both men and women

students, in fact, more for women than men students. Better academic facilities are also cited by students with higher father's educational level as the reason for college choice. Interestingly, a few men and women from higher father's education level family did state that location was the key. What is surprising to note is that two girl students, one in engineering and another in arts, cited affordability as the reason for choosing a college.

**Table 4.10**  
**Father's Education, Gender and Reasons for College Choice**

Fathers' Education	Gender	Reasons	Engineering	Science	Commerce	Liberal Arts	Total
Higher	Men	Reputation/Brand name	4	4	6	3	17
		Better academic facilities	4	2	1	2	9
		Location	1	-	-	1	2
		Total	5	6	7	6	28
	Women	Reputation/Brand name	6	5	7	4	22
		Better academic facilities	1	1	-	-	2
		Location	2	1	1	1	5
		Affordability	1	-	-	1	2
		Total	10	7	8	6	31
	Medium	Men	Reputation/Brand name		3	2	2
Total				3	2	2	7
Women		Reputation/Brand name		2	1	-	3
		Better academic facilities		-	-	1	1
		Affordability		1	-	-	1
	Total		3	1	1	5	
Lower	Men	Reputation/Brand name	1	1	1	-	3
		Better academic facilities	-	-	-	1	1
		Location	-	-	-	1	1
		Total	1	1	1	2	5
	Women	Reputation/Brand name			1	1	2
		Better academic facilities			-	1	1
		Affordability			-	1	1
	Total			1	3	4	

Similarly, all men and almost all women students from families where father's education status is medium relied on reputation of the college to make a choice. The opinions of those from lower father's education choice families are also more or similar. There is, however, not much difference in terms of distribution of other reasons across father's education status and gender.

### **Father's Occupational Status and College Choice**

Table 4.11 presents the distribution of data on reasons for college selection in terms of father's occupational status (FOS) and gender. In terms of the occupational status, we have seen in chapter 2 that most of the students in the sample were from middle level occupations and this goes well with the type of town the students largely come from. Guwahati being not so major metropolitan, largely the middle class constitutes a major chunk. The data reveals that a large number of students from middle stratum of FOS placed importance on the reputation of college for their college choice. Slightly more number of boys than the girls from medium FOS families contended that they chose the college because of its reputation. Similarly, most those with high FOS and also low FOS placed reputation of college as the reason for selecting the college. However, more girls than boys from higher FOS families argued that the reputation of college guided them to choose the college. Theirs, irrespective of the FOS, gender and streams of education, the students largely were guided by the reputation, popularity or brand name of the college to choose their options.

**Table 4.11**

**Fathers' Occupation, Gender and Reasons for College Choice**

<b>Fathers' Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>Commerce</b>	<b>Liberal Arts</b>	<b>Total</b>	
High	Men	Reputation/Brand name	3		1		4	
		Better academic facilities	4		-		4	
		Total	7		1		8	
	Women	Reputation/Brand name	3	3	2	2	10	
		Better academic facilities	1	-	-	-	1	
		Location	2	1	-	-	3	
		Total	6	4	2	2	14	
Medium	Men	Reputation/Brand name	2	6	5	4	17	
		Better academic facilities	-	2	-	2	4	
		Location	1	-	-	1	2	
		Total	3	8	5	7	23	
	Women	Reputation/Brand name	3	4	5	3	15	
		Better academic facilities	-	1	-	1	2	
		Location	-	-	1	1	2	
		Affordability	1	1	-	1	3	
			Total	4	6	6	6	22
	Low	Men	Reputation/Brand name		2	3	1	6
Better academic facilities				-	1	1	2	
Location				-	-	1	1	
Total				2	4	3	9	
Women		Reputation/Brand name			2	-	2	
		Better academic facilities			-	1	1	
		Affordability			-	1	1	
		Total			2	2	4	



## Ethnicity and College Choice

**Table 4.12**  
**Ethnicity and Reasons for College Choice**

Ethnicity	Reason	Engineering	Science	Commerce	Liberal Arts	Total
Assamese	Reputation/Brand name	8	7	7	4	26
	Better academic facilities	2	-	1	3	6
	Location	1	1	-	1	3
	Affordability	-	1	-	-	1
	Total	11	9	8	8	36
Bodo	Reputation/Brand name	-	3	2	1	6
	Better academic facilities	1	-	-	1	2
	Location	1	-	1	-	2
	Total	2	3	3	2	10
Bengali	Reputation/Brand name	-	3	3	2	8
	Better academic facilities	1	3	-	1	5
	Location	1	-	-	1	2
	Affordability	1	-	-	-	1
	Total	3	6	3	4	16
Any other	Reputation/Brand name	3	2	6	3	14
	Better academic facilities	1	-	-	-	1
	Location	-	-	-	1	1
	Affordability	-	-	-	2	2
	Total	4	2	6	6	18

The distribution of students in terms of ethnicity and their reasons for college choice is presented in table 4.12. It is seen from the table that students of all ethnic groups have largely noted that the reputation of the college was the reason for their college choice. A significant number of Assamese and Bengali students have also given due importance to the facilities in the college while choosing a particular college. A few Assamese, Bengali and Bodo students did note that location of the college was also important in choosing the college.

What the data suggest is that irrespective of ethnicity and streams of courses all seem to be relying on reputation and brand of the college while choosing it.

### **Summary**

The overall analysis suggests that the prestige of the profession as well as job status is important reasons for making a course choice. It may be seen that the engineering is considered to be guarantor of jobs and there is an assurance of ones' job prospects after passing out. These kinds of beliefs perhaps motivate students towards orienting themselves to choose something that brings dual advantage in future.

Other factor of SES also has than a very positive influence on the students' choice of courses. What is interesting is that largely the prestige of the course drove those who upheld for engineering, commerce and science, and the liking for the subject drove those in liberal arts to make a choice. Fathers' educational level, occupational status, the gender of the students and their ethnic background did have some influence in citing reasons for choosing a particular course in higher education.

The chapter attempted to discuss differential factors that are at play in making choice about colleges. Among these factors, reputation of colleges has appeared as the prime reason. There are other reasons too like the availability of academic facilities, the location of the college, and the affordability of which determine a students' choice of college. The chapter presented the influence of socio-economic factors in the attribution of reasons for college choice.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Choosing a course and a college represents a major decision in life requiring extensive decision-making over a period of time, especially considering the commitment of time and resources and expectations in such decisions. Studies from time to time have revealed that social and economic factors influence subject or course choices of students entering into higher education. Students and their families use several strategies and methods to arrive at the decisions and offer social, psychological, and economic explanations for such decisions. One needs to know that gender, ethnicity, and social class, etc are crucial in understanding differential access routes.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The present study thus focused on identifying aspects by which undergraduate students select their subjects / colleges post secondary education and the factors that play a role in such choices. It recognizes the influence of pre-college experience on initial course choice and also brings social contexts into the framework, i.e., family influence, gender and ethnicity. What the study assumed therefore is that choosing a subject or a college represents a major life decision and is associated with subjective belief. There are many factors and contexts that students consider integral to that process of selecting a course / college. Such as being from highly educated family may have more advantage in choosing the best course or college, in terms of employment prospects. There could be other possibilities like as part of family tradition to study similar courses / colleges were preferred as it might have brought economic and social prestige over a period of time. Similar pattern may be observed between men and women. At the same time, there is a pattern that signals the link between ethnicity and choice of majors and colleges towards the profession.

The data shows that all, except 18 students out of 80, have noted that they chose the course of study they preferred most, i.e., Engineering, Commerce and Liberal arts. The 18 students who said they are not in their most preferred choice were from science stream and

they preferred medicine mostly, with only two male students of those preferred engineering course, but could not make it due to a variety of reasons. The reason cited for not able to make it to their choice of course is that they have not qualified for their initial choice. All these students have scored 70% and above, and had coaching for the respective exams. Yet, they could not get through the entrance examination conducted for the course, at state and national levels.

It is found that engineering and science stream students cited that they made a choice because of the prestige and status of the profession that may be aspired for in future. Particularly, students from engineering stream are more conscious that their choice of course would fetch an advantage as engineering is considered to be the elite and sought after profession among all other professional streams. Broadly, it may be seen that the engineering is considered to be guarantor of jobs and there is a surety of one's job prospects after passing out of the college. These kinds of beliefs perhaps motivate students towards orienting themselves to choose something that brings advantage in future.

On the other hand, it may be noted that most of the commerce and liberal arts students stated that they chose their subjects either due to their liking for the subject or due to the fact that they were motivated by someone around them. What is interesting here is a clear distinction that marks the perception of students of engineering and sciences on the one hand and those of commerce and liberal arts on the other. However, a few commerce students did mention that they too were attracted towards commerce because it may land them in a prestigious job or profession subsequently. Combining the three streams of engineering, sciences and commerce, the prestige of professions in later life seem to have guided them through their choice making process.

Thus, the students were conscious enough as to why they have chosen something they have not studied before. To a large number of students, characteristic of job prestige is an important or main consideration in choosing their course of study. Examples of these job characteristics are stated as availability of jobs, flexibility in jobs and career paths, and job security over the course of a career. This category appears to focus primarily on the

functional / utilitarian outcomes associated with the selected course and subsequent career path. If we look at the articulations of various students, we will understand the complex, but well thought out and socially conditioned process of making choices.

Further it is found that the courses are selected not just because they are prestigious, but also because they offer jobs as soon as they complete their education. This seems a welcome change as sociological literature on girls' higher education suggests continuing constraints of women's access into technical and more lucrative fields of higher education. Even other professional courses such as commerce do endorse such a view. In addition to the prestige and status of a job, the opinions of students reflect the social status and prestige attached to such courses and also colleges. What is even more interesting to note is that it is not just the prestige or status of being a science student which determines a student's choice for science, but it also fulfills the gendered aspirations of girls.

Liking towards a particular course is what seem to have influenced them to choose a course. No doubt, a number of the students emphasized the importance of how well the course, and the likelihood of job prospects that will follow upon graduation, guided them towards a course but many had also revealed that their likeness for the subject made them to choose the courses. These students appear to focus primarily on efficacy. As discussed in the literature review, some participants in the current study did mention that they were influenced by the direct or indirect recommendations of people they knew. Advice from family members and others appeared to be the predominant sources of information in their course choice.

The findings also revealed interesting aspects from the gender perspective vis-à-vis choice of professional streams. Firstly, the choice of engineering profession is seen as prestigious by more men than the women students. The reason for this variation is that engineering profession is seen as a high end and complex profession, or, by and large, seen as a domain for the men rather than women. Traditionally, this profession has been dominated by men compared to women. The complex nature in terms of work environment, safety and security due to technical nature of the engineering jobs and high energy physical

strength oriented tasks have also limited participation of women in this profession. However, this trend has been changing over a period of time as the study reveals. Women students are now getting motivated and are even stating that they like the profession, and are motivated to pursue engineering as it gives them financial security as well.

Secondly, with regard to the choice of science course, both men and women students have laid equal emphasis on the prestige factor. The reasons cited have less to do with liking, motivation or financial security. It may be observed that science has a greater social value for women and female students. Further, it is seen that for women, others mainly siblings/father/mother play encouraging role to see their daughters or siblings to gain such social value along with belief that it provides economic security. From the societal view point, especially for the parents, science courses have greater suitability for women than engineering courses. They argue that there is more workplace safety and security and have less of complications of time and place of work.

Thirdly, with reference to the choice of commerce course, it is a mixed bag. Both prestige and liking of the course determined the choices. An equal number of men and women students stated that they chose commerce because of prestige of the course. Parental motivation also seems to have influenced equally men and women students. However, it is interesting to note that five women students went from commerce because they liked it.

Fourthly, the choice of liberal arts has also shown some interesting trends. The prestige or financial security seems to have no role to play. It is observed that for many students, liberal arts courses are less complex, easier going courses to pursue. It has no complexity in terms of theory or practical. Parents also find it easier for their wards to continue their higher education without much fear of failure or withdrawal.

In case of students, whose father has lower educational qualification, there is a marginal consideration for the prestige factor, in choosing courses like engineering and science. This is contrary to those with the middle educational levels of their father. This may have to do with first generation men learners who are guided by the desire to earn a good

name and position and emerge out of marginal social and economical background. For the parents also, the urge may be to fulfill the desire to see their children pursue a course that is considered prestigious in terms of prospective job opportunities. The same is the case in choice of science stream. In the case of women students with low educational qualification of father, their chance of choosing courses of prestige seems to be negligible. But their chance in choosing course like liberal arts is more. In the case of men wards, on the other hand, choice of course may be seen as agency of change and transformation and therefore push them to pursue a course which is considered more prestigious for its future job prospects.

It is also seen that the respondents with higher occupational status of father opted for prestigious streams like engineering, followed by science. They choose professional courses given higher occupation status of their father like senior administrative officers, engineers, doctors, big contractors, etc, and the desire to continue this lineage or status. Out of 10 women respondents, 4 were of the opinion that they chose a particular stream due to their fathers' high occupational status and family pride. However, for women respondents the choice of their courses is also determined by parental motivation which is directly or indirectly linked to their parental occupation. Further, it is seen that students whose fathers were in the middle level occupations also made choice mostly due to the prestigious nature of professions in order to raise their family status and position. In the case of students with lower occupational status of fathers, they too opted for courses based on prestige. The factor of prestige is strong for men as they are the hope to bring changes to the family fortune in a situation of lower occupational status of fathers. This is less relevant for women as in a marginal economic situation; the women have limitations to raise the bar of hope and expectation for the family with low occupational level of fathers. Also, the low capability and capacity to invest in higher education leads to 'man / boy hope' factor and the stress is on men to take up courses that may bring prestige by securing a job and a chance for family empowerment.

It is seen that students from the Assamese community opted for courses more based on prestige, followed by liking for the subject and parental motivation. Among Bodo students, prestige of the courses led them to choose science courses than the

engineering courses. The motivation by others is more relevant to choose liberal arts and the liking for the subject to choose commerce stream. For Bengali students, the prestige of the course led them to choose commerce courses, followed by engineering and science courses. Motivation by others is also a relevant reason to choose science stream, followed by liberal arts. The liking for the subject is strong a reason to choose liberal arts, followed by science for some Bengali students. Interestingly, financial security is also a factor to choose engineering and science streams. For other ethnic groups, the prestige attached to engineering, science and commerce courses, followed by liking and motivation by others in case of liberal arts and commerce were the reasons.

Similarly, in terms of the choice of colleges, the study revealed that academic reputation and the brand / label attached to a college was the reason for choosing a particular college. Many argued that the college of their choice was popular and well known in the region and therefore it was the first choice. Secondly, the colleges also seem to have been chosen because there were better facilities for study in those colleges in comparison to other colleges in the neighbourhood. A few have also noted that the location of the college was the prime determinant in their college choice. Stream-wise distribution of students reveals that across streams, reputation of the college was the major determinant.

A majority of science and commerce students chose the college because it was a reputed college in the region. Most of these students were attending colleges like Assam Engineering College, which have traditionally been regarded as ‘good’ or ‘reputed’ in the city of Guwahati. About half of the engineering students stated that they chose the college because it was a reputed college. A considerable number of students in the sample from engineering, science and arts chose the college as the facilities were better in the college. An equal number of men and women students did suggest that it was reputation that matters. Gender-wise distribution, however, brings out a very interesting finding that more girls than boys pointed out location of the concern for college choice. A few women students have also stated affordability as the reason for their choice of a particular college.



Overall, the study revealed that differential factors are at play in making choice about courses and colleges. Among these factors, prestige of the course, the prestige of the future occupations, and the reputation of colleges appeared as the prime reasons/determinants for making choices in higher education. Thus, the study establishes that it is the credentialism that determines a students' choice of courses and college whereby the student aspires to achieve the social status through the attainment of higher educational certification from these prestigious, high status course streams and reputed colleges.

### **Theoretical implications**

The study thus made an attempt to understand the nuances of choice making strategies from a sociological perspective and the findings of the study may be explained in terms of the available theoretical perspectives on the subject. Though there are many perspectives such as Rational Action Theory, Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Weber and neo- Weberian's notion of credentialism , we believe that no single model can explain the intricacies of choice solely. We try and to see what extent the findings of the study draw closer to some of the formulations of these theories. Though we set out the framework of Weberian and neo –Weberian credential theory, the other perspectives may also enrich our understanding drawing theoretical implications of the present study. First, Rational Action Theory model of choice is based on the predominance of agency over structure. Its theoretical origins can be traced to human capital theory (Becker, 1975). According to Rational Action Theory, choices are made after careful consideration and calculation of the expected costs and benefits of the various options. The balance between costs and benefits is defined mainly in terms of the ensuing financial benefits of the 'investment' in higher education, and rational choices are made after careful collection of information so that individuals will maximize the benefits from their choices (Boudon, 1974). Further class differentials in educational attainment are explained by the difference in the costs and benefits that are associated with different educational options perceived by students from different social classes. For him, the benefits associated with each educational option vary with social class because ambition is relative to the social starting point of an individual. For instance, a working class child who wants to be a lawyer must be more ambitious than a middle class child who wants to be a lawyer. Therefore, prestigious

educational options may be essential in avoiding social demotion for middle class students, whereas working class students can avoid social demotion without pursuing such options. This leads to middle class students being more likely to pursue prestigious educational options than working class students at any given level of ability.

Second, for Goldthorpe (1986), class differentiated choices ‘result from different evaluations of the benefits of education, rather than class cultural differences in values’ (p.485). Different evaluations are a result of economic disparities in the society, which leads to different assessment of costs and benefits according to social class. Class differences are a result of the fact that individuals from different social locations will make different evaluations, even if they have the same level of academic achievement. In fact, Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) proposed that the Rational Action Theory framework needs to be supplemented by a consideration of ‘risk aversion’ in relation to downward social mobility. They argue that education is an investment good and that, in the educational market, families are concerned with providing their children with higher education qualifications so that they can hold on to their current social position and avoid downward social mobility.

Third, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework highlights the influence of different forms of cultural, social and economic capital and habitus on choice about higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). He argues that there is a connection between the unequally distributed cultural capital according to social class and educational achievement. Middle-class families are endowed with cultural capital and, because the dominant culture is the culture of the school, middle-class students perform better at school. Pupils of less-advantaged social backgrounds perform less well because they lack the resources that bring familiarity with the dominant culture. Achievement impacts on the way pupils from different social class backgrounds perceive their educational future and consequently on higher education choice. Apart from high achievement levels, the cultural capital of middle-class parents provides them with knowledge of the various trajectories and options within the educational system and strategies for effective engagement with choice at important branching points. Because most middle-class families have members with experience from higher education, they can successfully be involved with and be active participants in the making of choices for their

children's education. They are 'embedded' choosers who view the status of higher education institutions and subjects of study as important and draw on knowledge sources when choosing (Ball & Vincent 1998; Ball, Reay, & David 2002). In this way, higher education choice is one way through which the middle classes reproduce their social advantage. Bourdieu (1986) quotes,

'In the process of higher education choice, parental cultural capital interacts with social capital, the 'aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (p, 248).

Social capital takes the form of the family's social networks and connections with educationally significant individuals. In a way, social capital has been linked both to academic performance, which affects the choice process (Portes, 1998), and to access to information sources that enable the best possible choice. Economic capital, that is, money wealth can be "cashed" in any part of society' (Grenfell & James, 1998).

For Bourdieu, middle-class habitus<sup>3</sup> enables middle-class students to consider higher education in a context of certainty and they 'need not engage in rational computation in order to reach the goals that best suit their interests' (Bourdieu, 1990). Students develop a sense of entitlement based on their family's habitus and social class. To Bourdieu (1990), familial habitus results in a tendency for young people to acquire expectations that are adjusted to what is acceptable 'for people like us' (pp.64–65). All these resources support the formation of a certain familial habitus that provides family members with confidence to make ambitious choices. Contrary to professional middle-class families who utilise their capitals additively to maximise their potentials, for working-class families the fact that they have less economic, social and cultural capital available compared with professional middle-class families usually leads to fewer and less ambitious options to consider for the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Habitus, 'a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which ... functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions', which is developed through experience, also affects educational opportunities and choice processes (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus has the capacity to create expectations and aspirations regarding educational trajectories by shaping, but not determining, life choices (Mills 2008, 82). Because different social groups have different experiences and chances in life, the habitus of each group will be different.

Utilising Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus, Reay (1998, 526) finds that 'middle class young people were engaging with higher education choice in a context of certainty'. In a similar vein, Allatt (1996) argues that the familial habitus of middle-class families endows them with the expectation that going to university is a certainty, while Furlong (1992) found that for many young people choosing to go to university 'was considered to be the norm'. Research has also pointed to the reproduction strategies employed by the middle classes in the choice process. Working within Bourdieu's conceptual framework, Reay and Ball (1998) argue that 'engagement with choice within middle-class families' renders choice as real, multifaceted, tangible and complex', and conclude that choice is a strategy for social reproduction that middle classes use (p. 439). Middle-class parents employ education as a means to reproducing their social advantages. They possess the capital that enables them to direct their offspring towards 'good' universities, since it is not only a question of participating in higher education, but participating in elite higher education institutions and university departments that can lead to enhanced material and symbolic benefits in the labour market (Pugsley 1998).

Finally, the notions of Credentialism of Weber and neo-weberians help us to clearly understand the data in a proper perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, to Weber, education credential represents one form of status culture. And this credential account has its roots in Weberian's notion of competition among groups who each derive their competitive strength from their educational degrees (Brown, 2001) and it is a primary determinant of modern stratification system. Broadly, education may therefore be economic resources, as in the market for occupational skills, a cultural resource in confirming status group membership (King, 1980) and so on. Individuals and groups thus seek to earn credentials in order to enhance not only their competitive position in the job market, but also their means of enhancing their social or cultural capital more generally, along the lines suggested by Bourdieu (1986), it would be reproduction of class inequality. Conventional argument is that credential or status generated through hierarchies/ ranking of subjects and institutions, which could be both given as well as constructed, is the supposed need for the middle classes to find new ways of ensuring the reproduction of their class advantage (Ainley, 1994; cited in Brooks, 2003, p.4). This is quite relevant for understanding the middle class advantage in

access to higher education across the world including India. In India higher education is not only middle class biased, it is urban biased as well.

Brooks (ibid) in his analysis finds that within the class and gender , the notion of education credential varies. In one case he finds that even if the subject is not of one's choice but credential is attained by getting admitted into a prestigious university. In another case, there was relatively unaware of the reputation of higher education institutions, but the status of subjects was of great importance to the applicants. The way in which various subject hierarchies intersected with considerations of university status differs among the young people. Some prioritized the hierarchy of courses over that of institutions; others are more concerned to ensure that they goes to the highest status institution possible. The role of peers and friends is significant in the individual choice about subject and institution.

Higher education is considered to be a delimited field, having its own structures of information and communication. The disparity in distribution of classes, gender and social groups within higher education or across institutions or course has to be understood as the outcome of several stages of decision-making in which choices and constraints or barriers inter-weave. The entrenched disparities in 'participation' in and across higher education are issues of process and structure, and exclusion and 'choice' (Ball *et al*, 2000).

Therefore, the study generates an understanding that multiplicity of factors are at play in the choice making process in higher education. We may conclude that the degrees of disparities in the choice process may emanate due to certain privileges such as social, cultural and economic that one may possess. And it is important for sociologists of education to understand the extent to which these higher education choices vary in terms of one's own social location. It may however be kept in mind that the study has the potential to go beyond the contains of the present study , to capture the nuances of the decision making process and negotiations that students and their families carry out in making their future decisions of higher education choices.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1: Interview Schedule**

#### **Interview Schedule for Students**

##### **A. General Information**

1. Areas of Study:
2. Gender:
3. Language:
4. Type of Schooling:

##### **B. Socio-Economic Background**

5. Father's Education Level::
6. Mother's Education Level:
7. Father's Occupation:
8. Mother's Occupation:
9. Family Income monthly:



**C. Choice of the Student: Course / College**

10. Did you make Course Choice post higher secondary? Yes / No
    - a. If No, why was it?
    - b. What did you intend to study?
    - c. What did you study after not getting your initial choice?
  11. What made you to choose the present course of study?
  12. Did your parents' say anything about your choice of course?
  13. Did you make College Choice post higher secondary? Yes / No.
    - a. If No, why was it?
    - b. Where did you intend to study?
    - c. Where did you study after not getting your initial choice?
  14. What made you to choose the present college?
  15. Did your parents' say anything about your choice of Colleges?
-