

EMERGING PATTERNS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION
IN RURAL ASSAM

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IN RURAL ASSAM

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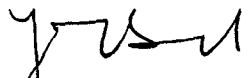
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This dissertation entitled, "Emerging Patterns of Social Stratification in Rural Assam", submitted by Shri Ranajit K. Bhadra, for the degree of M.Phil has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. We recommend that this thesis should be placed before the examiners for their consideration for the award of M.Phil degree.


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-- Ranajit K.Bhadra

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CHAPTER - I

THE FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

The focus in this chapter is on the formulation of the problem to study social stratification in rural Assam. This formulation necessitates an examination of the existing concepts, analyses and descriptions of the patterns of stratification. We have, therefore, to make a review of approaches to stratification and studies on caste, class and power. After making a conceptual assessment of the available researches on social stratification in village India, we have come to realise some gaps which have been the basis of the hypothesis we have formulated in the last section of this introductory chapter.

Though systematic and empirical researches of social stratification have been conducted since the last three decades, one yet finds a lack of uniform definition of social stratification. However, social stratification can be defined in the following way: "It is a particular kind of social differentiation and necessarily conveys the notion of hierarchical ranking, a ranking which produces strata into one of which all members of the society under investigation fall and within which all are equal but between which there are recognised and sanctioned differences which place one higher, or lower, than another in the admitted social order" (Mitchell, 1972, p.182). But social differentiation and social stratification are not identical, because

social differentiation does not involve differential ranking of positions, whereas stratification does. Population in a society is biologically differentiated, so the society is naturally differentiated in age and sex, positions and roles, with their particular rights and duties. This differentiation inherently involves the differential allocation of rights and duties according to the societal needs. But stratification is only one mode of differentiation in the society which is not identical with all forms of social differentiation. Differential distribution of rights, duties and privileges within the family does not constitute social stratification, because differentiations within the family do not go beyond it and the differential positions are equally open to all in due course (Smith, 1966, pp 149, 154). Davis (1949, p.36+) mentions, "...positions based on sex, age and kinship do not form part of the system of stratification. On the other hand, those positions that are socially prohibited from being combined in the same legal family -- viz., different caste or class positions -- constitute what we call stratification." Caste, estate and class are three types of social stratification of which first two are markedly stratified and elaborately institutionalised. Castes are rooted in a ritual institution and status in the institution of law, social classes must be seen to arise from the economy.

Studies on social stratification in India with the multidimensional aspects have not yet been done properly.

Moreover, study of its change in rural society is neglected and direction of the changing social stratification should be undertaken. So far, only one aspect of social stratification, i.e., caste has been systematically and elaborately studied. To get a comprehensive and holistic picture of the Indian social stratification cultural, occupational, economic, political and other dimensions of stratification are to be considered as the part and parcel of the Indian social stratification. However, without going to delineate this aspect in detail here it will be proper to present, in brief, the main trends of theoretical aspects of social stratification both in general and in particular, in Indian context.

Approaches to Social Stratification

The theory for the study of social stratification implies some concepts, propositions and assumptions, that could be verified and validated, and which constitutes an explanatory system. When most of the theoretical approaches to the study of social stratification are analysed with the help of these criteria, it is found that stratification studies rarely go to the level of theory. As a result there are a number of divergences of theoretical approaches to the explanations of social stratification. However, there are two approaches which occupy principal places in the social stratification theory, such as (a) dialectical

approach and (b) functional approach. Marshall (1963, pp. 128-149) draws a distinction between these two approaches and calls "deterministic" or "monodimensional" approach and "multidimensional" approach to social stratification.

According to Marx, stratification system is mainly based on the economic structure of the society. The system of production of a society gives rise to two antagonistic groups: the "haves" and "have-nots," those who own and control the means of production and those who work for the owners. His doctrine rests on the ideology of conflict and the need for violent overthrow of the existing social order. Weber (1970) explains that class is multidimensional rather than purely economic in substance. Alongwith it he has added the dimensions of "status", i.e., social honour and "party", i.e., political power. These three are interrelated and possession of one implies the possession of other two. Thus, though Weber gives a proper shape to the deterministic nature of Marx's theory of social stratification, he is not successful to go far in differentiating his model. There are, perhaps, other dimensions of social stratification such as kinship and ethnic categories which could give wide perspective to the social structure.

Veblen (1934) draws a basic feature of the modern society: the "working class" and the "Leisure class" or "businessmen". He does not deny the class struggle but he feels that class struggle is a conflict of minds, of

mental characters, and of habits of thought. Relations between the classes are imitation or emulation of the upper by the lower. If Marx is "economic determinist", Veblen is "technological determinist", because, he thinks, technology inevitably moulds man's social values.

The functionalists think that stratification is universal, because it is necessary or "functional". It is for the maintenance, integration and continuity of the society as a whole. They believe that different types of roles in the society require different types of skilled and specialist persons for whom rewards are distributed differentially. This differential reward system gives rise to stratification in the society, hence every society possesses certain amount of institutionalised inequality (Davis & Moor, 1966, Merton, 1961).

Stratification as an inherent feature of social organisation has been criticised by several sociologists (see Tumin, 1966; Simpson, 1956; Schwartz, 1955; Buckley, 1958; Huaco, 1963; Wesolowski, 1966). But the functional approach also fails to explain the dynamic nature of the social stratification. Though sometimes it tries to explain it, it is doubtful how far the analysis will be fruitful in analysing the functions and historic changes (Hobsbawm, 1973).

The development and sophistication of both the theories of social inequality suggest that either conflict

or the consensus model is not sufficient to explain the social stratification fully. Moreover, rationalisation of the established social order by the functionalists and prediction of conflict and classlessness in the society by the dialecticians have been proved to be less certain.

Dahrendorf's thesis is a reaction to the dialectical and functional theories of social stratification. He mentions two classes of people, viz., coercive and coerced. He says, "We cannot conceive of society unless we realize the dialectic of stability and change, integration and conflict, function and motive force, consensus and coercion" (Dahrendorf, 1970). These two theories are complementary to each other, but they cannot be combined to form a theory of integration and conflict (Dahrendorf, 1966).

Though these two theorists study two aspects of social reality, none of them tries to make a synthesis of these two to form a single integrated theory of social inequality. Now there is an increasing tendency to examine the social inequality through the convergence of both conflict and consensus models (Sorokin, 1927, Ossowski, 1963). Lenski (1966) is optimistic regarding the synthesis of the two theories by which, he believes, society can be observed through conflict and integration. He defines the study of stratification as the study of the distributive process in society. His concept is based on power, privilege, prestige and need. Whatever may be the progress of synthesis

of theories, today still there is controversy between the two schools regarding their approaches. However, this should be tested in the empirical situation.

Approaches to Caste Stratification

The studies on Indian social stratification are centred around the various aspects of caste system. The phenomena of caste have been approached from two perspectives. One view is that caste system in India is unique and it should be analysed in terms of Hindu tradition, i.e., ideas related to pollution-purity (Dumont, Leach, Pocock). Dumont's (1968) view is that this approach enables us to a better way of looking at the Indian caste system. The other view emphasises on the structural features of caste abstracted from the cultural aspects of Indian civilization. It enables us to analyse caste system in the cross-cultural perspective and to make possible generalisations about it (Bailey, Barth, Berreman). Dumont (1968) believes that it tends to hinder analysis of fundamental aspects of the Indian caste system. Sinha (1968) is of the opinion that a deeper understanding and analysis can be gained by combining these two approaches. He says, "...I would consider it as worthwhile to make a comparative study of social structure of interethnic stratification as it would be to make a cross-cultural study of the concept of intergroup pollution". However, these two types of approaches, i.e., cultural and structural could be formulated as cultural universalistic, cultural particularistic

structural universalistic and structural particularistic (Singh, 1974). Leach (1960) has emphasised the structural particularistic view. According to him caste is to be defined in terms of the system of Indian social organisation both in past and in present contexts and one should restrict caste as an Indian phenomenon only. In the structural universalistic approach Indian caste is viewed as a particular case of general phenomenon of a closed form of social stratification. This view of the cultural universalistic group is that caste is a cultural phenomenon based on ideology or value system, a system of hierarchy forming the basis of ranking among the people and thus culture-based stratification, which is similar to caste stratification, is common among the traditional societies. Here status and honour are the basis of inequality. And caste, in India, is a special form of the general system of status-based stratification. Ghurey (1957), following Weber, emphasises on this approach. The cultural particularistic approach of caste is expressed in Dumont's (1972) work. The structural particularistic approach to the study of caste is most prominent in stratification studies in India.

Caste has been viewed as institutionalised form of inequality with hierarchically stratified hereditary groups for marriage, division of labour, enforcement of cultural norms and values by certain bodies, and performance of rituals based on concepts of purity and pollution. Bogue (1958)

and Dumont (1961) emphasise on the binary opposition and mutual repulsion as the principal features of caste system in terms of "pure" and "impure" which create several divisions in a caste society. This view of caste has been opposed by Sinha (1968), because "pure" and "impure" concepts underlie the hierarchy of occupation and corporate caste status, so "mutual repulsion" cannot be the primary principle in social interaction among the caste groups. He says, "The reality lies in the fact that the jati groups within a caste system are committed to the maintenance of internal boundaries in the caste system as well as to organic inter-caste solidarity." Dumont's (1972; p.35) notions of "System" and "structure" are, as he mentions, "the caste system is above all a system of ideas and values, a formula, comprehensible, rational system, a system in the intellectual sense of the term...our first task is to grasp this intellectual system, this ideology." The jajmani system is based on ritual values rather than on economic logic and the caste hierarchy is based on the concept of "pure" and "impure".

Kroeber (1930) says that caste is an extreme form of class and it is a system of social stratification which is a rigid hierarchical system based on birth ascription and where no individual mobility is permitted. Weber calls it as "closed communities" (Gerth and Mills, 1970). According to Hutton (1969) central foci of caste system lie in

the socio-religious and ritual aspects of the Hindu society. Hocart (1965) offers a definition that "castes are merely families to whom various offices in the ritual are assigned by heredity." Srinivas (1965) says that "purity" and "impurity" principles are the main basis of intercaste relation. One important feature is that there is religious or ritual inequality of caste. The inequality among the members of society which is an essential feature of the caste society is the religious or ritual inequality. At the same time all caste groups constitute a single religious community as Hindu. In some caste studies emphasis has been given on the social solidarity of village life and on power and conflict as well (Srinivas, 1955). Orenstein (1965) shows the social solidarity of the village life, and demonstrates the relationships between it and the potentially centrifugal factors of caste, conflict and power. He writes that "pollution" produces alienation and dehumanization because it creates large differences in caste ranks. Dube's (1967) view is that division of labour among the caste groups is required not only for agricultural activities, but also for socio-religious life. No caste alone is self-sufficient. Interpersonal and intercaste relations are governed by established usage and social ethics. Mathur's (1964) study is an analysis of the functions of religion in terms of caste solidarity. Marriot's (1965) opinion is that caste ranking is a part of social structure. His concept of elaboration of caste ranking reflects that the differences

in the degree of elaboration of caste ranking in various regions in India and Pakistan may be affected by the differences in certain other gross dimensions of community structure.

The problem of mobility in the caste stratification in India is greatly complex. There are two types of hypothetical conceptions regarding it, which are (a) "Mode of production hypothesis" and (b) "Caste resilience and adaptation hypothesis". The mode of production hypothesis refers to the transformation of caste society into class society under the impact of new economic forces like industrialisation, urbanisation, etc. (Davis, 1951). Desai (1969), a Marxist sociologist, says that caste system is a social manifestation of mode of production and ownership of property based on agrarian-feudal complex. So change in the economic structure may bring about a direct blow to other caste characteristics. Though, in these types of social stratification studies powerful theoretical base is present, there is a limitation in objective analysis of stratification due to the lack of empirical studies (Singh, 1974). On the other hand, Srinivas (1968) assumes that nature of caste has undergone considerable changes to adapt itself in the new environment, but caste characteristics have not changed. Beteille (1969) also supports Srinivas's view. But other sociologists assume that caste is gradually losing its original character and possessing class-like feature (Bailey, 1963).

But they do not pay importance to the disappearance of caste and its replacement by class system. However, these studies are based on field materials and analysed with structural-functional perspective. Though their analysis is sound enough on the basis of empirical studies, their theoretical concern is very weak because it has little power for theoretical generalisations (Singh, 1974).

What do we find from all these studies on caste system in India? In all these studies, (caste as an aspect of social stratification has got the principal emphasis, and the ritual aspect is considered as the basis of ranking. This indicates that caste is only ranked vertically and horizontal mobility of the caste groups is impossible. However, there are a very few studies where both these aspects have been dealt with proper emphasis. Most of the studies on caste are holistic in nature and these are inspired by the rigour of empiricism. The authors of these studies have ignored the dysfunctional aspect of the village system, and particularly the role of feudalism, and more specifically land tenure systems on the village people.

Approaches to Class Stratification

There are a few studies where caste as well as other dimensions of stratification such as economic position, styles of life, educational, occupational and political statuses, etc. have been considered (Beteille, 1969). Beteille observes that various institutional structure of

several kinds have emerged which are (a) the growth of money economy as opposed to inherited status, (b) a new type of caste-free occupation, (c) new educational system, and (d) new political structure. It is needless to say that class features in Indian social stratification are organically existing with the traditional caste system, and it is difficult and also not possible to draw a clearcut distinction between caste and class. The caste and class features which are associated and overlap each other should be taken into consideration in the study of social stratification system in India.

However, controversies are still existing in the study of class stratification: whether it should be attributional or interactional and propositional. The attributional study gives emphasis on the rank-order of the classes on the basis of their certain attributes, but the interactional study takes into consideration only the interrelationships of various groups. Attempts have also been made to construct class groupings on the basis of attributional criteria and then interrelationships have been analysed on the basis of interactional perspective between these groups.

Mukherjee (1957) explains the existence of class features alongwith the system of caste and formulates three rural class groups out of the nine occupational categories. These are: (I) Landholders and supervisory farmers, (II) Cultivators, artisans and traders (self-sufficient peasantry)

and (III) Share-cropper, agricultural labourers, service-holders and others. This study of twelve villages in Bengal is an example of the integration of interactional and attributional approaches. He classified occupational groups through attributional approach and formulates three categories of interactional class ranks. He shows that in general the "upper caste Hindus" belong to class I of the economic structure; the "lower caste Hindus" and the Sayyad Moslems to class II; the scheduled castes, the Moslem functional castes, the scheduled tribes and the "intermediate" groups to class III. He observes that the caste and class features go together and the ritualistic basis of stratification only does not determine the hierarchical characteristics. The emerging pattern is that both economic hierarchy and ritual hierarchy go together.

Beteille (1969) observes the dynamic nature of the rural stratification system in Sripuram which, according to him, has acquired much more complex nature. He says that the caste, class and power, which are the characteristics of stratification system of traditional rural society in a cumulative fashion, have, now-a-days, dispersed among the different groups in a non-cumulative manner. The change from cumulative to dispersed inequalities is the important feature of rural social stratification of the present day. His study explains that hierarchy of caste, class and power are independently noticeable in the rural society. Now-a-days higher caste group may not have higher rank in class and

and power hierarchies. Whereas the intermediate castes have improved their economic position and achieved higher power position, the lower castes still remain in the lower economic and power position. Our emphasis is also on caste, class and power dimensions of rural stratification, but we would also analyse the emergence of new cumulative inequalities from the traditional inequalities. Beteille's study has not analysed this aspect of social mobility.

(Bailey's (1972) study in Orissa reflects that the caste which was superior as a land-owning group was politically dominant and enjoyed high ritual status. In the past there was a considerable degree of coincidence between economic, political and ritual ranks of caste. Now land is a marketable commodity and is going to the hands of different caste groups, and the traditional landowning class has considerably lost its economic power. Now-a-days structure of the caste hierarchy is rapidly changing and the landownership does not go together with the caste hierarchy, and there are cleavages between caste and class, caste and power, and class and power.

On the basis of his study in Rajasthan Villages Sharma (1974) finds some changes between caste and class, caste and power, and power and class. Though wealth is a factor for determining higher status, it alone is not sufficient for gaining higher status. He says that the ex-zamindars who have lost their land have gone down in status hierarchy and the ex-tenant peasants who have

accumulated considerable amount of land, since the time of the abolition of the zamindari system, have raised their status. In rural areas the neo-rich peasantry is emerging as bourgeoisie. Some of the ex-zamindars have lost their former class status, and come down in lower class position almost to the extent of what he calls the status of "proletariat". But the Banias who are richer than the Rajputs and Brahmins could not secure equivalent power and prestige.

According to him there is close association between these changes and the traditionally higher castes and classes. The higher caste and class people are in more privileged position to achieve higher education, power and economic status due to their already secured high position; and the lower caste and class people are not able to achieve higher status. So ascription and achievement interplay in status determination and block the way of mobility.

Discussion

The above discussion reveals that in most of the stratification studies principal focus is only on the caste and a very few studies go beyond caste to analyse the phenomena of class and power. The studies on class are also mainly confined to the level of attributional ranking. As a result most of the studies on caste and class have failed to generate wideranging hypotheses. In these studies multidimensional approach has also not been applied properly. A proper application of the pluralistic approach to social ranking

on the basis of caste, class and power can give deeper understanding of both vertical and horizontal cleavages between caste, class and power. The basic assumption here is that status and power are also important and not wholly determined by economic factor; and class, status and power are closely interdependent and none of them can be fully explained without the others. Here, some might argue that Indian caste hierarchy is basically built around the opposition of "purity" and "pollution" (Dumont, 1972). But it is not true, because the existence of economic and political factor cannot be ignored. Beteille (1972, p.7) says, "...it would be wrong to ignore the existence of economic and political distinctions there or even to assign a secondary place to them."

What happens to the rural society under the impact of the various modernisation processes? The "harmonic" nature of the society has been breaking down. Beteille (1974, p.196) says, "In this context a harmonic social system would be one in which there is consistency between the existential order and the normative order; inequalities not only exist in fact but are also accepted as legitimate". Indian society in the past possessed "harmonic" social system where social inequality was not considered as inherently unjust; it was rather matched by an ideology and social sanction (Beteille, 1974). Incongruities also existed in the traditional rural society, but these were also legitimised and accepted by the people, and hence "harmonic". But

at present changes in the traditional economy have brought about changes in the basic structure of the society. Villagers now are engaged in different types of non-traditional occupations. The economy of the society is directly connected with the wider economy of the country, even with the world economy. Participation of the villagers in the wider political sphere through Village Panchayat, State Assembly and Parliament has created "disharmonic" and incongruent structures and relations.

India's rural social system can be viewed as changes from "cumulative" inequalities to "dispersed" inequalities (Beteille, 1969). In traditional rural society "closed" social system existed where class and power went together with the caste hierarchy. Caste society could be said as "closed" system because combination of caste, class and power were more or less fixed. The closeness of caste stratification is associated with the principle of "status summation", say for example, if a caste is high or low in economic scale, it would also be high or low in political, social and ritual scales of the status system (Bailey, 1963). Caste had "organic" character in the past, but today it is becoming "segmental" in nature. The "organic" linkages have been weakened due to changes in the wider society. But classes are social categories occupying specific position in the production system of society. These classes form distinct categories only in the conceptual level and in

reality they do not form discrete groups, because a single person may belong to different groups at the same time (Bete-ille, 1969). Mere existence of classes on the basis of ownership and non-ownership of means of production does not necessarily constitute a basis for communal or political action. But under certain historical conditions they may be organised into groups through political and communal actions. In agrarian society class categories may be of following types: landlord, tenant, agricultural labourer, etc. This class system in many cases overlaps to a considerable extent with the caste system and sometimes it cuts across the caste system in many points. Power is difficult to define and it does not have any well defined boundaries, and it is almost fluid in nature in the rural society. The distribution of power also creates hierarchy in the village society. This hierarchy is also based on status position in respect of high and low. In traditional society distribution of power and economy were subsumed under caste, but both class and power now-a-days are more or less autonomous in character and independent of caste. Now, the economic classes and power status are seen to be existed side by side with the ritual status.

Hypothesis:

The following hypothesis would indicate the gaps in the existing researches on rural social stratification.

1. Our basic assumption is that different segments of

rural society which are hierarchically placed in the community could not have "harmonic" relations. Logically speaking, relations based on inequality of status, rank and differential privileges can never be "harmonic". Hence, patron-client relations were relations of power and high and low ranking.

2. The system, therefore, was not completely "closed" in the traditional India, because the underprivileged, functionaries, tenants, labourers, etc. always protested against the high handedness of the rich patrons and landowners. Cases of spatial mobility in medieval India were not uncommon. "Cultural modernisation" was an accepted process of status emulation. The system of stratification continues to be "closed" and "open" more or less in the same way. The contingent factors, however, have changed to a great extent resulting into mitigation of certain inequalities that existed earlier and creation of some new ones.

3. Logically deriving from the above two arguments, we could propose that inequalities do not have a unilateral direction of transformation, i.e., from "cumulative" to "dispersed"; certain dispersed inequalities existed earlier but became cumulative and some of the earlier cumulative inequalities changed into new type of cumulative inequalities. This point has ^{been} generally ignored.

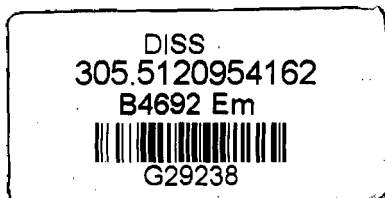
4. Stratification system is not changing from its "organic" character to "segmentary" one. "Organic" implies complete interdependence of different parts, which was not found

always in the older system. "Segmentary" means independence of different units which is not completely true. If it was so, normally we cannot think of exploitation, corruption and other maladies. Thus, "segmentary" and "organic" character of society should be seen contextually more than historically.

5. Stratification as a system of social ranking cannot be understood if we confine our investigation to a single village or a group of villages. One must see the extensions of position one occupies, and power and influence^{one} exercises in an area. Unless this is taken into account, any study on this subject remains incomplete. Most of the earlier researches suffer from this limitation. Our effort would be to take this factor into account when we collect our field materials.

Caste, class and power are also the main foci in our study like some of the studies we have reviewed above. But our approach to stratification would be different from them at least in the following way:

- a) Caste, class and power would be studied independent of each other as parts of overall stratification system in rural Assam. The changes in these aspects of stratification would be analysed individually and independently of each other.
- b) Analysis of change in stratification in terms of



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relationships between two or more variables would be made.

c) Overall system of stratification may be analysed on the basis of the analysis made at the above two levels.

Our study would also be different from the other studies as we propose to study individual, family and group as distinct stratificational units and also family and individual as parts of group and individual and family constituting status groups. Such a scheme of analysis facilitates not only a deeper understanding of mobility in caste, class and power ranking but also provides an opportunity to examine the role of ascriptive- and achievement-oriented principles of status determination.

Rural Assam provides a suitable empirical situation where the above assumptions could be tested. Caste Hindus, Tribals, mixed villages, etc. could be taken up along with a set of variables to examine the above hypotheses. Caste-based stratification could be compared with non-caste (tribal) stratification and the intermediate type (mixed villages having both caste Hindus and tribals) could explain processes of interaction between the two systems of stratification.

The Present Study

The present study is confined to the rural Assam only. Assam consists of six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, viz., Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and the one district of the Surma Valley, i.e., Cachar. Cachar and the eastern half of Goalpara are absolutely inhabited by the

Bengalis and rest of the districts are inhabited by the Assamese. The population of Assam is a mixture of various ethnic groups of both tribals and non-tribals which have given rise to its peculiar social structure different in many respects from the other parts of India. The process of ethnic mixture and its history have been discussed in brief in the next chapter. Tribal as well as feudal institutions existed in the country before the advent of the British. The feudal-based society changed rapidly to a semi-feudal stage under the British rule which brought about considerable changes in the native social structure and organisation. Under the land revenue policies of the British rule the raiyatwari system was firmly established all over the country except the districts of Cachar and Goalpara where zamindari system was introduced. Since independence several land regulations have been enacted. At the same time processes of modernisation and industrialisation have also been affecting the people.

The total population of the province, as stated in the 1971 census, is 7,072,478. Its rural population is extremely high and highest among all the provinces of India, being 6,504,108, i.e., 19.13% of the total population of the province and the urban population is remarkably low being 568,370, i.e., 8.87% of its total population.

This study is mainly based on the materials obtained from secondary sources. These sources include primarily

census reports, historical studies and documents, national sample survey reports, and anthropological and sociological studies. As the information used here is entirely based on the published materials, the analysis has been handicaped partly due to its inadequacy and inaccuracy. Due to ^{the} lack of sufficient materials the present analysis is tentative. However, the proposed hypotheses will be thoroughly examined after we collect adequate data through intensive field work which is part of the doctoral assignment. The present thesis is a long essay on social stratification in general, and rural social stratification in particular with special reference to Assam.

**

CHAPTER - II

ASSAMESE SOCIETY : A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Assam of the present day has passed through several historical and political phases of which three distinct periods can broadly be identified, namely, (1) the pre-British, i.e., the Ahom and its earlier periods, (2) the British period, and (3) the post-independence period. These three periods show marked differences in the Assamese social structure as well as in its stratification system. The British and the post-independence periods with their economic development and process of modernisation of the society have brought about changes in the social structure as well as in the social stratification system. But it does not mean that the pre-British Assamese social structure was static in nature, rather it also went through certain processes of change which were comparatively slower than that of to-day.

The Pre-British Period

Assam has its rich history of thousands of years. In ancient time (in Mahabharata period) it was known as Pragjyotishpura. In the Kalikapurana it was commonly called as Kamrup. Though from the historical evidences it had been found that there was Aryan culture in the base, it was certain that the Mongoloid racial elements were predominant among its population. From the earliest time there occurred a series

of invasions of different groups of people like Kirata, Dravidian, Austric, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tai and Indo-Tibetan to the territory, and gradual intermixture of them composed the present Assamese social structure. The growth of this composite social structure of Assam was significantly contributed by the communities belonging to Indo-Tibetan group (Miris, Mising, etc.), Bodos (Dimasa, Kachari, Rabha, Mech, Tipra, Rajbanshi, Lalung, Sonowal, Morans, etc.), and Tais and the Shans (Ahom, Khamti, Phakiyal, Aitonio and Chutiya) and the Vedic people migrated from northern India and Bengal (Brahmana, Kayastha, Ganaka, Kolita and Luhar, Hojain, Kumhar, Teli, etc.) (Dube, 1972).

In ancient time Hindu population in this region was not so significant. In the 4th century A.D. the Indo-Aryan ruler established his capital in Kamrup. Then the Varnasrama system was established by Vaskaravarman who brought Brahmanas from northern India. Thus significant changes were brought in the social structure. From 1228 A.D. to 1838 A.D. the whole upper Assam was ruled by the Ahom Kings who were the Shan Tribe of Burma. The western Assam was ruled by the Koch Kings roughly ^{from} about 1581 A.D. to 1725 A.D. who originated from the Mongoloid stock. The Kacharis, who were Mongoloid, ruled the eastern Assam up to the south bank of the Brahmaputra. They ruled this land roughly from about 1531 A.D. to 1831 A.D. Another Mongoloid tribe, the Chutiyas also ruled over the upper

Assam in roughly about 13th and 14th century A.D. These historical phases are so important, because it could brought significant changes in the social structure of the natives. During the Ahom and the Koch regimes the Muhammadans invaded Assam as many as fourteen times, but they could not bring any ethnological and racial changes in the local population.

Religious life of the people of the area formed out of the fusion of Hinduism, Buddhism, Tantrism and animism. In the later period Muhammadans had insignificant influence on the Assamese social structure. From the Purana, it was known that there were different Hindu sects like Saktatism, Saivaism and Vaisnavism which spreaded in Assam in much earlier times.

Process of Vedic culture was introduced by some Brahmanas migrated from northern India at about 4th century A.D. Under the Brahmanical influence the local kings (Kachari, Koch, etc.) became Hinduised. After intermixture with the non-Aryan people the Vedic religion underwent enormous changes. Then through gradual process of change Saivaism and Saktatism developed in the country. But they faced great challenge from neo-Vaisnavite movement and declined considerably later on. The Vaisnavism got a strong footing in 15th century during the Ahom regime under the leadership of Sankardev (1549-1630). The rise of neo-Vaisnavite movement was of great importance because

it tried to reform and reorganise Hinduism, and it attracted different tribes and communities within the Hindu fold irrespective of the differences in caste, communities and hierarchies. Sankardev's liberal form of Hinduism (Vaisnaism) was easily acceptable to the different castes, communities and tribes of Assam, and it spreaded among almost all the people of the country. He made vaisnavism in institutionalised form called Satra (Vaisnavite monasteries) and Namghar (temple). The heads of the Satra were known as Satradikar and Gosain who were at the top of social and religious hierarchy. His Vaisnavism gave a great blow to the priestly class and Saktatism, and brought tremendous impact on the Assamese society, which resulted into liberal outlook, less rigidity in the caste system and solidarity among the different ethnic groups of the region. This Satra system is crucial in the social structure even of the present Assamese society.

No doubt, the Varnasrama was present in Assam in ancient time. The kings of Kamrup always tried to preserve the divisions of the society -- Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. In the 7th century . A.D. this varnasrama was first established by the king Vaskarvarman. As the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas were absent in ancient Assamese social structure, it could be said that the classical varnasrama system did not have sound foundation (Dube, 1972). This varna system gradually lost its identity and became synonymous with jati based on birth and heredity. Thus numerous castes had been evolved when numerous arts, crafts and

professions developed. Tribal, racial and religious factors also influenced in increasing its number. But caste system did not have so rigidity regarding food, profession and marriage, and thus numerous subcastes grew up. Compared to north Indian states, caste was always a less rigid system of social relations and the Brahmanas never enjoyed their highest position to the same extent as they did in the north. This fact leads us to think that extra-caste factors played a very important role even earlier, and Assam was never an ethnically homogeneous state. Therefore, a unified consensual system of ranking did not emerge in Assam, hence a study of social stratification is necessitated.

In the 5th century A.D. large number of Brahmanas migrated to Kamrup and they were given land by the kings for their settlement. The social organisation of the Brahmana which was distinguished by Gotras and Veda-sakhas were basically linked with inheritance, marriage, worship, sacrifice, performances of daily sandhya prayer, etc. They lived a holy and righteous life, and practised six fold duties -- yajana, yājana, adhyayana, adhyapana, dana and pratigraha. They daily performed ritual of snana (bath). Besides Vedic studies, they cultivated sciences and arts. They were also related to diverse occupations as ministers, administrators, court poets, etc. The Brahmanas of Assam enjoyed social superiority but they were liberal in their outlook regarding occupations and in observances of different social laws. They followed a rather flexible system which

was less rigid in comparison with that of the other parts of India. They were liberal even regarding food acceptance from the other lower castes (Choudhury, 1966).

Detailed information about the non-Brahmana castes are not available. However, next to the Brahmana there were the Karana and Kayastha who were state officials. The Kayasthas and the Karanas were the same and known as scribes. The Karanas who performed the same vocations as the Kayasthas were gradually absorbed by the latter (Barua, 1969). According to the Visnu Smriti the Kayasthas were royal officials; they wrote the public documents and their office was that of an accountant and scribe. They were similar to a professional class rather than caste (Choudhury, 1966). Choudhury (1966) stated, "In Assam they (Kayasthas) are now given a position next to the Brahmana, and constitute the main priestly class of our society, unlike those of other parts of India". Allied to the Karana and the Kayastha were Lekhakas who were low caste like an oilman from whom food could not be taken by a Brahmana. It was written elsewhere that the Ganaka and the Lekhaka were connected with the work of a judge, and they were twice-born. But Barua (1969) mentioned that they were officers but not members of a particular caste. The Vaidyas occupied the very high position in state and society. In fact, they are absent in present day Assam as a caste. The Ojhas (physicians) of present day Assam may be the descendants of the Vaidyas, but it is doubtful. The Kolitas were predominant caste in Assam. They were the purest Hindu people belonging

to Sudra from whose hands higher castes took water and they were the expert cultivators. They were ranked next to the Brahmana in the same position of the Kayastha. They acted as priest of the Koch and held strong authority over them. Martin said that they were independent of the Brahmana priests (Barua, 1969). The Koches were next to the Kolita in social hierarchy. They belonged to the Mongoloid group of tribe and are regarded as Hindu at present. The Kaivartas were a mixed caste who were agriculturists and fishermen. In Assam they have now two sections -- Halova and Jalova who have become Sudra after adopting Hinduism. There were other professional castes like Kumbhakara (Potter), Tantuvaya (weaver), Nauki (Boatman) and Dandi (tower of boat). The Kumbhakaras belonged to Sudra and at present in Assam they have two groups -- Kumara and Hira. The Hiras were a degraded caste (antyaja) allied to the Kaivarta. They left their traditional occupation of fishing and took up pottery. There were rigidity of social intercourse between the Hira and the Kumara. The Tantuvayas were Sudras. At present they do not have any distinct caste, because all castes here perform weaving. The Haris were antyaja who were related to the Dom and the Chandala. In Assam they have taken up different occupations like trade, agriculture and gold working, and have improved their social position. In the course of history it has been found that some of the non-Aryan tribes are included within the Hindu caste

fold. The most important among them are the Ahom, chutiya, Rabha, Kachari, Mech, Koch, etc. who have adopted Hindu customs and are included in the Sudra group of the Varna system.

In ancient Assam, the caste system also reflected caste-wise segregation of houses. A large grama (village) in ancient Assam included several wards called pataka or pata and each pataka was occupied by a particular caste members who had similar occupations and blood relation among themselves. The Kings of that time frequently granted lands to the Brahmanas to create separate villages for their occupation. These villages were known as agrahara and were made exclusively for the Brahmanas which helped to enforce their caste solidarity. Thus caste-wise residential segregation was one of the characteristics of the caste system of those days. Separate settlements for weavers and merchant (vanik) class were also reported by some historians. These groups had certain amount of autonomy and independence within their own group because they decided their own disputes and maintained peace and order.

In ancient time, under the feudal system kings owned the land of the country. But they sometimes granted lands to the Brahmanas without any tax. However, some unoccupied lands were also possessed by the villagers either individually or corporately. But when the right over lands was recognised, arable lands were held individually and by the family members, but waste land, forests, etc. were held

in common, sometimes by the whole village. The major part of the cultivatable land was cultivated by the agriculturists whose right over it was inherited, subject to the payment of dues and taxes to the Kings' officers. The tillers of the soil were the owners of the land and the kings' right was normally confined to eviction for nonpayment of taxes. In respect of public land, the kings were entitled to sovereignty, but their property right was only on the estate. No such evidence is found where the kings possessed ultimate ownership of the soil. In the true sense, kings' relation with their cultivators was the duty of protection of their subjects and in return they received revenue from them; and so long as the cultivators paid their dues, the ownership of the land remained with them.

During the mediaeval period Vaisnavite movement reached its peak and it was strengthened when the Ahom Kings embraced Hinduism. The gradual spread of Islam in Assam along with the Vaisnavism modified the pattern of social stratification which was based on purely Brahmanical influence. The Ahoms were originally Buddhists but after coming to Assam they embraced Hinduism. || The administrative system of the Ahom, based on the functional groupings, created new pattern of hierarchy in the social system. In this hierarchy royal families were at the top, next position was for the three Gohains (Prime ministers and chief-advisers to the king), then in the third position was the Borphukans followed by others like the Borbaruas, the Borkatakies,

the Phukans, Baruas, Katakies, etc., and then came Hazarikas, Saikias, Boras, etc. This system of hierarchy was more effective during the Ahom period for distribution of power and politics.

The king was at the head of the administration and he was assisted by the other high officials. The succession of these offices were confined to the specific families and the offices were inherited by the son. The king's sons, wives and other relatives were given estates known as mels. After adopting Hinduism the Ahom kings began to patronise the nobles, priests and other officers of the court by making free gifts of land. The lands granted to the temples, and religious and charitable institutions were revenue-free and the owners of these estates were known as Lakhirajdars.

There was no land tax system under the Ahom rule. With the exception of nobles, priests and high caste persons all population were liable to render services to the state as labourers. The nobility had khels or parganas under their control. Each Khel furnished its quota of produce in kind through its own immediate superior. Under this khel the population was divided into gots consisting of four paiks and they were liable to be called upon either as soldiers, labourers or cultivators to work for the king, in return for which each paik got two poorahs of land free of rent.

The nobles possessed large amount of land cultivated by

their slaves. Slave system was prevalent during the Ahom regime. The slaves were not required to work for the state, thus their position was little better than that of the paiks. However, possession of slave is an indication of high social prestige, the slaves being only in the disposition of the nobles and respectable persons. The feudal aristocracy used forced labour to produce surplus food and luxury goods for their use. Only the crown controlled all the trades of the country. Therefore, there was no prosperous class of banyas patronising the new culture. There was no native capitalist in Assam; the artisan was independent and he supplemented his income with the products of his farm (Gohain, 1973).

In the Ahom kingdom there were some junior officers like Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras who constituted the middle class group in between the privileged nobles and the labouring paiks. This group was denied the privileges enjoyed by the nobles, but unlike the paiks this group was exempted from doing compulsory state labour.

In the Ahom kingdom social distinctions between the aristocracy and the common people on the one hand and between the higher and lower castes on the other were noticed. Only the nobles had the right to wear shoes, and to travel in a palanquin. It is reported that persons of humble birth who wished to wear the chaddar, were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder, and not over the right, as the upper

class did. The lower castes were forbidden to keep their hair long. The Ahom Kings and their nobles had right to built brick houses and the common people had to live in thatched houses erected on piles (Gait, 1968).

In Assam Brahmana, Sudra and tribals constituted the hierarchical system, and the absence of Kshatriya king represented an interesting picture. The tribal kings who ruled over Assam for a long time controlled the power and economy of the state, but their ritual rank was in the lowest position of the hierarchical system. But when they understood it, they accepted Hinduism and considerably raised their ritual rank. They patronised the Brahmanas by granting lands and gave sufficient economic support to them for their recognition of high ritual rank. Thus, at least in theory, these tribal kings got social recognition as Kshatriya in ritual rank. In the traditional social structure king and priest were in ^{the} top position and their roles were derived from the caste system based on values of the Hindu society. As a leader king's duty was to protect the caste order by enforcing its obligation on the people and to protect the priestly class for performing religious duty. Both of their offices were complementary to each other; the priest taught the moral norm and the king was obliged to enforce it. The king and the priest acquired the authoritarian quality by birth which had traditional as well as charismatic sanction. This feature of hierarchy was distinct because priestly role was assigned to the

Brahmanas and the kingly role to the Kshatriyas or rulers.

The history of Assam since the ancient time reflects its complex social structure, inequalities and dynamic social process through the different historical phases. In general, it is seen that the caste system in this land was less rigid and one can easily find the border-line between the different castes to be indistinct and not well-defined. It is quite possible in the land where bulk of the population is constituted by the non-Hindus and the tribals. Though in the different historical phases this country was ruled by the different non-Hindus and tribal kings who constituted the great bulk of the Assam population, it had been found that all of them embraced Hinduism under the minority Brahmanical group and entered into the fold of Hindu caste system. But, though all of them have got places in the Sudra varna, their places were in the lower rung of the caste hierarchy. However, during those historical phases the social climate under the pressure of different non-Hindu racial and ethnic groups was such that the normal rigid caste distinctions could not flourish and thrive in it. Probably it seems that the tribal dynasties which came to power gradually one by one in this land destroyed considerably all the barriers and vestiges of castes, and changed it according to their own standard to give harmonic shape to the society of the multi-ethnic and heterogenous population.

The British Period

The Britishers established their ruling power in Assam in 1826 after the Burmese War in 1824 and gradually they occupied the whole country. In 1874 Assam was separated from the government of Bengal and brought under the direct control of chief commissioner. Under the British rule Assam passed through a process of rapid change and development. The Public Works Department in 1868 and Local Board in 1880 were started for the improvement of communication. Roads and transport systems developed gradually. The steamer and railway services were started in 1847 and 1885 respectively. Consequently trade and commerce were established with the distant places and export of indigenous produces started. The principal export goods consisted of mustard seeds, muga silk, potato, etc. Coal and oil mines had been discovered in several places and there was remarkable expansion of the tea industry. The rapid increase of tea and other industries required large number of labourers which were brought from Bengal and other parts of India due to the scarcity of labour supply of the country. In 1923 about 527,000 labourers were recruited in such tea-gardens. Educated people were absorbed in clerical, administrative and medical jobs in tea industries, but as the spread of education was insignificant in Assam most of these officers came from Bengal. Demand for rice of the large number of such employees improved the rice market of the

country, and at the same time several markets grew up and opened the facilities of trade and commerce. Thus land products were sold in the market at a great profit. Tea industry was also another factor for improvement of communication and transport systems into the interior of the country. Many of these migrated tea labourers settled down afterwards as cultivators. In 1923 such labourers held 263,000 acres of land direct from the government and many of them became tenants of private land-holders. In 1921 the total number of migrants and their descendants were about a million, i.e., one-sixth of the total population of the province (Gait, 1963). The changes which occurred during this period were due to spread of modern education, new administrative centres, technology, growth of complex organisations--like bureaucracy, political parties, trade unions, rise of modern professions like legal practice, medical practice, engineering, etc.

For the administrative purposes the British modified the old institutions of the country. The old revenue system of Ahom which was based on only personal services was changed and in 1886 new revenue system based on cash payment was introduced. The British government confirmed the old practice of making the genuine Debottur (temple land) to be revenue free, while bonafide Brahmattur (Personal grants to the Brahmanas for religious service) and Dharmattur (grants to religious communities) grants were made half revenue-paying. Thus Lakhiraj (revenue free) and nisf-khiraj (half-revenue-paying) estates emerged in Assam. Gradually the British established raiyatwari system all over Assam except

the districts of Goalpara and Chachar where zamindari system was introduced. The zamindari system divided the proprietary rights into two -- the right to own and the right to occupy. Absenteeism, a quite natural phenomenon, grew out of it. The land transfer and subletting system created a group of rent-receivers, viz., tenure-holders, jotedars, etc. Under the raiyatwari system also a large number of non-cultivating owners grew up. The subletting system was also widely prevalent in the Lakhiraj and nisf-khiraj estates, and even in the khiraj estates.

The British appointed mouzadars or chouduris on hereditary basis to a particular circle of villages which ensured loyalty and continuity of feudal influence in a different set-up. Since the mouzadar or chouduri was required to be both a man of respect and education, skilled in accounts, the appointments were usually cornered by well-born and rich families from high caste Hindus (Gohain, 1973).

Under the British rule the ruling classes of Assam lost political power and social privileges. Due to the various administrative measures previous feudal structure of the society began to crumble. The quondam nobles found themselves deprived of their old sources of livelihood and had either to content themselves with small appointments under the British government or to sink to the level of ordinary cultivators. There were other reasons^{also}. At the time of the Burmese invasion most of the Ahom nobles and common people left their property and fled to Goalpara. But after that very few of them could recover their old

property and thus they lost their previous socio-economic status and prestige. The British granted meagre pension to many of them, but the rot could not be stopped. On the other hand, (noble aristocracy had deteriorated due to the emancipation of the slaves by the British. David Scott is reported to have released about 12,000 slaves in Kamrup alone (Gait, 1963). Gohain (1973) mentions that the middle class which has emerged in Assam today is not from the ranks of the former nobility. During the British period the facilities of modern education and the new avenues of employment and trade were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the former rulers as their clerks and bureaucrats. In the later part of the British rule rise of political elite was due to the expansion of modern education among the upper caste Hindus. As the political movement increased the old landed gentry was isolated and the new political elite grew up from the educated middle classes and professional groups. Therefore, there was a structural break from the feudal-monarchical character of the traditional elites. These new elites acquired their position due to their professional and educational achievement, but not on the basis of ascribed status. Thus the nobility lost their social privileges and status, and the lower strata got scope for raising their status. The British rule destroyed the feudal characteristics, but not the caste system as such. But the hierarchical system of the society had undergone some remarkable and interesting changes. This dynamic nature of the society is more rapid in the independent India under the impact of various

Governmental policies and modernisation process of the present day.

The Post-independence Period

The post-independence period has brought another historical phase where different trends of rapid modernisation and socio-cultural changes have been noticed. The end of feudal and colonial era in the country have brought tremendous changes and development in the society in different directions. The new national government has been trying to enhance several institutional changes in the society. Firstly, mentionable changes which have been brought in the economy of the rural sector is by the alteration and modification in the land tenure system. The Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Act, 1948 has been implemented to regulate landlord - adhiar (share-cropper) relation. It seeks to give limited security of tenure to the adhiars, to fix the maximum rent payable by the adhiars, to settle disputes between the adhiars and the landlords. The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaris Act, 1951 establishes direct relation between the state and the tenants by abolishing the rights of the intermediaris, and it tries to reform the existing tenures of land by bringing the zamindari areas in line with the raiyatwari areas. The Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956 fixes the amount of land

holding by a person. It tries to reduce the economic inequalities by redistribution of land and encourages the establishment of co-operative farming societies by the landless cultivators. The Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature Act, 1959 tries to acquire lands belonging to the religious and charitable institutions. It helps to extend relation between the state and the tenants of these institutions and distributes the unoccupied lands among the landless cultivators. These land reform regulations are the major sources which have brought economic changes in the rural sector. Secondly, nationalism and political culture of democracy -- these two phenomena have brought serious challenge to the normative structure of the Indian tradition. Nationalism has created rapid politicization in the country. Important changes which are also found in the power structure of the village are due to the abolition of privileges and economic rights of the zamindars and feudals. Decentralization of power of the country and establishment of Panchayati Raj in 1948 have brought considerable amount of new features in the power structure of the village. The post-independence period has given birth of several political parties bearing different ideologies, and direct relation of these parties with the common people and adult franchise have created political awareness among the rural mass. Besides,

the rapid spread of modern education, communication system, etc. have brought considerable amount of changes in the social structure.

These are the institutional factors which have been actively functioning in the country since independence and have brought tremendous impact on the social structure and stratification system of the society. In the following chapters we shall discuss in details about these institutional factors and their impact on the Assamese social structure, and we shall also intend to show how these factors have moulded the stratification system and what are the new features of stratification that have emerged out.

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CHAPTER III

THE RURAL CASTE STRUCTURE

Caste is the principal basis of social stratification among the Hindus. It is unique in India in the sense that the ideas enshrined in the caste system are not found elsewhere in other systems of ranking (Dumont, 1970). Caste as a system of social stratification shares some features with other systems (Berreman, 1968; Barth, 1960). In spite of variations in the manifestations of caste in different regions and linguistic groups, certain common features are purity-pollution, commensality, endogamy, hereditary specialization of occupation, cultural dominance, and domination and power based on hereditary principle. In Assam where ecological peculiarities and different political histories are distinctly present, variations of these caste features must be observable. The four-fold Varna system, in the true sense, did not exist here; only the two varnas, i.e., the Brahmana and the Sudra existed in the past and are still existing. The tribal folks, in the past, did not belong to this varna system; but their population which constituted the bulk of the total population and have, now-a-days, become Hinduised cannot be ignored. Gradually not only they embraced Hinduism but also placed themselves in the

Hindu hierarchical system. On the basis of these regional peculiarities the total population of Assam can broadly be divided into following caste categories: (a) the Brahmana, (b) the Non-Brahmana -- upper caste and lower caste, (c) Hinduised tribal, (d) tribal and (e) the Musalman.

Traditional Caste Hierarchy

I

It has already been mentioned earlier that the historical and ecological factors have created a different type of social stratification in rural Assam compared to other parts of Indian society, and for this reason it is very difficult to draw a typical hierarchical pattern of the Assamese society homologous to other parts. The tribal people were politically dominant in Assam for hundreds of years, but gradually they lost their political authority due to incongruent social and ritual status. Consequently, they tried to sanskritize the social and cultural aspects of their life. Gradually they embraced Hinduism and tried to find a place in the hierarchical system of the Hindu society. But their place in the caste hierarchy is unsettled and at the same time ambiguous. In the following table an attempt has been made to show the hierarchical nature of the rural society in Assam.

TABLE - I

Hierarchical System

| <u>Castes</u> | <u>Traditional Occupations</u> |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| A. 1. Brahmana: | Priesthood, Sanskrit Teaching. |
| 2. Ganaka: | Priesthood. |

| <u>Castes</u> | <u>Traditional Occupations</u> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| B. <u>Non-Brahmanas</u> | |
| (a) <u>Upper Castes</u> | |
| 3. Kayastha | Scribe, Officer |
| 4. Kolita | Agriculture, Scribe |
| (b) <u>Lower Castes</u> | |
| 5. Keot | Agriculture |
| 6. Salai | Agriculture |
| 7. Koch, Rajbanshi | Agriculture |
| 8. Kumar, Hira | Potter |
| 9. Sunri | Trade, Agriculture, Distiller. |
| 10. Kaibarta | Agriculture, Fishing |
| 11. Katani or Jugi | Spinning thread |
| 12. Chandal | Agriculture, Boating |
| 13. Dom | Fishing, Agriculture |
| C. <u>Hinduised Tribals</u> | |
| 14. Ahom | Agriculture |
| 15. Chutiya | Agriculture |
| D. <u>Tribals</u> | |
| 16. Kachari, Rabha | Agriculture |
| 17. Mikir | Agriculture |
| 18. Miri | Agriculture |
| 19. Mech | Agriculture |
| E. Musalman | Agriculture |

In addition to the numerically preponderant caste

groups represented in Table-1, there are some minor caste groups found all over the state of Assam. However, we do not wish to mention about them here.

The ranking of the caste groups (see table-1) including the Hinduised tribals is based on the notion of purity and pollution. Analytically speaking, sacred or ritual status may be distinguished from secular rank. The former is basically ascriptive and ritualistic, whereas the latter is more individualistic in orientation, and therefore, expressed through criteria of wealth and power. First, we intend to discuss the ritual rank and its varied manifestations and activities with reference to our study of rural Assam.

The rural Assamese society could be divided into five broad divisions, namely, (a) the Brahmana, (b) the Non-Brahmana, (c) Hinduised Tribals, (d) the tribals and (e) the Musalman. Each of these broad division can be further divided into subdivisions and also into sub-subdivisions which are also arranged in hierarchical order. This segmentation is necessary as it has social significance in different social situations. These divisions, subdivisions and sub-subdivisions not only explain the complexity and elaborateness of the system, but also status-convergences and status-conflicts between different groups as a result of commensality of status attributes and consensus on the one hand and divergences and conflicting claims on the other.

The Brahmanas

The Brahmanas of Assam are divided into different groups. The indigenous Brahmanas are said to be divided into two subcastes viz., the Baidik and the Saptasati. The Baidik Brahmanas are the descendants of those Brahmanas who refused to accept the reforms of Raja Ballal Sen of Bengal and fled to Assam to settle there. The Saptasati Brahmanas traced their separation from the original Brahmanas at that time. This classification is similar to that of the Daivik and Laukik Brahmanas referred by Srinivas and others (Srinivas, 1966).

The Brahmanas in Assam are also divided as the Vaisnavite and the Tantrik. The Brahmanas of upper Assam are Vaisnavites and they are the descendants of the Kanauja Brahmanas who migrated in Assam in ancient time. In lower Assam, the Tantrik Brahmanas are predominant and their forefathers were brought by the Ahom Kings from the Nadiya district of Bengal during the 17th century. The Tantrik Brahmanas permit themselves to eat meat and drink liquer, but the Vaisnavite Brahmanas are generally teetotallers. These distinctions among the Brahmanas of Assam centre around their being versatile in literary works and ability to keep "ritual" purity by avoiding certain practices which are not considered "pure".

There is also a distinction between the Srotriya

and the Barna Brahmanas, and this distinction arose due to their differential involvement into different types of priestly occupations. The Srotriya Brahmanas are regarded as a better class or group of the Brahmanas because their priestly activities are available for the upper non-Brahmana castes and the five castes of the nine Nava-Sakha groups. The rest of the castes who are rated as comparatively lower are served by the Barna Brahmanas who have degraded themselves by deciding to serve these lower castes. The commensal and connubial relations between these two groups are prohibited. Even the different sections of the Barna Brahmanas do not have such relations. It is in common practice that the priest of the Kaibarta does not marry the daughter of Kumara's Brahmana. This shows that hypergamy among these subdivisions of the Brahmanas is quite a practice as it is found among other upper sections of the Hindu society in other parts of India.

There is another group of the Brahmanas named as Ganaka, who occupy the lowest rank among the Brahmana groups. They are said to be of inferior origin on the mother's side. It is also said that they have degraded themselves by accepting alms from the lower castes. Their main profession is astrology. Their claim is that they are descendants of the original Brahmanas of Assam, but they have downgraded themselves by presiding as priests

over the ceremonies organised by lower castes.

Though the Ganakas are Brahmanas, they are distinctly different from the original Brahmanas in respect of commensal and conjugal relations. Their caste position is ambiguous and at the same ^{time} uncertain. In Assam they enjoy much more honour and prestige than in Bengal. One of the Brahmana Gosains, of one of the great Satras of Assam, has proved in his writings, that Ganakas are brothers of the original Brahmanas.

Though the differences exist among the different segments of the Brahmanas, it is difficult to represent them in hierarchical order. But the case of the Barna and the Ganaka Brahmanas, who are degraded, is different, and they can be placed in a relatively low position in the hierarchical order of different segments of the Brahmanas. However, although the differences exist among the different segments of the Brahmanas, they altogether constitute an undifferentiated unit. With an exception of two groups, namely, the Barna and the Ganaka Brahmanas, who are quite distinct from the rest of the Brahmana groups, no other groups can be identified very distinctly in terms of their styles of life and operation. However, these groups, the Barnas and the Ganakas, occupy the lowest position due to their low ritual status, lack of knowledge about vedic texts and service to the lower caste groups. The Brahmanas as a whole, including

these two groups, are quite distinct and different from the non-Brahmana caste groups.

The Non-Brahmanas

The Non-Brahmanas in Assam comprising a large number of caste groups are more heterogenous than the Brahmanas. In the present discussion attention will be given only to the major castes and subcastes of the non-Brahmana group. Though these different segments and subsegments exhibit different styles of life, some of their features represent a common style of life which is shared by most of them. According to the Varna system next to the Brahmanas come Kshatriyas and Vaisyas respectively, but they are totally absent in Assam. Therefore, it is not unreasonable on the part of the Brahmanas to think the Non-Brahmana group as Sudra, and thus they altogether form a single homogeneous group as perceived by the Brahmanas generally.

The Non-Brahmana group can be divided into two broad groups who have distinct styles of life based mainly on their occupations. These are: (a) upper caste group and (b) the lower caste group. The upper caste Non-Brahmana consists of the Kayasthas and the Kolitas. In Assam the Kayasthas are numerically very insignificant; they are scribes and state officials. The Kayasthas enjoy high social honour and prestige, and are ranked next to the Brahmanas. There are different views about the origin

of the Kayasthas. According to some sources they were Sudras. But today they ally themselves with the Nagar-Brahmanas, who constitute the priestly group in Assamese rural society (Choudhury, 1966, p.314).

Next to the Kayasthas come the Kolitas who are the numerically largest group compared to any other caste. Their social rank is ambiguous. They occupy the position equivalent to that of the Kayasthas in caste hierarchy. The Kolitas claim themselves as the descendants of the Kshatriya ancestors. Another view is that the Kolitas are Kayasthas who have lost caste by putting their hands to the plough. It has also been stated that during the Koch and the Ahom rules they were the religious instructors of the Kings and they were gradually displaced by the Brahmanas from their positions. The Kolitas are the remnants of the earliest Aryan colonists of Assam. In ancient Kamrup they were the important section of the population. Though they are mainly agriculturists, many of them are traders and officers, and now they are considered as the people who occupy the highest position in ritual hierarchy. In Assam valley, they enjoy high social prestige and honour like the Kayasthas and following the Kayasthas they have also adopted sacred thread by which they consider themselves as eligible for marrying the Kayasthas.

The Kayasthas and the Kolitas possess similar customs and styles of life. Though, in theory, they practise endogamy, marriage takes place between the two groups, and the commensal relations are also not prohibited. Thus, the upper-caste group of the non-Brahmanas constitutes distinctly a homogeneous segment different from the lower caste group of the Non-Brahmana on the one hand, and the Brahmanas and the other segments of the Assamese society, on the other.

The cultivators, artisans and servicing castes comprise an economically poor and socially lower status group in the non-Brahmana category. This group is characterised by the heterogeneity of its cultural, occupational and social backgrounds. Though each and every caste belonging to this group possesses distinct culture and style of life, there are certain common elements which constitute more or less undifferentiated style of life representing the lower caste group distinctly different from the upper-caste Non-Brahmanas on the one hand and the Brahmanas on the other.

The Keots occupy the top rank and the Doms are ranked at the bottom in the above group. The other castes which are placed in the intermediate position are the Salai, the Koch, the Kumar, the Katani or the jugi, the Sunri, the Kaibarta and the Chandal respectively from high to low in the hierarchical order.

The Keots, a large agricultural community of Assam, are regarded as one of the respectable Sudra castes. There are different views prevalent about their origin and spread. However, they are said to be related to the Kaibartas. The Keots are divided into a number of subcastes; the Halwa Keots are agriculturists and the Jaliya Keots are fishermen; and the former are superior to the latter. The Halwa Keots, by eating with the jaliyas, may degrade themselves to their level, but the Jaliyas cannot rise to the level of the Halwas by giving up their calling even. In Kamrup, there are Mali and Teli Keots. Besides, there are Kumar Keots, Dhoba Keots, etc. All the artisans belonging to this caste are included in the general form Saru Keots (small or low Keots) and other subcastes are called Uttori Keots who have adopted agriculture and sacred thread. Restriction about marital and commensal relations are strictly followed by all the subcastes, but in upper Assam all Keots are regarded as equal due to the absence of such divisions. It is perhaps due to the lack of caste mobility and fission among the Keots of upper Assam, therefore, divisions within the caste could not develop.

Next to the Keots come the Salais who are agriculturists. They have two subcastes, viz., Patua and Bongali; the latter occupy the lower caste rank and has migrated from Bengal. The Patuas are weavers and breeders of silkworm. The Salais marry girls from the Keots, but the Keots do not marry Salai

girls. This explains hypogamy among these groups, hence asymmetry of rank and status.

The agriculturist Koches had been Hinduised at a very early time. They are regarded as a branch of the Bodo tribe who have Hindu Gosains and priests, and are ranked next to the Salais. The Koches are subdivided into Kamtali or Bar Koch, Sarania Koch and Heremia or Saru Koch. The Kamtalis are regarded as teetotaler Hindus and they abstain from taking pork, fowl and liquor, while the other sub-caste accepts all these foods. A Kamtali does not marry a daughter of Saru Koch, but gives his daughter to the Saru Koch. In this case, the girl is degraded to her husband's rank. This system is opposite to that of hypergamy, and is called as hypogamy. There are also other functional caste groups without reflecting any noticeable distinctions such as Mahang, Garami Koch, Kumar, Kamar and Duliya Koch. These groups do not exhibit any distinction of social status regarding food and marriage. The Prajapati caste of north India can be equated with some of these functional caste groups of Assam having more or less similar status and rank.

A large number of the Koches of Goalpara call themselves as Rajbansi or clansmen of the Raja of Koch Bihar. But they adopted this name in the process of conversion to Hinduism.

The Kumars are a caste of the Nava-Sakha group who enjoy much higher prestige and are ranked equal to that of the

Potter Kolitas. Actually, the Hiras, who are also potters, are placed much below in the hierarchy than the Kumars.

The Hiras are potters and they are known as a subcaste of the Chandals. They differ from the potters serving the higher castes. One of the reasons responsible for their lower status is that their women engage themselves in their work. Secondly, they do not make use of the wheel in manufacturing the earthen vessels. Commensal and marital relations between the Hira and the Chandal potters are strictly prohibited.

The traditional occupation of the Shahas or Sunris was distilling liquor which was regarded as impure. Thus they were placed much below in the caste hierarchy. A few years ago they left this occupation and began to call themselves as Shaha. Their improved economic condition emulated their place in social hierarchy. They have made efforts to raise their social status by claiming themselves as the Sudra or Das caste group. This is a case of sanskritization.

The Kaibartas have two subcastes, namely, Halwa Das and Jaliya. The Halwa Kaibartas are mainly engaged in agriculture and occupy much higher position than the jaliya Kaibartas who still cling to their traditional calling of catching fish. The Halwas are allowed to smoke in the same hookah with members of the Nava-Sakha and

their water is acceptable by other castes except the Brahmanas. But the same privilege is not given to the Jaliya Kaibartas. The social rank of the Kaibartas and the Sunris is a matter of indetermination or ambiguity and it is difficult to place them in hierarchical order in respect of superiority and inferiority, and both the groups claim superiority to each other.

Actual social position of the Katanis or the Jugis is somewhat ambiguous and even their claim to be Hindus is questionable. The genuine persons of this caste eat all sorts of meats and do not have any Gosain. However, a good number of them have taken to agriculture and look down upon their caste members who still practise traditional occupation of spinning. They are divided into five subcastes, viz., the Sarmelas (snake charmers), the Palupohas (rearers of silkworm), the Duliyas (Palki bearers), the Katanis (weavers of silk) and the Thiyapotas (who burry their dead in standing position). Among these subcastes only the Katanis are completely Hinduised. As they are regarded very lower category of Sudra, commensal and marital relations with other castes are ruled out. It seems that the Katanis are akin to the non-Hindu Jugis. As they are Hinduised they are easily distinguished from the latter and enjoy superior status. Assuming their origin from a Brahmana widow the Jugis have adopted sacred thread and refuse to take food and water from any other castes, except the Srotriya Brahmanas, and they have their own priest. Thus the

hierarchical distance of the Katanis or Jugis from the other castes is great.

The Chandals are called Charals in the Brahmaputra valley and they try to hide their caste name by calling themselves as Namasudras. The Chandals are one of the most degraded castes and the Brahmana priests who serve them are also degraded from their original social rank. Their occupation is boating and cultivation. The Napits (barber) who are members of the Nava-Sakha group refuse to shave them.

The lowest position in the Sudra group is that of the Doms who are traditionally fishermen. In Assam, though they are inferior in terms of caste position, they are not regarded, as in upper India, with contempt and aversion. In Assam they do not even indulge in any kind of menial and disagreeable activities; rather they observe a high level of ceremonial purity. In upper Assam the entire caste forms a distinct homogeneous group, but in Kamrup they are divided into two subcastes, viz., the Halwa Dom and the Jalwa Dom. The Halwas are agriculturists and superior to the Jalwas whose calling is fishing.

The Hinduised Tribals

The Ahoms and the Chutiyas constitute a distinct segment in the Assamese society. Their place in the social hierarchy is very complex and ambiguous. They were completely Hinduised at an early period and after adopting Hindu language and customs they completely merged with the

natives. In the present Assamese social structure they are regarded as two distinct castes. But still their position within the Sudra group is unsettled. However, now-a-days people of their progressive section, who have sanskritized traditional customs, are ranked next to the Kayasthas and the Kolitas. But in Sibsagar the Chaodanges, a class of the Ahom, still practise their old customs. They do not have any exogamous or endogamous division, but they have some other divisions, some of which formerly denoted rank and formed a hereditary aristocracy, while others were purely functional. These divisions are the Chamua or gentry, the Kheluyas or functional section, Meldaggias or section assigned to the various people who were servants of the royal family. But today the distinctive features and occupations of these divisions are rapidly disappearing.

The Chutiyas, a Bodo tribe, were Hinduised more or less at the same time with the Ahoms and their Kingdom confined to the extreme north-west of the state. When the Ahom defeated them and established their rule in Assam, the Chutiyas had scattered in different districts and after embracing Hinduism they mixed with the Assamese society. They are divided into four groups, viz., Hindu, Ahom, Borahi and Deori. The first two groups are completely Hinduised and superior to the latter two groups. The Hindu Chutiyas and the Ahom Chutiyas are equal in rank and status and

eat together. But the Hindu Chutiyas seem to be superior as they are the earliest converted group, while the Ahom Chutiyas embraced Hinduism only during the Ahom rule. The Borahi and the Deori Chutiyas are so inferior to the Hindu and the Ahom Chutiyas that the marital and commensal relations among them are strictly prohibited. The Deori Chutiyas belong to the priestly group who worship the Hindu Goddesses Durga and Kali, but they do not have any Hindu priest and also do not observe any other Hindu rituals. Dalton (1960, p-77) describes them as a low Hindu caste in Assam, who ^{have} adopted a caste name called Hindu Chutiya to show that they were no longer Mlechhas.

There is a lack of consensus about the position of the Ahoms and the Chutiyas. Both the groups claim themselves to be superior to each other. Though they practise endogamy, marital relations do occur today; and they are liberal in respect of commensality. It seems that they occupy the same position as they intermarry and do not observe commensal restrictions. Thus the structural distance between these two groups is not noticeable; this homogeneity of rank makes them different from other tribal groups of Assam. They are much nearer to the Hindu caste groups and though they are Hinduised, still they practise many of their old tribal customs and beliefs. Thus they form a discrete unit in the Assamese caste system. At present the principal occupation of these two groups is either cultivation or

service which has raised them very nearer to the social rank of the Kayasthas and the Kolitas. The social organisation of rural Assam is different from that of north-India, and the criteria and attributes of social ranking are also different from that of Northern India. This is one of the crucial reasons for us to undertake this study of the patterns of social stratification in this unexplored region.

The Tribals

The next broader segment of the Assamese society which lies at the bottom of the hierarchy is the tribals. Here only the Kacharis, Rabhas, Mikirs, Miris and Meches have been considered for discussion. Though these tribals accepted Hinduism much earlier, still the process of Hinduisation is going on. These people are accepted as an independent group and have their distinctive styles of life, but they do not find a distinctive hierarchical rank in the social organisation. The uniformity of styles of their life separates them from the Hindu caste groups on the one hand and the Hinduised tribals on the other.

The Kacharis, a Mongoloid tribe, once ruled the Cachar Kingdom. At present they are under the process of Hinduisation through emulation of Hindu customs and beliefs. They have two endogamous sub-groups: the Sonowals (goldsmith) and the Thengal (silversmith). Though the former group is Vaisnavite, they do not have any Brahmana priest and take forbidden foods, whereas the other group is more Hinduised

and superior to the Sonowals. In lower Assam subgroups like Char Duaria, Ramsha and Hojai are found among whom inter-group marital relations do not exist. The Kacharis, known as Mahalias, consider themselves superior to the original Kacharis. The Mahalias do not eat with the Kacharis, but in certain cases intermarriage is permitted after certain purification ceremonies.

The Rabhas, who are more Hinduised, are ranked higher than the Kacharis. They have separated themselves from the Kacharis to become Hindu and they marry the Kachari girls, but the latter cannot get Rabhas' girls as wife. The Rabhas have also following sub-groups: Pati, Rangdania, Maitoria, Dahuria and Shonga Rabha. The first three groups are higher than the last two groups in terms of hypergamy and commensality.

Another semi-Hinduised tribal group is that of the Mikirs who are skilled cultivators, and are divided into four sub-groups, viz., Chintong, Ronghang, Amri and Dumarli. The first two groups are superior to the last two groups. Though among these sub-groups intermarriage can take place in theory, in practice it seldom happens. These sub-groups are again divided into several exogamous groups.

Another Mongoloid tribal group, which is also gradually merging with the Hindus, is the Miris, who are basically cultivators. They are divided into two endogamous groups: Barahgam and Dohgam. The Barahgam Miris call themselves

as Rajbanshi. They worship Sankara and Parameswara, and follow Hindu customs to some extent and have given up eating of buffalo meat. Therefore, they feel superior to the Dohgam Miris.

The Meches, who belong to the Bodo group of Mongolian tribe, are closely allied to the Kacharis and it is doubtful whether they are really a distinct tribe or not; but they decline to take food from the Kacharis and the Rabhas. Previously the Meches were divided into several sub-divisions and two of them were wax Swargiariya (the heaven born) and Bangoariya (those who speak in public assembly). The Swargiariyas were the people who claimed superiority towards the common people. But these sub-divisions are now of no use as no endogamy is practised. They are now cultivators and call themselves as Hindus of the Siva sect, and they are worshipers of the Siva.

Musalmanis

The Musalmans also constitute a part of social stratification system in rural Assam and are placed at the bottom of the ritual hierarchy. But they have their own hierarchical system which is more or less similar to that of the Hindus. However, we do not intend to discuss them in detail.

II

Now we shall see how the larger segments of the rural society, viz., the Brahmana, the Non-Brahmana, the

Hinduised Tribals, the Tribals and the Musalman constitute the total hierarchical structure of this society. So far, in the last few paragraphs all the internal sub-divisions and sub-subdivisions of these five larger segments of the society have been discussed with a view to showing the differences among them and their hierarchical structure. The larger segments of the society are as follows:

Table - 2

Hierarchical Order Of The Larger Segments

- A. Brahmana
- B. Non-Brahmana
 - 1. Upper Castes
 - 2. Lower castes
- C. Hinduised Tribals
- D. Tribals
- E. Musalman

In general, ethnic and physical differences are the primary criteria of ranking of these different groups. The Brahmanas and the Non-Brahman upper-castes have fair skin, sharp nose and are moderately taller than other caste groups. It is said that they are discendants of the earlier Aryan settlers, and the upper caste people are proud of it. It was historically proved that the Brahmanas of Assam were descendants of the Brahmanas of north India and Bengal who migrated at an earlier period with their Aryan blood. This is also about the Non-Brahmana upper-castes like the

Kolitas who are supposed to be the earliest Aryan colonists of Assam. The Non-Brahmana lower-caste people are of mixed origin of the Mongoloid and Dravidian stocks. Their black or dark-brown skin colour stands in contrast with the Brahmans, the Non-Brahmana upper-castes and the other lower segments. The Ahoms, the Chutiyas and other tribals, in sharp contrast, stand far away from the Brahmanas and the Non-Brahmana upper-caste groups in respect of the morphological appearance. These tribal groups originated from the Mongoloid stock of people who migrated into this territory at an earlier period. Their Mongolian facial appearance and light-brown skin colour indicate their tribal origin and they are easily distinguishable from the other upper caste people. These distinctive morphological appearances of the different people of different strata have some social values which indicate their origin and honourable or non-honourable positions in the social hierarchy, and each group is well conscious about its appearance. In case of the Non-Brahmana lower-castes this morphological feature does not have so much social value; it is, perhaps, due to their heterogenous cultural and ethnic characteristics.

Generally speaking, the Assamese culture is viewed as homogeneous, but there are distinctive sub-cultures of the various caste groups which possess differential styles of life of their own. These differential styles of life are indicated through their hereditary specialisations

of occupations. These differential occupational patterns have great social values in various spheres of their socio-cultural life.

In the pre-British Assamese society the Brahmanas engaged themselves in the study of Sanskrit language. They were the specialists in Sanskrit literature and writings, and they monopolised priestly occupations. The Kamrup Kings attracted them from other parts of India by extending hospitality and some privileges. Traditionally the Non-Brahmana upper-castes, namely, the Kayasthas and the Kolitas were not in the privileged position to take part in learning Sanskrit language and literature. They involved themselves in learning Assamese language and literature and performing jobs of scribes. But the non-Brahmana lower-castes and the tribals were deprived of such learning and thus they remained as a mass of illiterate people. Thus non-manual works like Sanskrit learning which is related to the religious and priestly professions and the jobs of scribes of the literate upper-caste people bear high social values and prestige; whereas the illiterate lower-caste people involve themselves only in the manual activities which have very low status and prestige. Therefore, the educational hierarchy went with the caste hierarchy which clearly coincided with the occupational specialisation of the groups. But the British administration and the process of modernisation in the independent India have

changed the situation remarkably. Sanskrit learning is no more in vogue. The non-Brahmana lower-castes and the tribals are enjoying equal facilities for education. But, still education among the people of lower-strata is insignificant. The Brahmanas and the Non-Brahmana upper-caste people, due to their privileged social position, are sufficiently educated, though today the situation differs at least apparently.

The economy of the Assamese society is principally based on agriculture. The agrarian groups which are found throughout Assam are the landowner, cultivating tenants and agricultural labourers. It can be said that the Brahmanas and the Non-Brahmana upper-castes are the landowners; the Non-Brahmana lower-castes belong to the category of cultivating owner and tenant cultivator, and the tribal groups are agricultural labourers. Of course, there are exceptions to it. Neither all the Brahmanas and the Non-Brahmana upper-castes are landowners nor all the Non-Brahmana lower-castes are tenants nor all the tribals are agricultural labourers. Some Brahmanas may not have sufficient land for which they have to live on only priestly profession or some other services. Likewise, some Kayasthas and Kolitas principally depend on the official services. But historical evidences proved that the Brahmanas were basically landowners who were given land gifts by the Kamrup kings and the Kolitas were the earliest people of Kamrup who owned much land for their livelihood (Choudhuri,

1966). In course of time, during the British period many of them had been appointed as zamindars and raiyat-holders. On the other hand, all the Non-Brahmana lower-castes are not tenants, because some of them are owner-cultivators or live on their traditional occupations, and same is true also about the tribals some of whom do not engage themselves as agricultural labourers. Most of the tribals live on the economy of Jhum cultivation (slush and burn method) from which they cannot afford their subsistence and for which they have to seek job as agricultural labourers. However, these broad agrarian groups are easily visible in the Assamese society and each of these groups possesses distinct style of life of its own.

Many other differences are found among the Brahmanas, Non-Brahmanas and the tribals which represent their distinct styles of life. These differences are generally found in the observance of ritual activities and purity-pollution. Ritual activities reflect the styles of life of the different groups and even of the sub-groups and sub-subgroups. There are always tendencies among the lower groups to adopt the ritual aspects of the upper groups by which they can raise their individual caste status. In this respect, no group leaves its own traditional rituals unless it gets considerably higher ritual status through adoption of the other. Thus, there is a continuous flow of upward mobility among the lower caste.

groups to achieve higher caste status.

The Brahmanas are regarded as purest among all the castes; their highest ritual status is reflected through the commensal restrictions and the daily ritual activities. In Assam, though remarkable changes have taken place in these aspects, the older generation of the Brahmanas strictly observe the commensal and ritual rules. The Brahmanas perform nitya snana (purification of body), gayatri mantras twice a day before taking meals and sandhyarati. Observance of daily ritual activities indicate their particular style of life which differs from the styles of life of the other caste groups like the Non-Brahmanas and the tribals. Thus, the lower caste groups, who do not follow these rules, are regarded as low on the basis of relatively less pure position. In respect of food the Brahmanas of Assam are not so conservative compared to the Brahmanas of other parts of India. The Vaisnavite group of Brahmanas are non-vegetarian, so also the Saivaite group of Brahmanas. The Brahmanas and the non-Brahmanas take both fish and mutton but not fowl and other meats. But the tribals take all types of fishes and meats. These differences in the observance of daily ritual activities and of the food acceptance have high social and ritual significance. All these castes, while invited in the social ceremonies, do not interdine.

Changes in the Caste Structure

I

Cases of Sanskritization:

The process of sanskritization is the normal way of status elevation. It represents changes in styles of life of the lower castes. The claims made by the sanskritizing groups should be accepted by the higher (dominant) castes. The acceptability by the higher castes increased more with the increase in wealth and economic prosperity. Conflicting claims for the same status are quite common, more particularly due to this process.

The Ganakas are originally Brahmanas, but having served the lower castes they have degraded themselves. In Assam they are not regarded as true Brahmanas by the Brahmanas as well as by the other castes. But they claim social status equal to that of the Brahmanas. These types of conflicting status claims are quite frequent in Assam.

Thus the Halwa Dases have separated themselves from the Kaibartas, and by adopting more respectable occupations and by purchasing brides from among the Kayasthas (a higher caste) they have claimed themselves as Kayasthas. But they have attained a position almost equal to that of the Nava-sakha group. In the same way, the Sunris have succeeded in raising themselves to a position of Kayasthas.

The Rajbansis, who are originally a Koch tribe, are no

more than a section of the Hinduised Koch. A section of the Koches, who have adopted Hinduism, have successfully separate themselves from the original group and raised considerably their status in the social hierarchy.

The Sunris, the traditional distillers, after rejecting their occupation have raised their status considerably in the Sudra rank. They are now traders and agriculturists. The Chandals or the Charals are of the lowest and degraded castes who always try to hide their caste name by calling themselves Namasudras. Risley mentions them as an aboriginal tribe. But in Assam they are considerably higher in rank in comparison to the Chandals of Bengal. They are now agriculturists.

The Jugis are known for eating all sorts of meats. They live without Brahmana Gosain and bury their dead. Thus they are said to have originated from the non-Hindu group. But in Assam their hierarchical status is quite high, and a good number of them have separated themselves from the Jugis and call themselves as Katanis who spin thread. Thus they have placed themselves among the Hindu castes. In the Brahmaputra valley the Katanis are distinct from the Jugis, but in Goalpara district both of them are regarded as equal in status.

The conflicting status claims are also found among the Ahoms and the Chutiyas. Both of them claim

superiority to each other. But the Ahoms are superior to the Chutiyas as recognised by the other caste groups. As these two groups are Hinduised and are descendants of the former ruling class they claim superiority to the Non-Brahmana lower-caste groups. But their caste status is still unsettled. These conflicting status claims are not uncommon among the other tribal groups. The Rabhas, who have distinguished themselves after adopting Hinduism, are a section of the Kacharis. They regard themselves as superior to the Kacharis who still hold their traditionality. Likewise, there are other tribal groups like the Mikir, Miri, Mech, etc. and each of them regard their own group as superior to the others, and to keep their superior status they are in competition for adopting Hindu customs. Thus the conflicting status claims are acting as agents or mediators for bringing the tribals within the Hindu caste fold. .

II

Structural Change:

In the foregoing sections we have already discussed the system of ritual ranking of the present day Assamese society and in this section we intend to see how this system of ranking has emerged today after undergoing several considerable changes within it under the impact of different historical phases.

During the pre-British period, in the traditional Assamese society, the system of ritual ranking was of a different type. Under the feudal rule the king, due to his absolute power, privileges and honour, held considerably high position in the society. In India the Kshatriyas were the ruling caste whose ritual rank was next to the Brahmanas. According to the ideology and value-patterns of the Hindu caste system, communities which held the ruling power enjoyed the Kshatriya status. This was also true in Assam. The tribal kings (Ahom, Chutiya, Kachari, etc.) who were not Kshatriyas also enjoyed status more or less equal to that of the Kshatriyas. The following table 3 depicts the hierarchical pattern that persisted during the pre-British period. In a broader sense, the kings and the priests occupied top

Table - 3
Hierarchical system under the feudal rules

- A. Priests and Kings (Tribals)
- B. Non-Brahmanas.
- C. Tribals.

rank in the social hierarchy. In feudal society the priests taught the moral norms and the kings were obliged to enforce it in the society. Their offices were complementary to each other, and the priests and the kings had authoritarian control acquired by birth and heredity. Thus the tribal kings enjoyed higher status in the society. The tribal kings, who did not belong to the Kshatriya

group, enjoyed much higher position than that of the Non-Brahmana castes. Though the Non-Brahmana caste groups did not fully recognise the superior status occupied by the kings, the tribal kings tried to maintain their higher social position through the adoption of Hinduism which helped them very much to retain their superior status position. Therefore, the superior status held by the tribal rulers is due to the values derived from the Hindu caste system on the one hand, and due to transformation to Hinduism and domination of the rulers over the common people, on the other. The next rank was for the Non-Brahmana caste groups who belonged to the Sudra Varna. Though the tribals were basically non-Hindus, they were not excluded from this hierarchical system; their position was at the bottom of this hierarchy.

The hierarchical system found during the pre-British period had changed considerably during the British and the post-independence periods. During the British period when the feudal structure of the country broke down, the position of the ruling communities had considerably gone down in the hierarchical system. Gradually, the kings lost their economic and political power, and consequently, they lost their honour and prestige in the society due to the loss of direct relation with the Brahmanas who were ritually ranked higher. The ruling tribal communities, who were Hinduised, were gradually placed in the lower

rung of the Sudra Varna; but their rank in the hierarchical system was much higher than that of the other tribals who did not embrace Hinduism.

Since the British period, patterns of the hierarchical system have been altering, and at present the hierarchical system can be shown in the following way (table - 4).

Table - 4

Hierarchical system during the British and post-independence periods:

- A. Brahmanas (priests)
- B. Non-Brahmanas.
- C. Hinduised Tribals (Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, etc.).
- D. Tribals.

Now the Brahmanas are at the top of the ranking system due to the high ritual values of their hereditary priestly profession. The Non-Brahmanas come next in the social rank due to their honourable and privileged social position. The Non-Brahmana upper-and lower-castes, being originally Hindus, have retained their status in the caste hierarchy as it was before. But the ruling communities of the past, who are Hinduised, are now placed next to the Non-Brahmana groups. This change of social rank is, perhaps, due to the change in their social existence from the Kshatriya-profession to the agricultural occupation. As they are no longer rulers, they are not regarded as a

part of the Kshatriya group and lost their former relations with the Brahmanas. On the other hand, the social rank of the tribals is, as it was before, at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The changes, which are also found in the caste structure of the Assamese society, are due to sanskritization of the cultural patterns of some groups. This process of sanskritization is not a new thing in the caste society. This process existed during the pre-British period also. But during the British and post independence periods various forces of modernisation have accelerated the pace of sanskritization.

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CHAPTER - IV

THE RURAL CLASS STRUCTURE

The present discussion is confined to the rural class structure and changes in it under the impact of the three different historical phases.

The Rural Class-Structure In The Pre-British Period

During the pre-British period, in Assam, agriculture was the principal mode of production of the society. Organisation of the agrarian production was based on the functional division of caste system. There was functional equilibrium between these caste divisions and the divisions of the agrarian productive organisation under feudalism. The class categories, which existed in Assam during the feudal period had already been discussed (see chapter II). Here we would like to see only the agrarian classes of those days. The class categories, in fact, were absent in the Pre-British period due to the absence of class relations as such among the agrarian groups. Under feudalism no class of landed nobility with proprietary rights over land ever existed (Desai, 1966). Nevertheless, agrarian groups existed in those days where the villagers cultivated land and the feudal nobles got share of the produce from them.

The kings' families and their relatives, the nobles

and the Brahmanas had large amount of land in the form of estates under their control. The royal families and the nobles, being placed in the privileged social position, cultivated their land by other members of the society. The Brahmanas of those days were also the estate-holders due to hospitality of the then kings who frequently granted them lands. ^{These} Brahmanas were usually the owners of the Brahmattur, Debattur and Dharmattur lands in the form of large estates. They also cultivated their land by the others (cultivators). Thus naturally the members of the lower strata of the society like the non-Brahmanas and the tribals engaged themselves as cultivators. The nobles had also slaves who cultivated their land. But the system of share-cropping and cultivation by hired labourers were absent in that agrarian economy. The self-sufficient cultivators using a plot of land in the village on a hereditary basis was dominant. It has already been mentioned that, in Assam, as land was plenty and population was less the peasants naturally did not prefer to work as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. On the other hand, as the land production was only for the direct consumption of the members within a particular village there was no external market for agricultural produce. And the village was more or less self-sufficient in its economic sphere. Now it is necessary to find out to what extent Indian traditional village

was self-sufficient in the economic sphere. Many sociologists have already raised this question and disagreed with Marx, Metcalfe and Maine on this point (Beteille, 1969 p.136). In the village community land sale was absent; but land transfer, though not frequent, was present in the form of gift only to the Brahmanas or to the religious organisations.

The Rural Class Structure In The British Period

It was 1826 when the British established ruling power in Assam and since then gradually several institutional changes have been brought in. It has already been discussed earlier (see chapter II) how the feudal structure of the society had broken down under the British administrative policies. Consequently, class structure of the feudal society had altered considerably during that period. The royal families had lost their politico-economic power and had considerably come down in the class hierarchy. Several important factors like the abolition of feudal structure, introduction of private property-right over land and landlordism, disintegration of village community, etc. brought changes in the stratification structure of the society. The new class structure which emerged in that period could be shown in the following way:

Table - 5

Caste and class hierarchy in the
British period

| <u>Zamindar/Mauzadar & Raiyat holder</u> | <u>Tenant, small cultivator</u> | <u>Agricultural labourer</u> |
|--|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. Brahmanas | - | - |
| 2. Non-Brahmana (upper-castes) | - | - |
| | 3. Non-Brahmana (lower-castes) | - |
| | 4. Royal families & their relatives, nobles, (Ahom, Chutiya, Kachari). | - |
| | | 5. Tribals (insignificant). |

With the introduction of the par^{an}ament zamindari settlement in Goalpara and Cachar districts landlordism was established. Under this system proprietorship in land was vested on some zamindars who were native tax-collectors and influential persons. But in all other districts of the province where the individual peasant proprietorship (raiyyatwari system) was established, big raiyats held much land and they were naturally from the non-Brahmana upper-caste groups. The different classes of raiyats recognised in Assam were: (1) privileged raiyat, (2) occupancy raiyat, (3) raiyat holding at fixed rate, and (4) non-occupancy raiyat. In this region

the Brahmanas were not found as raiyats but they held land equal to that of any zamindar or raiyat. This was another kind of land-tenure system where land belonged to the Mathas, Satras and other charity trusts which had been under the direct control of the Brahmanas since the pre-British period. The British made the Debottur land revenue-free and the Brahmattur and Dharmattur lands half-revenue paying estates where the Brahmana owners got the proprietary rights equal to those of the zamindars. The British gave rights of free transfer and absolute ownership in the land, especially in the raiyatwari areas, to the cultivators which they had never possessed before. Thus the village community system was lost for ever; and concentration of land began to take place in the hands of certain privileged sections of the society. The Brahmanas and the Non-Brahmana upper-castes people, being placed in the privileged social and educational positions, emerged as landlords or non-cultivating owners in different feudal set-up. As the zamindars and the religious land-owners had no interest in self-cultivation of their land, a large number of tenants grew up. In the raiyatwari system raiyats were the cultivators of their soil, but in course of time raiyatwari lands were alienated and reached the merchants and money-lenders. Thus gradually in both areas intermediate group, i.e., the tenants grew up. Absenteeism, a quite natural

phenomenon, grew out of such land tenure system. The land-transfer and subletting system created a large number of rent-receivers. So the next category of agrarian class was that of the self-sufficient cultivators, tenants and tenant-cum-cultivators. Naturally the Non-Brahmana lower-castes, who were in the socially unprivileged position, belonged to this group. The most interesting feature found in this category was that the former royal families and their relatives and the nobles who were top in the economic hierarchy had considerably gone down from the previous position and emerged as tenants. Only in Sibsagar district growth of the tenants was significant being 9900 in 1891 and 21,500 in 1901. The agricultural labourers, being placed in the bottom of the class hierarchy, represented themselves as the poorest and most deprived group of people. Though the tribals of Assam were more or less self-sufficient in food-production through the Jhum cultivation, time to time they had to work as agricultural labourers for maintaining their families. But their number was insignificant. In 1905 such labourers were almost absent in Assam, but their growth had been accelerated since the later part of the British rule. This growth was perhaps due to the collection of high land rents by the landowning class from the peasants settled on their estates. Due to ^{the} non-payment of rent

land went to the hands of the landlords or of the merchants which resulted into transformation of the peasants to the agricultural labourers. This change had been brought by other factors directly linked with it. The growth of external trade in Assam affected the relations of production in the agrarian economy. The village production previously possessed only a use-value but during the British period it began to take the character of commodity. The tenancy system created many problems of which insecurity of tenure and rack-renting deserve special attention. The Goalpara Tenancy Act, 1929 and Assam (Temporarily settled districts) Tenancy Act, 1935 were amended to protect the tenants from eviction and rack-renting. The privileged raiyats and the occupancy raiyats were given adequate protection. But the non-occupancy raiyats and the under-raiyats were not given proper protection. So also the adhiars were exposed to eviction. Thus these unprotected agrarian groups were exposed to eviction and rack-renting, and as a result they emerged as agricultural labourers.

Thus it was seen that though the economic structure of the feudal society broke down under the British colonial rule, the previous social strata did not remarkably alter. In the British period social structure still possessed the feudal elements. In this situation actually there was no fundamental change in the character of the economy due to the lack of industrialisation. On the

other hand, under the zamindari system the economy remained as "semi-feudal" in character and the upper-caste groups being landowning class created much more pressure on the producing and servicing caste groups who were under their control. Thus under the severe pressure the producing and servicing castes had begun to come down in the lower economic position and increased the number of the landless labourers.

The rural class structure in the post-independence period

Agrarian stratification in Assam is characterised by the landlords at the top and the landless labourers at the bottom. The tenant cultivators occupy the middle position. Such a system of agrarian relations has been found in other studies as well (see Beteille, 1965).

This class system is a system of social relations and these relations are not of inequality only, these are, sometimes, relations of conflict also which naturally arise from the ownership, control and use of land.

The social organisation of the agrarian system gives rise to various patterns of works and property rights, privileges and duties of the different classes. The structure of agrarian production can be understood on the basis of three types of relations, namely, family labour, hired labour and tenant cultivator. These three, however,

could be found in the same family or unit. . Due to this reason it is difficult to identify different class groupings in the village community. The other problem in identifying the concrete class groupings is that they overlap with the caste divisions. Hence, there are obvious lack of articulation among these class groupings to realise their respective interests. This is all the more true about the agricultural labourers and tenants than the other groups. Beteille (1974, pp.51-53) convincingly shows that the land and other forms of property would be more significant in describing the class structure of Indian rural society rather than the occupational or the income structure which are appropriate for understanding the class structure of the western societies. Here, ownership, control and use of property would surely be helpful for understanding the important features of class structure of the society where land is a fundamental basis of cleavage.

Today the village autonomy has undergone radical changes. Reciprocal relations in agriculture are not operative. Cultivation has crossed its caste bounds. Government's agrarian policies have brought about some important changes in the structure of landownership and process of production. The following changes could be discerned: (1) Newly emerged agrarian groupings have

altered the old class structure, (2) contractual relations have emerged, (3) since agricultural production is not for the village community only, but, for the wider society, cash crop and commercialisation have emerged. We could formulate the following questions: (1) What are the agrarian classes emerging in the rural area? (2) What are the inter-relations among these classes? (3) How these class groups are distinctly identifiable and do not overlap with other structural groupings.

The classes and their relations:

The land tenure system is responsible for creating the agrarian relationship and these relations have changed due to the various changes in the tenural system. The Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Act, 1948 regulated landlords - adhiars relations and gave security to the adhiars. The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaris Act, 1951 and the Assam State Acquisition of Land belonging to Religious or Charitable institution of Public Nature Act, 1959 gave the tenants the rights of self-cultivation and of ownership. The Assam Fixation of ceiling of Landholding Act, 1956 fixed a ceiling on landholding by an individual or a family at 150 bighas. The effects of the land tenure systems are not the same all over Assam. The zamindari areas of Goalpara and Cachar districts were affected much more where all the zamindars, except a few, had lost their land. But the raiyats were not affected so much and most of the medium and small raiyats had retained

their land as it was before. So the petty tenants could not gain anything from it and remained in the same economic position.

The new land-laws adversely affected the proprietors and other intermediaries of the lower income groups by terminating their rights. Moreover, when they lost rights on land, they were not paid reasonable compensation. According to the Act, the zamindars are entitled to keep vast areas of private land under their possession, but the small intermediaries are not in possession of adequate private land. So, due to the abolition of their rights, they lost a permanent source of income and consequently came down in the class hierarchy. On the other hand, the Act is liberal enough to allow a vast area of land (133 acres) under the possession of the big zamindars whereas in West Bengal they are allowed to keep only 25 acres of land. Moreover, the zamindars are allowed to keep about 16 acres of land free of revenue. Due to these reasons we find that even after losing a considerable proportion of land the big zamindars are still in the highest position in the class hierarchy. And on the other hand, the petty zamindars, after losing their land, have come down considerably in the class hierarchy. These changes in the class structure are quite conspicuous features of the agrarian hierarchy of the independent India.

The economy of the rural Assam has undergone some important changes which have been accelerated since the British rule and in the independent India it is relatively

more rapid. Land is still a basic productive source of the rural society, but it is not the only source of livelihood. The growth of towns and cities has further accelerated the situation. The towns and cities as urban, economic, business and educational centres have attracted the rural people. Land has become a marketable commodity and due to the rise of price of land nearer to the towns and cities people have sold it (Goswami, 1967). This feature had emerged due to introduction of the zamindari and raiyatwari systems by the British, and land became a private property, a commodity for sale, purchase and mortgage. It has been observed that the number of cultivators declined in the second generation compared to the first generation among the higher caste groups, and there is also a concomitant rise in the number of service-holders among them. This transfer of agricultural land from their hands has compelled them to take different jobs (Goswami, Ratha, Nisha, 1966).

The urban areas being the main education centres attracted the rural people and naturally the landowning rich families migrated to these areas for education of their children. Education being an expensive proposition cannot be afforded by the ordinary cultivators, tenants and agricultural labourers. So the absentee landlords are very common in the rural areas who live in the urban centres. They are generally educated, highly employed and big merchants, and naturally they are ignorant about the ~~about the~~ agrarian system and can not look after their lands. A considerable decline in the number of households

in the "owner-cultivator" is noticeable, while households under "agricultural labourer", "production other than agriculture" and "salaried jobs" shows a rapid rise. The tempo of urbanisation and industrialisation has increased the facilities of non-agricultural occupations (Goswami, 1963, 67).

In the British period the landowners as a class were more or less uniform in character. But today this uniformity has been disturbed. Though the landowners have sold off their land and land is easily transferable, the landowners continue to be a landowning class. However, we find that different situations have allowed the landowning class to dispose of their land and it is bought by the people of other classes, and specially the small cultivating tenants have availed of this opportunity by which they have considerably raised their economic standards. Thus the ownership of land goes to the people of different class and caste groups. But the poor agricultural labourers cannot increase their landholding and thus remain in the same position. Under the different situations landowners have lost their uniform class characters and emerged as three types of classes. These landowning classes are: (1) The absentee landlords who have left their villages to live in the urban centres. As they do not cultivate their land themselves the tenants cultivate their land. (2) The non-cultivating landlords who still live in the village, but have their land cultivated

by others. (3) The petty landlords live in the village and directly engaged themselves in the agricultural operations. The following tables depict the distribution of the agrarian classes in the two districts of Assam.

Table - 6

Agrarian Classes in Goalpara district
(zamindari area)

| | |
|--|-------------|
| <u>Total No. of household surveyed</u> | 144 |
| <u>Agrarian Classes:</u> | |
| Cultivating owners | 49(34.03) |
| Cultivating Tenants | 9(6.25) |
| Cultivating owners & tenants | 28(19.44) |
| Cultivating owners & rent receivers | 6(4.17) |
| Rent Receivers | 8(5.56) |
| Agricultural labours | 13(9.02) |
| Total: | 133 (78.48) |
| <u>Non-agricultural classes:</u> | |
| Total: | 31(21.52) |

Source: Dutta, N.C. - Land problems and land reforms in Assam, 1968.

Table - 7

Agrarian classes in Sibsagar district (raiyyatwari area)

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------|
| No. of villages | 35 |
| No. of households | 2,682 |
| <u>Agrarian classes:</u> | |
| Owner cultivators | 1,318 (60.40) |
| Tenants | 369 (16.21) |
| Partowners & Part tenants | 490 (22.46) |
| Agricultural labourers | 5 (0.23) |

Source: Sarma, S.C. - "A Survey of the rural economic conditions in Sibsagar", 1952.

From the table-6 it is seen that in the Goalpara district, the ex-zamindari area, the growth of the agricultural classes is conspicuous. This is due to the abolition of the zamindari system in this area. The different agrarian classes which we find here are: rent-receivers (5.56%), cultivating--owners and rent-receivers (4.17%), cultivating-owners (34.03%), cultivating owners and tenants (19.44%), cultivating tenants (6.25%) and agricultural labourers (9.02%). But the district of Sibsagar (Table-7), the raiyyatwari area, shows a different picture. Here the absence of landlords is the main feature in the agrarian class structure, whereas the owner-cultivators are highest in number being 60.40 per cent and the growth of agricultural labourers is considerably less being 0.23 per cent, of the total households. As the raiyyatwari system prevailed

all over Assam, except the districts of Goalpara and Cachar, the large landownership under a few persons did not develop and at the same time, there was very little competition for land in the last century (Goswami, 1963, p.51). The increase of petty cultivators is evident from the census data about private ownership of land since the advent of the British administration in Assam. Such a phenomenon is not absent in the independent India. The following table 8 shows the increase of the number of cultivators from 1951 to 1961 in Assam. The increase of cultivators is 255 to 280 per 1,000 of the total population of Assam.

Table - 8

Increase of the number of cultivators in Assam (Proportion of persons working as cultivators to 1,000 of total population)

| <u>Districts</u> | <u>1951</u> | <u>1961</u> |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Cachar | 153 | 178 |
| Goalpara | 290 | 281 |
| Darrang | 288 | 328 |
| Kamrup | 257 | 248 |
| Lakhimpur | 211 | 268 |
| Nowgong | 253 | 269 |
| Sibsagar | 244 | 292 |
| Assam | 255 | 280 |

Source: Census of India, 1961, Assam, Vol.-III, Part I-A.

The absentee landlords are a type of rentiers who live

in the city and do not enter into any agricultural activities with their tenants. Their separation from the traditional village is due to attainment of western education and better employment in the cities that could raise their status in modern society. Some of them live in the big urban centres and have taken to trade and commerce. These landlords comprise a class of rentiers and intermediaries between the tillers of the land and the government. The landownership right is with these owners of land, hence they deal with the state government. Any dealing by the tenants with the government may result into transformation of ownership right to the tenants. But as the absentee landowners are increasing in number relations between the landowners and the tenants have been undergoing some changes. The same applies to the non-cultivating landlords living in the villages. The change which we find is that these landowners have been transformed into "rural capitalists". But the petty landowning cultivators cultivate themselves and at the same time a part of the land is given on the basis of share-cropping or sub-letting. They engage themselves in the agricultural activities and invest for the productive purposes whenever it is necessary, and employ their family labour or hired-labour for production.

Thus several factors, already described, have considerably reduced the landholding size of the ex-zamindars and the raiyats, and to a great extent, political power of these groups has also been reduced.

Four patterns of relationships emerge as a result of the present functioning of these agrarian groups: (1) Relations between absentee landlords and tenants, (2) Non-absentee but non-cultivating landowners and tenants, (3) Petty landowning cultivators and agricultural labourers and tenants, and (4) Tenants and agricultural labourers. The economic as well as social ties bind the three classes through the agricultural spheres. The tenants as a class may belong to the two categories; sometimes a person may have a small amount of land where he is regarded as landowner and at the same time, he cultivates land of other persons for which he is regarded as tenant. In other case, a person is regarded as a tenant who lives on cultivation of land owned by others. Due to these reasons there is a problem of identification of the class of the people.

There are three different systems of payment of land taxes. These are systems of payment by the tenants to the landowners. First of all, the fixed cash-rent system of payment is widely prevalent in Assam. Secondly, the system of share-cropping is also common which is of two forms, viz., "boka-adhi" and "guti-adhi". The boka-adhi system is of peculiar kind where land is equally divided between the landlord and the tenant. The tenant cultivates both the pieces and the landowner supplies agricultural implements only. Both the parties take the harvest from their respective cultivated land. In the guti-adhi system tenant cultivates the owner's land and the harvest is equally divided between the two parties. The

landowner only pays the revenue of the land to the government and the other expenses for cultivation are borne by the tenant. But the Adhjar Protection Bill passed by the Assam government has reduced the landowner's share, i.e., one third of the crop on condition of supplying seeds and drought animals and one-fourth when the same are supplied by the tenant himself. But still this regulation is not fully implemented. The table 9 given below depicts the real situation. It depicts the terms of share-tenancy where the produce is divided equally. It is seen that about 42.43 per cent of the landlords did not give any assistance to the adhiars, and 43.90 per cent of the adhiars did not get any assistance from their landlords.

Table - 9

Percentage distribution of landlords and adhiars according to terms of tenancy when 50 per cent of the produce is Rent.

| <u>Terms of tenancy</u> | <u>Landlords</u> | <u>Adhiars</u> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Land only | 42.43 | 43.90 |
| Land and seed | 21.21 | 21.95 |
| Land and 1 bullock | 15.15 | 7.32 |
| Land and 1 pair bullock | - | - |
| Land, seeds and 1 bullock | 15.15 | 26.83 |
| Land, seed and 1 pair bullock | 6.06 | - |

Source: Dutta, N.C. -- Land problems and land reforms in Assam, 1968.

The third system of payment is the system of fixed rent in kind which is paid by the tenant to the landowner. In this system a tenant gives to his landlord a fixed amount of produce irrespective of the output. This fixed rent in kind is much higher than the rent in cash, but lower than that of the share-cropping. The tenant does not possess any right over the land, and term of the tenancy and right of enjoyment of the land are very insecure and restricted. The share-cropper's status was previously similar to that of the hired labourer receiving wages in kind. But in 1948, the Adhjar Protection and Regulation Act of Assam has safeguarded the interests of the share-cropper.

Before 1935 the relations between the landowners and tenants were such the tenurial status was transmitted from one generation to another; but the landlords could evict the tenant at any time and lease out their land to any other person. But under the Assam Temporarily settled Tenancy, 1935 and 1971 Acts the tenants' interests have been protected in many respects. At present it is difficult for a landlord to evict the tenant. The big tenants, being placed in their position, do not necessarily cultivate their land themselves, sometimes they sublet it to some other persons or have their land cultivated by the hired labourers. Such a legal provision, therefore, created a system of subtenancy and middlemanship between the zamindar and the real tiller of the land. But in some parts of the province, i.e., in Goalpara

and Chachar districts the Act is not yet implemented and in most of the cases, it has been found that the landlords have been evicting the adhiars according to their whims.

In Assam where land is plenty and population is less, the agricultural labourers as a class are not significant numerically. In Assam they are far less in number than the tenants. It had already been mentioned in the previous chapter that due to scarcity of labourers in Assam the British rulers brought labourers from other parts of India to work in the tea plantations. The agricultural labourers were absent in Assam in 1905 except a minority of ordinary labourers (Allen, 1905). But their growth under the different land tenure systems is conspicuous. In 1951 they were counted as 1.7 per cent of the total population of Assam and Agricultural Labour Enquiry of 1963 recorded them as 11 per cent of the total working forces compared to the all India average of 30.39 per cent. The following table 10 shows increase of the number of agricultural labourers from 1951 to 1961.

Table - 10

Increase of the number of agricultural labourers (Proportion of persons working as agricultural labourers to 1,000 of total population)

| <u>Districts</u> | <u>1951</u> | <u>1961</u> |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Cachar | 11 | 24 |
| Goalpara | 21 | 25 |
| Darrang | 13 | 16 |
| Kamrup | 10 | 14 |
| Lakhimpur | 14 | 7 |
| Nowgong | 21 | 19 |
| Sibsagar | 7 | 9 |
| Assam | 14 | 16 |

Source: Census of India, 1961, Assam, Vol.III, Part 1-A.

The labourers constitute a distinct category and are placed at the bottom of the agrarian class hierarchy. Generally, they do not own any land and live mainly on daily wages. In rare cases, they possess small strips of land which they own or hold in lease. In 1950-51, 43.35 per cent of the agricultural labour households were without land compared to the all India average of 50.07 per cent, while in 1956-57, 63.01 per cent of agricultural labour households were without land, compared to the all India average of 57.13 per cent. Their meagre income from the irregular employment and consequent insecurity of it put them below the subsistence level. All these have resulted into a particular way of life distinct from that of the landowners and the tenants. Sometimes, they own small plots of land which do not produce enough to live on. The common difference between the agricultural labourer and the tenant-cultivator is that the former does not have any security of employment whereas the latter does have. However, the agricultural labourers in Assam are economically better off than those living in other parts of India. In Assam an agricultural worker annually gets employment on an average of 208 days in agricultural season whereas at all-India level an agricultural labourer gets employment only for 189 days. Their daily wage in Assam is Rs. 2.58. Therefore, the agricultural labourers try to find some employment in non-agricultural sectors to compensate their earnings. This also creates the problem of identification of the agricultural labourers

as a class in the village community like that of the peasants. Their standard of living is very low and the average income per family is Rs. 447 per annum.

Almost everyday agricultural labourers have to seek for new employment and because of it they have to move from door to door to seek employment from the landowners or the tenant-cultivators. Their dependence on the upper classes puts them into the subordinate and voiceless position in the community. The economic relation between the agricultural labourers and their employers is that the labourers only supply their labour in the agricultural operations and do not invest any capital in it; whereas the employers provide them with agricultural implements, seeds, manure, etc. Payment of the labourers is generally made in cash and in some cases, during the harvest time, they are paid in kind. The agricultural labourers who use their ploughs and buffaloes get slightly higher wage than those who do not and in most cases payment to them is made very irregularly.

Today relations among the agrarian classes have changed to a great extent. It is, perhaps, due to the new market situation and partly due to the impact of various agrarian reforms. Now relations between the landowners and the labourers are contractual and impersonal in nature, and social distance between them is very great. Though in the past this social distance was not totally absent, both the groups were bound by some social obligations, rights and duties. The inter-dependence among the classes in the economic and social affairs

was more than what it is today, This was probably further strengthened by the functional division of caste, the spirit of paternalism and extension of kinship obligations. Kinship obligations had paramount importance in the traditional rural society; it not only extended within the caste group but also all over the village and even beyond the village sometimes.

However, economic relations among the agrarian classes are always changing in nature and this change is more prominent in the post-independence period. Enactment of several agricultural Acts have considerably accelerated this dynamic nature of the agrarian relations. Now-a-days relations among the classes are more formal and landless class is more secured than they were in the past. Though various types of land reforms have been adopted several years ago, their progress of implementation is very slow. The loopholes in the reforms are large enough for landowners to escape. However, economic relations are not the only class character, there are also socio-cultural relationships among the classes which are not touched upon here. Socio-cultural aspect of the agrarian interactions and interrelations could only be found out through intensive field research which is beyond the scope of this present study. The relational aspect which is already described here is only one aspect and the other aspect of relations among the classes is the relation of conflict which, due to the lack of data, is not taken into consideration in this study.

Styles of life:

Different styles of life can be distinctly identified

among the agricultural classes. These distinctions among these classes are closely associated with the system of hierarchically structured relations among the landlords, tenants and agricultural labourers. Unequal distribution of land provides unequal income to the respective agrarian classes. The landowners with high income from land in the form of rent are generally much above the subsistence level, whereas the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers live below the subsistence level. The landlords always abstain from agricultural and other manual works in which their participation, they think, makes them degraded. Thus the higher castes like the Brahmanas, Kolitas and Kayasthas do not work with plough. The degraded and unhonourable works like tilling the soil, irrigating the field, weeding, harvesting, etc. are done by the lower status persons those who belong to the landless agricultural labour group. These distinct styles of life are congruent with their superior economic position in the agrarian stratification system. Standards of living, dress patterns, houses, food habits, etc. have brought clear-cut distinctions among the different class groups in terms of high and low status groups and styles of life.

Level of education and class position are also related like caste and class representing remunerated ranks of the people. People of the landowning class who can afford the expenses for education avail of the opportunities for various types of honourable jobs. But the poverty-ridden landless

agricultural labourers cannot afford expensive education for their children. Thus they are unable to achieve various job opportunities and cannot improve their status through various new channels of social mobility. The landowners, being literate, have changed their speech, manners and attitudes whereas the illiterate mass of people remain where they were before independence.

Conclusion:

On the basis of the preceding discussion the following conclusions may be arrived at: (1) The pre-British Assamese society had a class structure of feudal character where king was at the top and the common people at the bottom of the hierarchy. In between these two groups there were hierarchies of nobles. (2) The British rule created a new class structure quite different from that of the pre-British period. (3) The British land policy created a class of landed interests and intermediaries between the cultivators and the landlords. (4) The organic character of agriculture was also changed to a large extent as a result of these new land relations, and hence non-communitarian, contractual and impersonal relations emerged. (5) The British rule also intensified the paternalistic ideas of the landlords alongwith impersonality and contractuality of relations. A tribe-caste region like Assam had paternalism even earlier to the British rule, hence it was not a completely new experience for the Assamese people. (6) The post-independence land reform policies such as the

Acquisition of Zamindari Act which was implemented in 1951 could not bring about the expected changes in the agrarian social structure. The "Haves" have successfully been able to escape the implementation of the Land ceiling Act and other laws pertaining to division of property, etc.

(7) Study of agrarian social structure with a caste and tribal background of the people becomes enormously significant in both respects.

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CHAPTER - V

THE RURAL POWER STRUCTURE

Power is to be viewed in two ways. Firstly, an individual holds power over the others and secondly, power is vested in a system thereby the system pursues certain goals. Weber defines power: "In general, we understand by "power" the change of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action" (Gerth and Mills, 1959). This concept is related to the distribution of power in the society on the basis of individual's capacity. Parsons' definition is "The goal or function of the polity I conceive to be the mobilization of social resources and their commitment for the attainment of collective goals, for the formation and implementation of "public policy". The product of the polity as a system is power, which I would like to define as the generalized capacity of a social system to get things done in the interest of collective goals" (Parsons, 1960). This concept is related to the creation of power as a resource in the society. Power as an individual phenomenon as well as a social or political resource would be examined in this chapter with special reference to rural Assam.

We would analyse the changes in power structure in rural Assam under the different historical phases. Power in our analysis is concerned only with the political aspect, more

particularly with its relation to social stratification. Due to paucity of adequate data on power structure of rural Assam our analysis is mainly non-substantive in nature.

Political party system and the decentralisation of power have connected the villages, blocks, districts and the state politically and administratively. On the other hand, rural electorate being sympathetic to various political parties are linked to the State Assembly or Parliament and the State government; and moreover, the Village Panchayat is connected with Anchal Parishad and Zila Parishad. Due to this complex nature of the rural power structure one should incline to see its nature of change, traditional caste panchayat, village panchayat, factions and impact of political competition and conflict on the village community.

Analytically speaking, political power creates legitimate domination and subordination, and thus it establishes its own hierarchy. It represents official expression to inequality: that of the social inequality and class system established between individuals and groups (Balandier, 1972). In the study of rural power structure statutory village panchayat and political parties principally draw our attention more than any other institutions. Panchayat and political parties, vested with some functions, are major institutions and arenas of power in the rural sector. The power structure of rural society which was previously more or less informal in nature has now transformed into a formal structure; however, it is still found operationally informal. The new power

structure has altered the old system of power relations to a large extent, and consequently new power groups and sub-groups have emerged. Power now-a-days does not go with birth and ritual status of a person or group, but it depends on the numerical strength, contact with the government functionaries and political parties. The concept of "dominant caste" is also important for understanding power structure of the rural people. A caste is said to be dominant when it possesses numerical superiority, economic status, political power, ritual status, non-traditional education, modern occupation and physical force (Srinivas, 1955). But today lack of congruity of status among the members of same caste disproves the concept of dominant caste, because families within the dominant caste may not have an equitable distribution of power and prestige. The dominant families, sometimes, enjoy power and prestige according to their composite status ranks (Sharma, 1974, Commen, 1970). The following possibilities could be there: (1) High Caste, high economic position and high power position; (2) Intermediate caste, high economic position, numerical preponderance and high power position; (3) High caste, middle economic position and middle power position; (4) Lower caste, intermediate economic position, numerical preponderance and middle power position; (5) Low caste, low economic position and low power position. Power is not an absolute phenomenon, it is relative. It has situational determinants as well along with the structural ones such as economic, social and cultural ones. The distribution of power creates divisions within the village community.

Broadly, there are two divisions: (1) those who possess more power and (2) those who have less power. The possession of power may be from the ownership and control of land by which an individual gets numerical support and there are also popular leaders. These two groups are always found in conflict with each other. In the present situation there is a distinction between the authority and power. The village panchayat officials have some authority whereas the political party leaders have power (Beteille, 1969).

The rural power-structure in the pre-British and British periods.

The pre-British period in Assam was ruled by the tribal kings. The royal families and the nobles had sole political authority over their respective territories and the common people were in the subordinate position. But, on the other hand, the village communities which were socially integrated, economically self-sufficient had political autonomy. In such a traditional society village headman and persons wielding influence and power were drawn from the higher castes.

The village community in Assam in the British period faced a centralised British administration which was completely new to them. The rural power structure was mainly feudalistic in nature. The feudal lords were at the top of the rural polity and were patronised by the British government, who offered various privileges to them and they became the masters of the village. The introduction of revenue and police officials brought significant changes and these, being related to the landlords, gave them more strength in managing

the village administration. Consequently, the traditional authority structure in the rural areas did not change its forms and functions. The high caste people, being placed at the top of the economic and social hierarchy, were the natural leaders of the village.

In Assam the power structure of the zamindari areas was different in many respects from that of the raiyatwari areas. The zamindars had full control on their land and collected revenue from it. They had also considerable influence over their officials, tenants and agricultural labourers. This situation was also same in respect of the big raiyats. Thus the zamindars and the big raiyats held considerable power and authority over the larger number of groups of people who were under their control. Therefore, under this feudal system social, economic and political power was centralised in their hands. The right over the land of the landlords represented a type of mastery over the general mass of rural people. Thus landlordism played a great role as a power institution, and it was able to influence the selection of leadership and also defined the role of the caste and community panchayats of the rural areas (Singh, 1969).

The landlords' power over the people in their jurisdiction was mainly based on their judicial rights in landownership. They were the sole owners of cultivatable land and the cultivators paid land rent to them. As the village land and timberland were also under their control the functionary and artisan castes had to pay them by rendering certain services.

Not only their cultivators were under their feudatory relationships, but also all the caste groups were included in it.

In traditional society there was village panchayat the members of which were from the major caste groups of the village. This village panchayat performed social, economic and political activities in the village, and was under the direct control of the zamindars and the big raiyats. So power structure was hierarchically arranged and dominated mostly by the upper caste and class people.

Besides, there was also caste panchayat which was mainly related to the particular caste group. It had extremely high decisive power in the spheres of its own caste and in this respect, it was more or less autonomous in nature.

The rural power structure in the post-independence period

In 1920 the British government introduced the system of village panchayat. But the panchayat officials were nominated by the British government on the recommendation of the zamindars. In 1948 Indian government introduced new type of village panchayat where officials were elected on the basis of adult franchise. The village panchayat has now become a formal institution, but its functioning remains informal to a large extent because of the influence of the non-member influentials of the village community in the statutory body. Like other states in Assam also the Panchayati Raj institution is functioning at three levels. At the village level there is Gaon Panchayat. A number of Gaon Panchayats constitute an Anchal Panchayat and then some Anchal Panchayats form a

Zila Parishad. All these tiers are interlinked. The following table 11 shows the number of Zila Parishads, Anchal Panchayats and Gaon Panchayats and number of villages in Assam.

Table-11

Distribution of Panchayats in Assam

| <u>Zila Parishad or District Panchayat</u> | <u>No. of Anchalik Panchayats</u> | <u>No. of Gaon Panchayats or village Panchayats</u> | <u>No. of villages</u> |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Lakhimpur | 17 | 331 | 2729 |
| Nowgong | 13 | 334 | 1681 |
| Sibsagar | 17 | 377 | 2115 |
| Cachar | 15 | 334 | 2032 |
| Darrang | 13 | 302 | 1733 |
| Goalpara | 20 | 353 | 4375 |
| Kamrup | 25 | 562 | 2938 |
| Total-7 | 120 | 2593 | 17603 |

Source: Census of India, 1961, Assam, District Census Handbooks.

(The process of democratic decentralisation and the introduction of adult franchise have brought about considerable shift of power from one group to another. The traditional power structure is no longer in existence. Traditionally, the landlords and the upper caste people were supreme political authorities. But in the present situation there is a considerable intermixture of different types of people in the power structure. The following tables depict the real

picture of power structure of some villages in rural Assam.

Table - 12

Rajahowly Village Panchayat (Sibsagar District)

| <u>Caste</u> | <u>No. of members</u> | <u>Office Bearers</u> | <u>Caste</u> |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Kolita | 3 | President | Kolita |
| Muslim | 2 | Vice-President | Brahmana |
| Brahmana | 1 | Members | (Kolita, (Muslim |

Source: Bordoloi, P.K. -- "A village in upper Assam"
The North-Eastern Research Bulletin,
Vol.I, 1970.

Table - 13

Katanipara Village panchayat (Kamrup District).

| <u>Caste</u> | <u>No. of families</u> | <u>Office Bearers</u> | <u>Caste</u> |
|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Kumar | 51 | Secretary | Kumar |
| Ganak | 1 | Treasurer | " |
| | | President | " |

Source: Census of India, 1961, Village Census Monograph.

But due to lack of sufficient and relevant data it is difficult to assess how much power and authority have shifted from one group to another and how far the lower caste and class people have been able to achieve positions of authority and power today in rural Assam. This will be our main concern while investigating the problem of distribution of power and privileges in the villages in Assam. However, it can be said

that the landlords and the upper castes have considerably lost their previous unquestionable position in the power structure in the village whereas the intermediate class and caste groups have considerably raised their status in the village (Boradoloi, 1970). But the lower caste and class groups due to their low social, ritual and economic position could not avail of the opportunities themselves to achieve power status and thus they still remain in the subordinate position in the power structure of the village.

A wide range of power and functions have been bestowed on the statutory panchayat by the government, and the panchayat is responsible for all round development and welfare of the village people. Both judicial and administrative aspects of the village are under the direct control of the panchayat. The panchayat President holds considerable power due to his official position; and today he has become a more important and influential leader due to his high position, responsibilities, and contact with the leaders and important persons outside the village. The consultancy and advisory roles of the president of the statutory panchayat are manifold because of his formal position of power and also because he hails normally from upper sections of society. He acquires greater power due to his direct connection with the administrative machinery at different levels including the Members of Zila Parishad, State Assembly and Parliament. By virtue of his presidency of the panchayat he is ex-officio member of the Anchal Samiti by which he commands prestige and power. The chairman of

the Anchal Panchayat holds more power than the head of the village panchayat and he is the member of Zila Parishad.

Candidates of the Congress political party generally seek help of the panchayat president to enlist support of his villagers. The president and the M.L.A. of the area have close contact with each other, and the panchayat president acquires extra power by virtue of his close relation with the Congress M.L.A. Therefore, in respect of power, president enjoys high esteem and prestige, and this power he acquires from the support of his villagers⁶ and from the close ties with the influential people outside the village. These village elites are of paramount importance in the study of village political structure and roles of the political elites. The votes of the villagers are under their control and they manipulate these in favour of any political leader at the higher levels. Thus they can bargain with these leaders at the higher levels for patronage for themselves and for their community.

In rural Assam caste panchayat is still existing side by side with the statutory panchayat and it functions independently of the village panchayat. Functions of the caste panchayat are limited within the caste group, and it is generally inactive outside the caste group⁷. Naturally due to its social homogeneity it is more active than the village panchayat. Ethnocentric attitudes have been gradually increasing among the lower caste groups. These are probably due to their inferior social

status and subordinate economic position in the society. This ethnocentrism is reinforced by this caste body. In the village generally there are factions among the caste groups and conflicts among these factions are not uncommon. But in most of the cases it has been found that there is always an indirect clash between the Brahmanas and the Kolitas for domination and in this conflict the Kolitas are generally supported by the other Non-Brahmana castes like Keets, Koches, Chutiyas, etc. (Bordoloi, 1970). But this conflict is not for economic interest of the groups rather it is perhaps, the expression of caste sentiment, i. e., the Non-Brahmana groups against the Brahmanas.

Caste ethnocentrism is not only enforced by the caste panchayat but also by the establishment of various formal caste associations. These caste associations function for the social, economic and educational betterment of the respective caste groups. One of these caste associations of Assam the Kumar Jatiya Sammilan -- a reformist organisation is very wellknown. It was established by the joint efforts of the people of the Kumar caste of Kamrup district with a view to improving their social and economic life. In an annual conference representatives of the different villages meet together. The tribal groups of Assam have also accumulated considerable amount of power and in many cases they represent the Village Panchayat, Anchal Panchayat and Zila Parishad. A significant number of them are members of the State Assembly and the Parliament. It has been seen that, in village, where

both tribes and castes constitute its population, the tribal representatives also hold considerable power by acquiring status in the new village panchayat. The leaders of the Ahoms and the Miris are so powerful ^{due} to their numerical strength that they even could mobilise the people for the purpose of the formation of a separate state for these communities. Earlier casteism was not so prominent politically because it was suppressed by the landlords, but now it has gained strength through institutions like caste associations and caste panchayats as a political instrument. Thus caste becomes a "political class" through these institutions.

Study of political parties and political networks is of immense importance to understand power relations in the rural Assam today. Political parties have penetrated into the village polity. The entire structure of cleavages and associations can be analysed with such a perspective. Villagers who are patronised by the political leaders and parties hold considerable amount of power and prestige in the village. However, existence of political parties as organised groups is rare in the villages, but they exert influence generally from outside. There are some individuals and families in the village who, due to their political affiliations, enjoy high power position and prestige. This is also reflected in the relations of some villagers with the high ranking government officials and other influential persons outside the village.

In Assam Congress, C.P.I. and Sanjukta Bidhayani Dal are active political parties. Though the rural people have vague perceptions about the political parties, they are

ignorant about their ideologies. The Congress party, due to its strongest root since the time of pre-independence National Movement, is favourite among the rural people. These political parties are active during General Elections only. So political cleavages are more prominently focussed only at the time of elections and the villagers cluster around their respective favourite political parties, and thus links between the political parties and the village social structure are noticeable. Thus political parties outside the village are responsible for maintenance and alteration of distribution of power in the village level; it creates changes among the villagers due to their association with the different political parties.

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CHAPTER - VI

CONCLUSION

The present study is a systematic analysis of the changing patterns of social stratification, namely, caste, class and power. It aims at analysing caste, class and power as independent phenomena of social stratification; interrelationships between them and changes in the stratification system being brought about as a result of the changes in these phenomena. With this view in mind we have reviewed briefly the dialectical and functional approaches to stratification and the studies on caste, class and power, in particular in the first chapter. We find that in most of the studies the phenomena of caste, class and power have not been adequately interrelated and the changes in the normative principles of social stratification have not been properly examined. On the basis of this frame of analysis we formulated the following points in the form of hypothesis in the first chapter.

The Indian society based on the principle of hierarchy could have "harmonic" relations⁴. The inequality based on the ideas of purity-pollution, superiority-inferiority and high and low ranks always created a situation of mutual distrust, disharmony and uneasiness. This has been revealed in terms of disharmonious relations occasionally occurring between the patron and the clients. As a result of such a tense situation

spatial mobility, ostracization and changes in the traditional callings occurred occasionally and intermitently. Cultural modernisation was associated with the upper sections of the society. Therefore, the system was not "closed", mobility was possible in certain situations and in certain directions. However, mobility avenues were not open to all sections of society irrespective of their position. Certain restrictions were a part of the system of stratification itself. In view of these observations, it has been proposed to examine the directions of mobility from cumulative to dispersed, from cumulative to cumulative, from dispersed to cumulative and dispersed to dispersed. This also calls for examination of the nature of stratification from "organic" to "segmentary" as observed by Bailey.

It is necessary to study networks, extensions and arenas of operation of status, prestige, power and influence of certain groups, families and individuals in a region to test the hypothetical points we have outlined in the first chapter of the thesis. Rural Assam provides a peculiar situation where these hypotheses could be tested. Patterns of stratification among the tribals and Hinduised tribals could be comparatively studied and differential impact on these people could be seen in terms of the British rule and the recent forces of change such as education, land reforms, contacts with the urban centres and Panchayati Raj institutions, etc. The proposed study for the degree of Ph.D. would be based on field-work in the Sibsagar district of Assam. The present thesis for the degree of M.Phil is based on the historical documents and other secondary sources available on Assamese rural social structure.

Chapters II, III and IV namely, Assamese society: A Historical Perspective, The Rural Caste Structure and the Rural Class structure respectively are based on these sources of Assamese history and culture. The chapter on the power structure is based on the scanty data available on the post-independence rural Assam. Thus, "historicity" of Assamese society with "historicism" finds a prominent place in our analysis as we could not collect first hand data.

The analysis of the changes in the stratification has been made at two levels; namely (1) cultural and structural changes and (2) comparison of the pre-independence caste, class and power structures with the post-independence stratification system. The processes of cultural changes created "structural strains" and structural changes bring about changes in the cultural styles, idioms and life-ways. The relationship has been noted between these two processes and factors of change. The comparison between pre-independence and post-independence phenomena of caste, class and power not only explains the role of structural and cultural factors, it also explains changes in the normative basis of the traditional stratification system and "legitimation" of the new system of stratification envisaged through land-reforms, Panchayati Raj institutions and welfare measures, etc. The old categories and classifications have lost their meanings, new vocabulary has come to exist. An understanding of colloquial and native categories and concepts has facilitated our understanding and analysis.

Finally, due to the lack of empirical data and proper insight into the field of investigation the hypothesis formulated in this thesis could not be tested on the basis of these historical resources. The same would be examined in the light of the data which we plan to collect now as a part of ~~my~~ doctoral research programme. Thus our observations are tentative, as the purpose of this dissertation was to familiarise with the theme of the proposed empirical research and to point out the gaps in the available researches and to know about the new areas of exploration.

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