CASTE - CLASS NEXUS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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Dedicated

to

My Parents

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAAA	-	All Assam Ahom Association
AASU	-	All Assam Students Union
NNC	-	Naga National Council
ULFA	-	United Liberation Front of Asom

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INTRODUCTION: A FRAMEWORK

'Caste and class are the two integral aspects of Indian social structure. Both are inter-related in such a way, that they are regarded as the most significant social formation in Indian society.

Caste is regarded as "rigid, unchanging, archaic and oriental system"[1] but pragmatically it is found to be "inevitable and useful."[2] Although, it is looked upon as rigid and unchanging, but it has some dynamic aspects also. In fact, in reality the very existence of inter-caste marriages and status incongruities suggests the dynamic factor in caste.

Caste refers to inequality both in theory and practice.[3] Ideas and values are considered by Dumont as basic determinant, for understanding the behaviour of the people. Hierarchy is the principle through which the elements are ranked in relation to the whole. This hierarchy of Hindu society is based on the idea of pure and impure. But Dumont's thesis of hierarchy has been

negated by the present objective realities of Indian society. Moreover, society has changed and is changing continuously. So, contradictions and discontinuities have effected the caste system.

As K. L. Sharma points out," what was considered as immutable and what was thought to be an inevitable part of the system has withered away."[4]

D'Souza also observes the rigidity- fluidity continuum in regard to both caste and class".[5] But he viewed caste as not an exclusive cultural system. To him, class and caste are different forms of social stratification. Caste groups or jatis are ranked in social stratification, especially with reference to class stratification. Thus individuals and his properties are the real units of analysis rather than the endogamous groups. He argues that class is replacing caste and the individual is replacing the group.

Caste and class are not polar opposites. Due to various factors there are some aspects of castes which have

undergone changes. As Y. Singh notes', "caste has been a dynamic system full of adaptation, accretion, contradictions and transformations, hence resilience and change".[6]

[Caste is a very complex social formation. Tradition - modernity, pollution-purity etc] are the unique characteristics of Indian caste system. "The most widely recognised carrier of pollution contagion are prepared food and water. There are Hindu dietary rules, rules about what to eat and drink, which in form similar to Leviticus, proscribe some food and drink as polluting. In Hinduism, it is considered sinful to kill cows and the consumption of beef is universally proscribed ..... pollution is not contagious among those who are equally polluted, nor can the campaign be spread from those who are less polluted, to those who are more polluted. Here is the nexus between the ideologies of purity/pollution and Varnadharma rules about eating and drinking affirm the separateness of the Varnas and the hierarchy among them."[7]

Religion and ritual barriers are breaking down. Difference between the lifestyles of castes are eliminated gradually and there is a tendency towards the evolution of a common style. Spread of education, development of transport and rapid means of communication facilitated the spread of ideas to all sections of population. This led to emergence of some values which are common to the majority of the population.

Caste and class nexus implies observation of the two as mutually inherent.[8] Contradictions and conflict between the two are not only perceptible but it brings out different consequences for different caste and classes.

Andre Beteille suggested a sort of modification of the caste model. He emphasised on the study of economic and political conflict with certain degree of autonomy for the economic and political activities of inter-caste relation. As he notes, 'The hierarchies of caste, class and power in the village overlaps to some extent, but also cut across'.[9]

In his study of the village of Sripuram in Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, Beteille noticed the phenomena of status incongruence. Here, he found that traditional upper caste owned land and monopolised political power in the village. But now due to various institutional changes they have lost control in political affairs to inter-mediate castes without losing their land to any substantial extent. Beteille also states that many areas of social life are now becoming to some extent caste free.[10]

Neither caste nor class can give a full understanding of Indian society. Although rigidity was highly marked in the ancient period, but mobility and migration was also in vogue.

Caste is also viewed by Bailey as a closed system of stratification,[11] whereas Beteille considers caste system as both 'closed' and 'open'.[12] Caste is becoming increasingly segmentary in nature. Various aspects of the caste are becoming differentiated. Many new elements are absorbed into the system. It has encountered innumerable diverse situations. This has added to its uniqueness.

Caste has evolved simultaneously in several directions and adjusted with ideologically antagonistic systems. It has not allowed the emergence of an alternative system of stratification and social relations though it has undergone significant changes from time to time.[13]

Risley, Ketkar, Sinart, Hutton, Furnivall, Sherring and Ghurye regards caste system as both positive and functional system. Even Marx, related the Asiatic mode of production to the stability of the caste system in India.[14] For Marx, the relationships of social groups to land and its ownership or non-ownership were the determinants of groups position in the society. Caste in this kind of system is derived from the economic system or in Maxis word mode of production.

However, Korian observes that "the analysis of Asiatic mode of production does not deny the role of class contradiction and class structures. India's pre-capitalist economic formation was neither classless nor static. Social relations and exploitation were based on both caste and class side by side".[15]

Max Weber suggested a multi-dimensional model. He argued that different kinds of stratification occured in contemporary societies and the numerous social status could be distinguished intermediate between workers and capitalists. He acknowledged the importance of economic factor in any system of stratification, but claimed that political power was another independent determinant, which produced its own hierarchical order. Another determinant was social prestige or honour. According to the amount of esteem in which they were held as members of a traditional aristocracy or in terms of occupation, education and living standard. According to Weber, 'caste is doubtlessly a closed status group and caste are communities as distinct from classes which are categories'.[16]

He contrasted status group from class. Classes are groups of people having the same economic position. He regards caste as a closed status group because all the obligation and barriers that membership in a status group entails also exist in a class but here they are intensified to a higher degree.

On the other hand, Kosambi accepts "the mode of production as the basis of understanding of class relations"[17]. But he does not accept the notion of economic determinism and universal application of Marxism. He argues that in order to study Indian society, one must take into account its historicity and experience.

Harris and Gail Omvedt have analysed class relations as a dominant causality. Within this causality they explain caste and other cultural aspects in Indian society. They were vehemently against the culturological determinism of caste advocated by M.N. Srinivas.

There are certain characteristics within caste which are class like and vice-versa. Like "emergence of grades within caste has been referred as class like change within caste."[18] Hypergamy is one such instance, where status distinctions is based on economic position and parental heritage. As castes are rooted in Indian society, classes are also a part of the society. "There are no absolute determinants of caste as well as class."[19]

In comparison to other parts of India, Assamese social structure is unique in nature. The Assamese social structure consists of various castes and Hinduised tribes and sects. There has been a synthesis of three religious traditions-the orthodox Hinduism (Shaktism), Vaishnava sectarianism and tribalism, which have affected differentially the stratification system of Assam. Such a situation combines 'closedness' of castes and openess of tribes.

Traditional society consisted of both castes and tribes in Assam. The social status of the tribes were evaluated within the frame of the Hindu hierarchical system. Although Brahmins and Sudras were prevalent, but Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were absent in Assam.

In medieval Assam, a number of ruling tribes were transformed into castes. Significant among them were the Bodo-Kacharis, Chutiyas and Ahoms. Ther came the Vaishnavite movement. The movement brought about considerable change in the social structure. It intensified social mobility and changes in the caste system. The British

advent in 1826 added a new character to the system. Various land reforms, plantation cultivation, migration of plantation workers from places like Bihar, Orissa etc. were introduced to the social system. Caste-class structure was very much existent during the traditional and medieval Assam. Due to arrival of various ethnic communities, the structure was never very stable. The dynamism in the caste-class relations has gained momentum during the post-independence period and because of modernisation the traditional structure has undergone considerable changes. "The feudal structure of the society has began to decline and "the caste system has been continuing inspite of some remarkable changes."[20] The distinction between the villages on the basis of caste or tribe and economy was very thin. Multiplicity of groups, Hinduisation of tribes and the presence of non-Assamese people are the basic components of the social structure. The caste is characterised by exclusiveness, endogamy, commensality, purity-pollution, hereditary specialization of occupation, cultural differences and domination of power based on hereditary principles.

A combination of rigidity and flexibility dimension of social norms are also present. This was reflected through the rules of marriage. Although rules of commensality and connubial relation are practised by these groups. But they reflect the egalitarian principle of the tribe. class structure like the caste structure is not that prominent in Assam. For example, the landowning class is not as exclusive one as the upper and intermediate caste and tribes also belongs to this class. Even the power structure has undergone changes. Power is not the domain of some upper caste or class. It has changed from an ascribed status to achieved status. Variety of factors are responsible for this, like economic, numerical strength, modern education and occupation and contact with the government functionaries and political parties.

There is a shift of power from one caste to another. This is the case in other parts of India also. 'The intermediate and lower caste groups have emerged in the new power structure. The upper castes have considerably lost their power in the new situation. This can be related to

Andre Beteille's findings of Tanjore village. There incongruities existed between caste, class and power statuses.

Today, caste and class do not coincide with power to a large extent as power is far more distributed among various castes and tribes than what it was before. The intermediate caste weild considerable power.[21] There are incongruence between various aspects of status of castes and tribes. Therefore inequalities were dispersed among the various groups of people. The nature of relation between caste and class have become more complex. The nexus between these two systems of social stratification can provide a better understanding of the social formation of Assam.

As Sharma argues that 'caste and class represent to a large extent though from different angles the same social reality. Classes function within the contexts of castes. Caste conflicts are also class or agrarian conflicts. The rifts between the upper and the lower castes to a large extent

correspond with conflicts between landowner and sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. Hence an overemphasis on either ideological or on structural aspect would provide an incomplete view of social reality.[22]

Purpose of Study

In this work, an attempt has been made to find out the peculiar nature of caste-class nexus in Assam. So far, Guha (Amalendu: Planter Raj to Swaraj, 1988) has studied the economy polity and society of Assam from pre-independent to post-independent days. But as the fact reveals, he does not give an adequate explanation to the social structure of Assam. S.K. Chauhan (Caste, Status and Power: Social stratification in Assam, 1980) studied caste, class and power in Assam, from an Weberian perspective. But the peculiarity of Assamese society, although accept this thesis to a certain extent but we have to go beyond that. In studying, Assam movement, though Manirul Hissain (The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity, 1993) is trying to give a class perspective to it, in reality the movements leadership structure and mass

mobi' tion programmes suggest a more broad based fran work. More particularly, R.K. Bhadra (Caste and Class: Social stratification in Assam, 1991), has analysed caste-class structure in Assam. He states that change in the nature of caste-class relation is from one form of dispersed inequalities to another form of dispersed inequalities. To him uniqueness of Assamese society is because of Ahomisation process, Vaishnavite movement and arrival of British, in this part of the Indian subcontinent.

All the above works and specially, Bhadra's have never mentioned about the effect of ethnic movements and stronger role of the state in structuring the Assamese society.

Here, we have examined these two factors which are considered to be most vital in reflecting the true character of the social formation in Assam along with other factors. Moreover, it gives particularities to Assamese society in comparison to Indian society in a broader social framework. It seems, in this context, this work will mark

a line of difference with the earlier works, which we have already mentioned.

Methods of Study

Basically, the methods we have used here are historical and analytical. No primary source has been used and secondary sources consist of published books, articles, newspapers, research journals and unpublished dissertation on related topics.

Chapterisation

This dissertation consists of four chapters.

The first chapter gives an introduction to the main topic as well as a theoretical framework for studying caste-class relations in India. Purpose of study has also clearly mentioned here.

In the second chapter, a comparative analysis of Assamese and Indian society is discussed. It is also tried here to compare India's social structure with the two neighboring countries (Pakistan and Sri Lanka). The motive

behind this is to find out a broader social framework for the subject.

The continuity and change of caste-class nexus has been dealt in the third chapter from a historical perspective.

The conclusion (4th chapter) brings a summary of all the previous chapters. We are trying here to suggest a framework to examine the peculiar caste-class relation in Assam.

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Chapter I
SOCIAL FORMATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Marx established a new science, the science of the history of social formations. He opened up for scientific knowledge a new continent, that of history. This foundation of the science of history by Marx has induced the birth of a new, theoretically practically revolutionary philosophy. He had shown that the material living relations rather than legal relations or the form of state constituted the basis for the development of society.[1]

In Economic and Philosophical Manuscript, he emphasised the role of production in the social process and pointed out that private property and division of labour are the materialistic basis of society's division into classes. He has put forward materialist criteria for assessing the development of economic thought, a development which is a reflection in the ideological sphere of the evolution of actual economic relations. Thus, "he indicates the importance of the social system. He states that social system gives rise to a new type of stratification or social formation. These new stratifications are all situated within

the framework of the essential division between bourgeoise and proliterate, for all the new developing social stratas are made up of wage earning employees of the capitalist enterprise."[2]

In classical Marxism, the social formation was analysed into the components of economic structure, determinant in the last instance and relatively autonomous superstructure: (1) State and law, (2) Ideology. Althusser clarifies this by dividing it into the structure (economic practice) and the superstructure (political and ideological practice).[3]

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Althusser on the other hand, states that social formation is a concept denoting society. It is a concrete complex whole comprising economic practice, political practice and ideological practice at a certain pace and stage of development. Historical materialism is the science of social formation.[4]

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Samir Amin argues that the societies known to history are formations that on the one hand combines mode of production and on the other organise relations between the local society and other societies.[5] He states that social formations are thus concrete, organised structure that are marked by a dominant mode of production and the articulation around this of a complex group of modes of production that are subordinate to it.[6]

He observes that all pre-capitalist societies are social formations combining the same elements. It is marked by, (i) the pre-dominance of a communal or tribute paying mode of production, (ii) the existence of simple commodity relations in limited sphere and the existence of long distance trade relations.

He also gives an account of social formations in the peripheral world. Just as the pre-capitalist mode of production are integrated into a system subject to the distinctive purpose of dominant capital. So, "the new social structure forms a structural, hierarchical totality dominated

by the great absentees, of colonial society. The economic system of the periphery cannot be understood in itself, it has to be related to the centre."[7]

Despite different origins, peripheral formations tries to converge towards a pattern which is essentially similar among them.

Assamese society has built up its own social structure through years starting from Ahom till date. Geographically, the state of Assam is for from India's mainstream of socio-cultural currents. Even then it was influenced by the traditional Indian social system. In the peripheral context, it has developed its own societal set up, but undoubtedly, it is reflecting more or less both traditional and modern aspects of greater Indian society. It is composed of various ethnic communities. Forerunner among them were Ahoms. They came and established their own kingdom and ruled this part for six hundred years. They started practicing their own social norms and values, which came into sharp conflict with other communities in

Assam. Among them, the Bodos were the largest tribal group. They had their peculiar tribal practices which was very different from that of Ahoms. The waves of Ahomisation forced other communities to search for their own codes and conducts. Most of the Bodos, Kacharis, Chutiyas remained outside the domain of Hindu culture. The force of Hindu culture was dominant and all embracing, which helped in consolidating the base for the greater Assamese society. Though there were internal conflicts in the society, they became united whenever there was external threat. After the arrival of the British the ethnic identity became stronger in Assam and this led to different movements.

The Ahom Movement [8]

Until 1838, Ahoms enjoyed a very prestigious position. The ancient monuments, historical records and various myths are important sources of inspiration for the Ahoms. Due to the British rule, they felt that they have been subjugated to a greater extent.

The Ahoms and other allied ethnic groups of upper Assam felt that they have their own cultures, languages and distinct traditions which they aspired that it needed to be preserved. The developing economy and growing industrialisation have attracted a large number of people from outside.[9] But these didnot provided any opportunities for the local people. With the extension of oil exploration in several areas more and more agricultural lands have been acquired by the government. Although, the landholders have been paid compensation in terms of money, but have not been provided with any other alternatives. So the villagers felt alienated from the soil.

"The All Assam AHOM Associaton (AAAA) which is the oldest organisation of its kind was formed as early as in 1893". It was concerned with the socio-cultural and economic problems of the Ahom people.[10] Initially the objectives of the movement was limited to cultural activities. But subsequently, it acquired a political character. It has sought a political solution for the people's social and economic well being.

On 28 May, 1967 resolution was adopted demanding a 'Separate Autonomous Unit of Upper Assam by AAAA. In the last part of the 19th century, the educated Ahom first thought about reviving their own culture, language and religion. Due to the strictness of the British Raj, the Ahoms couldn't form political organisations. "They propagated that Hinduism was not their original religion but had been introduced by the Ahom kings. They also maintained that Assamese was not their original language."[11]

It can be assumed that it was a sort of identity movement, in the early phase. With this they tried to crystallise their identity with a definite ideology, supported by a clear cut programme. At present although the Ahoms speak Assamese they are trying to revive their language. Even today, some important Ahom religious economies such as Um-Fa and Madam Me-Fi, are organised.[12] Still they have their feeling of superiority and belongingness to their royal dynasty.

The Bodo Movement

The Bodo Kacharis constitute the largest ethnic group among the tribal population of the present day state of Assam. Apart from the Bodo Kachari, the other segments of the plain tribes groups of Assam are the Rabha, Hojai, the Hajong, the Deori, the Lalung and Mishings. Except the last two groups, they all belong to the Bodo ethno-linguistic group.[13] They claim that they are not only Lingustically but also ethnically different from rest of the people of Assam.

The Bodos are economically depressed and backward in the educational development. As Prabhakar notes, the problem faced by the Bodo people is in essence the problem of less developed communities living with comparatively advanced group of people, under the common political system.[14] Here the advanced group of people was referred to the caste Hindus of Assam.

Although weaker sections of Hindu castes and the Bodo Tribals have been equally poor, but the elite among the non-tribal population were larger, better equipped ant

better trained than the Bodo elite. At present, the conflict for economic and political power has been essentially between the bodo elites on the one hand and the non-Bodo local elites on the other. As cultural manifestation of the politico-economic conflict has been the issue of the language and script of the Bodos.[15]

Narzary states that the Bodos have been facing exploitation and injustice for decades due to their illiteracy and simplicity.[16] Another important factor which added to their plight was the problem of land alienation. Immigrants from East Bengal (later East Pakistan) infiltrated into their areas and after occupying the lands have driven the Bodos out of their ownland. In recent years, these immigrants occupied government waste lands, unclassified forests and even reserved forests of the entire northern bank of Brahmaputra valley. In this way, the Bodos lost their lands, properties to some unknown people.

Other factors that aggravated their problem were the adverse effect of the recent urbanisation and

industrialisation without careful arrangements for their economic protection and rehabilitation. This led to the growth of feeling of discrimination and injustice among the Bodos.

The Bodos also felt that they have been late in waking up.[17] Because, the other tribal groups of the composite state of Assam not only retained their cultural identity but have won their rights to distinct political identity through the creation of the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur. They thought that they have been robbed of the constitutional protection contained in the provision for tribal belts and blocks.[18]

These adversities, discriminations and deprivations felt by the Bodos culminated into a movement. It started as socio-economic and cultural movement. In fact even in its political phase, the various bodies have expressed their feeling of socio-economic alienation. The Bodo leaders who started the movement were quite conscious about the need for educational upliftment of the Bodo community. The

movement has also clear cut cultural overtones, both in terms of goal and revival of Bodo literature.

The political movement for a separate state is strengthened by their urge to maintain and preserve their identity. However, the political nature of the entire movement can hardly be denied. The leaders have repeatedly argued that since the nature of the movement has been political and their aspiration are based on political and economic principle, they should be dealt at a political and democratic level. Thus, "the movement can be characterised as a complex of socio-economic, cultural and political factors".[19]

Besides these ethnic movements their are some others among whom the feeling of deprivation has taken root. One such example is the feeling of discontentment among the other Backward classes (OBC).

The educated section of OBC in Assam felt that inspite of their being a constitutional provision for their

upliftment no measures were taken to improve the socio-economic conditions of the downtrodden masses. However, among some section of the inhabitants of upper Assam, an awareness of their social, economic and educational backwardness developed soon after independence.

"As early as in 1949, when constitution was drafted, a few leaders belonging to the Ahoms, the Chutias, the Moran's and the Mataks of upper Assam came to learn that constitutional protection would be given to those belonging to the scheduled caste and scheduled Tribes. This led to an upsurge among the above mentioned communities.[20]

These people who were once a ruling class had become educationally backward because of the fact when British came they withdrew into some remote areas. This was because of the royal complex which inhibited them from bowing down before an alien power. This led to educational, social, economic and political backwardness of the people. Therefore to place their demands concerning the amelioration of their condition a Backward class

Association was formed. 'The aims and objectives of the movement was to ensure the socio-economic upliftment of the downtrodden mass. It seeks betterment of their conditions through organised efforts without taking on a political or communal colour'.[21]

But later the inspiration of the OBC to obtain representation in the legislature which in turn brings political power, perhaps reflect a political undertone of the movement. They also emphasized that Assam should not be further divided. And unity among the groups from different parts of the state helped in keeping it intact.

The leaders of the association felt that they were able to create a sense of unity among all the communities.

Another significant achievement was that "The OBC are now better represented in the state cabinet and legislatures. Though the Association is not politically oriented, this achievement has made it easier for it to attain its main objectives which are otherwise not political."[22]

The ethnic explosion of the 1980's in Assam was something very different. It is rather the control of resources within the state and access to national resources by those who consider themselves authentic Assamese. Assam's perceived deprivation has an objective basis in its economic backwardness.[23]

Assamese society is composed of various jatis, sub-jatis, tribals etc. Around 59% of the people speak Assamese language. Besides this, Indian languages, officially called "scheduled languages"[24] are spoken by the rest of the people. The marginal majority of the Assamese speakers is complicated by the fact that it includes a substantial number of speakers who were either Muslim immigrants or their descendants from Bangladesh.

Now those who regarded themselves as "authentic Assamese people"[25] and rejected the illegal intruders (the Bahiragatos) felt that their own identity has been threatened.

The political cohesion of the community thus remained uncertain and this uncertainty affected the bargaining strength of the Assamese ethnic movement. "The ethnic politics in Assam mainly calls attention to a set of deeply perceived disadvantages of the Assamese speech community."[26] Within Assam they feared of losing their rightful place in the society especially in regard to wealth and power. And within the country as a whole, they were concerned about their share in the resources generated in the state and in the nation. The movement seeks to control Assamese resources and to make sure that the management of these resources remains with Assam's own personnel.[27]

More complicated aspects is the ethnic politics in Assam. "Assam's boundaries have frequently changed, first as a result of colonial administrative designs and after independence, as a result of new domains of autonomy carried out and granted to various hill areas by the federal authority".[28]

Besides boundary and identity issues, Assamese in security is due to the demographic and economic fact that urban life in Assam is dominated by the "Bahiragatas". Bahiragatas are outsiders speaking languages of the neighboring states. The leaders of the Assamese movement pointed out that uneven share of Assam in the process of national economic development its consequently persisting underdevelopment are due to the intrusion of outsiders and the unresponsiveness of the central authority. These outsiders are mainly Bengali Muslims and Nepali immigrants.

Another aspect which disturbs the Assamese people was the nature of administration. The administration in Assam has not left significant levels of control with the "sons of the soil."[29] Within the state administration the Assamese speaking personnel are outnumbered by outsiders. The educated middle class consider this imbalance as an encroachment of their rights. Historically speaking, the Assam movement has not succeeded in using the state government, which is composed of Assamese politicians to represent the Assamese interests.

Ever since 1972, when the movement stepped up its pace, it has been mainly led by students, professionals and literary people. "The rise of interest association such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and other groups led the movement with certain specific demands. The main issues articulated towards the movement were (a) the alleged intrusion of foreigners from neighboring Bangladesh, (b) the prevention of Bengali domination, (e) the prevention of national and outsiders exploitation of Assam."[30]

The most important issues of the movement was the 'foreigners issues'. The direction of the movement reflect a number of complications. 'First, Bengali Muslim immigrants have poured in decades, going back to the pre-independence days, and many of them are considered 'proper' Assamese by the strict standards of the Assamese language. Secondly, Assamese congress leaders have used the immigrants support as a crucial vote bank for their electoral and mobilizational success. Thirdly, the differential recognition accorded to Bengali Muslim

immigrants has been a product of the changing requirements of political process of the electoral leadership, of the state and the movement leadership. Fourthly, because the major political parties of Assam need Muslim support at the same time Muslim leadership in religious and political organization feels threatened when they are made targets of organized agitation. That is why they started bargaining with the major political parties in Assam and with the national political parties."[31]

This process weakened the secular claims of the movement to represent a coherent community. Gradually, the movement identified itself with the ethnic interests of the Assamese Hindus.

More desperate the Assam movement become, to throw out the recent immigrants or to restrict their political rights, the more it encouraged its adversaries to organise a common cause among the settled Bengali Hindus and Assamese Muslim ethnic groups in the hill area and the immigrants from other parts of India[32].

The movement leaders finally formed the first regional government in the state, but if couldn't fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the people, particularly the tribals of Assam. Even the Bodos become frustrated and fragmented and they felt relatively deprived in comparison to the Assamese caste Hindu groups. This feeling of relative deprivation further accentuated the conflict between the Bodos and the Assamese. The Bodos became more identity conscious and tried to assert their peculiarity outside the domain of 'greater Assamese community.

With the AGP coming to power, the secessionist and underground activities have become more stronger. It reached its peak point with the emergence of ULFA which openly challenged the legitimacy of the Indian constitution. This time ethnic conflicts took a different turn, as ULFA is not based on the support of any particular community. The ULFA movement had marked a line of difference with the Assam movement as it has not supported the expulsion of the immigrants from Assam.

From the above three movements it is very clear that when ethnicity become dominant in social life than the rigidity of caste system makes little sense to the people.

Naga Movement

A major phenomena which generated this movement was the growing discontent among Naga tribes due to their inability to adjust themselves to the emerging socio-political situation on the eve of Indian independence and the impending withdrawal of British administration which they thought gave them special protection and some privileges.'[33]

They are apprehensive of losing their ethnic identity, consciousness of which was encouraged by the British administration. Interference and exploitation by the plainsmen (out group, Indian) and danger of encroachment upon their cultural autonomy were linked with a fear of losing their autonomy, which was linked to the customary ownership of the hills.[34]

The striving for Naga solidarity during the present century reached its climax in the post-independent era. Basically, it was a movement for autonomy which was transformed into one for the establishment of a sovereign independent Nagaland after Angami Zapu Phizo become the President of NNC is Nov. 1949. Later on it virtually transformed itself into a parallel government for Nagaland.

Christianisation and development of formal education in Naga Hills played a significant role in the formation of the movement.

The political problem of Nagaland is essentially an outcome of growing urge on the part of the Naga population for the special recognition of their ethnic identity and to safeguard their customary socio-economic rights against the interference of and amalgamation with the plains people of India.[35].

Naga tribe is divided into many sub-groups. They have their separate language and socio-economic and

cultural diversities. But after British withdrawal, they had strengthered solidarity among all these groups.

'The emergence of a separate Muslim state (Pakistan) from out of erstwhile India raised the hope among some Naga leaders that the distinactive cultural development of the Naga population may logically provide ground for the formation of a separate Naga state'.[36]

The NNC basically made a strong base for their political demands. Elwin has observed that 'the Naga disturbances are unique in having an almost entirely political foundation'.[37] This movement also tried to preserve their cultural identity, which according to the leaders only possible if they remain outside the Indian Union not necessary. One common character of all the movements including the Naga movement in the North East region is that they make a common hatred for Indian union and they are much more concerned about their ethnic identity than the national identity. Sinha notes that "for Nagas Hindu based Indian milieu does not offer a

reference goal for identity as it does for the other tribes like Munda, Santal, Oraon, Gond.'[38]

It is well known that tribal communities are closely Knit and self-contained social units and their comparative identity and isolation from the mainstream of society enable them to develop a unique structure of their own.

G.S. Ghurye has also examined the 'status of the tribals in the total Indian social structure'[39]. However, it is seen that linguistic, cultural and tribal unity are not always the same things.

The cultural boundary of a tribe is also less well defined. It is because of this reason tribes are considered things of the past and instead now people are concerned about the tribes in transition.[40]

Tribes were analysed within the framework of the caste system. But now the change among the tribes can be understood on the basis of secular principle i.e. class.

Kosambi notes that 'The Indian course of history shows tribal elements being fused in general society and process is still continuing.[41]

Earlier when the tribes came in contact with Hindus, caste ideology was the dominant ideology. Tribes had to assume a rank in the overall caste system either voluntarily or involuntarily. But in modern times caste system is not the dominant ideology, many new formulations have come up, within which tribes are trying to assert their identity.

In this respect, we are trying to examine the social structure of the tribals of Bengal and Uralis of Kerala.

Santals, Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Mahar, Toda, Bhutia, Malpahariya are some of the significant tribes of Bengal.[22]

Early history reveals that these tribes, like other parts of India were inducted in the hierarchic social order as Sudra manual workers. With the arrival of new channels

of transport and communication, immigration of non-tribals, the process of land alienation accelerated. "This forced them to immigrate from their own lands. The opening of coal, iron and other mines in some of the tribal region of eastern India, the tribals who were dispossessed of their land migrated to coal mines of Bihar and West Bengal, tea gardens of north Bengal and Assam".[43]

This led to economic inequalities which are an incipient form of class formation.[44] The exploitation resulted in protests and rebellious, at different times.

Inspite of different transformations, culturally the tribes were never isolated. For instance the Santals were settled in agriculture and lived in village with the Hindu artisans and under the authority of the Hindu Rajas.

The process of Sanskritisation also took place aiming them. "In 1971 there was a movement among the Santals known as the Kharwar movement when some Santals declared themselves as Saja-hor (The pureman) after

eschewing fowls, pigs and intoxicating liquor and tried to bring their social customs on a level with Hindu practice."[45]

A similar process of economic and cultural transformation took place in the case of the Munda also. One of the earliest factor to bring change in them was Vaishnavism. It was also influenced by Hinduism and Christianity.

After independence the process of acculturation and economic transformation increased at a faster rate. They even participated in state level and national election. Yet if we compare the economic conditions of tribals with that of the general population in West Bengal, are relatively more backward than the non-tribals.[46]

The formation of class consciousness among the tribal labourers was in a rudimentary state. They are often duped by the upper class tribals in the name of tribal development. In this respect principle of class provides a more meaningful account of tribal change as the tribals

interact in terms of class interests in a class divided society.[47]

Here, a difference can be observed between the Naga tribe and the tribals of Bengal. Nagas didnot identify themselves with the Hindu culture. They regarded Christianity and modern education as their ideology. Even at times, they declined to remain within the Indian society.

The tribal groups of Bengal struggled for their own identity, but they never denied the Hindu cultural system. They wanted to remain within the Hindu domain and maintain separateness of their own.

This character was similar to a certain extent about the tribes of Assam. Although later on they also asserted for their separate socio-cultural, economic and political identity.

The next tribal community to be studied are the Uralies of Idukki District in Kerala. The unique character

of this tribe it its harmonic social system. They have few contacts with rest of the world. Hence it was difficult for the government agencies to penetrate into their system. They also didnot favourably react to the welfare programmes drafted by the government.[48]

The restriction imposed on the clearing of forests for establishing new settlements has compelled them to abandon their nomadic habits. This brought them closer to the plains people. They have accepted without hesitation most of the elements of the material culture of the plains people.

The economic sphere of the people have undergone significant changes due to its adaptive capacity and government programmes. But most of the Uralies are ignorant of these welfare measures. The failure of the government to enforce the welfare measures with sincerity and seriousness has been met with indifference of the Uralies to avail them.

Even the political consciousness of the Uralies is very superficial, there has been no systematic and continuous effort by political parties to politicize the Uralies. The uniqueness of the Uralies is reflected in their religion. They still follow animistic beliefs. There is no impact of modern education, and Christianity among them.[49]

Although they are undergoing changes but the pace has been very slow, certainly not like the other tribes mentioned above. A marked difference can be seen between this tribe and the other tribes mentioned above. No doubt, they have a harmonic system, but modern ideas, values didnot have any impact on them.

But it had certain positive as well as negative effects on the Urali people. They have remained united and strived to maintain their unique character. But one cannot always remain isolated from the mainstream. Once they become aware of the aware of the modern culture, they can identity their drawbacks and develop a new social structure, of their own.

In order to understand the social formation in a broader perspective we have taken into account some non-tribal areas of Bihar and Rajasthan.

In Bihar, one cannot but come across the phenomena of caste in its most virulent form. Close and constant encounters with it has naturally made caste both a familiar factor of social existence in Bihar.[50]

On the other hand, people are also articulating itself in terms of class. People are grouping themselves on the basis of any economic and political categories which commonly go by the level of class. Basis for this lies in conceptual clarity.[51]

Caste also has been immutable earlier. Various ethnic identities (using the term ethnic in a loose non-racial, cultural sense) have over, time been diluted and merged into the caste structure.[52] 'Kurmi' is such a community. This groups considered a tribe till a decade ago, have settled down as agriculturist and resented the tribal status.

This led to the formation of All India Kurmi Nahasabha. It was started as a social reform organisation, but soon developed into a political lobby, increasing both its number and spread through this process. For example, the Awadhias of Patna, the Dhanuks of North Bihar and the Mahtos of Chotanagpur were till then discrete groups. However with the politicisation process, they also started regarding themselves as Kurmis.[53]

Thus this was more akin to the concept of 'class-in-the making" than that of a readymade caste.[54] The economic and political rather than social status has become more stronger. Even the Kurmi identity is being submerged under the groupings of more peasants going under the common level of 'Backward'.

The change in production seems to have altered the self perception of these people from "tribe to-caste-to-class"[55] caste stratification in Bihar is also changing on account of other factors. In the caste hierarchy, Brahmin hold the upper most positions. The Rajputs who have a

connotation of royal origins were identified as Kshatriyas. The Bhumihars and Kshatriyas were recorded as Vaishyas making them socially lower than the Rajputs and the Brahmins and equal to the mere Kurmis, Yadavas, Mallahs, Hajjams and Kahars."[56] The Kayasthas and Bhumihar resented this by filing cases in the Bihar court for their rightful status.

In due course, even the lowest section of the Sudra Varna started similar caste/class mobilization. Then the trouble began when the lowest caste started social reform movements among themselves, the stability of agrarian production relations were jeopardised. This led to almost violence. The landowners got very perturbed about their labourer becoming reformed Hindus.[57]

Therefore, the economic and political and the emergent formation like Kisan Sabha and Bhoomi Sena are class organisation.

To understand caste-class formation in Rajasthan we have to consider its specific socio-political aspect. "In fact, it was a part of the "Indian India", therefore remained largely unaffected by the British Raj.'[58] It represented a sort of feudalism which didnot exist in British India.

The princely states of Rajasthan which were ruled by 19 Rajput, two Jat and one Muslim class, were different in terms of their historicity, continuity and change from the rest of the country. It is this mode of polity and administration which gave a definite structure and direction to caste and class relations.[59]

After independence caste and class structure bear the prominent marks of the colonial as well as the feudal system. Feudalism was a mode of polity, administration and social relations in Rajasthan, so caste and class were inseparable from the feudal social formation. It was also a mode of production.

"Feudalism in Rajasthan was so near absolute",[60] which was not the case in eastern India, for semi-feudalism persists there'.

Being a level of jagirs, it witnessed greater changes due to the abolition of landlordism then other parts of the country where the Zamindari system was in vogue.[61]

Caste was not a rigid system as compared to other states. In terms of caste hierarchy the various castes are arranged in the following orders (i) Dwij caste, (2) principal agricultural castes (3) Lower castes and (4) Untouchable.

This can be compared with other parts of India. But one very significant fact about Rajasthan was that which perhaps didnot exist elsewhere was that "the Rajputs were ranked after the Brahmins and Vaishyas occupied a rank below the Rajputs"[62]. But in reality this was not the case, Rajputs rarely behaved as Dwij caste. They accepted food from other lower caste people. This is one of the secular aspect of the caste system.

It was found that feudalism was strong that it blurred the distinction between caste and class. "Because the land grants, cesses and taxes reduced the hiatus between different castes on the one hand and between the different classescs on the other".[63]

Thus it shows that caste and class overlaps to a great extent. This is apparent from the correspondence between caste, landholding and position of power enjoyed by a number of different castes. Caste is also a an ideological system and class a system of actual social relations. Distinction between caste and class is of a marginal nature. 'Caste struggle in Rajasthan was also class struggle".[64]

In case of Bihar, the caste system that was much debated is not rigid. Now there is trend for the transformation of caste towards class. But at times, caste elements become stronger, also.

It is feudalism which has made the caste structure more flexible in Rajasthan. In Assam, it is semi-federalism

which determine the caste-class formation to a certain extent. But it is the ethnic factor which has made it more feeble.

"The Indian social structure and cultural pattern are characterized by unity as well as diversity. Historically India has been hospitable to numerous groups of immigrants from different parts of Asia and Europe, but the culture of each group has undergone enough change over the centuries to become on integral part of the Indian mosaic. The institution of caste may be mentioned as a typical example of the paradox that is Indian society. "Each caste stands for a way of life that is to some extent distinctive, but at the same time to castes of a region form part of a single social framework".[65]

Caste is found not only among the Hindus but also among the Christians, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains and Jews. Diversity is seen in race, language, rural-urban settlement and several other aspects.

Although, diversity is one side of the picture there are also some unifying factors."The concept of Unity of India is inherent in Hinduism"[66]. The institution of caste cuts across diverse religious groups and gives them a common social idiom.

"The essence of caste is the arrangement of hereditary groups in a hierarchy. It is derived from the idea of Varna, with Brahmin at the top and Harijans at the bottom".[67] Infact, only the two opposite ends of the hierarchy are relatively fixed.

Srinivas notes that, "Islam proclaims the idea of equality of all those who profess the faith, but in it is characterized by caste. Muslim caste differs in some respect from the Hindu caste system. Caste divisions occur among Christians and Sikhs also.[68]

Conversion have however weakened the pollution purity principle. Social institutions are also changing, and this affects all social groups in varying degree. Class in

India is seen as a consequence of change in the caste system not a system inseparable from caste. It has existed along with caste and power.

There are numerous nature of caste which are class like, for e.g. economic domination and deprivations. There are various characteristics of caste, like pollution purity encompassing the power of caste. Dumont regards this character as a positive dimension of the caste system.[69]

Although it is marked by harmonic relations, but opposition and antagonism also form another perspective. Therefore in order to know about the particular relation between the two social phenomena, and the society in general we have to study it from a conceptualization and contexturalization dimension.

This can be related to a broader perspective with reference of North Pakistan and Sri Lanka. History explains the presence of Indian cultural influences and illustrates ethnic multiplicity of the 'caste' which make up the

communities of modern Swat. After a Buddhist phase Hindu religions reasserted itself, so that, at the time of the Muslim invasion the population was solidly Hindu.[70]

It is found that all though the people of Swat are Sunni Moslems, which fall outside the Hindu fold, their system of social stratifications may be compared to that of the Hindu caste system.

The hierarchical system consists of stable groups differ greatly in wealth, privilege, power and the respect accorded to them by other. The local term for such group in quom"[71]. In any such system the organization of one stratum can only be meaningfully understood with reference to its relation to the other Strata.[72]

There are diverse castes in Swat. This diversity can be assigned to infiltration. Since the time of the conversion of Islam a number of local lineages chaiming descent from the Prophet Mohammed have swelled the ranks of the saintly caste. Even from lowland India, Gujar pastoralist

have moved into the area. This shows that the capacity of the Swat qoum system to accommodate diverse ethnic groups within a framework of discrete categories".[73]

Barth notes that there is an intimate connection of this system with the traditions of India. But unlike the Hindu caste system, the basic organizational framework is defined not by ritual, but by occupation and division of labour.

Different communities distinguish clearly between caste status and occupational status like for example, a carpenter can say that he is working as a muleteer. But this does not means that he is at the same time a carpenter. The occupational status, provides the basic conceptual framework for the interrelations of caste. Caste status is ascribed to individuals by virtue of their paternity, while occupations are of individual choice. "Caste status and occupational status are not identical, but each caste position is identified with an occupational position".[74]

He argues that, the productives system of Swat depends on a high degree of individual specialization and division of labour which functions with a very small volume of exchange medium in a non-monetary economy. The high segregation of statuses are due to this factor.

Since the volume of money is small, the services are exchanged rather than money and goods. In order to make "the system of exchange functions the respective services due from each participating member must be clearly defined and kept rigidly separate."[75].

Since there are no centralized institution, the co-ordination of the occupational specialists were achieved in a non-monetary economy.

This is done through the formation of "productive teams." [76] The members of the team form a single co-ordinate productive unit, with communication passing directly from every member to every other member.

The landowner is the pivot on which organization in a village is based. "The team is formed through series of dyadic contacts between different specialists and each separate specialists; there are no contacts between different specialist although they directly co-ordinate their work."[77] Sometimes one productive team, works on land for several landowners, but if the work in the different fields is co-ordinateds the landlords do not pool their resources. Each field is divided separately.

Barth says that this pattern of organization has similarity with Hindu Jajmani System.

"Politically, the whole region is insecure and anarchic, and individuals ask security by attaching them selves to powerful chiefs. Such attachments are contractual."[78] Like a landowner automatically gains administrative authority over the individual residing on his property and in return he is responsible for protecting their lives.

Egalitarianism is attached to Islam. But ritual pollution which derives from body processes such as elimination, sexual intercourse and death, applies equal to all. Therefore, the ideal of ritual equality doesn't apply to Moslem Societies.

Barth, found certain features in Swat, which correspond to caste system in India. Following are some of the feature he formed in Swat:-

(1) Truly homogenous societies, in which internal differentiation is weak. Increasing status differentiation impairs this substitutability unless (2) Clusters of statuses are defined within a limited set of hierarchical categories (castes) which are interdependent and together compose the community.

(3) A complex system in which different statuses can be freely combined. This type of system is found associated with the use of a monetary medium which facilitates the division of labour.

Caste System belongs to the second category, but it is not confined to classical caste System of India.[79]

Caste has never been a regid system of social and hierarchical relations in Sri Lanka. Class relations have also not crystalized due to over-emphasised ethnic identities.[80]

In Sri Lanka, caste was tied to occupations as it was in India but Raghavan observes that the castes of nearly equal degree are very much equal today than a couple of decades ago. Another view is that caste and family commands great respect and position in every village in Sri-Lanka.

Wije Sekara reports that in Sri Lanka, there are various grades in the same caste, some being higher and other's lower. Besides this their are a hundred minor shades of differences. Superiority of caste provides help to secure position of power and prestige.[81]

K.L. Sharma opines, that, in India hypergamy is not simply a matter of ritual or status heirarachy, it essentially refers to class distinctions within a given caste. But within that more important aspect is the hypergamous nature of marriage alliance, hence the problem of dowry,

But in Sri Lanka no such social and cultural crises has culminated. The name Vasagama signifies hereditary class status, embodying some kind of aristocratic pedigree. But today any person with some respectibility lays claim to a Vasagama surname.[82]

Ascription of status in Sri Lanka is not through birth but also of economic activities and occupational role. Caste System in Sri Lanka was rooted into Feudalism and kingship. Landlordism was associated with Buddhist Sangas.[83]

In rural Ceylon there are many functional groups. These groups form an essential part of Ceylon's agrarian economy. These groups are low castes. In traditional

Sinhalese society these castes served the people of high castes rather than their own. The high caste are entitled to receive service from them. Such a system was known as Raja Kariya.[84] It is a counter part of India's Jajmani System.

Ceylonese social system was chracterised by the predominance of Buddhism and the weakness of Brahmanical system. But contradiction is seen in the ideology and practice of Buddhism. It has been never devoid of caste.

With the arrival of the British, changes were brought in Sri Lanka's economy, polity and society. An efficient police system was established, various religious organizations were banned. The Paddy and forest economy was converted to coffee economy.[85] This lead to significant effect on Ceylon's social formations.

Learning of English language gained momentum. The English speaking people were mostly from the upper layer of the Goigamas. Social structure in Ceylon is divided

both vertically and hortizontally. Vertically it is divided between a privileged well-to-do English educated upper class and indigenously educated lower class. Horizonally it is divided between different ethnic communities. In Ceylon, simple economic divisions cannot be made because community, class, language and religion are correlated.[91]

Ethnic differentiation and class hierarchy are closely related. Ethnically Sri Lanka is diverse but not complex. At present, it is passing through spell of serious ethnic violence and hatredness. Sinhalese are numerically preponderant. Ceylon Tamils are the largest minority group. Indian Tamils are of recent origin. The present ethnic conflict is due to the Ceylon Tamils. They have entered into various walks of life in Sri Lankan society. They have also taken up prestigious jobs and position.[87]

Lack of distributive justice and community self-awareness have remained as the roots of ethnic disharmony. According to Sharma, crystallization of ethnic identities has become the stark reality today in Sri Lanka.

This is due to various government policies and programmes since Independence.

The rise of middle class in post - independent Sri Lanka has also contributed to the emergence of Sinhalese consciousness. Wealth, education and occupation, rather than any ascriptive status and ritual position in Sri Lanka today.

The Sinhalese people are becoming more conscious about their own culture. This hatred for westernization and western educational middle class has become more stronger. "The leaders of the anti-western movement them selves were product of English education and colonial rule. The indigenization process started with anti-English and anti-western sentiment directed against Tamils"[88]. This is how the English educated youth who were hated initially by the Sinhalese educated young men joined hands with the latter, and the two become a formidable force against the Tamil people.[88]

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Chapter II
CASTE - CLASS NEXUS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Indian society is old and it is extremely complex. According to a popular estimate it has covered a span of five thousand years since the period of its first known civilization. During this long period of several waves of immigrants, representing different ethnic strains and linguistic families, have merged into its population to contribute to its diversity, richness and vitality.[1]

The ideological and social framework of Indian society began taking shape when the area of interaction between the Indo- Aryans and the earlier inhabitants widened. "The process of Aryanizatioin of the sub-continent was neither smooth nor complete".[2] It was characterised by cultural conflict and change.

Like other groups. the mongoloid groups of the north-east also undergone change. "Either they preserved their tribal identity or they were partially or fully assimilated into Hindu society. Sizeable members from the tribal groups like Khasi, Mizo and Naga have been

converted to christianity, although they still retain some distinctive attributes of their tribal way".[3]

Before the creation of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, Assam provided a home to several ethnic groups and a multiplicity of cultures.

It extended to the entire north-east except Manipur, Tripura and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. It was known as Pragjyotisha in the ancient times. Later it came to be known as Kamrupa.[4] Still later it acquired its present Same-Assam.

Assam bears a diverse socio-cultural milieu. Besides other factors, its geographical background has added to its diverseness.

(A) *Geographical Background*

Fringed on there sides and intersected in the middle by high mountain ranges, the north east region of India was

never entirely cut of from the current of historical change that shaped the sub-continent. In the valley of the Brahmaputra, the civilization flourishing in the Indo-Gangetic plains took root quite early. The differences of a hilly and swampy terrain and the consequent relative isolation from the rest of the changing world could not stop culture contacts. The knowledge of agriculture and the smelting and working of iron and other metals had reached Assam long before the Gupta age.[5]

So, the geographic inhibition could not retard the cultural development of Assam. Migrations into India from passes in the north-west are well recorded, but what is less known is the entry into the country of several waves of Mongolod groups, mostly via Assam-Burmese passes of Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet.[6] These groups added to the diversity of the traditional population of Assamese society.

Almost one half of the indigenous valley population was composed of non-Hindu and such tribes has been converted into Hinduism in the preceding two centuries.[7] Then came the migration of people from Indian region.

(B) *Population*

Kalitas, Koch Rajbonsis, Bodos, Lalung, Mikir, Nath-Panthi, Chutiyas and Ahoms are some of important communities of Assam at that time. Kalitas are an agricultural community who have entered Assam from the West.[8] They were given a Hindu caste Status by the sixteenth Century.

The Bodos or Bodos are an important group in Assam. This generic name does not refer to a tribe, but to a large number of communities speaking Bodo Language of the Tibeto-Burman Family. The Kacharis, once a powerful people with their own kingdom, belong to this group. So are the Rabhas. Both are being rapidly Hinduized.[9] These people of diverse origin, after their absorption into Hinduism, have given themselves a new identity as Rajbonsis.

Another important cluster, of Indo-Mongoloid populations, includes Chutia, Deuri, Mishing and Moran. They have mixed with other populations. A sizeable

section has adopted Hinduism. Another important caste group were the Nath-Panthi Jugi or Katani community. Spinning of the 'Pat Silk' (mulburry variety) was an exclusive function of this caste.

The last and perhaps the most important group consisted of the people of Tai or Shan origin known as the Ahoms.[10]

(C) *Traditional Social Structure*

The traditional caste stratification persisted in a weak form. It was superseded by the system of functional groupings. The indigenous caste structure of Assam does not reflect the existence of any trading caste of significance. Such castes are absent in upper part of Assam.

"But in lower Assam there is a small trading community, called Vaishya-Saud, a counterpart of the Saha caste of Bengal".[11] The presence of a over whelming tribal population and the weaker position of caste Hindus and specially of the Brahmins both in terms of numbers and

politico economic status, to a great extent undermined the growth of a pure model of Hinduism.

(i) *Economy*

Because of inhibiting geographic and ethnic factor, the spread of the iron-tipped plough in North-East India was limited. It is "Jhumming"[12] and associated hoe cultivation that dominated the hill area.

The rice economy of the hill region supplemented by food gathering, hunting and fishing was never self-sufficient. Barter economy was in vogue. Hill people used to come down to the plains every winter for their barter trade. Some of them even settled down on the banks of the hill streams. This served as a link in the channel of communication between the plains and the Hills.

Medieval Period

Medieval period was divided into several tribal kingdom which were never ruled by any Kshatriya kings.[13] In medieval Assam a group of ruling tribes had acquired

position for them in the Hindu social structure. They are-Koches and Chutiyas belonging to the Bodo group. They established their kingdom by 1300 A.D. But later on they were absorved by the Ahoms.

"A progressive segment of them who embraced Hinduism were called Hindu-Chutiyas. Two traditional groups of the Chutiyas, namely, Borahis and Deoris continue to remain in the tribal fold".[14]

Besides them, there are the Kacharies who ruled the cachar kingdom. Among the indigenous Castes, Vaishyas were considerably low in numerical strength. The population of Sudras was substantial in Assam and their major caste group were Kayasthas, Kalitas, Katanis or Jugis, Kaibartas, Keots, Doms or Nadiyals, Haris etc.

Kayasthas were placed next to the Brahmins and were state officials. The Katanis performed the same vocation as Kayasthas and were gradually absorbed by the latter. Kalitas an agricultural caste were non - polluting.[15]

The Nadiyals, Haris, Heras and few other untouchable castes were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Due to absence of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas in Assam the idea of Varna did not take a firm root.

Due to continuous interaction between various Hindu and non-Hindu ethnic groups, the normal rigid caste distinctions did not develop[16] The tribal dynasties which came to power played a role in preventing the caste barriers to develop.

Relative isolation from the rest of India, Assam had a peculiar socio-economic pattern. The economy of the plains was very much integrated with that of the hills.

Economy

The rice economy of the Brahmaputra valley was capable of producing a considerable surplus. But as difficulties of export came in the way, production was limited by the absence of a local market. The curb on the potentialities forced Assamese peasants to find an

alternative use of land and labour in the cultivation of poppy.[17]

The Ahoms also practiced both Shifting and settled cultivation. Guha observed that with the progressive Ahomisation and Hinduisation of the tribes. The settled plough cultivation become the predominant economic activity.

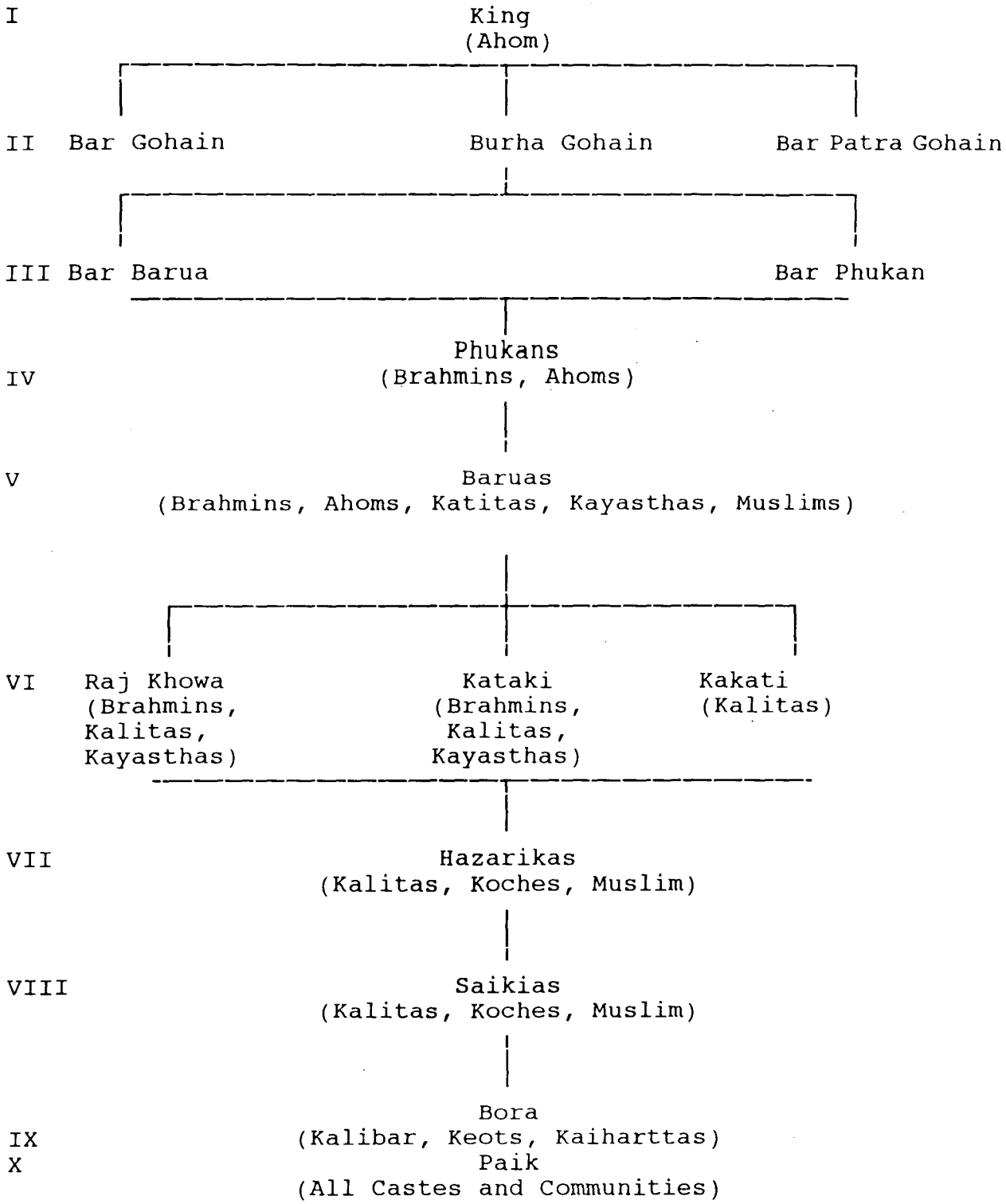
Caste and Class Structure

In some parts of Assam where settled cultivation was practiced along with shifting cultivation the economy was quasi- feudalistic in nature.[18] In the course of the consolidation of their political power and authority, the Ahoms gradually established federalism all over Assam.

With the spread of federalism there came into existence the system of vassalage and the institution of fief. Ahom's land tenure system contributed to the emergence of various feudal classes in medieval Assam.

The state organisation of the Ahoms was typically feudal in character. Political decentralization was an important part of its administration. The administrative system based on the functional groupings created new patterns of hierarchy in the society which did not exist earlier in the tribal political system. In the political hierarchy king was at the top and he was assisted by several high officials or nobles. Next to the king was the council of five known as Patra Mantri corresponding to the modern cabinet of ministers. It consisted of three Gohains, Bar Baruas and Bar Phukans. The appointment of these key position was the exclusive previledge of the Ahom noability constituted by the seven principal Ahom clans. The lower echeleons of position were occupied by officers such as Rajkhowas, Hazarikas, Saikias, Katakis, Kakatis, performing various types of administrative duties. At the bottom were the Paiks. They were liable to render service to the state as foot soldiers and labourers on public works.[19] Hierarchy of the functional/administrative groups and there castes during the Ahom rule.

Rank Order



Source: S.K. Chauhan - Caste, Status and Power - Social Stratification in Assam, p.27. Classical Publ. Company - New Delhi, 1980.

Hierarchy of these groups as given in the Diagram

Total population during the Ahom rule could be arranged in nine orders of Rank. The first place in the hierarchy was occupied by the king and his royal family. In the next place came the three Gohains, who were chosen from amongst the senior members of the royal family. Theoretically, the three Gohains possessed the power to make or unmake the king. The three together constituted a modern council of ministers. These three Gohains by law used to be Ahoms, especially from the royal family.

The third place in the hierarchy was occupied by Bar Phukan and Bar Barua simultaneously. Bar Phukan conducted diplomatic relations with Bengal, Bhutan and other neighboring states. Bar Barua performed the judicial functions. Both Bar Phukan and Bar Barua also used to belong to Ahoms caste. The fourth place was occupied by Phukans who could br recruited from Non-Ahoms native of the country.

Most of the Phukans were recuruited either from the Ahoms or from the Brahmin cast because out of the native castes, the Brahmins mostly fulfilled the education qualification required for the post.

'The fifth place was occupied by the Baruas. The Baruas came from different castes and communities of Assam. Such as Ahoms, Brahmins, Kayas thas Kalitas and Muslims. In the sixth place came the Rajkhowas, Katakis and Kakatis Katakis served as the agents or the messengers of the King. Kakatis served as writers or the clerks. Most of the Rajkhowas and Katakis were Kayasthas

Next, in order were the Hazarikas. Each Hazarika was incharge of one thousand paiks. Hazarikas generally came from castes such as Keotes, Koches and various other tribes. Eight place was occupied by the Boras. Boras also came from lower castes and various other tribes.

The above functional grouping to fulfill certain administrative needs was super imposed on the traditional

stratification system of caste. The former represented the secular status where as the latter conveyed one's ritual status. The administrative status was based on the universalistic principles. But the ritual status was hereditary.

That is why, even today, one comes across a Muslim, Kachari and a Brahmin and a Kaibartta bearing the title of Barua or Hazarikas. The effect of this cutting across of the functional status system over the caste structure were - (i) it prevented the caste system from getting to much regidified, as it has happened in other parts of the country.

(ii) It facilitated the integration of the tribes and the castes, since members from both groups shared the common title which often led to mutual interaction. Thus, the formation of the status groups took place along caste as well as along the administrative groups. The individual often shared two different styles of life, one of his caste and other of, his administrative groups.[20]

As a result the status system in the medieval Assamese society could not be assessed on the single dimension of caste as was the case in rest of India. Under the feudal mode of production, land was the only form of wealth. In conformity with the northern Indian tradition it was claimed that all land belonged to the king.

The privileged class comprised of royal and nobel families, Brahmin and Kayastha priests. Granting of estates to the privileged class was very much prevalent. During the Ahom rule, estates acquired different nâmes. There were 2 type of estates- "Nisf khiraj (half revenue paying estate) (ii) Khiraj (free revenue paying estates). The owners of the Khiraj estates were known as Lakhirj dars. Lakhiraj land was of three types: (a) Debattar land granted for the maintenance of temples and religious institutions.

(b) Dharmattar lands for religious and charitable purposes and

(c) Brahmattar lands were granted to the Brahmins.[21]

The land grants were also given by to Ahom Kings to Vaishnava Gosains. The kings extended grants to the Satras where the feudal type patron-client personal bonds developed. "In course of time a few satras acquired efficiency and affluence and their devotees, the paiks claimed exemption from the general liability to fight and work as labrourers for the state"[22]. Thus, during the medieval period, the Assamese society experienced a transition from tribalism to more progressive and tolerant Hindu culture.

To Guha, the Ahom political system was not a wholesale importation, nor it was an autonomous growth in Assam. It had certain Pre-Ahom elements taken from the civilization that was rooted in the Ancient state of Kamrupa. Although political change took place during the Ahom rule but continuity as factor should be also taken into consideration.

The multi-caste village community based on jajmani relation was unknown to Assam. There was no

urbanization at all. The number of specialized castes remained extremely limited and the division of labour minimal[23]. This exhibited the influence of tribalism on the evolution of medieval Assamese social structure.

One of the very significant aspect of the medieval social structure at that time, was that, the tribal families adopted Hinduism giving up their tribal animistic beliefs. But unlike, mid-India, it did not attain or aspire for the Kshatriya or Rajput status. Due to prolonged political rule of the Ahoms, Kacharis and Koch tribes were admitted into the hindu society as castes between the Brahmins and the Sudras. These two transformation has been characterised by Guha as sanskritizations and de-tribalizatiow.

Though considerately "Ahomized"[24] these groups were able to preserve the separate identity as a new Hindu caste of low status.

Vaishnavite Movement

Founded by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdev in the sixteenth century, the vaishnavite

movement had a far reaching effects in every aspect of Assamese society. It was revolutionary is nature and thus emerged as a challenge to the existing social order of the time. It spearheaded mobility in the social structure at various levels.

There are several viewpoints about mobility especially in the caste structure. They are the views of Srinivas, Mckim Marriott, Lynch and Damle. Srinivas has emphasized the need for sanskritization and Westernization as conceptual tools for understanding mobility in caste system. Lynch and Damle applied the reference group theory to understand caste and individual mobility in India. Stein pointed out the mobility of families and individuals. Marriott on the other hand referred to mobility within the frames of references, such as the rural versus metropolitan and traditional versus modern.[25]

Mobility in cast structure could be understood better if it is analysed at different levels. K.L. Sharma states that, it could be understood at the family, group and individual

level. These three levels of mobility encompass the entirety of mobility in the caste system.

Mobility at the familial level could be understood in terms of repurcussions of structural reforms. Reference group theory helps in the analysis of mobility at the level of individual, and corporate mobility is better undenstandable by the concept of Sanskritization.[26]

Like Sharma and other R.K. Bhadra stressed three dimensional aspect of mobility i.e Individual, Family and Corporate mobility in Assamese medieval society. Although Stein has remarked that mobility at the Jati level did not occur in medieval India, but in case of Assamese society it is found to have occurred frequently. It is true that this mobility usually remained confined to the same varnas.

"The most distinguishing feature of Assamese neo-vaishnavism, is however a network of decentralized monasteries (satra), each headed by a guru (designated as

the Mahanta, Goswami or Satradhikars) Proselytization was their most important function"[27]. Interestingly, all the three references, Sankardev, Madhavdev and Gopaldev were Kayastha by caste and Bhuyan by status.

Before the rise of neo-Vaishnavism, the bhuyans and the tribal chiefs were followers of Shakti. Their magico-religious faith reflected the existing fragmentation of society; cruelty and blood shed were sanctified as nccessary conditions for survival. "The Tai-Ahom religious cult, a form of animism tinged with elements of ancestor worship, had the same spirit, its hirerachy of gods for example was only a projection on the mental plane of the incipient trans-tribal feudal society the Ahom lived in".[28]

In Ahom society one's position was largely determined by birth and the highest state officials had to be recruited exclusively from the seven families (Sat-Ghar) constituting the Ahom nobility. That is why the Ahom nobility from the very begnning held the social gap that existed within the Assamese Hindu society as legitimate.

They even made common cause with the Brahamins against the non-conformism of neo-vaishnvism, since it tended to promote an egalitarian social outlook. The need for an alliance with a section of the neo-vaishnavite movement arose gradually as the feudal class expanded in space and heirarchy."[29]

Vashnavite movement was successful in bringing unity among different sections of people in Assam. Infact, this movement was not a religious revival rather it become a unifying force in consolidating Assamese culture and nationality.

Colonial and post colonial period

British administration in Assam had tried to restructure the society through various administrative polices.

It also tried to revive the economy within its territory by various agricultural reforms. The 1833, the old revenue system of the Ahoms based on personal service was changed, and the revenue system based on cash payment

was introduced [30]. Gradually the whole Assam was brought under the raiyatwari system, except few districts where zamindari system was introduced.

"The old practice of making the debattar lands rent free and the brahmattar and dharmattar lands at half revenue rates, was continued. Thus, lakhlraj and nisf-khiraj estates lingered on in Assam,"[31]

They also introduced new fiscal units. The districts of Assam was divided into fiscal units called Mauzas or Mahats. "Persons appointed to the offices of Mavzadars and Choudhuries were from well to do, influential background."[32] With the introduction of permanent settlement Goalpara and Cachar district, the institution of landlords came into being. In all districts except Goalpara and Cachar individual peasant ownership was introduced. The government recognised the paiks as raiyats.

Inspite of various land laws enacted for protecting the interests of the raiyats, the peasant economy began to

deteriorate. The most important reason was the continuous enhancement of the land revenue rates by the government. This led to improvement of the government finances at the cost of the poor masses. Bhadra states that, another important aspect of such harassment was the use of excessive land revenue to force the local labour to shift from peasantry to plantation sector. Monetisation of the economy was a serious set back for the local peasants. For these peasants hardly had cash to buy their necessary agricultural inputs.

In various aspects the traditional land owners especially the Brahmins and Mahantas still continued to consolidate their position. The non-Brahmin upper caste because of their early initiation into western education monopolised the government jobs and profession.

But one important consequence of the British rule was the emergence of the Assamese middle class. The members of this class, did not hail from the royal and noble families.[33] The ascribed element became less

important, and new power arenas rose up. Therefore, there was a structural break from the feudal monarchical character.

Various agrarian classes also came up, to exist as self sufficient Cultivators, tenants and tenant cultivators. These classes constituted non-brahmins lower castes, tribals and "Non- Assamese communities".[34]

Plantation Industry and its effect

British faced lots of difficulties in building up the plantation industry. In this aspect B.N Choudhury states that, "Inaccessibility of land and difficulty of procuring labour were main hurdles in the way of development of plantations"[35].

Because of the shortage of manpower, large member of labourers were brought from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal. Besides this, a Large number of educated persons from Bengal were absorbed in administrative posts.

B.N Choudhury arques that socio-economic aspect of the local economy underwent various changes. On the one hand production of tea was increased and on the other hand, production of food crops was neglected.[36]

During the later part of the British rule the growth of agricultural labourers was considerably rapid. A class of sharecroppers was also formed.

Post-Independence period

During the British rule, Assamese society experienced a centralised power structure. "The introduction of revenue and police administration brought significant changes in rural Assam and strengthened the position of the village aristocracy.[37] But, in the post-independence period the situation has changed. At present the people from all castes irrespective of high and low status are found sharing power.

Education and jobs are no longer the domain of the privilege castes like Brahmins and Kayasthas. Form the

above discussion it can be concluded that social stratification was prevalent and still it is persisting in Assam but traditional sensitivity and consciousness to the system is not that strong as compared to peninsular and other parts of India.

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2. Ibid, p.6.
3. Ibid, p.8.
4. Ibid, p.9.
5. Guha, Amalendu, 1991, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy, Calcutta, New Delhi, K.P. Bagchi and Company, p.1.
6. S.C. Dube op.cit. p.9.
7. Amalendu, Guha, op.cit, p.17.
8. Ibid, p.17.
9. S.C. Dube, op.cit, p.10.
10. Ibid, p.10.
11. Amalendu, Guha, op. cit. p.21.
12. Jhumming is a from of cultivation under from selected forest plots on hill slopes are cleared by slashing down and burning the jungles. These plots are cultivated continuously for several years and them left fallow for several years. In the North-east

it is known as Jhum cultivation.

13. Bhadra, R.K, 1991, Caste and Class-Social stratification in Assam, New Delhi, Hindustan Publishing Corporation (India), p.16.
14. Ibid, p.18.
15. Ibid, p.17.
16. Ibid, p.19.
17. Guha, Amalendu, op. cit. 24.
18. Bhadra, R.K. op.cit, 31.
19. Ibid, p.32.
20. Chauhan, S.K., 1991, Class, Status and Power: Social Stratification in Assam, New Delhi, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, p.29.
21. Bhadra, R.K. op. cit. p.33.
22. Ibid, p.34.
23. Guha, Amalendu, op. cit, 82.
24. 'Ahomized'. The very word Ahom signifies the people who ruled the state (Assam) for a long six hundred years from 1228-1826. They survived till the British annexation of the province in 1826. These people had a Chino-Tibetan origin and had a rich

cultural heritage, which in a way dominated the cultural, political, social current of Assam for a long time. In course of time many tribals and others groups were absorbed by Ahoms. Amalendu Guha used the term 'Ahomized', to signify, the asseptance of the Ahom way of life by various tribal communities.

25. Sharma, K.L, 1994, Social Stratification and Mobility, Jaipur and New Delhi, Rawat Publications, p.196.

26. Ibid, p.197.

27. Guha, Amalendu, op. cit. p.100.

28. Neog, Maheswar, 1965, Sankardeva and His times, Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Guwahati University cited in Amalendu Guha p.102.

29. Ibid, p.106.

30. Choudhery, B.N., 1959, An Economic History of Assam, 18-45-38, Gauhati, Gauhati University, Lawyers Book Stall, p.44. Also Bhuyan, S.K., 1974, Anglo-Assamese Relations, (1771-1826), Gauhati,

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31. Bhadra, R.K, op. cit, pp.39-40.

32. Ibid, p.39-40.

33. Gohain, Hiren, "Origins of the Assamese middle Class," Social Scientist, vol.13, August 1973, p.14.

34. Non-Assamese Community-Persons immigrated into Assam as plantation labourers are considered as Non-Assamese communities and their descendants not absorbed in plantation jobs as 'Surplus' plantation labourers, cited from R.K. Bhadra, op.cit, p.42.

35. Choudhury, B.N. - An Economic History of Assam 1845-58, Gauhati, Gauhati University Press, p.27.

36. R.K. Bhadra op. cit p.47.

37. Ibid, p.52.

Chapter III
CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that caste is hereditary, endogamous group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local heirarchy of castes. This is one of the pure model of caste, which has been held since the vedic days. But now changes has been observed in this phenomena. Today, caste groups are tending to emerge as political factions, and it will be misleading to assign it as character of caste.

Gough cites the formation of caste labour union as a symtom of caste disintegration where as, Dr. Yalman cites "the formation of a caste welfare society as one among many symtoms of caste resilience changing to social circumstances"[1]

Neither caste nor class can serve as a model for analysing the emerging social reality, because caste is not the precise equivalent of class and class is not synonymous with caste.

In the analysis, it is found that caste and class have moved away from the heirarchical model. Weber opined that Hindu religion is static. It does not permit mobility and change. But this can be challenged on the ground that Indian society from its inception till today is always changing.

The complexicity of caste lies in its ideology and its practice. At one time it constrains the lower caste people to accept their lower positions. On the other hand, it also provided for various movements for emancipation of others.

Role of caste is different from region to region, forces like Sanskritization and westernization are giving a different look to the caste heirarchy. There is no unversalitic pattern of caste-class nexus in Indian society. In this context, Sharma states that in places like Punjab castes are occupying leading positions in the competitive economy, where as in Bihar caste is used openly and unhesitatingly in a most verulent form to devide the society in real-life situations.[2]

Caste is not an end in itself, it has changed and discarded its dysfunctional element. It has become a resource for the members. It is very dificult to locate these two social phenomena in Assamese society with its typical hierarchical features.

It can be assumed that Assam with its stratigic location, role played by the state, predominance of tribal identity has developed unique social structure of its own. Influx of migrants (Bahiragotos) socio-cultural alienation felt by different communities has led to different social movements. One uniform character of these movements are, cry for one's own identity.

Today, people are more conscious about their own groups. Like, a person recognises himself or herself as an Ahom, Boro,Rabha etc. instead of identifying one self as an Assamese.

Caste-class nexus was still continuing. But it hasn't developed like other parts of India. Infact in the caste-class

heirarchy, people are aware of their positions. But when the question of one's identity comes up, it becomes the dominant feature.

Concept of 'untouchability' which is a burning problem in places like Bihar,U.P, M.P. etc, in contrast, people donot give any legitimacy to it in the ethnically dominant Assamese society.

Tribal groups in Assam also had their own divisons. Various social institutions and organizations are established. Through these, they want to keep their folk culture intact and mark a sharp difference with the 'Greater Assamese' society.

Another, two significant aspects of Assamese society are the Bengali (Hindus) and the Bangladeshis (both Hindus and Muslims). They are also fighting for their own right, since they are minority groups.

So, the society is facing a serious crisis. At this moment, Assamese people should be more conscious to maintain the peculiar social set up, which once acted as a bond among people of all walks of life.

Therefore, to study the distinctiveness of Assmese society we really need a different framework which can consider the objective and subjective realities of Assam, as well as entire North-east India.

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