CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

While summing up the present study a few points could be reiterated. The present study is different from other studies in a number of ways. Its main emphasis is on the understanding of a complex situation which cannot be characterised singularistically by caste, class, tribe and other frames of reference. Social structure of rural Assam has representation of castes, sects and tribes in different villages as well as in the same villages. Caste as an ideology of inequality was not as strong as it was in other parts of India. Generally, tribes were outside the caste fold; but in Assam they lived with caste groups, and therefore, tribes influenced castes, and the former were also influenced by the latter's hierarchical ideology. Tradition of Vaisnaba sectarianism had been quite strong in Assam. Vaisnaba sectarianism emerged as a strong reaction against the rigidity of the caste system. Thus, even in the traditional Assam ideas of commensality, connubiality and purity – pollution were not very strong. The three traditions, namely, Hinduism, Vaisnabism and tribalism have moulded the caste system in a new form having rigidity, flexibility and egalitarianism. Therefore, it would not be correct to assume that there was a congruence between caste, class and power in the same way as it was found elsewhere. The system permitted some flexibility in Assam. In view of these facts regarding Assam, we have examined in the present study certain hypotheses related to the social stratification. These hypotheses are that the traditional system did not permit mobility, and the ritually superior people controlled the system. There was a "summation of roles" or "congruence" between caste, class and power. The changes in the traditional system could be characterised as "from tradition to modernity," from "cumulative inequalities" to "dispersed inequalities," from "organic" relations to "segmentary"

1. Caste rigidity was not so pronounced except in Kamrup district of lower Assam, whereas in Upper Assam rigidity could not be established due to the resistance from tribalism and Vaisnabism.
relations, from "closed" to "open", from caste to class, and from hierarchy to stratification, etc. All these hypothetical statements imply a dichotomy between the past and the present, and also a breakthrough in the traditional structure. Therefore, basic changes in rural India have been viewed in these ways.

As we have reported that Assam did not have a situation of congruence before Independence or even earlier. There were noticeable incongruities, therefore, caste was not a very rigid system. Thus, flexibility facilitated considerable mobility in the system. Besides proximity of existential conditions between people belonging to various castes, tribes and sects, non-Assameses also lived with these segments of the Assamese society. But the latter was not recognised as a part of the Assamese social structure. The first three pursued their respective ideology and still live together. However, in regard to the caste groups it was noticed that certain castes did not exist in Assam. Due to this reason the jajmani system did not emerge as a pivotal institution. Landowners and share-croppers mainly belonging to the intermediate castes as well as tribes were able to acquire positions of power as they had also more numerical strength than other groups.

There were less inequality relations among the castes and even between the castes and tribes in traditional Assam. Therefore, changes were from those relations to "more dispersed" or "segmentary" relations. In other words, earlier relations were also based on class positions and affiliation to the sects. Such a situation demands a rethinking about certain concepts and approaches related to the social stratification. We have examined some of the hypotheses about the nature of social stratification and social mobility. The new institutional structures have not affected significantly Vaishnavism or the sectarian character of rural Assam. The new power structure and traditional structure of sectarianism have been co-existing without much clash of values or interests.

We have analysed social stratification in rural upper Assam from both structural and processual points of view. Social stratification refers not only to "structure", but it implies "process" also along with continuing features. Besides structure and process,
theory of social stratification is another important dimension which has been examined in the present study. The processual dimension, therefore, refers to the historicity of the system of stratification. The structural view takes into account the existing caste, class and power relations. The theoretical or ideological view focuses on the nature of stratification mainly in terms of consensus and contradictions between various castes and classes. In the first chapter we have raised some theoretical and analytical issues with a view to formulating some points for the present study. The historicity of stratification in rural Assam has been analysed in the second and third chapters. This provides a macro-view of the nature of stratification system of traditional society. The structure of social stratification in three villages of Dibrugarh district has been described in the three subsequent chapters. This represents a micro-dimension of the stratification system which is a part of the macro structure of the present society. Below is given a brief resume of the discussion of the various chapters related to theory, structure and process of social stratification in rural Assam with particular reference to the three villages of Dibrugarh district.

II

Caste system was not so elaborate in upper Assam before the advent of the British rule in India. The system had been less rigid compared to other parts of India because there were no Kshatriya and Vaishya castes in Assam, and interaction between caste and tribe was quite intense. Specialisation of occupations on the basis of castes did not develop properly. Only a few castes, namely, the Jajgirs or the Katanis and the Kaibartas pursued hereditary callings who had specialised spinning and fishing respectively. Besides, most of the caste groups engaged in agricultural occupation. At the top of the hierarchy the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas had specialised themselves in the priestly occupation. However, many other occupations as needs of the society were practised by the individual households of different caste groups.
But they were not segregated from their original caste groups for performance of such non-traditional occupations. There were a few tribes (Koches, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, etc.) who converted themselves to Hinduism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1881, half of the indigenous population consisted of the non-Hindus and the Hinduised tribes. When caste system gradually exerted its influence on the various communities of this region, it was challenged by the equalitarian ideology of Vaisnabism. Consequently, the Assamese social structure underwent significant changes. The principles of caste hierarchy started weakening to a great extent. Consequently, due to the contradiction between caste system and Vaisnabism two groups emerged. One of the groups retained the canons of the caste system and remained closely attached to the great Hindu tradition. The other group carried on the ideology of Vaisnabism. However, due to this contradiction, caste system could not retain as rigid as it was before. Gradually, Vaisnabism diversified into four sects, namely, the Brahma Samhati, the Kala Samhati, the Nika Samhati and the Purusha Samhati. From the Kala Samhati an offshoot came out which was later known as the Mayamaria or the Matak sect. Gradually, the people belonging to the Matak sect established more equalitarian relations among its disciples than the other three sects of Vaisnabism. All these sects gradually established their respective norms, ideology and culture among the devotees.

The Kings of the region tried their level best to establish Brahmanical institutions and norms, however, those were openly challenged by the Vaisnabites. Since the sixteenth century the royal families came under the influence of Vaisnabism, and this further increased the impact of Vaisnabism on other communities of upper Assam.

In the medieval period important changes occurred in the Assamese society particularly due to the impact of sectarianism. The Kayasthas (Vaisnabite gosains) moved upward and occupied position more or less equivalent to that of the Brahmanas. The
Roches, Chutiyas, Ahoms and Sonowals also tried to emulate their statuses. The Roches and Chutiyas were recognised as higher castes and the Ahoms were accepted as a lower caste of the Sudras of Assam. The Sonowals still remained as a tribe inspite of improvement of their status in the local hierarchy: they were ranked higher than the non-Hindu tribes of the region. The Sonowals are today regarded as "pure" Hindus.

Weber's view about Hindu religious values is that they do not permit social mobility and change. According to him religious ritualism is the strongest principle of social conservatism. Social change is possible only by reducing this ritualism\textsuperscript{2}. But this view cannot be accepted as caste system was not equally rigid or flexible in all the regions of India. Secondly, mobility existed in medieval Assam. Coexistence of caste and tribe also prevented emergence of rigid norms and rather encouraged flexibility and mobility in the society. The view that the Hindu society was static and absolute inequality existed in the Hindu society is therefore untenable. In fact, an absolute inequality in the Hindu society was never in existence due to presence of inherent contradictions\textsuperscript{3}. Contradictions were also prevalent in the traditional Assamese society, therefore, absolute inequality was frequently challenged from some quarters of the society. In traditional Assam contradictions were thus not only in the basic structure but were also found in the superstructural level. At the superstructural level there were conflicts between two religious ideologies, i.e., Hinduism and Vaisnabism. Moreover, even within Vaisnabism there were four Vaisnabite sects which emerged due to the contradictions at its ideological level. In course of time the Mayamaria sub-sect which came out from the Kala Sambati preached extreme equalitarianism.


principle. These differences gave rise to a "civil war" between the two sects, namely, the Matak or the Mayamaria and the Brahma Samhati which culminated into the downfall of the Ahom Kingdom. In this conflict the Ahom ruling power and the non-Vaisnabite Hindus supported the Brahma Samhati sect. However, in the process of this contradiction some avenues for social mobility were opened to certain low ranking castes. As a result certain individuals and groups could achieve higher social status in the society. Thus, such superstructural contradictions even brought about mobility and change in the society, and fixity of hereditary status did not remain as an unchallengeable norm. The notion of "harmonic" social system, as conceived by Beteille⁴, is therefore not very useful in understanding social stratification in rural Assam. Inequality was not always considered "legitimate", and it was thought to be "unjust".

It is difficult to give a correct measurement of flexibility in the caste system of the traditional Assam. However, it could be concluded that birth was the basis of caste membership in the society, but endogamy was not a so rigid norm. Only the Brahmanas and to a certain extent, the Kayasthas rigidly followed the rules of caste endogamy, and it was rarely followed by the other caste groups. Hereditary specialisation of occupations on the caste line did not emerge fully. The Katanis and the Kaibartas, however, pursued traditional occupations. Agriculture was the main occupation almost for the entire society. Therefore, the concept of purity and pollution related to the various occupations as well as hierarchy of them was not strongly entrenched into the Assamese society. Jajmani system also did not emerge quite strongly in Assam. But jajmani system was closely associated with agriculture and caste in other parts of India. How, then agricultural operations could be performed without jajmani system in Assam? One of the reasons is that due to non-pursuance of traditional callings, jajmani system did not have strong roots. Therefore, organic linkages and relations involving a group of castes could not also develop in the local

⁴ Beteille, A., Inequality and Social Change, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1972, p. 15.
caste system. Thus, the nature of the caste system in traditional Assamese society reflected the "segmental" nature of the caste system rather than "organic" character. The "organic" linkages did not exist in the caste system as they prevailed elsewhere. The "segmental" nature of relations in Assam existed due to absence of economic interdependence among various caste groups and lack of strict adherence to Brahmanical norms. However, all groups maintained their exclusiveness and cultural identities inspite of the flexibility in the norms of purity - pollution and hereditary occupations. But the contradiction existed in the fact that exogamy was practised without corresponding rigid endogamy.

The traditional Assamese society was relatively less "closed", and therefore, was "open" to some extent. Intra-caste mobility occurred in the traditional society. Social mobility also occurred in the economic and political spheres at the levels of individual and family. Incongruities existed between caste, class and power. The notion of "status summation" which refers to summation of social, economic and political statuses cannot be accepted as a frame of reference for analysing changes in the traditional stratification system in Assam.

In upper Assam political power was mainly held by the Ahoms, the tribal rulers and their nobles. The Ahom king was at the top of the political hierarchy and was assisted by several nobles belonging to the same tribe. These nobles were actually regional administrators. However, after 1772 the Ahom kings recruited some junior officer from various ethnic groups mainly belonging to the lower castes and tribes. These lower ranking officers also shared, to a certain extent, political and economic power in the traditional society. The castes such as Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas did not enjoy such political power. Thus, there was no direct relationship between caste and power. At the village level also the situation was not different. Since there were predominantly uni-caste as well as uni-tribe villages, dominance of the upper caste over the lower caste groups and tribal people did not take place. Naturally power at the village level was either held by the lower officers of the Ahom administration or by the dominant individuals of the same caste or tribe.
However, we find that Dumont's idea of a king-priest model based on the alliance between the king and priest is relevant for understanding the situation in rural Assam. In traditional Assam there was a close association between the Ahom kings and the Brahmanas. The Ahom kings enjoyed supreme authority in political matters, whereas the Brahmanas had supreme authority in the ritual and social affairs. The latter were expected to advise the former not only in socio-religious matters, but also in the administrative activities. However, we differ from the Dumont's view on certain points. Besides the Brahmanas, the Kayastha gosains had such close association with the Ahom king who enjoyed more or less equal status in the society. It was noted that not only the Brahmanas occupied high positions but the Kayasthas also served in the Ahom administration and occupied considerably high offices. The Ahom kings, the Brahmanas and the Kayastha gosains formed the top stratum of the Assamese society. The Brahmanas and the Kayasthas served as politico-religious advisers to the Ahom kings. Thus, it seems that not only the Brahmanas possessed advisory power but the non-Brahmanas who performed the occupation of the priest also could achieve status comparable with the former. During the latter part of the Ahom rule, the gosains of the Matak satras who were craved for power revolted against the Ahom kings to snatch power from them. They were successful in establishing a Matak kingdom (consisting of Dibrugarh and North Lakhimpur districts) which was inhabited mainly by the followers of this Vaisnabite sect.

It is not quite easy to find out relationship of economic position with the caste rank. The Brahmanas though highest in caste hierarchy, were not the richest of all the castes. The Kayasthas enjoyed economic status equivalent to that of the Brahmanas. The Ahoms were economically well off and they enjoyed status comparable with the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas. The Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Ahom kings had a large number of estates under their control. The Brahmanas and the Kayasthas received such estates as land-grants from the Ahom kings. Besides, the junior officers who belonged mostly to the Ahoms, lower castes and tribes enjoyed some

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higher economic status than the rest of the people as they belonged to the social status of the community of the king. However, under the feudal system none of these groups enjoyed proprietary rights over their estates. These estates were generally cultivated by the seffs who belonged to the lower castes and the tribal groups. The feudal system emerged during the Ahom rule along with the spread of settled cultivation and shrinkage of shifting cultivation. The shifting cultivation was practised by half of the indigenous population who were non-Hindu and Hinduised tribals. Therefore, co-existence of two types of mode of production, namely, the feudal mode of production and the primitive mode of production within the same social structure cannot be assumed as harmonic in relations. Because the former was based on inequalitarian principles while the latter believed in egalitarianism.

Thus, economic differences between various segments of the Assamese society were not as acute as they were in other parts of India. Caste ranking did not represent a corresponding hierarchy of economic relations. The upper caste and class people did not have exploitative relations with the lower castes and classes as they were found elsewhere.

III

Castes in the three villages, i.e., in the multi-caste, uni-caste and tribal villages are relatively less particular about their ritual status. The traditional norms of the caste system are not strictly observed among all the caste groups in the same fashion. In general caste studies reveal that endogamy and exclusiveness of caste groups are found as the most important features of the caste system. But in upper Assam endogamy does not have a decisive role in maintaining the exclusiveness of caste groups. Except the caste groups of the two ends of the hierarchy, the rules of endogamy are not strictly followed by the other castes. Therefore, with an exception of the Brahmanas and the Kaibartas all the castes are found

to be violated the rules of endogamy. Thus, endogamy is not always a strict principle of hierarchy at least in the Assamese society.

The norms of commensality pervades over the entire life situations, but it is not found as the basis of caste hierarchy. Except the Brahmanas and the Kaibartas, norms of commensality are not rigidly adhered to by other caste groups. But notions of purity - pollution are found among various caste groups. Before initiation into Vaisnabism they accept all sorts of food from each other. The Brahmanas who have not undergone initiation may also accept food from some other castes including the Sonowal tribe, but not from the Kaibartas who are quite low in the hierarchy. However, purity - pollution syndrome is not attached to various occupations as caste and occupations were not related in the traditional Assamese society. However, some occupations were considered quite impure. Fishing was one such occupation which was pursued by the Kaibartas accorded them a low status in the caste hierarchy. Priesthood is not recognised as the highest occupation though it is pursued by the Brahmanas and is pure one. The reason is that Vaisnabism does not require Brahmanical services and it advocates the ideology of equalitarianism. The tribal groups who have entered into the caste system practise agriculture, but they do not have notions of purity-pollution attached to hereditary occupations. Moreover, all the castes including the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas are engaged in agriculture, either directly or indirectly, hence all of them are pure / impure on the basis of occupation.

The jajmani system is not found in the three villages as there is no interdependence among the caste groups through such relations. This is also a very common feature of the caste system in upper Assam. One of the reasons is that the uni-caste or the uni-tribe villages are predominantly found in upper Assam. Interdependence of caste groups cannot be expected in such villages. Therefore, there is a lack of jajmani relations. Even the multi-caste villages, which are rather rare to this region, do not
have the jajmani system. Therefore, caste system of upper Assam cannot be explained in terms of the "organic" relations as organic linkages were and are absent among the caste groups. Because, "organic" relations imply interdependence which is not found among the castes of the three villages. Dumont mentions that specialisation of occupations entails separation between castes, and this is oriented towards the fulfilment of the needs of the people. But in upper Assam, specially in the three villages which we have studied, such a notion is not applicable because separation of the caste groups in terms of specialisation of occupations as well as consequent hierarchy could not be explained completely as almost all the castes are involved in agricultural and allied occupations. Dumont, while explaining the jajmani system, mentions that it is an overall interdependence of the caste groups on the basis of division of labour which is encompassed by religious ideology.

But in Assam, as we have seen, interdependence of the caste groups on each other does not arise as occupational specialisation along caste line is particularly non-existent and naturally the question of exchange of services does not arise. Therefore, the system of reciprocity could not develop.

In Assam, both castes and tribes constitute the local social structure, and the norms of both the segments comprise the normative structure of local hierarchy. Norms of inequality of Hindus have contributed to the local hierarchical system. The equalitarian ideology of the various tribal groups has influenced the Hindu system of stratification to a great extent. Thus the system is characterised by "closedness" and "openness" of the caste and the tribe respectively.

Under such a situation of flux some of the caste groups have reduced their exclusiveness, while some other caste groups have been able to maintain their separate identity. In the caste hierarchy the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas have retained their exclusiveness as they are the two highest castes. The Kaibartas have also retained their distinctiveness as a group as they occupy the lowest

8. Ibid., pp. 107, 153.
rank in the local hierarchy. The middle castes have come closer to each other to a considerable extent. In upper Assam, for example, the Koches have identified themselves with the Kalitas. It has been noticed that the Kalitas, Koches, Chutiyas, Keots and Katania of the multi-caste village have reduced their distinctive practices and come close to each other, and have gradually identified themselves as Kalitas, a better Sudra. The Chutiyas and the Kacharis have identified themselves with the Ahoms. Therefore, castes in the three villages are not completely closed. A caste may be accepted and absorbed by another caste group. This indicates that the system is "closed" and "open" at the same time. However, this feature represents mobility in the caste system; this mobility occurs slowly in a gradual process.

Dumont's understanding of the caste system is based on three principles, namely, hierarchy, interdependence and separateness. He lays greatest emphasis on the hierarchy in relation to economy and power as the latter two, he says, are encompassed by the former. But it has been seen that this is not found in upper Assam. Even in the traditional society, it was found that the Ahoms, being superior in the domain of power, enjoyed superiority over other higher caste groups. In the three villages, we have observed that wealthy Ahoms and Sonowals are rated higher than some of the higher castes' families including the Brahmanas who are living at the subsistence level. The poor Brahmanas who offer their services at the time of death in performing certain rituals (shraddha) to other castes are considered lower than the rich Brahmanas who generally avoid performance of such ritual services. Miller has also pointed out that Dumont's analysis fails to explain the real nature of relations between the ritual and the secular domains of Hindu caste system.

9. Ibid., p. 43.

Class is one of the phenomena of social stratification. Marxian analysis of class refers to two classes, namely, owners and non-owners of the means of production. Commonality of interests brings together the owners and the non-owners who participate in the process of production. The classes, therefore, become communities as they share common conditions of existence. But the fact is that members sharing common interests have not been even able to realise the commonality. They have not functioned as a "communal" group. Marx thought of a certain process of awakening of the proletariat which did not take place in many countries, and particularly, in the feudal and colonial societies. India as a whole and also Assam in particular had, existentially speaking, explosive situation in terms of exploitative relations between the owners and the non-owners, but the situation did not lead to the explosion, and even to a mild threat by the Have-notes to the Haves. There were enough institutional mechanisms to prohibit the required process of politicisation of the proletariat and further strengthening of the bourgeoisie.

The agrarian classes are found on the basis of their relations to the productive organisation. These are: the landowners, the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers. In case we club the share-croppers with the labourers and look at the village class structure in terms of those who control the means of production and those who do not, we will not be able to understand fully the class structure. The fact is that the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers cannot be clubbed under a single class as they do not have commonality of interest. They do not have common economic interests, and therefore, they cannot unite as members of the single class. The share-croppers and the agricultural labourers compete with each other in the local situation for acquiring land to cultivate on the basis of share-cropping. Those who are successful are different from those who compete unsuccessfully, and the

share-croppers emulate their economic position by cultivating as sharers with the landowners.

The three classes are further differentiated into several smaller categories on the basis of their specific economic interests. Among the landowning class there are absentee landowners, supervisory cultivator - service holders / traders / priests, non-cultivating landowners, cultivators - service holders / traders, and cultivators. Among the class of share-croppers there are share-cropper - cultivators/service holders/traders, share cropper-cultivators, share cropper-service holders and share-croppers. The agricultural labourers are differentiated into: agricultural labourer-cultivators, agricultural labourer-share croppers, agricultural labourer-share cropper-cultivators, agricultural labourers, and agricultural labourer-service holders/traders. These class-categories show economic distinctions between various classes. Such differences prevent these classes from uniting as organised groups against their exploiters. Each of these classes have their specific economic interests.

The three classes, namely, the landowners, the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers do not comprise the totality of the rural class structure. The gosains and the white-collar job doers do not contribute to the processes of economic production in any significant manner. Class antagonism between the landowners and the share-croppers is found as it is noticed between the landowners and the agricultural labourers, but it cannot be as explicit and acute as it is between the landowners and the agricultural labourers as the share-croppers share cultivation with the landowners and the labourers are paid wage-workers.

In the three villages conflict between the landowners and the agricultural labourers is not expressed explicitly as the latter depend upon the former for their livelihood. Conflict between various sub-divisions of the landowners, the share-croppers and agricultural labourers could be seen in the form of competition for hiring labourers, for getting land for share-cropping, for getting employment on the farms of landowners. Although some tensions are
observed between the classes these cannot be generalised that their mutual relations are essentially those of conflict. It is, in fact, due to the high degree of overlapping between the classes. Beteille also observes that there is an overlapping between various classes, that is classes are not exclusive categories, and therefore, class-antagonism have not become sharp enough. Changes in the position of various classes and sub-divisions of the classes at various points of time do not allow crystallisation of class antagonism and emergence of class consciousness. Changes in classes are different from the change of class structure.

Upward mobility of various sub-divisions of the classes has occurred over a period of time, but the class structure has remained as such without witnessing significant changes. But this mobility is evidently faster than that of the castes. However, class antagonism which emerge under certain conditions in the spheres of relations of production may be effectively dissolved due to the loyalties based on kin, caste groups and sectarian affiliation of the people. This, in fact, is noticed among the Sonowals, Ahoms, Kaibartas, Koches and Katanis. Caste, Hinduism (Saktaism) and Vaisnabism have prevented crystallisation of class cleavages. Moreover, there is conflict between the two sects of Vaisnabism, namely, the Matak and the Bamunia. Therefore, tensions generally follow these cleavages of society rather than those of the classes. In this way polarisation of classes is effectively retarded.

In the multi-caste village (Hatkhola), there are absentee Brahmana and Kaibarta landowners. There is only one Brahmana and he has more land in the village than other castes. Previously he did not have land in the village. But he acquired it to start a tea plantation in the village in the early period of this century. The Kaibarta absentee landowners have little land in Hatkhola as they work at Dibrugarh town. Thus, the upper caste landowner is an absentee landlord as he is owner and manager of his plantation, and also the lower caste landowners are absentees as they have settled at Dibrugarh for regular and gainful employment.

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A good number of the landowners in the multi-caste village are Kayasthas, Chutiyas, Ahoms, Katanas, Kalitas and Koches. However, numerically the Ahoms are more than all other castes. There are only two landowning households of the Keots and the Kaibartas. None of the non-Assameses belong to the class of landowners.

The class of share-croppers overlap mainly with the Keots, Ahoms, Kalitas, and Koches. The proportion of the Keots in this class is higher than the Ahoms, Kalitas and Koches. A few of the Katanas, non-Assameses and Kaibartas are also engaged in share-cropping. However, none of the Kayasthas and Chutiyas are share-croppers.

The Kaibartas and the non-Assameses are overwhelmingly agricultural labourers. Some of the Katanas, Koches, Kalitas, Chutiyas and Ahoms also work as agricultural labourers. The Kayasthas and Keots do not take up agricultural labour works as a source of their livelihood.

A few points could be concluded in regard to the multi-caste village. The Kayasthas, an upper caste, occupy the top rank in the ritual hierarchy, and their social status is equivalent to that of the Brahmans. But today they are not economically dominant. About eighty years ago, they were non-cultivating landowners, but from the beginning of the present century their economic condition has been declining. Today, large landholdings are held by the intermediate castes such as the Ahoms, Kalitas and Chutiyas. In fact, there is nothing like "caste dominance" or "dominant caste" in the multi-caste village. A number of families from different castes enjoy economic dominance. Families belonging to the same castes are economically dominant share-croppers and agricultural labourers. Some families of the Keots, Ahoms, Kalitas and Koches are economically well off, and also some of the families of these castes are agricultural labourers and work with the lower caste families of the Kaibartas and the non-Assameses.

The uni-caste village (Chakalibaria) is mainly inhabited by the Ahoms although there are a few families of the Muslims and the Chutiyas. In the uni-caste village the Ahoms are equally economically well off and poor. On the one hand, they are landowning group
and on the other, they are agricultural labourers. However, one Ahom of the unit-caste village owns largest landholdings in all the three villages. There are fewer share-croppers compared to other villages. Only a few Ahoms are engaged in share-cropping.

The tribal village (Kapahua) is inhabited mainly by the Sonowal tribe. Although there are a few Brahmanas, non-Assameses and Chutiyas, they are small in number and are not the original inhabitants of the village. Land of the village is owned mainly by the Sonowals. There are also Brahmana landowners. Although the Brahmanas belong to the landowning class, their landholdings are not big in size. Only one family of them owns considerable amount of land. Large landholdings are found only among the Sonowals. Eleven families of the Sonowals own considerable land in the village. The Sonowals enjoy better economic position than the Brahmanas. As it is a tribal village only the Sonowals are engaged in share-cropping. The non-Assameses and some Sonowals are engaged as agricultural labourers in the village.

Traditionally, the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas - the two upper castes were main landowning people. But today they are not economically dominant as they do not possess much land. Earlier they owned large landholdings in the form of religious estates which they received from the Ahom Kings. Today, their economic condition has come down to a considerable extent. The Brahmanas and the Kayasthas do not participate in the agricultural operations on their own land. They generally get their land cultivated either by the share-croppers or by hired labourers under direct supervision. But some of the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas have taken up self-cultivation in recent years. Today, by and large, the intermediate and lower castes and the tribals work as share-croppers and agricultural labourers on the land of the upper castes. But many of the families of the intermediate castes and tribe are economically well off as they own substantial landholdings. Landholdings of some of them are much larger than that of the upper castes. Therefore, they are economically more dominant than their upper caste neighbours. These families of the intermediate castes have acquired land after the abolition of the traditional land tenure systems. Therefore, they could improve their economic standard as well as class position.
However, some of them own land traditionally. Since these castes are numerically preponderant the economically better off families have taken advantage of the numerical preponderance by contesting elections and occupying positions of power in the rural areas.

The class of the share-croppers overlaps to a large extent with the intermediate castes and the tribe. Many of the families of the intermediate castes own land and also cultivate land on share-cropping basis. They generally acquire land for share-cropping from the families of their own castes/tribe and from the upper castes, namely, the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas.

The non-Assameses and the Kaibartas overlap with the class of the agricultural labourers. The non-Assamese groups cannot be placed in the local caste hierarchy. During the later part of the British rule they migrated to Assam as labourers in tea plantations. Many of them settled down in Assam's countryside as agricultural labourers in the beginning of the present century. They are preferred as labourers because they are available generally on convenient terms and conditions. Among the Assamese the Kaibartas, who are considered as a lower caste, are today overwhelmingly agricultural labourers. Previously they were attached to the religious estate of the Moderkhat satra as tenants. But in course of time they become agricultural workers. About 94 per cent of them depend upon agricultural and other forms of casual labour for their livelihood. It is not that the agricultural labourers are from the lower castes alone, there are some from the intermediate castes and tribal communities also. But the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas do not provide a single recruit to this class.

On the basis of our understanding of social stratification in upper Assam we could conclude that the traditional stratification did not have "congruence" or "cumulation" of statuses or inequalities. There was incongruence between various aspects of status of castes and tribes. In other words, there was dispersion of inequality. The system was not undifferentiated as it has been assumed by some scholars. Therefore, change is not from "cumulative inequalities" to "dispersed inequalities" as perceived by Beteille

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It is also not of a "segmentary" nature as observed by Bailey\textsuperscript{14}. Our study of rural upper Assam shows that there was incongruence in various statuses of the members of some caste, tribe or community, hence there were "dispersed inequalities" in the traditional Assamese society. However, today the picture has changed to a considerable extent. It is evident that there is more dynamism in the relation between caste and class, and therefore, divergence is more noticed between the hierarchy of caste and that of class. The relation has become much more complex in recent years. The nature of change is, therefore, from one form of "dispersed inequalities" to another form of "dispersed inequalities".

V

Today power is far more distributed among the members of various castes and tribes than what it was before. Even in the traditional society power did not always go along with the caste hierarchy. But there was close relationship between power and class in the traditional Assamese society. Due to the emergence of various new sources of power, the social base of power distribution has become wider. Young leaders have replaced the old ones. Power has become in some way independent of both caste and class.

In the multi-caste village (Hatkhola), intermediate caste like the Kalitas sent largest number of representatives in the panchayat from 1952 to 1969. Besides the Kalitas, others who represented in the panchayat were the Koches, Ahoms, Chutiyas and the Kaibartas. The positions of the president, vice-president and secretary went to the Koches, Ahoms, Kalitas, Chutiyas and Katanis. Some Katanis and Kacharis of the neighbouring villages also held offices in the Hatkhola panchayat. The co-option of women and the scheduled castes as members of the panchayat has also reduced concentration of power in the village.

In 1974, the village panchayat was reorganised and its jurisdiction was widened up to the mauza level. As the mauza is numerically dominated by the Ahoms, they got elected for the panchayat.

In the changed situation, particularly since 1974, some of the sub-divisions of the landowning groups such as the supervisory cultivator - service holders, cultivator - service holders and cultivators have occupied dominant positions in the power arena as their economic condition is better off compared to other classes. The reason is that besides the income from the agriculture, many of them have regular cash income from salaries of some of their family members.

From 1952 to 1974 the members of the Sonowal tribe of the tribal village elected the panchayat representatives from among themselves. The Brahmanas and the Chutiyas did not entangle in the game of power-politics. As the village is a part of the "scheduled tribe reserved area", the Sonowals have been able to wield considerable power in the region. The Sonowals of the tribal village who have found berths in the panchayat belong mainly to the class of share-croppers.

Since 1974 the uni-caste village was incorporated into the scheduled tribe reserved area along with the tribal village. This has deprived the Ahoms from holding any office in the panchayat as they are not considered eligible for the elections. Before 1974, the Ahoms of the uni-caste village held various offices in the panchayat. These leaders are from the classes of the landowners, the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers, and some of them have education up to high school standard.

Today, some educated persons who have established connections with the administration and district leaders have power in the multi-caste village. In the emerging situation economic position and education are the most important bases of power. Caste rank is not a decisive factor for acquiring power as most of the leaders are from the intermediate caste groups; but a bulk of them are landowners and have higher education. Besides, a few of them
also hail from the share-cropping families.

In the tribal village the influential persons are mainly from the Sonowal tribe. The Sonowals derive power from different sources. Numerical strength is a source of power particularly in the case of the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers as they do not have economic resourcefulness and education like the upper castes and the landowning groups. Some Sonowal females are influential in the village as they are engaged in modern occupations. They are also educated. The Brahmanas of the tribal village do not wield power. Only one of the Brahmanas has been able to acquire some power on the basis of education and white-collar occupation.

In the uni-caste village the informal leaders’ power is based on their sound economic position as they hold large landholdings. Besides this, some of their family members are educated, and they are engaged in modern occupations. Thus, the main determinants of power of the influential leaders are landholdings, education and white-collar modern occupations.

Since Independence, due to the process of politicisation, new bases of power have emerged in the villages. Influence of political ideologies and parties has brought about changes in the power structure. Power has shifted from the traditional elites to the modern elites.

The multi-caste village has been influenced mainly by the ideology of the Congress party. The Socialist party has attracted recently some of its young members. Today some of the intermediate castes such as the Kalitas, Koches, Kayasthas and Ahoms wield power due to their connections with these political parties. Political power is vested, to a large extent, among the intermediate castes. The members of the power-wielding families have acquired better economic position and attained modern education. But the Kaibartas, a lower caste, have not been able to enhance their position partly due to their low caste rank and partly due to a lack of resources required for higher education, etc.
The Sonowals of the tribal village are more politicised than the caste groups of the multi-caste village. Since Independence the tribal village has been the stronghold of the Congress party. Some of the members of the Sonowal tribe (including women) and a Brahmana have acquired power due to their connections with the Congress leaders, who are M.L.A's. and M.P's. from the region. The Communist party of India has also been gaining popularity in the village. A few Sonowals who know about the CPI's ideology have accepted membership of the party.

The people of the uni-caste village are also equally aware of the intricacies of politics. Although majority of the villagers support the Congress party, the CPI and the Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad (UARP) have made some inroads into the village polity. The Ahoms of the uni-caste village wield power due to their connections with certain political parties and their leaders. However, most of the leaders of the three villages, who have connections with the political parties, belong to the landowning families, and have formal education.

The leaders with traditional styles still have decisive voice in the three villages as they control the Vaisnabite institutions of satra and namghar. Modern sources of power have not affected these institutions. But some traditional elites have acquired positions of power in the new structures as village panchayat leaders. Therefore, there is a blending of tradition and modernity. In all the villages, there are some members who are accepted as custodians of traditional heritage and culture. These leaders belong to different castes/tribes, and some of them have their respective primordial groups as the arenas of operation. In the multi-caste village most of the traditional leaders are from the agricultural labourer families, in the uni-caste village they generally belong to the families of the agricultural labourers as well as share-croppers, and in the tribal village bulk of them are drawn from the landowning and share-cropping classes.

There is no single dominant caste in the three villages. There are at least two rival groups competing for positions of power.
The people divided on the basis of sectarianism function as factions. Thus, dominance of a group of people is confined to the members belonging to a sect, caste or tribe. The two sects, namely, the Matak and the Bamunia represent two factions in the village, and each one is dominant within its own caste group. Lewis has reported such a situation of factionalism and group dynamics in a north Indian village. Miller has also reported similar situation in his study of a Hariana village. But in reality dominance is shared by a few families belonging to various castes, sects, classes and tribes and not by all those who belong to the caste of these dominant families. Therefore, the unit of dominance is not "group" or "caste", but a number of "families" or "individuals". Dominance is enjoyed by an individual due to his achieved qualities rather than as a representative of the dominant caste group. Therefore, power has become individualistic.

Caste and class today do not coincide with power to a larger extent. The intermediate and the lower castes which belong to the classes of the landowners, the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers exercise considerable power in the three villages. In the emerging situation power also has diffused among the scheduled caste and tribal groups. Still economic resource ownership, to a certain extent, remains as an important factor facilitating acquisition of power and prestige as the landless agricultural labourers have even not yet been able to enhance considerable power.