CHAPTER II
THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND STRATIFICATION IN TRADITIONAL RURAL ASSAM

The politico-economic history of Assam has passed through two distinct phases, namely, (a) the pre-British period and (b) the British and the post-independence periods. These two periods show marked differences in the Assamese social structure as well as in its stratification system. The purpose of the chapter two and three is to show the process of change in the stratification system due to the impact of the two phases of the politico-economic history. This will reflect the macro view of the Assamese social structure and its dynamic process. However, the discussion is confined principally to upper Assam as the social structure of the region is a combination of the Hindu population along with a large number of Hinduised and semi-Hinduised tribal communities which make it different in many respects from that of lower Assam.

The history of migration shows that various groups of people like the Kirata, Dravidian, Austric, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Tai, Vedic people and Indo Tibetan have constituted the present Assamese social structure. In the seventh century first Indo-Aryan ruler of Kamrup introduced \textit{Varnashrama} system in lower Assam by bringing Brahmanas from northern India. Kamrup of lower Assam being only the strong seat of Aryan culture and \textit{Varnashrama} system where Kings and the Brahmanas had dominated the local society could bring very little change in the non-Hindu social structure of upper Assam. The geographical barriers and predominance of tribalism in upper Assam stood as resistance to Hinduisation. However, during the later period Hinduism penetrated into the societies of upper Assam. After inter-mixture with the non-Aryan culture the Vedic religion underwent enormous changes and through the gradual process of change Saivaism and Saktism developed. But they faced a great challenge from Vaisnavism and later on declined considerably. Looking at the political history of Assam it was noticed that the rulers were mainly from among the local tribal communities who never enjoyed the status of
Kshatriyas in the society. The whole upper Assam was ruled by the Ahoms (1228 to 1838 A.D.) and the Chutiyas (1300 to 1400 A.D.), the western Assam by the Koches (1581 to 1725 A.D.) and the eastern Assam by the Kacharis (1531 to 1831 A.D.). However, in the following discussion it will be examined how the dominating politico-economic history of the Ahom kingdom had brought enormous changes in the Assamese social structure and stratification system.

CASTE SYSTEM IN THE TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Kamrup in lower Assam was a seat of the ancient Hindu tradition. The kings with the help of the Brahmanas tried to preserve the Varnashrama system for which the later were given land grants. Besides Vedic studies, the Brahmanas cultivated sciences and arts; and were also related to diverse occupations as ministers, administrators, court poets, etc. They always enjoyed social superiority but were liberal in outlook regarding occupations, in observances of different social laws and commensal relations with other castes. The following tables show the distribution of castes and tribes in Assam and in Lakhimpur district in 1891.
Table 1

Distribution of indigenous castes and tribes in erstwhile Ahom dominion (processed from 1891 census). (Districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Nowgong and Kamrup).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous population</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bodo - Kachari tribes - Kachari, Mech, Lalung, Hojai, Garo, Rabha, Mahalia, etc. (Non-Hindus)</td>
<td>322,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Miri and Mikir</td>
<td>103,441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moran</td>
<td>5,806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Koch/Rajbanshi</td>
<td>236,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chutiya</td>
<td>86,843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ahom and other Shan elements</td>
<td>158,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Kalita</td>
<td>212,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Dom/Nadiyal</td>
<td>84,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kaibarta</td>
<td>23,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Kewat</td>
<td>90,103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Kayastha</td>
<td>12,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Brahmin</td>
<td>51,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Ganak</td>
<td>16,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Saha/Sunri</td>
<td>18,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Jugi/Katani</td>
<td>71,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Other indigenous tribes and castes</td>
<td>89,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous groups</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Bodo-Kachari tribes - Kachari, Mech, Lalung, Hojai, Garo, Rabha, Mahalia, etc. (Non-Hindus)</td>
<td>24,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Miri and Mikir</td>
<td>18,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moran</td>
<td>4,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Koch/Rajbanshi</td>
<td>6,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chutiya</td>
<td>17,206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ahom and other Shan elements</td>
<td>50,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Kalita</td>
<td>4,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Dom/Nadiyal</td>
<td>12,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kaibarta</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Kewat</td>
<td>2,457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Kayastha</td>
<td>1,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Brahmin</td>
<td>2,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Ganak</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Saha/Sunri</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Jugi/Katani</td>
<td>3,162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Other indigenous castes and tribes</td>
<td>6,138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ancient and medieval Assam was divided into several small kingdoms which were never ruled by any Kshatriya king. There were a number of tribal groups who were the rulers of the kingdoms. Among the indigenous castes Vaishyas were considerably lower in numerical strength. The Vaishya - Suds, though numerically negligible, was found in upper Assam who were actually the counterpart of the Sahas of Bengal. Besides, Kalita craftsmen of Kamrup sold their products all over Assam. People of Barpeta were known as vigorous traders who traded with Bengal by riverine route. It was recorded elsewhere in the history that some Assamese merchants of eighteenth century were Brahmana by caste. Thus in Assam trades were open to all castes, and these were not monopolised by any particular caste group. Therefore, as the original Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas were absent in Assam, the Varnashrama system did not have sound foundation.

However, the Sudras were numerous in Assam, and the major caste groups were the Kayasthas, Kalitas, Katanis or Jugis, Kaibartas, Keots, Dom or Nadiyals, Haris, etc. The Kayasthas were next to the Brahmans, and were state officials and scribes. The Karanas performed the same vocations as the Kayasthas and were gradually absorbed by the latter. Like the Brahmans they did not plough the land. It had been said that the Kayasthas, who ploughed the land, lost their caste status and

became Kalitas. A large number of the satradhikara (Vaisnabite gurus) in Assam were Kayasthas by caste who were vastly learned and had thorough knowledge about the religious scriptures. Some of them were so learned that they defeated the Brahmana pandits in the open debate in the Ahom court. However, in Assam they had acquired socio-religious status equivalent to that of the Brahmanas.

The Kalitas, an agriculturist caste, were the purest Hindu people belonging to the Sudras from whose hands higher castes used to accept water; they were believed to be originated from the Aryan who established their colonies in ancient Assam. The Kalitas of Kamrup were broadly divided into Barkalitas and Saru-Kalitas. The Saru-Kalitas had following functional divisions which could not be ranked in hierarchical order: Mali (gardener), Kumar (potter), Kamar (blacksmith), Tanti (weaver), Sonari (Goldsmith), Napit (barber) and Nat (dancer - acrobat), etc.

The lower ranks among the Sudras were occupied by the Katanis, Kaibartas or Keots. The Katanis were the spinning caste, but most of them subsisted on agriculture. Although weaving and spinning were done by all castes, the spinning of the pat (mulberry) variety of silk yarn was exclusively monopolised by the Katanis. The Kaibartas were fishermen as well as agriculturists; and they were known as jalwas and halowas respectively. The Keots were equated with the Kaibartas due to their similar occupation; they were also known as Pani-Kaibartas. Another fisherman's caste was known as Nadiyal or Dom. The Hari (Brittial) caste was employed as sweeper by the Ahom kings. Later on, they adopted gold-working. The Nadiyals, Haris, Hiras and few other untouchables were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

A group of tribes who ruled over Assam for a long period had occupied positions outside the Hindu caste system. The Koches, originally a tribe of north-Bengal, were given a caste status in the sixteenth century. They had three subgroups, namely, Kamtali.

Haramia and Modhahi distributed mainly in Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts. During the medieval period caste status of the Koches was accessible to some of the Assamese tribes who newly converted themselves to Hinduism. To enter into the Koch caste status one needed conversion to Hinduism, to adopt plough cultivation in the place of shifting cultivation, mud-house in place of pile-dwelling, to cremate the deceased rather than to bury. It was also required to adopt Sanskrit-based Assamese language, abandoning of pig-rearing, abstinence from liquor. The same process was followed by the Bodos, and merged themselves with the Koches.

The Chutiyas were originally a hill tribe belonging to the Bodo group, who established a Kingdom in north-west of Assam by the thirteenth century. Gradually, they were defeated and absorbed by the Ahoms to a considerable extent and were known as Ahom-Chutiyas. Those who embraced Hinduism were called Hindu-Chutiyas; and the other groups were known as Borahis and Deoris.

The Ahoms, a Shan tribe of Burma, settled down in upper Assam in the thirteenth century and ruled for about six hundred years. About 94 per cent of them were found in upper Assam who constituted about 10 per cent of the total population of the state. Gradually, they liberally absorbed different tribal communities like Chutiyas, Morans, Kacharis, etc., and in the seventeenth century they embraced Hinduism. Although they were economically and politically dominant, they never enjoyed a status of high caste.

The Kacharis, a Mongoloid tribe, once ruled the Cachar Kingdom. It appeared from the 1881 census that one-third of the population of the Brahmaputra valley were ethnically of Bodo-Kachari origin. They had two subgroups: the Sonowals (Goldsmith) and the Thengals (silversmith). In lower Assam, subgroups like Charduaria, Ramsha and Hojai were found among whom intergroup marital relations did not exist. The Kacharis who were known as Mahalias considered

themselves superior to the original Kacharis and they did neither interdine nor intermarry; but in certain cases, after certain purificatory ceremonies, intermarriage was permitted. The Rabhas, a section of them, were Hinduised, and ranked superior to the original Kacharis; hypergamy was practised in certain cases, but not hypogamy. They had also subgroups like Pati, Rangdania, Maitoria, Dahu-ria and Shonga of which the first three groups were superior to the last two groups in terms of hypergamy and commensality.

The Miris and the Mikirs were the other two major tribal groups of the Mongoloid stock. Besides, there were also a number of minor tribal groups which constituted an important section of the Assamese social structure. However, they are not considered here for discussion.

The caste system, even during the medieval period was not strongly pronounced as specialisation of occupations by the various caste groups did not take place. Mustard oil and jaggery were prepared by individual household. Weaving and spinning were also not exclusively monopolised by any caste. But there were a few specialised occupational groups who worked on bellmetal and brass utensils, earthen-wares, ornaments, etc. But there was no single caste group having monopolised occupation. In general, it was seen that the caste system was less rigid, and one can easily find the borderline between the different castes to be indistinct and not well-defined. It was quite possible in the land where most of the population was consisted of the non-Hindu tribals. The social climate under the pressure of different non-Hindu ethnic groups was such that the normal rigid caste distinctions could not flourish and thrive in it. Probably it seemed that the tribal dynasties which came to power could considerably destroy the barriers and vestiges of castes, and changed it in a different way, to form a harmonious multi-ethnic society.

HINDUISM AND VAISNABISM

The Vedic culture gradually flourished along with the establishment of Varna system in Assam. The caste distinction and ritualism had been increasingly getting importance in the society due to the implication of purity - pollution concept, and the Brahmanas played an important role in bringing transformation of the society. Still upto the end of the fifteenth century no tribe had been converted to Hinduism. The tribals could not adopt Hinduism due to its high ritualism and concept of purity - pollution which formed an insurmountable barrier between them and the Hindu society.

An important historical phase appeared at the end of the fifteenth century when the Vaisnabite movement started by Sankardeva (1449 - 1569); this brought tremendous changes in religion and social structure of the Assamese society. Sankardeva's Vaisnabism would be important to understand the Assamese social structure. The reasons were : (1) Vaisnabism was spread all over Assam, (2) As a result, it brought several horizontal divisions in the society, (3) It created new type of social structure by reducing rigidity of the caste system, Brahmanical ritualism and the concept of purity - pollution, (4) It enhanced individual, family and corporate mobility, (5) It gave impetus to caste mobility and (6) It accelerated process of transformation from tribe to caste.

Sankardeva preached a purified Vaisnabism and inculcated the doctrine of salvation by faith and prayer rather than by sacrifice. He brought the message of bhakti cult to the people irrespective of caste in the medium of mother tongue, instead of Sanskrit, which was easily understandable to all people. He opposed the caste differences, idol-worship and practice of Brahmanical rituals, and tried to develop a liberal Hinduism which could be easily acceptable to the people irrespective of caste and tribe. According to him a Chandala, if he was a devotee, was superior to a Brahmana without devotion. But he did not try to do away or interfere with caste regulation and also did not encourage interdining. It had been
mentioned elsewhere that a Brahmana disciple of a satra (Vaisnabite monastery) once cast off his sacred thread, and the satradhikar (owner of the satra) expelled him from the satra for transgressing the traditional caste rules. Thus, it was assumed that Sankardeva wanted religious freedom and fellowship rather than throwing away the caste system.\textsuperscript{11}

Sankardeva's main contribution was to institutionalize Vaisnabism in the form of satra and namghar (temple). The head of the satra known as satradhikar was at the top of socio-religious hierarchy. He was the religious head and spiritual guide to his disciples or bhadras. In the satra, caste distinction was maintained in respect of dining and social practices. Nonetheless, the spiritual bond and fellowship fostered by the satra did actually decrease the distance between castes and tribes. In certain satras, ecclesiastical offices were exclusively held by the Brahmanas, where only they were eligible to be priests. The namghar was religious as well as social institution for maintaining harmony and cohesion in the village society, and off and on it strived for discipline, order and morality of the people concerned. It was as well as village prayer hall, a village court and a village theatre hall. Generally village disputes were tried here by the rajmedhi or the gaonbura (the agent of the satra), and if necessary, they could inflict punishment on the offender.\textsuperscript{12}

In course of time, when Vaisnabism was getting popularity in Assam, there grew up four subsects or Samhatis due to rivalry among Sankardeva's great disciples. These are the Brahma Samhati, the Kala Samhati, the Purusha Samhati and the Nika Samhati. The first two subsects are important for the present discussion.

The satras belonging to the Brahma Samhati were headed by the Brahmana satradhikars, although Kayastha satradhikars were not

\begin{itemize}
  \item[11.] Sarma, S.N., The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, Department of Publication, Guwahati University, 1966, p. 64.
  \item[12.] Sarma, S.N., ibid., p. 155. See also his 'The satra institution of Assam', in Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, Indian History Congress, 22nd session, 1959.
\end{itemize}
uncommon. According to this sect, the Vedic as well as Puranic rituals and devotional practices were not mutually exclusive. The middle path between the Vedic rites and rituals, and devotional practices helped the sect to win over the twice-born castes to bring them into its fold. One of the principal satras of the Kala Samhati was known as Mayamaria, established by Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626). The Mayamaria satra was of immense importance for its history of conflict with the other Vaisnaba satras and the Ahom kings. Aniruddhadeva preached his religious ideas among the low caste people and tribals, although upper caste Hindus were not excluded. He was able to place the tribals on an elevated footing in the society, and therefore, he was branded as a dissenter, a promoter of heterodoxy for offering initiation to untouchable tribes. However, as a result the caste rigidity had been reduced to a considerable extent. But Aniruddhadeva, like other Vaisnabites, did never insist on interdining and intermarriage. The beliefs and practices of this sect were admixture of Tantrism, Saivaism and Vaisnabism. The followers used to practise a peculiar secret night-worship locally known as ratikhowa which was apparently attractive to the backward castes. The Mayamaria disciples were notable for their devotion to the gosain (Vaisnabite preceptor), which helped them to be united and to increase the prosperity of the satras. Due to this material prosperity and unity, the Mayamarias were looked upon with suspicion by the Ahom Kings which resulted into a prolonged civil war. An open rebellion, from 1770 to 1795, was raised by this sect which helped in decaying of the Ahom rule.13

VAISNABISM AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

Social mobility can be defined as the movement of individuals up and down from their positions in class, caste and power hierarchies14. And this occurs generally at the inter-generational

level. The mobility of an individual refers to the changing of social position of any individual by going up or down. This change of status may confine to the individual's own family or to his own caste group or to the caste hierarchy of the region concerned as it is found in the traditional Assamese society. However, mobility of an individual may affect his family and vice-versa, because these always overlap with one another. On the other hand, mobility at the group or corporate level refers to the mobility of the whole group (caste/tribe) or a section of a group (caste/tribe) up or down in the social status. The case of Hinduisation or Vaisnabisation or sanskritisation may be referred as an example of such mobility. Social mobility is not a phenomenon of modern India only, because it has also occurred in the traditional society. But many studies have already tried to see the real nature of social immobility and its immobilising religious values and ideologies of the traditional society. This misconception often leads the scholars to interpret the relatively static nature of the traditional Indian society. This concept is generally derived from the absolute nature of inequality prevailing in the Hindu society as a guiding principle of social relationships. But the absolute inequality was never been successful in the Hindu society as there was inherent contradiction. Individuals or groups often strived for higher social as well as economic statuses and also succeeded in improving their standard. In so far as they overcome the main principles of caste system, i.e., the ascribed inherited status, there is mobility as well as change. Hence fixity of hereditary status becomes impossible. Therefore, the caste system was already loose to a certain extent and mobility was possible. There are a few studies which have shown that several social movements occurred in the traditional

society in different parts of the country. In the sixteenth century a Munda Raja of Ranchi successfully improved his status and was accepted as a Rajput (Kshatriya)\(^{17}\). Rowe also reports a similar social mobility from his study of the New Chauhan\(^{18}\). Stein in his study of medieval South Indian society said that there was widespread social mobility at the individual and family level, but jati or corporate mobility was comparatively rare. A group of Sudra Srivaishnavas achieved upward mobility through religious roles at the Tiruvemgadam temple at Tirupati. The channels of this mobility was opened by the Bhakti movement\(^{19}\). Mobility at the individual, family and corporate level were found in traditional India, although mobility at the first two levels were comparatively higher\(^{20}\).

Both indigenous and exogenous factors influenced such mobility in the Hindu society in spite of the extreme opposition flowing from the Hindu socio-religious and ideological values which could greatly reduce the amount of such mobility\(^{21}\).


\(^{19}\) Stein, B., 'Social mobility and medieval South Indian Hindu Sects', in J. Silverberg (ed.), op.cit., pp. 79 - 94.

\(^{20}\) Barber, B., 'Social mobility in Hindu India', in J. Silverberg (ed.), op.cit., p. 29.

The Vaisnabite movement of medieval Assam has already been discussed. The consequences of such religious movement, which have brought to a considerable extent mobility in the caste system, will be discussed here. This mobility was rapid and was easily identifiable as there was positional shift of certain castes and tribes. Perhaps, previously such caste mobility was rare and slower. But, since the later part of the fifteenth century, due to the opening of various channels of mobility through the Vaisnabite movement, there occurred a large number of social mobility. Violation of caste rigidity and opening of new avenues had facilitated the castes and tribes to improve their social status by ignoring the Brahmanical institution. This mobility occurred at the caste or corporate level, and at the family and individual level. There are sufficient evidences of group or corporate mobility as well as of individual and family mobility in the medieval Assamese society. Though Stein mentioned that mobility at the jati level did not occur in medieval India, but in the context of the Assamese society this was found to be occurred frequently. Of course, it was true that this mobility always remained confined to the same Varna category.

Individual and Family Mobility:

Sankardeva (1449 - 1569) was a descendant of one of the Bara-Bhuiyas (twelve petty-rulers) of Assam. He was Kayastha by caste, and after visiting different centres of Vaisnabite culture he attained extraordinary knowledge about the Hindu religious literature and Vaisnabism. At the beginning he started to preach Vaisnabism in the Ahom territory, but was subject to persecution. It was the Brahmans who Vehemently opposed Vaisnabism and landed an open conflict with him. Sankardeva challenged the ritual monopoly and domination of the Brahmana in the society. He succeeded in raising himself and his Sudra followers to the status of highest spiritual and religious power, and thus they received much social

importance equal to that of the Brahmana caste. Sankardeva's teachings were opposed by the Brahmanas, because he discarded the rites and ceremonies including idol worship, which constituted the occupation of the Brahmanas, and translated the religious scriptures into the vernacular which enabled the Sudras and even the untouchable Chandalas to read them. Thus he denied the ritual monopoly of the Brahmanas. However, at the early part of the sixteenth century Sankardeva succeeded in preaching his Vaisnabite ideology among the people of Assam including the Sudras and the Brahmanas, and he became the gosain of the Patbasi satra. Although he was of Sudra origin, the Brahmana disciples regarded him as spiritual and religious preceptor and used to bow down to him. However, it was the first time in the history of Assam that the Brahmanas accepted a Sudra as a spiritual guide and bowed down to him. This was due to the attainment of spiritual and religious power that Sankardeva acquired a status equivalent to that of the Brahmanas of that time, and he also adopted sacred thread. Not only himself, but also his family members and descendants who became gosains or satradhikars enjoyed such socio-religious status. Many of his famous Sudra disciples later on established satras in different parts of Assam and had become gosains or satradhikars. The gosains belonging to the satras of the Purusha Sambati were twelve descendants of his line. Almost all the satras of the Kala Samhati were headed by the Sudra Gosains of which Mayamaria satras were established by Sankardeva's nephew named Aniruddhadeva and his descendants. A good number of Sankardeva's Brahmana disciples established several satras belonging to the Brahma Samhati and had become gosains after his death. The Sudra gosains had followers irrespective of tribe and caste including Brahmanas. So also the Brahmana gosains had drawn their disciples from different castes and tribes.


At the beginning, the Vaisnabite movement spread in different parts of Assam due to the efforts of different gosains who had established several satras as centres of Vaisnabite culture. Since the middle part of the Ahom rule it considerably attracted the Ahom, Kachari, Chutiya and Koch rulers who patronised the gosains and established several Vaisnabite satras. During the period between 1649 to 1681 A.D. the Kings and their nobles were adherent to Vaisnaba gosains, and many important satras of eastern Assam had been established under their patronage. Previously the Ahom Kings had been patronising the Sakta preceptors and also tried to follow Saktaism. Specially the Ahom rulers who accepted Vaisnabism gave equal status to the gosains belonging to the Brahmana and the Sudra groups along with their Sakta preceptors. Therefore, all the religious preceptors irrespective of caste and sect had received equal importance in the Ahom court. A Koch King named Chila Roy placed Sankardeva and other Kayasthas of his court at the top most status position, and even above the Brahmanas. Both the Sakta preceptors and the Vaisnabite gosains belonging to the Brahmanas and Sudras were the religious and moral advisers to the Ahom Kings. Thus, the ritual status of the gosains was strengthened due to their close relations with the ruling power. It was noticed that the gosains used to join at the initiation ceremony of the Kings, and the Kings used to send his higher administrative staffs at the time of initiation of the gosains. In the selection of the satradhikar the king's decision was much regarded. Gradually the custom of visiting different satras by the King came into vogue.

Gradually the Vaishnabite satras had become important temple institutions in Assam and appeared as principal centres for the Vaishnabite activities. Except a few satras headed by Brahmana gosains, most of the satras were led by the Sudra gosains. These Sudra gosains enjoyed high socio-religious status and power which were undoubtedly greater than that allocated to them by the religious texts of that time. The devotees belonging to the various castes and tribes also enjoyed equal socio-religious status in the society. A Brahmana or any higher caste did not get any special privilege because of his birth. In this respect practices of the Kala Samhati satras were of extreme type. The gosains belonging to the satras of the Kala Samhati were required to salute with his knees bending even to a person of lowest caste, in return of the latter's salutation. However, in the satras belonging to the Brahma Samhati caste privileges had been restored, though lesser than before. Since the early part of the sixteenth century the Sudras had been taking an important role in the Vaishnabite satra institution in Assam, and in this respect role of the Brahmanas was quite negligible. In most of the satras the offices of the gosains were inherited by their sons. Thus, status, prestige and power of those gosains were also developed upon their younger generations. The similar practices are still followed in these satras. However, the Sudra gosains had never been identified as Brahmanas in the society. What ever it might be, during the medieval period, social mobility at the individual as well as family level was widespread in the Assamese society, and it was only due to the Vaishnabite movement which opened the channels of such social mobility. The Sudras, as respected and integrated members of the society, occupied an important place; even today they have successfully retained their status.

Corporate Mobility:

The Ahoms, a Shan tribe of Burma, were originally Buddhists, and used to take beef, pork and liquor. In 1228 they established a kingdom in north-eastern part of Assam and gradually occupied the whole territory. Since then up to the seventeenth century they did not embrace Hinduism, although they had been patronising Saktaism by bringing Brahmanas from Bengal and by giving land grants to them. It was reported that Chudangpha (1397 - 1407) and Pratapsingh (1603 - 1661), the two Ahom Kings, used to worship the goddess Durga. In spite of rapid spread of Vaisnabism since the later part of the fifteenth century, the Ahoms did not accept it. It was only towards the early part of the eighteenth century they embraced Vaisnabism for the first time. Though the later Ahom kings were blind followers of Saktaism, they also, at the same time, patronised Vaisnabism. Sibasingh (1714 - 1744), an Ahom King accepted a Sakta Brahmana as his preceptor which indicated the formal entry of Saktaism in the royal family. Following the royal families, nobles also adopted Hinduism. But this change had been protested by the priestly sections of the Ahoms, namely, the Deodhais and the Bailungs who refused to accept Saktaism, but they were not fully beyond the influence of Vaisnabism. However, it was noticed that when the Kings and the nobles basically remained as Saktas or under its shadow, the rest of the people of the Ahoms were under the rapid process of Vaisnabisation. Still up to the seventeenth century it was seen that the Ahoms used to take forbidden foods, but gradually under the process of Vaisnabisation they lost many of their own cultural elements, language, food habits and religion, and were assimilated into the Assamese society. Thus in course of history the royal families, nobles and the common people converted themselves to Hinduism but the priestly groups remained in traditionalism. The converted Ahoms were no longer untouchables or tribals, rather they were recognised as Hindus.  

The Hinduisation of the Ahoms was, perhaps, result of deliberate policy for strengthening their power in the Hindu country. They realised the danger of keeping the Hindus away from the kings, and thus, they preferred to be Hindus, to speak Assamese, to prohibit traditional foods, etc. Since the seventeenth century they continued to patronise Vaisnabism and the caste system. However, they were not accepted by the Hindus through intermarriage and inter­dining\(^{31}\). The Brahmanas refused to take water from their hands, although, they were able to achieve a lower status among the Sudras through the process of Hinduisation. It was perhaps due to their acceptance of rice-bear and pork that the Brahmanas did not consider them as one of the four higher castes of Assam\(^{32}\). However, their status was ambiguous, because they have enhanced, to a great extent, a considerably higher position due to their ruling profession\(^{33}\).

Unlike the Kshatriyas of other parts of India, the Ahoms did not achieve Kshatriya status\(^ {34}\). Whether they did aspire for such status was unknown. However, mythology of their origin from India explained such aspiration\(^ {35}\).

Under the process of Hinduisation, the priestly sections of the Ahoms, namely, the Deodhais and the Bailungs lost their functions to a great extent. Traditionally, they were not only priests, but also political advisers to the Ahom kings. However, the Brahmanas

\(^{31}\) Bhuyan, S.K., 1949, op.cit., p. 18.


\(^{34}\) Guha, A., 1974, op.cit.

and the Vaisnaba preceptors gradually replaced them from the arena of the political functions. During the eighteenth century when numerous satras grew up in Assam, some sort of state supervision with political motive, rather than religious one, was felt necessary. Thus, the priestly classes of the Ahoms had to confine their activities to the socio-religious ceremonies only.\(^36\)

Cases of corporate mobility were also found among the Chutiyas, Koches and Sonowals during the medieval period. The Chutiyas, originally a tribe of the Bodo group, ruled north-west Assam from 1300 to 1400 A.D. The first Chutiya King accepted Hinduism from a Brahmana. Gradually a crude form of Tantric Hinduism became a state religion at a very early time. The Chutiyas worshipped various forms of the goddess Kali, and an important among them was Kechaikhati goddess propitiated by their own tribal priests. They aspired Hindu social status and claimed to be descended from Bhismak the father of Rukmini, one of the wives of Srikrishna.\(^37\) They had originally two subgroups, namely, Borahi and Deori Chutiyas. However, in course of history there emerged other two groups, namely, Hindu Chutiya and Ahom Chutiya. The Hindu Chutiyas asserted a nominal superiority as representing the earliest converted branch of their countrymen, and distinguished from those who changed their religion with the Ahoms around the sixteenth century. The latter group of the Chutiyas gradually established commensal and marital relations with the Ahoms, and were known as Ahom Chutiyas who segregated themselves from the Hindu Chutiyas. A member of the Ahom Chutiyas could, however, obtain a Hindu Chutiya girl by paying high bride price, but the bride sunk to the status of her husband. The Deori and Borahi Chutiyas adhered to traditionalism and were regarded as inferior to the Hindu-and the Ahom-Chutiyas.\(^38\)

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Gradually, in course of time, the Hindu Chutiyas, by embracing Vaisnabism, had considerably improved their social status. They continued to be regarded as a higher caste Sudra with whom the Kali-tas and the Koches did not hesitate to establish marital relation. On the other hand, the Ahom Chutiyas, by allying themselves with the Ahoms, acquired a social position equivalent to that of the latter. In this way fission and mobility, and achievement of higher caste status were the typical process of corporate mobility in the traditional Assamese society.

Corporate mobility was also found among the Kacharis. The Kacharis were already discussed. In the latter part of the eighteenth century the royal families converted themselves to Hinduism, whereas rest of the Kacharis remained as mon-Hindus. They made an unsuccessful attempt to be Kahatriyas by tracing their origin from Bhima of the Mahabharata. The Sonowals, a section of the Kacharis whose original home was in Cachar, by adopting the occupation of goldworking under the patronage of the Ahom kings settled down near the bank of the Subansiri. In the mid-seventeenth century the Sonowals converted themselves to Vaisnabism under Keshabdeo, a gosain of the Auniati satra. Since then the Sonowals, after being separated from the original Kacharis, established themselves as an independent and superior group. They did not interdine and intermarry with the original Kacharis; however, they were able to raise their social status considerably in the Hindu society. Nevertheless, they were still regarded as a tribe, although one could hardly find any tribal element in their culture.

The Koches were already discussed who were originally a tribe. Traditionally, they freely interdined and intermarried with other neighbouring tribes, namely, the Meches, etc. Since the early part of the sixteenth century after embracing Hinduism they stopped such relations with them. In 1515 Bishu Singh, a Koch King, became a great patron of Hinduism, and worshipped Siva and Durga. He patronised

several Brahmanas who came from Kanauja and Banaras. The King claimed himself as a Kshatriya who originated from Siva. However, during the middle of the sixteenth century Naranarayana, a Koch King, converted himself into Vaisnabism. Since then the Koches became followers of Vaisnabism, who gradually adopted Assamese language, high caste customs and caste's way of life. In the process of conversion they could successfully place themselves among the higher caste Sudras of Assam. They were accepted for interdining and intermarrying by the Kalitas, one of the clean Sudras. However, the counterpart of the Koches in Bengal could not enhance similar status. In this way process of Hinduisation, fission and corporate mobility took place among the various tribal communities in medieval Assam.

FEUDAL SOCIETY AND CLASS STRUCTURE

The politico-economic structure of the Ahom regime has been discussed here to show its impact on the social structure of the Assamese society. Before the advent of the Ahom rule tribalism existed in Assam, rather than feudalism in the true sense of the term. Assam was consisted of different small tribal Kingdoms, and the impact of the Varna system was confined to Kamrup of lower Assam. The division of labour and specialisation of occupations by the caste groups were not distinctly found in the society, and multicaaste village was unknown, except in certain regions of lower Assam. However, due to these reasons, jajmani system could not develop. The use of slave and serfs in agriculture was of marginal importance. There was also no minted money, and thus extent of trade was negligible. Therefore, the tribal based society had a peculiar quasi-feudalistic structure.

42. Gait, E., ibid, pp. 58-60.
The growth of feudalism from tribalism seemed to have started since the rule of the Bara-Bhuyans in the thirteenth century. But the Ahoms, in the later period, consolidated feudalism. In medieval Assam, unlike other parts of India, there was no urban centre. In 1662, in the Ahom capital, there was only a market road where only traders were the betel-leaf sellers. However, some sort of township developed in Gorgaon, the capital and in Gauhati due to concentration of population. Nevertheless, there was not much difference between the life of the towns and the villages due to dependence on the agricultural and allied occupations. Therefore, medieval Assam had no experience of urban stratification. The nature of inequality which prevailed in the society was agrarian based, and along with this there was the inequality of power based on the Ahom's feudal political system.

The agrarian economy of medieval Assam was based on both settled plough cultivation and shifting hill cultivation. At the beginning of the Ahom rule it was found that the shifting cultivation (jhum) formed a dominant part of the economy; it was widely practised in the hills, upper Assam and even in the western and central parts of the Brahmaputra valley. Upto the close of the nineteenth century it was found that 50 per cent, 39 per cent and 9 per cent of the areas in Barpeta, North-Lakhimpur and Gauhati respectively were under the shifting cultivation which was practised by various tribal communities. The settled plough cultivation was predominantly practised in lower Assam by the Hindu caste people. In 1881 half of the indigenous population was consisted of the non-Hindu and Hindu

tribals of which the Bodo-Kachari population was 40 per cent of the total population. All of them used to produce *ahu* rice in the shifting cultivation; but only the Ahoms practised both shifting and settled cultivation. Since their migration the Ahoms, like the caste people, had been growing *sali* rice in the settled cultivation. For this purpose they took much care in levelling the land in upper Assam which was mostly hilly and uneven. After a few centuries it was noticed that the whole upper Assam was turned into flat-level land which became suitable farm-sites for *sali* cultivation. As the yield of *sali* rice was considerably higher, which provided surplus crops to the people, it brought, about changes in the economy of the shifting cultivation of the indigenous tribal people. With the progressive Ahomisation and Hinduisation of the tribes the shifting cultivation gradually declined and its place was occupied by the settled cultivation. In the late nineteenth century, only 1.5 per cent of the area in Dibrugarh district was found under the shifting cultivation. This economic transformation was further accelerated by the spread of Vaisnabism by Aniruddhadeva among the tribal communities of upper Assam which influenced them to settle down in the permanent villages for practising Vaisnabism, and therefore they had to adopt the settled cultivation. As the Ahoms were concentrated in upper Assam their influence was considerably less on the economy of lower Assam. Therefore, it was noticed that still in 1901 the shifting cultivation was predominantly practised in Kamrup district of lower Assam in about 50 per cent of the cultivated land.

The shifting cultivation was a unique type of tribal economy where village land was commonly held by the members of the particular tribe. It required simple division of labour but needed more hands to perform economic operations which were met mainly by the

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family labours. However, outside labourers were employed which were available only from among their own community. Employment of such labourers was done on the basis of mutual exchange of works without payment of wages. There was no individual proprietary rights over land as the village land was commonly held and controlled by the members of the particular tribal group. The economy of the shifting cultivation was principally of subsistence economy where there was no interest of any individual or group to possess more land or to have surplus produce. Therefore, there did not develop any landed class with proprietary rights over land in the tribal economy of the shifting cultivation which was non-feudalistic in nature.

In some parts of Assam where settled cultivation was practised, the economy was quasi-feudalistic in nature. The gradual spread of *sali* cultivation in the settled land along with the spread of Ahom rule transformed the older economy into feudalistic nature. The general features of feudalism were also commonly found in the economy of the settled cultivation. These were: (a) The productive organisation is characterised by simple technology with primitive division of labour, (b) The production is mainly for the consumption of each household and it is not for the wider market, (c) The Lord's estate is generally cultivated by compulsory labour service or by the slaves, (d) Political decentralisation is common to the feudal system, (e) conditional holding of land by lords on some kind of service-tenure, (f) possession of judicial or quasi-judicial functions by the lords in relation to the dependent population. Feudalism was widely established in Assam along with the spread of settled cultivation by the Ahoms. Several tribal kingdoms were gradually brought under the direct rule of the Ahoms where settled cultivation and the Ahom's land tenure system were introduced. In Dibrugarh district the percentage of total land under the settled cultivation significantly, went up during the early part of the Ahom rule.

Due to the spread of sali rice cultivation, since that time, upper Assam was able to produce surplus crops which helped the Ahoms in consolidating their rule in Assam. Some of the shifting cultivation areas, which were under the control of various tribal rulers, were converted into feudatory states, and the rulers annually used to pay tributes consisting of firewood, tuber, vegetable and other local products to the Ahom Kings.

The Ahoms not only extended the areas under the settled cultivation, but also gradually introduced their land-tenure system. According to the land tenure system hereditary private property rights existed in homestead and garden lands; paddy land around the village was commonly held by the members of a Khel which was a localised class or a caste group, but not always so, and distribution of it was managed by the state or the King. Paddy land was, sometimes, reclaimed and protected against flood collectively by the villagers. Therefore, it seemed that the peasant had only usufruct right over the paddy land, and after his death it went back to his community. Till 1826, land, due to the absence of money economy, did not come into the market as a commodity for sale. Although the peasant did not have any right to sell his land, he could mortgage it\textsuperscript{53}. In Assam, as land was plenty in proportionate to population the peasants naturally did not prefer to work either as share-croppers or as agricultural labourers. Therefore, numerous classes did not emerge in that agrarian economy. Due to the lack of proper marketing facilities production from the village land was generally consumed by the members of the village itself. Nevertheless, it could not be said that the village economy was completely self-sufficient as most of the villages were inhabited by single caste. Each village had to depend for non-agricultural produces on the neighbouring villages for which, perhaps, some sort of market mechanism grew up.

The administrative system of the Ahom, based on the functional groupings, created new patterns of hierarchy in the society. In the hierarchy the King was at the top who was assisted by several high officials or nobles. Seven Ahom clans monopolised all the important offices. Next to the king there were three gohaine (ministers), then the barphukans followed by the barbaruas, the barkatakas, the phukans, the baruas, the katakas, etc. and then came the hazarikas, the saikias, and the boras. Upto 1972 it was found that these nobles were recruited from among the selected royal families, and in the later period, only the phukan, barua, and other lower officers were, sometimes, recruited from certain other ethnic groups. The system of hierarchy was highly effective during the Ahom period for distribution of power and politics. At the bottom there were the common people called paiks. On the other hand, there were the priests occupying status equivalent to that of the nobles. Besides the king, the nobles had also absolute political authority over their respective jurisdiction. But on the other hand, the village communities, which were socially integrated and economically more or less self-sufficient, had political autonomy to some extent at the village level. In such a traditional Assamese society village headman (gaonbura) and persons wielding influence and power were not always drawn from among the higher castes. There were some junior officers like hazarika, saikia, bora, etc. recruited mostly from among the Ahoms and sometimes from other ethnic groups, who constituted the middle class in between the privileged nobles and the paiks. This group was denied the privileges enjoyed by the nobles, but unlike the paiks, the group was exempted from doing compulsory state labour. At the village level these officers had considerable command over the people and acted as leaders. The bora had twenty paiks under his control, the saikia had one hundred paiks, the hazarika had one thousand paiks and so on.

The Aboms seemed to have favoured the panchayat as an instrument of local government which was generally consisted of elderly experienced people of the rural areas to settle land disputes. But these local bodies were generally overshadowed by the personal rule of the feudal nobles who constituted the hierarchy of the Ahom administration as well as by a system of centralised monarchy.

In general, land of the country was under the control of the Ahom king, but the cultivators were the real owners of the land. The kings could only evict the cultivators when they became defaulters in paying taxes. The duty of the king was to protect his subjects, and in return he received revenue. However, in respect of public land, the king was entitled to sovereignty, and he has proprietary right only on his estate. The royal families and their relatives owned a large number of estates known as melas or Khats. They were the biggest of all the Khat holders. The nobles were also provided with such Khats. They were appointed as regional administrators and received certain percentage of the income from the respective jurisdiction. But there was no landed nobility with proprietary rights over land. Nevertheless agrarian classes could be traced out. These Khats were cultivated by engaging a large number of field-serfs. Besides, the Khat holders were supplied with paiks who used to offer services in free of wages. The north and south banks of the Dibroo river were completely under the possession of the Ahom kings as their Khats. However, this type of medieval serfdom was found mainly in upper Assam.

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56. Sukapha, an Ahom king, had three royal Khats reclaimed by the Moran (tribe) servitors. Besides, some of these Khats were still indicated by names of some places of today like Moderkhat, Tengakhat, Khatowal-gaon, Bahatiya-gaon, etc.
57. Acharyya, N.N., op.cit., p. 111.
The priests (belonging to both Brahmanas and Kayasthas) along with the royal and noble families constituted the dominant class. They also received a large number of Khats as land grants from the kings. The offices of the priests and the kings were complementary to each other; the priests taught the moral norms and the kings were obliged to enforce it in the society. Their position was so high that they were exempted from certain punishments. Even, some offices of ministers in the Ahom court were hereditarily occupied by the Brahmanas. The Khats belonging to the Brahmanas were cultivated by the slaves and attached serfs settled in the estates. They constituted about 10 per cent of the total population. Only on the eve of the Ahom colonisation hundred of such Khats of the Brahmanas were found in the Brahmaputra valley. In the later period land granted by the Ahom kings for religious purposes came to be known as nisf-khiraj (half-revenue paying estates) and Khiraj (free-revenue paying estates). The owners of the Khiraj estates were known as lakhirajdars. Lakhiraj land was of three types: (a) Debottar - granted to temples, (b) Dharmattar - granted for religious and charitable purposes, and (c) Brahmatattar - granted to the Brahmanas.

The priestly class included the Brahmanas and the Vaishnaba gosains who were given land grants by the kings. In respect of property and wealth gosains of the satras were not far behind the kings and the nobles. One of the Mayamaria satras in 1751-61, for example, had ten to twelve Khats, four to five thousands of buffalos, eight to ten thousands of attendants and thousands of tithe paying adherents. In 1826, a Brahmana of Kamrup was found possessing 45,000 bighas of Brahmatattar land. In 1841, the Brahmanas held very large amount of land and slaves under their possession. Most of the kings extended grants and endowments to the satras where the feudal mode of a personal bond between a patron and client had characterised the

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59. Barua, B.K., op.cit.
organisation of satras. These satras became tithe-collecting organisation, and hankered after power and grants of estates and serfs. In course of time a few satras became very wealthy and powerful, and the paiks, who became devotees, escaped themselves from payment of revenue to the kings, which ultimately created conflict between the kings and the devotees due to the increasing jealousy. During the period from 1770 to 1810 there was prolonged civil war between the left-wing satras belonging to the Mayamaria group and the Ahom kings. In this war the Brahmanas and the right-wing satras joined with the king.

The landed aristocracy included the Ahom and the Brahmanas constituting 1 per cent of the total population who held bulk of the Khata and slaves. In 1872 the Ahoms were 9 per cent and the Brahmanas were 4 per cent of the total population of Assam. It was important to note that only 1 per cent of the Ahom occupied the top class and rest of the population belonged to the karni-paik (labouring people) group. But the majority of the Brahmanas had the status of apaikan chamuas (gentry).

During the Ahom rule there was no tax on land. With the exception of royal families, nobles, priests and high caste groups, others were liable to render services to the state as labourers. The nobility had khel consisting of six thousand persons under their control. Each khel furnished its quota of produce in kind through its own immediate superior. Under this khel the population was divided into gots consisting of four paiks, and they were liable to be called

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63. Gadadhar Singh, an Ahom king, removed all the married devotees from the satras, but not the celibates, and also tortured the devotees belonging to lower castes and paiks except those of the higher castes. Even the gosains of the Mayamaria satras were killed.
64. Guha, A., 1974, op.cit., pp. 73-74.
upon either as soldiers, labourers or cultivators to work for the king, and in return each paik got 2.66 acres of paddy land free of rent along with homestead and garden lands.

Among the classes of the feudal society the lowest rank was that of the common people known as paiks who had to offer physical labours to the royal families, nobles and priests. These paiks normally belonged to the low Hindu castes, Ahom and other tribals. Those who were entrusted with offices or status or those who belonged to the high castes were completely exempted from such personal services and were known as apaikan chamus. Those who were with specialised skill, were exempted from manual labour; they were free men but were liable to render non-manual services or allowed to contribute a share of their produce. These people were called as chamua-paiks, and were inferior in status to the apaikan-chamus. But bulk of the paiks were deprived of such privileges and were known as karni-paiks consisted of bulk of the peasantry, who instead of paying any tax, offered unpaid compulsory services to the upper classes for a period of four months in a year. The chamua-paiks and the karni-paiks were organised into khel. They had own homestead and garden land, and thus they were independent of any landlord. They had every right to cultivate the khel land allotted by the king. About 30 per cent of total karni-paiks were attached to the nobles to serve as likchous (personal attendants). They were the quasi-serfs who worked temporarily in the farms of the upper classes, and were exposed to severe exploitation. Their condition was worst than the ordinary slaves. A section of the paiks, perhaps slightly superior to the rest, was permanently withdrawn from the khels, and were allotted to the satras or the temples for serving the gosains. However, they did not have any obligation to the kings for services.

The paiks in general coincided to the peasantry of the country, who were ruthlessly exploited by the upper classes. The worst suffering

peasantry of upper Assam belonging to the Mayamaria satras revolted against the king and wealthy right-wing Vaisnabite satras which was ultimately tinged with religious colours 68. However, in general, position of the paiks were very low in the society. The land and the paiks were the properties of the state or of the king as they could be given away at the king's pleasure 69.

Below the karni-paiks there were slaves. The domestic slaves were known as bandibeti and farm slaves as bahatia. Debt-slavery was a wide-spread social phenomenon. The poor paiks often mortgaged themselves and gradually turned into bandi. This system took the form of an institution during the period from seventeenth to nineteenth century 70. In the early nineteenth century there were about 6 per cent slaves and 3 per cent bondsmen in Kamrup district and in other districts the same situation was found 71. It was estimated that in 1751-69 the total population was about twenty-four lakhs of which slaves and bondsmen were 9 per cent. The feudal aristocracy possessed slaves as a symbol of prestige, and they forced them to produce surplus foods and luxury goods for their personal use 72.

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