CHAPTER III

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE BRITISH AND THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Prior to the advent of the British rule the Mayamaria rebellion (1770-1795) and the Burmese invasion (1819-1824) brought wholesale depopulation in Assam. In 1827, out of 2489541 acres of land in lower Assam, only 794602 acres were cultivated, and in 1853, out of the total area of 35,345 square miles, only 2242 square miles were under cultivation. In such a deteriorating economic condition the British government enhanced all round development which included bringing of fallow land under tillage, agrarian reforms, establishment of tea plantations, coal and oil mines, introduction of steamers and railway services, etc. All these have destroyed, to a considerable extent, traditional structure of the society. The changes were accelerated due to the spread of modern education, new administrative centres, technology, bureaucracy, political parties, trade unions, modern professions like legal practice, medical practice, engineering, etc. The administrative centres gradually grew up as urban centres along with the urban economy and urban stratification system unlike that of the earlier one. However, as this study concentrates only on the rural class structure, the urban stratification system is left for this moment.

Under the British rule the ruling classes of Assam lost political power and social privileges. Due to the various administrative measures previous feudal structure of the society began to crumble. The quondam nobles found themselves deprived of their old sources of livelihood, and had either to content themselves with small appointments under the British government or to sink to the level of ordinary cultivators. There were also other reasons. At the time of the Burmese invasion all men of rank, the heads of the Ahoms and

Barpujari, H.K., Assam in the days of the Company 1826-1858, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1963, p.211.
priestly families fled to Goalpara and lost their properties. A few of them came back and could recover their old properties; thus most of them lost their previous socio-economic status and prestige. In 1846 it was reported that there were large quantities of waste land but the upper class people did not have sufficient finance for reclamation. The British granted meagre pension to many of them, but the rot could not be stopped. Their economic condition further deteriorated due to the sequestration of the paike and the emancipation of the slaves in 1843. Only in Kamrup, about 12,000 slaves were released by the British government. They were unable to cultivate their estates without the paike and slaves, and had, with small exception, either left the estates or allowed them to be sold for arrears of revenues and debts. Thus, many of the upper class people came down to the level of the ordinary raiyats. Therefore during the British period there was no class of the landholders above the raiyats and actual cultivators.

The middle class, which emerged due to the expansion of modern education and occupation, did not grow up from the royal and noble families. The facilities of modern education, employment and trade were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the former rulers as their clerks and bureaucrats. In the later part of the British rule a group of political elites emerged from among the upper caste Hindus who achieved modern education and profession.

As the political movement increased the new political elites grew up from the educated middle class and professional groups. The ascribed elements had become less important for acquiring power as well as the old landed gentry was considerably isolated from the new power arenas. Therefore, there was a structural break from the feudal monarchical character of the traditional elites. The nobility lost their previous status and social privileges whereas people of various strata had considerably improved their position. Although the previous feudal features declined considerably the caste system continued in the society. But the caste system had undergone some remarkable and interesting changes.

AGRARIAN REFORMS AND CLASS STRUCTURE IN THE BRITISH PERIOD

The British government modified many of the old institutions for administrative purposes. In 1833, the old revenue system of the Ahom, which was based on personal services, was changed and the revenue system based on cash payment was introduced. Gradually raiyatwari system was introduced all over Assam except Goalpara and Cachar districts of lower Assam where zamindari system, similar to that of Bengal, was introduced. The British government confirmed the old practice by making the genuine debattar to be revenue free, while bonafide brahmattar and dharmattar grants were made half-revenue paying. Thus, lakhiraj and nisf-Khiraj estates emerged in Assam.

The districts of upper Assam were divided into several fiscal units called mauzas. A mauza was consisted of a few villages. The heads of the mauzas were known as mauzadars who were appointed for collection of revenue in their respective jurisdiction for which they received some commission. The revenue estates was not under any private landlord, but was regarded as area of the fiscal officer. But his status was similar to that of the zamindar. He was a

representative as well as a leader of the local people, but was bound to the government by dint of his official position. Below the mauzadar there was a group of mandals who controlled the small portion of a mauza. His duty was to measure all occupied lands. The mauzadar and the mandal were always local men of considerable influence and landed property. The choudhuries of lower Assam were similar to the zamindars of Bengal. The mauzadars and the choudhuries were appointed on hereditary basis which ensured loyalty and continuity of feudal influence in a different set-up. Since the mauzadar or the choudhury was required to be both a man of respect and education, skilled in accounts, the appointments were usually cornered by well-born and rich families from high caste Hindus.

The Choudhuries were the heads of the parganas and collected revenues within their jurisdiction. They did not have any proprietary right on the land. In the petty criminal cases they were called upon to act as magistrates. As the official position of the Choudhuries was insecure they squeezed money from the raiyats as far as possible, and the mode of assessment helped them for extortion also. In this condition the raiyats were easily rack-rented as they could not pay the rent which was five or six times higher than the normal rate. The Choudhuries, who used to play dual roles in the rural society as rent-collectors and as magistrates, could extort the peasants with greater impunity. As a result many of the peasants abandoned their homes and lands. It was reported that Bureegam pargana was deserted by such raiyats in 1830. In Chutgari two years ago there were about 785 tenant houses, but in 1832 all of them, except 68, deserted the area. These raiyats settled on the waste land which was not scarce in the region, and for the first three years they were exempted from paying any rent.

With the introduction of the permanent settlement in Goalpara and Cachar districts landlordism was established where proprietorship in land was vested in some zamindars. Previously Goalpara was consisted of several small territories which were ruled by different chieftains; the government recognised them as zamindars and proprietors of their territories unlike that of Bengal. One of these zamindars was a descendant of the Koch royal family. They were superior to the tea planters of fee-simple estates or to the lakhirajdar in respect of status and prestige, except the great gosain of the Majuli satra.

Throughout Assam there were estates equal to that of the zamindars which were revenue free. It was a different kind of land-tenure system where land belonged to the mathas, satras and other charitable trusts; these were under the direct control of the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas. The debattar land was made revenue-free, and the brahmatiar and the dharmattar lands were half-revenue-paying estates where the Brahmana and the Kayastha owners got the proprietary rights equal to that of the zamindars. In Assam, there were more than 11,63,196 acres of such half-revenue paying estates. The lakhirajdars of Kamrup paid Rs. 49,000 as revenue in 1846. The Brahmanas, not being able to cultivate their land, had been reduced to much wretchedness due to the emancipation of their slaves. But now they could get their land cultivated only by the raiyats. Nevertheless, these raiyats were merely slaves. The Brahmanas used to collect revenue which was double of the government's rate. Mismanagement and oppression forced the cultivators to leave the estates and as a consequence the estates deteriorated considerably. Gradually, subletting system became wide spread phenomenon in the lakhiraj and nisf-Khiraj estates and even in

16. Ibid., p. 16.
the Khiraj estates. It was reported that at the beginning of the twentieth century 25 per cent, 16 per cent and 7 per cent of the total settled areas in Kamrup, Cachar and Sibsagar districts respectively were occupied by tenants.

In all other districts, except Goalpara and Cachar, individual peasant proprietorship was introduced. The government recognised the paiks as raiyats. The raiyats were thus given absolute ownership rights on their lands and also were allowed to transfer it from which they were deprived by the Ahom rule. It had been mentioned earlier that the lower castes and tribes generally belonged to the paiks who did not have much land of their own. But the raiyats who could hold much land under this system were naturally from the non-Brahmanas. Though, under the system direct settlement was made with the actual cultivators, but in many cases, it was not done. Thus, a large number of non-cultivating owners grew up gradually in the raiyatwari areas. The various classes of raiyats found in the British period were: (1) Privileged raiyats, (2) occupancy raiyats, (3) Raiyat holding at first rate, and (4) Non-occupancy raiyat.

Although various land laws had been enacted for protecting the interests of the raiyats, it was found that their economic condition had been deteriorating continuously. During the early part of their rule the British government allowed the money lenders to come from outside in the hope of supplying money to the raiyats who could be able to reclaim waste lands for cultivation. But at the hands of the money lenders the raiyats were reduced to bondsmen; even the Chaudhuries and mauzadars were utterly ruined. Even under this precarious situation of the peasants the Britishers continuously increased and enhanced the land revenues to improve the financial condition of the government. Along with this the repeated natural

calamities caused by inundation and epidemic during the period from 1854 aggravated the situation. The high pressure of revenue made the condition of the ordinary raiyats worse. The unequal distribution of land among the raiyats, unlike that of the paika of the Ahom period, became a usual picture in the agrarian economy; the landless people gradually continued to be increasing in the country. In the situation, concentration of land began to take place in the hands of certain privileged groups. The Brahmanas and the non-Brahmana upper caste people, being placed in the privileged social and educational positions, emerged as landlords or non-cultivating owners in different feudal set-up.

As the zamindars and the religious landowners had no interest in cultivation of their lands by employing their own family labours a large number of tenants gradually grew up. In the raiyatwari areas, the dwarf raiyats gradually emerged as tenants or agricultural labourers as their land went in the hands of the merchants and money lenders. Therefore, it was noticed that in both of the zamindari and raiyatwari areas a group of tenants grew up equally. Absenteeism, also emerged out of such tenural system. The land-transfer and subletting system created a large number of rent-receivers. Besides, other agrarian classes were: the self-sufficient cultivators, tenants and tenant-cultivators. Naturally, the non-Brahmana lower castes, tribals and the non-Assamese communities, who were in the socially unprivileged position, belonged to these classes. The most interesting feature was that the former royal families, their relatives and the nobles, who were economically superior during the Ahom period, had considerably gone down and emerged as dwarf cultivators and tenants. Only in Sibsagar district

24. The tribals who have migrated into Assam as plantation labourers are considered here as non-Assamese communities. Members of their younger generation who are not absorbed in the plantation are considered as ex-plantation labourers.
growth of the tenants was significant being 9900 in 1891 and 21,500 in 1901. A significant section of the non-Assamese communities also engaged themselves as tenants.

The impact of the Burmese devastation and of the land tenure policies of the British government gave rise to the agricultural labourers although land was abundant in proportionate to the population of the country. In 1905, among the agriculturists more than a quarter were found to be landless in Cachar; in Goalpara they were about 8 per cent. In Darrang and Nowgong districts no such landless labouring class was found in 1891, but 1124 and 1049 persons respectively depended principally on ordinary labour. But in Sibsagar, the agricultural labourers consisted of the non-Assamese communities, Ahoms, Chutiyas, etc. The ex-gentry did not even regard such work as derogatory. The agricultural labourers principally consisted of the non-Brahmana lower castes and the tribals; although they were paiks during the Ahom rule they lost their land due to the impact of the various tenurial systems. Though the tribal people were more or less self-sufficient in food production, time to time, they had to work as agricultural labourers for maintaining their families. However, except the Kacharlis very few tribals could be hired as labourers. Therefore, still in 1905 agricultural labourers were insignificant, but their growth had been accelerated since the later part of the British rule. This growth was perhaps due to the collection of high land rents from the peasants by the landowning class. Due to the non-payment of rent, land went to the hands of the landlords or of the merchants which resulted into the transformation of the peasants to the agricultural labourers. On the other hand, when the growth of the tea plantation became stagnant, the unemployed persons used to seek employment only in the agricultural sector. This change had been brought by other factors directly

26. Ibid., Darrang, p. 106; Nowgong, p. 156.
27. Ibid., Sibsagar, p. 121.
linked with it. The growth of external trade in Assam affected the relations of production in the agrarian economy. The village production previously possessed only a use-value but during the British period it began to take the character of commodity. The tenancy system created many problems of which insecurity of tenure and rack-renting deserve special mention. This resulted into the growth of indebtedness among the peasants. At the beginning of this century more than half of the rural people of Nowgong and Sibsagar districts were in debt.\(^{29}\) The Goalpara Tenancy Act, 1929 and Assam (Temporarily settled districts) Tenancy Act, 1935 were amended to protect the tenants. The privileged raiyats and the occupancy raiyats were given adequate protection; but the non-occupancy raiyats and the under-raiyats were considerably neglected. So also the share-croppers (adhiars) were equally neglected. As a result people belonging to these agrarian categories were exposed to eviction and rack-renting which ultimately helped in the growth of agricultural labourers in the region.

The implementation of land reforms, enhancement of the ever increasing land-revenues, etc., which helped emergence of various classes, had also developed class interests. The interests of the different classes gave rise to class consciousness and class conflict. The class conflicts, which were found during this period, were not organised in a large scale for violent attack to the upper classes, rather some sporadic class organisations grew up in different parts of the country which ultimately could not achieve satisfactory results due to lack of their unity. Since 1860 there had been different kinds of outbreaks and uprising directed towards attainment of immunity from various taxation as well as from enhancement of land revenue. The Phulaguri uprising, the Jaintia rebellion, the Raj Mels, etc. were organised against enhanced assessment of land revenue in 1868-69 in Kamrup.

and Darrang. The Raiyat Sabha came into existence here and there. The Assam Riots or the violent uprising against the administration in 1894 took place in Kamrup and Darrang districts aimed at to resist enhancement of land revenue and exploitation of their means of subsistence.

TEA PLANTATION AND RURAL ECONOMY IN THE BRITISH PERIOD

Since the beginning, the British government tried to improve the rural economy through various ways; introduction of tea plantation was one of them. But it was reported that the inaccessibility of land and difficulty of procuring labour were two main hurdles in the way of development of plantation. However, the first tea plantation was started in 1835 by the government; but when the plantation was opened to the private enterprises in 1859, it spread rapidly. In 1947, 30 per cent of the 1.5 million acres of land was occupied by the tea planters.


The table: 3 depicts the actual increase of the area of tea plantation in Assam; in 1880 about 566,277 acres of land were occupied by the tea planters whereas in 1893 it increased upto 1,045,334 acres. 34.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total area (Acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880-81</td>
<td>566,277 - 706,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>783,362 - 923,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-85</td>
<td>913,476 - 921,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-87</td>
<td>942,134 - 950,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-89</td>
<td>955,499 - 1000,665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-91</td>
<td>994,497 - 996,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892-93</td>
<td>1,044,984 - 1,045,334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gradually the tea industry became the main economic source of the government, and the waste lands were made available for the tea planters by amending the Waste Land Rules of 1838 and 1854. By these rules no grant less than 100 acres could be given to any body for agriculture. 35.

All these, as a result, had brought enormous impact on the traditional productive organisation. The waste lands were occupied rapidly by the planters under the Assam Clearance Rule, 1845 and many tribal tracts were transformed into tea plantation. 36.

settled cultivation area, village land was also occupied by the planters through dishonesty. But no guarantee was given to the cultivators to protect their land, thus many of the raiyats could not save their land from the hands of the plantation owners. By 1901 almost one fourth of the total settled area had been occupied by planters. The planters, who were of British as well as high caste origin, were exempted from the land-taxes; they either used to purchase land in a nominal price at auction or acquired it from the government on long lease. But the ordinary peasants used to pay much higher revenue than any planter; the rate was Rs.1.47 which was heavier than what prevailed in Bengal at that time.

In Bengal districts like Dacca, Mymonsingh and Rangpur the revenues were Rs.0.36 and Rs.0.45 respectively. This seriously affected the peasants on the one hand and on the other, restricted the extension of paddy cultivation which could be made by reclamation of waste land. The purposes were to keep the vacant lands for the occupation of the new coming planters and for attracting tenants on this land who could be employed casually in the plantation works. This enabled rapid extension of plantation as well as solved the labour crisis in plantation. The land revenue was increased from 15 per cent to 30 per cent, and it was strictly enhanced from the peasants to force them indirectly to accept work in the tea plantations. But it failed to attract the peasants.

In 1901, out of 307,000 labourers of the plantations in Kamrup and Darrang districts there were only 20,000 reported to be local peasants of which 14,000 belonged to the Bodo-Kachari tribal group.

The reluctance of the local peasants to work in the plantation and shortage of manpower due to the Mayamaria rebellion (1770-1795), the Burmese War (1819-24) and epidemics (1853-54) disturbed the production in agriculture as well as labour supply in the plantation. Only the important source of local labourers in the plantation was the Kacharis of Darrang district and a small proportion of peasants of the adjacent areas. But this only fulfilled the marginal necessity of the plantation, and only up to 1860 the supply of local labourers was sufficient for the plantation. But rapid increase of the plantation required large number of labourers who were brought from Bengal and other parts of India. The number of imported labourers from 1872 to 1880 was 226,321. In 1872, they were about 40,000 and the total number of immigrants including them was 80,000. Thus non-indigenous persons constituted about one-quarter to one third of the population of Assam in 1901. In 1923 about 527,000 labourers were recruited in the plantation. Educated persons were absorbed in clerical, administrative and medical jobs in tea industries, but as the spread of education was insignificant in Assam most of these officers were brought from Bengal. Demand of rice for the large number of such employees improved the rice market of the country, and at the same time several markets grew up which opened the facilities of trade and commerce. The land products were sold in the market at a great profit. But due to the increase of population and stagnation of rice economy since the mid-nineteenth century deficit in food grain was noticed; it necessitated to import rice from Bengal. In 1873 about three lakh mounds of

rice was imported, and by the early eighties the import increased up to four to five lakh mounds annually. In the following years the import further increased rapidly. The situation became worst when the members of the next generations of the immigrant labourers, who did not get employment in the plantation, settled down on the waste land of the neighbouring areas either as agricultural labourers or as share-croppers. Thus, a vast area of waste land gradually came under the occupation of the immigrants. The table 4 depicts the area of land occupied by ex-plantation labourers since 1879 to 1941.

Table 4

Land occupied by ex-plantation labourers in Assam (1879-1941)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Districts</th>
<th>Land occupied (acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1879-80</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>2,658 - 4,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>4,745 - 4,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-85</td>
<td>5-5</td>
<td>5,647 - 7,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-87</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>13,705 - 16,414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-89</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>25,315 - 28,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-91</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>32,360 - 36,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892-93</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>40,510 - 41,916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-95</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>42,275 - 53,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>58,167 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td></td>
<td>83,947 - 89,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td></td>
<td>96,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902-3</td>
<td></td>
<td>106,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903-4</td>
<td></td>
<td>111,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-5</td>
<td></td>
<td>120,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-33</td>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>320,724 - 322,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-41</td>
<td></td>
<td>384,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1932, 1933 and 1940-41 about 26,800; 18,601; 26,635 ex-plantation labourers respectively engaged themselves as sub-tenants in the lands of the local villagers. Immigrants other than the tea-labourers who settled down in the country increased from decade to decade; up to 1950 about 1.4 million or one-fifth of the total settled area of the Brahmaputra valley had been occupied by these immigrants (see table 5).

46. Assam Census Report, 1951, p. 56.
Table: 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average holding of immigrants other than tea labourers (in acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930 - 31</td>
<td>501,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940 - 41</td>
<td>715,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949 - 50</td>
<td>1388,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was found that the changes in the local economy significantly took place due to the rapid increase of tea cultivation, but the other food crops could not enhance any significant change in it. Upto 1901 there was increase of 92 per cent in the tea sector whereas 13 per cent was in the food crops. However, changes in the agricultural economy was markedly noticed in the shifting cultivation area; there was continuous shrinkage of shifting cultivation and increase of settled cultivation due to the rapid extension of tea plantation in the tribal dominating areas as well as due to the influx of population from 1901 onwards. Development of market economy also insisted on cultivation of jute, pulses, mustard, etc. Therefore, Assam in the British period experienced a dual economy consisting of the traditional subsistence economy and the capital-intensive monetised modern economy.

The above two types of economy were contradictory as these involved two classes of people having different economic interests. A group of small peasants having subsistence type of economy was

in conflict with the newly emerging capitalist class, i.e., the
planters who were the privileged land-owning class in the rural
areas. Though the peasants were not permanently organised as a
class under any political party, they in different parts of Assam
casually organised themselves to protest against the planters.
In many cases there were violent attacks on the planters and their
officers. In 1880, a case of dispute between the villagers and
a manager of a tea-garden was reported. In 1883 and 1889 dis-
putes between the villagers and tea planters took place in Sylhet
district. This was due to the occupation of waste land by the
planters which was the source of firewood and paddy land to the
villagers. In 1892, a dispute occurred at Mohima in Golaghat
between the owner of the garden and the neighbouring villagers;
the manager was killed in the incident.

CHANGES IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

In the post-Independence period different trends of moder-
nisation and socio-cultural changes have been noticed. These
changes could be attributed to the abolition of the feudal system
and the British colonialism. Firstly, the changes which have been
brought in the rural economy are by introduction of the land tenure
system. The new land tenure system is responsible for creating
new agrarian classes and land relations. The Assam Adhia
protection and Regulation Act, 1948 seeks (i) to regulate landlords -
share croppers relations, (ii) to give security to the share-cro-
ppers, (iii) to settle disputes between the share-croppers and
the landowners, and (iv) to fix the maximum rent payable by the
share-croppers. The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindari Act, 1951

49. Annual Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1880,
Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, p. 19.
50. Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1883, p. 13 and
1889, p. 51.
establishes direct relations between the state and the tenants by abolishing the rights of the intermediaries, and it aims at to reform the existing tenures by bringing the zamindari areas in line with the raiyatwari areas. The Assam State Acquisition of Land Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature Act, 1959 ensures the rights of self-cultivation and of ownership to the tenants. The Assam Fixation of Ceiling of Landholding Act, 1956 fixed a ceiling on landholding by an individual or a family at 50 acres. It aims at to reduce the economic inequalities by redistribution of land and encourages the establishment of co-operative farming societies by the landless cultivators. Under the Assam Temporarily Settled Tenancy Acts, 1935 and 1971 tenants' interests could be protected in several ways. The impact of the land tenure system is not the same all over Assam. The zamindari areas of Goalpara and Cachar districts are affected much more where all the zamindars, except a few, have lost their land. But the raiyats are not affected so much in other districts, and most of the medium and small raiyats have retained their land. Thus, the small tenants could not gain substantially from the new land tenure systems. Though the new legislations have adversely affected the proprietors and other intermediaries by abolishing their rights, yet they have been able to keep enough land under their possession. The landowning groups, due to loss of ownership rights, have considerably come down in class hierarchy. Each of the zamindars are allowed to retain 133 acres of land under their possession; moreover they are exempted from paying revenue upto 16 acres of land. The big zamindars continue at the top of class hierarchy. The Act of 1959 considerably reduced the size of the land belonging to the various religious institutions. This has reduced the landholdings of the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas. The mauzadars and the chowdhuries are no more powerful in the rural society as their power has been

considerably curbed due to these structural changes.

The rural economy has undergone some basic changes during the post-Independence period. However, land remains a basic source of livelihood of the rural people. Since the British period land has become a private property, a commodity for sale, purchase and mortgage. The growth of towns and cities as centres of trade and commerce and cultural activities has attracted the rural people. The hinter-land villages have been selling their lands due to rise in price of land because of expansion of the towns and cities. The number of cultivators has decreased in the second generation compared to the first among the higher castes particularly due to their migration to cities and diversification of occupational structure in the village community. The transfer of land from their hands has compelled them to accept various modern occupations. On the other hand, the number of the agricultural labourers has been increasing rapidly. Since 1951 to 1961 there has been an increase in the number of cultivators from 255 to 280 per 1,000 persons (see table: 6).

Table: 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur (including Dibrugarh)</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emerging class structure, found in the two districts, namely, Goalpara (zamindari area) and Sibsagar (raiyatwari area), is a result of various land laws implemented in the state. The emerging situation of the zamindari and the raiyatwari areas show differential changes in the agrarian class structure. The following agrarian classes are found in Goalpara: (1) rent receiver (5.56%), (2) cultivating owner and rent receiver (4.17%), (3) cultivating owner (34.03%), (4) cultivating owner and tenant (10.44%), (5) cultivating tenant (6.25%) and (6) agricultural labourer (9.02%)\(^{57}\)

But the district of Sibsagar in upper Assam shows a different picture. Here the absence of landlords is the main feature. The agrarian classes found in this district are: (1) owner cultivator (60.4%), (2) tenant (16.21%), (3) part owner and part tenants (22.46%) and (4) agricultural labourer (0.25%)\(^{58}\). As the raiyatwari system prevailed all over Assam, except the districts of Goalpara, and Cachar, the large land ownership under a few persons has not developed\(^ {59}\).

**Table: 7**

Agrarian classes in Goalpara district (ex-zamindari area)  
(144 households surveyed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agrarian classes</th>
<th>Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Cultivating owner</td>
<td>49 (34.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Cultivating tenant</td>
<td>9 (6.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Cultivating owner and tenant</td>
<td>28 (19.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Cultivating owner and rent receiver</td>
<td>6 (4.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Rent receiver</td>
<td>8 (5.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>13 (9.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agrarian classes</td>
<td>31 (21.52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{57}\) Dutta, N.C., op.cit., p. 150.  


Table: 8

Agrarian classes in Sibsagar district (Raïyatwari area)  
(2,682 households surveyed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agrarian classes</th>
<th>Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Owner cultivator</td>
<td>1,318 (60.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Tenant</td>
<td>369 (16.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Part tenant and part owner</td>
<td>490 (22.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>5 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prevailing systems of share-cropping contracts are: the fixed cash rent locally known as Kereya and the rent in kind which is known as boka-adhi and guti-adhi. However, the contracts will be discussed in some details in the next chapter. The shares of the contract have changed due to the various land regulations. The Adhiai Protection Bill of Assam has reduced the landowner's share, i.e., one third of the crop on condition of supplying seeds and animals, and one-forth when the same are supplied by the tenant himself. However, this regulation is not fully implemented.

It has been observed that about 42.43 per cent of the landowners do not give any assistance to the share-croppers, and 43.9 per cent of the share-croppers do not get any assistance from their landowners. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, interests of the share-croppers have been protected by the Adhiai Protection and Regulation Act, 1948. Though the interests of the tenants have been protected by the Assam Temporarily Settled Tenancy, 1935 and 1971 Acts, in Goalpara and Cachar districts, the landowner still evict the share-croppers according to their whims.

Since Independence the number of the agricultural labourers has been steadily increasing. In 1951 and 1963 they were recorded as 1.7 and 11 per cent respectively. This increase can be seen

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from the census records which are as follows (table:9)\(^1\).

**Table: 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The growth of the agricultural labourers during the post Independence period is due to the impact of various land reforms on the one hand, and stagnation of plantation economy on the other. However, members of plantation labourers who could not be employed in plantations have emerged as agricultural labourers. Since land has become a market commodity due to land relations introduced by the British rule in Assam, the upper classes, namely, the money-lenders, merchants and the big farmers have always been beneficiaries as they have become either intermediaries or buyers of land. Gradually, a group of non-cultivating landowners has emerged, and the cultivators have now become either share-croppers or agricultural labourers. However, the power and privileges of the Choukhurias and the mauzadars have been reduced to a considerable extent due to these land reforms\(^2\). However, the condition of the

\(^1\) Census of India, 1961, Assam, Vol. III, Part I-A.

poor people has not changed much due to these land legislations.

Growth of industry is comparatively slow and insignificant in the region. However, industrial and commercial enterprises have created new opportunities of employment. A new class of big businessmen and industrialists has emerged along with the middle class people. But castes have no role to play in shaping the economic behaviour of the people 63.

It is already mentioned that, in the traditional society, caste system was not as rigid as it was found in other parts of India. Therefore, changes in the caste system have been faster in Assam since the British period compared to other states. Creation of new economic opportunities since the later part of the British rule has made the system open to a considerable extent. Communication between the villages and the outside world has increased interpersonal relations and networks of the rural people with the cities and towns, and thus new values have created an impact on the life of the rural folk. Although the caste system has been legally abolished by the Indian constitution, yet it has not disappeared, nor untouchability has been withered away. However, recently there has been further weakening of ideas regarding pollution.

Horizontal solidarity of caste groups has been increased at the expense of the vertical solidarity in Assam. Role of means of communication and modern education has created a new set of values for the people. Different caste associations have emerged, and some of them have political affiliations. The Ahoms and the Kacharis have such associations. These have increased intra-caste solidarity, and have decreased interdependence between different caste groups 64. The spread of western education has brought some changes in the life of the people. This has broaden the outlook and knowledge about politics.

During the pre-British period education was mainly confined to the higher castes like Brahmanas and Kayasthas who used to receive Sanskrit education at Nabadwip and Banaras. Usually the learning of Sanskrit was confined to Pragjyotispura, the capital of Kamrup of lower Assam. During the Ahom rule a few Sanskrit institutions such as the tolas were established in Sibsagar, the capital of the Ahoms. These tolas were run by the Brahmana pandits. Later on the Vaisnabite satras were established in different parts of Assam which brought about considerable changes in the society. These satras as religious and educational institutions gave impetus to the people of all castes and tribes for studying the Assamese language. During the British and post-Independence period Sanskrit learning and religious awakening declined considerably. Western education started spreading considerably among all the castes and tribes of the region. The Ahom nobility gradually declined due to the loss of their prestige and power, and an educated middle class gentry emerged from various caste groups to assist the British administration.

In 1825, the British government formally introduced the institution of panchayat in Assam. In 1828 this panchayat was split into three different organs such as sadar panchayat, sarupanchayat and chachari panchayat. The functions of panchayats were limited to tax collection and settlement of disputes over money-lending as well as landownership. In 1953, the Assam Rural Panchayat was introduced with two-tier system, and in 1959, this was made three-tier such as gaon panchayat, anchalik panchayat and mahakuma parishad. There was provisions for co-option of woman, scheduled caste and tribal members. The power and functions of the institution were increased considerably in the planning for rural development and settling various disputes of village life.

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During the British period the Assamese society experienced a centralised administration of the British government which was new to it. However, during this period power structure remained feudalistic in nature, as the feudal lords were patronised by the British government by offering various privileges. Thus, they continued to control village land and people. The introduction of revenue and police administration brought significant changes in rural Assam and strengthened the position of the village aristocracy. But the traditional authority structure in the rural areas did not change to a considerable extent.

In Assam, power structure in the zamindari areas was different, in many respects, from that of the raiyatwari areas. The zamindars had full control over officials, tenants and labourers. The similar situation was also found in the raiyatwari areas where the big raiyats used to play the same role. Therefore, under the feudal system, social, economic and political power remained centralised. Thus, landlordism played an important role as a power institution 67.

Today people from middle and lower caste and class groups have started sharing power by participating in the political institutions 68. Even the tribals are to be found wielding considerable amount of power in the panchayats. A number of them are members of the State Assembly and the Parliament. It has been seen that, in the village, where both tribes and castes constitute its population, the tribal representatives also hold considerable amount of power. The leaders of the Ahoms and the Miris are so powerful due to their numerical strength in upper Assam that they even mobilised the people for the purpose of the formation of a


separate state for these communities. Earlier castism was not so strong as a political instrument, because it was suppressed by the landlords, but today it has gained strength through institutions like caste associations and caste panchayats.\(^{69}\)

In rural Assam caste mel (caste assembly) is still functioning side by side with the statutory panchayat. The caste mel reinforces the ethnocentric attitude of the caste groups. In the village where there is indirect conflict between the Brahmanas and the Kalitas, the latter is supported by the non-Brahmana caste groups like the Keota, Koches, Chutiyas, etc. The caste mel not only helps to increase ethnocentrism, but also various caste associations having formal organisations.\(^{70}\)

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