CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE MULTI-CASTE VILLAGE

Hatkhola Gaon - A multi-caste village

Hatkhola is a multi-caste village having 145 households with a population of 855 members. The village comprises of both Assamese and non-Assamese people. Among the Assamese there are eight castes and one tribe having 128 households and 765 members. They are Kayasthas, Kalitas, Koches, Chutiyas, Keots, Katanis, Ahoms, Kaibartas and Kacharis. The non-Assameses have 17 households with 90 persons. They are Baraiks, Bhumijes, Murhas, Ahirs and Lohars, and all of them are of tribal origin. The following table shows the caste and community wise distribution of population.

Table:10
Distribution of population and caste composition of Hatkhola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>No.of household</th>
<th>Population %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>5(3.4)</td>
<td>25 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>23(15.9)</td>
<td>175 (20.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>15(10.3)</td>
<td>103 (12.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiyas</td>
<td>9(5.5)</td>
<td>54 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>4(2.7)</td>
<td>25 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>8(5.5)</td>
<td>46 (5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahoms</td>
<td>25(17.2)</td>
<td>142 (16.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>1(.7)</td>
<td>7 (.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>39(26.9)</td>
<td>188 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baraik</td>
<td>9(6.2)</td>
<td>48 (5.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhumij</td>
<td>3(1.7)</td>
<td>15 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murha</td>
<td>3(1.7)</td>
<td>16 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahirs</td>
<td>1(.7)</td>
<td>7 (.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lohars</td>
<td>1(.7)</td>
<td>4 (.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>145</strong></td>
<td><strong>855</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hatkhola is known as a Matak village as it is inhabited mainly by the castes belonging to the Matak or the Mayamaria sect. The village has a satra (Vaisnabite monastery) for the Matak which is known as Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. Besides, a few villagers are followers of the Brahma Samhiti, and they are commonly known as Bamunias. While the Bamunias have Brahmana gosains the Matakas are followers of the non-Brahmana gosains. The word Bamunia also denotes to the followers of other Vaisnabite sects. The Bamunias worship Lord Krishna and Durga, and believe in other gods and goddesses as well. But the Matakas no longer worship mother goddesses and image of deity. The two sects have a long history of conflict regarding their religious ideologies. This has created fissions in the Assamese society.

Social Organisation of the Vaisnabite Sects

Out of the four Vaisnabite sects only two, namely, the Kala Samhuti and the Brahma Samhuti, and their internal organisations are considered here for discussion.

It is mentioned earlier that the Matak sect is an offshoot of the Kala Samhuti. The Matak religious organisation consists of two institutions. At the top there is satra which has control over a number of villages. This institution is headed by a gosain known as satradhikar (owner of the satra) who is assisted by a dekadhikar (junior satradhikar). Both of them are selected from the gosains families. A Khatonial who assists the gosains in ritual activities is one of the best devotees belonging to one of the higher castes. Under the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra there are 1400 villages whose inhabitants are bhakate of the satra. Therefore, the satra institution is beyond the village level.

1. Castes belonging to the Matak sect are regarded as Matak Kayasthas, Matak Kalitas, Matak Ahoms, Matak Koches, etc.
2. Bhakat is a term for the Vaisnabite devotee.
At the village level there is institution of namghar (temple). A caste may have one or more than one namghar. Even a number of castes may also belong to a single namghar. In Hatkhola, the gosains do not have namghar as their religious activities are performed in the satra itself. Previously, the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis belonged to a single namghar, but in 1972 a new namghar was erected by a faction of these castes. The Matak Ahoms participate in a namghar situated in a neighbouring village. The Matak Kaibartas have also a separate namghar of their own.

The institution of namghar is headed by a gaonbura, an elderly devotee. Besides, the institution has various offices a few of which are discussed here. There are patheki for recitation of the Bhagabat and radhuni for preparing food in ritual occasions. All the offices are appointed by the gosains only.

Besides these offices, there are large number of devotees in the namghar who are guided by the gaonbura. There are two types of devotees, namely, the sharania and the bhajania. When a person undergoes the sharan—the first initiation, he is known as sharania devotee. Similarly he is called bhajania devotee when he undergoes the bhajan—the second initiation. He is required to observe various restrictions according to Vaisnabism.

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The religious organisation of the Brahma Samhiti consists of satra and namghar institutions similar to that of the Matak sect. Besides the various offices of the satra, which are less important here, there are offices of the institution of namghar. As the Auniati Satra is located at about 800 Kilometres away from the village religious functions are vested in elderly and pious devotee of the namghar who is known as medhi. Below this office, there are bhajania and sharania devotees similar to that of the Mataks. The Kaibartas, Ahoms and Kacharis of the Brahma Samhati are devotees of the Auniati Satra. The Bamunia Kaibartas have namghar in a neighbouring village. The Bamunia Ahoms and the Bamunia Kacharis belong to a single namghar. The Bamunia Ahoms have two medhias, who act as mediators between the gasain and their caste fellows.

RELIGIOUS AND RITUAL BASES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Caste system is characterised by its exclusiveness, inclusiveness and hierarchical relations between the various groups of people on the one hand and the system has some other features such as endogamy, commensality, purity-pollution, hereditary specialisation, cultural differences and domination of power based on hereditary principles, on the other. We shall examine how and to what extent these features operate at the village level in determining relations between groups and individuals. There is a gap between the ideals of caste system and its various practices. As there are multicaite, tribal and single caste villages the society in upper Assam is somewhat different from that of other regions of India. These three types of villages represent different sets of relations between groups and individuals. Hence, nature of gaps between the ideal and the actual would

also be different accordingly. A village, having both caste Hindus and tribal groups, might have a different picture of social relations. We shall here make an analysis of the stratification relations in a multicaste village. In the two subsequent chapters the focus of analysis will be on single-caste and tribal villages.

In the present context we shall define the basic concepts related to caste stratification. Endogamy refers to marriage within one's caste group. Two distinct features are: one marries within the group; and other is restriction on marrying outside the group. Endogamy is basically found among the various caste groups, whereas the tribal people may practise exogamy. The principle of endogamy and hypergamy among the Hindu castes provides a basis for hierarchical relations. The hypergamous notion related to marriage is absent among the tribal people. This itself is a significant criterion of difference between caste and tribe.

Commensality refers to the norms of intercaste relations in regard to acceptance or refusal of food, water and other goods by the higher castes from the lower ones. Commensality is both less strict and more subject to regional variation. It refers to the ranking of caste groups in terms of their relatively pure and impure ranks. Thus commensality means exclusiveness of caste groups. Miller also explains how this exclusiveness operates in ranking of the caste groups through the people's evaluation of commensal relationships in terms of relative purity and pollution. Ritual status refers to birth-ascription, that is, individual's membership in a caste by birth. Ritual purity and impurity are the criteria of status evaluation. Dumont stresses on the importance

of pure and impure, because there is a fundamental opposition between these two; this opposition underlies hierarchy, i.e., there is superiority of the pure to the impure. Hereditary specialisation of occupation means that a particular occupation is assigned to a particular caste by birth, the members of which are required to learn that occupation. Thus, caste groups have their own specific culture distinguishable from one another. The castes, which enjoy superior status in all these respects, possess considerable influence and power over the castes which occupy comparatively lower status in the hierarchy.

From the caste composition it is found that there is no Brahmana in Hatkhola village. Even in upper Assam the Brahmana population is less in comparison to lower Assam as the Vaisnabas do not accept services of the Brahmana priests. However, there are important divisions among the Brahmanas such as Sakta, Vaisnaba and Matak Brahmanas. In the neighbouring village there are a few Sakta Brahmanas whose services are not accepted by the Vaisnabite castes of Hatkhola. However, the villagers, who originally belonged to Hindu castes, employ Brahmana priests of the Mayamaria sect only in the rituals related to marriage, death, prayaschitta etc.

The Kayasthas:

In Hatkhola, the Kayasthas occupy the top rank in the caste hierarchy. There are only 5 families of the Kayasthas comprising 25 members. The Kayasthas are believed to be the direct descendants of Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the Mayamaria sect of Vaisnabism. They are religious preceptors and owners of the

11. Prayaschitta is a ritual performed in purificating individual who has made himself polluted by breaching social norms.
Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. In the latter part of the nineteenth century a satradhikar of the Dinjoy Satra established the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. Since then six satradhikara headed the satra who were the forefathers of the present satradhikar.

In Assam the Vaisnaba preceptors are known as gosains. The Kayasthas of Hatkhola are also the gosains. The eldest male member of the Kayasthas is supposed to hold the status of the gosain, and by virtue of his status he enjoys the office of the satradhikar in the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. The next eldest male member of them is appointed as dekadhikar. All these appointments are made with the consent of the influential devotees. However, the offices are hereditary.

The Kayastha gosain is the spiritual and religious head of his devotees. His social status is above the Brahmanas in the society, because his devotees are not only from the non-Brahmana castes and tribals but also from the Brahmanas as well. In regard to the religious and spiritual spheres non-Brahmana gosain's status is much superior to that of the Brahmanas. Therefore, the achieved religious status of the gosain is much more regarded than the ascribed status of the Brahmanas in the society. Nevertheless, the Kayastha gosains are still regarded as one of the pure Sudras in Assam. The situation is, in fact, ambiguous; and it is impossible to compare the status of the Mayamaria gosains with the Brahmanas of the other Vaisnabite sects. A comparison can be made only between the Matak gosains and the Matak Brahmanas. The Kayastha gosains are required to take services of the Brahmana priests in marriage and death rituals, and the Brahmanas, to become Vaisnabites, are required to undergo initiation under the Sudra gosain. Therefore, the status of the two groups are more or less equal.

The devotees of all the caste groups show high respect to the Kayastha gosains; they use fictitious kinship terms in their

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12. Dinjoy Satra is the biggest satra of the Mayamaria sect situated in Dibrugarh district.
day-to-day dealings. Such a respectful treatment is not given even to the Brahmanas. However, the status which is enjoyed by the gosains is due to liberal Vaisnabism.

Traditionally, gosains had to learn Sanskrit and Assamese language, for recitation of the Bhagabat on ritual occasions. Though the members of the present gosain families are not aware of Sanskrit language, they, however, know well the Bhagabat recitation. The gosains are also well-versed in gayen or kirtan (religious songs) and bayen (playing of musical instruments).

The Kayastha gosains observe certain practices. Like the Brahmanas, all the males undergo the sacred thread ceremony (upanayana). They also perform certain rituals thrice a day. Traditionally, they used to preach Vaisnabism, and their activities were looked after by some of their devotees. They perform certain rituals, but their traditional occupation does not include priestly activities. The Brahmanas still control the priestly domain, but their dominance has slid down due to the spread of Vaisnabism. Their priestly occupation is confined only to the marriage and death rituals as Vaisnabism prohibits cult of any god and goddess. Although the Kayastha gosains are not teetotallers, they observe certain taboo regarding food. Certain meals, fishes and liquor are prohibited for them. Such a pattern of ritual practices among the Kayasthas explain the flexibility of the caste system in upper Assam. It is quite different from the rigidity regarding ritual practices prevailing in northern India.

The Kayasthas prefer endogamy, but as a small community, it is difficult to find spouses from their own caste. There is also restriction on marrying outside the Matak sect. The members of both the Matak and the Bamunia sects practise sect endogamy. As all the Kayasthas of the Matak sect belong to the same lineage being the direct descendants of Aniruddhadeva they cannot practise sect endogamy. Naturally, they have developed a custom of sect exogamy with the Kayasthas of the Brahma Samhati. Besides, they are allowed to have hypogamous relations with the Kalitas
who are lower than the Kayasthas. However, at the time of marriage, the Kalita girl is raised to the status of her Kayastha husband by performing a prayaschitta, and henceforth the girl stops commensal relations with her agnatic relatives. Similarly, the Kayastha girls may be married by the Kalitas, and the former stops commensal relations thereafter with the affinal relatives. Such an exogamous pattern of marital alliances is found between these two groups only. Exception to this rule is also found. In 1976, a Koch family settled matrimonial alliance with a son of a Kayastha gosain of the Dinjoy Satra, a largest Matak satra in Assam today.

The practice of concubinage with the women of lower castes is not uncommon among the Kayastha gosains. Out of three such cases, two gosains have Ahom concubines. The present satradhikar of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra has an Ahom concubine. Another gosain of this satra had a Kaibarta (a fishing caste) concubine. A Kaibarta woman of this village was a concubine of the present gosain of the Dinjoy Satra. The practice of concubinage explains that sex-relation with the lower caste women does not affect the status of the higher caste persons unless they interdine. The children of these concubines have not been accorded the status of their fathers' caste, rather they have been absorbed by the respective castes of their mothers.

The Kalitas:

Next to the Kayasthas are the Kalitas, who have 24 households comprising a population of 175 members. In upper Assam, specially in Dibrugarh, they are numerically less, but are preponderant in lower Assam. Lower Assam was their original homeland, where they have still retained their traditional characteristics. But in upper Assam, due to certain factors of changes they have lost, in many respects, their traditional caste status.

The Kalitas are one of the principal agricultural castes, and today many of them have adopted modern occupations. Out of
24 households of the Kalitas. 3 have immigrated to this village a few years ago, the rest of the families are the natives of the village. These three families are the affines of the Kayasthas of this village. All the Kalitas of Hatkhola belong to the Matak or the Mayamaria sect and are disciples of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra.

The Kalitas practise endogamy, but in practice, exogamy is also found. Apart from establishing affinal relations with the Kayasthas, they extend such relations with the Koches and Chutiyas. Traditionally marital relations with the Matak Ahoms are prohibited, but in case of such marriages the couples were not excommunicated. Since last thirty years such marriages have been increasing among them.

In this respect, the prevailing types of marriages may be referred here. Two types of marriages are in vogue; marriage by elopement, locally known as gandharba-biya is widely practised. In this marriage, rituals do not play any vital role for forming a conjugal unit. Perhaps, it is a tribal custom as it is widely practised by the local non-Hindus. However, caste marriage takes place according to the Vedic rituals in which role of Brahmana priest is considered indispensable. This marriage is locally known as bar-biya. Today the marriage by elopement is also largely practised by the lower caste people. In case of marriage by elopement, generally the Vedic rituals are performed in the old age of the couple. This ritual practice is known as bura-biya.

The marital alliances between the Kalitas and the Matak Ahoms generally take place by elopements. Out of 24 Kalita households, 4 families had such marital alliances. However, more restrictions are found in case of marriage with the Bamunia Ahoms. A Bamunia Ahom girl can be accepted only after raising her status through a puyaasha ritual. In some cases of marriage with lower castes, the question of acceptance of the couple is raised by the caste fellows, and then the gosain’s advice is sought. In case of positive advice of the gosain, a ritual is suggested, which involves offering of a feast to the devotees. If the girl’s caste
status is considerably low, the process must be accompanied with a rigorous ritual which could be performed only by the Brahmana priest. But exogamy with the Kaibartas is not possible. A case could be cited here. A Matak Kalita of a neighbouring village who has married a Matak Kalibarta girl, is excommunicated by his caste fellows. Now the couple is living in the Kaibarta settlement of this village. His status in the village is anomalous.

The Koches:

In the caste hierarchy, the Koches occupy a position just below the Kalitas. They have 15 households comprising a population of 103 persons. The Koches of Assam are descendants of the Koches of North Bengal. It is already discussed in the earlier chapter that the Koches were originally a tribe and have gradually transformed themselves into a caste of Assam.

The Koches are agriculturists and are one of the old settlers of Hatkhola. They are devotees of the Moderkhat Mayamaha Satra. Like the Kalitas, they also observed certain rules regarding food, etc.

Relations between the Koches and other castes can be explained by the rules of marriage they observe. They are basically an endogamous group but today exogamy is also practised. Generally, there is no practice of establishing marital relations with the Kayasthas as the Koches are inferior to the former; but this restriction is not strictly followed by both of these groups. Though marriage between the Koches and the Kalitas has not yet taken place in Hatkhola, it is not uncommon in the neighbouring villages. The Koches sometimes call themselves Koch-Kalitas to associate them with the Kalitas. They can also establish marital relations with the Keota and the Chutiyas though this is rarely done. Since last twenty years, exogamy among these castes has been emerging as a conspicuous feature; but it was rarely practised in the traditional society. Today, Katanis are also accepted, though not frequently, by the Koches. Marriage between the Koches and the Ahoms of both the Matak and the Bamunia sects was strictly prohibited in the
traditional society; but today conjugal union may take place, and the couple is accepted through a *prayaschitta* ritual. The married girl stops commensal relations with her agnatic relatives. Out of 15 households of the Koches of Hatkhola, 2 intercaste marriages have taken place with the Matakas and Bamunia Ahoms. Marital relation with the Kaibartas is out of question. Traditionally and even today, marriage between the Koches and the Kacharis is strictly prohibited; but in case when marriage takes place, the couple is not socially rejected. A Koch of this village married a Kachari girl by elopement, and consequently, his caste fellows refused to continue commensal relations with his family. The couple sought advice from the *gosain*, and accordingly a ritual was performed by a Brahmana priest, and a feast was given to the devotees of his caste. Thus, the girl's caste-status was raised, and since then she stopped commensal relations with her parental family. The children of the couple have got status of their father's caste.

**The Chutiyas:**

The Chutiyas, an agricultural caste, come next in the hierarchy, and have 8 households with 54 members. They were originally tribal rulers. A section of the Chutiyas was gradually absorbed by the Hindus, and they were known as Hindu Chutiyas. This process of social mobility is already discussed in the earlier chapter. However, the Hindu Chutiyas today have achieved much higher status among the upper castes of Assam.

The Chutiyas of Hatkhola are known as Hindu Chutiyas. They immigrated to this village about a hundred years ago. Like other caste groups they practice endogamy, but this rule is not strictly followed. They do not have marital relations with the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas as they are inferior to the latter. But sometimes marriage may take place with other superior castes like the Kalitas and the Koches. On the other hand Chutiyas may also have marital alliances with the Keots and the Katanis, who are
ranked lower in the caste hierarchy. Such exogamous relations are socially approved, and are never disfavoured. It is already discussed earlier (chapter II) that a section of the Chutiyas who establish marital alliances with the Ahoms are known as Ahom Chutiyas. But the Hindu Chutiyas strictly avoid such marriages. Today they are found to accept such exogamous cases which generally take place by elopement. However, exogamy with other lower castes is strictly prohibited.

The Keots:

The Keots have only 4 households with a population of 24 members. They occupy a position below the Koches, but it is difficult to say whether they are superior to the Chutiyas or not. Thus, their status in the caste hierarchy is somewhat ambiguous. The Keots are divided into two groups, namely, the Jalowa-Keots and the Halowa-Keots. Social status of the former is equivalent to that of the Kalibartas. In lower Assam, the Halowa-Keots enjoy much superior status due to their social proximity to the Kalitas. The Keots of Hatkhola belong to the Halowa group; they are primarily agriculturists. The Halowas and the Jalowas are endogamous groups. But the Halowa Keots of Hatkhola and also of upper Assam in general, practice exogamy with some higher castes like the Chutiyas, the Koches, etc. Although in traditional society marital relations with the Ahoms were not practised, such exogamous couples were not excommunicated. Out of 4 household of Hatkhola, 3 cases of exogamy with the Matak Ahoms and one with the Kalitas have taken place by elopement. Marriage with the Kacharis is prohibited, and in case of marriage with the Kaibartas the couple is excommunicated.

The Katanis:

Next to the Keots or the Chutiyas in the caste hierarchy are the Katanis. In Hatkhola, they have 8 households and 46 members. Their principal occupation is agriculture. About twenty years ago they left their traditional occupation of spinning and
weaving. Traditionally, they did not have flexible rules of marriage, as due to their inferior status and impure occupation no caste established marital alliance with them. However, after rejecting their traditional occupation they have considerably improved their status. Now a days, occasionally they enter into marital relations with the Chutiyas and the Keots. The Katanis also do not have marital relations with the Ahoms. However, one Katani has married with one Matak Ahom.

The Ahoms:

There are 25 households of the Ahoms comprising a population of 142 members. They are engaged in agriculture. Their position is next to the Katanis in the caste hierarchy. They came to this village about three generations ago from Sibsagar district, the original seat of the Ahoms. It is already mentioned earlier (chapter II) that the Ahoms were the most powerful tribal rulers in Assam. They gradually transformed themselves into caste through the process of Vaisnabisation. Out of 25 households, 10 are followers of the Matak sect, and 15 are devotees of the Brahma Samhati and the Purusha Samhati who are known as Bamunias. Therefore, the Ahoms are distinguished into two broader segments, namely, the Matak Ahoms and the Bamunia Ahoms which are actually horizontal divisions.

Generally, the Ahoms practise endogamy. But traditionally they also occasionally practised exogamy with some local tribals. Therefore, it can be said that they never practise endogamy in true sense of the term. Since last twenty years or so, they have been practising exogamy with the Kalitas, Koches and Keots. Out of 10 Matak Ahom households of Hatkhola, there are 3 cases of exogamy with the Matak Kalitas. The Matak Ahoms think themselves superior to the Katanis and the Chutiyas. Therefore marriage by elopement is the only way to establish marital relation with the Katanis. But the Ahoms have exogamous relations with a section of the Chutiyas who are known as Ahom Chutiyas. They do not have
marital relations with the Kacharis due to the latter's adherence to traditional norms and tribalism; but in case of marriage by elopement couple may be accepted through purificatory ritual. Marital relations are strictly prohibited with the Kaibartas.

The two segments of the Ahoms always practise endogamy. Exogamy by elopement is not also uncommon, and the couple is socially accepted through a purificatory ritual. In Hatkhola, out of 15 households of the Bamunia Ahoms, there are 3 cases of inter-group marriages with the Matak Ahoms. A case of inter-group marriage may be cited here. About five years ago, Jagat Gogoi (40), a Bamunia Ahom, married a Matak Ahom girl of a neighbouring village by elopement. At once, the devotees of his own community stopped commensal relations with his family for breach of marriage rules. Then the couple met the devotees and according to their advice they paid a fine of Rs. 1.25 and arranged a feast. Thus, the Matak Ahom girl is raised to the status of her husband and is accepted by her husband's caste fellows.

These two segments of the Ahoms have antagonistic relations with one another. In most of the cases this is expressed through religious ideas. The Matak Ahoms always blame the Bamunias for their addition to liquor and acceptance of pork and chicken which is prohibited for the former. The Bamunia Ahoms, on the other hand, blame the Matak for stealing their religious script — the Bhagabat by the latter's gosain Shri Aniruddhadev.

The Kacharis:

There is only one Kachari household in the village. They are considered as a scheduled tribe and are ranked next to the Ahoms in the caste hierarchy. Whether they can be called as tribe or not is a matter of ambiguity. The Kachris of Hatkhola are followers of the Brahma Samhati. They are agriculturists. In Hatkhola, culturally they are close to the Bamunia Ahoms. They are basically endogamous group, but exogamy with other castes,
except the Kaibartas, is socially accepted by them.

The Kaibartas:

The oldest settlers of the village are the Kaibartas, who have 38 households comprising a strength of 188 members. Their traditional calling is fishing, and a few of them are still clinging to this occupation. Today majority of the Kaibartas are agriculturists. Out of 38 households, 35 are devotees of the Matak sect and the remaining 3 households are followers of the Brahma Samhati. These two segments of the Matak and the Bamunia are similar to that of the Ahoms. As these divisions are based on the Vaisnabite ideologies these are also found among the Kayasthas, Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas, Katanis, Ahoms and Kaibartas. But in Hatkhola, the Ahoms and the Kaibartas have followers of both the sects whereas the remaining caste groups belong to the Matak sect and the Kacharis are devotees of the Bamunia sect.

The Matak Kaibartas feel proud by calling themselves as Nadiyals which denotes occupation of fishing, but to them Kaibarta as a caste name is a derogatory one.

The two segments of the Kaibartas practice endogamy. Intersegment marriages are regularised by a purificatory ritual. No other caste prefers to have marital alliances with them. But the Kaibartas accept the couple in case of intercaste marriage as they are ranked lower than the other caste groups. In 1976 Pateswar Das, a Matak Kaibarta, married a Kayastha girl. According to the advice of the devotees the couple performed a ritual, and was accepted by his caste fellows. In another case, Ambeswar Das, a Matak Kaibarta, married a Matak Ahom girl. As a consequence, the Kaibartas refused to continue commensal relations with his family. However, according to the gosain's advice the couple performed a purificatory ritual by a Brahmana priest, and offered a feast to the devotees. Through this process the couple is accepted.

It is to be noted here that the Brahmanas, who serve to the Kaibartas, have lower status than the other Brahmanas because of the lower status of the Kaibartas.
The Non-Assamese Communities:

So far, various castes, which constitute the social structure of Hatkhola are discussed. Besides, there are altogether 17 households of different communities having 90 members. Out of 17 households there are 9 households of the Barai-ke, 3 each of the Bhumijes and the Murhas, and 1 each of the Ahirs and the Lohars. They are of tribal as well as caste origins from Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. During the British period they came to Assam as labourers in the tea plantations. But many of them have settled down in the villages as agricultural labourers. They have lost many of their customs, but have retained their traditional animistic religion and dialects. The non-Assamese communities cannot be considered as a part of the Assamese social structure and they are, therefore, excluded from the discussion. However, they have become the principal source of agricultural labourers in the local agrarian economy. However, to the Assamese villagers their community identity is vague, and therefore, they are clubbed together as 'coolies'.

The Rules of Marriage

The principle of endogamy is one of the basic criteria of caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, it does not exclude the role of isogamy specially in the form of hypergamy in the formation of conjugal union in the Hindu society, which is to a certain extent acceptable, and the descendants of such union are able to retain their paternal caste status in the society. The description of rules of marriage in upper Assam suggests prevalence of endogamy in theory, and dominance of exogamy in practice, both are of hypogamous and hypergamous nature. A combination of rigidity and flexibility dimensions of societal norms could be seen through the rules of marriage. In Assam normally the Kayasthas have marriages with the Kalitas and the Koches. In Dumont's words it coincides with the "optional hypergamy".

On the other hand, the Kalitas and the Koches generally avoid to bring daughters of the Kayasthas as wives, as the Kayasthas are their religious preceptors. Besides hypergamy, the Kayasthas also practise concubinage which is not socially disfavoured.

In such a situation of marital relations how the caste groups maintain exclusiveness and separateness. This leads to the discussion of commensal behaviours. In case of hypergamy, woman is raised to her husband's caste status, and she stops commensal relations with her parental caste. Members of her husband's caste accept foods from her and the children born out of such union enjoy the status of their paternal caste. However, a Kayastha gosain who keeps a concubine of a lower caste does not accept food from her. So long as hypergamous relations are allowed, inter-caste sex relations are not considered objectionable. We have mentioned earlier that the Kayastha gosains of Hatkhola have kept concubines belonging not only to the Ahoms, but also to the Kaibartas, a fishing caste, with whom hypergamous relations are prohibited. Therefore, sex relations with the lower castes do not pollute the higher castes, but commensal contacts with the former do affect the status of the higher castes. The children born out of such union enjoy status of their mother's caste.

Hutton mentions more or less similar custom among the Nambudiri Brahmanas who have liaisons with the Nayar women and do not eat with them. Their children inherit the status of their mother's caste and property. In upper Assam although a high caste man extends relations of concubinage across caste boundaries, the principles of purity and endogamy are maintained as the lower castes are never recognised as affinal Kinsmen of the higher castes.

Considerable flexibility is noticed in connubial relations among the castes occupying middle status in the hierarchy. The Kalitas, Koaches and Chutiyas practise such relation. The

Koches, Chutiyas, Keots and Katanis also have exogamous as well as commensal relations with each other. Though the Kayasthas and Kalitas decline to establish marital relations with the Katanis, indirectly they become distant affinal Kinsmen of the latter as both of them have exogamous relations with the Koches, Chutiyas and Keots.

The Ahoms practise exogamy and have absorbed many castes and tribes within them, and they have still retained their caste identity by practising endogamy as a basic principle of marriage. As marriage with the Ahom Chutiyas is socially accepted, they have reached close to the castes occupying middle status in the hierarchy. The distinction between the Ahom Chutiyas and Hindu Chutiyas is not strictly maintained today.

Yalman mentions more or less similar flexibility prevailing in the caste system of the Sinhalese society. He reports that inspite of flexibility people remain endogamous for their economic interest as well as for keeping the 'blood' pure. In Assam, the situation is different. It appears that caste system has been diluted here to a considerable extent since its inception in the region perhaps due to following reasons:

(I) the true varnashrama system, as it is found in northern India, could not penetrate into the various local ethnic communities, as a result concept of purity-pollution and castes with hereditary specialised occupation like artisan and servicing castes could not develop properly, (II) the impact of egalitarian ideology of Vaisnabism on the local ethnic communities, and (III) the impact of the dominant forces of tribalism of the region.

The Nature of Commensal Relations

Connubiality and commensality are the basis of ranking of groups in upper Assam. Hierarchy and separation of groups are thus based on such distinctions\(^{17}\). The principle of commensality keeps the caste groups separate and ranks them in hierarchical order. The following discussion explains that the commensal hierarchy of the castes refers to the relative exclusiveness of groups.

Commensal distinctions express separateness and divisions among the caste groups. Commensality, is a complex phenomenon due to rigidity-flexibility of its rules. This is true in regard to the Vaisnabites of Assam. Our observations about such relations are based on the behaviour of male members of the society though in practice such relations are carried on by womenfolk also. Generally, women do not come into contact with the other groups in the village community. Commensal relations also vary on the basis of sectarian affiliations of the Vaisnabites. Miller also faced similar problems in evaluating commensal relations of the womenfolk of Badipur\(^ {18} \).

Three different types of responses are observed in reference to the commensal behaviour of the male members belonging to the Matak Vaisnabite sect. In the village there are some young people who are not devotees as they have not yet undergone initiation into sharan. They are liberal in outlook regarding commensal relations with other castes. The middle aged male members of the village are sharania devotees, and the old males are bhajania devotees. The non-devotees have a wide range of commensal relations. The sharania devotees observe certain restrictions regarding commensal relations with other castes, and the bhajania devotees observe more restrictions. These restrictions on commensality are suggested by the gosains in maintaining

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\(^{17}\) Dumont, L., op.cit., p. 43.

\(^{18}\) Miller, D.B., op.cit., p. 72.
ritual purity of the individual as well as of the group, and it is imposed on the devotees by the Vaisnabite institutions of satra and namghar. The sharania devotees of all castes strictly follow the rules at least in theory, but in practice, the progressive devotees frequently violate such rules. The sharania devotees belonging to the Kalitas, Koches, Keota, Chutiyas and Katanis practise commensal relations among themselves. This situation is unique in Hatkhola because intermixture of caste groups has been possible under certain social circumstances and according to the advice of the gosains of the Moderkhata Mayamaria satra. The sharania devotees of these above mentioned castes do not accept poka food from the Matak Ahoms, and not even from their Kayastha gosains and the Matak Brahmanas. Only kecha food is acceptable from them. They, even refuse kecha food from the Bamunia Ahoms, Kacharis and Kaibartas; only water and kata-tamul-pan can be taken from the first two groups and only gota-tamul-pan can be taken from the last group. The sharania devotees of the Matak Ahoms, Bamunia Ahoms and Kaibartas do not accept poka food from them (Kalita, Koch, Keot, Chutiya and Katanai); only kecha food is accepted. Here the distinctions between the various types of food are necessary. But the concept of poka and kecha food is not same everywhere in the caste

19. Poka and Kecha are Assamese terms for pakka and kachha in Hindi.

20. Kata-Tamul-pan is betal leaf along with nut which is cut into pieces, and gota-tamul-pan is betal leaf along with nut which is not cut. This distinction is important in regard to the commensal behaviour.
society; the concept which is found in Badipur village of Haryana is different. Food cooked with the help of fire either in water or in oil, is regarded as pokka; when eaten by other castes it transmits pollution which is close to that of the cook. Cooked food is generally related to the daily meals, festivals and ceremonies. Food that is prepared without help of fire is regarded as kecha which is pollution-proof with certain limits, but if it is prepared by very low castes like the Kaibartas, Kacharis, etc. it may transmit pollution to the eaters. Kecha food is generally related to the rituals and also daily food. Water is regarded as pure, but pollution may transmit through the pot if previously used by very low castes. Tamul and pan are always pure; these are kecha, but pollution may transmit from the body of the person belonging to a very low caste if the tamul is cut open by himself. Thus, kecha food can be eaten over a much wider range of hierarchy than pokka food.

Not all the sharania devotees, can strictly observe the commensal restrictions. A few of them, who practically observe it, generally become bhajania devotees, and they have to observe more restrictions. The bhajania devotees are prohibited to accept pokka food not only from other castes, but also from the members of their own castes and family except his wife.

21. Miller, D.B., op.cit., p. 69-70. He mentions that food boiled in water or baked is kachcha while food fried in ghee (clarified butter) is pakka. Kachcha foods make up the regular everyday diet while pakka foods are associated with ceremonies and festivals which most commonly involve sweetmeats and fried breads. Pakka food transmits less of the pollution qualities of the cook and can therefore be eaten over a much wider range of hierarchy than kachcha foods. See also : Dumont, L., op.cit., p.142-143. He also mentions similar concept related to kachcha and pakka foods.
The rules of commensality and the consequent cleavages in the society can be explained if we consider the non-devotees who have both positive and negative attitudes regarding acceptance of food from different social segments. The concept of pollution related to food are relatively less in the community. However, strict observance of such rules is found among the devotees.

The male members of the Kayasthas, after sacred-thread ritual, do not accept pokka food from the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis. But the latter group of castes accept all types of foods from the former castes. But no caste, though inferior in rank, accepts cooked rice from the Kayasthas and even from the Brahmanas. This is because of the fact that the Kayastha gosaia and the Brahmanas are the sources of spiritual virtue to all castes. Rice including other materials are offered as gift to the Kayastha gosaia and the Brahmana priests, and therefore, the gift-maker should not take it back. Miller also observes the same concept prevailing in Badipur. Such a conception of give and take is found elsewhere also. However, commensal relations of this sort cannot be equated with hierarchy based on 'purity' and 'impurity' of things and objects. In northern India, the parents do not accept gifts from the in-laws of their daughters because the daughters have been given as a dan, popularly known as kanyadan. However, the Kayasthas decline to take anything from the Kaibartas except guta-tamul-pan due to the latter's impure occupation. The Kayasthas accept kecha foods from the Matak Ahoms but not from their counterpart belonging to the Bamunia sect, and they accept only guta-tamul-pan from the Kacharis.

The Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis accept pokka foods from the Matak Ahoms, and the latter also accept from the former group of castes. The Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas

22. Miller, D.B., op.cit., p. 70
and Katanis decline to accept pokha foods from the Bamunia Ahoms and the Kacharis, and the latter groups do not accept from the former, but both of them take kecha foods from each other. All these castes accept only water and tamul-pan from the Kaibartas.

Today, the Natak Ahoms and the Bamunia Ahoms accept kecha food from each other, however, it was prohibited in the past. Some educated persons even take pokha food from each other. Only kecha food is accepted from the Kacharis by the Natak Ahoms; but the Bamunia Ahoms accept both kecha and pokha foods. From the Kaibartas only water, gota - tamul-pan are accepted by the Ahoms.

The Kaibartas accept all types of food from all higher castes; but the food is offered in the banana leaf or in a particular plate assigned for such purpose for lower castes. They have also commensal relations with their counterpart belonging to the Bamunia sect.

The differences related to the meals, types of food and acceptance of food are found at different levels which segregate the groups from each other reflecting their styles of life and hierarchical idioms on the basis of purity and impurity. The ritual related to the daily meals found among the Kayastha gosains is recitation of gayatri mantras. This ritual reflects a particular style of life associated with the Brahmanas and the Kayastha gosains. But the other non-Brahmana castes and the tribals do not have any such ritual.

Two commonly known words, namely, sakam and samaj carry importance in the society in regard to commensality. The sakam is a ritual related to death ceremony and other religious activities according to Vaisnabism. This is found exclusively among the devotees. But samaj is an aggregation of persons comprising of both devotees and non-devotees who gather temporarily for performance of certain activities of both religious as well as mundane nature. The sakam is accompanied with the prasad made up of kecha food like rice-powder and fruits along with ritual activities. Generally, the sakam is caste-centred; but when members
of other castes join it, the prasad is prepared separately by the radhunis for the participating castes. In the sakam, the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis do not observe any commensal distinction. But if the Matak Ahoms and the Matak Kaibartas participate in the sakam of the above mentioned group of castes, they do not accept prasad prepared by the latter group and vis-a-vis. Therefore, the radhunis of the Ahoms and of the Kaibartas prepare the prasad separately for the members of their respective castes and it requires for the groups to sit in separate lines while taking the prasad.

The bhoj, both in social and religious festivals, plays a vital role in the Assamese society. It is an important occasion when caste distinctions are easily noticeable. There are cleavages between those who accept bhoj and those who do not. This is a ritual separation among the castes to maintain the cleavages. In the fiestas associated with bhoj, members of other castes are not invited. The bhoj is of two types, that is, the bhoj performed by individual household, and the bhoj performed by caste as a whole. The bhoj in an individual household is related to the nakhowa, marriage and death ceremonies. In rare cases, other castes are invited; such invitees are only from those communities who accept poka food prepared by the hosts. However, there is a gap between the ideal and actual aspects of the acceptance of food. It has been observed that members of a particular caste may take poka food from other castes secretly; but in the samaj they decline to accept food from each other. Even the Kaibarta devotees refuse to accept food in the bhoj from the higher castes.

There are bhojes exclusively of particular castes. In November, 1975, the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis arranged a

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23. Bhoj is a feast consisting of cooked rice, vegetables, meat, etc. associated with social and religious feasts.

24. Nakhowa is a new rice-eating festival in the form of bhoj which generally takes place once in a year after the harvest.
nakhowa bhoj in the namghar. The nakhowa festival is exclusively a caste-centred bhoj having pokha food like rice, meat, etc. When bhoj was served, a Kachari boy was found eating in the same line. The gaonbura, an elderly devotee, scolded the boy and dragged him out of the village. The boy was invited by his Koch friend. Thus, it was found that though the older people still put much importance on the commensal restrictions, the younger people are not very particular about it. The second incident occurred in the month of December, 1975. The Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis of the other namghar of this village celebrated the Magh Bihu festival. This was also a caste-centred fiesta where no other castes are invited. However, I was invited in the bhoj, but was not allowed to sit in the same line with the devotees. The villagers erected a temporary hut and a hearth in a nearby paddy field to arrange the bhoj. The devotees and the non-devotees of the same castes sat in two separate lines; when the food was served, a Kaibarta boy, a servant of a Kalita landowner was found to take food along with his master’s son in the line of the non-devotees. Immediately, two young men asked the Kaibarta boy to sit separately. But his master’s son protested it and after a quarrel, he took the bhoj along with the Kaibarta boy by his side. The protest from the boy was quite vehement as he belonged to a landed rich family and he himself was a science graduate and employed in a big oil company in Dibrugarh.

The Namghar and the Caste System.

The institution of namghar plays an important role in maintaining social structure of the village. It maintains caste solidarity on the one hand and caste separateness on the other.

There are four namghar in the village. About four years ago the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis together were under a single namghar, but due to factionalism they were split into two. Although caste distinction is reflected through the namghar, it is, also possible that different castes which are
culturally close to each other may be united together under a single namghar. However, these five castes in traditional society maintained separateness, though to a limited extent, in respect of their occupation, endogamy, commensality, etc. About forty years ago according to the advice of the gosain of Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra they united under a single namghar for performing Vaisnabite socio-religious activities. Gradually in the process of socio-religious interactions under the influence of gosains these caste groups have lost restrictions of commensality and principle of endogamy.

The namghar is an important institution of the village where daily and annual rituals are performed. Different castes of the village perform ritual separately in their respective namghars. This indicates exclusiveness where all members of a particular caste are centred around their own namghar. All the castes of the Matak sect of this village perform jagarna, janmas-thami, Lakshmiduka, nakhowa, Aniruddha-tithi, etc. in May, August, October, November and January respectively in their respective namghars. The Kalitas, Koches, Keotis, Chutiyas and Katanis perform all these rituals in their two namghars and no other castes are allowed to participate in the rituals. The Kalbarta households together observe these rituals in their own namghar. So also the Matak Ahoms perform all the festivals. The Bamunia Ahoms and the Kacharlis together perform all these rituals, except the Aniruddha-tithi. Therefore, the social and religious activities which are performed by the castes of Hatkhola in their respective namghars are exclusively caste-oriented. However, a group of castes may also participate in a single namghar for this purpose. This is possible only when their caste statuses are more or less equal and a positive sanction is available from their gosains.

Location of the households as well as their namghar reflect segregation of castes in the village. The Kayastha gosains' houses are located at the north-eastern corner of the village
near the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra, as their ritual occupation is related to this institution. The Kaibartas' houses are agglomerated at the centre of the village where they have their own namghar. The Matak Ahoms' households are located at the eastern part of the village, as their namghar is located in the neighbouring village. But the houses of the Bamunia Ahoms, in the western part of the village, are somewhat distinctly separated from the settlements of the Matak castes. The Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Kacharis are concentrated at the south-west part of the village where they have their two namghars.

Role of Festivals and Domestic Rituals

In Hatkhola, caste exclusiveness is also maintained in the social festivals of the various caste groups. Therefore, role of festivals in maintaining segregation of the caste groups can easily be observable. In the Babag Bihu, the most important festival held in April, the villagers unite in their respective namghars. Thus, four separate Bihu groups are formed by the major caste groups as well as by the four namghars of the village. The broader caste group of the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis are split into two Bihu groups under their two namghars. The Kaibarta houses form a separate Bihu group in their own namghar. The Bamunia Ahoms and the Kacharis together form a separate Bihu group. The Matak Ahoms participate in the Bihu group of their caste in a neighbouring village. Every namghar is caste-centred, and it constitutes the Bihu group. Therefore, the Bihu group is either exclusively caste-centred or castes having cultural proximity constitute the Bihu group. Each Bihu group performs dance and song in the houses of its caste and of its namghar.

Caste cleavages are also noticed in the Magh Bihu in February. In this festival caste-based and namghar-centred unity is markedly noticed. On this occasion the Bihu group arrange bhoj separately which is exclusively uni-caste affairs.
The castes of Hatkhola can broadly be grouped into two: (1) some caste groups follow the Vedic way of life and rituals, and (II) others follow non-Vedic and tribal cultural idioms. The Vedic group includes various local castes such as the Kayasthas, Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas, Katanis and Kaibartas; and in the non-Vedic group there are Ahoms and Kacharis. The two groups can be distinguished from one another on the basis of certain customs. The Vedic caste groups accept services of the Brahmana priests in marriage rituals which must be accompanied with the Hom (a marriage ritual). They do not prefer widow marriage, although a few of them like the Koches, Katanis and Chutiyas do not hesitate to practise it. The non-Vedic castes, on the other hand, never follow the Vedic rules of marriage, and thus do not put any importance on the services of the Brahmana priest. In most of the cases they practise widow marriage and levirate. But the Koches and Chutiyas of Vedic group, though tribal in origin, have today completely left these practices. In the death rituals of the Vedic caste groups which are performed according to the Vedic rules, services of the Brahmana priest are essential. The non-Vedic castes do not employ any Brahmana priest, and generally, they bury the corpse according to their traditional tribal custom.

The distinction made on the basis of the practices of the Vedic and the non-Vedic customs bears social significance. The castes which follow the Vedic customs are rated higher and they enjoy much superiority than those who do not follow. But exception to this is also noticed. The Kaibartas, a caste of the Vedic group, is rated lower than the non-Vedic group, namely, the Ahoms and the Kacharis, in the caste hierarchy. The lower position of Kaibartas can be explained due to their impure occupation of fishing.
ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND STRATIFICATION

The economy of Hatkhola is principally based on agriculture. In this regard, the nature of the means of production and the relations of production have been discussed here. The following aspects are considered in studying the productive organisation: the nature of the productive unit, what are the crops produced, how they are produced, what are the relations between the various categories of the producers who participate in the process of production, the mechanisms of distribution and exchange of the produced, etc. However, the main objective here is to study the nature of class relations in the agrarian economy of Hatkhola.

In studying the class system as a system of social relations, the interactional approach is, perhaps, more appropriate. It is true, at least, in the case of agrarian society in Hatkhola. In the interactional approach emphasis is given on the relations between the participants of production, particularly in terms of control over the process of production and the lack of it. However, the attributional approach is also used to find out the class groups on the basis of attributes such as size of landholdings, occupational differentiation, etc. In some studies on the class structure, a mixed approach of both interactional and attributional has been adopted. Even for Marx, Wesolowski mentions, classes differ in terms of a certain number of attributes interlinked with each other. Therefore, we shall examine the class

1. Singh, Y., *Social Stratification and Change in India*, Manohar, Delhi, 1977, p. 34.
groupings through the interactional model while using the attributional criteria to understand the differentiation of various classes.

The peasant economy of Hatkhola is based on family labour where all the caste groups involve themselves in the productive organisation. But some of the villagers have taken up new occupations recently without discarding their traditional callings. Nevertheless the land has remained as the basic source of income for them even today. The following table shows such a combination of traditional and modern occupations.

**Table : 11**

**Caste and occupation in Hatkhola**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Present occupations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kayasthas</td>
<td>Priesthood, Supervisory farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>Agriculture, Services, Trading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>Agriculture, Fishing, Trading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese Communities</td>
<td>Agriculture, Labour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Agrarian Organisation

Paddy is cultivated in the wetland of the village, and practically there is no dry or high land suitable for cultivation of any other crop. As paddy is the principal crop the villagers usually cultivate it in two different seasons, one in summer and other in winter. The summer crop includes Hali and Lahi. The mode of agricultural operation is not mechanised as simple iron-blade plough and bullocks are used. Manual operations like ploughing, transplantation, harvesting and threshing are done by both family members and hired labourers. But as the demand of hired labourers is very high during the operations most of the people usually employ their family labours only. The village has a large number of landless people who make themselves available as daily-wage workers. None of them need to search for employment in the neighbouring villages, even during the lean agricultural season. Thus, the village is almost self-sufficient in labour supply. This is also true in case of other villages of the region.

In winter paddy is raised by more than half of the peasant families who have adopted high yielding varieties of paddy like Jaya and Pusha; rarely Abu, a local variety, is also raised. This is produced on a small scale as on an average a peasant cultivates it on less than 7 acres of land. The crop is grown by the poor peasants only for the family consumption whereas the well-to-do peasants have little interest of some cash income. Therefore, the family labour is sufficient and no hired labour is required. The yield is quite high being 1200 kilograms per acre, almost double of the summer crop. Not more than three or four peasant households raise wheat as winter crop, and no other crop is cultivated in the village. Most of the peasants cultivate vegetable in the kitchen garden for family consumption.

Most attracting cultivation is that of Tamul and Pan (betel nut and leaf) in every house as these are highly consumed by the villagers. Every household has orchards, large or small, depending on its economic condition. The Tamul is also a minor
source of income for the households, and the cultivation of it
does not require much labour.

The Agrarian Class Structure

In Hatkhola, there are three agrarian classes comprising twel­
ve sub-divisions. These three agrarian classes are: (a) The
landowner, (b) the share-cropper and (c) the agricultural labourer.
These classes are not exclusive as the owners of land are also
self cultivators and cultivate some land on share-cropping basis.
The labourers own some land and also cultivate on share-cropping
basis. However, all these will be examined in the following dis­
cussion. Besides, there are some absentee landowners and others
particularly the gosains who own land in the village.

The Landowners:

There are 5 absentee landowners who live in Dibrugarh town; 4 of
them were not residents of Hatkhola, but 1 was from this
village. One of these absentee landowners is the proprietor of the
Mokerkhat Tea Plantation situated in this village, who has more
than 66.6 acres of paddy land as a part of the plantation. He is
Brahmana and has enhanced power and position in the locality.
Other four landowners are employed in Dibrugarh town; one of
them is the Principal of the Dibrugarh Medical College. Two of
these landowners have 10 acres of paddy land of each, and the other
two have 16.6 acres of land of each in Hatkhola. Out of 5 landowners,
3 belong to the Brahmanas and 2 to the Kaibartas. They possess
diverse cultural background. The Brahmana landowners are highly
educated and economically well off.

As the landowners are engaged in various occupations in
towns, they cannot either cultivate or supervise their land. Their
land is usually cultivated by the share-croppers of Hatkhola. Thus,
the entire burden of cultivation is left to the share-croppers
(adhiars).
Most important fact is that these landowners have acquired lands recently. Four decades ago, at least three of them did not have any land in Hatkhola. The situation is unlike that of Sripuram in Tanjore district where absentee landowners have started disposing of their lands since Independence. Out of 5 absentee landowners of Hatkhola, two purchased land from small cultivators, other two purchased from the Kayasthas in open-auction, and the biggest owner purchased large amount of land through decit from a Kayastha gosain, which we shall discuss gradually in this chapter.

### Table 12

Agrarian classes and landholdings of Hatkhola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Sub-divisions</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
<th>No. landless households</th>
<th>Average landholding (in acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Absentee landowner</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Supervisory cultivator-service holder/priest</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Cultivator-service holder</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Cultivator</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share-cropper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Share cropper - cultivator - service holder/trader</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Share cropper - cultivator</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Share cropper - Service holder</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Share - cropper</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Agricultural labourer-cultivator</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Agricultural labourer-share cropper - cultivator</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Agricultural labourer-share cropper</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Agricultural labourer</td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Agricultural labourer-service holder/trader</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The absentee landowners are not residents of Hatkhola.
2. One Kayastha household is landless and depends upon priestly occupation, and therefore excluded from this table.
Table-13

**Castes and landholdings in Hatkhola**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>No. of household</th>
<th>No. of landless household</th>
<th>Average landholding (in acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese Communities</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 14

**Castes and agrarian classes in Hatkhola**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Absentee landowner</th>
<th>Supervisory cultivator-service holder/priest</th>
<th>Cultivator- cultivator</th>
<th>Cultivator-service holder</th>
<th>Share cropper-cultivator-service holder/priest</th>
<th>Share cropper-cultivator</th>
<th>Share cropper-service holder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmans</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese communities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Contd.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>Share cropper</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer-cultivator</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer-share cropper -cultivator</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer-share cropper</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer-service holder/trader</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese communities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 4 12 6 10 8 38

(1) A Yajastha household which depends upon priestly occupation is excluded from the table.

(2) The absentee landowners belonging to the Brahmanas and the Kaibertas are non-residents of Hatkhola.
Table -15

Distribution of caste and class in Hatkhola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>No. of households of landowner</th>
<th>No. of households of share-cropper</th>
<th>No. of households of agricultural labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>4 (80)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>11 (47.8)</td>
<td>6 (26.0)</td>
<td>6 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>6 (40)</td>
<td>4 (26.6)</td>
<td>5 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keot</td>
<td>1 (25)</td>
<td>3 (75)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>4 (50)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>3 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>6 (75)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>13 (52)</td>
<td>7 (28)</td>
<td>5 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>1 (2.5)</td>
<td>1 (2.5)</td>
<td>37 (94.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (100)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese communities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (5.8)</td>
<td>16 (94.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the gosain is a religious preceptor of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. There is only one household of the gosain who solely depends on the traditional occupation of priesthood. This household does not have any land at present, and thus possesses low economic status. But due to his ritual status as a gosain of the Moderkhat Satra he enjoys considerable prestige and power.

Apart from the absentee landowners, there are other types of landowners who are more homogeneous and residents of the village. These landowners come from different caste groups and they represent an array of economic interests. These are: (a) Supervisory cultivator - service holder / priest, (b) Cultivator and (c) Cultivator - service holder. There are 6 families of the Kayasthas, Kalitas and Ahoms in the first type. They depend mainly on agriculture for their livelihood, but rarely
work as farmers. They hire labourers for agricultural operations. In Hatkhola, the supervisory cultivators have an average landholding of 9.5 acres per family. Families having without considerable amount of land may also belong to this group. This is particularly due to their high position in the society in respect of caste, education and modern profession. Four families of the Kayasthas belong to this category, and their average landholding is only 5 acres compared to the average landholding of 9.5 acres of this group. The factor of caste rank also affects the status of a farmer. The Kayasthas are gosains, and therefore, they are not supposed to have self-cultivation. In the past, their land was cultivated by their devotees for which no share of the produce was given to the latter. But today due to deterioration of the economic condition and changes in the religious beliefs, the devotees are not helping the gosains in cultivating their lands. Therefore, the gosains are required to employ holowas (seasonal labourers) and daily wage labourers, and also sometimes they even work in their own farms. However, these Kayastha households of Hatkhola still carry on their traditional calling.

There is a supervisory cultivator who is Kalita by caste. He is one of the richest person in Hatkhola. Although the Kalitas are not traditionally prohibited to work on their farms, his land is cultivated by three permanent holowas and daily-wage labourers. This Kalita is a graduate and works as a clerk in a government office. His wife teaches in a school. His graduate son works in a big oil company, and two daughters are college students. He lives in a brick-built house and has two taxis working on hire basis in Tinsukia town. He has built a house in this town to look after his business. He owns about 17.3 acres of land and has recently purchased 5.3 acres of land in this town.

The other supervisory cultivator is an Ahom and is the biggest landowner who has 25.3 acres of land. He is high school educated, and works as a clerk in a government office. He owns a brick-built house and a taxi which he plys on hire basis in Dibrugarh town. His father, a most powerful person among the Ahoms,
is a *medhi*. He is unable to devote considerable time to agriculture, but his family members work in the farm.

Thus, from the point of social and cultural background, the supervisory cultivators are a diversified group. This explains some amount of incongruence between caste and class. However, similarity of class background amounts to similarity of 'life styles' to a large extent, but this itself may take a long time to reduce the magnitude of cultural dissimilarities between people of different castes having the same class association.

In Hatkhola, there are 21 families of the cultivators of which there are 5 each of the Chutiyas and the Ahoms, 4 of the Kalitas, 3 of the Katanis, 2 of the Koches and 1 of each of the Keots and the Kaibartas. None of the Kayasthas, Kacharis and the non-Assamese communities are cultivators. The peasants of this category depend upon hired as well as family labours. Their landholding is not large as it is on an average 3.7 acres per family. However, they do not engage themselves in non-agricultural pursuits. Their landholdings vary between 1.3 and 9 acres. Therefore, the size of landholding of a family determines the nature of labour—only family, mainly hired or both family and hired labour. The well off peasants have some attributes of landowner-cum-labour employers, hence clash of interests with labour force remains a possibility so far as this group is concerned. The small landowners, for example, who own 1.3 to 2.7 acres of land, do not have the attributes of labour-employing landowing class. Such a situation of class relations explains differentiation within this given class of agriculturists. A lack of certain degree of class homogeneity does not permit emergence of uniform pattern of class relations and class consciousness. Such differences are reflected in the style of life of the various families which belong to this class of landowners. The analyses done by Mukherjee and Saith and Tanakha explain the attributes of these classes in terms of occupation, income, social background, landholding, quality of land, debts, credits, loans, capacity to repay loans to the banks, etc. Thus,

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we have adopted such a device of understanding both interaction between the classes and their attributes in terms of differences with other class category.

The category of the cultivator-service holder is also heterogeneous. There are families of five caste group in this category. The families have taken up various modern occupations, hence they possess diversified economic interests. The households belonging to this category have an average landholding of 4.8 acres per household. The holding ranges from 1.3 to 17.7 acres. Their economic position is better off and the size of landholdings is bigger than that of the cultivators. Income from the new occupations has enabled them to lead a comfortable life. There are 7 households of the Ahoms, 6 of the Kalitas, 4 of the Koches, and 1 each of the Katonis and Chutiyas in this category. Various modern occupations such as clerical, teaching at the school and college level, technical, etc. are taken up by the people of this category. Teaching and clerical jobs are more popular among them. The households of this category come from inferior social background compared to the above mentioned categories of people. The members of their families work on the farms without inhibition. Cash income from salaried jobs adds to the savings. They spend a better life as their economic power is better than those who are superior to them in social hierarchy. However, the landowners of this class also employ labourers on certain occasions; therefore, an interactional situation with the labourers may also emerge. Generally, they have three types of interests: (i) as cultivators, (ii) as white collar workers and (iii) as employers of the agricultural labourers.

The Share-croppers:

A large number of villagers, who do not fall under the landowning class, usually engage themselves in the land owned by others. However, some of them either do not have any land or may have a small plot of land which is insufficient for subsistence. Broadly they could be differentiated into two classes, viz., the sharecropper (adhiar) and the agricultural labourer (halowa, roymi, daoni, etc.)
In Hatkhola, there are 24 households whose principal source of earning is from the share-cropping (adhi); therefore, they are called share-croppers (adhiare). They could be divided into four sub-divisions: (a) the share-cropper, (b) the share cropper-cultivator, (c) the share cropper-service holder and (d) the share cropper-cultivator-service holder/trader. The number of households belonging to these categories are 4, 9, 3 and 8 respectively having landholdings on an average 3.2, 2.6 and 3.1 acres per household respectively. Out of 4 households of the share-croppers, all are Ahomas and 2 of them are landless. Sometimes when share-cropping land is not available, they engage themselves as wage-labourers.

In the share cropper-cultivator category there are 3 Koch, 2 Keot, 3 Ahom and 1 Kaibarta households having landholdings higher than that of the categories of the share-croppers and the share cropper-service holders. In some years, due to scarcity of the share-cropping land they may emerge as marginal cultivators or as cultivator-labourers by accepting works of wage-labourers.

There are 3 households of the Koches, Kacharis and non-Assamese communities in the category of the share cropper-service holders. Their main occupation is service, and share-cropping is only a subsidiary occupation. When the share-cropping land is not available to them, they may emerge only as service holders; but usually they disfavour to work as wage-labourers. Their position is not as weak as of some others because of security of job and regular source of cash income.

Six households of the Kalitas and 1 each of the Keots and the Katanis belong to the share cropper-cultivator-service holder/trader category. These families are economically better off than the other categories of the share-croppers; their landholdings vary from 1.3 to 11.6 acres. Therefore, many of them have considerable amount of land, and engage themselves in teaching and trading. The members of this class do not accept works of agricultural labourers for their livelihood. On the contrary, they hire farm labourers, hence they enjoy status of employers.
The four possible categories of the share-croppers, which we have worked out, are flexible to a greater extent in reality, and they do not constitute concrete class groups. The households of these categories mainly depend upon the family labours and except a few, no family employs hired labourers. Those who partially depend upon hired labourers may appear as employers also. When share-cropping land is not available to the peasants or when poor peasants cannot accept share-cropping contract due to death of their cattle and excessive land-rent (Kereya), they enter into different classes other than that of the share-croppers. All those factors retard formation of concrete classes as well as class consciousness. Moreover, due to absence of sufficient amount of share-cropping land most of the households of Hatkhola are in competition with one another to obtain the contract which ultimately keeps them divided on their own interests.

The landowners and the share-croppers maintain close relations by the way of participating in agricultural processes. Principally, the absentee landowners provide land to the share-croppers of Hatkhola, because more than half of the village land is owned by them. Besides, a very few of the villagers give their lands to the share-croppers for cultivation. Generally three systems of share-cropping contract are found to be practised in the region. Firstly, the fixed cash-rent (Kereya) system of payment is widely prevalent in the region. Secondly, the system of share-cropping is also common which is of two types, namely, pother-adhi and guti-adhi. The contracts are made only on verbal agreement, and the share-cropper is allowed to cultivate summer paddy only. It does not include cultivation of any winter crop. However, the share-croppers are always in a state of insecurity, and just before beginning of each agricultural season they are at the door of the landowners. They usually meet the owners at their houses at least ten to fifteen times to get a contract which also involves giving a little bribe consisting of a few kilograms of rice, a few eggs, vegetables, etc. Sometimes the planter, who is also the owner of the land, employs managers to whom the entire responsibility of
contract is given. These middlemen squeeze as much bribes as they can from the poor share-croppers who do not have any other way to get land on contract. Thus, they have to remain, always loyal to the owners almost as bonded workers. It is found that, in every case, the big landowners take signatures of their share-croppers on a blank paper which is filled in later on by them mentioning payment of particular amount of money to particular persons for working as halowas (ploughmen) on their lands. The landowners do it to escape themselves from the recent land regulations enacted in favour of the share-croppers. In no circumstances, a share-cropper is given the same plot of land consecutively for more than a year to avoid transfer of ownership-right from the owner to the share-cropper. Such tactics are used by the landowners in other states also as such land legislations have been promulgated after Independence.

However, the landowners generally prefer the kereya (rent) contract rather than the pother-adhi and the guti-adhi contracts, because they remain in convenient position to show the government that their land is cultivated by the halowas. Under the kereya contract the share-croppers pay a fixed rent in cash irrespective of the quantity of the produced crops. The rent varies from year to year and even from owner to owner. It is noticed that where landowner is of a substantial standing, the rent is high, and where landowner has small holding it is low. The biggest absentee landowner enhances exorbitant rents from the share-croppers. It was Rs. 45.00 in 1969; Rs. 60.00 in 1970-71, and Rs. 100.00 in 1972-77 for .3 acre (1 bigha). Whereas the small landowners used to charge Rs. 25.00 to Rs. 40.00 before 1972, and Rs. 50.00 to Rs. 90.00 during 1972 to 1977.

In the pother-adhi contract, land is divided into two halves for harvest. One of the halves is harvested by the share-cropper himself and the other half is taken by the landowner. There are some changes in the contract. About eight years ago, the landowners used to provide expenses of seeds, ploughing, transplantation and harvesting, but today nothing is given to the share-croppers.
In the *guti-adhi* contract the share-croppers are asked to pay a certain amount of paddy irrespective of the produce. Generally, 360 kilograms of paddy for one acre of land is agreed upon. This system always favours the landowners as average production of paddy per acre is about 600 kilograms. Besides, all the expenses of cultivation are borne by the share-croppers themselves. Thus, under this system more than half of the produce is paid by the share-croppers, and in the year when production comes down due to natural calamities, the peasants bear the loss. Although the 'Adhia Protection Regulation' has reduced the landowner's share, i.e., one-third of the crop on the condition of supplying seeds, plough and animals; and one-fourth when the same are supplied by the tenant himself. However, this regulation has not been implemented in the region.

The share-cropper does not possess any right over the land, and the tenure of the tenancy is short lived and limited in nature. The share-cropper's status was previously similar to that of the hired labourer receiving wages in kind. But in 1948, the 'Adhia Protection and Regulation Act' of Assam has safeguarded the interests of the share-cropper. Under the 'Assam: Temporary Tenancy, 1935 and 1971 Acts', the share-cropper's interests have been protected in theory only.

**The Agricultural Labourers**

In Hatkhola, number of the agricultural labourers is highest among all the agrarian classes. They have 74 (51.03 per cent) households in the village. The majority of the labourforce comes from the lower caste groups like the Kaibartas and the non-Assamese communities, and a few are available from the Koches, Chutiyas, Katanis, Ahoms and Kalitas. Such a significant number of the agricultural labourers is perhaps due to the impact of the Moderkhat Tea Plantation on the village economy. The process of emergence of agricultural labourers in the village will be gradually discussed in this chapter. However, the situation was quite different in Assam
even a few decades ago. During the earlier part of the 20th century the agricultural labourers were very negligible in number in Assam. In 1951 they were counted as 1.7 per cent of the total population, and the Agricultural Labourer Enquiry of 1963 recorded them as 11 per cent of the total workforce compared to the all-India average of 30.4 per cent.

Generally, the agricultural labourers do not own any land and live mainly on daily wages. A few of them own small strips of land which do not produce enough to support their livelihood. In 1950-51 in Assam, 43.3 per cent of the agricultural labourer households were without land compared to the all-India average of 50.07 per cent, while in 1956-57, 63.01 per cent of their households were without land compared to the all-India average of 57.1 per cent. In Hatkhola village, in 1976-77 about 51.3 per cent of the agricultural labourers were without any land. Their meagre income from the irregular employment and consequent insecurity put them below the subsistence level. However, the agricultural labourers in Assam are economically better off than those living in other parts of India. In Assam, an agricultural labourer annually gets employment on an average of 208 days, whereas at all-India level he gets employment only for 189 days.

Out of 74 households of the agricultural labourers in Hatkhola, 38 were completely landless. However, on the basis of differentiation among the labourforce, they could be grouped into the following categories: (a) Agricultural labourer, (b) Agricultural labourer-cultivator, (c) Agricultural labourer-share cropper, (d) Agricultural labourer-share cropper-cultivator and (e) Agricultural labourer-service holder/trader. The households belonging to the category of the Agricultural labourers are 38 in number having landholding on an average .14 acres per household, and about 29 households are landless. There are, in this category, 13 households of the non-Assamese communities, 18 of the Kaibartas, 3 each of the Ahoms and the Katanis and 1 of the Koches. Both male and female members work as agricultural labourers within the village, and this is the only source of their livelihood. Besides,
a few non-Assamese accept work in the plantation during the lean agricultural season. This category of the agricultural labourers looks homogeneous on the basis of the similarity of their economic interests. Neither they take up any other occupation nor they get land on share-cropping basis because of their poor economic condition.

There are 8 households of the agricultural labourer-service holders/traders; 6 of them belong to the Kaibartas and 1 each to the Ahoms and the non-Assamese communities. They own land on an average 12 acres per household. Four of these households are landless. Both men and women work as agricultural labourers. Their subsidiary callings are trade in rice, fish catching, carpentary and part-time services.

The category of the agricultural labourer-share croppers consists of 10 households with an average landholding of 3 acres per household, and 5 of the households are landless. Out of the 10 households, there are 7 of the Kaibartas, 2 of the non-Assamese communities and 1 of the Kalitas. These households principally depend upon agricultural labour for their livelihood, and sometimes cultivate land on share-cropping basis. When share-cropping land is not available, some of them emerge as pure agricultural labourers. As these households always compete among themselves for getting share-cropping land, they remain divided among themselves on the basis of the particular economic interest.

There are other two categories, namely, the agricultural labourer-cultivator and the agricultural labourer-cultivator-share cropper. The former has 12 households and the latter has 6, having an average landholding of 2.1 acres and 1.4 acres per household respectively. There are 5 households of the Kaibartas, 3 each of the Kalitas and Koches, and 1 of the Ahoms in the category of the agricultural labourer - cultivator. In the agricultural labourer - share cropper - cultivator group there are 2 households each of the Kalitas and Chutiyas, and 1 each of the Koches and Kaibartas. The economic condition of these two categories are more or less same, and certainly better than the other agricultural labourers. Basically they are 'marginal cultivators'.
but to maintain their families they take up works on daily wages. Generally their woman members accept works on daily wages within this village only. Besides this, they accept contracts of share-cropping cultivation whenever available. The difference between these two categories of people is mainly in terms of their distinction which is horizontal in nature, that is, some of them cannot get share-cropping contract whereas other can manage to get it. However, the people belonging to these two categories are found to be competing among themselves for receiving contracts of share-cropping from the landowners.

In Hatkhola, generally four types of labourers are found; these four groups can be differentiated on the basis of the agricultural operations which they perform. These are: halowa (ploughman), rovni (transplanter), daoni (harvester) and morani (thresher). These differences arise due to the nature of agricultural jobs and the division of labour on the basis of sex. The halowas are always males, the rovnis and daonis are always females, and the threshing may be done by both the sexes. As the division of labour is strictly observed in the society it always limits the labour supply in the agrarian economy. One also finds disparity in wages on the basis of work done by different types of labourers. The wages also depend upon labour supply specially in the villages of upper Assam. In Hatkhola, the supply of labourers is always confined to the village itself. Intervillage transfer of labour is not quite common. Only some of the halowas go to other villages in search of employment.

The halowas are an important section of the agrarian society as they do the major agricultural works. There are two types of halowas: (a) the Halowas who work on contract for a couple of months in a year, and (b) the hazira-halowas who work on daily wages. A halowa gets work for about four months, that is, from June to September mainly for ploughing and other difficult operations. The Assameses usually do not prefer to work as halowas, therefore, the halowas are usually drawn from among the non-Assamese communities of Hatkhola or from outside the village. During the period of the contract, a halowa is offered a separate room in the landowner's
house; thus, he becomes, in fact, a full time helper to his employer. He is offered daily meals in a separate plate which he has to wash, and he does not have access to owner's other apartments. By and large, the halowa is treated as a dependent member of the family, and he addresses members of his employer's family by fictitious kinship terms, but he is called by name by the latter. The 'master' looks after him in situations of illness, etc. He receives the patronage of the 'master', and is treated as a loyal servant. The wages of the halowa vary depending on the bargaining capacity of both the sides. His wages include daily meals, minimum clothing during the period of contract, and a fixed salary. The amount of salary varies from Rs. 80.00 to Rs. 100.00 depending upon the willingness of the owner as well as duration of the period of contract. Before 1947, a halowa used to receive only daily meals, paddy of 3 acre (1 bigha) of land and clothings without any cash. The hazira-halowa, who is employed on daily wage, is recruited for a day from the village itself. He gets between Rs. 4 and Rs. 6 per day and breakfast if he provides bullock and plough. If the bullock and plough are provided by the employer himself, the hazira-halowa gets only Rs. 2 along with a breakfast. The difference between a halowa and a hazira-halowa is that the former's employment is secured for about four months during the ploughing season, whereas the latter may not be employed regularly, thus he has to depend on availability of work on daily basis. The other agricultural labourers - the roynis and the daonis are drawn from among the females only, who fully depend on the daily wages varying between Rs 3 and 5 along with breakfast.

The agricultural labourers get employment regularly during the agricultural season; but during the lean period they get employment, mainly in the non-agricultural sector, for two days on an average in a week. There is no uniform wage-pattern for the labourers even within the same agricultural season. Wages may vary due to the following reasons: (a) low labour demand in a particular period of the agricultural season, and (b) high labour demand during the peak period of the agricultural season. In the
former case, the bargaining capacity of the labourer is minimised; in the latter situation he may take an upper hand over the employers. Payment is made in both cash and kind, but payment in paddy is preferred by the labourers. Those who thresh paddy in landowner's house are paid one don (2 kgs) of paddy for threshing one mound of paddy. Although there has been continuous rise of wages in agriculture since 1940, the existing wages of the labourers are not enough for their survival. The wage-rise has been as follows: Re. 1 in 1940; Rs. 1.50 in 1945; Rs. 2 in 1950; Rs. 2.50 in 1955; Rs. 3 in 1960 and Rs. 4 in 1972 and onwards.

Due to irregular employment the agricultural labourers are economically insecure than the other agrarian classes. In most of the days they use to move from door to door of the employers for job. But during the peak agricultural season, that is, from June to September and November to February demand of labour is quite high; and therefore, the employers are commonly found to move within the village for recruiting daily-wage labourers.

The agricultural labourers are the most dissatisfied class due to their oppressed position. They are more so against the big landowners than the other classes as the former controls their employment market. However, they remain silent as their dependence upon the big landowners is very high. They borrow money or paddy from them and also depend for other activities. Almost all the agricultural labourers borrow paddy from the well-to-do cultivators throughout the year and particularly during July to November when price of paddy becomes comparatively higher or during the lean agricultural season. The agricultural labourers enter into oral contract with the paddy-lenders under which they promise to return it by working as daonis on the latter's farm or by paddy or by cash. However, the money-lending remains confined to the village only.

Three ways of repayment of loans are practised in the village: (a) thika, (b) badli and (c) hazira. The repayment of a loan is always accompanied with interest. In the thika system, if a daoni borrows three done of paddy or Rs. 12, the borrower is required
to return it by harvesting work on 3 acre (1 bigha) of land of the lender. Thus, where a daoni, in a normal situation, takes five days to harvest 3 acre (1 bigha) of land receiving one don of paddy as daily wage, she in the thika receives only three don of paddy. In the badli system, if she borrows three don of paddy, she has to repay four don; the extra don of paddy is counted as interest. In the hazira system, if she borrows two don of paddy, she has to do harvesting work for three days on the lender’s farm; thus, she looses her wage of one day. In this way most of the agricultural labourers are burdened with the loans borrowed by them during the lean season, and they are required to pay back after harvest. About half of the earning, which is earned during the harvesting season, is spent to meet their previous loans. The labourers, who borrow loans, remain bonded with the well-to-do landowners as tenurial labourers earn less wages than the current market rates. Such a situation negates the role of the factor of demand of the labourforce. In fact, the existential conditions of the labourforce and the dominant position of the landowners determine the entire relations between the employers and the workers.

Impact of Tea Plantation on the Class Structure

During the later part of the nineteenth century the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra was established in Hatkhola, when it received a large amount of land grants from its parent satra named Dinjoy Mayamaria Satra and also from its disciples. The satra had about 600 acres of land, and out of this about 134 acres of paddy land was within Hatkhola village. The paddy land was full revenue-paying, i.e., Khiraj land; while 466 acres of land was in the name of the satra and it was half revenue-paying, i.e., nisf-khiraj land.

The owner of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra is a Kayastha gosain. As the gosains were prohibited to cultivate their land, they get it cultivated by their devotees who lived nearby the satra. In return, a large amount of paddy land was distributed among them.
in free of rent. The gosains practically did not look after the agricultural operations, but they provided all sorts of expenses. Most of the Kaibartas of Hatkhola offered their physical labours for raising crops in the gosains' land, and in return, they received lands from the former which they cultivated for maintenance of their families. The Kaibarta-tenants enjoyed this land on hereditary basis without having ownership right on it. But the land-revenue was paid by the gosains or met it by subscriptions collected from their devotees. This system of cash-subscription is still found to be practised in the village. Such a system of tenancy prevailed regarding the satra land up to the later part of the British rule. The Kaibarta-tenants had economic security as they enjoyed hereditary rights of cultivation over the satra land. According to the villagers, these Kaibartas were economically well off, and none of them lived on daily wages. We have come to know that at least two families had considerable amount of land and they also owned elephants. However, today these two families have been reduced to the status of small cultivators. The gosains not only depended on the agriculture, but also they used to collect a large amount of paddy grain, cash and betel-nut from their devotees. Such offerings given to the gosains in exchange of their ritual services were known as kar (tax). The tax is still collected by the gosains from the devotees just after harvest. Traditionally, such tax included six dons of paddy, two rupees and betel-nut and leaf. Even the poor families had to pay tax whatever amount they could afford. However, economic condition of the gosains has gradually deteriorated to a considerable extent due to the reduction of importance of religiosity of the gosains under the forces of modernisation on the one hand and due to sliding down of the economic condition of the devotees on the other. Finally, the land has gone from the gosains to the tea planter.

In 1925, the Moderkhat Tea Plantation was established by a Brahmana of Dibrugarh town. He purchased about half of the Kiraj and nisf-kiraj lands from a gosain of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra. The gosain led an aristocratic life as he owned a car, an elephant and a gun. All these he managed after selling out his land.
He also transferred a large amount of *nisf-Khiraj* land to another Brahmana of Dibrugar town by mortgaging which he could never recover. Rest of his land was sold to the former Brahmana on auction by the government as the *gosain* became defaulter in paying revenue. After occupying the land of the *sattra*, the planter occupied land of the villagers either forcefully or by trickery. In 1941, this planter, for further extension of the plantation, occupied the pasture land belonging to this village.

In this process villagers' and gosain's land went into the hands of the two Brahmanas. The present *gosain* could recover partly as he has got back 18 acres of land from this planter, and at present five families of the Kayastha *gosains* depend on this land for their livelihood.

However, not only the *gosain* families have come down in the economic hierarchy, but also the Kaibartas have lost their right to cultivate the *gosain's* land. Gradually, most of the Kaibartas have been reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers. At least two cases of land-disputes, as reported to me, where the planter occupied Kaibartas' land through deception were filed in the court...A few other castes were also partially affected due to the grabbing of the village land by the plantation owner.

However, after acquiring the land, the Brahmana established the plantation on the north east part of the village. Since high land was suitable for growing tea plants, the low land was utilised for paddy cultivation. The paddy land was given to the local share-croppers who remained loyal to him. In this way the traditional tenancy system of the *sattra* land was transformed into the system of share-cropping by the plantation owner. In most of the cases, the old tenants belonging to the Kaibartas were not offered the share-cropping contract and thus they were evicted. However, the land was distributed in small plots among the new share-croppers of neighbouring villages and among a few plantation labourers who were the non-Assameses either on the basis of *pother-adhi* or *Keraya* system. Only a few faithful Kaibartas were offered such contract. The size of the plots distributed among the share-croppers varied from person to person depending on faithfulness and loyalty of the share-croppers. At the beginning, the share-croppers
were given contracts in writing. But in 1948, when the "Assam Adbiar Protection and Regulation Bill" was passed by the Assam government, the plantation owner was put in a difficult situation as he could not keep the ownership right over lands given out to the share-croppers. However, the planter managed to take back the documents from the share-croppers who were innocent and illiterate about the implications of the new land legislation. Since then the plantation owner has stopped to give any written record of contracts to the share-croppers. Moreover, the plantation owner does not allow the share-croppers to cultivate the same plot of land consecutively for more than one year. Therefore, the lands are rotated among the share-croppers every year to prevent the claim of ownership right of a cultivator on a particular plot of land.

Gradually, the "Assam Fixation of Ceiling of Landholding Act, 1956" has fixed a ceiling on landholding by an individual or a family at 50 acres. Since that time several amendments have been made and the Ceiling Act of 1972 has fixed a minimum holding at 16.7 acres (50 bighas). But the plantation has been exempted from this ceiling act; though the amendment of 1971 has specified that the land actually under the tea cultivation is exempted from the ceiling act, and not the paddy lands attached to if which are given to the share-croppers for cultivation. Nevertheless, it has been found that the planter has been able to keep more than 134 acres of paddy land under the plantation even today due to the loopholes in the act.

The share-croppers who cultivate the planter's land face much trouble to get contract every year, even if he is one of the old and loyal share-croppers. This is actually due to the new land laws that put them in more difficulties rather than ameliorating their lot. The planter lives in Dibrugarh town and remains busy with his profession. He cannot spend sufficient time to meet the share-croppers. Therefore, he has to employ one of his plantation employees to look after the land. In fact, there is no direct relation between him and the share-croppers. To the share-croppers the landowner is
nothing but an individual, but the middleman is a real authority and highly powerful, as he selects and employs the share-croppers.

The present relations between the landowner and the share-croppers are of conflict. Although the conflict is not explicit as the share-croppers do not protest openly against the plantation owner, but all of them are dissatisfied with him. The seeds of dissatisfaction have been noticed since the establishment of the plantation. The relations between the planter and the villagers have been very strained. In 1950, when the planter tried to occupy a vast area of the grazing land, all the peasants whose economic interests were adversely affected protested against him. They united against the planter and resisted the forcible occupation of land. A clash between the peasants and the plantation owner took place. In this clash, a person of the planter's group was killed. A police case was filed against the peasants involved in the incident, and each of the eight peasants were fined of Rs. 320.00 by the court. It is reported that the plantation owner, to establish good relations with the leaders of the village, paid the fine on behalf of the peasants. Since then he has not put any effort to grab any village land. But still relations between him and the villagers have remained quite strained. The plantation owner, however, is not still allowed to enter into the village.
POWER AND AUTHORITY AS BASES OF STRATIFICATION

Power can be viewed in two ways: firstly, an individual holds power over the others, and secondly, power is vested in a system thereby the system pursues certain goals. Weber defines power: "In general, we understand by 'power' the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in communal action against the resistance of others who are participating in the action".¹ This concept is related to the distribution of power in the society on the basis of individuals capacity. We shall discuss power as an individual phenomenon as well as a social or political resource. Power in the present context is concerned with the political aspects, and its relation to social stratification.

Political party system and decentralisation of power have connected the village, blocks, districts and the state politically and administratively. Adult franchise has also facilitated structural links between village and the larger society. Such a change could create disturbances in the old and continuing structures of power and influence. Political power creates legitimate domination and subordination, and thus it establishes its own hierarchy. It represents official expression to inequality: that of the social inequality and class system established between individuals and groups². In the study of rural power structure statutory gaon-panchayat and political parties draw our attention more than any other institutions. Panchayat and political parties, vested with some functions, are major institutions and arenas of power in the countryside. The power structure of rural society which was previously more or less informal in nature has transformed into a formal structure, however, it is still found operationally informal. The formal power structure has offered new power groups which do not have similarities with that of the traditional society.

Power, now-a-days, does not go with the ascriptive status, i.e., birth and ritual status of a person or group, but it depends on the economic as well as numerical strength, contact with the government functionaries and political parties.

The concept of 'dominant caste' is also important for understanding power structure of the village community. A caste is said to be dominant when it possesses numerical superiority, economic status, political power, ritual status, non-traditional education, modern occupation and physical force. But today lack of congruity of statuses among the members of same caste disproves the concept of dominant caste, because families within the dominant caste may not have an equitable distribution of power and prestige. The dominant families, sometimes enjoy power and prestige according to their composite status ranks. The following possibilities could be found to exist in the society: (a) high caste, high economic position and high power position, (b) intermediate caste, high economic position, numerical preponderance and high power position, (c) high caste, middle economic position and middle power position, (d) lower caste, intermediate economic position, numerical preponderance and middle power position and (c) low caste, low economic position and low power position.

Power is not an absolute but a relative phenomenon. It has situational determinants as well along with the structural ones such as economic, social and cultural ones. The distribution of power creates divisions within the society. Broadly speaking, there are two divisions: (a) those who possess more power and (b) those who have less. The possession of power may be from the ownership and control of land by which an individual gets numerical...

support, and there are also popular leaders. In this context, one should make distinction between authority and power. 'Authority' is defined as 'the legitimate exercise of imperative control', 'imperative control' being 'the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons'. 'Legitimate' means 'sanctioned' by tradition, conversion or legal authority. Thus, the distinction is that power may not be always legitimised, such as power of an influential leader which is not legitimised under any institution. But authority is legitimised power which operates within an institutional framework. The village panchayat officials or the Vaisnabite gosaing or the political leaders have authority under their respective institutions; but the factional leaders in the village do not have any authority but have power.

**Gaon Panchayat**

In Assam, Panchayati Raj institution was introduced in 1952, and up to 1973 it functioned as a three-tier system. At the village level there was gaon-panchayat. A number of gaon-panchayats constituted an anchal-panchayat. A number of anchal-panchayats formed a zila-parishad. However, in 1974 the Panchayati Raj institution was restructured to make it as a two-tier system by abolishing the anchal-panchayats. In the present panchayat system, the gaon-panchayat is formed at the mauza level which is a revenue area. Previously under the mauza there were five gaon-panchayats. To increase power of the gaon-panchayat, its area has been widened from village to mauza level, and more power has been given to it. At the district level there is mahakuma-parishad with more power than before to make it an effective body.


In order to understand the distribution of power in Hatkhola, we shall analyse the structure and formation of past panchayats of the village. This would facilitate our understanding of the village power structure, and its distribution among various castes and classes since the inception of the Panchayati Raj in 1952. Since Independence six panchayat elections in 1952, 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968 and 1974 have taken place. Twice legal changes have been made in the structure of the Panchayati Raj institutions.

In 1952, panchayats were formed at the mauza level, and there were thirty-one villages under the panchayat which was known as Sarboday Rural Panchayat. In 1956, the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat was restructured. It had five villages including Hatkhola. Out of these villages, Hatkhola always represented higher number of representatives in the panchayat (see table 1.6). In 1952, out of 17 members of the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat, Hatkhola village sent 10 members, 5 of them were from the Kalitas, 1 each from the Chutiyas and the Koches and 3 from the Ahoms. Both the president and the secretary were Kalitas, and the Vice-president was an Ahom. All of them were from Hatkhola.

In 1956, changes in the panchayat members were noticeable. Out of 18 members of the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat, 10 were represented only from Hatkhola village. Out of the 10 representatives, 6 were from among the Kalitas, 1 each from among the Koches, Kayasthas, Ahoms and Kaibartas. The previous Kalita president was succeeded by a Katani of the neighbouring village. But the previous vice-president and the secretary were again nominated. According to the new Panchayati Raj Act two female representatives from the Kalita caste and one scheduled caste representative from the Kaibartas were nominated to the panchayat. A kayastha gosain was also a member of the panchayat, who was twice elected as a member of the anchal-panchayat.

In the 1960 panchayat, out of 13 members 4 were from Hatkhola of whom 2 each were from the Kalitas and the Koches. An influential person of a neighbouring village, who was a Bihari, was elected as presidnet. The president of the 1956 panchayat held the office of the Vice-president in 1960. The same secretary who belonged to the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of members from 5 villages of Hatkhola gaon-panchayat</th>
<th>No. of members from Hatkhola village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Kayastha Kalita Koch Chutiya Keot Katani Ahom Kachari Kaibarta Non-Assamese communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
caste of Kalita continued his office in this panchayat.

In 1964, out of 13 members of the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat, 6 representatives were from Hatkhola. Two Kalitas and 1 each from the Koches, Chutiyas, Katanis and Kaibartas were elected from the village. The offices of the president and Vice-president were held by two new members. The president was a Koch and the Vice-president was a Chutiya by caste. A woman, Katani by caste, was appointed as a secretary of the panchayat office.

In the 1968 election of the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat 13 representatives were elected, and 3 of them were from Hatkhola village. Two of them were Koch and 1 was an Ahom. The president was an Ahom and the secretary was also a new incumbent from a neighbouring village who was a Kachari. The Vice-president was a Katani from a neighbouring village who held the posts of president and vice-president twice in the past.

In studying the newly structured panchayat of 1974, it is necessary to know about the newly formed administrative divisions of the region. The sub-divisions of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia constitute the district of Dibrugarh. The former has twentyfour gaon-panchayats, and the latter has twentyone. Hatkhola village falls under the Moderkhat gaon-panchayat of the Dibrugarh subdivision. The Moderkhat gaon-panchayat has thirty-six villages, and for convenience of administration these villages are grouped into fifteen samasthis, and villagers of each of the samasthis elect a representative. Thus, the samasthis send 15 members to constitute the Moderkhat gaon-panchayat. A president and a councillor are elected by the villagers of all the thirty-six villages, and a vice-president is elected by the elected members of the panchayat from among themselves. A salaried secretary, who is appointed by the mahakuma parishad, looks after the accounts and other official matters.

In the present Moderkhat gaon-panchayat, Hatkhola and Melengial villages constitute the Melengial samasthi which has a representative in the panchayat committee. This member is Ahom by caste and is an inhabitant of Melengial village. However, Hatkhola
village does not have any formal leader at present. Due to this reason we have not discussed in details about the members of the 1974 panchayat. The following table 17 depicts the caste / tribe background of the panchayat officials.

Table 17

Castes/Tribes of the panchayat office-bearers, 1974

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panchayat officials</th>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>No.of members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>7 (including 2 females)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Assamese (Lohar)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Assamese (Bihari)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillor</td>
<td>Non-Assamese (Marwari)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table it is found that in 1974, out of 18 office-bearers of the Moderkhat gaon-panchayat, 9 belong to the Ahoms, 1 each to the Kalitas and the Sonowals. Besides, there are a few non-Assamese members in the panchayat of whom 3 are Lohars and 2 are Biharis. The secretary of the panchayat is an Ahom, and the councillor is a Morwari businessman.
In 1974, for the membership in the Moderkhat gaon-panchayat no one contested from Hatkhola. However, for the post of president, nine candidates contested and two of them were from Hatkhola. One of these two was a Koch and the other was an Ahom. Both of them were influential leaders of this village who previously held position of power and prestige in the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat. The Ahom held the post of president in 1968. The Koch held different offices in 1952, 1956 and 1960; he was an ordinary member in 1968 and was elected as president in 1974. These two leaders lost their grip later on. The councillor elected from the Moderkhat gaon-panchayat was an inhabitant of a neighbouring village, and none from Hatkhola contested for this post.

However, Hatkhola does not have any formal leader in the present panchayat. The present panchayat officials exert considerable power on the Hatkhola villagers even though they hail from other villages. The jurisdiction of the new panchayat has been widened upto the mauza level. Therefore, power and influence of the officials have also been extended to a considerable extent.

Looking at the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat from 1952 to 1973 we find that Hatkhola dominated over the other four villages, namely, Melengial, Habichuk, Gohaingaon and Dikom. In 1952, the president of the Hatkhola gaon-panchayat was Kalita by caste, who was educated upto primary school standard and was a marginal cultivator having about 3 acres of land. It seemed, due to his charismatic quality he held such leadership. He lost the election in the next panchayats. The vice-president, who was an Ahom, was equally educated; he was a supervisory cultivator and the biggest landowner having 25.3 acres of land. He also held the position of medhi, a traditional religious authority of the village. In the 1956 panchayat, he also held the same office. His son is college educated, and he works as a clerk in a government office, and due to his education and landed property he is an influential figure in the village. However, he keeps himself aloof from the Panchayat.

The secretary of this panchayat was a Kalita and he was primary school educated, and had 4.7 acres of land. He held the office in
1952, 1956 and 1968. In 1956 the president and in 1960 both the president and the vice-president of the panchayat were elected from the neighbouring villages. In 1964, the president of panchayat was a Koch of Hatkhola who had education upto the high school and was a cultivator having 6 acres of land. The president was a member of the higher body of panchayat in 1952, 1956 and 1960, and was elected as a member of the Hatkholagaon-panchayat in 1968. Charismatic qualities made him one of the most influential leaders. Both village and religious headmanship are held by him which he succeeded from his father. The government office of the gaonbura (village-headman) which he has been occupying is a source of power and authority. He keeps birth and death records of the villagers, and has power to settle various minor disputes. For performance of these duties he receives Rs. 300.00 annually and is exempted from payment of revenue of 1.7 acres (5 bighas) of agricultural land. Father of this leader was one of the most influential persons who held a responsible position in the traditional religious authority. His grandfather was a mauzadar, and due to well economic position he was an influential person in the village. It is said that this leader was related to the ex-King of the Matak Kingdom from his mother's side, and therefore, he considers himself superior to all the villagers. He and his two sons are notorious and are ill-famed as trouble-makers. In 1964, by virtue of the presidency he was a member of the Lahal anchal-panchayat where he was regarded as a highly influential member, and thus he could do a lot of welfare works for his villagers. This could be possible due to achievement of formal power and authority as a gaonbura (village headman) and as a president of the panchayat which enabled him to have close contact with the government officers at the district level. In 1964 when he was president of the panchayat, he could manage construction of a building for the panchayat office and a quarter for the gramsevak. The presidents of other panchayats could not do any significant welfare work. His father was a member of the National Congress Party during the pre-Independence period and he participated in the Non-Co-operation movement, and therefore, had to discontinue his education. His arena of influence extends beyond the
village. Arbitration of disputes was under-taken by him very often on the request of other leaders and government officials. Due to his efforts a few local organisations and schools have been established. He is a member of the governing bodies of half-a-dozen of schools of this region, and an ex-member of the Co-operative Society in the Block Development Office. In the 1968 and the 1974 panchayat elections, he contested for presidentship, but due to opposition from the young, educated and influential leaders of the village he was defeated. The vice-president of the panchayat in 1964 was Chutiya by caste who was educated upto high school and owned 16 acres of land. His influence in the village is less than other leaders. The secretary was a woman belonging to the Katani caste. She was not highly educated and hailed from an ordinary family which had only 2.3 acres of land. She did not have any leadership quality and power; it was due to the willingness of the president that she was nominated to this post. In the 1968 election of the panchayat, a middle aged Ahom, who was educated upto high school, held the office of the president. His economic position was not sound enough as he depended on the share-cropping cultivation for livelihood. He became a popular leader due to support of his caste members. His father was an influential person as he was a medhi. He held the office for a much longer period due to extension of the tenure of the panchayat upto 1974. But in the 1974 panchayat elections, he lost his office. In the 1974 panchayat, the president was a middle aged Ahom having education upto primary-school standard. In spite of having a brick-built house, considerable amount of land and sound economic source from a business he did not have much influence. But he managed to spend Rs.5000.00 to win over the election. However, to obtain supports from all sections of people he has started taking interest in the welfare of the villages.

Before 1974, the panchayat president used to be an ex-officio member of the anchal-panchayat. Since 1974 the president, by virtue of his office, becomes a member of the mahakuma-parishad at the district level. The president of the new panchayat enjoys much more power and authority than that of the earlier panchayate due to his
close connections with the mahakuma-parishad and various officials at the district level.

Table: 18

Caste and class background of the Panchayat office-bearers (1952 - 1974) of Hatkhola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>No. of office-bearers/others</th>
<th>Class background</th>
<th>Landholding (in acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gosain</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>7 (including 2 female)</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>2.7-13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>share-cropper</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>2.3-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>6.7-25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Share-cropper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Many of the office-bearers held the office more than once.

The table: 18 shows the positions of various castes in the new power structure, and shift of power from one caste to another. The middle and lower caste groups have emerged in the new power structure. The upper caste has also considerably lost its power in the new situation. The Kayasthas (gosains), who traditionally held power and authority, are not powerful today.
However, about twenty years ago, a Kayastha gosain held offices in the gaon - and anchal - panchayats. Besides him, no other Kayasta contested for power in the formal institution of panchayat.

Today, the village is dominated by the middle caste groups, namely, the Kalitas, Koches and Chutiyas. It has been possible for them due to their earnest efforts to identify themselves as a single unit as they do not observe connubial and commensal restrictions among themselves. The Ahoms also take prominent role in the gaon-panchayat. However, the Kaibartas, due to their low social, economic and ritual positions are not politically influential.

On the other hand, the upper caste, like the Kayasthas, try to avoid participation in the panchayat. In spite of their numerical dominance in the village, the Kaibarta, do not exercise political influence. Since the Kaibarta is a scheduled caste, it has a nominated member in the panchayat. Because of their downtrodden position, they cannot participate in the power-politics of the village. Moreover, they are largely dependent on the higher caste landowners and tenants for their livelihood.

There has been considerable amount of changes in the relations between power and class as marginal cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers have acquired some amount of power due to adult franchise and their numerical strength. But as there is no ex-zamindar or big landowning class in the village, most of the well-to-do cultivators have monopolised power in the village. On the other hand, the lower class and caste, that is, the agricultural labourers and the Kaibartas respectively are still in the subordinate positions who could not enhance power even today. Nonetheless, power is found much more diffused among the people of Hatkhola irrespective of their caste and class positions than their counterpart in other parts of India. Today, at least a few leaders are to be found from the village who are widely recognised by the people irrespective of any caste and class. However, in spite of the changes in the relations between power and class the roles of castes and classes are still operative to a considerable extent at the level of gaon-panchayat indicating the persistence of traditional
values of inequality and justice. Therefore, the rural elites are predominantly socio-economic elites. Thus democratisation of power involving the people of all castes and classes is yet to be established in rural India. To what extent the traditional values along with the 'village-assembly' are still found to be operated in the life of the rural folks will be examined.

The Mel and the Religious Authority

The traditional village polity along with the statutory panchayat continues in the villages of upper Assam. This body is locally known as mel, that is, an assembly of the village people which may be held at the caste level or village level. In the Assamese social structure the mel performs not only judicial functions, but it also arbitrates and performs administrative and legislative functions, as it can modify or prescribe customs for the members of the group. In the Hindu society, Dumont mentions, the supreme authority is the caste assembly. The assembly has dual character, that is, partly it is 'permanent' and partly it is 'non-permanent'. Generally the upper castes do not have such assemblies. Similarly, in Assam the Brahmans and the Kayasthas do not have any caste assembly, whereas other castes have such assemblies which are of 'non-permanent' nature.

The mel is a traditional informal body comprising of influential persons of the village. Both caste mel and village mel are found to be operated even today; the former is a single-caste assembly whereas the latter is a multicastrate assembly. The authority of the religious functionaries was more important in the traditional village community. Today, the gaonbura (village headman), educated persons, government officers, panchayat members, etc. comprise the pool of the influential in the village who also quite often take part in mel.

Since the inception of the statutory panchayat in the village, the mel has lost its authority to a large extent. However, since 1974 the mel has again become an important instrument of social control because of the restructuring of the panchayat by which its area has been extended up to the mauza level. Now the panchayat office is located far away from its villages, therefore, it is not convenient for most of the villagers to come there for settling minor disputes. Therefore, they prefer to settle their disputes in the mel. Now the mel has become a lower body for settling disputes in the village, and the undecided cases are referred to the panchayat or to the police. Therefore, like the statutory gaon-panchayat, the study of mel also provides an insight into the relationship between the village social structure and the distribution of power.

Apart from the mel and the statutory gaon-panchayat there is the institution of namghar which also functions as an instrument of social control in the socio-ritual spheres of the caste groups. The role of gaonbura or medhi, barbura, patheki, radhuni and tamuli in socio-religious spheres has been discussed earlier. The devotees also perform certain important functions. Today, the authority of the namghar has declined due to certain wider structural forces of change. However, there are four namghars in Hatkhola led by four gaonburas. The gaonbura of the Bamunia Ashoms is the richest person of the village. The gaonbura of the Kaibartas is a landless agricultural labourer. The other two gaonburas of the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis are marginal cultivator and agricultural labourer. Out of 24 important religious functionaries of the four namghars, 14 belong to the landowing class having landholding of 1.7-25.3 acres, 5 are from the share-cropping class whose landholdings vary from 1-6 acres and 5 depend primarily upon the agricultural labourer's works. Persons belonging to the last category are either landless or marginal holders (see table:19).
Table: 19

The ritual office-holders of the four namghars of Hatkhola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of office-holders</th>
<th>Class background</th>
<th>Landholding (in acre)</th>
<th>Other offices held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>1.7-25.3</td>
<td>Membership of panchayat and other committees-3, village headman-1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Share-cropper</td>
<td>1 - 6</td>
<td>Member of various committees - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>0 - 2.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, functions of the namghara of Hatkhola are like that of the caste mel. Therefore, their jurisdiction is the particular caste, hence caste harmony and discipline are maintained by the namghara. The authority of the namghar appears as formal due to the existence of hierarchy of its offices, but its way of functioning is irregular and quite informal. But it is socially sanctioned by the religious institution and has a permanent house called namghar where meetings are held.

There are some differences between the authority of the namghar and the caste mel. The members of the caste mel are generally the elderly devotees and some influential persons belonging to the same caste. But the mel does not have any formal office, it is informal in nature, and its meetings are held irregularly at any place of the village. However, its meetings are dominated by a few elderly devotees and influential members of a caste. Unlike the namghar, the non-religious influential persons and the traditional leaders are equally important in the caste mel and in its decision-making processes. Thus, a mel is an informal body consisting of both secular and ritual leaders of a caste. The formal leaders
do not have any role and decisive power in the functioning of
the namghar.

The mel is also held, though rare, depending on the comple-
xity of the cases, at the village level. The cases which are
generally dealt with at the village mel are like that of theft,
land-disputes between villagers, disputes over irrigation water,
adultery, illicit children, and quarrels over animals. Today
such disputes are referred to the gaon-panchayat or to the police
without referring to the village mel. In the village mel, a case
is referred first to the gaonbura (village headman) who informs the
religious gaonbura of all the castes and other influential persons
of the village. The meeting of the mel may be held at a suitable
place in the village. The village mel also does not have any
formal-legal authority where all the adult males are entitled to
attend it. Its meetings are presided by the gaonbura (village
headman) who keeps the record of its deliberations. The gaonbura
looks after the cases referred by the caste mel.

The traditional leaders of all the castes are invited to
attend the meeting of the mel; however, the Ahoms, Kalitas, Koches,
Chutiyas, Keots and Katanis generally dominate the meeting. The
Kaibarta leaders inspite of their numerical preponderance remain
subordinate to other leaders due to their low socio-economic status.
However the Kayasthas do not participate in the village mel as
they feel it derogatory. The new leaders who derive their strength
from modern education, landholding, political support, personal
qualities, etc., are mainly drawn from the three namghara of the
Ahoms, Kalitas, Koches, Chutiyas, Keots and Katanis. The two-tier
system of the present panchayat has revived the role of the insti-
tution of mel both at the caste and at the village level. The
extension of the area of the statutory panchayat has been respon-
sible for this as the distance has increased to the headquarters
from a particular village of the panchayat. Further, because of
this situation, traditional and modern leaders are functioning side
by side, and they are not as contrary to each other. Their functioning
has been more complimentary because of this change which we have mentioned here.

The Informal Village Leaders

In Hatkhola, there is virtual absence of any prominent leader or influential person. On the one hand, there is cleavage between the Matak caste groups (Kayasthas, Kalitas, Kochas, Keots, Chutiyas, Ahoms and Kaibartas) and the Bamunia groups (Ahoms, Kaibartas and Kacharis), and on the other, cleavage within the Matak caste groups, namely, between the Matak Kaibartas and the other higher Matak castes is found. Usually the Matak castes tend to unite against the Bamunia groups and they have a long history of conflict with each other. These cleavages are too prominent and rigid that are observable in day to day social interactions. Moreover, the traditional religious authority still persists with its elaborate functions. These factors affect adversely the emergence of new leadership, particularly, from among the lower caste groups. However, the forces of modernisation have affected the structure of the traditional religious authority to a certain extent. Today a few influential have emerged in the village who have acquired some power. Naturally, these influential persons are drawn from among the younger generation of the villagers. Although they have been able to accumulate some power from various sources, they do not have any authority. Thus, there are distinctions between the older and the younger generations. The concept of dangar-manu (big-man) is closely related to the leadership in the village, particularly to the traditional leaders. To be a dangar-manu is a quality of being a leader, hence it applies to the ruling royal families and their nobles. Today, the notion of dangar-manu has changed due to certain structural changes.

The young leaders do not have authority, but have power and influence over the villagers, which they derive from the spheres of education, white-collar jobs and networks, etc. Two Bamunia Ahoms are such influential leaders of Hatkhola. They are powerful
landowners and have command over the share-croppers and the agricul­
tural labourers of the village. One of them has college-education and is a highly paid officer in a plantation. He wields considerable power and influence among the Ahoms. Another young leader is a son of a medhi. He is educated upto high school standard and is employed as a clerk in the government office. Influence of this leader is confined to his own caste. However, as both of them are followers of the Brahman Samhati, they are not recognised as leaders by the followers of the Matak sect of Hatkhola. In Hatkhola the position of the Matah Ahoms is low due to their low numerical strength as well as due to their low social and economic status. However, a 26 years old Matah Ahom is regarded as an influential leader, although he is an illegitimate son of a Matah Ahom woman and a Kayastha gosain of the Moderkhaut satra. In spite of his claims to be a son of a gosain, his claim is not admitted. He has only primary education, and has to depend upon the share-cropping cultivation. However, his power in the village is based on the bullying capacity which he has. At present he is the vice-president of the Village Defence Party due to which he has close contact with the local police station. However, his influence is found mainly among the Matah Ahoms and the Kaibartas of the village.

Although, the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis are different castes, they constitute a more or less homogeneous group. Before 1972 when all these castes were united under a single namghar, homogeneity was more prominent among them. The unity was possible due to their cultural similarities. Since 1972 although two factions have come up in the form of two namghars, these castes constitute a dominant group in the village. But cleavages among them are not completely absent, and homogeneity is not absolute. They have 6 influential persons; none of them is a leader who could be accepted by all. The Kalitas have 4 influential leaders; 2 of them are very young, below 30 years. One of them is a teacher in a college whose wife teaches in the University of Dibrugarh. He hails from a small cultivating family having only 3 acres of land. In the last general elections in 1972, he was an active supporter of a
Congress M.L.A. Only due to his well political and educational background and close connections with some educated people in the town, he is considered as a person of much importance and respect. A good number of young and old villagers are his followers. He is a member of the managing committee of a high school. The other Kalita leader hails from a respectable family. He is a graduate and teaches in a high school. His family owns 11.3 acres of land which is cultivated by the family members. In 1972, when the namghar was bifurcated due to factionalism, these two Kalita leaders tried their best to prevent division of the collectivity, but in vain. After having failed in their mission they promoted a separate namghar with the help of a few other influential leaders. The Kalitas have also other 2 influential leaders in the village who are considerably experienced and have contact with important people in the town. One of them is a cultivator and owns 5.3 acres of land. He has education upto high school standard and is working as a kanoongo (land revenue officer). His official position silences even his critics and some orthodox people. The owner of the Moderkhat Tea Plantation tries to keep good relations with him. However, as he does not believe in pollution-purity, etc., the older people do not like him. But the younger people have admiration for his progressive outlook. The other influential Kalita is one of the biggest supervisory cultivator having 13.3 acres of land. He is a graduate and is a government employee. Due to his social, economic and educational status he has acquired considerable prestige in the village. However, he always tries to keep himself away from village politics.

There is only one Koch leader in the village who is educated upto high school standard and works as a clerk in a plantation. He has only 2 acres of land. However, he is much respected by the villagers due to his good qualities and religious bent of mind. He was one of the leaders who created factionalism, and organised a new namghar in the village in 1972.

A Koch who is graduated in science is a high school teacher. He belongs to a share-cropping family. However, he has acquired
influence mainly due to his education, occupation and personal qualities.

In spite of numerical dominance the Kaibartas are not appeared as a dominant caste due to their low social, economic educational and political status in the society. Only one influential person is there who is a nominated member of the gaon-panchayat. He hails from a cultivating family having 6.7 acres of land. He does not have any formal education. Recently he has picked up a quarrel with the Kaibarta gaonbura. This incident has created, factional situation. He and his followers always try to keep themselves aloof from the religious festivals observed by the members of the rival group. However, he, as a factional leader, is too small to challenge the traditional leaders.

Thus, to become influential by acquiring power and prestige one requires to achieve modern education and good economic standing along with some personal qualities. The status accruing from the qualities is more important than the one derived from ascribed position. For example, even a Kayastha who does not have modern education and other qualities can not be recognised as a leader in the village. But the Kalitas, Koches, Keota and Ahomas can be influential persons if they acquire considerable wealth and education. Thus, there are "dominant individuals" and not "dominant caste". Because there is no caste which is exclusively dominant in all the respects.

Networks and Political Power

The structure of cleavages and associations could be analysed by understanding the penetration of political parties into the village polity. The villagers who are patronised by political leaders and parties hold considerable amount of power and prestige. However, existence of political parties as organised groups is not a common phenomenon in the village. Generally, they exert influence from outside. There are some individuals and families in the village.

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who enjoy high power-position, prestige and status due to their linkages with certain political parties and leaders.

We shall give a brief account of the general elections of 1972 with a view to understanding the role of political parties in the village power politics. In the general elections of 1972, three political parties, namely, the Congress (R), the Congress (O) and the Socialist contested the elections. The Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad party, though popular today in this area, did not participate in the elections, as its candidate withdrew his nomination due to some political reasons. This local party has influenced the people of this region as it gives premium to ethnic and cultural interests of the people.

The villagers have vague perceptions about various political parties, and most of them are ignorant about their ideologies also. The Congress party, due to its long history of Independence movement, is popular among the villagers. The Congress candidates were returned with thumping majority in all the general elections. Our data show that more and more young leaders have emerged because of the increased activities by political parties in the village area. The election results show that the Congress has been ahead of other parties. We shall now give a description of some leaders who have been affiliated with political parties. A Koch gaonbura was the most prominent among the new generation leaders. He held different offices including presidentship of the gaon-panchayat. He was the only one who during his school days joined the National Movement. A warrant was issued to arrest him under the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1947; however, he went underground. He was the only member of the Congress Party before Independence. A Kayastha gosain of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra was also involved actively in politics. He held many positions in the panchayat. Both of them were active supporters of the Congress M.L.A. Smt. Lily Sengupta, a Bengali woman, who had been returned consecutively four times from this constituency. In the 1972 elections, she did not contest. However, these two influential villagers were the principal source of votes in the area. The Koch leader had influence in a number of
villages; the Kayastha gosain, being a religious functionary of the Matak people, had influence among his devotees. Their close contact with the M.L.A. contributed to the power and prestige which they enjoyed in the area.

Three candidates contested in the 1972 elections. The Congress (R) and the Congress (O) candidates were new-comers who got tickets for the first time. Dipak Murmu of the Congress (R) was returned in 1972 from this constituency. Nibaran Bora, a candidate of the Socialist Party was his nearest rival. Maneewar Barbarua of the Congress (O) was the third in fetching the votes.

Murμu is a graduate and belongs to the Santal community. He hails from a family of the ex-plantation labourer. A large section of the constituency population consists of the tea plantation labourers whose support has helped Murμu to win over the election. He secured more votes from Hatkhola than the other candidates. Seventeen households of the Non-Assamese communities of Hatkhola cast their ballots in favour of Murμu. He secured votes of the other castes also as he had good relations with the influential persons of these castes. One of them is a Kalita who is a lecturer in a college in Dibrugarh. He has good reputation in the region. Due to his active support a large number of votes of the villagers specially of the Kaibartas went in favour of Murμu. The other influential person, who is the president of the gaon-panchayat, worked hard to fetch votes for the candidate.

The other candidate named Nibaran Bora belongs to the Socialist Party who hails from a Bamunia Ahom family. He is highly educated. Although his political career is longer than other candidates he has always been defeated by his Congress rival. Today the young villagers are impressed by the Socialist Party mainly due to the failures of the Congress. However, they are not organised group as they have been found elsewhere in the country. Most of the Bamunia Ahoms of Hatkhola and of the neighbouring villages cast their votes in favour of Bora due to the caste sentiment.

Maneewar Barbarua, a Koch, is educated up to high school standard who contested for the first time as a Congress (O) candidate.
He held the post of the joint-secretary in the "Saudy Assam Matak Sanmilan" which was held seventeen times from 1947 to 1972. On behalf of this association, he personally met the Prime Minister of India in 1967, and submitted a memorandum asking for a separate state for the Mataks. He did not receive any active support from his own villagers due to his involvement in the factional conflict in the namghar. From among the important leaders, only a young Reot teacher and a gosain of the Moderkhat Mayamaria Satra actively supported him. It was only due to the effective campaign of the gosain among his devotees that Barbarua could secure about twenty-five thousand votes. The votes obtained by him are mainly from his own factional group, the Kayastha families and a small section of the Kaibartas.

The study of political parties throws some light on the role of networks of the village people with the wider society. The village factions and cleavages could be seen as consequences of these houses of power. However, it is interesting to note that even in a society like Assamese where caste roots are not as strong as they are in northern India, affiliations to political parties are generally on the line of caste and community rather than ideology or interest of the political parties or of the groups themselves.

So far, we have delineated the picture of the general elections of the Assembly in 1972. But the activities of the villagers show a different picture in regard to the Parliamentary elections which will be discussed in the chapter on the tribal village.

A Critique of Dominant Caste

Srinivas writes: "A caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A larger and powerful group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low." Later on, he has incorporated

other elements of dominance such as non-traditional education, modern occupation and physical force. If all these elements are found together in a caste, it may be called as a "dominant caste". The concept of dominant caste negates proper understanding of the community power structure in India. Several village studies throw some light on the distribution of economy and power. Congruity of status, as Srinivas mentions, is not found within a particular caste. It is far from reality, at least, in respect of rural Assam. Incongruence of status is found within a caste. Differences could be seen at the levels of individuals, families and sub-groups within a given caste. When a few individuals or a few families of a caste have congruent statuses, they could be called as dominant; other individuals and families of the same caste may not have it, hence non-dominant.

While considering the attributes of numerical preponderance, we have found that the Kaibartas are highest in number having 39 households, but they are divided into two sects - 36 are of the Matak and 3 are of the Bamunia. In regard to the numerical superiority though the Ahoms come next to the Kaibartas they are also divided into two groups, 15 are of the Bamunia group and 10 belong to the Matak group. There are 48 households of the Kalitas, Koches, Keots, Chutiyas and Katanis; they also have cleavages. The Kalitas have 23 households, but they are divided into two namghars having affiliation into two factional groups. Thus the Kaibartas are numerically superior to other groups, but they are low in caste hierarchy and other spheres of evaluation, hence less dominant than some other groups. The Ahoms - a non-Vedic caste, stand much below in the traditional rank, but their dominance is not less than the Kalitas who stand just below the Kayasthas in the hierarchy. Thus numerical superiority is not always an indicator of dominance. Numerically lower caste may also be dominant provided it has superiority in other spheres.

The criterion of high economic status to be a dominant caste, as Srinivas mentions could not be applied to Hatkhola village. In Hatkhola, there is no single caste group whose all the members are economically superior compared to that of the other castes. For example, a few families of the Kalita, Koch, Chutiya and Ahom castes are more economically dominant in the village than some families of the higher castes. From among the economically dominant Kalitas there are 3 families which own 11.3 to 13.3 acres of land. Among the Ahoms, the biggest landholder has 25.3 acres of land, while the other 2 families have 17.7 and 18 acres. There are 2 families one of the Koches and other of Chutiyas who have 12.7 and 16.0 acres of land respectively. These families have members who have achieved modern education, and taken up white-collar jobs.

Thus, on the one hand, higher ritual status does not necessarily ensure economic dominance of a caste; on the other, economic dominance of a few families of a caste cannot ensure the dominance of the entire caste group.

Modern education is not evenly achieved by all the members of a caste. Generally, the members of the economically well-off families of a caste attain higher education. Regarding modern education we have found that there are 6 graduates of which 4, 1 and 1 are from the Kalitas, Koches and Keota, respectively. There are 10, 8, 2, 8, and 1 matriculates from the Kalitas, Koches, Katanis, Bamunia Ahoms and Kaibartas respectively. Likewise, modern occupations are also found within a caste in the same proportion in all the families. The Kalitas, Bamunia Ahoms, Koches and Katanis have members engaged in white-collar jobs not in order of their ranks, nor in proportion to their numerical strength.

In the gaon-panchayat since 1952 to 1968 it has been seen that most of the offices have been occupied by the Kalitas, Koches and the Ahoms. The Kalita and the Koch leaders who held the offices did not derive their power mainly from their own castes, but also from other castes such as the Keota, Chutiyas, Katanis, etc. Thus, caste is not a power-wielding unit, here rather a group of castes enjoy power what Dube calls as "multi-caste power alliance". These castes also

receive significant support from the numerically dominant Kaibartas who economically depend upon them. The Bamunia Ahoms, though numerically insignificant, are not less important than the Kalitas and the Koches in the power arena as they also receive support from the Kaibartas. All of these office-bearers of the gaon-panchayat, who used to wield power principally from the political arena, were not economically well off. Some of them were supervisory-cultivators, some were medium-sized cultivators and even some other belonged to the small cultivating and share-cropping families. In the political arena the Kalitas, Koches and Bamunia Ahoms are more or less equally powerful. However, from among them, a Koch leader seems to be more powerful than others. Thus, political power is also not confined to any single caste.

Thus, not all the economically dominant families are powerful, and not all the economically non-dominant families are powerless. Not all the members of a caste are powerful, nor all the members of a caste are powerless. Thus when a few individuals or families of a caste occupy most powerful positions, it is not correct to say that the caste is dominant.\(^{15}\)

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