CHAPTER VI

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE TRIBAL VILLAGE

Kapahua Gaon - A tribal village

Like uni-caste villages, tribal villages are also prevalent in upper Assam. In this chapter, we have studied a single tribal village known as Kapahua. The purpose here is to examine how a tribe, namely, the Sonowal maintains social relations with other communities, such as, the Brahmanas, Chutiyas and Ahoms of the neighbouring areas.

Today, the Sonowals have become Hindus under the influence of Vaisnabism. Nevertheless, they are still regarded as a tribe and are enlisted as a Scheduled tribe due to their economic and cultural backwardness. However, inspite of their tribal origin, they have a position in the local caste system of the Assamese society. In this regard, we are interested to see the process of Hinduisation of the tribe as well as their status in the local caste hierarchy. Today, distinction between tribe and caste is not very clear in upper Assam as the Sonowals have marriage alliances with the Ahoms and to a certain extent, with the Chutiyas. By and large, in regard to the class and power structure, similarities between the two are more than differences. As the tribe today practise settled agriculture similar to that of the caste societies of the rural Assam, they are also divided into several classes as we have noticed in the multi-caste as well as single-caste villages. Process of politicisation also affects the tribal political institution in the similar way. In view of such a situation, we are emphasising the nature of control and distribution of economic resources as well as distribution of power in the tribal village.

The Caste Structure

Kapahua is known as a Sonowal-Kachari village due to the predominance of Sonowal population. There are 112 households of the
Sonowals with a population of 858 persons. Besides, there are a few households of the Brahmanas, the Chutiyas and the Non-Assamese communities like the Sabars and the Khonds. There are 6 households of the Brahmanas consisting of 41 persons and a single household of the Chutiyas having 6 members. The non-Assamese households are 6 only, of which 2 are Khond households having 11 persons and 4 are Sabar households having 16 persons. Thus, the total population of Kapahua is 930 persons belonging to 125 households (see table:28). One interesting feature found in this village is that the Brahmana live along with the Sonowals who are one of the predominant tribes of Assam having low social status in the region. Earlier the village was exclusively inhabited by the Sonowals. About two decades ago Brahmanas migrated from Sibsagar district to this village.

Table :28

Distribution of population and tribe/caste composition of Kapahua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>No. of household</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assamese</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>112 (89.6)</td>
<td>858 (91.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>6 (4.8)</td>
<td>41 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
<td>6 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Assamese</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabar</td>
<td>4 (3.2)</td>
<td>14 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khond</td>
<td>2 (1.6)</td>
<td>11 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>125 (100.00)</td>
<td>930 (100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Sonowals and the Chutiyas of Kapahua are the disciples of the Auniati satra of the Brahma Samhati sect. The internal organisation of the Auniati satra has been discussed in the chapter on the Hatkhola village. In Kapahua, there are 5 namghars; the
oldest among them was established in 1814. The second one was established in 1958, the third one in 1966 and the other two were started recently. The namghars are headed by 6 medhis appointed by the gosain of the Auniati satra. There are some ritual offices as well as a large number of devotees (bhakata) of both bhajania and sharania stages who are below the medhis in ritual hierarchy.

The Brahmanas of Kapahua are Saktas, and they receive diksha from the gosains of the Garmur, the Mukulimaria and the Parbatia satras of Saktaism. Unlike the Vaisnabas, the Sakta disciples neither have namghar institution at the village level nor have various gradation among themselves. But every household has its own ritual apartment known as gosain-ghar where household-rituals are performed everyday.

The Sonowals

The position of the Kacharis in the local hierarchy has been discussed in the chapter on the Hatkhola village. The Kacharis of Kapahua are one of the Hinduised sections of the Kacharis of Assam who are known either as Sonowals or as Sonowal - Kacharis. The Sonowals are enlisted as a scheduled tribe though they are Hindu today. There are various sections of the Kacharis who are found in different parts of Assam. We have already discussed about them in the chapter two. The Sonowals of Kapahua today speak Assamese language. But a few sections of the Kacharis still speak their own dialects.

Today, the Sonowals of Kapahua are mainly agriculturists. It is known that during the Ahom regime they mainly depended upon the occupation of gold-washing. Gradually, they established their colony on the bank of the Subansiri river for the purpose of collecting gold from the river basin. The gold was usually supplied to the Ahom Kings. Prior to the Ahom regime they neither practised agriculture nor gold-washing. Their main occupation was shifting

1. The gosains of the Garmur satra preach both Sakta and Vaisnaba religious ideologies, thus the satra has both Sakta and Vaisnaba disciples.
cultivation like many other tribal groups of the region.

Like the Ahoms, the Sonowals of Kapahua do not have a clear conception about the Hindu varna system. This, perhaps, indicates that they were originally outside the Hindu caste system. Around 1694 A.D. the Sonowals first underwent initiation into Vaisnabism by the gosain of the Auniati satra named Sri Keshabdeva. Since then they have been under the process of Hinduisation. Their status in the caste system is ambiguous. They think themselves to be one of the clean Hindu groups belonging to the Sudras. But the caste Hindus regard them as a tribe. However, the Sonowals undoubtedly regard themselves inferior to the Brahmanas, Kayasthas, Kalitas and Koches, and superior to the Keota, Katanis, Ahoms and Kaibartas. According to some Sonowals, the Ahoms are equal to them in the caste hierarchy. However, the Sonowals are proud enough, like the Ahoms. They look back nostalgically at their glorious dynasty during 1531 - 1831 A.D. in Assam. In this respect, both the Sonowals and the Ahoms seem to occupy the same status in the local caste system.

The Sonowals are endogamous group. But today exogamy is not uncommon among them. Marriage by elopement (Gandharba-biya) was in vogue in the past. Today, following the higher Hindu castes, they prefer to practise marriage by negotiation to raise their status in the caste hierarchy. The Sonowals, like the Ahoms, possess liberal attitudes regarding exogamous marriage with other castes and tribes. Marital relations with the Ahoms were not practised in the traditional society; but recently they are reported to have marriage alliance with the Ahoms. In Kapahua, four Sonowals are married to Ahom girls, and two Sonowal girls to the Ahoms. In the village, though there is no single case of exogamous marriage with the Chutiyas, it however appears that the Sonowals generally accept such couple. A number of such cases are reported from the neighbouring villages where such couples have been socially accepted. Exogamous relations with the castes like the Brahmanas, Kayasthas, Kalitas, etc. are out of question as these castes do not accept Sonowal girls. In Kapahua, there is a case of inter-caste marriage between the Sonowals and the Kalitas. In this case, the Kalita girl is socially accepted.
by the Sonowals. The marriage, no doubt, took place by elopement. Marriage with the Kaibartas is strictly prohibited. A case of marriage by elopement which took place between the Sonowals and the Kaibartas in a neighbouring village is reported to have been ex-communicated by the Sonowals.

Under the process of Vaisnabisation the Sonowals of Kapahua have been gradually losing their tribal characteristics. They are reported to have adopted Vaisnabite customs, rites and rituals to a great extent. Today, their marriages are performed according to the Vaisnabite rules. The Vedic marriage rituals and services of the Brahmana priests are over looked. Marriage by negotiation, instead of the traditional way of marriage by elopement, are much in vogue. Widow marriage is still found among them. The birth and death rites are performed according to the prescriptions of their Vaisnaba gosains. Undoubtedly, there is no role of the Brahmana priest.

The Sonowals, therefore, are more akin to the Vaisnabite castes than to the tribals. Their festivals are like that of the Hindus. However, Sonowal culture is an admixture of both Hindu and tribal cultural elements. Therefore, their status in the hierarchy has become somewhat ambiguous. Like the Hindu caste groups, the Sonowals observe Janmasthami and birth anniversary of the great gosains named Sri Sankardeva and Sri Madhavdeva. They also worship Lakshmi. Similarly, social festivals like the Kati-Bihu, Magh-Bihu and Bahag-Bihu are observed by them. Along with these Vaisnabite rituals, they still adhere to some of their animistic rituals of which the Dangaria-Kam is the most important one. The head of the village spirit named Gatiguri Dangaria is worshiped in this ritual. A few households, which are more inclined towards traditionalism perform the Gojai-Khowa Sakam. In this ritual, the spirit is propitiated and rice-bear, chicken, etc. are offered. All these rituals are performed either in the individual household or in the village namghar.
The Brahmanas

The Brahmanas occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy. They are divided into two sub-groups, namely, the Vaisnabites and the Saktas. Most of the Brahmanas of upper Assam are Vaisnabites, and they are descendants of the Kanauja Brahmanas. The Sakta Brahmanas are found mainly in lower Assam. It is believed that during the seventeenth century their forefathers had migrated to Assam from Nadiya district of Bengal.

In Kapahua, there are 6 households of the Brahmanas who are related to each other through kinship ties. About four hundred years ago, these families were brought by the Ahom Kings. They were given land grants for establishing their settlements, and in return they used to perform rituals in the King's temples. The Brahmanas also used to receive Khatoniar (ritual helps to the chief priest of the temple) from the Ahom kings. The Brahmanas involved themselves in the learning of the dharma-shastras and Sanskrit language. But since the last few decades there have been some changes in their occupations and education. Today, they principally depend upon the income from land. Some of them have accepted modern occupations and only 3 families adhere to priestly occupation as a secondary source of income. In spite of their belief in Saktaism, some of the Vaisnabite castes like the Kalitas and the Koches accept their services. The Brahmanas of Kapahua also serve the Ahoms and the Sonowals. However, their services are required only in two rituals, namely, the Graha-puja and the Bishnu-puja.

In regard to the marriage rules, the Brahmanas exclusively practise endogamy, and in no case marriage with the non-Brahmana castes is socially permissible. Thus, the Brahmanas are, perhaps, the only caste in the three villages who, in the true sense, have retained their caste identity by adhering to the rules of endogamy. Traditionally, the two divisions of the Brahmanas, namely, the Vaisnabite Brahmanas and the Sakta Brahmanas did not have marital ties. But today they establish marital relations. Nonetheless, the Sakta Brahmanas, even today, refuse to marry from among the Brahmanas who are followers of the Mayamaria or the Matak sect.
The socio-religious life of the Brahmanas bears some social significance on the basis of which they can be distinguished from the Chutiyas and the Sonowals of Kapahua and the other caste groups of Hatkhola and Chakalibaria. This distinction is due to their belief in Saktaism. The principal religious festivals which the Brahmanas of Kapahua observe are the Durga-puja, the Kali-puja and Jagadhatri-puja. These three major religious festivals are performed only by the Saktaas, and the Vaisnabas vehemently refuse the cults of the mother goddesses. Besides, the Brahmanas, like the other caste groups, observe the Bihu festivals, but they put considerably less importance to it. It is important to note that though the Sonowals are tribals, they are always invited by the Brahmanas to these festivals. This reduces social distance between the two groups.

The Chutiyas

In regard to the Hatkhola and the Chakalibaria villages, we have discussed about the Chutiyas and their status in the caste hierarchy. The Chutiyas of Kapahua and Chakalibaria belong to the same group as both of them are followers of the Auniati satra of the Brahma Samhati, hence known as Bamunia Chutiyas. They differ from the Chutiyas of Hatkhola as the latter belong to the Mayamaria or the Matak sect. This represents two divisions among them in respect of their sectarian affiliation to the two different sects of Vaisnabism. Although their position in the caste hierarchy is ambiguous as they occupy the same position.

The Non-Assamese Communities

In Kapahua, there are 6 households of the non-Assamese belonging to the Sabar and the Khond communities. They are ex-plantation labourers, and at present, they depend upon the agricultural labour and other forms of casual labour for their livelihood. To the Assamese villagers they are commonly known as "coolies".
As they do not form a part of the social structure of the village, we do not think it necessary to give a description about them.

As the Brahmanas and the Sonowals of Kapahua are Saktas and Vaisnabas respectively, commensal relations between them are restricted to a considerable extent. The elderly Brahmanas still adhere to traditional practices in regard to the commensal relations with other caste groups. The younger Brahmanas, who have not undergone initiation pertaining to sacred thread ceremony, accept kecha food from the Sonowals. However, after the initiation they refuse to take all sorts of food except water and pan-temul (betel leaf - nut). Today, along with the changes in the various spheres of the society the commensal relations have also undergone some changes. The educated and young Brahmanas accept food from the Sonowals. This feature has been gradually increasing due to the close interactions between the two groups in the village. The Brahmanas and the Sonowals, in most of the cases, invite each other in their socio-religious festivals where such commensal behaviour is noticed. The Sonowals generally accept all sorts of food from the Brahmanas. However, the bhajania devotees refuse to take pokha food from the Brahmanas. Such commensal relations indicate complexity as well as flexibility in regard to the norms of commensal relations. However, this is only due to their affiliation into two different religious ideologies, namely, Saktaism and Vaisnabism. In the same way, the principle of commensal relations operate between the Sonowals and other caste groups such as Kayasthas, Kalitas, Koches, Chutiyas, Keots, Katanis and Ahoms. It is also difficult to ascertain the commensal relations between the Sonowals and the Kaibartas as both these groups generally do not have social interactions. However, according to some Sonowals, kecha food could be accepted from the Kaibartas.

The Sonowals of Kapahua are one of the Hinduised tribes of Assam, and they are culturally more akin to the caste Hindus rather than the tribes. Under the encompassing nature of the Vaisnaba
religion they have adopted many of the principles of the caste-society, and they form an important part of the Assamese social structure. Today their status in the hierarchy is similar to that of a clean Sudra, and they are never treated as an untouchable caste. This contrasts with the Dumont's view of inclusion of foreign groups into a territorial set of castes. He refers to "groups who are in the process of transition from tribe to untouchable caste".

However, the wide-range of commensal and connubial relations practised by the Sonowals reflect equalitarian principles of the tribe. The concept of purity - pollution of caste system has affected the Sonowal society to a limited way. This is evident from their commensal behaviour as the bhajania devotees refuse to take poka food from both the lower and higher caste groups. Although they may establish connubial relations with any caste group except the Kaibartas because of their impure occupation. In this way, the Sonowals show integration into the caste system on the one hand and exclusiveness and separateness, though not strictly, from the various caste groups on the other.

However, Dumont's thesis has always kept the Indian tribes outside the main sphere of his interest. As if they are not part of the Hindu social structure. But the study of the Sonowal tribe shows that it would be misleading if one puts them outside the caste system of Assam. Our discussion on the tribes in the traditional and present social structures of the Assamese society explains the necessity of thinking them as a part of the Hindu social structure.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND STRATIFICATION

Like the other two villages under study, the economy of the tribal village also primarily depends upon agriculture. Our data show that there are similarities, to a large extent, in the economic structures of the tribal, single-caste and multi-caste villages. Therefore, the data related to the agrarian economy of the tribal village are analysed here in view of the approaches discussed in connections with the earlier two villages.

All the households of Kapahua are actually peasant households. They employ family labour in carrying out agricultural operations. But there are some Brahmanas in the village who generally employ labourers on their land; however, they also participate in some of the agricultural operations. Today some changes are noticed in the economic structure of the tribal village. The trends of change are largely similar to those of the multi-caste and single-caste villages. The changes which are found today are mostly due to impact of the various modern occupations on the economic structure of the tribal village. The following table: 29 shows a combination of traditional and modern occupations.

Table: 29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>Present occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>Agriculture, Service, priesthood, trading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>Agriculture, service, trading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td>Agriculture, labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Agrarian Organisation

Paddy is the principal crop of Kapahua. The village land is low, thus it facilitates cultivation of only wet-rice. As Kapahua is situated near Chakalibaria village, it is also inundated by the same river. This causes serious damage to the crops, at the same time the flood makes the land fertile. There is no high or dry land in the village, therefore, the cultivators do not have any scope to cultivate other crops. A very few households grow vegetable in the kitchen garden only for the family consumption.

In summer, the villagers cultivate two local varieties of paddy, namely, Hali and Lahi. During the winter they cultivate another local variety of paddy known as Ahu. For the last four or five years the villagers have adopted high yielding varieties of paddy like Jaya, Taichun and IR6. However, as the winter crops are cultivated on small scale the villagers do not employ hired labourers, because their family labour suffices the labour demands. But for the summer crops, which are cultivated on large scale, employment of hired labourers becomes essential. The labourers are usually available from among the villagers, but in some cases they are also recruited from neighbouring villages, particularly, from among the non-Assamese communities. In most of the cases, the Sonowal cultivators practise traditional haori system in which labour force is exchanged between the peasant households. Payment of any kind is not made under this system.

The agricultural operations are not mechanised. The iron-blade plough, sickle, spade and bullock are used by the villagers. Almost all the households practise double-cropping. But the poor peasants raise the two crops only for the family consumption, whereas the well-do-do peasants raise the two crops to sell the surplus in the local markets.

The yield of Hali and Lahi paddy is only 240 kilograms per acre, whereas the yield of the high-yielding varieties is about 1440 kilograms per acre. Today, some of the peasants have started growing such crops like pulses, sugar-cane, mustard seeds, potatoes,
cabbages, etc. on small scale, but they are not getting satisfactory yield. Besides, they also grow tamul and pan like the peasants of other two villages.

### The Agrarian Class Structure

In Kapahua, there are three agrarian classes, namely, the landowner, the share-cropper and the agricultural labourer. These three classes could also be divided into 11 sub-divisions (see table:30). These sub-divisions refer to sets of economic activities pursued by different families. Besides, there is a single Brahmana household which could not be included in either of the agrarian classes. This household principally depends upon the income from modern occupation. As the members of this family do not participate in the productive organisation of Kapahua we have excluded them from the present discussion.

### The Landowners

Like the other two villages, there is no big landowner in Kapahua too. There are 55 households of the landowners who have landholdings of medium size. The landowners could also be divided into four sub-divisions, namely, (a) the non-cultivating landowners, (b) the supervisory cultivator-service holders/priests/traders, (c) the cultivators and (d) the cultivator-service holders (see table:30).
Table 30

Agrarian classes and landholdings of Kapahua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Sub-divisions</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
<th>No. of landless households</th>
<th>Average landholding (in acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>(a) Non-cultivating landowner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Supervisory cultivator-service holder/priest/trader</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) Cultivator</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Cultivator-service holder</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share-cropper</td>
<td>(a) Share cropper-cultivator</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Share cropper-cultivator-service holder/trader</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>(a) Agricultural labourer-share cropper - cultivator</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Agricultural labourer-cultivator</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) Agricultural labourer-share cropper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 31

Caste/tribe and landholdings in Kapahua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>No. of household</th>
<th>No. of landless household</th>
<th>Average landholding (in acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table: 32

**Castes/tribes and agrarian classes in Kapahua**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes/Tribes</th>
<th>Non-cultivating landowner</th>
<th>Supervisory cultivator service holder/priest/trader</th>
<th>Cultivator</th>
<th>Cultivator service holder</th>
<th>Share cropper</th>
<th>Share cropper service holder/trader</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer</th>
<th>Agricultural cultivator</th>
<th>Agricultural labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</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>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Total**              | **3**                      | **4**                                               | **35**     | **13**                    | **32**        | **7**                               | **12**                | **14**                 | **1**                 | **3**
Table: 33

Distribution of caste/tribe and class in Kapahua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/ Tribe</th>
<th>No. of household of landowner</th>
<th>No. of household of share-cropper</th>
<th>No. of household of Agricultural labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmana</td>
<td>5 (83.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>49 (43.7)</td>
<td>39 (34.8)</td>
<td>24 (21.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>1 (100.00)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>39</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Kapahua, there are 3 households of the non-cultivating landowners, of which 2 belong to the Brahmanas and 1 to the Sonowals. Their average landholding is 4.4 acres per family. These 3 households are not, in fact, non-cultivating landowners in the true sense of the term, because under certain circumstances they have left tilling their own land.

The lone Sonowal non-cultivating landowner is a 60 years old widow. As she does not have any family member, her land is cultivated by the share-croppers. But prior to her husband's death the land was cultivated by the family.

Similarly, out of the 2 Brahmana households of the non-cultivating landowners, one was a supervisory cultivator having only 1.7 acres of land, but after the death of the husband the widow got the land cultivated by the agricultural labourers.
The another Brahmana household was a supervisory cultivator having 8.7 acres of land, but for the last six years his land is being cultivated by the sharecroppers. Therefore, he has become a non-cultivating landowner.

Out of the 4 households of the supervisory cultivator - service holders/priests/traders, 3 are from the Brahmanas and 1 is from the Sonowals having an average landholding of 4.2 acres per household. Like Hatkhola, the supervisory cultivators of Kapahua have both small and big landholdings. The landholdings of the 3 households of the Brahmanas vary from 2.7 to 6 acres. The Brahmana supervisory cultivators, who have comparatively smaller landholdings, live in thatched houses, and they are school educated. As a secondary source of income they depend upon the priestly services. The other families, who possess comparatively bigger landholdings, live in brick-built houses. Members of the latter are college educated and pursue modern occupations like clerical jobs, teaching and shop keeping. The Brahmana supervisory cultivators get their land cultivated by the agricultural labourers under their direct supervision. Traditionally they are prohibited to undertake manual agricultural operations, but today, some of them are found to take part in transplantation, weeding and harvesting. Some of them even till the land with hoe but not with plough which is traditionally prohibited. The lone Sonowal supervisory cultivator is a retired surveyor (mandal) of the settlement office in Dibrugarh. He is an influential person in the village due to his official position as well as well off economic condition. He is also a gaonbura of Kapahua village. He possesses 5.7 acres of land which is cultivated by the agricultural labourers and share-croppers. Members of his family also participate in the agricultural operations.

In Kapahua, the cultivators are numerically highest of all the agrarian classes. Out of 35 households of the cultivators, there are 34 households of the Sonowals and 1 household of the Chutiya. They possess landholdings of 4.2 acres on an average, although it varies from 1.3 to 12 acres. Therefore, there is a disparity in the landowing patterns of the cultivators. The cultivators who are
economically well of can retain surplus grains for the bad years, and can have cash income by selling it in the local market. They are thus able to improve their styles of life as they can afford to have better houses, dresses, modern education, etc. Generally they carry out agricultural operations themselves and also employ halowas (seasonal labourers) on their land. The cultivators who have meagre landholdings cannot afford to employ halowas on their land. However, some of them may employ agricultural labourers on daily wages. Because of the small landholdings the family members of the marginal cultivators themselves carry out the agricultural operations without employing hired labourers. The marginal cultivators and the landless people are generally involved in a sort of competition to get land for cultivating on the basis of share-cropping.

There are 13 households of the Sonowals who are cultivator-service holders having an average landholding of 5.7 acres per household. These households depend upon land as well as various modern occupations, but they have a great deal of socio-economic distinctions. Teaching in primary schools is the most popular profession among them. Besides, a few of them are surveyors (mandals) in the settlement office. One of them is a Homoeopathic doctor, and another owns a small grocery shop. The landholdings of these households vary from 2 to 14 acres. The largest landholding of Kapahua is found among them. The economic condition of the cultivator - service holders is comparatively better off than other groups. Income from land and modern occupations has enabled them to have a better standard of living. Generally, they cultivate their land themselves, but some times they also engage agricultural labourers. They are capable of producing surplus grains.

The Share-croppers

Out of the three villages, Kaphua has the largest number of households who depend upon the income from cultivation. There are
39 households of the share-croppers. These could be divided into two sub-divisions, namely, (a) the share-cropper—cultivators and (b) the share-cropper—cultivator-service holders/traders. These households also own some land. However, to supplement their income they cultivate land on share-cropping basis. Besides, some of them are engaged in modern occupations also. They cultivate their land themselves, but sometimes employ agricultural labourer also.

In Kapahua, there are 32 households of the share-cropper-cultivators of the Sonowals having an average landholding of 2.3 acres per household. Therefore, they could be called as marginal cultivators, and to maintain their families they cultivate other’s land on share-cropping basis.

Seven households of the Sonowals are share-cropper—cultivator—service holders/traders. They have 2.6 acres of land per household. Being the marginal cultivators they also cultivate land on share-cropping basis. Besides, members of these households have taken up non-agricultural occupations. Thus, their economic position is better than that of the share-cropper-cultivators.

Like that of the other two villages, the number of households of the share-croppers in Kapahua is not fixed as it varies from season to season. However, the same households continue as share-croppers for years together also. There is competition among the marginal cultivators for getting land on share-cropping basis. Success of getting land on share-cropping depends upon the maintenance of good relations with the landowners.

Similar to that of the multi-caste and single-caste villages, there are also three systems of share-cropping contract, namely, pother-adhi, giti-adhi and kereya in the tribal village. In Kapahua, the pother-adhi contract is the most prevalent one. Besides, a few cases of giti-adhi and kereya contracts are also found. Due to the impact of some land regulations some changes are noticed in the system since last few years. The terms and conditions undergo changes from time to time. Today, the share-croppers are harassed and put in a difficult situation by the landowners. The contract is renewed every year, and the share-croppers may not get the contract
from the same landowners every year. At least a decade ago the situation was better than what it is today. Earlier the share-croppers were allowed to cultivate the same plot of land for more than fifteen years. Inspite of various regulations, the landowners have been able to bring some changes in the terms and conditions of the contract to protect their economic interests. According to the old system of pother-adhi, the landowners used to supply paddy seedlings, manure and expenses for harvest, and the share-croppers performed agricultural operations like ploughing and transplantation. But during last fifteen years or so the terms and conditions have partly changed. Now the owners do not provide seedlings to the share-croppers. They only bear the expenses for harvesting the crops. Since last six years the owners have stopped to provide any expense to the share-croppers. Moreover, the share-croppers are forced to carry the crops from the field to the owner's house.

In the guti-adhi contract, in which fixed rent in kind, i.e., paddy is taken, the rent per acre was increased from 180 kilograms to 240 kilograms of paddy, and then subsequently to 360 kilograms.

In the kereya contract, in which fixed rent in cash is paid, the rate has been increased to Rs. 180\% per acre. But about fifteen years ago the rent was only Rs. 45\% per acre.

The sources of share-cropping land are very much limited in Kapahua. About a dozen Sonowal and Brahmana landowners of Kapahua provide land to the share-croppers. Besides, a few landowners belonging to the Muslim, Sonowal, Chutiya and Marowari communities of the neighbouring villages also give land for share-cropping. However, the main source of share-cropping land is a Sonowal of Kapahua who is a cultivator-service holder. He has been able to manipulate, in his interest, changes in the contract of the share-cropping system in the village. And the share-croppers have accepted the changes. The share-cropping regulations, which were passed in 1935, 1948 and 1971 in Assam to protect the interests of the share-croppers, are of no use as they cannot oppose the unilaterally imposed terms and conditions of the landlords. In spite of such a situation there is no direct conflict between the
landowners and the share-croppers in the village. It is due to the fact that the economic tension is effectively resolved where both the landowner and the share-cropper belong to the same community such as the Sonowals. It is possible only when kinship and ethnic ties are too strong. But explicit class conflict may take place when both the groups belong to the two different ethnic groups. In 1975, a conflict between a Brahmana landowner and a non-Assamese share-cropper took place. This conflict on share of the grains was decided in the inter-caste mel (assembly), and the decision went in favour of the landowner.

The Agricultural Labourers

The agricultural labourers of Kapahua are divided into four sub-divisions, namely, (a) the agricultural labourer-share cropper-cultivators, (b) the agricultural labourer-cultivators, (c) the agricultural labourer-share croppers, and (d) the agricultural labourers. There are altogether 30 households of the agricultural labourers in Kapahua. Almost all of them possess some amount of land of their own, except only 3 households. The majority of the agricultural labourers are inhabitants of Kapahua village, except a few halowas (seasonal ploughmen) who belong to the non-Assamese communities from the neighbouring villages. The Sonowals do not prefer to work as halowas, but they work as casual agricultural labourers.

The agricultural labourer-share cropper-cultivators are relatively economically well off among the agricultural labourers of Kapahua. They have an average landholding of 2 acres per family. But keeping in view the average size of households, their landholding is quite meagre. They are much more heterogeneous than the other groups of the agricultural labourers as they represent more diversity of economic interests. In Kapahua, there are 12 households of the Sonowals who are agricultural labourers - share cropper - cultivators. They are economically much more secure in comparison to other agricultural labourers as their income comes from three different sources. Members of this category engage themselves as
cultivators, agricultural labourers as well as share-croppers. Generally, they do not hire labourer. But, a few of them, who are economically well off, do hire haori labourers under certain unavoidable situation.

There are 14 households of the agricultural labourer - cultivators who have an average landholding of 1 acre per family. Eleven households of the Sonowals and 3 of the non-Assamese communities are agricultural labourer - cultivators. They mainly depend upon the daily wages.

Only one Sonowal family is agricultural labourer - share cropper. Members of this family work as agricultural labourers, and as a secondary source of income they cultivate land on share-cropping basis.

There are 3 households of the non-Assamese communities who are landless, and therefore, they primarily depend upon the works of the agricultural labourers.

In Kapahua, like the other two villages, there are subdivisions among the agricultural labourers. The basis of such divisions is the type of agricultural activities pursued by them. The non-Assamese communities of the neighbouring villages are only available for working as halowas. In 1976, 30 halowas were employed by 30 households of Kapahua. Out of 30 halowas, 26 were non-Assamese, 2 were Sonowals, and 1 each was of Napit and Muslim. The contract in employing the halowas has been discussed in regard to other two villages. In Kapahua also, their wages vary from time to time. The wages vary from Rs. 20.00 to 25.00 per month along with three meals a day and clothings. The ploughmen who are employed on daily wages are known as hazira-halowas. Similarly, there are hazira-roynis and hazira-daonis. The Sonowals of Kapahua are mainly available for working as these three types of labourers. Besides, a few non-Assameses also accept these works who come from the neighbouring villages. In 1975 - 76, the wages of the hazira - halowas, who work with their own plough and bullock, were between Rs. 5.00 and Rs. 6.00 per day. Along with the cash they are also given jalpan (breakfast). The hazira - halowas, who do not use their own plough and bullock, get only Rs. 2.50 along
with the jalpan. In the same year, the wages of the hazira-roynie and hazira-daonie were between Rs. 3.00 and Rs. 4.00 per day along with the jalpan. There is also thika system in which a hazira-daoni enters into a contract to harvest paddy of 3 acre of land on a payment of Rs. 20.00 to Rs. 30.00.

The marginal cultivators, share - croppers and agricultural labourers of Kapahua find it difficult to survive during the non-harvesting period. Therefore, they depend upon the landowners for loan. Commonly loan is extended in kind, i.e., paddy. In 1975-76, 40 households borrowed paddy from the landowners of the village. The loan could be cleared either in cash or in kind or by working on the lender's land during the next harvesting season. The latter two systems are prevalent in Kapahua. The interest on loan is quite heavy as it doubles by the next harvesting season.

There is no acute demand for the agricultural labourers as they are mainly available from among the villagers. Moreover, the haori system reduces demand for agricultural labourers to a considerable extent. The haori is a system of exchange of labour in the agricultural operations found among the villagers belonging to the same community or from the families of the neighbours. The operations involved are ploughing, transplantation and harvesting. The haori - labourers are employed generally by the well-to-do cultivators. As the Sonowals adhere largely to the traditional customs, they still practise haori system. The families with considerable landholdings cannot complete agricultural operations in time only by their own family labours, Thus they largely depend upon the haori labourers rather than the hired labourers. Therefore, many of the agricultural labourers remain unemployed or ill-paid even during the peak agricultural seasons. The system is thus, beneficial for the well-to-do landowners, because the agricultural labourers, share-croppers and even the marginal cultivators do not employ the haori labourers as their family labour is enough to complete the agricultural operations.

In the haori system, generally the persons of the same community, kin-group and namghar are found to offer their family
labours to the fellow cultivators. The haori labourers are not paid wages; they are entertained with a feast in the evening. Today, only jalipan is offered to them. The well-to-do cultivators get their land cultivated by the haori labourers without incurring much expenses, whereas the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers, who offer their haori labours in free of wages, are deprived of their earnings. In 1976, 10 Sonowal households employed haori labourers, of which 4 households belonged to the category of the share cropper - cultivators and 3 each belonged to the cultivators and the cultivator - service holders.

A few points could be concluded from the above discussion on the class structure of Kapahua. The economy of the Sonowal tribe does not possess any feature of tribalism except the system of labour-exchange locally known as haori. Traditionally, they solely depended upon the economy of the shifting cultivation where land was owned communally by them. The society was then based on the principle of egalitarianism. Today, the Sonowals are settled plough agriculturists, and as a consequence, homogeneity of the society is disturbed to a considerable extent, because the settled plough cultivation, which provides private ownership right on land, differentiates the population into various groups with their respective economic interests. Similar to that of the multi-caste village there are also three broad agrarian classes in Kapahua; these are the landowners, the share - croppers and the agricultural labourers which are distributed among the Sonowals having 43.7, 34.8 and 21.5 per cent respectively. These three are also distributed into 10 agrarian sub-divisions. Majority of the Sonowals are, therefore, landowners, and large holdings are found only among them. Thus, the Sonowals are "dominant landowners". But many of them are also share - croppers and agricultural labourers. Perhaps in the economy of the shifting cultivation the haori was beneficial for the community, but today the haori system in the plough cultivation has become a mechanism of exploitation as only the landowners take help of the villagers belonging to the classes, of the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers. This, to a large extent,
hamper the economic interest of the share-croppers and the agricultural labourers as the landowners get their land cultivated by the latter in free of wages under the haori system. The situation here is similar to that of the Chakalibaria village as in Kapahua the Sonowal landowners exploit their own community members who are share-croppers and agricultural labourers. Although the Sonowals are considered as a scheduled tribe, they enjoy higher status as they seem to be superior to the Kaibartas in the local hierarchy, and also majority of them are economically better off. Many of them have considerably large landholdings in comparison to the Hindu caste groups of the other two villages. However economic interaction between tribe and caste is almost absent and therefore, the jajmani relationship is out of question.
DISTRIBUTION OF POWER AMONG THE SONOWALS

In regard to the distribution of power, the tribal village does not show much differences from that of the multi-caste and single-caste villages. The tribal political institution is replaced by the mel which is essentially a caste assembly. Therefore, in studying the power structure of Kapahua village, we shall discuss the traditional authority, gaon-panchayat, informal leaders and the political parties. Our main concern is to examine the distribution of power within the single tribal group, namely, the Sonowals.

Gaon - Panchayat

Kapahua, Chakalibaria and Saru-Abhaypuria together constitute a samasthi in the Tengakhat gaon-panchayat. Kapahua is mainly a tribal village comprising Sonowal Kacharis, although there are a few households of the Brahmanas and the Chutiyas. The other two villages are predominantly inhabited by the Ahoms and the Chutiyas respectively. In 1974, when the samasthi was declared reserved for the scheduled tribe, the power structure of Kapahua changed to a considerable extent. Now the Sonowals of Kapahua send their representative in every panchayat election, and the non-tribals find it difficult to take part in the panchayat.

In 1974, a 45 years old Sonowal was elected unopposed from this samasthi as a member of the Tengakhat gaon-panchayat. Another influential Sonowal inclined to contest against him, but finally, on the request of his supporters, he withdrew his nomination. However, this member was supported not only by the Sonowals but also by the Ahoms and the Chutiyas of the other two villages of this samasthi. He is educated upto high school standard and hails from a share-cropper's family. But due to his formal position in the panchayat he has become member of the several local committees, and the government officers at the district and the block levels are known to him. He meets frequently the Additional District Commissioner for supply of kerosene oil in the villages and also
he represents the village before the Agricultural Extension Officer.

Although, the Sonowals of Kapahua dominated the samasthi, they are not dominant in the Tengakhat gaon-panchayat. In 1974, this panchayat consisted of the representatives from various communities. The following table: 34 shows social background of the members of the panchayat.

Table: 34

Cast/tribal background of the office-bearers of the Tengakhat Gaon Panchayat, 1974

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panchayat officials</th>
<th>Caste/tribe</th>
<th>No. of member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillor</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other members</td>
<td>Ahom</td>
<td>7 (Female-1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sonowal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Assamese</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that out of 17 office-bearers of the Tengakhat gaon-panchayat in 1974, 7, 4, 4 and 2 members were Ahoms, Sonowals, Non-Assameses and Muslims respectively. It is interesting to note that the president and the 3 members of the Tengakhat gaon-panchayat belonged to the non-Assamese communities, particularly, they hailed from the families of the ex-plantation labourers. They were elected as the tea plantation workers supported them. The Vice-president was Sonowal who was elected by the members of the panchayat. One Ahom contested for the position of the
vice-president but was defeated.

For detail analysis of all the panchayat office-bearers of Kapahua we intend to include, in our discussion, the gaon-panchayats from 1952 to 1968. During this period, Kapahua village, along with seven other villages, was under the Hatibandha gaon-panchayat. There were 6 leaders who represented the Kapahua village in this panchayat. We have analysed community and class background of these leaders.

In the 1964 and 1968 panchayats, a Sonowal named Chandra Hazarika represented Kapahua village as the president of the Hatibandha gaon-panchayat. He is a school-teacher and hails from a share-cropper's family. But he has acquired considerable power and popularity due to his education and profession. Moreover, being a member of the district organisation of the CPI he receives support of the poor. In the panchayat elections of 1964, an influential Ahom of the area contested against him, but in the 1968 panchayat elections, he was elected unopposed. During the tenure of his office he took up several welfare activities for the villagers like installation of tube-wells, construction of village roads, etc.

In the Hatibandha gaon-panchayat of 1964, another Sonowal named Nanda Bora was elected as a member from Kapahua village. He was primary school educated and belonged to a cultivator's family having only 3.3 acres of land. His popularity was due to his friendship with Chandra Hazarika, the panchayat president. Moreover, he was known as a CPI worker among the poor of the area.

A Sonowal of Kapahua, who was elected unopposed as a member in the 1960 panchayat, was not so influential. But due to his personal qualities he received support from his villagers. He is a share-cropper and has education upto high school standard. But he draws popularity due to several other reasons, such as, love for higher education and relation with the then M.P. of the area. His eldest son and son's wife are science graduates. Both of them are teachers in a high school. His other two sons are college students.
The M.P. is his daughter-in-law's uncle, and he was an elected member of the Parliament consecutively in the first three General Elections as a Congress candidate. Thus, the panchayat member could acquire considerable power and prestige among the villagers. During the tenure of his office he undertook many welfare activities.

In the 1956 Hatibandha gaon-panchayat, a Sonowal of Kapahua was elected as a member. He is a marginal cultivator having 2.7 acres of land and is educated upto school standard. But as he is a CPI party worker he has received considerable popularity in the area. During the tenure of his office he undertook many welfare activities for the villagers like installation of six tube-wells, a financial grant for the primary school of the village, construction of roads, etc. He held many responsible positions in various local committees also.

In the 1952 panchayat elections a Sonowal of Kapahua was elected unopposed. Although he hails from a share-cropper's family having 2.3 acres of land and is educated upto IX standard, he draws prestige due to his friendship with the M.P. of the area. Once he could bring financial assistance for the village school. This has enabled him to wield considerable power and influence in the village.

Besides these panchayat leaders of Kapahua, there is a gaonbura (village headman) in Kapahua. A 29 years old Sonowal, who is educated upto high school standard, holds the office of the gaonbura. His family background helped him in securing this office. His grandfather, great-grandfather and his great-grandfather's younger brother hold the office of the gaonbura. His elder brother, who is educated upto B.A., is a Block Development Officer. Although he is a share-cropper having 4.7 acres of land, his formal position as a gaonbura enables him to enjoy power and influence in the village power structure.

The study of the panchayats from 1952 to 1974 reveals that only the Sonowals represented the village. Although there are a few Brahmanas in Kapahua, they are reluctant today to participate in
the local power politics. All the 7 office-bearers of the panchayat and 1 gaonbura are Sonowals. Six of them are share-croppers and 2 are landowning cultivators. Therefore, the panchayat leaders are not only from the landowning class and higher caste groups. Family background, education, personal qualities, connections with the influential leaders of the higher echelons also help them in securing position of power.

The Mel and the Religious Authority

Under the process of Hinduisation the tribal council of the Sonowals has completely lost its functions, and today mel (caste assembly) has taken its place. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the tribal people evaluate power and influence of its members. Similar to that of the multi-caste and single-caste villages the mel also plays an important role in Kapahua - a tribal village. Even after introduction of the Panchayati Raj the mel is regarded as a means of social control among the Sonowals of Kapahua. Today, some changes are noticed in the institution of mel, which are perhaps, due to the impact of the formal institution on the village polity. The village elders particularly the religious functionaries of the institution of namghar use to constitute the mel. In Kapahua both tribal and village mels function simultaneously. The tribal mel is formed by the members of the particular tribe, and in the village mel both the groups participate. The religious functionaries of the Sonowals who belong to the Auniati satra of the Brahma Samhati differ in many respects from those of the Mayamaria satra of the Kala Samhati. The religious functionaries of the Auniati satra are the medhi, pathaki, tamuli, etc. who constitute the hierarchy of the namghar institution. Today, along with these functionaries influential leaders who draw their power mainly from the secular spheres equally take part in the mel.

Similar to that of the namghar institution of the multi-caste and single-caste villages, namghar also plays vital role in matters of social control in the tribal village also. But today,
functions of the institution are curbed to a considerable extent due to the emergence of various modern sources of power. The Sonowals are divided under five namghars, which are headed by 27 religious elders belonging to the medhi, patheki, tamuli, radhuni, etc. along with several devotees.

Out of 27 religious functionaries, 13 belong to the land-owning families having landholdings from 2.3 to 8.3 acres, 11 belong to the share-cropper's families having landholdings from 1.3 to 5.3 acres and 3 belong to the families of the agricultural labourers having landholdings from 2 to 2.3 acres. As the religious offices are not hereditary people of various classes may occupy the offices in the namghar. The following table 3:35 shows the class background of the functionaries in Kapahua.

Table 3:35

Class background of the religious functionaries of Kapahua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of functionaries</th>
<th>Class background</th>
<th>Landholding (in acre)</th>
<th>Other offices held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Landowner</td>
<td>2.3-8.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Share-cropper</td>
<td>1.3-5.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Agricultural labourer</td>
<td>2-2.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Brahmana households are migrants in Kapahua they do not have the mel of their own. Their disputes are settled by the gaon-panchayat. But a mixed mel, consisting of tribal and caste Hindu members, is organised when persons of the two groups are involved in disputes. But among the Sonowals mel is formed at the namghar level. If necessary, households of two or more namghars
together organise mel, and sometimes, all the households of the village together comprise a village mel.

In the traditional society the mel was organised by the religious functionaries as well as by some influential leaders who did not have formal power and authority. The meetings were usually presided by the head of the namghar. Today, the mel has lost many of its traditional features, and has become formal to a certain extent. The gaonbura and the members of the panchayat, who have formal power and authority, play important role in the functioning of the mel. Today, the gaonbura usually presides over the meetings, and he keeps the proceedings of the meeting in black and white. Therefore, the mel today has acquired formal character to some extent.

In Kapahua, sometimes inter-community mel is also held when persons belonging to different groups are involved in some disputes. Such a tribe-caste mel shows the nature of interactions between the two groups of people. A case may be cited here. In 1975, Makhan Khatoniar, a Brahmana of Kapahua rented his land on share-cropping basis to a persons belonging to the non-Assamese community of his village. The contract for share-cropping was made on the guti-adhi basis, i.e., the produced grains would be equally shared by the two parties. But at the time of harvest the Brahmana landowner complained that the share-cropper did not look after the field properly, as a result cattle destroyed the crops. Therefore, the share-cropper was denied to have his full share. As the share-cropper refused to accept the terms outside the contract, this led to some disputes. The Brahmana lodged a complain to the panchayat representative of Kapahua. Then a mel consisting of 8 influential persons of Kapahua was organised under the leadership of the panchayat representative. Out of the 8 leaders, 4 were Sonowals, 3 were Brahmans, and 1 was Chutiya of Kapahua. The mel meeting was presided over by the panchayat representative, and a Brahmana helped in noting down the proceedings. The decision of the meeting went in favour of the Brahmana landowner. The mel decided that 3/4 th share of the produced grain would be taken by the owner and 1/4th share would be given
to the share-cropper. The decision was accepted by both the parties.

The Influential Leaders

Although there are a few households of the Brahmanas Kapahu is a tribal village due to predominance of its Sonowal population. The Sonowals are divided into five namghars which do not play any important role in the village polity. However, there is a good number of influential persons among the Sonowals, but the Brahmanas have only one influential person. They are drawn from among the members of the old as well as young generations. They derive power from diverse sources like education, white-collar occupation, well-off economic position, personal qualities, landholdings, political linkages, etc.

In Kapahu, there are 18 influential leaders. Among them 5 are Sonowals who belong to the cultivating families having landholdings from 2.3 to 9.3 acres. They are educated up to high school, and their age varies from 45 to 70 years. A few of them are marginal cultivators who have become influential leaders. But those who have considerable landholdings enjoy much power due to their well-off economic position.

Other 5 influential leaders are also Sonowals. Their main occupation is cultivation and they own land between 2.3 and 14 acres. Their age varies from 30 to 66 years. But secondary sources of income from modern occupations enable them to have a better style of life. Four of them are teachers in the nearby primary schools and have education up to high school and college standard. Other influential leader is working in the government office. One of these leaders is the richest man of the village who has 14 acres of land. He has become an influential person due to his well-off economic position and teaching profession. However, a combination of attributes such as education, occupation and well-off economic position has enabled them to wield power in the village.
Seven Sonowals who are recognised as influential leaders belong to the share-cropping families. Two of them enjoy respect of the villagers due to their education and modern occupations. Both of them are young and are teachers in the village school. Another 25 years old and college going influential Sonowal of Kapahua is a member of the "Sadar Assam Sonowal Kachari Chhatra Sanstha". In 1974, he attended the conference of this organisation on behalf of the "Tengakhat Chhatra Sub-committee" consisted of seven leading Sonowal students of the locality. Due to his connections with the organisation he has become very popular among the Sonowal students of this region. A middle aged Sonowal, who is moderately educated is a share-cropper. He has also acquired considerable power in the village.

Besides, there are 3 females who have become influential leaders among the females of the region. One of them is president of the "Mahila Samiti" in Kapahua. The "Mahila Samiti" was established in 1962 to undertake welfare activities among the womenfolk. She is educated upto high school standard, and teaches in a primary school. The most influential female of the village is a 23 years old secretary of the "Mahila Samiti" who is educated upto high school standard. She has been elected as a member of the "Anchalik Mahila Samiti".

Besides the Sonowal leaders, there is only one influential person among the Brahmanas of Kapahua who is a widely accepted leader in the area. He is a trained graduate teacher and does not have any landed property. But due to his education, occupation and personal qualities he has acquired considerable acceptability and prestige in the area. This Brahmana is the Chairman of the Tengkhat Co-operative Society, and secretary of the governing body of the Tengakhat College, of the Tengakhat Sahitya Sabha and of the Dibrugarh District Teachers' Association. As a district representative once he represented in the conference of the "All Assam Teachers' Association" held in Gauhati city.
Networks and Political Power

For an understanding of networks and power in Kapahua we shall discuss here the General Elections of 1972. In the General Elections of 1972, Kapahua along with Chakalibaria was under the Hatibandha Assembly constituency. It has already been mentioned that four political parties, namely, the Congress (R), the CPI, the Socialist and the Janasangh contested the elections from this constituency in 1972.

The Sonowals of Kapahua are politicised like the non-tribals of the single-caste village, but they are more politicised than the people of the multi-caste village. This could be observed from the activities of the political parties in the General Elections of 1972 and the participation of the Sonowals in such activities. However, the members of the older generation of Kapahua have poor perception of the political parties and their ideologies, but the members of the younger generation are highly politicised. They have close connections with the political parties and are aware about their ideologies. In all the General Elections the Congress was able to return its candidates from this constituency. The General Elections of 1972 was quite interesting due to the split within the Congress party into the Congress (R) and the Congress (O). The Congress (O) did not sponsor its candidate in 1972 for the Assembly seat. In the earlier four General Elections the Congress party nominee Manik Das, a Sonowal, won the elections. But in the elections of 1972 he did not contest.

A discussion of the candidates and their political parties and the leaders of Kapahua village from whom the former derive support shows the nature of political networks and power at the village level. In the General Elections of 1972, the Congress (R) set up a candidate named Indreswar Khaund who was returned from this constituency with a thumping majority. Later on, he became the Agriculture Minister. Although Khaund is an Ahom of the Matak sect he has received more than 60 per cent of votes from the Sonowals of Kapahua. His popularity in Kapahua largely depends upon the four Sonowals...
who are active workers of the Congress party. Among them the most popular leader is Dimbeswar Sonowal who is a member of the gaon-panchayat. Due to his position in the local political arena he is approached by the Congress candidate, and he takes active part in the elections. After victory of the Congress candidate Dimbeswar Sonowal has become more powerful due to his connections with the M.L.A. of the constituency.

A Sonowal female who is secretary of the "Mahila Samiti" has worked for the Congress candidate. She has influence over the females of Kapahua as well as of the neighbouring villages. She has been a female "vote bank" for the candidates of the Congress party. Her elder brother who is an influential leader of the village also works for the Congress candidate. Although these three leaders actively supported the Congress (R) candidate in the Assembly elections, they favoured the Congress (O) candidate in the Parliament elections of 1972 as he happened to be their relative. Connections with the elected members of the Assembly and the Parliament are the most important source of power in the village community.

Another Sonowal leader of Kapahua, who is a school teacher, worked for the Congress (R) candidate. He does not have any political background, but his education, modern profession and ritual position in the Vaisnavite institution have enabled him to have control over a large number of villagers. A large number of people who are motivated by him, voted for the Congress (R) candidate.

Besides the Sonowal leaders, there is a Brahmana who is a supporter of the Congress (R) candidate. His influence over the villagers enabled the Congress (R) candidate to receive a large number of votes. He also does not have political background, but as a social worker he is very much popular in the area. The M.L.A. personally likes him very much, and this has been the source of his power.

Besides the Congress party, the CPI is considerably popular in the tribal village. Since Independence the CPI has gradually
been gaining popularity in the region although its candidates are always defeated by the Congress rivals. In the General Elections of 1972, Tilok Gogoi, an Ahom contested the elections for Assembly on behalf of the CPI, but he lost. However, the popularity of the CPI in this constituency has been gradually increasing due to Chandra Hazarika, a Sonowal leader of Kapahua. He is a middle aged school-teacher and is a member of the Dibrugarh district organisation of the CPI since 1960. Hazarika is influential in the region due to his education, occupation and social work among the poor peasants. Twice he held the position of the president in the Hatibandha gaon-panchayat. He possesses a fair knowledge about the CPI ideology, and under his influence a good number of people of the neighbouring villages have become members of the CPI. On behalf of the CPI, he organised three important movements, namely, the Assam Food Movement, the Language Movement and the Oil Refinery Movement in the Tengakhat region for which he was put thrice into jail. There are five active workers working with Hazarika as members of the CPI.

In the General Elections of 1972, the Janasangh and the Socialist candidates, namely, Madan Beria and Jatin Hazarika respectively lost the elections.

We have discussed about the Assembly elections of 1972, and have examined the networks and political activities in three villages. Although these villages come under the two Assembly constituencies, altogether these two constitute one Parliament constituency. The examination of the Parliament elections of 1972 reflects some interesting picture relating to networks and political activities of the power elites of the three villages. In the General Elections of 1972 for Parliament five political parties contested. These parties were: the Congress (O), the Congress (R), the CPI, the Janasangh and the Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad (UARP). There was a triangular contest between the candidates of the Congress (O), the Congress (R) and the UARP, and the Congress (R) candidate was returned from this constituency. The election was
interesting as the Congress party had divided into two groups known as Congress (R) and Congress (O). This split divided the people of the region as well. The Congress (R) set up a candidate who was Kayastha by caste. The candidate was new to the area as he did not contest any election previously from this constituency. But he received a wide ranging support. Most of the villagers of Hatkhola, except a few, cast their votes to the Congress (R) candidate mainly for two reasons — considering his caste and political affiliation to the Congress (R). Although the Congress (O) set up its old candidate who was returned from this constituency in the last four General Elections consecutively, but he lost the elections for the first time. The candidate was Sonowal and was inhabitant of a nearby village. Most of the Sonowals of Kapahua cast their votes in favour of the Congress (O) candidate. Many of them worked sincerely for his victory. The Sonowals of Kapahua favoured him due to their primordial ties, his long political background as an M.P. of the area and many welfare works done by him for the people of the area.

One of the most popular political parties of upper Assam is the Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad, which is, nowadays, increasingly getting popularity among the people of the region. In the beginning, the party was known as Tai Mongolian Rajya Parishad organised exclusively by the Ahoms. The name was changed latter on into the Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad (UARP) to attract the people of various ethnic groups of Mongoloid origin. Consequently, the aims and the objectives of the organisation were also changed to fulfil the interests of the various ethnic groups. Although in the beginning it was started with a parochial base and latter on it was changed to a greater extent, this party could not attract the attention of all the Mongoloid groups of the region. The party is mainly organised by the Ahom leaders. Therefore, leaders of the various other communities are not inclined to support it. Once the UARP party launced an unsuccessful movement demanding a separate state for the Mongoloid people of upper Assam. Its failure was perhaps due to the lack of strong support from the other communities.
In the General Elections of 1972, Lucy Gogoi, an Ahom lady, contested as a candidate of the UARP party. There was a keen contest between the UARP and the Congress (R), and the candidate of the UARP received the second majority votes from this constituency. Most of the Ahoms of the constituency voted for Sm.Gogoi. The Ahoms of Hatkhola and Chakalibaria cast their votes to the Congress (R) in the Assembly elections, and voted for the UARP in the Parliament elections. Even the Ahoms of Chakalibaria who voted for the CPI in the Assembly elections, sincerely worked for the UARP candidate in the Parliament elections. Among the most influential persons of Chakalibaria, who actively supported the UARP candidate, was an Ahom. Recently he has acquired considerable power due to his connection with the UARP party. He is a member of this party. He hails from a big landowning family of the village and is a law student. However, the Sonowals of Kapahua although belong to the Mongoloid ethnic group, they did not cast their ballots in favour of the UARP party.

In the above discussion we have analysed the distribution of power in Kapahua. It has been observed that power is distributed only among the members of the Sonowal tribe. Power is not determined by caste/tribe and other primordial factors. It is mainly determined by a combination of factors, such as, landholding, economic position, education, occupation, social work and connections with block and district level leaders. Variations in these factors and their consequent combination refer to variations in the power of persons and families in the rural Assam.

Power and influence of the Sonowals of Kapahua spread over the three villages which have been included under a "scheduled tribe reserved area" in the 1974 panchayat. Some members of the Sonowals, thus, could wield power, and their power has extended over the neighbouring villages. Therefore, statutory panchayat enables them to have monopoly over power. This refers to the "regional dominance" of the Sonowals. But it is not meant to say that all the members of the Sonowals are dominant in all respects what
Srinivas mentions regarding "dominant caste"\textsuperscript{1}. We prefer to call it as "regional dominance" of the "dominant individuals"\textsuperscript{2}.

1. For the characteristic features of "dominant caste" see M.N. Srinivas, "The dominant caste in Rampura", in American Anthropologist, 61, 1, 1959, pp. 1-16.