SOCIAL STRATIFICATION UNDER COLONIALISM

Colonial era experienced the growth and development of various social classes which were not there in pre-colonial era in India as well as in Assam. Emergence and role of classes became meaningful during colonial period due to the basic social change in which they had to play a crucial role in regard to various political and social issues. The process of class formation in Assam during colonial period was bound up with the general process of class formation all over India.

The British annexed India as well as Assam for commercial purposes. With the advent of the British, different parts of the country became economically transformed along with political subjugation. New social classes came into being earlier in those places which were the first to come under British influence. Since the Britishers first entered Bengal, new social classes emerged in Bengal first. "As a result of the alliance of British rule with landlordism a new social basis was created in Bengal, Within a few years of its introduction the permanent settlement had stimulated subinfeudation. It became a marked feature in the land system of Bengal."
by 1806-1807. One of the objectives of the permanent settlement was stated to be the creation of Bengali middle class". ¹

The Britishers created private property in land in the form of Zamindary system. In agrarian sector landlords or zamindars occupied top most position. Introduction of the system of leasing land created the class of tenants and sub-tenants. With the grant of the power to purchase and sell land, a class of absentee landlords emerged. Absentee landlords were connected with collection of rent. Absentee landlords, merchants and money lenders formed an intermediary group. Money lenders acted as intermediaries between the peasants and the market, zamindars, absentee landlords, tenants under zamindars, peasant proprietors divided into upper, middle and lower strata, modern middle class money lenders etc. were some of the new classes which evolved in the agrarian sector of Indian society in Colonial period. ²

In the beginning, the number of big zamindars was small. There was, however, a very large class of

small zamindars and tenure holders who formed a middle class. These tenure holders and other middle-class people, who stood between the zamindars and the cultivators, formed the socio-economic structure of Bengal during Colonial rule.

With the establishment of educational institutions, professional classes with a job seeking motive emerged at the all India level. Professional classes generally emerged out of those who had higher positions in caste hierarchy also. High caste Hindus got the benefit of higher education much earlier and formed the educated middle-class group. Educated middle class refers to those people who received higher education through the medium of English and engaged themselves in various professions which came into being as a result of British rule. They engaged themselves either in government offices or in business. The Brahmins were the first to acquire modern education and to emerge as a group of modern intelligentsia.

New type of political and administrative system, education, cash economy were some of the factors which helped in the emergence of new classes in India as well as in Assam. These new classes emerged with the advent
of the British. "The emergence of new social classes in India was the direct consequence of the establishment of a new social economy, a new type of state system and a state administrative machinery and the spread of new education during the British rule".

Various factors were responsible for the emergence of classes among which cash economy was one of the most important. Monetization of the economy brought changes in the society by replacing the old practice of trade and exchange with a new system. With the monetization of economy, the barter system was replaced by money. When money came to the scene, inequality increased among the people. Those who had money became the owners of means of production. Whoever possessed more money acquired more wealth and thereby occupied higher position in society.

Education was another important factor in the growth of middle class. With the establishment of educational institutions by the British a few people...
with good financial background, got the chance of educating themselves. Assam witnessed the growth of a educated middle class by the turn of the nineteenth century. They formed a distinct group. They availed of the opportunity of working in newly established tea plantations. Their social status was such that they were neither the ruling class nor the labouring class.

The British rulers selected political and administrative personnel from among the local people for smooth running of the administrative machinery. These local agents enjoyed power, status and wealth on the basis of which they were differentiated from the masses. 'Rai Bahadur' and 'Rai Sahab' were the titles conferred on the Hindu political agents, 'Khan Bahadur' and 'Khan Sahab' were the titles bestowed on the Muslim political agents. Knighthood was also conferred on some local people who distinguished themselves in serving the imperial interests.

The social structure of pre-British Assamese society was feudal in nature with the king at the top and the labouring masses at the bottom of social ladder. Hinduism was the main religion during Ahom period.
Therefore, division of society on the basis of caste system prevailed. But caste system had not evolved in Assam to such an extent as in the rest of India. It was superimposed on another social structure based on compulsory labour service and bureaucracy. Caste system prevails in Assam but it is not as rigid as in other parts of India because the tribal rulers in earlier ages did not maintain any caste differentiation. Caste system again failed to effectively penetrate into the Assamese society due to the influence of Islam and also due to the influence of Vaishnavism. The Vaishnavite religion was initiated and propounded by Shankardev (1449-1568). "The Vaishnavite religion, which cuts across caste and creed distinctions and is distinguished by catholic and liberal (sic) attitudes, is the main religion of the Assamese ... even very recent sociological studies conducted by the Dibrugarh University among the rural communities have indicated that education, occupation and wealth are more important than caste or creed in determining one's social status and influence."  

During the days of feudal Ahom rule, a privileged microscopic minority formed the upper stratum.

of the society. Prior to the advent of the British, the ruling nobility and the Brahmans were the holders of distinct status in society, and they enjoyed many privileges. First of all, the British abolished the privileges of nobility. Consequently the king and the nobility of the Ahom society lost their social and political status. They lost their political authority as well as their social privileges as soon as the British assumed political power. The social status of the Ahom nobility deteriorated with the abolition of the paik system.

"The abolition of the paik system, the mainstay of the aristocracy, had a further deteriorating effect upon the social and economic life of the nobility of Assam who suffered most of all at the turn of events." 5 The paiks were emancipated from their bonds. They were no longer required to serve their masters as before. Reform measures adopted by the British freed Assamese society to some extent from the shackles of traditional practices.

Emergence of middle class in Assam cannot be explained outside the imperial context. British Colonization restructured the Assamese society. Emergence of the new social classes in Assam was the consequence of the new type of economic, administrative, legal and educational system introduced by the British. The process of Colonization aimed at restructuring this society and monetizing its economy with a view to making both more relevant and useful to imperial interests. The administration, the land revenue and taxation policy as well as super and infra structural growth—all were geared during the 19th century to the major task of transforming the valley into England’s agricultural estate. It was in that process that the Assamese middle class, consisting of businessmen, professionals and salaried employees was born from within the given class structure of the old society.  

Classes emerged in Assamese society during the British rule out of the old class division. They included rich, middle and poor peasants, landholders, and new middle class comprising tea garden owners, lawyers, teachers, owners of business establishments and

service holders, Assamese middle class as a class came to the socio-political scene of Assam very late. Due to Colonial constraints and other socio-economic factors, growth and development of middle class throughout nineteenth century remained feebile. The Britishers did not allow local entrepreneurs to develop. Maniram Dewan's case is illustrative of this. Initially, he collaborated with the British. But later on, when he started his own tea garden, Britishers discouraged him. In 1857, Maniram was executed, when he plotted to overthrow the British. "It will be an exaggeration to say that the British fostered the growth of the middle class without restriction. In fact, anything that disturbed the tenor of their colonial exploitation was destroyed".  

The British rule in Assam Valley integrated the area into their colonial empire. Politically and culturally, Assam came under the immediate impact of the Bengal renaissance. "The impact of Bengal on the life and culture of the Assamese was also not small. The process which began since the closing years of the Ahom rule continued without any break till the close of the

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nineteenth century. In spite of their animosity against linguistic domination, the intelligentsia was not slow in adopting Bengali dress, customs, usages and even food habits. The Assamese middle class since then had grown in line with the middle class in Bengal and elsewhere in India. At that time the middle class in India was under the strong impact of its counterpart in England.

The present century started with a challenge to the old social order where aristocracy was the mainstay of government. Ascription and not merit was the basis of the administrative machinery. A group of scribes carried on official work during the Ahom period. People belonging to the nobility group of Ahom period did not form the middle-class group of the British period. The landed caste Hindus, who had served the Ahom rulers as their scribes, got the privilege of educating themselves during the colonial era.

"The new middle class was not formed from the ranks of the former nobility. The advantages of British education and the new avenues of employment and trade were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the former rulers as their clerks and bureaucrats."  

The Britishers wanted to establish in Assam a new administrative system different from that of the earlier one. They needed educated men to run the administrative machinery efficiently. Since number of such qualified people in Assam was insignificant at that time, they brought in Bengali middle class or baboo class (bhadralok) to Assam for meeting their administrative requirements. The Bengali middle class was the first group in India to have the privilege of educating itself in British established educational institutions. Educated Bengali middle class got a chance to work as clerks and bureaucrats not only in Bengal but in the neighbouring areas too. By the beginning of the present century these educated people of Bengal got an easy access in the job market of neighbouring areas of Assam, Bihar and Orissa. This embittered the local youths of these places. The enthusiasm with which the Bengal bhadralok accepted and promoted English language education, in marked contrast to the response of the landed elites in the surrounding provinces, gave them the lion's share of the new opportunities for professional, administrative and clerical employment throughout eastern and northern India.  

In medieval society of North-East India, generally three broad categories of people could be found. First group comprised the privileged aristocracy. The peasantry, including the artisans, formed the second group. The servile class consisting of slaves, formed the third group. Cultivation was the primary and sometimes an auxiliary occupation of the peasantry. It was the major source of their income. Initially, traders and artisans did not form a distinct social group. Slowly and gradually, they emerged as a separate group.

High caste landowners and rich peasants, who were not much affected by the British rule, formed the base on which the modern middle-class businessman emerged. Some of the privileges enjoyed by these landowners were no doubt curtailed by the British but not all privileges. Privileged high caste landowners, other big landowners who managed to survive, and those peasants who exploited labour or combined crafts and trading activities with agriculture they all constituted the potential seed-bed for new middle class businessmen to emerge.¹¹

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With the establishment of industries in Assam by the British, a class of industrialists and proletariat emerged. Initially, growth and development of industrial middle class in Assam was very slow. "The middle class in Assam originated mainly in the administrative, educational and legal system established by the British rulers and not in trade and industrial sector. The growth of the industrial middle class in Assam was very slow and tenuous because of the slow growth of industrial economy in the state and low degree of local participation in economic and industrial pursuits". In the urban sector, traders, shopkeepers, doctors, engineers and professors emerged. The basic economic transformation brought by the British government resulted in the emergence of these new classes. "Primarily, the new classes came into existence as a result of the basic economic transformation brought about by various acts of the British government (such as the new type of land relations), the penetration of Indian society by commercial and other forces from the outside capitalist world, and the establishment of modern industries in India".

12. K. Alam, "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam", in Bijnoreti Roy, ed., The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in NE India (New Delhi, 1983), p. 90.

In Assam, a merchant class emerged in the commercial sector whose primary function was mainly import and export of goods. This numerically small and financially weak commercial middle-class group had to contend with strong Marwari competition. Establishment of factories and tea plantations resulted in the emergence of an industrial middle-class group. The educated middle class comprised doctors, teachers, professors, and managers. Thus, British Colonialism led to the emergence of an educated, commercial, and industrial middle class in the Assamese society. Assamese society witnessed a structural transformation under Colonialism.

Until the 1850's, the Assamese middle class did not participate in any major contemporary issue. Middle class in Assam emerged as a politically conscious group by the later part of the nineteenth century.

When Britishers established tea plantations and other such establishments, they needed some people to work there as laborers. But only a few local businessmen came out with the needed capital to start such business. The Ahoms were also not business oriented. Nobility did not even have capital to start business
due to their pauperisation by the British. Paucity of
capital was an important factor which hampered the growth
and development of entrepreneurial group in Assam in the
initial stage of the Colonial era. Most of the tea gardens
in Assam were owned and managed by European planters.

Tea industry attracted a few Assamese middle-
class businessmen, who had experience of cultivation.
Maniram Deben opened up two small tea gardens by 1653.
Between 1859-60, the number of tea planters in upper Assam
rose to six. Towards the end of nineteenth century the
number rose to over two dozen. The leading Assamese tea
planters of that time included Hemchur Barua, Jagannath
Barua, Dimarath Bezerum, Kalprasad Chaliha, Jodev
Chaliha, Devinharan Barua, Haramba Prasad Barua, Halbhog
Barua and many others. They along with some others emerged
as middle-class group by the end of nineteenth century.
Though many Assamese people established their own tea
plantations, yet they had to depend on the British for
technical know-how and processing of tea. Britishers
discouraged those, who tried to come up as planter. It
was only since late nineteenth and early twentieth
century that small and independent Assamese enterprises
started growing.
Lack of capital, British discouragement, competition from non-Assamese traders, distaste of Assamese for petty trades and addiction to opium were some of the important factors for the slow growth of Assamese middle class, during colonial period. Petty trades were carried on by a group of people from Bengal which the local Assamese people generally hesitated to do. Some people belonging to lower class in the Brahmaputra Valley, especially, in Barpeta, Sarthebari, Sualkuchi, engaged themselves in petty trades as blacksmiths, potters etc. But the high caste Assamese Hindus had a distaste for trade.

Trades in Assam during the British rule were dominated by outsiders, especially, the Marwaris of Rajasthan. The local traders, however, failed to compete with the Marwaris who were financially stronger than the Assamese petty traders (popularly known as Soudr or Moodoi). The Assamese merchants and traders were represented by the title Soudr or Moodoi. But the operations of these Assamese traders were of limited value and quantity and even in the early British period they could not stand in competition against the powerful Marwari traders and in course of time their successors
gave up the trading profession and took to agriculture and other pursuits".  

Assamese people in general were addicted to opium. Towards the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the present century a high per capita opium consumption persisted in the Brahmaputra Valley. "As such as 1,557 maunds out of the provincial consumption of 1,566 maunds in 1890-91 and 1,201 maunds out of 1,291 maunds in 1900-01 were consumed there alone".  

... gradual enhancement of its prices reduced the number of opium eaters. When the evil effects of opium consumption was widely felt then poppy cultivation was prohibited. "Prior to 1860, no restriction was placed upon the cultivation of the poppy. But the evil effects of unrestrained indulgence in opium were undeniable ..."  

Assamese middle class as a class, came up late onto the Assamese political scene. Middle class of the

14. K. Alam, "The Emergence of Industrial Middle Class in Assam", P.96.  
Assamese society emerged during the British Colonial Rule. The nobility group of the Ahoms did not emerge as the middle-class group during colonial era, because it lost many of its privileges with the advent of the British. During Ahom rule paiks were the manual labourers who rendered services to the state. The emancipation of the paiks by the British gave a severe blow to the Ahom nobility.

The Assamese middle class is the most articulate section of the society. It has been providing leadership in all major socio-economic and political issues of Assam since Colonial era till today. Middle class occupies an important place in Assamese society because they voice the demands of the Assamese people in general.