CHAPTER VII

THE EARLY BEGINNERS: THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE ASAMESE MIDDLE CLASS

The work of determining the origins or the roots of a new class in a society is bound to be a very complex and complicated process for there cannot be one single determinant for the formation of a class. But, in the main, the origins of a viable new class can be sought either in the agrarian sector, or in the trading and commercial sector, or in the industrial sector in any society. In the case of class formations in Assamese society we have, however, seen that these sectors were not developed enough in the nineteenth century to provide the basis of a new class formation. We have discussed in the course of our fourth chapter that from the advent of British rule in 1826 to the end of the nineteenth century there was a definite trend towards stagnation of the Assamese economy. In the agricultural sector

*As enough data is not available on Mausadars and Satras either in official documents or published and unpublished works to enable us to interpret their true positions in the society, the major part of the analysis in this chapter is based on recorded interviews with a few Mausadars in Assam and the Gossaiins and a few other officials of the four most affluent Satras in Assam. The questions on the basis of which these interviews were conducted are given in Appendix A."
there was very little extension of cultivation, the number of ploughs and cattle had remained almost static and there was no progress in the technology of cultivation. There is no evidence to show that rapid accumulation in the hands of one section was taking place in the agrarian sector, and in fact, there was no significant polarisation of land holdings taking place, which could have heralded the growth of new classes in the agrarian sector. So far as the commercial sector is concerned, we have already seen that the chances of a new class emerging in the Assamese society from that sector were even more remote. There was no indigenous merchant class in Assam, the only notable merchants in the pre-British days were the merchants of the district of Kamrup\(^1\) who traded primarily in mustard amongst other articles of trade. But with the coming of the British and the opening up of the country these indigenous traders gradually lost their trade to the more affluent and enterprising Marwari or Kanva (as they are locally called in Assam) traders. Besides, as there was practically no commercialisation of the Assamese economy either through a change in the crop-pattern or extension of markets and improvement of communications, there were no possibilities for a new class to

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1. These merchants were mainly from the present Barpeta subdivision, See A. Guha.
emerge from the commercial sector. With the agrarian and commercial sectors so underdeveloped, added to which was the fact that caste based occupation was almost totally absent in Assam, the possibilities of an industrial development in Assam which could bring about new class formations in the society, were almost totally ruled out. Thus, the necessary conditions in the traditional Marxist sense of the term for the emergence of new classes in a developed feudal society or capitalist society, did not exist in the nineteenth century Assamese society. Therefore, the conditions for the emergence of a new class in Assam has to be sought elsewhere, and these were present in the super-imposition of a colonial economy with the advent of British rule, and in the economic policies and administrative network which was set up for the maintenance of colonialism in Assam. It was this colonial set-up which created the base for the growth of new classes, particularly the middle-class, in Assam. There is no gainsaying the fact that the middle class is a product of the capitalist era but the

2. Census of India (Assam) Report 1901; B.C. Allen, District Gazettesers op. cit.
3. This is where Marxism has to be adapted to the special conditions prevailing in countries which come under a colonial economy. This adaptation can be done on the lines developed by V.L. Allen in Social Analysis, p. 205-206.
necessary conditions for its emergence can be different in different situations, and so in the case of Assam colonialism presented the necessary conditions for the growth of the middle class. Had it not been for British imperialism the history of developments in Assam as in the rest of India would have been very different indeed.

It has been discussed in the third chapter of our work that the advent of the British heralded the end of the six hundred year long rule of the Ahom monarchs. Through our discussion of the Ahom economy we have already shown that the Ahom nobility did not develop on the lines of a classical feudal nobility, and so after the fall of the Ahom monarchy the nobility did not remain as a class and, in fact, it lost its influence and power as well. The Ahom nobility was not in a position therefore to reap any benefits from the establishment of British rule or to take advantage of the facilities which colonial rule brought to the country. Furthermore, during Ahom rule this nobility was absolutely indifferent to any savings or accumulation of any type of wealth because it was secure about its hereditary enjoyment of office and status. But the Ahom officials like the Baruas and Phukans were more conscious about the fact that
they must save and accumulate some wealth in the family because their offices did not come to them hereditarily and so their status and position in the society were not so secure. So, during the tenure of office these officers would make use of their official perks in extending their cultivated lands and accumulating any other kind of wealth that they could for their families. It is however difficult to ascertain if any landed property had accumulated in the hands of the officers because, as we have already discussed, during Ahom rule there were no rights of transfer and sale of land, and the land in the final count belonged to the state. But towards the end of Ahom rule the power of the king, which had become very weak, was no longer there to interfere in the wealth of the high officers, and with the advent of colonial rule and the conferring of the rights of private property, these high officials were able to retain most of their official perks (in land) as their

4. See also H. Gohain, "Asomor Madhyabitta Samajar Itahas" in Sabitya Aru Chattra op. cit., p. 20.

5. It must be remembered here, however, that during the heyday of Ahom rule, the monarchy would not have accepted with equanimity the growing riches of the officialdom and there are instances in the Burenjis where royal wrath was exhibited against the affluence of an officer. But with the weakening of Ahom rule, the last generation of the officers were freer to retain their wealth.
personal property. Wealth which they had acquired in the shape of moveable property was already there with them. Of course, it must be remembered that these officers were affluent only in the relative context of Assam's economy, and their affluence could not be compared to that of the Zamindars and Jagirdars of other parts of India.

Thus at the beginning of British rule in Assam the well to do people belonged to the grade of high officials of the Ahom administration, the nobles by and large, having become almost redundant in the new system. For instance Maniram Dewan's father Ram Datta Barua had a large amount of gold and silver coins hoarded in his house.6 Paraschuram Barua, who, at the time of the advent of the British, was the officer in charge of the trade that went on between Bengal and Assam through the Hadira Chokev (out post), had so much money in the family that at the time of the division of the joint family one brother could ask for as much as nine lakhs of rupees.7 There were other officers of the Ahom government like Dinanath Bazbarua who was a Bazbarua,

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during the reign of Purandar Singha (1818-1819), Chana Shyam Kharghoria Phukan, and Kashi Nath Tamuli Phukan, both officers of Purandar Singha also, who were some of the affluent people at the beginning of British rule in Assam. These officers were more useful to the British Government than the Ahom nobles, because the officers, through long usage, had expertise in managing accounts and taking care of administration in revenue and other matters connected with the land. So these officers were the people who were called upon to help the British in the new administrative set up. In the absence of a class of rich zamindars or a class of merchants who had money enough to take advantage of the new colonial set up it was the families of the British created high revenue officers like sheristadars, Sadr Amin and Mauzadars, and the traditional Satra institutions of Assam which had the resources to give western education to their sons and make them qualified to take part in the colonial administration. From amongst the revenue officials the Mauzadars were a more important section because numerically they were stronger than the other officers. According to an official calculation that we have, in 1894 there were 165 Mauzas in

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Kamrup, Mangaldai, Nowgong, Golaghat, Jorhat, and Sibsagar (Sadr). Basing on this it can be deduced that in the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley there would be near about 300 Mauzas in 1894. This seems to be near the truth because the Mauzadar of the Charigaon Mauza of Jorhat, during our interview with him had also stated that there were about 300 Mauzas in Assam. If this was the number in 1894 then in the 1840s the number would have been bigger because it was found advisable by the British Government to reduce the number of Mauzas by increasing their size. The Mauzadars therefore formed a very large segment of the well-to-do section of the Assamese society in the 1840s whereas during the same period there were only 6 Sadr Amins and 17 musifs in the Brahmaputra Valley.

"From the very early days of British rule in Assam, the method of collecting the revenue adopted was an agency

9. Revenue A. Progs. July 1895, Nos. 131-312, No.3894R, 27th June, 1894. In the calculations made of the number of Mauzas, in this file some areas were exempted because the list was drawn up in response to a letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the D.Cs of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Sibsagar. In this letter the D.Cs were asked to prepare a statement of the areas which were cadastrally surveyed till 31st March 1892. So many areas of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Sibaigar and the whole of Lakhimpur were exempted from the statement.


11. Ibid., p.383.
known originally as the *chaudhuri* and later the *mauzadar*.\(^{12}\)

The British wanted that the *mauzadars* or *chaudhuris* should be men who would be able not only to collect the revenue but also command respect and obedience from the local people. With this end in view the government laid down that in order to be chosen a *mauzadar* a person must be "an influential and well-to-do resident of his mauza."\(^{13}\) It has already been discussed that at the time of the annexation of Assam to the British dominion the influential and relatively better off people in Assamese social life were the high officers of the Ahom government like the Baruas, Phukans and Rajkhwas. Therefore, these were the people who had to be appointed *Chaudhuris* or *Mauzadars* if local influential men were wanted. There were of course exceptional cases like in the Saikhowa *Mauza* of Sadiya sub-division in the easternmost corner of the Brahmaputra Valley, where the Buragohain and his descendants were made *mauzadars*, they being the most important local people in the area.\(^{14}\) The most convenient mode of appointing a

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Introduction by William Ward, Chief Commissioner of Assam 1891–1896, P. LXXXV.


Chaudhuri or Mauzadar was to select a person who had been appointed as an officer in that particular territory by the Ahom kings. This can also be corroborated by some data which was collected while interviewing a few mauzadars in Upper Assam and also from some biographical sources. For instance the Mauzadar of the Khongia Mauza in Jorhat said in an interview that the first Mauzadar of their Mauza, Krishnanath Khongia Baruah was given the title of Khongia Baruah by the Ahom King and he was made a Baruah over the areas of Titabor, Khongia, and Thengal in Jorhat. It was therefore but natural that he should be given the Khongia Mauzadarship by the British as he was the man with the greatest local influence in that area. In another interview with the present Mauzadar of the Silakhuti Mauza in Sibsagar, it was ascertained that the father of the first Mauzadar of that Mauza, Durgeswar Rajkhowa was an Ahom officer and was given landed property in the Ratigarh area (which was under his supervision) by the king as part

15. The present Mauzadar of the Khongia Mauza, Shaktinath Barua, was interviewed on 6th January 1986 at Jorhat and the interview was recorded. Excerpts of a translated version of the interview are given in Appendix B, Part I.

16. The Mauza has been in their family all through. Refer Appendix B, Part I.

17. Umesh Chandral Rajkhowa, the present Mauzadar of the Silakhuti Mauza was interviewed at his residence in Sibsagar town on 8th January 1986, See Appendix B, Part II.
of his official perks, and he later became a treasury officer during British rule. His son, Indrajeet Rajkhowa got the Mauza of Silakhati. Further, from the autobiography of a Sadr Amin, Harakanta Barua, it can be seen that the father of Harakanta Barua was a Majinder Barua of the Ahom king and so as an important and high official of the Ahom administration he had considerable local influence and expertise in preparing royal declaration and such other documents. The British government therefore considered the sons of Radhakanta Majinder Barua fit enough to manage a Pargana and so settled the Hajo Pargana in Kamrup district with Harakanta Barua who later became a Sadr Amin. Thus it can be seen that the first Mausadars and Chaudhuries appointed by the British were in some way or the other linked with the last of the Ahom official hierarchy. The Mausadar had also to have some amount of relative wealth, and besides being a requirement this was a necessity also because a Mausadar had to "pay the entire revenue due from

19. The Majinder-Baruas of the Ahom kings were in charge of all important correspondence of the king in matters relating to external affairs and all other highly confidential matters.
20. We stress the point of the last of the Ahom officers, because as we have already discussed, the Ahom official hierarchy was not a hereditary one.
his Mauza by June every year."21 If he could not pay the revenue he would lose his Mauza and so, often he had to pay some amount from his own pocket if the entire revenue had not come in on time in order to retain his Mauza.22 So most of the early Mauzadars had to have some wealth which they could show as their personal property. For instance the first Mauzadar of the Khongia Mauza had about 100 bighas of landed property.23 This may not have been a very big asset by the standards of landed property in many other parts of India, but in the particular economic situation prevailing in Assam in the nineteenth century 100 bighas would be considered a very big holding.24 The other mauzadars we interviewed also testified to the effect that the first Mauzadar of their Mauza had some landed property which could stand them as a security in running the Mauza.25

The Mauzadars "received a commission of 10% on the first ten thousand and 5% on the balance of the revenue paid by him."26 The earning of a Mauzadar were therefore

22. See K. Bordoloi (ed) op.cit. pp.50, 61.
23. Refer Appendix B, Part I.
25. See Appendix B for interviews with Mauzadars.
quite impressive particularly in the context of economic development of Assam in the first decades of British rule in the state. For instance, if the total demand of a Mauza was around Rs. 20,000/- than the yearly income of a Mauzadar would be on an average Rs. 1500-2000/-. That would give a monthly income of roughly 125/- to 170/- rupees. This is a very tentative calculation for a relatively small Mauza. The earnings of the Mauzadars of larger Mauzas would be even greater. Hunter in his Statistical Account of Assam had calculated that on Rs. 40/- to Rs. 45/- a prosperous trader could meet all his monthly expenses and on even less if the rice came from his own lands. If this was the case in the 1870s then in the beginning of British rule in Assam, in the 1830s and 1840s a person could meet all his expenses on even less than Rs. 45/-.

27. The Khongia Mauza's demand in 1900 was Rs. 22000/-. That of Charigaon Mauza was Rs. 70,000/- when the 30 years settlement began. Basing on this even if the revenue demand was half of the above in 1840s, the annual income of the average mauzadars would be considerable. H. Cohain "Asomor Madhyabitta Samajir Itihas" op. cit. p. 40, has made a calculation taking the demand to be around Rs. 6000/- of a small Mauza.

28. These rough calculations we have made on the basis of the figures for total demand supplied by the Khongia and Charigaon Mauzadars.

29. See W.W. Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam Vol. I, op. cit. pp. 189, 257. This argument has been developed by H. Cohain also in "Asomor Madhyabitta Samajir Itihas" op. cit. albeit for a different calculation.
This would enable a Mauzadar who earned about hundred and seventy rupees a month from his mauza to save at least a hundred rupees every month. This was a very considerable saving in relation to the economic conditions of early nineteenth century in Assam. The Mauzadars could therefore lead a luxurious life and also save money to invest elsewhere, if they so desired, and also afford to send their children to schools which imparted western education and even to Calcutta for further education. In fact, nearly all the Mauzadars we interviewed had some history of business in the family. In the Khongia Mauzadar's family there were some dealings in the timber trade by a brother of the present Mauzadar. In the Charigaon Mauzadar's family there was a successful investment in the opium and country liquor Mahals, in buying and selling of shares of the tea gardens under the Quota System of tea gardens and in running a Pharmacy in the Jorhat town. The Silakhuti Mauzadar's family made some investments, though not successful ones, in Tea gardens.30 Also, the earnings of a Mauza could be used as a security for applying for and receiving another Mauza by members of the same Mauzadar's family. In fact it is quite apparent that many of the enterprising young men of Assam who dabbled in some kind of business or the

30. See Appendix B.
other in the latter part of the nineteenth century can trace back to a very close link with families of Maunzadara and other high revenue officials. In the socio-economic milieu of Assam in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Maunzadara therefore formed a very affluent section of the Assamese society. They had resources and were able to give their children a good western education and most of the first matriculates and graduates came out of the second generation of the Maunzadar families. Doctors, teachers and lawyers also mainly came from families of Maunzadara and other revenue officials like Sheristadara, Sadr Amins and Munsifs. Either they belonged directly to these families or they were helped in some way or the other by these families. For example, Krishna Sharma's father, who was a very

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31. This can be ascertained from the autobiographies and biographies of some of the leading Assamese men of the nineteenth century. See for instance K. Sarma, Krishna Sarma Diary (Gauhati: 1972); P.D. Goswami, Manick Chandra Barooah (Gauhati: 1977); N. Talukdar (Ed. & Compiled), Anandaram Dhskial Phukanar Rachana Sangrah (Gauhati: 1977).
32. Refer Appendix B.
33. Krishna Jarna was a Congress worker and a staunch follower of Gandhi.
affluent advocate, was almost adopted and brought up by Dinanath Bezbarua, who was one of the first Munsifs of British rule in Assam.\[34\]

In the socio-economic life of Assam in the first few decades of the nineteenth century the people holding an advantageous position were therefore, these Maugadars and such other British revenue officers. With the resources at their command they were in a position to reap the maximum benefits from the opportunities offered by the British administration. However, in their rise to affluence and power the Maugadars and Chaudhurias became more important, not only because of their numerical strength but also because "to the people they represent [ed] the Government, to the Government the people. He [the Maugadar] is [was] not merely a revenue farmer, but a responsible local person entrusted with the charge and welfare of his Mauga and by results when [he] produces the proceeds of

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34. See K. Sharma, Krishna Sharmar Diary (Ibid. p.1-2. This point can be further corroborated by the fact that in the course of the interviews we conducted we found that almost all the interviewed persons could give at least one instance where their grandfathers or fathers had financially or otherwise helped a boy to study and get established. These could not therefore have been isolated incidents and there must have been many more such cases all over the Brahmaputra Valley. Moreover some Maugadars seems to have patronised the spread of western education. The present Maugadar of Charigaun told us about his predecessors who established M.E. Schools and encouraged others to do so. See Appendix B, Part III.
revenue collection."\textsuperscript{35} (sic!) How lucrative was the office of the Mauzadar and what social status and importance he had is clearly reflected in an article on the Mauzadar presented in the Assamese journal \textit{Mou} which was edited by Bolinaryan Bora who belonged to the educated Assamese elite of the eighteenth century and published in the years 1886 and 1887.\textsuperscript{36} This article, written most probably by Gunabhiram Baruah,\textsuperscript{37} very vehemently argues that the Mauzadarshina should on no account be given to people of the "lower classes" or to Bengalis and that this very important office should always remain in the hands of the families of the first Mauzadars and their descendents. He further laments the fact that the Mauzadars were no longer given the importance and respect which was given to the early Mauzadars. From this writing two other important conclusions can be deduced. One is that during the first decades of British rule the Mauzadars, because of their direct descendence from the Abom officialdom, the nature of their work, and the prevalent ideas of the time were, as was to be expected, very feudal in their attitudes, ideas, and manner of living. But with the inroad of bourgeois

\textsuperscript{35} Royal Commission on Agriculture in India 1923, \textit{op.cit.} Appendix to Report, p.12-13.
\textsuperscript{36} S. Sharma (ed.) \textit{Mou} (Gauhati: 1980) pp.120-123.
\textsuperscript{37} See \textit{Ibid.}, p.2.
ideas as British imperialist domination advanced, the old feudal values in the society began to weaken considerably and with the weakening of the early feudal values the position and status of the Mauzadara also began to undergo a change. Besides, the economic hardships faced by the peasants gradually made them regard the Mauzadar more as a part of the system that was the cause of their miseries, than as the respected overlord. Thus at the end of the nineteenth century the Mauzadara, though by and large still loyal to the British were gradually becoming more and more mere government servants and were thus losing much of their earlier feudal status and social influence and power. The later mauzadara were also in many cases a shade different from their earlier counterparts, because bourgeois liberal ideas must have affected them to some extent and that is why perhaps we find that some mauzadars left their jobs during the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921.38 The other members of the Mauzadara families were of course bound to be different having been open to western education and ideas, and so many scions of Mauzadar families were directly involved in the freedom struggle.39

39. See Appendix B for interviews with Mauzadara Shaktinath Barua and Narendra Nath Barua. Their families actively participated in the Quit India Movement etc.
This change in the status and attitude of the Manzadar was lamented by a section of the educated elite, most of whom came from the early Manzadar families, because the new Manzadar did not belong to their own genre. The other important deduction that can be made is that British rule did bring in some progressive changes which opened up various avenues of employment for some sections of the people. For instance the jobs of tea garden 'babus' or employment in the steamer companies and Assam-Bengal Railways did give a source of income to some people in the nineteenth century. It is therefore possible that men belonging to the new affluent class and not the early elite were in a position to apply for Manzadarships by the last decades of the nineteenth century.

40. For example Lakshmikanta Borkakoti, one of the first Congressmen of Assam, and grandfather of the renowned Congress worker and minister Omco Kumar Das, worked in the tea gardens and steamer companies and with this earnings he could also help other young boys of his family to receive education. O.K. Das's father was a doctor but he took service in a tea garden being denied a government job. From the tea garden he tried to open a printing press in Gauhati. See O.K. Das, Jivan Smriti (Gauhati: 1983). There must have been many more men who had been similarly employed in these other institutions opened up by the British.
Gunabhiram Barua took strong exception to this fact that people who did not belong to the early well-to-do families were being given mauza by the Government.

Thus, it is evident that in the nineteenth century Assamese society the mauzadara and other revenue officials were a very important element to whom can be traced not only the roots of the educated elite\[41] of the mid nineteenth century but also of the middle class of the last decade of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The early educated elite was very closely linked to these elements, and the later government servants like office-assistants and others, the teachers, lawyers and doctors did also have some connections or the other with these families. Either they belonged to these families, or they had been financially and otherwise helped by these families in acquiring the necessary western education and other qualifications, or had been helped in finding employment. The elite that had emerged from the first generation of the Mauzadar and the other revenue officials helped in a rather indirect way also in the emergence of the Assamese middle class. This elite as also the early Assamese officers of the British Government realised the necessity of western education and

\[41\] The list which Guha gives in his Planter Bai to Swaraj on cit. Appendix 5 Pp. 341-343, of his Assamese Middle Class also proves this point.
they tried in their various ways to popularise western education in Assam. This spread of western education was taken advantage of by some of the more enterprising section of the slightly better off rural population, especially in lower Assam. Seeing the advantages of a western education these enterprising people would send their sons to school and once there, if they were hardworking enough the boys could take the help of the scholarships which the British Government offered. For instance, Omeo Kumar Das's father came from such a rural background. 42

One line of the social roots of the Assamese middle class can therefore be traced back to the early British revenue officers, the most important of whom were the Maungadars because of their numerical strength, their affluence and social importance. The other line of these roots must be looked for in the other important social institution of the time — the Vaishnava Satras. 43

The Vaishnava reform movement was begun in Assam by Sir Sankardeva in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth

43. The Vaishnava *Sātra* "is an institution, resembling to a certain extent, the Buddhist monastery system or the *matha* institution of the medieval period," S.N. Sarma, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Sātra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati: 1966).
centuries. Throughout the sixteenth century Vaishnavism gradually began to spread in Assam and by the end of the century it had acquired a strong foothold in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the seventeenth century the Vaisnava movement which had gone through many ups and downs in the preceding century, began to see better days when first the Koch Kings of eastern and western Kamrup began to patronise "the Vaisnavites by granting land and money towards the establishment of Satras." Later when the Ahom monarchs "from Jayadhvaj Singh (1649-63) to Ratnaadhvaj Singh (1679-1681),... showed due respect and courtesy to Vaisnava Gosains and accepted initiation," the Vaisnava movement gained a footing in Eastern Assam also. However,

"the most notable characteristic of the Vaisnavism of Assam is the Satra institution through which the faith was propagated and stabilised.... The importance of the institution lies in the fact that it is intimately connected with the Assamese society and it has become a part and parcel of Assamese life.... The District Gazetteers of Assam 1905, have

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44. For details of Vaishnava movement in Assam see amongst others J.H. Sarma, The Neo-Vaisnaviti Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, Ibid.; B.K. Barua, A Cultural History of Assam (Gauhati: 1950); M. Neog, Sri Sankardev (Gauhati: 1951).
recorded two hundred eighty-eight (288) Satras, excluding many branches of these Satras, spreading over the entire Brahmaputra Valley. All of them are not uniform in size and affluence, but they are marked by the same fundamental characteristics.47

The origin and growth of the Satra institution is very closely connected with the growth and development of the vaisnava movement in Assam.

Initially the Satras were religious settings or congregations, but gradually, as Vaishnavism began to spread these settings of disciples began to get more and more institutionalised and finally emerged as well developed institutions with a distinctive structure.48 In the second half of the seventeenth century when the Ahom and Koch Kings began to patronise the Satras and granted them both devotarial lands and paikas, the Satras were placed on firm economic grounds and from then on they began to grow in power and affluence. In eastern Assam, in the river island of Majuli, and in the Sibsagar district some very big and affluent Satras were established. The most well known of

47. S.N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam op. cit., p. XII.
these are the Dakshinpat, Auniati, Caramur, Kamalabar (the Kamalabar Satra split into two later on), and Bengenaati in Majuli and Kuruabahi in Sibsagar. The land grants for these Satras were made by Ahom Kings. These land grants, with the naiks, were rent free lands and within these huge grants the Adhikar (Gossain) was the supreme head and he managed all affairs of the Satra. With so much revenue free lands at their disposal and also the services of the naiks and the bhakats on the Devottar lands and in the Satra Campus, the Satras began to grow in affluence and with affluence also came power. In the seventeenth century the Satras had become so rich and powerful that they began to be considered a danger to their power by the Ahom monarchs. There was therefore a


51. The Adhikar is the head of the Satra. "His position is similar to that of the mahant of medieval mathas or the abbot of the Christian monastic system." S.N. Sharma, Ibid. p. 102.

52. Bhakats are devotees "who either holds ecclesiastical office of the Satra or lead the life of a celebate within the Satra campus." Ibid.
lot of persecution of the Vaisnava 
Sattas by the Ahom Kings, 
and this persecution reached its climax in 1681 when Gada-
dhar Singha became the king. The reasons for this exces-
sive persecution in 1681 are not far to seek. While Gada-
dhar Singha, as a prince, was running from place to place 
to save himself from being killed by the king Sulikapha, 
he happened to visit many of the Sattas. The pomp and 
riches that he saw within the Sattas and the management of 
the Satta institution that he witnessed, made him realise 
that the Sattas were states within the state, and "as such 
a menace to the sovereignty of the state." In fact in 
the Dakshinpat Satta Gaddadhara Singha saw "the wealth and 
splendour of religious practitioners, even Bhukans, Rajkho-
was, Majarikas, Saikias and Boras were selected from among 
the Bhakats or disciples; the Gossains enjoyed the services 
of the full quota of functionaries attached to a king's 
households... and they also enjoyed all the prerogatives 
of a sovereign excepting Kekora-dolas or royal sedans and 
elephants. The prince also noticed the same state of affairs

53. For details of the Satta-State relation see, S.K. 
Bhuyan (Ed.) Tungkhunia Barani on cit.; E. Gait, 
A History of Assam on cit.; S.N. Sharma, Ibid, 
B. Sharma Dakshinpat Satta on cit., amongst others.
54. S.N. Sharma, Ibid., p. 182.
at Auniati and other Satras. The Satras had indeed developed as almost independent institutions within the Ahom state, and as we shall presently show, feudal relations within the Satras were more developed than in the Ahom state.

It is difficult to ascertain how much total land a Satra had. In fact, as the present Gossain of the Auniati Satra told us during the course of a recorded interview, neither the Government (British) nor the Satra knew exactly what amount of land the Satra had. He further said during the course of the interview that the method by which the Satras themselves kept track of the occupied Satra lands was quite simple. If the Satra found that some paiks had come and settled on Devottar land belonging to the Satra, then a Bora and the Mendol of the Satra went and measured the area and the area was thenceforth allotted to the settlers. The rest of the land was left just as it was without measuring it. But there is no doubt that the Satras had very big landed properties scattered in various parts of

55. J.K. Bhuyan (Ed.) Tungkhungia Buranii op. cit., p.16.
56. The character of the Ahom State we have already discussed in our third chapter.
57. See Appendix C Part I, for extracts of the recorded interview with the Gossain of Auniati Satra.
the Brahmaputra Valley. According to a rough estimate given by the bhakats of the Garamur Satra during our interviews the Satra had about 3,600 bighas of land at the time of British occupation. Later in 1910 the then Gossain Jogesh Chandra Goswami bought about 500 bighas of land at Ajeraguri in North Lakhimpur, and so the Satra land increased somewhat.

The Auniati had, according to the district Gazetteer, 21,000 acres of Lakhiraj and 600 acres of Misf Khirai land. Even if there are some discrepancies in these calculations of the amount of land owned by the Satras, yet one fact is evident - that the Satra had considerable landed wealth.

With so much land to be managed, a system of administering these properties gradually evolved in the Satras. This system was very similar to the naik system that prevailed in the Ahom administrative set up. There was however

58. See Appendix C Part II for extracts of recorded interview with the officials of the Garamur Satra. As the Gossain of Garamur Satra could not be contacted we met the highest officials of the Satra and recorded their accounts.

59. Ahom king Siba Singh had granted 30,000 Buras of free land and 1200 families of Raikes to the Garamur Satra. But at the time when the British Government was making enquiries into and recognising the free land grants made by the Ahom kings, the Gossain of Garamur Satra was away from the Satra and so did not take much interest in the British enquiries. As a result most of the free lands were lost. Later the British Government gave 1000 bighas to the Satra. See M. Neog (Ed.) Fabitra Assom (Jorhat; 1960) p.63.

60. Ibid., p.60.
a very important difference. In the Ahom administrative set up the paika were given two puras of land revenue free by the king, and in lieu of that the paika had to give manual service to the state. We have discussed this point in details earlier. But in the Satras, the paika, (except for the ones who served the Satra in some way or the other), paid a tax to the Satra and were given virtual occupancy rights which could be inherited, by the major Satra.61

In fact in the course of the interviews at the Satras in Majuli one point was mentioned again and again at both Aumiati and Garamur Satras, that the paika who were on the land cultivated and enjoyed the products of the land. Thus the land system that prevailed in the Satras was more developed than the Ahom system, because on Satra lands the paika paid a revenue, enjoyed heritable occupancy rights and were free from giving personal service whereas in the Ahom state there was very little collection of land revenue and the paika had occupancy rights of their land in lieu of manual service to the state but only during a paika's lifetime. So, there were more chances of accumulation of wealth

61. See Appendix C. Part I. As referred earlier S. N. Sharma, op. cit. has written that the fundamental characteristics of all the Satras were the same. So it can be inferred that the land system in all the Satras must have been the same as prevailed in the major Satras.
in the Satras than in the Ahom system in general. As, we have earlier mentioned, the feudal tendencies in the Satras were far more stronger than in the Ahom monarchical system. 62

When the British occupied Assam their main interest initially was to collect as much revenue as possible. The British found that in the five districts of the Brahmaputra valley there were 178 estates, with a total area of 82,197 acres, 63 which were free grants made by the earlier Ahom government and to allow all these estates to go revenue free would have meant a great loss of revenue. So David Scott, assessed these rent free devottar, brahmottar and dhar-mottar lands at half rates showing as precedent the barangani 64 which was levied by the former government. Initially Scott had introduced this as a temporary measure with the intention of giving them up later.

62. From a detailed study of the land relations of the Satras it will be possible to show that feudalism within the Satra institution was growing much faster than in the Ahom State.
63. The Assam Land Revenue Manual op. cit. p. XXIV.
64. The barangani was initially asked from the owners of rent free lands by the Ahom kings in times of emergency when the expenses of the state exceeded the receipts. Parshanta Borphohain, who was the Prime Minister during the Burmese invasions had levied this tax, nine years prior to British occupation, and this Scott took as a precedence. See M.K. Barooah, David Scott in North East India op. cit. pp. 93, 100-101. The Assam Land Revenue Manual. Ibid. p. IXXXVIII.
although the government of India denied later on that Scott had meant any such thing. In 1834, the Government of India had ruled that "all rights to hold lands free of assessment, founded on grants made by any former government must be considered to have been cancelled by the British conquest." But this act of the British wrought great discontentment amongst the holders of these revenue free grants and they objected to paying the half rates assessed. When the British Government realised that taxing these grants had brought great discontentment amongst a section of the people which had not only wealth but a great spiritual hold over the society, then the Government of India directed Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, in 1834 to institute an enquiry into these revenue grants and establish the bona fide of the grants. This enquiry went on over a long period and even in 1860 it was not completed. But under this enquiry, all those Satras which could show their grant deeds given by the Ahom monarchs got back their lands. The major Satras therefore got back their earlier status, although many of

67. See B. Sarma, Dakhinpat Satra op.cit. pp.67-68.
the smaller Satras must have lost land being unable to present the original grant deeds. All devottar lands were granted as revenue free or la-khirai estates by the British government while the charmattar and brahmattar lands remained as half-revenue paying or Misf Khirai estates.68

The principal Satras like Auniati, Dakshinpat and Garamur could show that all their lands were devottar lands and thus became la-khirai estates. Once having recognised the la-khirai status the British Government never interfered with the Satras and all Satra matters were decided within the Satra as before.68 The British also had by this time seen the great following which the Gossains had, and, began to comprehend the importance of the Satras in the Assamese social network and so saw in the Satras a possible support base of British rule if they were not antagonised but nurtured well. In fact there are many instances of the Chief Commissioners paying ritualistic visits to the major Satras and also treating the Gossains of these Satras with great respect and honour.69 The Gossains of the Satras also

68. For details of la-khirai and Misf-khirai lands see Ibid., pp. XXXIX - XCI.
68. See, Appendix C.
looked upon the British rulers as they had done on the Ahom kings and gave the British Chief Commissioners royal treatment when they went to the Satras. Thus, by maintaining cordial relations with the government the Satras retained their earlier affluence and power even during British rule.

Under these conditions there was every possibility of the Satras helping in the emergence of a middle class in Assam. The Satra itself was rich enough, and we shall presently give an idea of the extent of the wealth of the Satras. Besides this, the officials who managed the Satras also had considerable opportunities for earning enough for themselves and their families. In the case of the celibate or Naskhin Satras this help to the family would be of course indirect but in the case of the Gribasti or non-celibate Satras the families would benefit a lot from the Satra system of management. For the management of the Satra lands there was a gradation of officers and these officers were the Muktia, Raimedi, Mausadar and Raikhowa. These officers could be both celibate bhakatas, Gribasti (non-celibates) bhaktas and also disciples, and they were in charge of the lands outside the Satra campus. For the work

70. T. Sharma Ibid Pg. 259.
that they did of collecting the rent from the naika on
Satra lands and Guru kar (an annual tax that the disciples
of the Satra paid) from the disciples in other villages
and towns, they got a commission of 4% to 6% on their
collection and were also given some lands or khatas.*
These lands were cultivated by other naika of the Satra
on the basis of share-cropping. The Satra land and the
villages and towns where the Satra had disciples were
divided off into areas called Sahas and these Sahas were
allotted to the officers in charge of land management. The
importance and status of these officers were determined
by the number of Sahas which fell to their lot. 72 The
commission which these officers got and the product from
the land which the Satra allotted to them, formed their
own earnings and they did not have to give anything to the
Satra from that income. However, in the case of the death
of a celibate bhakat, his property went back to the Satra. 72
The Grihasthi or non-celibate bhakats of course retained
the property in his family. But a celibate bhakat during
his life time could help his other family members (parents,
brothers, sisters etc.) with his earnings from the Satra

* Khatas are special periodic estates. For reference see
71. See Appendix C, Parts I & II; B. Sarma, op. cit., p. 18.
if he so desired. If a celibate bhakat wanted to leave
the Satra and go away he was allowed to take his moveable
property with him. The bhakatas of the Satras, both
Udashin and Grihasethi were therefore in a position to take
advantage of the opportunities opened up by British rule,
by being able to afford a good education for their family
members. We shall take up this point in greater details
presently.

The Satra institution itself was very affluent.
Its sources of income were many. First, it got rent from
the ryots settled on Satra land and these ryots were
tenants of the Gossain, but a big difference between a
Gossain and a Zamindar was that the former paid no revenue
to the government. Therefore, all the rent which the Satra
collected went to the treasury of the Satra. Besides this
rent, the disciples or Siyagas of the Satra paid a Guru-kar
or tax annually to the Satra and when the Gossains went
on their ecclesiastical tours "to see for themselves the
condition of disciples," they not only initiated the

73. The Gossain of the Uttar-Kamalabari Satra emphasised
this point during the course of our interview with him on
5th January, 1986.
74. N.C. Dutta, Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam
(New Delhi: 1968) p.11 (f.n.).
75. S.N. Sarma, op.cit., p.117.
devotees but also collected tithes. Anyone who came to see the Gossain during these tours, and the number of such devotees was great, came with some offering, and all this went to the Satra treasury. Further, as we were told at Garamur Satra, the forest lands and the natural fisheries or Bills were auctioned off by the concerned Maunadar or Malindar under whose area those lands fell, and the earnings, after deducting one-fourth commission for the Maunadar concerned went to the Satra. If this was the case in Garamur then the other major Satras must have also had this source of income. Almost all the principal Satras, that is Auniati, Dakshinpat and Kuruabhi had also leased out their lakhibal land for tea garden, and from these leased out lands the Satras got a yearly premium (Salami) and an annual rent. The Auniati Satra had leased out land to four tea gardens. The Kamalpur tea-estate lease to Debeswar Sarma (a government pleader), the Bijuligan grant of Govindapur tea-estate, the Boidiha grant to Chandrakamal Bezbarua, and the Rongdoi tea estate grant to Kuladhar Chalihia. All these leases were granted during the second decade of the twentieth century. The Dakshinpat Satra had

76. See Appendix C, Part II.
77. Vide Leasenama No. 1349, Jorhat 28th June 1919.
78. Appendix C, for interview with Auniati Gossain.
leased out land to the three tea gardens of the Holongapar grant, viz. Sotai, Jugibheta and Jadavpur Tea Estates. It is to be noted that all these leases were granted to enterprising Assamese young men but not to the British. These leases were then a big source of income for the Satras.

There was thus considerable accumulation in the treasury of the Satras. This affluence of the Satras was evident from the life-styles of the Gossains and in the fact that they made big donations for various purposes during the period of our study. The affluence of the Satras can be gauged from a few concrete cases. For instance in 1905 the Gossain of the Auniati Satra decided to go on a pilgrimage to Naihati to bathe in the Ganges, and perform the last rites of the former Gossain. For this long journey a boat was hired for the Gossain at Rs. 200/- per day. In 1905, this was a luxury which could have been afforded only by the very rich. On his return to Gauhati, the Gossain bought a ship but because of the complicated mechanism it could not be operated by his men so he sold it off and with that money bought a large quantity of corrugated iron sheets for the houses of his bhakats. Later around

79, B. Sarma, op. cit., Appendix.
1909-10, while on a trip to Dibrugarh, a newly bought ship of the Gossain capsized in the Brahmaputra. The ship was insured and so he got Rs. 10,000/- for it from the insurance company and with this he got a motor-launch for himself. 80 This affluence of the Satras could therefore help the development of the Assamese society both directly and indirectly. We have mentioned earlier that the Satras treated the British Chief Commissioners in Assam as they did the Ahom monarchs and therefore recognised the British Government as their overlord. Thus, while they accepted British suzerainty they also accepted western ideas and were therefore not averse to the spread of western education and accepting jobs in the British Government or taking up other independent professions. There are instances of the Gossains helping young men to get established. The Gossain of Dakshinpat Satra from 1895-1925, financially helped Debeswar Chaliha of Jorhat to go to Calcutta and study law. 81 Benudhar Sarma, while writing the history of the Dakshinpat Satra has said that like Debeswar Chaliha there were many other young men who could never forget the help which the Gossain had given. 82 The Gossain of Auniati

80. T.N. Sharma, Auniati Satpur Hiranil, op. cit., pp. 287-293. This is but one instance. Other instance of the wealth of the Satras can be found in the accounts of B. Sarma, op. cit. also.
81. B. Sarma, op. cit., p. 85.
82. Ibid. Loc. cit.
Satra from 1838 to 1904, Dattadev Goswami, was a man who had ideas which were liberal enough to use the riches of the Satra in various projects which would in the long run help in the spread of western ideas in Assamese society. He was the first Gossain to try and incorporate western music into the traditional music of the Satras and use the violin to capture the melifluous notes of the classical tunes of Satriva music. In 1871, the Gossain established a printing press in the Satra and from this press published a monthly Assamese paper Asam Bilasini, for a period of twelve years. The Gossain was also desirous of encouraging western education, and so after his death in 1904, the next Gossain instituted a gold-medal in the name of Dattadev Gossain for the candidate who stood first in the Entrance Examination from Assam. 83 Later the Gossain also gave money from the Satra to set up a High School. In the later years other Gossains also encouraged the spread of western education by establishing schools and also a college, the Nital Pukhuri College. 84 In the Garamur Satra a Lower Primary School had been set up as early as 1885. 85 The Satras were thus not only not averse to the spread of western ideas but they even encouraged the

83. For the details of all this T.N. Sarma, op. cit, Pp. 244-286.
84. See Appendix C, Part I.
85. Appendix C, Part II.
popularisation of western education. During the course of our interviews in the Satras one point was mentioned at all the Satras - that the Satras were very generous in the matter of giving donations and financial assistance to various causes. T.N. Sarma and Benudhar Sarma have also testified this in their writings and have cited instances where the Gossain of the Dakshinpat Satra donated Rs. 8000/- for the nascent Assam Sahitya Sabha, and the Gossain of Amuniati donated Rs. 1000/- in 1897 to the famine stricken areas of India, and Rs. 500/- to Golaghat to take measures to relieve water shortage there. Therefore, having both affluence and generosity it is quite possible that the case of Debeswar Chaliha was not an isolated case, and the Satras must have helped, directly or indirectly, many young men to acquire western education, go in for higher studies and get themselves established, thus helping in the emergence of the Assamese middle class. Not only did the Satras accept the spread of western ideas, but western liberal ideas had so deeply penetrated some of the major Satras that the Gossain of the Garamur Satra, Pitambar Deva Goswami, joined the freedom movement from the 1920s, for which the

British later took punitive action against the Satra. Such a situation could have taken place only if there was a predominance of middle class values in the Satra, which could spread and popularise western liberal ideas in the Satra. Thus we see that both directly and indirectly the Satra institution did help in the growth of the Assamese middle class.

The Satra institution had another aspect of development from which a new middle class could emerge. We have mentioned earlier that the ryots on the Satra lands were tenants of the Satra and on payment of the rent they enjoyed their property hereditarily. Here lies a vast difference between the ryots of the rest of Assam and the ryots of the Satra. During the Ahom rule the paiks did not have hereditary rights over their land, but the paiks on the Satra lands had enjoyed hereditary rights even during Ahom rule and so the latter paiks had greater opportunities for accumulating private wealth than the former paiks. So, when British rule started the ryots on Satra land were economically far better off than the ryots in the rest of Assam. Under British rule, the ordinary ryots in Assam had to face great difficulties because the British Government was very

strict about the payment of revenue and if a *ryot* defaulted he had to lose his land, and the British revenue rates were also very high. The *ryots* on the *Satra* lands, on the other hand, had a far easier time because although the relationship between him and the *Satra Gossain* was a tenant-landlord relationship, yet unlike the feudal *Zamindars* who had their army of retainers, the *Satra Gossains* had no organisation for physical coercion and if the tenants did not pay their rent the *Satra* could do very little to collect that rent. In fact, as the Auniati *Gossain* told us during the interview there were some *ryots* who had not paid their rent for forty to fifty years. Further the rent on the *Satra* lands was very low. So, the *ryots* on *Satra* land were economically far better-off than the *ryots* elsewhere because their rent was low, they were not forced to pay the rent, and they had occupied their lands hereditarily right from the time of Ahom rule. There was therefore comparatively more wealth in the families of the *ryots* on the *Satra* land. From amongst this rural population on the *Satra* lands there would be a section which would be in a position to send their sons to schools,

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88. See Appendix C, Part I. The Auniati *Gossain* said that the *ryots* paid a nominal rent though he did not tell us the exact rate. On the low rental see also W.W. Hunter *op. cit.*, p.131.
give them the education required to take up government jobs or to take up independent professions. For example, the well-to-do family of the Chalihas—Kuladhar Chaliha, Phanidhar Chaliha etc. — which was one of the earliest families of the Assamese educated elite, and from which family many later Congressmen also emerged including one of the chief ministers of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, had begun from Dakshinpat Satra land as noted by Banudhar Sarma. The earliest ancestor of this family, Ram Chaliha came and settled on a Chanari in the Dakshinpat Satra land and from there the family began to grow in wealth and importance. Another important family of Assam, the family of Debeswar Sarma, a freedom fighter and later a minister in Assam, can also trace the history of its wealth to the Satra. Though not settled on Satra land as cultivators, Debeswar Sarma was a disciple of the Garamur Satra and he was given a large area of Satra land in present Jorhat town on a permanent lease. On this land he built up his property and on the strength of that he became one of the leading men of Assam. Another very

89. B. Sarma, op. cit., Appendix.
90. Both at Garamur and Auniati we were told that Debeswar Sarma got a large property at a throw away price from the Satra on which he was able to build his career.
important congressman and freedom fighter, Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury also belonged originally to a Satra - the Barpeta Satra and his family had in its possession Misf-khirai land belonging to the Satra. Here it must also be mentioned that some families belonging to the Brahmanical temple lands were also able to establish themselves in the society because of their background in the la-khirai and Misf-khirai temple grants. Karmavir Chandranath Sarma came from such a background. Thus, the Satras helped in the emergence of the early educated elite in Assam and hence in the emergence of a middle class.

From the above discussions it is, thus evident, that in the nineteenth century Assamese society, there were two affluent sections which were in a position to take advantage of the benefits of British rule. On the one hand were the Maungadars and the high revenue officers of the British administrative system, and on the other hand the Satras. We have also shown that the social roots of the various sections of the Assamese middle class can be traced back either to the former or to the latter, and both these sections helped in the emergence of the Assamese middle class.

class. These social roots of the middle class highlight one other fact - that whether coming from the Satras or from the other affluent section, the Assamese middle class had very strong rural links, because both these sections were after all rooted in the rural life of Assam. Further, there being very few other avenues of fruitful investment in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam, whatever savings the middle class accumulated from their jobs, the first investment would be in the purchase of a plot of cultivable land in the village. The Assamese middle class therefore had a rural base and it was not a rootless middle class like the middle class in a totally urbanised capitalist system. It must also be remembered here, that as discussed earlier, the development of truly urban centres was almost absent in Assam even in the early twentieth century. The Assamese middle class was therefore always able to muster support for its demands in the rural areas also, because it had strong links in rural Assam and it was also able to a certain extent, to support some of the demands of the peasantry. It was this middle class, with very definite rural links which rose to a hegemonic position in the Assamese society.