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## Social Status and Class Perception of the Kaibarttas: A Study of Three Villages in Sivasagar District of Assam, India

Dr. Trailokya Dehingia

### Abstract

*Social status refers to the position occupied by a person, family or kinship group in a social system relative to other. There is a fastened relationship between status and social class. A status group is considered as a social class. As a Scheduled Caste community, the Kaibarttas always occupy lower status in society. Of late, most of them are highly status conscious and aware of with social class. In this paper an endeavour has been made to examine the perspectives of the Kaibarttas toward various factors of social status and their class perceptions with special emphasis on class identity and aspirations. The study has been conducted in three Kaibartta villages in Sivasagar District of Assam. Both primary and secondary data have been used in the present paper. The respondents have been selected randomly by using sequential list method. The head of the households were the respondents in the present study. The study revealed that education, occupation and income are the major determinant of social status and class identity for the Kaibarttas in the present society and most of them have aspiration for becoming middle class.*

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## **Social Status and Class Perception of the Kaibarttas: A Study of Three Villages in Sivasagar District of Assam, India**

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### **Abstract**

*Social status refers to the position occupied by a person, family or kinship group in a social system relative to other. There is a fastened relationship between status and social class. A status group is considered as a social class. As a Scheduled Caste community, the Kaibarttas always occupy lower status in society. Of late, most of them are highly status conscious and aware of with social class. In this paper an endeavour has been made to examine the perspectives of the Kaibarttas toward various factors of social status and their class perceptions with special emphasis on class identity and aspirations. The study has been conducted in three Kaibartta villages in Sivasagar District of Assam. Both primary and secondary data have been used in the present paper. The respondents have been selected randomly by using sequential list method. The head of the households were the respondents in the present study. The study revealed that education, occupation and income are the major determinant of social status and class identity for the Kaibarttas in the present society and most of them have aspiration for becoming middle class.*

**Keyword:** *Social status; Social class; Kaibartta; Identity; Aspiration.*

### **Introduction:**

The very term social status signifies the position or rank of a person or group within the society. Social status can be understood as the degree of honour or prestige attached to one's position in society. A person's 'social status' is a position in which he or she hold relative to other people in society. Morris Ginsberg regards that a status is a position in a social group or grouping, a relation to other position held by other individuals in the group or grouping (Rao 1990: 126). All societies have some achieved status and no society depends upon completely on ascribed statuses. Ascribed status is typically based on sex, age, race, family relationship or birth, while achieved status is based on education, occupation, income, marital status, accomplishments or other factors. In modern societies most of the statuses are achieved. Status is very important element in one's own life. An individual wins respect in society by virtue of his or her social status.

In the same way, every society has many social classes. Each social class has its status in society in accordance with which it receives prestige in society. The members of all classes have some special benefits and facilities which are bestowed upon them due to class status (Sharma 1986: 242). Class is a status group. A status group has a particular position in a hierarchy of ascent-decent, the status groups can be considered as social class. It is a group of people who possess a particular status or position by virtue of which they possess some privileges, responsibilities and powers.

According to Marxian analysis, class is a group of people who share a common economic situation based upon their relationship to the means of production and whose

interests inevitably clash with those of others. Refuting the Marxian view, Mac Iver and page along with other sociologists have rightly pointed out that classes are based not merely on economic difference, but on the social status also (ibid: 243). They have designated other bases of social class, like education, occupation, average income, manual labour, prestige rating etc.

The Scheduled Castes people suffered from all sorts of social disabilities in traditional India. They did not enjoy status in society because of their caste and occupations. Gradually a few of them have been able to improve their status mainly by availing the special facilities offered by the Government to the Scheduled Castes (Semthakumari 1985: 117). The Kaibarttas of Assam are not different from that of the scheduled castes in general. Of course, Kaibarttas are nowadays aware of with regard to education and occupational achievement. Hence, an attempt is made in the present paper to examine the perspective of the Kaibarttas towards various factors involved in social status and their class perception with special emphasis on class identity and aspirations for their future life. In this study education, occupation, income and wealth are the prime parameters for understanding their social status and class perception.

### **The Kaibarttas:**

The Kaibarttas are the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam and Dravidians in origin (Bordoloi et. al. 1994: 1, Das & Hazarika 2008: 6, Sharma Thakur 2008: 62-63, Sarma 2010: 13) they are one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes communities in the state as per constitution (Scheduled Castes) order of 1950. The Kaibarttas are the largest Scheduled Castes group in the Brahmaputra Valley and they have comparative better position among the Scheduled Castes of Assam. The word Kaibartta is sanskritized from the prakrit Kevatta, the dictionary meaning of the word 'KAIBARTTA' is derived from two words i.e. 'Koi' means water and 'Brit' means to live (Boruah 2000: 236, Das 1986: 13). It signifies that the Kaibartta is that community who lives in riverine areas and earn livelihood by merchandizing through river.

There are 6,93,219 Kaibartta population in Assam and 29011 in Sivasagar district. The Kaibarttas constitute 31.8% Scheduled Castes population of Assam (census 2011). It is noteworthy to mention that the rate of literacy among the Kaibarttas of Assam is much higher (70.12%) than the literacy rate of Scheduled Caste (66.8%) in general. The Kaibarttas are the disciple of religious institution (SATRAS) which trace its origin to Mahapurush Sankardeva, the 15<sup>th</sup> century great saint and socio-religious reformer of Assam. The Kaibarttas of Assam used to live on the bank of the river side mainly for their fishing profession as fishing in the traditional occupation of the Kaibarttas. Besides traditional occupation they are nowadays engaged in other income earning activities. They are an important segment of the greater Assamese society for whose socio-economic upliftment various measures have been adopted under Scheduled Caste component plan.

### **Objective of the Study:**

The basic objectives of the present paper are –

1. To examine perspective of the Kaibarttas towards factors involved in social status.
2. To focus aspirations of the Kaibarttas towards class identity.

### **Methodology:**

#### **The Field:**

The present study has been conducted in three selected Kaibartta villages of Sivasagar District of Assam, India. The Sivasagar district is situated in the mid-eastern part of Assam on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Geographically it is located at

26.98° north and 94.63° east with 2668 sq.km. of land mass covering 2360.40 sq.km. rural areas and 3796 sq.km. urban areas. As per census Report 2011, the total population of Sivasagar district is 11,51,050 of which 5,89,216 are males and 5,61,834 are females. The rural population of Sivasagar district is 10,40,954 and urban population is 1,10,096, sex ratio of Sivasagar district is 928 against per 1000 males and the population density of the district is 394 per sq.km. The population of Scheduled Caste in Sivasagar district is 42,347 (3.70%).

The three selected villages are Rajabari village, Kamar Dhadia (Jugania) village and Moupuria village. The Rajabari village lies under the jurisdiction of Sivasagar revenue circle and Kheluwa development block. The Rajabari village is located on the northern bank of the river Darika under Disang par Gaon panchayat. The Kamar Phadia (Jugunia) village is situated on the northern bank of the river Dikhow under Nagar Mahal Gaon Panchayat area of Kheluwa development block and Sivasagar revenue circle. The Moupuria village is situated under Rangpur Gaon Panchayat of Gourisagar development block within the jurisdiction of Sivasagar revenue circle. The village located on the southern bank of the river Dikhow. The villages are exclusively inhabited by the Kaibartta population.

#### Respondents:

There are 529 households in the three study villages. Out of 529 households 129 households in Moupuria village, 143 households in Kamar Phadia (Jugania) village and 257 households in the Rajabari village. We have selected 212 households (40% from each village) by applying sequential list method i.e. serialization of households of each village. The head of the household were the respondents in the present study.

#### Collection of Data:

Both primary and secondary data have been used in the present paper. The primary data were collected from the respondent with the help of interview, interview scheduled and observation. The secondary data were collected from various books and journals and Government office concerned.

#### Findings and Analysis:

In modern society, people want not only wealth but also definite status. There are various factors, which are associated in determining social status of person, such as education, occupation, income, wealth, family background etc. In this particular study an emphasis is made to examine the perspective of Kaibarttas under study about the factors involved in social status. In this respect, respondents responses are shown in the following table (1) in order of preference.

Table 1. Factors in Determining Social Status (in order of Preference)

Factors of Social Status	Choices					Total Score	Rank
	1st	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>		
Family Background	26x5=130	54x4=216	75x3=225	26x2=52	31x1=31	654	V
Education	139x5=695	39x4=156	17x3=51	9x2=18	8x1=8	928	I
Occupation	95x5=475	44x4=176	41x3=123	18x2=36	14x1=14	824	II
Income	94x5=470	41x4=164	37x3=111	30x2=60	10x1=10	815	III
Wealth	83x5=415	53x4=212	44x3=132	15x2=30	17x1=17	806	IV

Source: Field Data

Weightage: 1<sup>st</sup> Preference x5=

2<sup>nd</sup> Preference x4=

3<sup>rd</sup> Preference x3=

4<sup>th</sup> Preference x2=

5<sup>th</sup> Preference x1=

In perusal of the above table 1, it is clear that among various factors of social status mentioned in the table education is the first factor in determining social status for the Kaibarttas under studied. At the same time, the table shows that 'occupation' is the second status giving factor for the Kaibarttas under studied. In the same way, income is also one of the factors for determining social status which occupied third place in ranking order. But there is slight difference between occupation and income in ranking score, it signifies both are equally important for achieving status in society. As a factor of social status 'wealth' is occupied fourth position in ranking order for the Kaibarttas. On the otherhand, family background is also a factor in determining social status which posses last position i.e. fifth rank in ranking order.

However, from the above ranking table, it is found that, 'education' is the first status factor and family background is the lowest i.e. fifth factor of social status for the Kaibarttas under studied. It has also been observed from the table that education, occupation and income are the three major determinants of social status for the Kaibarttas and Scheduled Caste in general.

It is obviously known that as a Scheduled Caste community the Kaibarttas always occupy lower status in society. But, at present most of them are highly status conscious and also aware of with the social class. In sociological literature, a status group is considered as a social class. There are numbers of bases in creating social class like education, occupation, income, manual labour etc. Therefore, in this particular study an emphasis is made to examine class class perception of the Kaibarttas in the light of attitude towards bases of social class and their class aspirations for their future. In this context, researcher put first question to the respondents whether they think that education, occupation and income create a new class identity in their present society or not ? The following table (2) depicts the respondents' opinion in this state of being.

**Table 2. Perception on Class Identity through Education, Occupation and Income**

Opinion of the respondents	Responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	169	79.72%
No	43	20.28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data

It is evident from the above table (2) that out of 212 respondents 169 respondents i.e. 79.72% were provided positive response to the question. They think that those who have higher education, upper level occupation (service holder etc) and good income, they form a new class from that of those who have not a standardize level of education, a good occupation and income. It is understood from the table that 43 respondents i.e. 20.28%

were provided negative response to the query. They do not think in that way. They feel that as a scheduled caste community, they are within one status group. They perform unitedly various socio-cultural and religious activities of their locality.

Furthermore, the respondents who have provided positive response, they were asked another question to know their aspirations towards class identity. In this context, aspiration implies desire for achieving or attaining new position, it is a changing attitude towards future life world. In other words, it signifies attitude of an individual or a community towards social mobility. Hence, in this study, it is pertinent to examine aspirations of the Kaibarttas towards class identity. The following table (3) shows respondents responses in this state of being.

Table 3  
Aspirations towards Class Identity

Class aspiration	Responses	Percentage (%)
Upper class	51	30.18
Middle class	88	52.07
Lower middle class	21	12.42
Can not Say	9	5.33
Total	169	100%

Source: Field Data

It can be inferred from the above table (3) that highest number of respondents i.e. 88 (52.07%) have desire as well as aspiration to become middle class group. In fact, they are not highly educated and their occupation and income level also medium level, for which they hope a middle class position in society. Followed by, 51 respondents i.e. 30.18% have aspiration to achieve upper class position, though all the respondents of this group are not educationally so advance they are economically advanced. So, they always aspires an upper class position in society. At the same time, it is known from the table that 21 respondents i.e. 12.42% have aspiration to attain lower middle class position in society. This group of respondents' minimum level of educational attainment and economically not so advanced but they are trying their best for achieving this status group. The very significant fact is found from the table that 9 respondents i.e. 5.33% replied, they could not say anything about their aspirations towards class identity. It may be because of the fact that they are still educationally and socio-economically backward. Of course, they think that education, occupation and income these three determinants pave the way for attaining desirable class status in society.

#### Conclusion:

From the above discussion we may conclude that the Kaibarttas are one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes of Assam. They are traditionally fishing community. Their traditional occupation was confined only to fishing or related activities. Of late, they are engaged in variety of income generating occupations. The level of education among them is gradually increasing, which is a positive sign for their development. It has been observed that most of the Kaibarttas under studied are highly conscious with regard to social status and class identity. In this study we found that education, occupation and income are the major determinant of social status for the Kaibarttas. In the same way, it may be stated that higher level of educational attainment, upper level of occupation and good income create a new class identity among the Kaibarttas in the present society and most of them have aspiration to become middle class group. It has also been noticed that modern education and new occupational avenues highly impact on social structure of the

Kaibartta community. Of course, still some of the Kaibartta people are socio-economically lagging behind. In this context, Government publicity media, Scheduled Castes development council etc should play significant role for their overall development. At present, their contribution to the sphere of socio-cultural and economy is largely helpful not only in the formation of greater Assamese society but also in the national development process.

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