

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The Karbis, formerly known as the Mikirs are the major community of the district of Karbi Anglong and the geographical area is named after them. The Karbis call themselves as the 'Arleng' which means 'man'. They belong to the Mongoloid racial stock ethnically; while linguistically they belong to the 'Tibeto-Burman' group.<sup>1</sup> Though the Karbis are mainly found in the district of Karbi Anglong, some of the Karbis also reside in the district of N.C. hills and in some parts of Golaghat, Nagaon, Kamrup districts of the present Assam and also in small pockets of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. They are one of the major constituents of the tribal population of North-East India in general and Assam in particular. The details about the Karbi community as a whole are analyzed in chapter three of the study.

The Karbi Hills, politically known as Karbi Anglong is one of the two Hills districts of present Assam, the other being the N.C. Hills (presently Dima Hasao). At the beginning, i.e. in 1951, when the districts were carved out they were known as United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. The political region, so created earlier included parts of the then Cachar, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Nagaon and Shivasagar Districts. The District was granted a District Council under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian constitution on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1952. The present Karbi Anglong by then was a subdivision, namely, the Mikir Hills and this was further upgraded and renamed as Mikir Hills district with a full-fledged District Council in the year 1971 by separating North Cachar from it. Since 1976, the name of the district was changed to Karbi Anglong. Again in the year 1995, the Autonomous District Council was upgraded to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). The detail about the Karbi Anglong district is analyzed in chapter three of study.

As in other parts of the North-East, the Karbi middle class played a significant role in the formation of the then Mikir Hills District for the Karbi Tribe which at that time was scattered in different parts of the then Assam. The middle class of the Karbis continued to remain as the epicenter of Karbi politics even after the creation of the district. An in-depth study of the causes for the emergence of the middle class among the Karbis and their role in the politics of Karbi Anglong district is deemed vital to understand the process of the growth of political leadership among the Karbis and to evaluate their role in the socio-economic and political development of the district.

#### **I.I. Objectives of the Study:**

The objectives of the study are as follows

- (i) To ascertain the causes for the emergence of the middle class among the Karbis.
- (ii) To assess the role played by the Karbi middle class in the creation of a District Council for the tribe.
- (iii) To study the role of Karbi middle class in the politics of Karbi Anglong district.

#### **I.II. Hypotheses:**

The study tested the following hypotheses -

- (i) The spread of Christianity, modern education among the Karbis and the British Administrative system helped in the emergence of a middle class among the Karbis.
- (ii) The Karbi middle class played the most important role in the formation of the then Mikir Hills District Council for the Karbis of the hills.
- (iii) Karbi middle class continues to play a dominant role in the politics of the district even after the creation of the district.

#### **I.III. Methodology:**

In order to conduct the research, the data were collected from two main sources, namely, Primary and Secondary sources.

The primary sources included the study of the personal records such as, certificates, diaries besides the official records including the legislatives, judicial or executive documents prepared by central or state governments, District Council and also the data preserved by the missionaries etc.

Further, the researcher undertook field survey comprising collection of primary data by personally visiting selected group of political leaders, relatives of the prominent Karbi leaders who have already expired, social activists, Karbi historians and academicians and interviewed them to collect information relating to the field of the study.

In addition to that, questionnaire was prepared and circulated among respondents to collect information relating to the area of the study. In this regard the variables used were, age of the respondents, their educational qualification, occupation, gender and their participation in autonomy movements and electoral politics of the district. The universe of the study covered of the Karbi Angong district of Assam. Out of the universe of the study, total 350 Karbi personalities of Karbi Anglong district were selected as respondents through simple random sampling to secure information through questionnaire method. The respondents were supplied with a set of questionnaire seeking information relating to the area of the study. The respondents were asked to indicated their answers by mentioning 'Yes' or 'No' and in some cases to choose an answer from a number options mentioned in the questionnaire. This was done to encourage the respondents to supply authentic information as in many cases we found that the respondents were not willing to write an elaborate answer by themselves as they found the same time consuming and sometimes insignificant for them. During our first round of seeking information through questionnaire method we kept option in the questionnaire asking the respondents to write an answer by themselves. But in most of the cases the respondents did not return the filled up questionnaire despite our repeated requests and reminders. This experience forced us to prepare a fresh set of questionnaire by asking the respondents to answer a question from the options given in the questionnaire itself. We kept the theme of the questionnaire the same as our earlier set of the questionnaire. Our second method

received better response from the respondents as most of them returned the questionnaire within the stipulated time given to them.

#### **I.III.I. General Information of the Respondents:**

The broad outline of the sample respondents has already been given above. On the basis of the above outline, the sample respondents have been classified in to various groups on the basis of their sex, age, literacy, occupation and religion.

#### **I.III.I.I. Sex-wise Distribution of the Sample Respondents:**

While choosing the respondents for the circulation of questionnaire, special cares were taken to ensure the representation of both male and female respondents in the study. Accordingly out of the total 350 respondents chosen for the questionnaire method, 187 respondents were male and the remaining 163 respondents were female. The percentage of the male respondents was 53.43 % and the percentage of the female respondents was 46.57 %. The sex wise distribution of the sample respondents is shown in the following table.(Table-1)

Table 1: Sex-wise distribution of the sample respondents:

Total no. of sample respondents	Male	Female	Percentage of Male respondents	Percentage of female respondents
350	187	163	53.43 %	46.57 %

#### **I.III.I.II. Age Group of the Respondents:-**

The sample respondents have been classified in to various age groups which were (a) below 25 years (b) between 25-50 years and (c) above 50 years. Out of the 350 respondents, 103 were below 25 years (24.79%), 125 were between 25 to 50 years (41.02%), and 122 were above 50 years (34.19%). The age wise breakup of the sample respondents is shown in the following table (Table-2)

Table 2: Age wise breakup of the sample respondents:

Age group of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Below 25 years	103	29.43 %
Between 25-50 years	125	35.71 %
Above 50 years	122	34.86 %

#### I.III.I.III. Literacy wise Breakup of the Respondents:-

Out of the total 350 sample respondents, the literacy wise breakup of the sample respondents included (a) Matric to Higher secondary (b) Graduate and (c) Post Graduate. The details of the literacy breakup of the sample respondents are shown in the following table (Table -3)

Table 3: Literacy wise breakup of the respondents

Literacy group of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Matric to H.S.	163	46.57 %
Graduate	155	44.29 %
Post Graduate	32	9.14 %

#### I.III.I.IV. Occupational Distribution of the Respondents:

The occupational distribution of the respondents was divided in to two distinct groups, namely, earners and non earners. Out of the total 350 respondents, 265 were earners (75.71%) and 85 were non earners (24.29%). The total 265 earners of the sample respondents belonged to following broad categories-(a) Government and non government employees (b) Professionals and (c)Businessmen and (d) Social service

The details of the occupational distribution are shown in the following tables. (Table. 4) and (Table. 5)

Table 4: Distribution of the sample respondents on the basis of income (Earners and Non earners)

Total no. of sample respondents	No. of earners	No. of non-earners	Percentage of earners	Percentage of non earners
350	265	85	75.71 %	24.29 %

Table 5: Occupational distribution of the respondents

Occupational distribution of respondents	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Govt. & non govt. employees	93	35.10 %
Professionals	41	15.47 %
Businessmen	98	36.98 %
Social service	33	12.45 %

#### **I.III.I.V. Religion wise Breakup of the Respondents:**

The respondents have been classified in to various religions as found among the Karbis. These included (a) the Indigenous religion of the Karbis,(b) the Hindus and (c) the Christians. The religion wise breakup of the sample respondents is shown in the following table (Table-6)

Table 6: Religion wise breakup of the respondents

Religion	No. of respondents	Percentage
Indigenous	139	39.71 %
Hindu	120	34.29 %
Christians	91	26.00 %

Apart from collecting information through questionnaire method from the sample respondents we adopted interview method to collect information relating to the area of the study. For this purpose we personally visited selected groups of Karbi personalities who could supply firsthand information relating to the topic. These Karbi personalities included Karbi politicians, academicians, Karbi historians, writers, journalists and observers of the Karbi politics. We interviewed total 56 Karbi personalities selected through the purposive sampling to collect information from them. The unstructured interview was conducted in the mode of conversation with these persons. We made these persons realize about their importance in the Karbi society which encouraged them to provide information. The motive was to find the background of these Karbi leaders to ascertain the class they represented and whether they belonged to the definition of the middle class which we have accepted in our working definition.

The secondary source included the study of the available published materials in the forms of books, journals news papers and articles etc.

#### **I.IV. Significance of the Study:**

As no systematic work has been done till date on the emergence and role of the Karbi Middle Class in the Politics of Karbi Anglong district, it is believed that the proposed research work on Karbi Middle Class will serve the long felt need of tracing the emergence and role of the Karbi Middle Class in the Politics of the district of Karbi Anglong.

#### **I.V. Theoretical Perspective of Middle Class:**

The concept of class has been existent since time of ancient Rome where we come across the classes like plebeians and patriarchs. Even Plato and Aristotle had mentioned in details about the existence of different classes in their theories of justice and slavery respectively. Usually, the term ‘middle Class’ is used as an umbrella term to describe all the people who are not manual workers. The term gained currency

when the classes were measured in terms of their economic standing and the analysts found out the symbolic relationship between the economic standing and its social behavior. The concept of the middle class therefore is as old as the advent of the concept of private property itself. As far back as 350 B.C., Aristotle acknowledged the existence and role of the middle class when he said that no democracy could last without middle-class rule as the rich and the poor simply distrust each other too intensely to let the other have the reins. Aristotle while putting forward his argument against democracy in his famous book 'Politics' emphasized the role of the middle class in introducing and maintaining the democratic political system in the following words, "In all states there are three sections of the community - the very well off, the very badly-off, and those in between. Seeing therefore that it is agreed that moderation and a middle position are best, it is clear that in the matter of possessions to own a middling amount is best of all. This condition is most obedient to reason, and following reason is just what is difficult both for the exceedingly rich, handsome, strong, and well-born, and for the opposite, the extremely poor, the weak, and the downtrodden. The former commit deeds of violence on a large scale, the latter are delinquent and wicked in petty ways. ... There are other drawbacks about the two extremes. Those who have a super-abundance of all that makes for success, strength, riches, friends, and so forth, neither wish to hold office nor understand the work. Those on the other hand who are greatly deficient in these qualities are too subservient. So they cannot command and can only obey in a servile regime while the others cannot obey in any regime and can command only in a master-slave relationship. The result is a state not of free man but of slaves and masters, the one full of envy, the other of contempt... The middle class is also the steadiest element, the least eager for change. They neither covet, like the poor, the possessions of others, nor do others covet theirs, as the poor covet those of the rich. ... It is a happy state of affairs when those who take part in the life of the state have a moderate but adequate amount of property; for where one set of people possesses a great deal and the other nothing, the result is either extreme democracy or unmixed oligarchy or a tyranny due to the excesses of the other two. Tyranny often emerges from an over-enthusiastic democracy or from an oligarchy, but much more rarely from middle-class constitutions"<sup>1</sup> It is therefore, clear that even Aristotle acknowledged the existence of three broad classes in the society, namely, the upper, the middle and the lower, each having its own distinct characteristics.



Though the concept of the class is a very old one, it was with the writings of Karl Marx during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept began to raise much debate and controversy among the social scientists. It was Karl Marx who for the first time gave a systematic expression of class. Marx distinguished between “class in itself and class for itself” to which Lenin later added that “Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation to the means of production, by their role in organization of labour and consequently, by their mode and dimension of acquiring the share of social wealth which they dispose ( Lenin ,1935: *Selected Works* ,Vol. 3, International Publishers, New York, P.249). Marx and his followers gave a theory of class which is considered to be pro-change aiming at the end of the class struggle through a proletariat revolution. On the other hand, another group of thinkers led by Max Weber tried to counter the pro change concept of class as put forwarded by Karl Marx and his followers by their own concept of class which prefers stability of the social system. According to Weber, classes are aggregate of individuals who have the same opportunities of acquiring goods, and the same exhibited standard of living as he says , “class’ refers to any group of people that is found in the same class situation”(Ian McIntosh,(ed.) 1997:*Classical Sociological Theory*’ Edinburgh University Press, p.-133). The Marxian, Liberal and the Weberian concept of the middle class has been discussed later in this chapter.

In simple terms, the middle class may be defined as an intermediary social and economic class between two distinct classes –upper and lower. They represent neither the affluent and highly propertied class nor they are economic paupers. According to Aijaz Ahmed, “the middle class, or in other words, the intermediate and auxiliary classes comprise all classes which are not part of the polar classes of a particular dominant mode of production, capitalist or the working class.”<sup>3</sup> He has further viewed that the in the metropolitan countries, the middle class are composed of analytically identifiable groupings or factions that combine to form a social whole. They have experienced a particular formation in the process of capital accumulation , they perform particular function in the social division of labor as it involves through different phases of development , they have particular postings in the changing social relations of capitalist development , they share common class interests and achieve a

coherent unity in the sphere of class culture and life style and they have played and will continue to play key roles in the social struggles that shape the development of monopoly capitalist society.<sup>4</sup>

Andre Beteille, in his book 'Marxism and Class Analysis' has defined 'middle class' as "that section of the society that stands in the middle, somewhere between the very rich and very poor. It is too vague and arbitrary, and depends where the lines are drawn between the rich and the rest and between the poor and the others."<sup>5</sup> According to Prof. Beteille, a class from the sociological point of view has to be defined in relation to some significant features of society, such as the property structure or the occupational structure. The middle class according to him is a composite because it has proved impossible to dispense with either the property structure or the occupational structure in defining it and the two structures are based on different principles. In his definition of the 'Middle Class' Prof. Beteille has also taken special note of the distinction between the old middle class and the new middle class as he has viewed that, "In explaining the socially composite nature of the middle class, it may be best to begin with the distinction between the old middle class and the new middle class. The old middle class or 'petty bourgeoisie' typically comprised small independent operators where as the new middle class consists typically of salaried 'white-collar' employees."<sup>6</sup> According to him, the salaried middle class emerged first in the advanced industrial countries of the West, but in due course of time, it made its appearance in other countries as well.

Ghanshyam Shah, in his book 'Social Movements in India' has viewed that the middle class is class "Placed between labour and capital. It neither directly owns the means of production that pumps out the surplus generated by wage labour power, nor does it, by its own labour, produce the surplus which has use and exchange value."<sup>7</sup> According to him, "the middle class consists of the petty bourgeoisie and the white collar workers. The former are self employed or involved in the distribution of commodities and the latter are non manual office workers, supervisors and professionals. Thus, in terms of occupation, shopkeepers, salesmen, brokers, government and non government office workers, writers, teachers, social workers

and self employed professionals , such as engineers , pleaders , doctors etc , constitute the middle class . Most of these occupations require at least some degree of formal education.”<sup>8</sup> Shah has further viewed that this middle class is primarily a product of capitalist development and the expansion of the functions of the state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . Though the petty bourgeoisie and managers did exist in pre capitalist society , they constituted a tiny class. Industrial development and expansion of markets require not only a large managerial class than earlier , but also impel the state to shoulder the responsibilities of monitoring market competition and resolving contradictions of capitalist development . This includes formation and implementation of welfare programmes to minimize tension in society. For carrying out these functions , the state also require a managerial class . Formal education contributes to the expansion of this class.<sup>9</sup>

Nikolai Tilkidjiev in his book “The Middle Class and Social Stratification” has defined the middle class as“essentially, a macro-social group embracing individuals, or rather categories of individuals, marked by a unique general attitude towards life.”<sup>10</sup> According to him, the middle class consists of the people who owe everything to their own efforts, resources, qualification, education, etc. Self-made as they are, middle-class people are furthermore self-employed and relatively free and autonomous in their work. Their knowledge and qualification, property and managerial skills are intentionally acquired and so is their social status. Indeed, it is status hierarchy - in terms of occupation, education, income, property and social prestige - that reveals the unique medial position of the middle class people. And the status of the middle class within that hierarchy is clearly a unique one – in-between the “upper-class” elite and the “lower-class” workers, in-between the upper class and the wage earners, in-between the envied of the world and the pitied ones.<sup>11</sup> Prof. Tilkidjiev has pointed out certain distinctive characteristics of the middle class, such as:

(A) The people who are middle class are relatively well off, the absolute amount of property owned and income received being conditioned on the well being of the specific society as a whole.

(B) Good or even high prestige is another important component characteristic of the middle class status.

(C) Next comes the specific value system and culture, embracing a pro-active attitude towards life and a tendency for rational and modern consumption.

According to him, the individualistic middle class life style, innovative behaviour, realism, devotion to work, etc. are the distinctive characteristics of the middle class. No wonder, success and prosperity are the rule, rather than an exception among middle class people. Indeed, middle class actors are enterprising. This makes them active, flexible and adaptable in situations of uncertainty and quickly changing conditions and hence the broader stabilizing effect the middle class brings into society as a whole. In a word, if society is to be genuinely coherent and integrated, a prosperous middle class is indispensable. Moreover, being a crucial factor for stability and development, the middle class is to continue to play a vital positive role in society.

The configuration of the middle class in the developing countries may be at variance with that of the developed world. But broadly it is said to be made up of administrators of the large bureaucracies and technical , scientific and professional sectors of the labour force that have grown with the progression of capitalism since the turn of the century.

Nevertheless in concrete, empirical terms Prof. Nikolai Tilkidjiev has identified three basic middle class strata,<sup>12</sup> they are as follows -

- i. First comes the stratum of enterprising people running small or medium-size businesses, or what is known as small or medium enterprises (SMEs). These are people relying on resources of their own – money, property and possessions. The stratum embraces, in the first place, shopkeepers and traders, craftsmen and small-scale manufacturers. Most of the businesses in consideration are self-employed and family-run. The rest of the enterprising middle class stratum comes from the small-scale and medium-size agricultural sector. Farmers, accordingly, SMEs in the farming sector, are an important component of the middle class.

ii. Then comes the stratum of public servants, administrators and managers (service class). Those are well-qualified employees of the state and local administration, as well as people with administrative and supervisory positions in the private sector. The authority of this category of people, accordingly, their responsibilities, vary from the national level to the local one, from the chief or deputy chief of a department to the rank-and-file supervisors, from the mayor or deputy mayor of a major city to the small local official.

iii. And, finally, there comes the intelligentsia, whose main resource is knowledge, culture, education, qualification and intelligence. The stratum embraces the various professionals and experts. Such are the specialists with higher education and genuine professional experience in their corresponding fields of expertise. Lawyers, doctors, architects and designers are intelligentsia too. So are also artists, writers, etc.

#### **I.V.I. Classical Liberalism and the Middle Class:**

The ‘middle class’ which is so vogue at present was not heard in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the liberal economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo were scientifically analyzing the basis of demand and supply, production and distribution and the role of capital and labour in the sphere of production and the creation of economic values through distribution. Smith, Ricardo and Malthus studied deep in to the economic phenomena of rent. These prominent economists who are often called the classists as they formed the classical school of Political Economy had initiated a much wider discussion on the interaction of economy in politics and society. Free competition, free trade, free banks, freedom to choose one’s employment and competitive rate of interest were the various demands which were raised by these thinkers. In his book, ‘Wealth of Nations’, Adam Smith postulated a system of natural liberty in order to promote national prosperity. His argument was that the businessman knows his interest better than any Government can tell him. He defined the system of natural liberty in these words, “Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest in his own way and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man or order of men.”<sup>13</sup> These principles laid the foundation of unrestricted capitalism and a capitalist system

of economy based on the sole consideration of profit by the industrialist employer . It did not take care of the interest of the working class , which was forced to live on substance wages. Ricardo viewed that, “ The produce of the earth- all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labour , machinery and capital is divided among the three classes in the community; namely the proprietors of the land , the owner of the stock or capital necessary for its cultivation , and labourers by whose industry it is cultivated .”<sup>14</sup> Higher wages to the workers was opposed by Malthus on the ground that it would encourage them to produce more children and consequently there would be stiff competition for jobs and the resultant fall in the wages for the workers. Hence he argued that increasing the wages for the workers would not serve any real purpose. Such a kind of ideology promoted the rise and the consolidation of the industrial middle class in Great Britain. The classical liberalism by providing political rights and economic freedom to the new middle class consolidated their position in the society as a highly privileged class.<sup>15</sup>

#### **I.V.II. Marx on Class and the Middle Class:**

The term ‘middle class’ as is used in the modern times started to gain much popularity and attention only after Karl Marx’s exposition of the theory of ‘ class struggle’ and ‘surplus value’. Marx’s theory of class struggle rests on the premise that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”<sup>16</sup> According to this view, ever since human society emerged from its primitive and relatively undifferentiated state it has remained fundamentally divided between classes who clash in the pursuit of class interests. In the ‘Communist Manifesto’ Marx and Engels clearly pointed out that “freeman and slave , patrician and plebeian ,lord and serf, guild master and journeyman ,in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another , carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden ,now open fight , a fight that each time ended ,either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”<sup>17</sup> Precisely speaking, Marx and Engels viewed the increasing division of the capitalist society in to “two great hostile camps, in to two great classes directly facing one another: the bourgeoisie and proletariat.”<sup>18</sup> Marx used the term ‘Bourgeoisie’ to denote the new producing class which owns the means of production. The ‘Proletariat’ on the other

hand according to him, are the workers offering their labour to produce the 'surplus value'. Apart from the afore mentioned two main classes, Marx also recognizes the existence certain intermediary group in between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat whom Marx term as the 'petty bourgeoisie' or the 'middle class' .

In Part II of his 'Theories of Surplus Value' Marx clearly made use of the term 'middle class' while leveling criticisms against the famous classical liberalist David Ricardo for ignoring the growing number of this middle class in his study. According to Marx, what Ricardo forgets to emphasize is a constantly growing number of middle classes, those who stand between the workmen on the one hand and the capitalist on the other.<sup>19</sup> In the same place , Marx further viewed that, "The middle classes maintain themselves to an ever increasing extent directly out of revenue , they are a burden weighing heavily on the working base and increase the social security and power of the upper ten thousand."<sup>20</sup>

In the Part-I of his 'Theories of Surplus' Value' Marx included in his conception 'middle class' category, " The horde of flunkies, the soldiers, ,police, lower officials and so on mistresses , grooms ,clowns and jugglers as well as ill paid artisans , musicians , lawyers , physicians , scholars , masters, inventors etc."<sup>21</sup> However, despite Marx's address to these desperate groups as middle class, it should not be taken to mean that he attributed to them the same economic and political significance that he ordinarily implied by the term 'class'. Despite his obvious awareness of these sections and his belief in their likely expansion, at no place in his writings Marx attempted to incorporate them within the general model of the capitalist society as a class on a par with the proletariat or the bourgeoisie . This clearly proves the fact that Marx was not much interested in middle class as according to him this intermediate class would lose its identity as it will merge either of the two main classes ,i.e . either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat in due course of the time.

Marx was not much interested in this intermediate class or classes because they according to him have no real meaning for history. Their role in either capitalist



production or proletariat revolution is negligible as they will be swallowed up by one of the two main groups ,i.e. the bourgeoisie or the proletariat and there will be polarization of two groups.<sup>22</sup> Marx viewed that the condition of the industrial capitalism must inevitably drive out all these classes in to one camp or the other . Then comes the inevitable war between the two giant camps until the victory of the exploited. The middle class will disappear and with the advance of the capitalism, most of its members will be absorbed in the proletariat. This is quite evident from the following passage expressed by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, “In the countries where modern civilization developed, a new petty bourgeoisie was formed, which hovers between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and continually renews itself a supplementary part of the bourgeoisie society. The members of this class, however, are being constantly hurled down in the proletariat by the action of competition; indeed with the development of large scale industry they even see a time approaching when they will be replaced, in commerce, manufacturing and agriculture by labour overseers and stewards.”<sup>23</sup> In same book Marx and Engels predicted the similar fate for the lower strata of the middle class in these words, “The previously existing small intermediate strata- the small industrialists , merchants and renters , the artisans and peasants –all these classes sink down in to proletariat partly because their small capital does not suffice for carrying on of large scale industry and succumbs in competition with the larger capitalists , partly because their skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production . Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population.”<sup>24</sup>

#### **I.V.III. Max Weber on Class and Middle Class:**

Weberian perspectives on the middle class (es) are even more diverse than Marxist ones. This is because “ The hallmark of Max Weber’s treatment of class, which forms their generative matrix , is its celebrated multidimensionality : Class is understood as the summation or weighed combination of a variety of positional effects on partly orthogonal scales or divides - of property , occupation , authority , education and prestige .”<sup>25</sup> In his definition of class , Max Weber says, “ We may speak of a ‘class’(1) when a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as,(2) this component is represented exclusively by



economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and(3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. These points refer to “class situation.” which we may express more briefly as the typical chance for a supply of goods, external living conditions and personal life experiences, in so far as this chance is determined by the amount and kind of power, or lack of such, to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of income in a given economic order. The term ‘class’ refers to any group of people that is found in the same class situation.”<sup>26</sup>

For Weber, class is represented by holding of property and economic resource which affect one’s life chances under market conditions. Moreover, class is a situation to which individual conform according to their economic means and patterns of consumption. In contrast to Marx, classes according to Weber derive from consumption. Class does not constitute a community of interest aligned against another class comprising of opposing community of interest whose power it wants to supplant, in Weber exist in discrete splendor.<sup>27</sup>

Weber lays greater emphasis on status groups that constitute communities. Status is found on honour and prestige and not on property. He remarks that both propertied and the property less can belong to the same status group. Status differences are evident in lifestyles and the acquisition of honour and prestige. Social honor does not emanate from economic wellbeing of property but from recognition and acceptance of one’s actions. A variety of lifestyles may persist within the same economic class, signifying the presence of multiple status groups. In this perspective Weber views that “The middle class is composed of those who stand in the middle in the statistical distribution of income and prestige, i.e. white collar workers and professionals for most part.”<sup>28</sup> Thus in the Weberian perspective, the manual and non manual line is considered to mark the boundary of the middle class and the main hurdle to mobility in a fundamentally open class structure.<sup>29</sup>

From the above discussion of the different definitions and conceptions of the middle class, one thing becomes clear that the “ 'middle class' is an over-used

expression and difficult to pin down, since it is defined not just in terms of income, but also as values, cultural affinities, lifestyles, educational attainments and service sector employment.”<sup>30</sup> The complexity in pinpointing and defining the middle class is well ventilated in the words of Loic J.D. Wacquant , who viewed that , “The epistemic ambition of defining once and for all , the correct classification, of discovering the ‘real’ boundaries of the middle class is doomed to be failure because it rests on a fundamentally mistaken conception of the ontological status classes . The middle class , like any other social group does not exist readymade in reality. It must be constituted through material and symbolic struggle waged simultaneously over class and between classes.”<sup>31</sup> The question of the so called ‘middle classes’ in advanced societies –their theoretical status , social composition and structural position has been variously referred as ‘ one of the most intractable issues in contemporary sociology.’<sup>32</sup> Wacquant has attributed much of the difficulty and controversy in defining and conceptualizing the concept of middle class in present times to the Marxist thinkers and the rivals of Marxism. According to him ,“ Much of the current controversy surrounding the question of the ‘middle class’ can be traced back to Marx and to the rival interpretations that the ambiguities and deficiencies of his theory have generated in the political context of German revisionism dispute of 1890.”<sup>33</sup>

#### **I.V.IV. Working Definition of Middle Class:**

Despite all the above difficulties in defining the term middle class, a close look in to the basic features of the different theories help us to understand the meaning of the middle class in general. In the Indian Context, we can term those classes of the people as the middle class whom J.H. Broomfield termed as the ‘Bhadralok’ while referring to a section of people in 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. According to Boomfield, “ In city, town and village there was one group of Bengalis who claimed and were accorded recognition as superior in social status to the mass of their fellows. These were the bhadraloks , literally the respectable people , the gentlemen. They were distinguished by many aspects of their behaviour- their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits, their occupations and their association.”<sup>34</sup> According to him, education was the hallmark of the bhadralok status and they had a keen interest in white collar employments such as the law, civil service (ICS) or other learned

professions.<sup>35</sup> However, for the purpose of our study we have accepted the definition of middle class forwarded by Ghanshyam Shah as our working definition. According to this definition, the middle class is an intermediary social and economic class between two distinct classes –upper and lower. They represent neither the affluent and highly propertied class nor they are economic paupers. They comprise all classes which are not part of the polar classes of a particular dominant mode of production, capitalist or the working class. The middle classes are the groups of people who are mainly composed of the professionals and white collar employees mostly non manual works and they mainly consist of the people who owe everything to their own efforts, resources, qualification, education, etc. Self-made as they are, middle-class people are furthermore self-employed and relatively free and autonomous in their work. Occupation and income are the identifying criteria of the middle classes. But again, income is related with education and status. Persons with high income who are not educated will not be regarded as middle class. The middle class are the intellectuals who carry influence in social, political and cultural spheres. Thus, in terms of occupation, shopkeepers, salesmen, brokers, government and non government office workers, writers, teachers, social workers, cultural workers and self employed professionals, such as engineers, pleaders, doctors, etc, constitute the middle class. Most of these occupations require at least some degree of formal education. The middle class occupy a strategic field in the economy and politics, thus obtaining power and initiatives which make it possible for them to struggle for political dominance over other classes including the bourgeoisie. As Aijaz Ahmed says, “these classes play a key role in the construction of political reaction as well as in the process of radicalisation and even revolution. What political role they play in a given conjuncture and whether they will align themselves with the class above or class below, is highly influenced by the historical constitution of the conjuncture itself.”<sup>36</sup>

In the context of the Karbis of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, it can be said that a middle class as defined above do exist. The Karbi middle class possesses most of the traits of the middle class which we have accepted in our working definition and the same will be justified in our study in the subsequent chapters. Further, in the subsequent chapters we shall primarily study the Karbi middle class as conceptualised in our working definition and examine how Karbi middle class

emerged to occupy an important position in the political scenario of Karbi Anglong district.

#### **I.V.V. The ‘Middleness’ of the Middle Class:**

For a clear understanding of the meaning of the term ‘middle class’ it would be appropriate to trace the location of this class in the social hierarchy. As we have found the various definitions and also in our working definition it can surely be said that nothing is coincidental about the medial position of the middle class. If the middle class is situated in-between the “up” and the “down”, the “top” and the “bottom”, it has nothing to do with any coincidence of circumstances or a temporary configuration of factors. The distinction runs deep and transcends day-to-day social occurrences. Group characteristics and interrelations are underpinned and driven by deep-running societal structures and undercurrents. Here is an indirect evidence of that: the medial position of the middle class, accordingly, its three-dimensional composition and structure is a cross-border occurrence. It does not vary from region to region. Whatever the specifics of society, it is always the same social groups that are “in the middle”. Moreover, the social strata situated “above” and “below” the middle class are identical too. But then comes another question - how can this universality or ubiquity be explained.

The answer lies in the common basis and mechanisms of social group differentiation. Really, regardless of the specifics of modern societies, that is to say, irrespective of the specific historical background, cultural setting, current political and economic development, etc. the basic mechanisms of differentiation and reproduction of the specific social groups and strata remain the same. And it is the specific mechanisms of differentiation and reproduction of the small and medium-size business, the intelligentsia, the professional and experts, and the public servants and employees, etc. that predetermine the role and position of the specific middle class categories in society. The sub-classes under consideration are nothing of an elite or upper class . They do not run society. The middle class may be indispensable in terms of the administration and management its members provide, but it is not middle class

persons that take the strategic decisions. In the final analysis, the middle class *serves* the upper class. On the other hand, though, middle class people are no riffraff either. By no means are they at the bottom. In economic terms, as well as in terms of culture and prestige, the middle class status is superior to the working class status. Middle class people may not as a rule employ hired labour, but they do as a rule run hired labour, such as white-collar and blue-collar workers. This is a crucial characteristic that distinguishes the middle class strata from the lower class strata. Indeed, nothing is middle class about manual and non-manual workers. The very essence and specifics of the small and medium-size business, the intelligentsia, the professional and experts, the public servants and employees, that is to say, their power, cultural and consumer status, predetermines and underlies their general stratification position, their medial status, their being a middle class. But then, the reiteration of the intermediate character of the middle class – of its being “in-between” the “upper class” and the “lower class” - is something of a vicious circle. And the only way of getting unchained from it is to concentrate on the middle class as such, accordingly, on the specific middle class strata as such.

After all, the “medial character” of the middle class, its middleness is only a consequence from its wider stratification specifics. Shortly, it is not that the observation of the middle class being “in-between” is unimportant. Rather, the very concept of the middle class and its strata should be developed and specified in terms of the latest developments in social stratification studies.

#### **I.V.VI. Functions of the Middle Class:**

As has already been found in the above study , the configuration of the middle class in the developing countries may be at variance with that of the developed world . But broadly it is said to be made up of the administrators of the large bureaucracies and technical, scientific and professional sectors of the labour force that have grown with the progression of capitalism since the turn of the century . In the peripheral or developing nations , intermediate classes are formed along with the local bourgeoisie and the working class often under the conditions of dependency that are structured by

accumulation on a world scale . The middle class along with the polar classes , are involved in rapidly changing relations within the national contexts, which also have an international ramification . Rupak Dattagupta in his book '*Classes And Elites in the Third World*' has enumerated the functions of the middle class position in the capital accumulation process as follows<sup>37</sup> :-

- i. The supervision and control of the labour process in the form of managers, foremen, supervisors etc;
- ii. The reproduction of capitalist social relations as teachers ,, social workers , health professionals , state administrators , lawyers, cultural workers;
- iii. The accounting and realisation of value professionals in advertising, sales, accounting, banking, finance and insurance; and
- iv. The transformation of technical means of production as scientists, engineers, research technicians.

Therefore, the growth and positions of the middle classes have been determined by the dynamic process of unfolding social relations to the accumulations process, of capitalist development and it has been also a never ending propellant to economic and social development . In this context, the middle class has often been referred to as an agent of other class, particularly of the bourgeoisie class , its salaried section has been described as those who do not produce surplus value and live on the surplus value that is transferred to them from the rest of society. As an organic intellectual of the bourgeoisie , the middle class performs the functions of direction and vigilance over the labour process and of exercising political domination through the state .

However, disagreeing with this view, Dale Jhonson, in his book '*Middle Class in Dependent Countries*' has asserted that the middle class is no body's agent though they may often act so. Because people are formed in social relations in which they are enmeshed and "in living and thinking the relations that shape their lives and their self conceptions , they engage in a process of self-formation."<sup>38</sup> Middle classes are human beings caught between their defined roles and their actual circumstances.

The middle class occupy a strategic field in the economy and politics, thus obtaining power and initiatives which make it possible for them to struggle for political dominance over other classes including the bourgeoisie. As Aijaz Ahmed says, “these classes play a key role in the construction of political reaction as well as in the process of radicalisation and even revolution. What political role they play in a given conjuncture and whether they will align themselves with the class above or class below , is highly influenced by the historical constitution of the conjuncture itself.”<sup>39</sup>

#### **I.VI. Middle Class in India:**

The middle class in India today consists of more than million households or 300 million people, the largest in the world.<sup>40</sup> If one goes by Pranab Bardhan’s categorisation of the dominant coalition, the middle class –professional –as he refers to them, forms the third constituent of the power triumvirate, along with the dominant landed interests and the big business, that are involved in the business of ruling India. According to Bardhan, the professionals ,both civil and military as well as the white collar workers(i.e. the middle class), can be considered as a propriety class in so far as they possess human capital in the form of education, skills and technical expertise.<sup>41</sup>

According to Rupak Dattagupta, in the context of the dynamics of Indian social structure the middle class can be defined to include the following categories of the people-<sup>42</sup>

1. Small business-both manufacturing and trading.
2. The middle peasantry.
3. The entrepreneurial classes.
4. A large chunk of the (government) bureaucracy.
5. The professional classes.
6. A variety of groups performing many overlapping functions in the informal sector but having incomes comparable to those of the other aforementioned categories and
7. The political elite who may have earned on unearned incomes.

Dattagupta has further viewed that of the above mentioned categories, only the first three categories comprise the producing classes . The middle class is said to be a critical part of the political class or the elite , because the political leadership takes the general political decisions which the public bureaucracy (a very significant element of the middle class ) is expected to implement . The British colonialists who introduced the modern system of bureaucratic and administrative organisation in India and under whose rule modern professions such as law, academics , engineering, medicine , journalism etc. and modern enterprise arose , recruited the civil servants from the traditional literate groups, which unlike in Europe , had little organic relationship with trade or industry.

Education was a privilege and also a monopoly of the upper classes and castes , hence not only the bureaucracy came to be dominated by the upper castes like the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Kayasthas but the other professions such as engineering , science , medicine , law , education , journalism etc. conformed to this configuration . Although the post- independence policy of reservation and quota has made some dent in caste content of the professions, yet the overall domination of the upper castes /classes is still evident. This is because , the educated elite enjoy a high scarcity value for their education and profession . Upper castes/classes being traditional monopolists in these fields ,by managing to direct educational investment away from the masses , they have been able to protect their scarcity rent , and by acquiring licence –giving power at various levels of bureaucracy some of them have increased their capacity to multiply their rental income . The old rentier classes in Indian society , delivering their income from absentee landlordism , has now been replaced by the new renter elements in the privilege bureaucracy and they belong to similar social status groups and castes.<sup>43</sup> Rupak Dattagupta has classified the middle class in contemporary India in to three main categories <sup>44</sup> :-

- i. Commercial: Traders, medium and small scale entrepreneurs, the self employed and rich peasants.
- ii. Professionals: Doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, engineers, scientists, journalists etc.



iii. Bureaucrats: The salaried personnel in government administration, private enterprise, commerce and banking.

It is this middle class that has been in the forefront of the independence movement in India . As such , it is from this class came the political elites and rulers in the earlier part of the post-colonial era. It is the political leadership , having their social origins in the middle class that took up the reins of the statecraft and formulated its domestic and foreign policies . The reluctance of the industrial and other bourgeoisie to get directly involved in the ruling and administration of India and the post colonial state's effort to undertake the economic , social and cultural reorganisation of the nation and employment generation gave a boost to the ambitions of the middle classes .

Compared to its rural counterpart , the urban middle class is in an advantageous position as it forms the more educated and informed section of the society. Their political awareness enables them to organise themselves and they are also in a position to political processes and workout political programmes . However, the trade and commerce section of the urban middle class , being a small percentage of the entire middle class , seeks its alliance from the rural side , specially from the big and rich peasantry , mainly to protect itself from the expanding big bourgeoisie and to maintain the status quo, lest it is reduced to the status of the proletariat . Thus the very nature of this class , makes it support state capitalism or state involvement in the economy . This is mainly for two main reasons –one because the state's involvement in the economy and society brings new forms of organisations , technological advances and vast increase in the public employment opportunities along with the political and economic benefits . Secondly, the state intervention in the economy is welcome in order to curb uninhabited growth of the big capitalists industrialists as long as it does not interfere with the growth of small and medium enterprise in agriculture , industry and commerce . Therefore , the state subsidies , nationalisation of banks , financial institutions and insurance and cooperativisation have helped the middle class entrepreneur in both rural as well as urban areas . Similarly , cheap and highly subsidised higher education has helped the middle class to achieve higher skills and expertise , necessary for economic betterment and a decent livelihood .

Talking of the characteristics and lifestyle of the Indian middle class , J.D Sethi is of the view that it is not only expanding but it is the mainstay of the national savings and a source of conspicuous consumption of luxury and semi luxury items. The Indian middle class unlike their counterparts in the developed world , has been able to create ‘pseudo-employment’ by affording to hire the services of domestic help and street service at cheap rates . A section of the middle interests of the entire elite class. On two counts, the middle class has been portrayed in the negative –“ a majority of its being parasitic pitted against the producing classes and its intellectual subservience to Western thought and culture through its integration with the outside forces.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus the very nature of the mixed economy in India has helped the creation of a vast class of middle men between the private sector and the government . And of course , the middle class would not have grown without fiscal support by the government in the form of raising the exemption limit of personal income tax, which compared to international standards is quite high . The purpose is to encourage household savings, which now accounts for 80 percent of the middle class savings.

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