

Socio-Economic Status and Nature of Community Elite: A Survey

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Some studies on elite shows that high levels of education, higher incomes and high standards of living, job security, etc. are important attributes of leaders/ elite. Are these assumptions true in the case of Paite elite as well? Based on data and information collected from survey, the paper examines the social, economic and ideological position of modern Paite elite in Churachandpur.

Keywords: Community Elite, Paite, Churachandpur, Manipur.

This research study is the outcome of survey carried out in Churachandpur district, Manipur during December 2007 and January 2008. The community under investigation is the Paite.¹ In the context of Manipur which is inhabited by different ethnic groups and communities with varying sizes and stages of development, confronted with diverse social and political unrest, the paper provides insight about the status and nature of the dominant section in Paite community.

Social status and attitudes and orientations of the community elite are dependent on several factors. Some studies on elite suggested that high levels of education, higher incomes and high standards of living, job security, etc. are important attributes of leaders/ elite (for instance, see Kaistha 1987: 81-91; Bandyopadhyay 1985). There has not been any empirical study to prove whether these assumptions apply in case of the Paite elite as well. Hence, the paper attempts to understand socio-economic status and ideological orientation of modern Paite elite.

To determine the socio-economic status of Paite elite, variables like age, marital status, sex and educational qualification are taken into consideration. In order to understand the nature of the elite, it is necessary to examine the ideals they cherish and the values that they hold and advocate. In what direction the community or society advances depends to a considerable extent on the ideological leanings of the elite. Ideology is identified with broad fundamental norms generally shared by the members of society or community (Gould and Kolb 1967: 743-745). Ideology here refers to “perceptions, attitudes and values” held and applied in daily activities, in decision-making, in maintaining social relationships, and in performing their roles in different social and political organisations and institutions.

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Elite refers to individual or group of individuals playing important role in the affairs of a community of people (Yapp 1979: 17). The elite emerge within the community and are organically linked to it. They comprise of a broad spectrum of influential people within the ethnic community, such as traditional chiefs, church leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, intelligentsia and students/youth leaders. The ethnic elites directly or indirectly play an important role in pursuit of the identity and interest of the community. They work towards building internal cohesion and solidarity by making use of certain ethnic markers.

Methodology, Collection of Data and Analysis

The sample size of the paper is twenty five Paite elite. Churachandpur district was chosen for area of survey as more than ninety percent of Paite of Manipur resides in the district. Important personalities, leaders and organisation of the community have their base in the district. Taking into consideration the size of the population and the compact area they occupy, the sample size of twenty-five Paite elite was considered as representative. Questionnaires and field observation were administered to these twenty five elite with the purpose of getting firsthand information about their socio-economic background and ideological orientation.

Initially, a list of hundred active Paite elite in Churachandpur district playing significant roles in politics, business, church, students and youth wings, and also in the fields of literature, academics and journalism was prepared. For preparing the list, the author took the help of Paite newspapers such as *The Lamka Post* and *Manipur Express* of several years, referred to their history and literature and discussed with members of different Paite organisations. The list so prepared includes the names of important surviving traditional chiefs, church leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, intelligentsia, and students and youth leaders, who have played important roles in the political and social life of the community. The list is broadly classified into five categories – i) the politicians,² ii) the intelligentsia,³ iii) the bureaucrats and businessmen,⁴ iv) students and youth leaders,⁵ and v) the traditional and church leaders.⁶

Using stratified random sampling method, five members are chosen from each category at random through a lot and a sample of twenty-five persons was identified for the purpose of survey. The structured schedules were administered to these members to secure data on their socio-economic and ideological background.

The schedule administered to the select Paite elite included queries concerning their socio-economic background and their perceptions on community issues and their role in Paite politics. For information on the general socio-economic background questions concerning age and marital status: sex, educational qualification, occupation, father's occupation, nature and size of family, inter-community marriage, family monthly income, sources and expenses and material possessions are asked. To understand the elite role in community issues, queries related to elite participation or involvement in church activities, organisations, public meetings and demonstrations are analysed. Finally, to assess their role in politics, questions concerning their ideological orientation, political affiliation, nature of voting and political identity are asked. Efforts are made to crosscheck the claims made by the informants through empirical observation of their movable and immovable properties and also by talking to others who have knowledge of the persons

included in the sample.

Based on the data and information collected through questionnaire and schedule, the following findings and observations are made.

General Background of Elite

The survey gives us a clear picture of the status and nature of Paite elite in the socio-political and cultural domains. With regard to age distribution of the respondents,⁷ they are found in different age groups and not from a particular age group. However, it is observed that an overwhelming number of respondents are above 40 years of age. Eleven (44 per cent) are in the middle-age group (41–60) and 10 (40 per cent) in the old-age (> 61) group. There are only four (16 per cent) in the young age group (14–40).

Another interesting finding is on the unequal gender representation in the affairs of the community. Only one member of the elite out of the 25 surveyed elite is a woman. To substantiate the finding, further investigation was carried out on this particular issue by examining participation of Paite women in different Paite/Zomi organisations.⁸ It was found that only in student and church organisations women participation was noticed. Even in these organisations, women generally occupy lower rung of the hierarchy. The finding clearly shows that male elite dominate the decision-making process in the community.

Contemporary Paite women have made significant progress in the field of education and other walks of life. Some of them have occupied high administrative posts in both central and state governments (*Siamsinpawlpi Annual Magazine [Annual Magazine of the Siamsinpawlpi 1987: s(1)–s(xxxv)]*). In spite of the achievements they have made, when it comes to community affairs and politics, women's role and participation is found to be minimal. The predominant position of men in political decision-making processes may be related to the patriarchal traditions and customs of the community.

It is established that one's educational⁹ and occupation¹⁰ status plays an important role in the making of elite. There are no illiterate elite among the respondents. All elite are educated and most of them got academic degrees. It is seen that only two respondents have higher secondary qualifications: one among them is a student/youth leader and the other one a Church worker. The rest are graduate and above. Thirteen members of the elite have education up to graduate or post-graduate level. Six members of the elite are MPhil/PhD degree holders. The remaining four elite are professional degree holders. Two of the intelligentsia and three Church leaders possess PhD degrees. Three of them had obtained PhD degrees from secular streams and two from theology. One from the politician category is an MPhil. Among those who have professional degrees, two of the elite are from students/youth leaders category and one respondent each is from the intelligentsia and bureaucrat and businessmen category.

Even though the elite are drawn from different occupational backgrounds, most of them are salaried employees and have stable economic means. Out of 25 elite surveyed, none of the respondents is engaged in cultivation for their livelihood. Nine members of the elite are government/semi-government employees and four are employees of private institutions. Seven among them are retired persons drawing pensions¹¹ and four are social workers.

While 13 of the fathers of the surveyed elite were found to have an agriculture background, 10 were government employees. The father of one respondent is self-employed and of another was a politician. A comparative study of “occupation of respondents” and “occupation of fathers” shows that although the parents of more than half of the respondents have an agricultural background, none of the elite surveyed engaged in agriculture for their livelihood. This indicates a total shift of elite from agriculture to modern activities and symbolises the decline of traditional hold on the society.

The finding on the nature of family background¹² shows that the majority of the elite hail from a joint-family background (13 members of the elite, i.e. 52 per cent). The high incidence of joint families could probably be explained from the fact that still being young and economically not fully self-reliant, students/youth leaders live with their families. With regard to the size of family,¹³ the study shows a high incidence of medium-sized families among the elite: 20 respondents have medium-size families as compared to 3 with small families and 2 with large families. The average size of the family ranges from 6 to 10.4. The large size of families is explained by the presence of a high incidence of joint families among the elite.

Knowledge of incidence of inter-community marriage is one important way of understanding the family backgrounds of the elite and their attitude towards inter-community relations. With regard to inter-community marriage, the finding is quite revealing. Only 7 members out of 25 surveyed elite have reported of inter-community marriages in their families. Although the incidences of inter-community marriage are not many, it is observed that community elite are quite open and liberal when it comes to inter-community marriages as quite a few have married into diverse communities.¹⁴

On the number of earning members in the family, it is established that the majority of the families are high-income families. There is more than one earning member in the families of the respondents. Together there are 60 earning members in the families of 25 surveyed elite. The average number of earners in a Paite elite family ranges from 2 to 3. Even though the families depended upon two or more different sources, salaries¹⁵ (92 percent regular and 48 percent pensions) were the main source of earning for the majority of the families.

Coming to the monthly family income of the respondents,¹⁶ it is observed that the majority of the Paite elite families surveyed have a decent income of over 16,000 per month (pm). Nineteen families out of 25 surveyed elites have income above Rs. 16,000. This is explained by the presence of a large number of joint families among the families of the elite. It is also related to the existence of a significant number of earning family members. It is also observed that significant numbers of elite families have high monthly expenditure¹⁷: 16 out of 25 families are reported to spend more than Rs. 16,000 pm. The monthly expenditure of 6 families is found to be within the range of Rs. 10,000–16,000. The remaining 3 families spend less than Rs. 10,000 pm.

A comparative analysis of “family monthly income” and “family monthly expenses” reveals that the data of income and expenditure of the families more or less coincide. This clearly shows that the higher the family income, the higher would be their capacity to spend. This is a natural phenomenon as people with more wealth will have more resources to utilise or spend.

To determine the level of living in terms of material possessions, this author surveyed household items¹⁸ that the elite possess in their houses. Out of the 25 surveyed elite, only 1 family (4 per cent) did not have a Television, 3 (12 per cent) families are without a refrigerator, 8 (32 per cent) families did not possess a washing machine, and 1 family (4 per cent) did not have a vehicle. Even though none of the elite is found to possess all these household items, it is found that they enjoy comfortable life and a good standard of living and possess household amenities considered luxuries by the poorer sections.

Community Activities and Elite Participation

So far, the discussion was on the general socio-economic status of the respondents. In this section, the focus is on participation of the elite in community issues through an analysis of their participation in the activities of different Paite/Zomi organizations.

To understand the social engagement of the elite in respect of Church service, each respondent was asked whether he/she participated in Church activities. It was learnt that all the elite participated in Church activities. Another important finding is on the high involvement of elite in community affairs.¹⁹ It is observed that majority of the elite - 14 members of the elite (56 per cent) out of the 25 respondents are associated with three or more community organisations while 6 (24 per cent) are associated with only one organisation. Four (16 per cent) others claimed that they work for two organisations. The finding also confirms the significant position occupied by ethnic organisations in community affairs.

After examining the involvement of the elite in politics, social and community affairs, it was considered important to find out the nature of their participation in public meetings and demonstrations/processions.²⁰ The study shows that 12 members of the elite (48 per cent) are involved in organising and planning of public meetings, while 11 (44 per cent) are found to attend public meetings just to listen to what leaders say. Ten (40 per cent) usually participate in public meetings as special guests. It is also observed that due to participation of some respondents in more than one organisation there is an overlapping of roles performed by the elite. They may be organisers in some, while participating as special guests or as passive participants in others.

In contrast to the above, 14 (56 per cent) stay away from political demonstrations and processions. The high non-participation of the elite in demonstrations may probably be due to the professions and occupations of the elite. It is learnt from the earlier discussion that majority of the elites were/are government employees. The kind of work or the ethics of their work culture may have restricted them from participating in demonstrations or processions.

Ideological Orientation

One way of knowing the political ideals and values upheld by a person or group of individuals is to study his/her nature of participation and involvement in the political process. With this view in mind, this author sought to understand political involvement of Paite elite. The survey shows that only 2 members (8 per cent) have affiliations with political parties. Twelve (48 per cent) expressed that they were not interested in political affiliations while 9 (36 per cent) said that they were concerned with candidates, not with

political parties. The finding clearly reveals the insignificance of political parties in the political life of the elite. It also shows the general apathy of the Paite people towards political parties. The record of accomplishments of parties and party manifestos are not relevant to them. It is then natural that they cast their votes without any consideration for political ideology and can easily switch their loyalty from one party to another.

With regard to participation in elections the data reveal that almost half of the elite (12 in numbers) do not actively get involved in elections. On the voting behaviour of the elite²¹ it is seen that 18 elite cast their vote in elections based on personal equations, whereas 5 voted based on party lines. This only further confirms the insignificance of political manifestos or party ideology in the political life of the elite.

Finally, understanding one's area of political interest is one way of knowing from where one derives one's values and spends one's time and resources. When asked whether they read newspapers regularly, all responded affirmatively. Since all respondents said that they read newspapers, it was probed further to understand which issues interested them most.²² The study established that news concerning community issues is the first preference of the elite: 17 (68 per cent) of them reported that they are most interested on issues concerning the community. Only 4 of them expressed their interest in national and international issues. Three said that they were interested in religious and cultural issues, and only 1 said that he was interested in state politics.

Notes

1. The Paites are one of the recognised scheduled tribal communities of Manipur. They mainly inhabit part of Churachandpur district.
2. Politicians include Members of Union Parliament, Members of Manipur State Legislative Assembly, sitting and former state ministers and party leaders belonging to the community and Members of District Council.
3. Intelligentsia includes teachers, journalists, editors, etc.
4. Under bureaucrats and businessmen category, only those persons playing active role in public life of the Paite community are taken into consideration.
5. Student and youth leaders are those persons active in the Paite organisations.
6. The author was aware that some individuals can be placed in more than one category. But for the purpose of survey, the author took into considerations how the individual would like to identify themselves.
7. The respondents were divided into three age groups, viz., young-age group, middle-age group and old-age group. Those elite whose age were in the range of 18–40 years were placed in the young-age group; 41–60 years in the middle-age group; > 61 years and above were placed in the old-age group.
8. Organisations where membership is meant only for women are not considered.
9. For meaningful analysis, educational level of the elite is grouped into two categories: (1) undergraduate, and (2) graduate and above. The latter category is subdivided into three subcategories, viz., (a) graduate and post-graduate in humanities and social sciences; (b) professionals such as engineers, doctors, and advocates; and (c) MPhil/PhD degree holders.

10. Occupations of the elite are broadly divided into five categories, viz., cultivators; employed in government and semi-government; employed in private institutions; self-employed professionals; and others. Under government and semi-government employees, academicians, bureaucrats, medical doctors, engineers working for the government, managers, etc., were taken into consideration. If the elite were working in private institutions and in NGOs, they were taken as employees of private institutions. If the elite were found to earn their living by doing business, and through institutions run by them, they were counted as self-employed. The other occupational group consists of pensioners and social workers.

11. Most of the pensioners (with the exception of one) are from government services and are still drawing pension regularly.

12. To understand their family background, the author survey whether they come from a joint family or nuclear family or an extended nuclear family.

13. Sizes of family are grouped into three: small (1–5), medium (6–10), and large (11–15).

14. The communities with which the 7 elite are reported to have inter-community marriages in the families are Gangte, Anal, Thadou, Hmar, Lusei, Malayali, Tangkhul-Naga, and Meitei.

15. As most of the pensioners are retired government servants (with the exception of 1) still drawing pension, they are included under the salaries group.

16. Family monthly income of surveyed elite is divided into three: Low: < 10,000; Middle: 10,000–16,000; and High: > 16,000.

17. Family monthly expenses of surveyed elite are divided into three: Low: < 10,000; Middle: 10,000–16,000; and High :> 16,000.

18. Items for determining household items that the elite possess in their houses: Television, refrigerator, washing machine, motor vehicle (vehicles include two-wheelers, three-wheelers and four-wheelers), Assam-type/pucca house (the type of house was recorded by personal observation).

19. To understand the association and involvement of Paite elite in community affairs, the respondents were asked to tick their participation/involvement in organizations such as the Paite Tribe Council, Young Paite Association, SiamSinPawlpi, Paite Literature Society, Church organisations, Zomi Re-unification Organization, Zomi Mothers' Association, Zomi Students' Federation, Zomi Youth Association, Zomi Council. Except one respondent, all others responded to the query.

20. The respondents were asked whether they participated in the meetings as organisers, special guests, or as passive participants. It may be noted that one respondent from politicians and 2 elite from the bureaucrats and businessmen category did not respond to this question.

21. Choices given to the elite with regard to voting behaviour are: party lines, community lines, and personal equations.

22. To examine the political interests of the elite, the respondents were asked which issues interest them most. Issues/choices given to them are: community issues, national and international affairs, religion and culture, and state politics.

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