

CHAPTER-III

TRANSITION OF AGRARIAN SYSTEM

3.1 Introduction

The agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley during colonial epoch was neither based on feudalism or capitalism in character; instead, it was under the process of capitalist development. At the debut of the colonial administration, the rural economic life of the people revolved around land-based production. The Census Report of 1901 clearly brought to light that the 87 percent people of the Brahmaputra valley mostly engaged in agriculture.¹ In pursuance of the greater extent of revenue enhancement, the new regime took an active role in changing the agrarian relation for proper utilization of land that brought large acres of land under cultivation. The expansion of cultivation added more revenue to the colonial government. The exclusive domestic food production took gradual shift towards commercial crops production with the help of a skilled and specialized agrarian community from outside the province of Assam.

The overseas market demand remained another driving force that stimulated extensive production of agriculture in the rural areas focusing on commercial crops possessing export market value. Thus, a radical pace of agrarian transformation in the Brahmaputra valley occurred during colonial period beginning with monetized payment of land revenue regardless of kind, distribution of land with valid *patta*, land reform, emphasizing more on commercial crops, pattern of agricultural production, liberation of bonded labour etc. Indeed, the overseas demand for commercial merchandise was hardly felt in that period but the limited needs of the

people more or less provided less importance to privatization and personal economic interest strictly regulated by the state. Another cause of self-isolation from global trade in agricultural products was attributed to the late establishment of the colonial regime in the Brahmaputra valley. Notably, self-isolation of its territory from external dominion had an adverse impact on the progress of its socio-economic activities. However, following the anchoring of the British East India Company's ship, foreign capitalists began engagement in accumulation of wealth through a legitimate regulation. With more experience in intellect and management in economic activity, the British quickly penetrated in procurement of territorial and political power.

The second quarter of the 19th century marked a scientific advancement in agricultural production. Furthermore, rapid changes have been reflected in modification of land systems, revenue settlement, evolution of markets, capital investment in commercial crops, money lending agencies etc. With the development of capitalism in agriculture, the race of mass production has intensified and ensured better livelihood and economic benefits to the smallholding farmers as well as traders. The economic prospects on agriculture provoked the colonial authority to modify its preceding regulation upon lands. Urgency over changing the systems of land and revenue were felt following the development of agricultural capitalism provoked by international markets. The fertile land of the Brahmaputra valley offered substantial prospects for food crops and commercial crops production. Indeed, at the time of British occupation, rice cultivation played a dominant role in agricultural production. Gradually, there emerged an integration of global markets with local supply of agricultural products.

The practice of spatial distribution of land and its utilization followed a South Asian pattern. No doubt, concentration of large acres of land in the hands of non-producers and less possession of cultivable land in the hands of actual cultivators resulted in subsistence economy and confinement to food crops production without having advanced methods of agricultural operation. Peasants produced the crops out of compulsion to fulfill the demand of proprietors without their personal interest instead they adhered to work just for subsistence. With the growing importance of tea in the Brahmaputra valley, it has opened the eyes of the international community to invest their capital. Along with tea, other commercial crops got its importance. The prospect of commercial crop production broke the regional isolation and confinement of

food production. Subsequently, the pattern of land system was modified as per the convenience of the perpetual flow of revenue to colonial exchequer.

Table 3.1: Statistics of Agriculture in the Assam valley division excluding the permanently settled Estates in Goalpara.²

Particulars	Average for seven years ending 1899-90	1899-1900	1900-1901	1903-1904
Current fallow	-	916	1227	1236
Unsettled waste	-	12,749	14651	15066
Rice	1879	2012	1930	2157
Other food grains including pulses	87	104	102	116
Oilseeds	241	257	193	253
Sugarcane	29	27	28	30
Tea	178	249	320	

Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series: Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1909.

3.2 Reorganization of Land Ownership

The colonial period represented a major difference in land tenure and land ownership. Mr. Richard Morse wrote that ‘the British had developed the *zamindari* and *ryotwari* system’ in his book *Colonial Land System in India*.³ Through *ryotwari* and *zamindari* systems, land was directly and indirectly settled with *ryots*. The previous practice of land ownership structured on joint proprietorship of land largely possessed by royal dignitaries such as Buragohains and Bargohain and the *Satgharia* Ahom no longer remained permanent; instead, it was eliminated

by the colonial government. On the other hand, the land granted by the king to the religious priests such as Brahmanas, *Satradhikaras*, Muslim *Pirs* and the temples were brought under assessment likewise revenue as fixed. All the common individual families possessed their paternal homestead land in perpetuity.⁴ The farsighted and experienced in colonization took no time for generating revenue that eventually resorted to liquidation of proprietary rights retained by joint participation in territorial conquest. The immediate annihilation of the feudal system of land utilization without providing ownership rights but surplus labour was appropriated by the state in exchange of rent. It is better to argue that the actual owner of the land happened to be non-cultivators but they were granted land by the king which was later handed over to sharecroppers or *adhiars* for the purpose of cultivation. However, the colonial administration has come up with a new process of settlement where tenure was fixed on an annual model and tax was monetized and *ryots* were directly contacted by the revenue officials.

In Goalpara district, the Mughal system of land ownership was not completely wiped out, instead it was retained. The existence of Mughal land ownership system was due to paucity of central political power in Goalpara, the Mughal had administered from Bengal province in the middle of the Seventeenth century. The district Goalpara was handed over to the British East India Company following the treaty of Allahabad by virtue of the Emperor's Farman on 12 August 1765.⁵ During Mughal administration the entire land was divided into an estate system and most part of the land was held by the original *zamindars*.⁶ There were 19 permanently settled estates in Goalpara and *zamindars* were the main owners of the land.⁷ Following introduction of the Tenancy Act of 1929, the peasants were given personal right to permanent, heritable and transferable right in land.

3.3 Agrarian Setting

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the agrarian system in the Brahmaputra valley had undergone extreme transformations. The multiple factors, both external and internal were attributed to the course of agrarian transformation. Introduction of ownership rights for *ryots*, a new land revenue system, increasing land revenue, immigration of population from east Bengal and cattle breeders and pastoralists from Nepal into Brahmaputra valley and settlement of tea plantation workers in agricultural land- all directly influenced the agrarian scenario.⁸

Sharecroppers are *adhiars* who possess land from landlords on contract with promises of returning the produce in kind. Majority of Guwahati based absentee landowners had landed interest in Panbari and in other *mauzas* who engaged tribal peasants as their sharecroppers. Barpeta had approximately 1 percent of land under sharecropping. It might be due to reclamation of riverine land in the early twentieth century there seemed to appear a smaller number of lands was taken for sharecropping. In Darrang district the land under sharecropping was extensively found. In the first half of the twentieth century, on account of twice land revenue resettlement in the district, land under sharecropping has reached 8.9 percent and 6.34 percent respectively.⁹ In the later period the landowners systematically extracted higher rates of rent from the sharecroppers by wrongful use of a land measurement stick known as *nal*. The length of the measuring pole varied according to the length of the landowner's hand. Thus, an enhanced share was obtained by using a *nal* shorter than one or more cubits that was usually specified as 8 cubits by the government. For example, a seven and half cubit pole led to an enhancement of about 15 % and a seven-cubit pole, enhanced 30%.¹⁰

As per the report, the Assam valley or the Brahmaputra valley possessed three types of ordinary tenure such as *raiya-wari*, *nisf-khiraj* and *lakhiraj*. Of three categories of land, *ryotwari* tenure seemed to be held on annual and decennial lease where peasants were given an option to relinquish the whole part of holding if desired.¹¹ A set of new regulations was rolled out with a ten-year lease regardless of annual lease along with the benefit of heritable and transferable rights. Subsequently, this regulation was embodied in Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 that conferred permanent, heritable and transferable ownership rights on land. Some of the remaining *chamua* of Barpeta had paid direct tax to the government instead of paying to mauzadar. With regard to the *nisf-khiraj* and *lakhiraj* granted by preceding rulers to the religious priests and institution on exemption of revenue were assessed at the rate of 2 annas per *pura* later augmented to 8 annas per *pura*.¹² As per the assessment made by Mr. Scott, the *lakhiraj* that consists of *debottar* (temple lands), *brahmottar* (priest's land) and *dharmottar* (religious communities) were not imposed at full rate due to under assessment. Following the speculation on the valid holding of land, non-bona fide land was settled at full rate of Rs. 1 anna. Subsequently, the *nisf-khirajdar* settlement was established over a period of ten year. In view of Goalpara, lands were permanently settled. By and large, this district has nineteenth

permanently settled estates and eight non- permanent. Of nineteenth estates, twelve of them were entrusted to Chaudhuris and remaining seven estates settled at *jama* fixed permanently. Besides, char land is settled annually and provided on auction to the highest bidder.¹³ The part of Eastern *duar* consisting of Bijni, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu and Guma was earlier held by the Bhutanese king as ceded to the British on the agreement of *Sinsula* treaty in 1864.¹⁴ This region was later merged with Goapara district. The rate of assessment in Eastern *duar* was relatively lower than the Assam proper.

Table 3.2: Total area of settled *khiraj* land of 1901-1902.¹⁵

Sl. No.	Districts	Settled area
1	Goalpara	66,912
2	Kamrup	4,20,992
3	Darrang	2,53,684
4	Nowgong	1,95,216
5	Sibsagar	4,99,471
6	Lakhimpur	2,04,639
	Total	16,40,914

Source: Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year, 1901-1902

3.4 Agrarianization of Wasteland

Before the advent of Eastern Bengal immigrants, prevalence of large tracts of wasteland was found in all the districts of the Brahmaputra valley. The reason behind the prevalence of large acres of wasteland was due to the traditional method of cultivation adopted by indigenous cultivators who preferred to cultivate wet rice or dry crops on the bank of the Brahmaputra on

annual lease.¹⁶The local cultivators lacked skills in growing valuable crops and refused to occupy dry land and *char* land that was normally looked upon as unproductive to agricultural yields. Moreover, the indigenous people of Assam were by nature lethargic, easy loving and unambitious.¹⁷ Another feature of the Upper districts of the Brahmaputra valley was opium habit.¹⁸With the discovery and success of commercial tea and jute cultivation in the plain districts of the Brahmaputra valley, heterogeneous Europeans took keen interest in investment. The growing international demand for tea, which was already monopolized by Chinese tea in overseas markets, raised alarm to some of the entrepreneurs and colonial officials to look for suitable land for growing tea. Ultimate panacea to the secret thirst for profit-oriented crops was materialized in Assam especially plain areas of the Brahmaputra valley. Land being the important resources for growing tea was exhaustively surveyed by the colonial officials. An exhaustive land survey had brought to light large acres of wasteland conducive to tea plantation. The East India Company whose main objective was profit generation found a golden opportunity to invest their capital by allowing the land to European entrepreneurs. To this extent, the charter act of 1813 and 1833 ruled out the activities of the East India Company as commercial body and turned it purely an administrative body¹⁹ that empowered the British subjects to move beyond the colony and invest their capital in startups. The revenue generation was materialized through the utilization of wasteland. The use of wasteland ensured regular and estimated revenue supplemented by commercial crops. However, the primary intention of the administrator was to procure more revenue from land that was considered as loss assets of the state. As per the census report of 1930, most of the districts of Assam's wastelands were being utilized by immigrants from east Bengal by reclaiming the wastelands for growing crops.²⁰ In the early twentieth century, the peasants from Bengal were invited with the special offer to settle in the extensive wastelands of plains of Assam.

3.5 Technological Change

The advent of the British in the Brahmaputra valley added more technology in agriculture contributing to an easier process at harvest and cultivation of crops. Interestingly, the first agricultural tools were made of wood and stone. For loosening of the soil stick was used and for the harvest stone tool was used. As far as the use of primitive plough was concerned it

was first used 5,000 years ago.²¹ No doubt, the Industrial Revolution began in the 18th century in England that brought a transition in agricultural production by contributing technological aid that resulted in extensive utilization of land for surplus agricultural production. However, in the case of the Brahmaputra valley, it would not be feasible to utilize vast tracts of land without extensive use of iron technology. The large deposit of iron was found at Radhola Pathar in Dhekial which is currently located under Golaghat district of Assam and happened to be the earliest center of iron deposit and iron smelting site in the Brahmaputra valley.²² During British administration in Assam, some of the agricultural implements such as power tiller, roller, modern plough, tractors etc., were being used in agriculture. The scientific modern tools provided greater operation of land for more production and movement of goods. Along with the iron tip ploughshare, powered tiller and tractors were inducted in the agricultural fields for subsoiling. With the growing momentum of tea, use of tractors became more widespread. By and large, 35-50 H.P. tractors were being used to uproot and prepare the land. However, for more than 50 H.P. tractors were being used for subsoiling to the depths of about 60 cm.²³ Along with the use of traditional implements in agriculture, some advanced technology such as construction of embankment and protection was carried out to make protection from inundation. Thus, the immigration of some north Indians into the Brahmaputra valley especially Marwari and Bihari communities introduced wheeled carts that facilitated faster mobility in transporting the seedlings to agricultural fields and carrying the harvested crops or grains to certain locations for storing at the granary or for sale at the markets. Use of iron plough became a dominant form of agricultural tools that offered spectacular advancement in land for cultivation.²⁴ Use of iron plough has provided more boost to the human and animal in the agricultural field. This period also witnessed intensive water resource management by adopting artificial irrigation that was necessary for irrigating the agricultural fields.

Irrigation is an important technique of channelizing streams of water to agricultural fields by diverting river water by putting elevated protection especially for high land. According to Martin Konrad and Joachim Sauer born, “the availability of water determines the possibility of growing crops and the security of the yield.”²⁵ The river bank of the Nile in Egypt happened to be the first landscape where irrigation was practiced approximately 7,000 years ago.²⁶ The use of artificial irrigation was initially adopted by the Kacharis in Brahmaputra valley.²⁷

Regarding the artificial irrigation practice adopted by the Kacharis, it has been clearly reported in the Annual Report on the Administration the Land Revenue in Assam, year 1889-89, “In the northern mauzas of Mangaldai where the Kachari *ryots* practice artificial irrigation and have their water-supply in such perfect control that they can flood or drain off their fields whenever they please.”²⁸ No doubt, the Brahmaputra valley possessed several tributary rivers, but there also existed substantial numbers of high ground land where regular and timely flow of water supply is required for the *sali* crops cultivation.

3.6 Pattern of Crops Distribution

Depending on the fertility of land and crops the land of the Brahmaputra valley is classified into four categories. This division of land that was conducive to growing crops conglomerated *chapari* land that was often inundated in the rainy season. The cultivation of summer rice known as Ahu is normally sown either in the month of March or April and its harvest is done in the month of June or July thereafter cash crops such as mustard or pulse is grown.²⁹ Next to *chapari* land lies higher land that is mostly used for cultivation of different types of rice. In this land locally known *baou* rice was grown to a considerable extent. The season for growing rice in this area was held in the months of April or May and harvested in the months of November and December. Another type of land happened to be flood free land or dry land that stretches beyond the 70 km of Brahmaputra River lying in the East and West of the Brahmaputra valley which had largely accommodated overwhelming yield of *sali* rice. Initially *sali* rice is sown in nursery beds and seedlings are transplanted in the month of July and July for greater productivity.³⁰ Beyond the free inundation zone, lies foothills of the mountain located in higher ground where practice of agriculture was carried out through artificial irrigation where streams of water were maneuvered through a canal that led to agricultural fields.³¹ As per Provincial Gazetteer of Assam 1901, “84 percent of the populations were engaged in land based production and agriculture formed the basis of livelihood. Of the plain districts of the Brahmaputra valley, Darrang, Nowgong and Sibsagar offered home to the highest proportion of agriculture growers.”³² The remaining 16 percent of the area of land was under non-food crops. The increasing price of the commercial crops gradually changed the pattern of crop cultivation.³³

Table 3.3: The table represents the proportions of the settled land in the Brahmaputra valley during the year 1888-1889.³⁴

District	Total Area of District	Area Settled	Forest Cover	Revenue Free Tenures including Fee Simple Grants
Goalpara	1,011,285	72,642	4,00009	Not Available
Kamrup	23,23,840	6,37,663	83,688	50,795
Darrang	21,87,690	3,04,195	1,90,711	24,459
Sibsagar	18,26,995	4,38,611	1,02,490	1,70,927
Lakhimpur	11,817,824	1,90,940	2,18,187	4,22,145

Source: *Annual Report on the Administration of the Land Revenue in Assam, Year 1888-89.*

The commercialization of agriculture shaped the development of the rural economy by adopting new methods of cultivation. With the growing demand of basic necessities compelled the *ryots* to switch over to new methods of production by using new seeds. The erstwhile mono cropping process exclusively relied on wet rice cultivation. However, the colonial government took the initiative of bringing new seeds that yield better crops. Thus, rotation of crops as a process of production embeds; cultivation of more than one crop in the same season of the year improves the fertility of the soil by adding nutrients. No doubt, during the colonial period, dry crop cultivation was given special emphasis to meet the market demands. Following the intensification of commercial crops cultivation, it resulted in specialization of crop production which possessed economic profit. Interestingly, cultivators did not equally benefit from the cultivation of commercial crops but only rich peasants, planters and traders gained the actual benefit. Before engagement into cash crops cultivation, peasants relied on money lenders to

meet the payment of rent in cash and purchase agricultural implements and new seeds. Commercialization of agriculture directly established integration of the rural economy with world markets.

3.7 Changing Pattern of Agricultural Production

For the process of soil fertilization, simple and common processes of organic materials consisting of animal dung have been used for growing crops such as jute, sugarcane and rice seedlings.³⁵ The traditional method of seed broadcasting proved to be less productive than was in practice until the takeover of Assam by the British.³⁶ However, this process of production no longer remained static; instead, the technique of hydraulic diversion developed by the Kacharis proved to be more effective for timely distribution of water in paddy fields.

For the better yield in agricultural production, old methods of monocropping and the fallowing techniques were combined with multi cropping mechanisms. Mix farming is a combination of different crops grown in the same plot of land because monocropping results in soil degradation. As a result, cash and food crops can be grown as a necessary component of a crop rotation.³⁷ As the revenue revolution of cash payment was enforced by the new regime, peasant's compulsion has become inevitable to change the traditional technique of cultivation and look forward to better alternatives to meet the demand of revenue officials. A concept of multi cropping has developed when marketing facilities mushroomed in rural areas. The method of broadcasting of seeds was practiced for the *bao* and *ahu* rice. With the advent of the new regime native mainland money lending agency has rolled out the microfinance operation to the cultivator. They also arranged new cash crop seeds that were in high market demand. Need of experience and skillful labour in agricultural fields was very indispensable at that time. However, paucity of scientific knowledge in growing crops could not keep pace with the demand of the market; instead, complacency was confined within the domestic food production without having the prospect of export. It is to be argued that cash crop cultivation and market-oriented mode of cultivation began following the hardworking peasant's immigration to Assam. By and large, they were welcomed by the British to make use of the char areas of land which was viewed by the colonial regime as good revenue generating resources. Hard Working peasants brought and rolled out a new revolution in agriculture who had developed commercial

crops such as jute as the main crops that are grown for the manufacturers instead of domestic consumption. Since the processing of jute fibre required skill labour, it was mostly cultivated by the immigrants of East Bengal who had occupied char areas of land. The main crops grown by the *ryots* in the Brahmaputra valley are rice, pulse, sugarcane, mustard, jute and tea. Wheat is grown in Goalpara district that covers over 10,000 acres of land. Goalpara was one of the largest producers of jute in the Brahmaputra valley, and it was gradually extended to other parts of the region. As per the record of 1903-04, Gaolpara accounted for 39,000 acres under jute cultivation.³⁸ The annexation of western *duars* (dooars) or erstwhile Bhutan duars was by and large under the dominion of Bhutan, however it was later incorporated with Goalpara by the British through the ‘treaty of Shinsula’ in 1866.³⁹

3.8 Paddy Seed Experiment

The soil and climate played a crucial role in cultivation of rice. The Department of Agriculture and the Economic Botanist took an active role in the improvement of varieties of paddy seeds for large scale production. It was noted that *ahu*, *bao* and *sali* rice dominated in the field of rice cultivation until the establishment of imperial rule in the region. *Ahu* rice was mostly grown in dry land by broadcasting the seeds. *Bao* is a long-stemmed rice sown by spreading the seeds that can sustain deep water.⁴⁰ Of them, *sali* rice was largely cultivated in most of the part of the Brahmaputra valley. *Ahu* and *bao* rice were mostly cultivated in lower Brahmaputra valley. As recorded by Allen, the extent of rice cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley encompassed *sali* 70 percent, *ahu* 22 percent and *bao* 8 percent.⁴¹ The changing nature of the Brahmaputra valley prompted the cultivators to look forward to new rice having a strong resistance even in times of inundation. The *ahu* rice was a common rice mostly cultivated by broadcast in dry land before the rainy season began. The cultivation of *ahu* rice was due to paucity of resistance in water, it was mostly sowed in the months of November and December. *Sali* rice was another predominant rice mostly transplanted by the cultivators that relatively provided better yield than *ahu*. For the experiment of paddy seeds Karimganj farm was established. For testing of improved varieties of rice, the second rice breeding station was established at Titabar in 1923.⁴² So as to procure new and improved seeds of rice, the Department of Agriculture has carried on experiments for better yield. The cross-breeding seed

experiment was first begun in 1921-1922.⁴³ In 1922-1923, the extent of rice cultivation in the valley accounted for 4,62,4064.

As per the productive land of rice is concerned, *Aus* rice did not make it instead *sail* rice was successfully grown.⁴⁴ The *Aus* rice has the germinating capacity up to the 2nd year.⁴⁵ Among the *Aus* class of rice, *Murali* and *Basmati* and among the *sail* class included *Lati Sail*, *George Sail*, *Indra Sail* and *Nagra*. Under the *Asra* class of rice included *Birpak*.⁴⁶

The cultivation of *Aman* and *Basmati* paddy was practiced in small numbers in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. As per rice is concerned, *Aus* rice did not make it, instead *sail* rice was successfully grown.⁴⁷ The *Aus* rice has the germinating capacity up to the 2nd year.⁴⁸ Among the *Aus* class of rice, *Murali* and *Basmati* and among the *sail* class included *Lati Sail*, *George Sail*, *Indra Sail* and *Nagra*. Under the *Asra* class of rice included *Birpak*.⁴⁹ The cultivation of *Aman* and *Basmati* paddy was practiced in small numbers in different parts for the Brahmaputra valley.

Table 3.4: The following table shows the seasons and months of sowing and harvesting of rice.

Autumn		Winter		Summer	
Sowing	Harvesting	Sowing	Harvesting	Sowing	Harvesting
February to April	June to July	June to August	November to December	December to February	May to June

Source: Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture, Assam, for the year, 1923-1924.

3.9 Change in Land Property Regulation

By the thirteenth century land sale practice was recognized to be well-established as such land and house became salable commodities.⁵⁰ The land sale remained one of the tendencies of the colonial administration where land was sold on account of defaulter that often-triggered severe constraint in recovery of arrear of land rent. Several districts of the Brahmaputra valley witnessed phenomena of land sale. It was brought to light that before fetching the land for sale numerous efforts were made to recover the arrear of land rent from the owners. Most of the sold

land is less productive and market value lies outside the densely settled areas. However, there was reference to selling 40 bighas *basti* land and 379 bighas *rupit* land in the district of Nowgong.⁵¹ There was another incident in Dibrugarh, where land was canceled despite being granted through Waste Land Grant under Thirty Years of Lease Rules and it was granted to two new grantees on condition of paying arrears to the revenue officials.⁵²

3.10 Change in Control of Land

Following the British accession of administrative domain over the entire Brahmaputra valley, the process of land control passed on to the colonial authority. The control of land was organized in a modified pattern of Bengal model where the entire land was claimed as property of the government. The earlier nature of land control was based on communal service consisting of both religious and secular forms. However, the communal based land control no longer remained as an independent body of exclusive proprietorship in the colonial period. As far as land control in Goalpara is concerned, there prevailed a unique set of land ownership. The *jotedars* controlled a considerable extent of land who often turned as creditors to the cultivators and landless labourers. These *jotedars* held the land next to the *zamindars* who rented that land to under-tenants and *adhiars* (sharecroppers).⁵³ In addition, some bigger *jotedars* became a rural elite and held high social status in the society.

3.11 Change in Tenancy System

The tenancy system is one of the agrarian institutions that underwent change due to the phenomenon of transformation triggered by the colonial authority. The emergence of the tenancy system can be traced back to the Land Revenue system introduced by the British in the colonial period. The tenants are the actual landless cultivators who take the land on contract from the landowners governed by ordinary law of agreement without protective legislation.⁵⁴ The tenants had no fixed interest in land because lands were normally taken on lease at the cost of sharing half of the produce between landowner and cultivators. Besides, the greater level of amelioration of production did not assure incentives to the real sharecroppers that triggered loss of labour cost on the part of actual growers for extending extra labour to improve the land instead extra cost went to the landlord without availing the benefit. As far as the payment of rent was concerned, the tenant paid the rent to their landlord in kind. The nineteenth century brought a

paradigm shift from payment of rent in kind to cash. On account of rapid monetization, the British administration put more pressure on the landlords to pay the land revenue in cash. Moreover, the absentee landlords preferred to take the rent from the tenant in the form of cash who had mostly lived in far away places.⁵⁵ It was also apparent that despite having available land, there was a growing number of considerable tenants in the colonial period. The intensification of tenants in the region was attributed to the *ryots* tendency of transferring their land *pattas* to the influential middlemen whom they preferred to be their patron just to escape direct payment of tax to the revenue officials.⁵⁶

Under the tenancy arrangement there prevailed *Chukani* and *Adhi* (sharecropping). *Chukani* is a kind of tenancy where rent is paid in cash. On the other hand, *Adhi* is a form of tenancy where land is leased on equal share of produce between landlords and tenants. Of these, *Chukani* formed predominant tenancy in the Brahmaputra valley.⁵⁷ As far as tenancy contract is concerned, there persisted five kinds of tenancy contract such as fixed produce, fixed money, share produce, usufructuary mortgage and others.

The exorbitant rate of revenue triggered a bulk of sharecroppers and to avoid burden of paying rent to the revenue officials instead preferred to take the land on lease that would provide basic needs to maintain the household requirements. As early as the Bengal Tenancy Act came into force in 1885 that assured right to occupancy to the *ryots* and under *ryots*. Similarly, the insecure tenure for the tenants or sharecroppers prevailed in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period.

The Tenancy system has partially taken its shape in the Brahmaputra valley. The tenancy has cropped up on account of the ex-tea garden labourers and defaulters of the land triggered by increased rate of land revenue creating dependency upon moneylenders. Besides, some of the *ryots* relinquished the land on account of escaping revenue and turned as tenants working under the rice peasants. However, Tenancy Act was partly introduced in Goalpara district. In this region the prevalence of 19 permanent estates was being treated as *zamindar's* land that came under Permanent Settlement which was mostly cultivated by the tenants on splitting a certain amount of produce between owner and tillers. There is no tenancy law in Kamrup and the tenants

have no statutory rights.⁵⁸ Eventually, in 1929, the Tenancy Act of Goalpara was introduced that mandated occupancy rights to the *jotedors* as well as *ryots*.⁵⁹

Table 3.5: Table showing total area of land leased out in particular district excluding Kamrup, Sibsagar and Goalpara during the year 1891.⁶⁰

Sl. No.	Districts	Leased out Area for <i>Chukani</i>	Leased out Area for <i>Adhi</i>
1	Lakhimpur	98 percent	2 percent
2	Darrang	90 percent	10 percent
3	Nowgong	89 percent	11 percent

Source: Census of India, 1891 Assam, Part-II.

The aforementioned statement reflects the total area of land being leased out in the year 1891 where Lakhimpur constituted the leading district in presence of *chukani* tenancy. However, Kamrup and Sibsagar also led a predominant form of *chukani* tenancy in the region.⁶¹

3.12 Change in Land Tenurial System

In the *zamindari* system of Golpara, *zamindars* directly held the land under which at a certain rate of revenue was assessed under Non- Regulation Tract as parallel to Permanent Settlement of Bengal.⁶² Under this system, *zamindars* had no permanent, transferable and heritable rights on land.⁶³ In Goalpara, *jotedors* often held large acres of land under which lay *ryots*. However, Tenancy Act in Goalpara came into existence in 1929 that provided occupancy rights to the *jotedors* as well as *ryots*.⁶⁴ An occupancy right to tenants was granted on ground where land was under cultivation over a minimum period of twelve or more.⁶⁵ The Tenancy Bill granted legal protection of the peasant against landlord's rent enhancement and transferable right subject to transfer fee to the landlords. It also stated that no landlords would be allowed to increase the rent by more than 3 *annas*. The Goalpara Tenancy Act of 1929 did not endure in perpetuity but in the same year it was amended.⁶⁶ In the same way, in 1934 Tenancy Act for five temporarily settled districts was introduced in a similar pattern of the Goalpara Tenancy

Act. At the beginning, due to strong protest of the landlords, this bill was not passed. But on 7 June 1935 Tenancy Bill was passed. From 1937, Tenancy Act was fully enforced that assured legal protection and regulation over exploitative nature of the landlords against the interest of the tenants.⁶⁷

The lease in rural areas mainly consisted of two types: periodic and annual lease. Annual lease is mainly applied to the land that was newly brought under cultivation. Normally, this land belonged to the Government but in reality, the continuity of lease in such land resumed on payment of revenue to the government. However, the annual lease land bears no saleable rights but this land was often sold by the landholders. Interestingly, after a couple of years, the annual lease was turned into periodic lease based on regular cultivation of staple crops.⁶⁸ The periodic lease was not allowed to be transferred to the non-cultivators without the consent of the Deputy Commissioners.⁶⁹ From this it was evident that a strict regulation on such land was enacted to rule out transfer of land to the non-indigenous individuals. To a certain extent, periodic lease holders allowed their land to be cultivated by the tenants on equal share of production. Despite several years of working on land, the tenant could not accrue rights of landholding. Besides, there existed several revenues exempted lands and half paid revenue land held by the Hindu priests and religious institutions were later brought under assessment. *Lakhiraj* and *nisfkhiaj* are the examples of such revenue exempted land being enjoyed by the grantee on concession.

3.13 Emergence of Special Crops Grower

The special crops products are literally referred to commercial crops possessing high demand in the markets. The debut of commercial crop production grew momentum following the establishment of the British in the Brahmaputra valley. The colonial prospect itself projected generation of maximum income that promoted growing of commercial crops by inviting immigrants from East Bengal (present Bangladesh). The immigrants from East Bengal and central India had contributed to the growing of special crops. Tea, cotton, jute etc., formed chief commercial crops of the region that established commercial links with the national and international markets. The labourers from East Bengal province of British India happened to be hard working and specialized in growing jute contributed towards processing and extensive cultivation of jute crops.⁷⁰

3.14 Dynamics of Land Revenue

At the time of British take-over of Assam, it was noted that hereditary private proprietary rights existed only in the case of homesteads and gardens but not in the case of paddy lands.⁷¹ In the wake of political reorganization in the Brahmaputra valley, the British government had ruled out the preceding revenue system that was deeply rooted in physical labour. However, tax on persons better called poll tax was elevated at the rate of Rs.3 per head. Thus, different tracts of the Brahmaputra valley possessed non uniform rate likewise some parts of the territory paid up to 10 *annas* per acre. In the same way, the rate of land revenue was fixed in 1870 that included homestead or surrounding areas of the house was fixed at Rs.3; paddy land that was often transplanted was fixed at 1-11-0 and other lands was fixed at 1-8-0.⁷² However, in 1893 the tenure of land settlement was fixed at decennial tenure. The settled land was assessed at full revenue whether cultivated or uncultivated. The quota of tax-free wet paddy land per eligible adult male was fixed at two *puras* or about 2.66 acres. Earlier each family was allowed to hold as much as land one could reclaim and cultivate. But with the increased number of populations the wetland for paddy cultivation became limited. Another reason for the introduction of a fixed quota of tax-exempt landholding was the growing pressure on the treasury, as a result of confrontation with the Mughals.⁷³

Table 3.6: The extent of Settled area of land and revenue drawn (1901-02)⁷⁴

Sl. No.	Districts of Brahmaputra Valley	Extent of Settled Area 1901-1902
.1	Kamrup	4,20,992
2	Darrang	2,53,684
3	Nowgong	1,95,216
4	Sibsagar	4,99,471
5	Lakhimpur	2,04,639
6	Goalpara	68,912

Source: Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam, 1901-1902.

3.15 Agrarian labour

In the colonial agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley, the landed and landless individuals formed the component of the agrarian labour having minimum access to sustainable livelihood. Their sustenance was mostly dependent upon rice that could support their basic necessities. According to Saikia, ‘the question of agricultural labourers in Assam was first noted in 1878 following the Famine Commissioner’s questions.’⁷⁵ In fact, after the abolition of slavery many bonded land-based workers were formally freed from the cage. However, despite being released from personal liberty as unfree labourers, considerable individuals were seen serving their master as before. Besides, several freed labourers turned as landless individuals and preferred to serve their owners for numerous factors. The changing of agrarian labourers did not come overnight due to paucity of agricultural implements, cattle, etc. Over the years they have lived as dependent lives having limited means of subsistence. Interestingly, the agricultural labourers were relatively paid the lowest wages than the skilled labourers who were paid more than agricultural labour. By the 1880s the agrarian labourers rose to a distinct labour force in

entire districts of the Brahmaputra valley.⁷⁶ The process of employing a working force varies from place to place where some were employed on contract; some were employed on a monthly or yearly basis. The system of payment was processed either in kind or cash.

As per the report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30, the population of the tea garden labourers at the time of 1921 are given below.

Table 3.7: Following table represents the population of tea labourers.

Districts	Total Population	Population on Tea Gardens
Lakhimpur	5,88,295	2,53,171
Sibsagar	8,23,197	2,28,570
Nowgong	3,97,921	21,919
Darrang	4,77, 935	1,22,749
Kamrup	7,62,671	5,209
Goalpara	762523	2,218
Total	38,12,542	6,33,836

Source: Census of 1921 and The Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30.

In this table there is representation of the labourers mostly constituting of immigrants from outside the province of Assam where cheap and more ambitious labourers were brought by the government by substituting the indigenous inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley that constantly disregarded the call of the British tea estate owner to be a labourer. As per the Land Revenue Report of 1928-29, the ex-tea garden labourers occupied about 3,44,980 acres of Government's temporarily settled lands.

From the first quarter of the twentieth century cultivation of commercial crops in Goalpara district reached to the extensive level that was brought to the surface with expansion

of cultivated land.⁷⁷ The available space and sparse population allowed more external human space who were socially and economically marginalized. These agrarian labourers contributed maximum labour to the conversion of unproductive land into arable land.

3.16 Conclusion

The above discussion is centered on the evolution of the agrarian system that embedded the pre-colonial and the colonial epoch of the Brahmaputra valley. The indigenous process of production based on slash and burn and pastoralism was gradually replaced by plough-based cultivation.⁷⁸ The Ahom operated plough as a more effective tool for production of agriculture that ameliorated wet rice cultivation.⁷⁹ Transplantation of rice remained another productive method of cultivation mainly carried out by the cultivators facilitated by artificial irrigation.⁸⁰ On the other hand, there are some other ethnic groups who switched over to a technique of seed broadcasting in cultivation of crops which provides less output.⁸¹ The colonial period no longer retained the existing agrarian system of transformation that was triggered by institutional change.

In order to procure money to pay the rent the peasants were forced to cultivate cash crops which resulted in common practice of cash crop cultivation. Normally, the actual debt of the peasants was attributed to marriage, purchase of cattle and plough⁸² but the issue of the peasant cultivator's debt in the Brahmaputra was slightly supplemented by land revenue policy of the colonial period liable to cash revenue payment. The economic policy of the British on agriculture shifted the system of cultivation from stable domestic consumption to market-based production. The British succeeded in transforming the land system and extensive use of natural resources in the Brahmaputra valley in the model of capitalism to meet the estimated expenses of the colonial state that formed a focal objective of the colonial administration.⁸³

The colonial authority's technique of assessment on land at survey appropriated the Government's share of produce in the land.⁸⁴ The non-market based agricultural production restrained the hard labour of the peasants and subjected them to a subsistence economy. Several factors were attributed to the stagnant economy and the production of surplus economy ranging from diseases, external aggression, internal conflict, prevalence of the natural transactions based on exchange of commodities, stressing more on food-based production without adopting new

technique of cash crop production, paucity of international market network and communal based of land distribution etc. The pre-colonial Assam represented the use of surplus labour rather than surplus economic production. Use of technology was primarily dependent upon plough. People improvised the agricultural implements for better yield. The semi-feudal socio-economic structure was deeply rooted, providing little space for independent use of productive land. Besides, a section of royal officials known as *Satgharia* (top aristocrats of the Ahom) who had participated in joint territorial ventures appropriated large acres of tax-exempt land having permanent and inheritable rights. Apart from them, there were service based land granted by the king on account of religious service such as *Brahmottar*, *Devottar*, and *Dharmottar* land were gradually brought under assessment. In addition, due to constant enhancement in the rate of land, landholders could not fulfil the revenue payment as a result large acres of land came under the control of the government.

It would be pertinent to argue that in pursuance of maximum revenue from land the agrarian institution of *paik* system was abolished and all the members of *paik* were driven out from the voluntary state service. The colonial authority had allowed the *gomati* land to be owned by the free voluntary men on payment of revenue to the state.

The process of monetized revenue payment prompted the cultivators to switch over to the cash crop cultivation to meet the cash revenue payment. The *ryowari* and *zamindari* system of direct and indirect revenue settlements subjected to cash revenue increased the fiscal income of the state. On the other hand, paucity of monetary power of the cultivators intensified financial dependency on moneylenders that sometimes resulted in peasant's rural indebtedness.

A multitude of the wasteland was being filled with immigrants for the conversion of revenue generation. The settlement of hard working peasants from Bengal province brought a large area of unproductive land lying on the river bank of the Brahmaputra under jute and other cash crops cultivation that increased the revenue of the state.

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