

## CHAPTER-IV

### COMMERCIALIZATION OF AGRICULTURE

#### 4.1 Introduction

The term commercialization of agriculture is clearly defined by N. Jayapalan, according to him “commercialization of agriculture is generally used for the process of production of crops for market to be sold for cash rather than for family use or subsistence.”<sup>1</sup> According to Nurul Islam, “Commercialization can broadly be defined as a rise in the share of marketed output or of purchased inputs per unit of output.”<sup>2</sup> In this context, input mainly signified a value of inputs received from markets that determined agricultural production value. Besides, output was referred to the value of agricultural sales in markets that determined agricultural production value.<sup>3</sup> No doubt, the commercialization of agriculture in India commenced in the first decades of the nineteenth century and subsequently grew momentum in half of the nineteenth century to meet requirements of industries.<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, the Brahmaputra valley provided a space for rudimentary commercial enterprise mostly carried out between Assam and Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and China through the medium of transaction exercised by exchanging commodities. As such, the Ahom also maintained frontier trade relations with the hill settlers through medium of exchange and with Bengal for procuring salt.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the medieval period, the rulers of the Brahmaputra valley maintained a close door policy with the mainland of India in terms of trade.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the treaty signed between Gaurinath Singha and the British under Captain Welsh on 20, 1793 has established reciprocal and liberty of trade between subjects of Bengal province and Assam.<sup>7</sup>

This treaty had bridged the economic gap between the two regions that had significant impact on commercialization of agriculture.

The Brahmaputra valley was ecologically rich and economically underdeveloped until its resources were fully utilized under the state initiative allowing thousands of immigrants to settle for active participation in agricultural production. The report of Opening of Free Trade with Assam brought to the surface as to the debut of British commercial enterprise embarking with salt articles being considered as the most valuable articles that were sometimes exchanged with gold dust.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, J.P. Wade has clearly delineated as to gold dust, according to him, 'gold dust can be traceable in most of the rivers which have sources in the mountains to the north of the Brahmaputra Valley.'<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly, the debut of the commercialization of agriculture in the Brahmaputra valley took its shape in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and gained momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century. The advent of the British into the Brahmaputra valley was looked upon as a magnetic force who drove some business opportunists to embark on new economic ventures. These opportunists subsequently succeeded in the form of providing loans to the marginalized *ryots*. No doubt, the development of communication has facilitated faster and safe transportation of raw materials and ensured import of industrial products to local markets.

The development of commercial agriculture has induced large scale land reclamation for greater utilization of land for crop cultivation. The land reform or reorganization of land had offered better and independent choices for the common people to occupy more land and inherit them without impediment to state regulation. No doubt, in ancient times, India has supplied large quantities of agricultural products to the foreign countries and built-up a large gold reserve. Thus, some handful of local small traders, engaged in commercial activity with the hill dwellers in *duars* areas considered to be the adjoint area of plain and hills. Trade activity was executed in the traditional mode of exchange.

The colonial Brahmaputra valley of Assam witnessed the process of agricultural development proceeding towards market economy. The Charter of 1833 permitted easy access to hold considerable acres of land by the Europeans.<sup>10</sup> According to Guha, the Charter of 1833

liquidated the East India Company's commercial interest, which cropped up the prospects of colonization of Assam with import of private enterprise and capital from Britain.<sup>11</sup> Following the Charter of 1833, the Britishers were unconditionally induced by the government to participate in capital investment in uncultivated dry land for non-food crops such as sugarcane, indigo and tea cultivation.<sup>12</sup> Jenkin's scheme for commercialization of agriculture in 1834 contained amelioration of agriculture and paradigm shift from giving way to intensive commercial crops cultivation.<sup>13</sup>

The commercial interest of the East India Company left no stone unturned in the agrarian sector, instead working in the line of driving domestic food production economy to the market economy. The less efficient indigenous cultivators were confronted with a competitive challenge that demanded a paradigm shift of agricultural production from food crops to high value crops having more prospects in Indian and world markets. In fact, the traditional agricultural production of rice could not hold out the expanding internal market demands for commodities such as jute and tea. The integration of local agricultural production with international markets put more pressure on land for surplus production of commercial crops. Undoubtedly, security, credit system, supply of seed, engagement of labour, price rise, markets and communication make a difference in development of agricultural capitalism.

Thus, the British government focused more on the aforementioned aspects for the commercialization of agriculture. The commercialization of agriculture increased the participation of cultivators in the domestic and international exchange economy resulting in higher income and easy means for the peasants to meet the cost of living. The British along with them brought trading communities of north and north western India who actively participated in providing small loan operations. In addition, the development of inland and waterway communication facilitated movement of agricultural produce from Brahmaputra valley to mainland India. In this context, Goalpara district was used as a transit point for exportation of merchandise. The development of railway and light steam boats had extended faster movement of goods and reduced the cost of transportation promoting widespread commercial activity and movement of cheap labour for agricultural purposes. This chapter focuses on the expansion of

agriculture resulting in mass production to meet the market demand and farmer's participation in the output markets.

#### **4.2 Driving Forces of Commercialization of Agriculture**

1. Introduction of proper money economy facilitated cash transaction pertinent to extensive sale and purchase of agricultural produce.
2. Some agents who turned as commercial middlemen drew huge benefits from agricultural produce of villages by securing them from the original grower and selling them with high price. It has encouraged cultivators to grow cash crops by giving them advance loan to the growers. From this perspective, peasants learned that it was better to grow commercial crops rather than food crops that provided them with more economic benefit, which enabled them to buy domestic necessities and articles from the markets.
3. The British agricultural policy has resulted in cultivation of tea, jute and opium that contributed to the commercialization of agriculture and shifted the process of production from domestic consumption to merchandise meant for international markets for the purpose of acquiring more profit.<sup>14</sup>
4. The deindustrialization of small-scale industry impelled the artisan to engage into land for cultivation that contributed greater output of agricultural production.
5. The increase of land revenue and payment in cash for land revenue induced peasants to shift from food crops production and switch over to cash crops cultivation.
6. The improvement of road and river communication meant for railway, boat and steamers facilitated faster transportation of goods and supply of cheap labour.
7. The grow more food policy of the British directly encouraged the Eastern Bengal settlers to move into the Brahmaputra valley who were already under internal pressure of overpopulation, drought, famine, lack of living space, atrocities caused by nobility in their own region got free access to enter the land of the Brahmaputra valley with one scheme of grow more food. These hard working and skilled peasants instantly responded the call of the British and intensified the reclamation of *char* areas and waste land for grew commercial crops who toiled with the objective of procuring money from

agricultural produce to support the family that gradually gained momentum for the traders as well as the British in the food of cheap supply of agricultural produce and land tax.

8. The American civil war of 1861-1865 and the act of Napoleon Bonaparte provided alternative space for exporting of local articles to European markets.
9. The opening of Suez Canal in 1869<sup>15</sup> was of immense help for India in general and the Brahmaputra valley in particular for supply of commercial crops that shortened the distance between Europe and India. This canal has reduced the cost of transportation by 30 percent cubic ton<sup>16</sup> which was earlier required high cost and took longer days to reach Europe by crossing the Cape of Good Hope Sea route. Between 1880 and 1925, the volume of trade from India was doubled and more than half of the agricultural produce consisting of raw cotton, raw jute, grains and seeds was exported to European markets.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4.3 Process of Commercialization of Agriculture**

The commercialization of agriculture commenced after the surplus production. This surplus was generated by the use of technology in agriculture. The Iron plough has contributed to a substantial extent in agricultural activity. Assam being a land of diverse rivers shaped the fertile land apt for growing crops. The Bodo Kacharis were the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley<sup>18</sup> who had practiced the simple way of farming. The primitive mode of cultivation was dependent on the slash and burn method which was also looked upon as the tribal method of production in agriculture.<sup>19</sup> However, the extensive cultivation commenced after the Ahom period by introducing the rice transplantation method such as *sali* rice. As per the 'Statistical Account of Assam' by Hunter there was a reference to over 87 varieties of rice being cultivated in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.<sup>20</sup>

Prior to the British occupation of Assam, all the land belonged to the state and there was no private ownership of land except the land grants donated by the kings to the high ranks of royal officers, Brahmins and religious institutions.<sup>21</sup> Mode of collection of tax was done either in kind or cash. There was no substantial circulation of coins during the Ahom period. The Ahom adopted the *paik* system<sup>22</sup> that is better known as voluntary service to the state instead of

paying tax to the state. It was in terms of labour peasants paid their tax instead of cash.<sup>23</sup> The *paik* system deprived the peasants of their right to own the land. Hence, the peasant communities could not cultivate to a large extent owing to lack of their own land. When the British occupation of Assam began, new policies were adopted.

The main objective of the colonial state was to gain economically. In order to meet the revenue demands of the colonial state, local peasants were compelled to adopt cultivation of cash crops. Earlier a small group of Marwaris and Bengali Peasants played the role of financial agent who had provided loans to the marginalized peasants for growing commercial crops. However, limited circulation of coins caused another problem for the peasants who were forced to sell their produce so as to meet the revenue demand of the British. One of the policies was 'grow more food'. From 1838 onwards the colonial government has partially ruled out the earlier system of land settlement and liberal land rights was introduced such as for the local cultivators in Upper Assam and Eastern Duars *ryotwari system* and *zamindari system* in Lower Assam especially Goalpara area. The concept of private ownership of land was not prevalent in Upper Assam but through land grants, the religious persons and institutions held the considerable extent of land in perpetuity. With the agrarian policy of 'Wasteland Grant Rule' interested European individuals were allowed to occupy vast areas of unproductive land for tea cultivation on liberal terms of rent and long tenure of ownership.<sup>24</sup> When the tea plantation commenced, dearth of labour became another problem for the tea planters which subsequently recommended the colonial government to proliferate the land revenue rates so that marginalized peasants of the rural area would be flushed out from their villages to work as wage labour in the British owned tea gardens. Since the local people were self-sufficient, they refused to work for the British in their gardens and field.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the British took another alternative by encouraging the people of East Bengal as well as who were better known as hard working immigrants to come and occupy Assam's waste, marshy and forest land to cultivate which eventually gained momentum in the economic development of the colonial state. The growth of tea industry in Assam, paved the way for development of communications such as road, river and train.

No doubt, the British had managed to develop commercial relations prior to the establishment of British colonialism in India in 1757.<sup>26</sup> The real commercialization of agriculture began when the demand for export began and these export goods include jute, cotton and opium. When the British attempted to establish trade relations with the Chinese commercial, the Chinese Government rejected the initial proposal of the British commercial treaty in return the British took it as a humiliation that finally hatched revenge against the Chinese government to destroy the Chinese societies with opium.<sup>27</sup> Despite the entire problem, the British established their trade activity in China. It was owing to this factor the cultivation of opium was done in Assam and Bengal which was finally transported to China. This generated huge revenue for British India. Warren Hasting the governor general of Colonial India transferred the opium monopoly from the merchandise's account to that of revenue. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, monopoly on opium remained an effective imperial mechanism for solving the acute plight of remittance and Britain's ample balance of payments.<sup>28</sup> In fact, another demand on the Indian cotton article came from the Manchester lobby. It was a substitute to the American cotton which was at halt due to the American civil war. As a result, cotton cultivation took its turn in the soil of Assam. Cotton spinning and weaving constituted one of the professions for every woman of Assam. Tanti, a caste associated with weaving emerged from cotton weaving.<sup>29</sup> A compulsory spinning of cotton at certain quantities by Assamese women has been made by Momai Tamuli Barbarua. It is also mention-worthy that Sri Sankaradev better known as the Assamese Vaishnava reformer once acted as head of the professional weaver's guild.<sup>30</sup>

#### **4.4 Role of Credit Facilities and Commercial Activity**

The informal credit facilities formed one of the significant economic institutions in the Brahmaputra valley. The paucity of professional money lending classes paved the way for the active operation of informal credit systems without having legal proceedings. There are varied statements that early creditors seemed to be fellow villagers. However, the Famine Enquiry Commission delineated Marwari traders who often took active participation in money lending operations.<sup>31</sup> From the report, it is evident that in the early twentieth century, a new class of creditors of loan cropped up who had provided loans in advance for growing mustard and jute crops.<sup>32</sup>

According to Ramesh Chandra Kalita, “The moneylenders were the creation of the British colonial state consequent on the introduction of private ownership on land as well as the introduction of money economy in an economy that had been based on a barter system.”<sup>33</sup> Following the establishment of several cooperative credit societies in the region wealthy landowners ruled out the credit operation of the Marwari traders.<sup>34</sup> Undoubtedly, the rich proprietors availed the economic benefit from the cooperative societies. The marginalized sections of cultivators were the hardest hit people who had limited access to financial power to meet the cost of basic necessities of life.<sup>35</sup> In some cases, a sense of insecurity arose among the creditors against handing over the loan to the peasant cultivators for the land being held on annual *patta* land. As a result, the rate of interest of the capital amount of the loan considerably went up to ensure easy recovery.<sup>36</sup> However, the absence of cash money and economic constraint of the peasants compelled them to borrow loans to meet the domestic maintenance and colonial economic thirst. Despite having abundant land, the agricultural revolution and the economic condition of the peasants remained a matter of discussion who had constantly looked forward to financial assistance from the agents who could give them loans through which payment of rent and meeting of agricultural maintenance will be helpful.

Eventually, in 1934 Assam Moneylender’s Act was passed that ruled out charging compound interest from the loanee and simple rate of interest was fixed at 12.5 percent especially for secured loan and for unsecured loan rate of interest was fixed at 18.75 per cent.<sup>37</sup> Under this act, it has been furnished that the rate of interest should not exceed the principal amount of the loan. The credit facilities launched by the Marwari, Bengali, Bihari traders and some local *Mahajans* paved the way for significant smooth functioning of the agricultural activities. The traders who had more purchasing power belonging to the Marwari traders began to establish several markets in every corner of the villages setting up weekly markets for easy transaction of produce. Several references have been made as to the economic activities of the Marwaris who had actively participated in constant rural transactions especially on agricultural produce and supplied to big towns like Guwahati and Dibrugarh and Bengal.<sup>38</sup> By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the traders of Barpeta happened to be vigorous in Assam.<sup>39</sup>



The credit facilities were by and large given through private agreement on account of returning the capital and interest of the rate of loan. In several cases, the *ryots* could not return the borrowed money to the creditors as a result; debtor's land was confiscated by the creditors and cultivated so long as terms of loan expired. Question was often raised: why peasants took loans from the moneylenders? Answer to the question was to purchase agricultural implements, better seeds, cattle, and hire seasonal labour and pay revenue to the revenue officials.<sup>40</sup> Since, advanced loans were taken from money lenders they mostly dominated the rate of agricultural produce seemed to be relatively less than market price. That's the kind payment of a loan. The Colonial rule emphasized more on global economic integration with some regions for supply of rural produce.<sup>41</sup> As a result, advance was given to the growers of jute and mustard crops which had more economic value. The provision of advance loans to the specialized peasants created direct wakening of peasants with new spirit of production. In the early years the East India Company used to bring boat filled with coins from Calcutta. The colonial economic interest effected transition of rural economy of the Brahmaputra valley from natural economy to cash economy.<sup>42</sup>

#### **4.5 Cash Transaction**

The beginning of the colonial period represented both methods of exchange and cash transactions depending on availability of money. The monetized economy played a momentous role in the process of commercialization of agriculture. In the pre-colonial period, customary transactions based on exchange in commodities formed widespread phenomenon and circulation of coin currency and the network of trade with adjacent states was limited.<sup>43</sup> However, the sixteenth century marked the early circulation of coins in a small quantity.<sup>44</sup> Following the coin minting of Ahom, the coins of Koch and Kachari kings are circulated from 1555.<sup>45</sup> At this time, the necessity of coins was not in the forefront as a result there prevailed limited circulation of coins. Undoubtedly, the widespread circulation of the money economy was attributed to the colonial period that brought thousands of coins to facilitate the easy process of cash transactions. 1835 down the line, there was single circulation of silver standard coins being circulated in India without exception to the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>46</sup> The land revenue payment in cash necessitated a large quantity of coins for the peasants. Besides, the paradigm shift from customary

transaction to modern cash transaction promoted greater extent of money circulation which empowered the peasants with more buying capacity and met the necessities of life.

#### **4.6 Grow More Food Policy**

The ‘Grow More Food Policy’ was a colonial mechanism of the British to meet the growing demand of the population by providing excess production of crops and supplying commercial crops to the global markets. ‘Grow more food’ scheme was the mechanism of the government to distribute land to the landless peasantry that was adopted on 24 August 1943.<sup>47</sup> Under this scheme, new settlement was sought by converting reserved land by de-reserving the grazing land that belonged to the government. Thus, a substantial extent of reserved lands in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Nowgong were given free hold to the immigrants to bring under cultivation for the purpose of economic development of the region.<sup>48</sup> In the years 1943 to 1944 the landless indigenous and immigrant peasants from Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Nowgong districts were given over 5,000, 12,000 and 85,000 bighas of land to be claimed by them.<sup>49</sup> From the economic point of view, the colonial government viewed the prevalence of vast stretches of uncultivated land as loss of revenue and utilization of vast stretches of land would mean profitable avenue as a result human settlement in this wasteland remained one of the targets of the colonial government to resolve the problem by inviting outsiders allowing them to reclaim the land for the greater interest of the commercial crop cultivation.<sup>50</sup> The low density of local population, unwillingness to take extra labour and negative response to the spirit of competition remained as main factors for allowing free space for the hard-working peasants from Eastern Bengal who were looked upon as hardworking and skilled in growing jute other cash crops. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an influx of immigration of Eastern Bengal settlers called ‘Grow More Food.’<sup>51</sup> With this policy immigrant settlers from Eastern Bengal appropriated the reclamation of land who took active participation in development of agrarian economy.

#### **4.7 Role of Transport and Communication**

The development of means of transport and communication contributed to the overwhelming service to social needs and commercial activity.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, development of communication has reciprocal relevance with the intensification of trade. Before the introduction of the railway, the country boat was used for the purpose of transporting

agricultural produce. As delineated by the M’Cosh there was frequent transportation of goods carried out from Goalpara to Bengal that took days and months to reach.<sup>53</sup> Apart from country boats, horses, elephants and mules were used for carrying goods. The Brahmaputra River served as one of the earliest and cheapest waterways for transporting agricultural products.<sup>54</sup> The construction of the railway network reduced the cost of transportation and expanded trade.<sup>55</sup> Since the ancient period, the people of Assam maintained certain informal trading activity with the hill’s dwellers of the neighbouring countries of Tibet, Bhutan and China. Along with the trade carried out with adjacent countries, the native ethnic groups of Naga, Khasi, Abor, Nishi and Garos involved exchanging of goods at the *duars* or adjoining areas of plains and mountains. Undoubtedly, regarding the nexus of road communication, the Brahmaputra valley maintained a good scheme of road communication with the west. Some of the roads conglomerate Gohain Kamal Ali that connected between Cooch Behar to Narayanpur in Lakhimpur, Bangal Ali that connected between Darrang to North Guwahati from there Jayantia road to Roha, Bar Ali which connected between Kaliabor to Rangpur and Dhodar Ali in Sibsagar district.<sup>56</sup> Under the Ahom rule, the public works were constructed with the help of large labourers organized into the *paik* system. In fact, the importance of constructing communication was not heeded until the rebellion of Khamti. The colonial period, stressed more on the massive construction of the road summoned by Lord William Bentinck to chief engineer of Dhaka to carry out public work in Assam through the Military Board.<sup>57</sup> The construction of roads was approved by the Governor General in Council in 1840.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the colonial government of Assam first constructed Grand Trunk Road in 1866 under the guidance of two engineers.<sup>59</sup> As per the endorsement of the military Board, the Public Work Department was established in 1868 that executed construction of roads in Assam. Initially, lack of labour force and funds triggered impediment to road construction works. Subsequently, labour from Oudh and Rohilkhand contributed towards development of road construction. Along with the defense, commercialization of agriculture compelled the British authority to construct good roads.<sup>60</sup> Over the years, Local Boards was established in 1880 in pursuance of constructing roads financed by land revenue and grants in aid provided by provincial government.<sup>61</sup>

The construction of the road, the expansion of tea industry in the Brahmaputra valley emphasized on major construction of railway that would transport cheap labourers to tea estates,

export raw materials and import manufactured products to the local markets. Thus, the Assam Railways and Trading Company was founded in 1881 for the construction of a railway line. The initial Railway line began in 1882 connecting Dibrugarh Steamer ghat to Jaipur Road.<sup>62</sup> Thereafter, Jorhat Provincial Railway and Tezpur-Balipara Railway was formed in 1885 for transportation of tea and labourers to Jorhat and Tezpur tea estates.<sup>63</sup> But, major railway in Assam was carried out by Assam-Bengal Railway connecting the port of Chittagong to Silchar. Another branch of railway line began in the Southern part of Brahmaputra valley connecting from Guwahati to Tinsukia at Dibru-Sadiya Railway station.<sup>64</sup> The period between 1926 to 27 seemed to be the turning point for the development of transport and it was in this period where Assam Provincial Road Board was founded. For improvement of roads, Tea Rates Road Fund was created that imposed additional toll on tea land meant for financing of road construction and improvement of road. Along with the process of road development water communication was operated for transportation of goods to Bengal. For inland communication steamers were used for transport which was docked on the bank of Brahmaputra River in Goalpara. With respect to the transporting means, Gait has clearly mentioned that, 'country boat and steamer were being used for exporting tea, jute, cotton, mustard seed and paddy to Bengal.'<sup>65</sup>

Following the development of commercial agriculture brought significant results in the development of transport and communication. The overwhelming growth of tea, jute mustard, opium, cotton etc. was attributed to demand of international markets which induced the surplus production for exportation. Thus, the inland and riverine communication was ameliorated by the colonial authority to transport agricultural products and labourers through the means of steamers and railway.

#### **4.8 Role of Skilled Peasants**

The various tendencies of working of the immigrant cultivators in the fields were grounded on superior knowledge and more intensive methods of yielding crops. As such the complacent and self-sufficient indigenous cultivators initially failed to respond to the new spirit of competition in commercial crop production.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the local cultivators obsessed with conservative methods of cultivation, skilled and hard working peasants from neighbouring province hailed from Bengal immediately responded the spirit of competition in surplus

production of agriculture by reclaiming thousands acres of *char* and floodplains in western Brahmaputra valley.<sup>67</sup> The immigration of peasants from outside the territory into the newly occupied Brahmaputra valley became a necessity to live economically independent and self-sufficient. Of Bengal immigrants to the Brahmaputra valley, 90 percent of them belonged to the ordinary cultivators having limited land or without land in their homeland.<sup>68</sup> However, poverty stricken and marginalized peasants often subjected to oppression and economic exploitation triggered by the corrupt revenue officials waited for an opportunity to find a better place for new life. At the right moment the colonial authority has initiated a scheme to turn waste and unproductive land into revenue generating assets by allowing them to be reclaimed by the hardworking peasants from the Bengal province who were better off than the local *ryots*. In the process of greater agricultural operation, these peasants focused more on cultivation of commercial crops in low lying areas of land which were often inundated at the time of the rainy season. Their contribution towards cash crops cultivation played a key role in exportation of jute in international markets. As articulated by Amalendu Guha (2016), ‘with the superior technique of cultivation, the East Bengal peasants taught indigenous peasants as to growing jute, pulse and several other crops.’<sup>69</sup> Another section of indentured wage labourers contributed to the working force of tea cultivation which also played a greater role in supply of tea to international markets.

#### **4.9 New Seeds Distribution**

After a series of research and experiments executed by the Department of Agriculture, varieties of seeds were distributed to the cultivators importing from outside the province of Assam.<sup>70</sup> Several gardens of Assam located in Dhubri Subsidiary Jail Garden, Gauhati Jail Garden received seeds from Messrs. Sutton & Sons, England.<sup>71</sup> The import of new commercial seeds contributed towards large scale and widespread cultivation of commercial crops that ensured more financial security to the cultivators. As reported by the Agricultural Department of Assam, the province of Assam constituted three seed depots located in Gauhati, Jorhat and Sylhet. All these districts supplied seeds of paddy, potatoes, sugarcane mills and iron pans.<sup>72</sup> Apart from that other cash crop seeds are also distributed for yielding market demand crops having internal market demand.

#### 4.10 Use of Chemical Fertilizer

Until the advent of the British in India, use of chemical fertilizer was unknown to the cultivators in the Brahmaputra valley. Initially, the local inhabitants did not resort to amelioration of land on account of temporary ownership of land.<sup>73</sup> The commercialization of agriculture induced use of chemical fertilizers for the enhancement of agricultural production and supplies the agricultural output to the international markets. With the colonial purpose of maximizing the productivity of land more impetus was stressed on the use of chemical fertilizers. The constant use of arable crops for the same crop failed to augment the fertility of soil. The primitive method of restoring soil nutrient was practiced through the process of fallowing the lands for a period of two to three years or more. The prolonged fallowing practice resulted in large acres of waste lands. The organic fertilizer encompassing manure of cow and buffalo dung was a common practice prevailed in the earlier process of fertilizing the land for greater extent of production of crops. However, with the growing demand of commercial crops, large-scale production necessitated use of inorganic chemical substances for greater yield in agriculture. Thus, the use of chemical fertilizer helped synthetic pesticides that killed the insects and for fertilizing the land, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium substances were used resulting in extensive production of crops that solved the problem of fertilization.<sup>74</sup> In India, a fertilizer plant was established in Tamil Nadu under Madras province.<sup>75</sup> For the greater output, modern chemical fertilization in the Brahmaputra valley began with the tea plantations. By and large, numbers of tea estates put 20kg P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (Phosphorus trioxide) and 40 K<sub>2</sub>O (Potassium oxide) per hectare in every three years as a fertilizing component.<sup>76</sup> No doubt, the commercialization of agriculture induced use of scientific fertilizers for large scale production. But, use of inorganic fertilizers was also being used in other cash crops such jute, sugarcane and mustard.

#### 4.11 Flourishment of Commercial Crops in the Markets and Its Trade

The following crops became dominant commercial crops in the markets of the Brahmaputra valley.

**Jute:** Before the penetration of the Bengali immigrants into the Brahmaputra valley, the local ethnic communities engaged in cultivation of jute for domestic consumption. The indigenous cultivators such as the Rabhas, the Hajongs and the Kacharis perfected the technique of jute

cultivation and developed production of superior quality of jute in small quantities.<sup>77</sup> Following the mass penetration of East Bengal immigrants in Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts, cultivation of jute grew momentum and jute was made an important commercial crop having more monetary value.<sup>78</sup> By and large, climate, soil and season determined the growth of jute cultivation. The 20<sup>th</sup> century created a landmark for overwhelming cultivation of jute in India in general and Assam in particular. The ‘Crimean War’ triggered punitive economic disruption that thwarted regular supply of Russian flax and hemp to Europe which compelled the colonial authority to substitute with Indian jute that was mostly found in Bengal and char areas of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.<sup>79</sup> Before the exportation of Indian jute to Europe, Dundee had established an exhaustive monopoly over the jute industry. The international demand for jute fiber as a profitable article promoted overwhelming production of jute in the Brahmaputra valley.

With the industrial development, demand for jute has been intensified, that was required for packaging materials, gunny bags, tents, bags etc. Cultivation of jute was initially carried out by immigrated peasants from Eastern Bengal considered as specialized in growing such crops. The growing importance of jute caught the eyes of the Marwari and Bengali traders who had provided advanced loans to the cultivators to cultivate jute by ensuring timely delivery to them. At that point of time, Goalpara turned out to be the highest producer of jute in the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>80</sup> The success of jute cultivation was attributed to the role of the credit agency who had provided advance loans to the interested individuals for growing jute crops and purchase of jute was mainly carried by Marwari and Bengal traders. Undoubtedly, the processing of jute fiber needed specialized labour and its production was confined to inundated plains of the Brahmaputra valley located in frontier areas of Bengal. As reported by Hunter, regarding the extent of jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley in 1879, Saibsagar accounted for 35,000 acres, Kamrup about 400 acres, Nagaon about 300 acres, Lakhimpur about 100 acres and Goalpara about 35,000 acres.<sup>81</sup> According to Barpujari, ‘Since 1890, jute cultivation expanded rapidly in western portion of the district of Goalpara.’<sup>82</sup> On the eve of the Second World War, the price of the jute considerably began to crop up.

**Tea:** The discovery tea by Robert Bruce and its success of experiments and plantation turned the mindset of the colonial authority to grant more land to the entrepreneurs and capitalists on long term tenure with maximum relaxation. In the pre-colonial period, the locally available tea plants were never valued as important and lucrative crops by the local ethnic groups. The sense of value came to surface following the discovery and successful experiment by the British. By and large, local people directly did not make profit from tea cultivation instead they extended it as labour to the owners. Following the establishment of Assam Company in 1839 took significant interest in tea cultivation.<sup>83</sup> Several experiments have been carried out for the success of tea cultivation but some of them were to no avail. In this regard, Lakhimpur represents the initial attempt to experiment with tea cultivation in 1835 that resulted in failure.<sup>84</sup> However, expansion of tea plantations brought development of public works such as construction of roads and markets. Tea became the most important merchandise of export and its value represented about 75 per cent of the total value of exports by rail and river.<sup>85</sup>

**Table 4.1:** The following table represents export of jute from the Brahmaputra valley.

Sl. No.	Year	Export of Jute in <i>maunds</i>
1	1880-1881	59,249
2	1889-1890	2,25,742
3	1893-1894	3,24,911
4	1896-1897	3,48,332

Source: Report on the Rail and River Borne Trade in Assam during the year 1912-1913.

As per the report, the jute articles exported from Brahmaputra valley by country boat and steamer in 1891-92 accounted for 147745 by boat and 65256 by steamer and 1892-93 accounted for 118420 by boat and 95,346 by steamer.<sup>86</sup> By 1930-31, the total acreage of jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley exceeded one lakh and by 1960 it had exceeded two lakhs acres.<sup>87</sup>



**Mustard:** Mustard is the most important *rabi* crop of the Brahmaputra valley normally grown with summer rice.<sup>88</sup> By and large sowing of seed is done in November and harvested in the month of February.<sup>89</sup> As observed by Barpujari, mustard crops formed the most important staple commercial crops in the Brahmaputra valley covering the flood plains of districts of Kamrup and Nogaon.<sup>90</sup> Since the medieval period of Assam, the traders from Barpeta in hitherto Kamrup district used to export mustard seeds to neighbouring Bengal province from the Brahmaputra valley by loading on the boat.<sup>91</sup> However, due to the prolonged outbreak of civil war, the number of traders in the pre-colonial period seemed to be very low.<sup>92</sup> The colonial period witnessed, the mustard exported from the Brahmaputra valley in 1891-92 was about 587447 *maunds* by boat and 680770 *maunds* by steamer and in 1892-93 was about 486683 *maunds* by boat and 642313 *maunds* by steamer.<sup>93</sup> Till the year 1895-1896, the total export of mustard accounted for 7 to 14 percent.<sup>94</sup>

**Table 4.2:** Export of Mustard seeds from the Brahmaputra valley in different years.<sup>95</sup>

1880-81	1881-82	1882-83	1891-92	1901-02
8.55	6.89	4.63	12.75	4.50

Source: An Account of the Province of Assam 1901-02.

**Opium:** In the wake of East India Company takeover of Assam, poppy cultivation emerged as lucrative and pertinent commercial crops. In the local name opium was also known as *kani*. A.J. Moffat Mills brought to the surface that cultivation of opium was first carried out at the time of Lakshmi Singh's tenure of 1769-1805.<sup>96</sup> Another renowned person of Assam, Maniram Dewan has clearly iterated, 'poppy was first cultivated by the Rajput Barkendazes at Beltala in the vicinity of Guwahati at the time of Swrgadeo Lakshmi Singha's reign.'<sup>97</sup> In fact, people of the Brahmaputra valley were drawn with addiction to opium. Ecological factors induced a large number of populations in the Brahmaputra valley to take opium. By and large, native inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley took opium out of necessity rather than luxury.<sup>98</sup> However, the extent of opium cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley was estimated to 2,000 *puras* and it was also iterated by Haliramb Dhekiyal Phukan who was the pioneer of Assamese literature in *Orunodoi*

epoch, which the poppy was cultivated in the entire places of Brahmaputra valley.<sup>99</sup> But, cultivation of poppy was by and large done in *chapari* and *basti* lands. As observed by Guha, “opium was the most important source of the province’s revenue, next only to land.<sup>100</sup> The opium production in the Brahmaputra valley later made exportation to China. The deliberate policy of the British with the objective of destroying the social structure and morality of Chinese culture, British authority has given consent to grow opium. Undoubtedly, opium cultivation provided cash revenue to the cultivators. The growth of poppies had gained momentum in the market during the years between 1826 to 1853.<sup>101</sup> To this extent, the gaining momentum of the monetized economy triggered extensive cultivation of poppy for procuring cash money.<sup>102</sup> As delineated by Goswami regarding the significance of poppy cultivation, he has outlined that, “the importance of poppy as a cash crop became so pronounced over the years that traders regularly distributed advances to the cultivators to ensure timely deliveries.”<sup>103</sup> Later cultivation of opium was prohibited in 1860.<sup>104</sup> However, opium cultivation in other parts of North India continued to have gained lucrative profit which was supervised by colonial authority.

**Sugarcane:** The cultivation of sugarcane in the Brahmaputra valley was produced in small quantities. The indigenous communities grew sugarcane for the purpose of domestic use by making jaggery. Following the immigration of Nepalese in the Brahmaputra valley, they concentrated their settlement in the districts of Lakhimpur, Darrang and Sibsagar and they have massively participated in cultivation of sugarcane.<sup>105</sup> However, on account of less production of sugarcane, it could not supply huge quantities of sugarcane across and outside India. The Department of Agriculture undertook an initiative of supplying sugarcane setts to the interested growers. Over 50,000 sugarcane setts were being distributed to the growers in the lower Brahmaputra valley.<sup>106</sup> In addition, the department of agriculture also distributed roller and iron pas for sugarcane mills.<sup>107</sup> Besides, there are agencies who took the role of supplying varieties of improved seeds through cooperative organizations called the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation. There were some references to societies who had undertaken supply of seeds; one such instance could be found as Jamira Societies.<sup>108</sup>

**Table 4.3:** Import and export rail and river borne trade of Assam with outside the province.  
(In thousand rupees)<sup>109</sup>

Articles	1980-81	1900-1901	1903-04
<b>Jute</b>	852	1510	1799
<b>Oilseeds</b>	36,08	25,36	42,18
<b>Rice</b>	3274	3136	4218
<b>Tea</b>	3,3974	4,46,66	5,5181

Source: Imperial Gazetteer India Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1909, p.127.

#### 4. 12 Conclusion

The commercialization of agriculture is an integral part of the development of capitalism. The colonial administration in the Brahmaputra valley brought changes in the process of production by changing the relation of production, ownership of land, systematic cash transaction and capital investment. Following the Charter of 1833, the Brahmaputra valley had witnessed considerable flow of capital investment in dry land especially for non-food crops such as sugarcane, indigo and tea cultivation. Jenkin's scheme of commercialization of agriculture in 1834 involved a paradigm shift from giving way to intensive commercial crops cultivation. The monetized system of revenue payment prompted the change of traditional crop production and emphasis was placed on cultivation of profitable crops having markets. The commercialization of agriculture was directly encouraged by the colonial government to gain maximum profit by supplying local agricultural produce of high value crops to the international markets. The colonial objective reached the target of profit maximization by establishing a close nexus with the international markets that aligned the rural agricultural production with world markets. The self-sufficiency in rice production, paucity of markets and absence of extensive commercial crops cultivation curbed the pre-colonial agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>110</sup> The charter act of 1833 was another turning point that offered more space for commercialization of agriculture that abolished the Company's commercial interest and opened

the prospect of colonization with import of private enterprise and capital from Britain. From this year Englishmen were encouraged by the administration to invest their capital in the wastelands of Assam to produce cash crops like indigo, sugarcane and tea. The colonial initiative of land reform paved the way for flexibility in the control over land which was necessary for greater autonomy on utilization of land. Besides, it assured the right to reclaim waste land for growing commercial crops that subsequently provided space for immigrants from west Bengal and central India. The various tendencies of working of the immigrant cultivators in the fields were grounded on superior knowledge and more intensive methods of yielding crops. As such the complacent and self-sufficient indigenous cultivators initially failed to respond to the new spirit of competition in commercial crop production.<sup>111</sup> The active role of Eastern Bengal peasants in the Brahmaputra valley reflected in extensive utilization of unproductive land and the greater level of agricultural production having more economic benefit eventually supplemented the colonial treasury. The greater extent of land utilization ensured more revenue where land tax was assessed as per the productivity of land. The extensive cultivation of jute and mustard crops was mostly carried out by the immigrant Bengal peasants. Besides, local moneylenders took active participation in providing credit facilities to the peasants with advanced loan on agreement of returning loan due in the form of merchandise.<sup>112</sup> In the same way, the Marwari traders almost monopolized over the rural production of agriculture by providing advanced loans to the cultivators which empowered the hardworking peasants to purchase agricultural materials such as new seeds and implements and pay wages to hired agricultural labourers. Initially, the transportation of goods was carried by country boat, steamers and railway. The impact of the Industrial Revolution was also felt in the Brahmaputra valley that was evident from the use of steamers and railways. The development of railways ensured faster and easier transportation of agricultural produce for domestic and overseas markets.<sup>113</sup> The development of market economy led to the process of modernization, diversification and specialization in production and monetization of transactions led to the commercialization of products.

## Endnotes

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