

CHAPTER-V

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF AGRARIAN CHANGE

5.1 Introduction

The 19th century marked the beginning of agrarian transformation in the Brahmaputra Valley. The process of agrarian change in the colonial era of the Brahmaputra valley was clearly outlined by S. D. Goswami, according to him ‘in the initial stage, the British did not make a radical change in the revenue system exercised by preceding rulers but they retained it with minor modifications which were considered absolutely necessary. A major step was taken in 1833, which replaced the system of drawing revenue in personal labour to cash payment.’¹ The British policy brought an extensive revolution on agrarian economy that intensified commercial crops production with the perspective of meeting the demands of world markets. In this regard, J.B. Bhattacharjee has clearly mentioned the colonial interest of the British as ‘the economic interest remained the primary target behind the transformation of the East India Company from a trading concern to a territorial authority.’² Bipan Chandra has also delineated the intention of the British over extension of colony, according to him, “the Colonisation was the complete but complex integration and enmeshing of India’s economy and society with world capitalism carried out by stages over a period lasting nearly two centuries.”³ So as to maintain the imperial regime in India, a huge financial requirement was mounted upon the soldiers of the British which eventually provoked the formulation of new land revenue regulation to collect the revenue.

During the Ahom era, there was no concept of private property on land in upper parts of the Brahmaputra valley consisting of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar. However, in the case of lower

Brahmaputra valley, the concept of private ownership of land was practiced, because this part of territory was once occupied by the Mughals where *zamindari* and *pargana* system was introduced. Thus, the colonial epoch brought unprecedented change in agrarian life ranging from individual ownership of land rights, land sale rights, forced labour etc.⁴

The introduction of railways in India brought significant change in agrarian economy by facilitating transportation of agricultural products and import of new seeds for extensive cultivation and better yield. The self-sufficient village economy of the Brahmaputra valley was revolutionized with the introduction of railways that also expanded the trade activity, connection of rural agrarian production and penetration of large numbers of traders from outside the province.

5.2 Proper Utilization of Land

During colonial period in the Brahmaputra valley, policy of colonization of land for profit remained pivotal objective of the colonial authority that was systematically executed through Wasteland Grant Rule of 1838 and Fee Simple Rules of 1862 maximum privilege to the owners was offered consisting of flexible and convenient terms of land holding as well as payment of minimum taxes for growing tea and other commercial crops.⁵ Prior to the introduction of these two legislations, the Charter Act of 1833 created a landmark for the East India Company and other Europeans that granted autonomy on land and allowed them to move beyond the Presidency Town and accumulate land for the purpose of enterprise on minimum payment of rent. This act has offered legitimacy to the Britishers to reclaim the land in the entire territory of India for investment. Besides, it also offered free space for import of foreign capital from Britain to India that was required for the investment in land and other sectors.⁶ In the same way, the expansion of tea cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley compelled the colonial authority that eventually resulted in privatization and accumulation of land to a large extent that provided maximum benefit to the entrepreneurs. By 1871, due to agrarian policy introduced by the British government more than three lakh acres of wasteland or unproductive land that was constantly neglected by the indigenous cultivators were provided to the entrepreneurs which were eventually brought under cultivation.⁷ In this regard, C.E. Buckland has clearly articulated that, 'Large areas of waste lands were sold to jobbers, who transferred them at a profit or threw them

up if they failed to transfer, while in many cases cultivated lands that were not regularly settled were sold.⁸ The granting of long lease evolved from a concept of privatization that subsequently provided considerable waste lands to interested individuals on flexible tenure along with certain conditions to be fulfilled within stipulated time after the procurement of land that was earlier looked upon as non-profitable immovable assets.

The utilization of unproductive land better known as wasteland turned out to be the most effective revenue generating resources of the colonial period where extensive commercial crops production was carried out in these lands. Following the extensive utilization of wasteland for tea, jute, coffee etc., cultivation of large numbers of working force were in huge demand. The indigenous people showed unwillingness to work as a labour in the tea cultivation. Besides, the char lands which were easily inundated during the rainy season were hardly reclaimed by the local people. As a result, a systematic agrarian policy was executed which had invited thousands of hard working peasants from Bengal province who had subsequently responded to the call of the British and begun to reclaim less productive land lying on the bank of the Brahmaputra valley. Though, these lands were previously considered as non-profitable assets due to dry land and low lying coverage of land because at that period rice cultivation formed a dominant occupation of the common people as a result, these lands were often neglected by the cultivators.⁹

The primary colonial perspective of introducing the Forest Act was to exploit the forest for commercial interest. Following the land reform, there was increased numbers of land reclamation in the sparsely inhabited areas of the Brahmaputra that was being taken up by the outside immigrants who brought under permanent cultivation that particular tenurial structure was changed from periodic lease to annual or decennial tenure. Due to commercialization of agriculture, hardworking and skilled immigrant peasants from Eastern Bengal increased the economic institutions.¹⁰

5.3 Market Elevation

Under colonial rule in the Brahmaputra valley, several commercial activities cropped up without exception to rural villages. With the coming of traders mostly belonging to North India, extensive rural transactions in the weekly village markets escalated. The colonial interest of the

commercial crops focused more on the reduction of the cost of transport and more security to the supply of merchandise to distant provinces or countries.

The extensive agricultural production depends upon the extent of market expansion that offers substantial economic prospects. Since the early agricultural operation was centered on shifting and traditional mode of production without any mixed cropping method. The structure of land holding was ultimately determined by the highest state authority. There were some vested interest individuals who had amassed an ample *bighas* of land through royal right to inheritance who had extended military help at the time of territorial expansion of the Ahom kingdom. Strict measures of state regulation of land provided marginal access to common people. This system caused a subsistence economy without a nexus to commercial interest. This devoid commercial interest of the people of Assam during Ahom period was due to the strict preventive measure and self-dependent policy of the Ahom king where the state was on the edge of Mughal invasion which reached in close proximity to the adjacent province of Bengal. However, complacent and self-reliance could withstand the might power of the British. The colonial administration brought a revolution in land holding and mode of cultivation. Emphasizing on commercial interest, the British colonial government advocated cash crop cultivation which has good economic prospects. Initially, they did extensive survey of land followed by assessment was carried out and fixation of land was executed before it was handed over to interested individuals. Apart from this, local common men no longer had to serve as *paik* instead they could occupy the land on condition of revenue payment to the colonial authority.

The quick transformation in land holding was witnessed following the British takeover of Assam. The political control over Assam has resulted in reformation of land. The flexibility in land holding and proprietary rights has triggered access to land reclamation by common people. This provision offered a substantial occupation of land and extensive cultivation. Indeed, countries cannot progress with rice production alone; instead, supplementary economic activity is essential for a country's economic development. Slow pace of economic development was accelerated by the rolling out of interstate trade relations and establishment of overseas trade networks.

With the development of trading activity, status and standard of common people's livelihood was elevated to another layer. The international demand for agricultural products and inter-state trade offered a space for farmers to get engaged in extensive agricultural cultivation. After the development of the global network, the agrarian economy of Brahmaputra valley has been shifted to commercial interest. With the expansion of markets, it has augmented the price of the agricultural commodity which provided big respite to the farmers to retain the benefit of agricultural production.

5.4 Institutional Change from *Khelwari* to *Ryotwari* and *Zamindari*

During the colonial period, Brahmaputra valley possessed different types of land and revenue administration consisting of *Ryotwari* system and *Zamindari* system. However, the conquest of Brahmaputra Assam brought a radical transformation in settlement of land that eventually cancelled the previous land holding rights exempted from assessment.¹¹ The *Ryotwari* system was exercised in some districts of Brahmaputra valley consisting of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgong. Under *ryotwari* system, peasants held the land on annual or decennial lease from the government. However, in 1870, the tenure of land was accorded to ten years that consisted of heritable and transferable rights with renewal of annual *patta*.¹² The Kamrup district was the only district where the pargana system was implemented in Bengal model. The legacy of the pargana system has association with the revenue system of the Mughal administration. However, in Goalpara and Eastern Duars two types of revenue systems existed depending on its location: *Zamindari* and *Ryotwari* system. In Goalpara there happened to exist nineteenth permanent estates and eight temporarily settled estates. Besides, the Eastern Duar prevailed with both *ryotwari* and *zamindari* systems but rate of assessment was literally low as compared to other parts of Brahmaputra valley. Amongst the five estates, Bijni, Chirang, Guma and Ripu were directly administered by the government; however, Bijni was under the *zamindari* system.¹³ On the other hand, the *Khelwari* system was one of the Ahom administrative units which was deeply rooted in utilization of resources. During the Ahom period, it was used as a state mechanism to bring all the male population into one single platform for voluntary state service. However, the *ryotwari* settlement was the ordinary land tenure that was introduced by the British authority in Brahmaputra valley to collect the land revenue in a

collective manner. The earlier institution like *paik* or *khel* has a close nexus with the Ahom administration that was executed as per the convenience of its administration. The absence of cash transactions confined the masses to the institution of physical labour organized on the system of revenue payment in the line of personal service.¹⁴ The *paik* system has close affinity with the feudal structure where the Ahom claimed the subject and the land as property of the state. Eventually, colonial rule brought all the houses and cultivators under assessment.¹⁵

5.5 Curtailment of Big Landlords

The Charter of 1833 promoted commercial interest for the European capitalists to venture into Indian land and hold large acres of lands.¹⁶ The reformation of land became inevitable after the British takeover of Assam. The Ahom administration had a corresponding effect on the feudal system. The feudal nature of Ahom administration privileged the *Satgharias*, senior and junior rank of officers by allowing them to occupy ample proportion of land on account of ancestral participation in territorial conquest. Apart from that, religious priests consisting of Brahmanas, *Satradhikaras* and *Pirs* and religious institutions such as *satras*, temples and mosques received substantial lands through grants made by the kings. Therefore, these lands were by and large cultivated with the help of slaves and *paiks*. Indeed, the existence of slaves in Brahmaputra valley differed from the rest of the world. Certain degree of liberty was given to slaves in Assam. There was no such exhaustive suppression of freedom over slaves in the case of Assam. The war prisoners and some marginalized people were either engaged in land or in temples for maintenance of religious institutions. However, there was no such prevalence of slave trade in Assam. However, slaves were inducted for domestic purposes. The big landlords happened to be noble and high rank officials who had enjoyed under Ahom administration were gradually ruled out by the British through new legislation that introduced the *ryotwari* and *zamindari* system. In this regard, Santo Barman has mentioned about the *zamindari* system of Assam with reference to the Goalpara region that was once under Mughal administration and landlordism was in existence.¹⁷

5.6 Curtailment of *Nisf-khiraj* and *Lakhiraj* Estate

The Ahom land and revenue system was deeply grounded on voluntary corporal service for certain months in the years in alternative time. Apart from the common people, religious

institutions, priests and rich peasants or *chamua* possessed large acres of tax-exempt lands through grants and position. *Chamuas* happened to be rich peasants who had accumulated wealth through inheritance of royal possession. Some of them belonged to the aristocratic families but subjected to subjugation who had admitted suzerainty of a more powerful king. However, *chamuas* was not directly involved in the Ahom service of labour; instead paid direct tax to the treasury of the government. Over and above, the granted lands enjoyed by the religious and priests no longer remain under the framework of free rent. The regulation of assessment was later implemented on moderate assessment and failure to prove the validation of ownership of *debottar*, *brahmottar* and *dharmottar* estates were directly confiscated by the colonial authority.¹⁸ The abolition slavery in Assam had punitive impact on the agrarian life of the free estates of religious institutions and priests whose cultivation land was dependent upon slave. Besides, the full assessment of revenue came as an overwhelming burden for the owner of these estates. All these factors triggered non-productive land and owners were directly driven into the radar of tax liabilities that finally resulted in loss of lands.

5.7 Transfer of Temporary Land Rights to *Pattadari*

During the Ahom rule, the *Paik* system or *Khel* system formed a part of administrative machinery which distributed land for agricultural purposes and assigned military duty for which portions of lands were granted to them with temporary ownership without having right to inheritance.¹⁹ The Ahom state had strictly implemented the state mechanism where young and dynamic men were directly engaged in utilization of land resources. Land being the main resources of the state, the Ahom kings had established absolute control over land and gave unparalleled rights over land. However, members of *paiks* were granted temporary ownership in cultivable land for their service to the state. This usufruct cultivable land (*gomati*) merely constituted two and half acres. Subsequently, a severe challenge appeared in the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries where the Burmese aggression created unprecedented damage to the Ahom kingdom that marked *Monor Din*.²⁰ The Burmese aggression and the political reorganization of Assam eliminated the privileges enjoyed by the members of *paik* who had procured two *puras* of land *gamati* (land owned by *paik*). Following the establishment of the British regime in Brahmaputra valley, the *gamati* land was gradually lost on account of

exempting themselves from the state service who had paid the amount of Rs.3 per head annually. In the process of borrowing cash money from the rich or wealthy person the *gomati* land was given on agreement at mortgage. Failure of loan payment on time resulted in loss of land subsequently they turned as mere slaves. Sometimes, bribery became a common phenomenon for escaping from serving as *paik* in the same way some *satras* became a safe haven for them.²¹ On the other hand, the impact of Burmese aggression was so strong that it weakened the socio-economic and political balance that eventually offered mild resistance to the British occupation of Assam. Following the takeover of Assam, the preceding system of land rights and various social economic and political structures have changed that exhaustively generalized the system of land holding that was structured on revenue orientation and issuance of *pattadari* that ensured permanent ownership of land.

5.8 Upsurge of Landed and Landless Cultivators

In the colonial period, land and revenue structures underwent significant change where payment of cash rent and proliferation of land revenue triggered loss of arable land. Following the introduction of cash revenue payment and for the indirect creation of large labour force in tea estate, the colonial authority has rolled out an exorbitant rate of tax that impelled the peasantry to rely on moneylenders for cash money to meet the revenue demand. On the other hand, some rich cultivators turned as wealthy gentry due to accumulation of land through defaulter of loan where land was put at stake for failure of loan repayment. Thus, the intensification of landed and landless cultivators was attributed to land and revenue policies of the colonial authority which triggered creation of two groups of peasantries such as permanent and temporary. The permanent agriculturists seemed to be landed individuals who persistently involved in their own cultivable land and earned considerable profit by stressing on commercial crops production. On the other hand, temporary peasants referred to as landless peasants preferred to serve as seasonal labour to the wealthy peasants. Over and above, some of these landless peasants took the cultivable land on lease from the rich peasants on agreement of supplying 50 percent of the produce at the time of harvest. By and large, they became landless due to loss of their land on account of indebtedness triggered by cash revenue payment and augmentation of land tax.

5.9 Rise of Credit Cooperative Society

Initially, the informal credit facilities were grounded on money lending operations that were individually operated during the colonial period. Prior to the colonial period, Brahmaputra valley did not operate a credit system. The arrival of the British in Brahmaputra valley brought some of the North Indian traders such as Marwaris, Biharis and Bengalis who had been involved in lending of advanced money to peasants on agreement of land and supply agricultural products to the moneylenders.²² The Marwari, initially embarked on *golas* (small shop) at different places in lower Brahmaputra valley who have carried out commercial activity with Bengal.²³ The feasibility of credit operation was promoted by the spread of monetization.

The informal credit facilities, the Central Banking system of India commenced which provided loans to the agricultural society at the rate of 9 percent interest per annum.²⁴ The cooperative society having economic vested interest drastically grew momentum in later periods. The growing demand of cash rent payment compelled the agriculturists to depend on the traders for loan. The growing numbers of loan seekers promoted individual loaners to form a credit cooperative society to meet the expectation of the marginalized peasants. As compared to the individual loaners, the rate of credit cooperative society was relatively less. The purpose of loans taken by the individuals is conglomerated agriculture, purchase of cattle, purchase of land, payment of rent, payment of old debts, trade and commerce maintenance of agriculture. Of them, agriculture, purchase of cattle and paying off old debt constituted a major purpose of loan being taken by the individuals.²⁵ Besides, the Cooperative Society accepted an individual's deposit at a certain rate of interest comparatively less than loan issuance. The Cooperative Societies provided a big respite to some of the peasants to meet expenses of agricultural maintenance. The local cooperative bank known as *Hati* funds of Barpeta operated and financed the immigrants of Bengal to grow commercial crops and reclaimed new lands.²⁶

5.10 Peasant's Indebtedness

The persistent oppression at the hands of British agents triggered social and economic insecurity. The agents of creditors sometimes charged exorbitant rates of interest from the peasants that doubled the burden of loan repayment. The monetized system of land revenue payment was attributed to have caused mental pressure to procure cash to pay the rent. The

Marwari moneylenders appropriated the accumulation of debtor's land through private agreement that was previously settled at the time of loan handover without legal process.²⁷ Now the question lies why did the peasants take loan from the Marwari moneylenders? The answer was, to purchase the agricultural materials, to pay land tax to the British and hire agricultural labourers. As per the observation of Assam Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929, the moneylenders usually charged at the interest rate of 37.5 to 150 percent and total debts of the *ryots* accounted at 22 crores.²⁸ The aforementioned rate of interest stripped off the economic power of the lowest social strata in the Brahmaputra valley who had been victimized at the cost of colonial interest. By the late 1930s, more than 80 percent of the peasants in Goalpara became indebted to the local Mahajans and Marwari traders.²⁹

5.11 Peasant Unrest

In the course of colonial administration in the Brahmaputra valley several land revenue policies were introduced that changed the rate of revenue resulting in reaction of the peasants against augmented revenue that put more pressure on subsistence rural economies. The demand for labourers in the plantation of tea eventually put pressure on the government to implement new revenue policy through which intensified form of revenue proliferation would be materialized by driving out the peasants from conventional agricultural practice and turn as labour in the tea estate. The revenue augmentation in land subject to cash payment pauperized the subsistent economic condition of the peasant triggering acute constraint in household maintenance. The peasant reaction was manifested in unrest. The colonial vested interest of revenue proliferation was mainly focused on meeting the gross expenditure of the government officials. No doubt, a new concept of land revenue and other taxes met the revenue expectation of the British for smooth function of administration; on the other hand, several *ryots* felt an overwhelming burden of tax that caused disgruntlement and resentment of the peasants who eventually responded with protest.³⁰ Of these resistances, Nowgong district happened to be one of the largest producers of opium that encountered ban on poppy cultivation in 1860 resulting in loss of extra income for the family maintenance. Out of compulsion, peasants resorted to an uprising known as '*Phulaguri Dhawa*' which occurred in 1861.³¹ Another peasant resistance took place at Patharughat in Mangaldai under Darrang District on 28 January 1894.³² The main

cause of the Patharughat incident was forceful collection of enhanced revenue. No doubt, the revised settlement notified in 1892 constituted an exorbitant rate of revenue payment accounting for 53 percent. However, several villages faced the burden of revenue accounting for 70 to 100 percent.³³ Despite several protests, the attitude of the colonial government remained strong towards tax collection. The exorbitant rate of revenue proliferation aggravated the economic condition of the peasants to live an impoverished life. The poll tax was the first tax introduced by the British in the wake of administrative dominion that replaced the erstwhile *paik* system of tax accumulation through personal service.³⁴ The plough tax was another tax exaction executed by the British in the form of agricultural land operation.³⁵ The grazing tax was introduced in 1888 that constituted tax on cattle realized annually at the rate of eight *annas* per cattle. However, periodic proliferation of grazing tax has been materialized over the span of time and little revision was made in rate, yet its exaction sometimes reached up to eight rupees per cattle.³⁶

5.12 Internal Relocation of *Ryots*

Internal relocation of *ryots* induced agrarian life on account of deadly diseases, human act and natural forces. According to the Census of British India, the population of Assam was 99 per square mile.³⁷ The expansion of agriculture and revision of land structure has a significant effect on the pattern of human population that changed the demography of Assam. In the pre-colonial period, the Brahmaputra Valley witnessed a scanty population. With regard to scanty population, it has been reported by Assam Administrative Report³⁸ that Assam was infested with endemic diseases such as *Kala Azar*, Malaria, small-pox and Cholera. According to Captain Rogers, '*Kala Azar* is nothing but a very intense form of malaria fever.'³⁹ However, erstwhile contagion theory propagated by the sanitary report of Assam province over *Kala Azar* was completely rejected by Civil Surgeon of Goalpara. As far as origin of the *Kala Azar* disease was concerned, it was presumed by Captain Rogers that it has begun in Rangpur⁴⁰ and spread to Goalpara thereafter across the Brahmaputra valley. Within a short span of time, this natural phenomenon triggered rampant loss of human life and affected agrarian life in several parts of the Brahmaputra valley.

Another natural force that took thousands of human lives and caused ecological imbalance was due to earthquakes. A great earthquake occurred in 1897 that triggered a decrease

in the surface level of extreme western parts of Brahmaputra valley that often resulted in inundation. Frequent inundation often triggered crop failures and loss of agricultural production which was later substituted with yielding of commercial crops cultivation.

The rice production being the main source of income remained a subsistence economy. This single mode of production could not generate surplus revenue which can be viewed as the primary factor of subsistence economy. Besides, Ahom state policy of limited access to land reclamation offered limited agricultural operation by the common people. With the British political takeover of Assam, the flexibility in land holding came into force. As the primary objective of the British was emphasis on maximization of profit with less capital. The capitalist and other vested interest British officials sought a virgin ground to invest their capital. In this regard, participation of some British army officers, doctors and engineers were found. An interesting part is, as the common people remained under complacency without extending their work beyond rice cultivation. The single agricultural practices of the common people of Brahmaputra valley were looked upon by the British as incompetent and lazy revenue generators. Since, a large extent of land remained uncultivated it resulted in failure of revenue. Over time, the unutilized resources were substituted with hardworking peasants from the adjacent province of East Bengal. So as to succeed in maximum revenue generation, wasteland and less productive land were offered to the outsiders for extensive cultivation. 'Grow more Food' was another campaign that encouraged surplus production. The very intention of the British has subsequently confronted menace to the indigenous people of Assam. Undoubtedly, the colonial authority had invited thousands of people from outside Assam for the purpose of cultivation. Tea cultivation demanded large numbers of labour and large number of Eastern Bengal immigrants were settled in the lower Brahmaputra valley especially in *char* areas for cash crop cultivation that was rejected by the local inhabitant due to frequent occurrence of inundation during the rainy season and often resulted in crop failure. A rapid growth of population in the Brahmaputra valley can be attributed to immigration of outsiders who were marginalized or being brought to Assam by force.

Annually the Brahmaputra valley receives thousands of people from outside the province. The unchecked and unconstrained mass immigration was initially looked upon by the

British as very important for resource utilization. However, over pouring and consistent intrusion of peasants from neighbouring provinces caused problems to the local settlers that was eventually sorted out with the policy of ‘Line System’ that segregated people on communal lines. In fact, the hardworking and skilled labour from East Bengal participated in commercial crop production. It was also a period where the international market opened a new chapter for supply of local commodities. The overseas demand for commodities offered a large participation in cash crop cultivation. Earliest, the Ahom participated only in wet rice cultivation. The technology they very often used constituted iron tipped plow and spade. The demand of overseas trade puts pressure on the farmers to produce in surplus production. It can be argued that without pressure there will be no progress. With the demand extensive cultivation was carried out that also opened more internal markets for sale of agriculture products.

Table 5.1: Immigration of farm settlers of various categories into the Brahmaputra valley, 1881-1931.⁴¹

Year	East Bengal peasant immigrants	Nepalese	Traders/Artisans	Others
1881-1891	17,300	1,000	3,400	13,400
1891-1900	17,700	9,000	3,400	37,100
1901-1910	74,700	15,000	12,600	23,300
1911-1920	1,95,800	12,000	25,000	84,600
1921-1930	2,26,000	16,000	30,000	1,49,000

Source: Proceeding of the North East India History Association: Imphal Session, 1983.

5.13 Transformation of Agrarian Social Fabric

The development of agriculture had a profound impact on society. The classification of society had emerged due to development of agricultural production that uplifted the socio-economic life of the peasants. With the changing mode of money economy and growing

importance of commercial crops elevated subsistence economy to the wealthy class who has secured better standard of life through accumulation of more lands. The overwhelming utilization of land resources and timely response to the demand of the markets for agricultural products provided more economic power to certain individuals which turned them into moneylenders that proliferated the proportions of land by charging exorbitant rates of interest. Besides, peasants who had turned as defaulters of loan and lost their valuable land that eventually turned them landless peasants. In addition, due to loan liabilities some of the peasants worked as bonded labour in the lender's house to repay the loan in the form of physical service from whom they had earlier borrowed the money. Along with the rich peasants, some Marwari, Bengali and North Indian traders who had accompanied the East India Company grew momentum in operation of rural credit and they had collected all the grains and agricultural produce at a cheap rate and sold out at an exorbitant rate.

5.14 Emergence of New Social Forces

Under the British colonial regime in the Brahmaputra valley a series of agrarian policies were rolled out where a large section of the peasantry could not cope with the new policy. These policies aggravated the economic condition of the peasants. The monetized system of land revenue payment triggered unprecedented pressure on the smallholding peasants. Besides, the expansion of tea cultivation demanded large numbers of working force which was not fully responded by the local inhabitants that compelled the colonial authority to adopt a mechanism to drive the peasants out of land by increasing the rate of land revenue to turn them as wage labourers in tea estates. Furthermore, black fever known as *Kala Azar*⁴² and frequent inundation triggered failure of crops production that further aggravated the economic condition of the peasants. On the other hand, the collapse of the world economy in the 1930s gave a severe economic crisis and the eleven-point charter of demands initiated by Mahatma Gandhi raised 50 percent remission of the land tax. This charter of demands triggered an overwhelming effect in the Brahmaputra valley which has induced a strong demand for peasant's reduction of land tax, abolition of cart tax and distribution of agricultural loan.⁴³ There were different organizations which came forward to stand with the toiling and marginalized peasants to ameliorate their condition.

Initially this uprising was confined to rural areas and such mobilization was carried out in 1861 known as Phulaguri uprising organized by *raij mel* which put a strong against the prohibition of poppy cultivation.⁴⁴In the same way, several peasants' unrest was carried out in Patharughat in Darrang and Rangia and Lachima in Kamrup.

Under the initiative of Jaganth Barooah, Jorhart Sarvajanik Sabha was established in 1875 and Tezpur Ryot Sabha was founded in 1884 under new elite class such as Laksmikanta Barkakati (Manazer of saw mills), Haribilas Agarwal (merchant) and Labmodar Bora (lawyer) and by 1886 the Nowgong Ryot Sabha and Upper Assam Association came into existence. Thus, all these organizations put strong resistance against the enhancement of the exorbitant rate of land tax and demanded remission of 50 percent of land tax.⁴⁵On the other hand, Krishak Sanmilani or Samiti of Goalpara also stood against the grievances faced by the tenants of Mechpara estate as the peasants frequently confronted the burden of tax and exploitation of moneylenders which aggravated the economic condition.⁴⁶ The profit maximizing machinery of the colonial regime inflicted a punitive plight to the toiling peasants.⁴⁷However, the ultimate repercussion of the plight and discontentment of the peasants were brought to the surface through uprising. Thus, the new social forces emerged to protect and to intercede the cause of the peasant's grievances for the greater interest of the marginalized section of the peasantry. The affiliation of the local peasant organization to Indian National Congress provided more impetus which eventually put a collective and strong pressure on the colonial government who quickly responded to the cause at peasant's interest.

5.15 Role of Agricultural Department in Changing Agrarian System

The Agricultural Department took an active role in experiments of paddy, sugarcane, jute, potato, insect pests and plant diseases, supplying seeds, plants and manures, and improving livestock. For the experiment of sugarcane Jorhat farm is devoted and for the rice experiment Titabar farm station is devoted.⁴⁸ Under the initiative of the Agricultural Department rural reconstruction campaign was organized with the intention to ameliorate the capital resources of the such as land cattle and tools. This department encouraged the cultivators to grow commercial crops that would improve the economic condition of the peasant community.⁴⁹In the year 1939-34, the Department of Agriculture spent over 5,00,172. Of which 3,91,991 rupees was spent for

crops and soils. Several improved agricultural appliances were distributed by the department of Agriculture, such improved implements are meston plough, planet junior hand hoe, power driven irrigation pump, sugarcane crusher, *gur* boiling pan and roller of sugarcane mill.⁵⁰ It also provided chemical fertilizers to middle-class farmers. In the lower Brahmaputra valley, the Department of Agriculture has conducted varieties of jute development financed by Indian Central Jute. Under the initiative of the Agricultural Department, the jute cultivators of the Goalpara districts availed improved seeds of jute from the department that intensified large scale jute cultivation.⁵¹

5.16 Impact of Modern Technology

Throughout the time technological innovation has overwhelmingly shaped agriculture. Thus, the arrival of the British in the Brahmaputra valley added more technology in agriculture that contributed to surplus production of agriculture. The use of modern technology could not completely thwart the use of traditional tools, human and animal energy. However, technological innovation brought efficiency in the field of agriculture. The effect of the Industrial Revolution has eventually reached the Brahmaputra valley that contributed mechanization, fertilizers, and modern seeds. The development of Biotechnology which is a part of the Industrial Revolution contributed towards resistance of pests and intensified the productivity of land. The arrival of mechanization in agriculture has reduced the human labour or energy and increased the agricultural activity in the fields. The scientific modern tools intensified the agricultural operation resulting in surplus production. During British administration in Assam, some of the agricultural implements such as power tiller, roller, modern plough, tractors etc., were being used in agriculture.⁵² For the first time in the Brahmaputra valley, Marwaris and Biharis introduced wheeled carts that facilitated faster mobility in transporting agricultural crops from the village to particular markets. The wheeled cart also helped the farmers to move the rice seedlings to agricultural fields and grains to certain locations for the purpose of storing grains and sale in the markets.

With the development of tea, more tractors arrived in the region which was also used in agricultural fields. Normally, for the uprooting and loosening of the soil 35-50 H.P. tractors were being used. However, for subsoiling more than 50 H.P. tractors were being used to the

depths of about 60 cm. Along with the iron tip ploughshare, powered tiller and tractors were inducted in the agricultural fields for subsoiling. Despite the use of modern tractors in agriculture, Use of iron plough became a dominant form of agricultural tools that offered spectacular advancement in land for cultivation.⁵³ Along with the modern technology the local inhabitants parallelly adopted water resource management through artificial irrigation that was necessary for irrigating the agricultural fields especially for growing transplanted rice. However, due to prevalence of available rivers, there was no such extensive project of irrigation carried out in the Brahmaputra valley except some embankments were constructed to prevent inundation.

5.17 Internal and External Migration

Human migration is a common phenomenon. According to E. H. Whetham, “migration of individuals, families or whole communities is an obvious response to falling yields in the home district.”⁵⁴ In the process of migration, various factors are attributed to have induced driving social forces for agrarian factors. The social migration in this context, referred to agriculturists who constantly moved out from one place to another place in search of better cultivable land. The common issue of internal migration of cultivators was driven by abundant territorial space, scanty population, natural causes etc. The considerable rate of land and conversion of land from *faringmaati* to *rupit* was a colonial mechanism that forced the local cultivators to move out from the traditional arable land and settle in new land.⁵⁵ The earlier method of cultivation dependent upon shifting cultivation and monocropping agricultural operation required fallowing of land for a period of two to three years or more for revival of its productivity of land. Prior to the British occupation of Assam, the external movement of cultivators was induced by civil war and foreign aggression. Frequent acts of terror brought social insecurity in the region. This act of terror was triggered by Mughals and Burmese resulting in punitive social and economic disorders. As such, foreign aggression on the people of Assam, had a severe impact on the agrarian life. Large numbers of *ryot* made their escape from foreign enemies, by taking shelter in neighbouring states for their personal safety. The mass immigration of eastern Bengal settlers triggered eviction of the *chukanidars* (under

tenants) to mere starvation who were looked upon as the actual cultivators of the land in Goalpara districts.⁵⁶

5.18 Land Encroachment

The transition in demography and encroachment of government's land are not a natural phenomenon in the Brahmaputra valley. The birth rate and fertility rate were not the actual cause of unprecedented augmentation of population in Assam. However, during colonial Assam, numbers of administrative dynamism took its turn before it was permanently established. This administrative transition commenced with the formation of Assam division under Bengal Presidency (1826-1874), followed by Chief Commissionership of Assam administered under direct supervision of Governor General (1874-1905) thereafter Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was constituted and put under Lieutenant Governor (1912-1921), finally Province of Assam was established under direct supervision of Governor (1921-1947).⁵⁷ Initial wave of immigration embarked on in the wake of constituting administrative division within the Bengal Presidency. No doubt, the period 1826 witnessed the debut of colonial hegemony that received considerable numbers of guests such as professionals, traders from different parts of India and settled in the Brahmaputra valley.⁵⁸ Furthermore, following the discovery and expansion of tea enterprises in the Brahmaputra valley demanded more labourers for clearing of jungles, leveling up the surface, sowing seeds, weeding, pruning, plucking etc.⁵⁹ that was initially responded to by the local people. Subsequently, local inhabitants became reluctant to work as labourers in tea estates. No doubt, economic self-sufficiency, low wages and opium addiction of the local inhabitants obliterated extension of manual labour to the tea estate owners. Eventually, acute labour problems confronted by the tea estate owners in the Brahmaputra valley put pressure on the colonial authority to roll out a systematic mechanism to bring more cheap labour from outside Assam to materialize the continuous process of cultivation and processing of tea. These labourers mostly belonged to Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Central Provinces, United Provinces and Madras.⁶⁰ Indeed several reports accounted for numbers of labourers being forcefully brought to Assam to engage them in tea cultivation. In 1891 over 423199 tea labourers were brought to Assam and in 1901 over 645100 labourers were brought from outside the province.⁶¹

The intensity of immigration grew momentum following the creation of Assam as Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874, which incorporated more administrative divisions such as Goalpara that poured overwhelming Eastern Bengali settlers into the land of Brahmaputra valley.⁶² In addition, with the growing momentum of jute export, more labourers were required for processing of golden fiber that seemed to be labour intensive as a result substitution of expensive local labour was executed by welcoming labour from Bengal. According to Barpujari, "Labour was more expensive in Assam than in Bengal."⁶³ The labour problem was later resolved by providing free entry of the settlers of Bengal into Brahmaputra valley. According to Basu, 'jute is almost more than twice as expensive as Ahu rice'.⁶⁴ The fertile land of western Brahmaputra valley located in close proximity of Bengal offered unprecedented space for growing jute in high profitable commercial extent.

The British policy of 'Grow More Food' policy and profit maximization left no stone unturned in the population of Brahmaputra valley. In the year 1901-1902, the Brahmaputra valley accommodated over 20,307 acres of land to the foreigners, especially Eastern settlers.⁶⁵ Besides, following the introduction of the railway, mass exodus of coolies thronged the land of Assam who were engaged in tea estates by the British. Self-sufficient village economy and addiction to opium offered hardly any corporal service to the British's owned estates and views as encumbrance to expansion of special crop production and colonial economic growth. Scanty population with sluggish nature of native inhabitants and unutilized vast tracts of land put encumbrance to the profit maximizing scheme of the British, as a result, British administration have come up with a new policy that gave free access to settle in the Brahmaputra valley. The perpetual influx of Eastern Bengal peasants into the Brahmaputra valley drastically changed the demography that eventually resulted in encroachment of government's lands and brought conflict in the peaceful village environment of the local inhabitants. The marginalized immigrants who had undergone intense misery in their own province preferred to improvise the resources to make sustainable living. Due to their skill and hard work even, unproductive lands were brought under cultivation through which the colonial government accrued unprecedented revenue from land. Initially, recurrent immigration was considered a colonial benefit, but the post immigration effect was witnessed in illegal occupation of government land and conflict in

villages as well. To thwart the forceful act of immigrants ‘Line System’⁶⁶ was adopted on a communal basis that put retraction in social movement.

5.19 Demographic Change

The colonial period witnessed massive proliferation of population in the Brahmaputra valley. The elimination of Burmese from the soil of Assam revived a sense of social security and spirit of agrarian life that brought back thousands of displaced indigenous inhabitants who had taken shelter in the adjacent territories for security purposes. However, the existence of external social elements in the Brahmaputra valley grew momentum in the colonial period. According to Sanghamitra Sarma, “Immigration was a colonial policy designed to accomplish imperialistic designs of the British rulers.”⁶⁷ The Census of India clearly indicated as to how the province of Assam was amalgamated with East Bengal in 1905 that bridged the territorial gap between the two provinces allowing the Bengali settlers of Eastern Bengal to move towards the Brahmaputra valley for better livelihood. Undoubtedly, it was evident from the Census of 1911 that the Eastern Bengal settlers started to penetrate in the districts of Nowgong, Kamrup and Darrang. As such, from the census of 1931 it has been brought to light that the influx of Bengal settlers exceeded the previous numbers. The absence of available local working forces compelled the colonial authority to invite thousands of skilled and cheap labourers from the neighbouring provinces to engage them in commercial crop production. The available living space provided home to thousands of immigrants which had eventually triggered population explosion. The agrarian policy of the British such as ‘grow more food’ created territorial space for land hungry peasants from adjoining provinces who did not hesitate to move out of their native land due to hard pressed life triggered by unsympathetic landlords, constant inundation, high density of population and corrupt officials. In 1940-41, one fifth of the total temporarily settled areas including waste land in the Brahmaputra valley accounted for 1.1 million. Of this figure, the Eastern Bengal settlers accounted for almost half a million acres.⁶⁸

Table 5.2: The table showing a demographic pattern of the Brahmaputra valley (1872 to 1891).⁶⁹

Year	Population
1872	18,84,046
1881	22,52,003
1891	24,76,481
1901	61,26,343

Source: Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India & Census of India, 1901, Vol. 1-A.⁷⁰

5.3 Table: Table showing the changing demographic pattern of the Brahmaputra valley for the year 1901.⁷¹

Sl. No.	Districts	Total Figure
1	Sibsagar	5,97,969
2	Lakhimpur	3,71,396
3	Nowgong	2,61,160
4	Darrang	3,37,313
5	Kamrup	5,89,187
6	Goalpara	4,62,052
	Total	26,19,077

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

Between 1911 and 1921 the population of the Brahmaputra valley reached 7,48,650. It was due to frequent penetration of the Eastern Bengal immigrants constituting over 55.6 percent of the population of mentioned periods. Mymensingh became the main region of Eastern Bengal from where a large number of immigrants took shelter in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Lakhimpur.⁷² In 1940-41, one fifth of the total temporarily settled areas including waste land in the Brahmaputra valley accounted for 1.1 million. Of this figure, the Eastern Bengal settlers accounted for almost half a million acres.⁷³

5.20 New Settlers in Forest Land

Since the early imperial rule in the Brahmaputra valley the forest became a central area of revenue extracting resource and future zone of agrarian expansion.⁷⁴ The written vision of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan clearly mentioned about the clearing of forest for agrarian expansion, ‘The time will come when the forest of Assam will be converted into garden; ship will replace country boats...’⁷⁵ The nineteenth century witnessed a growing revenue demand of the provincial government that prompted them to look for suitable land for growing jute crops. Ironically, the local peasants expressed an unwilling spirit towards cultivation of jute. The attitude of the indigenous peasants towards growing jute was observed by J. Sheer, the Deputy Commissioner of Nogaon in 1873.⁷⁶ With the prospect of jute cultivation, vast tracts of available land in Lakhimpur, Darrang Nogaon, Goalpara and portions of Kamrup districts were provided to the immigrant peasants from East Bengal to reclaim the land for jute cultivation.⁷⁷ The colonizing scheme of the British invited large numbers of peasants from neighbouring provinces for the purpose of agrarian expansion. From the late nineteenth century, the settlement of East Bengal immigrant peasants in wastelands embarked upon.⁷⁸ As observed by Saikia, “the rapid land reclamation changed the character of the regional agrarian economy and relation in various ways.”⁷⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century, the colonial attitude towards virgin land was flexible as a result no restriction was put on the clearance of forest for agricultural purposes. But, due to local political interference in wasteland settlement policy, the colonial administration had to introduce communal restriction in the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁸⁰ In the years 1879 to 1960, over 7,00,000 hectares of forest and woodland were cleared for agricultural purposes, where considerable numbers of East Bengal peasants took shelter.⁸¹

The settlement of East Bengal peasants took active participation in changing the rural agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra valley. On the other hand, recurrent immigration of East Bengal peasants in the Brahmaputra valley increased the population density of the region that finally resulted in conflict over land between indigenous inhabitants and the immigrant peasants.

5.21 Conclusion

The agrarian change took different shapes during the colonial period that significantly resulted in transition of society and economy in the Brahmaputra valley. The transition in agrarian life embedded positive and negative impacts on society and economy. The rural subsistence economy was changed following the colonial administration in the Brahmaputra valley. Over the years, the whole of North East which was earlier known as Assam lived in complete isolation and self-reliance offering little space for external influence. The only food production economy was later transformed with the mix-economy that consisted of food and cash crop production with the purpose of domestic consumption and trade. The introduction of technological innovation further extended the faster movement of merchandise which was essential for the development of surplus agricultural production. The extensive production was encouraged by development of Assam-Bengal railway communication that became instrumental in widening markets. Over time, the process of agrarian economy moved towards commercial interest widening market facilities. The expansion of the market offered an avenue for the crop growers to reap the hard work they have extended in land. The traders considerably constituted Marwaris who are non-indigenous community. This community immigrated into Brahmaputra valley along with the British. The absence of local traders offered free access to Marwaris from north India. Over time this community retained control over the means of production in every corner of the Brahmaputra valley. The provision of advanced loans to the cultivators has mixed effects. Hardworking peasants availed profit from the loan provided by the Marwaris, On the other hand, marginalized peasants who had taken loan on mortgage of land had to lose their land on account of crop failure that resulted in indebtedness. The monetized system of payment rolled out by the colonial government laid a heavy burden on the peasants who were traders and some wealthy local inhabitants often turned into moneylenders. Besides, the scheme of immigration promoted by the British and solidarity extended by local emerging Assamese intellectuals

subsequently resulted in large scale immigration from outside the province of Assam. The perpetual immigration triggered population explosion in the Brahmaputra valley. These immigrants by and large settled in wastelands tracts and participated in extensive operation of agriculture that has commercial affinity. The shift in mode of production from traditional food production to commercial crops further increased the standard of economic status and gradually gave rise to new heights to social and economic stratum.

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