

**AGRARIAN CHANGE IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA
VALLEY (1826-1947)**



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the present thesis “**Agrarian Change in the Brahmaputra Valley (1826-1947)**” is result of the original research carried out by **Bijit Brahma** under my supervision and that to the best of our knowledge and belief, neither this thesis nor any part of it forms the basis of any research degree either in this University or anywhere else.

I am pleased to forward the thesis to Bodoland University for its evaluation by the concerned examiners.

(Dr. Jaysagar Wary Ph.D)

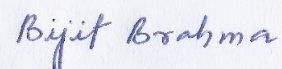
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DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that this work entitled **AGRARIAN CHANGE IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY (1826-1947)** submitted by me to Bodoland University has been originally carried out by me. This work has not been earlier submitted for any other research degree in any other University or Institution.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bijit Brahma".

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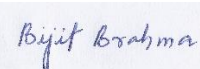
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Place: Bodoland University

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Glossary

Adhiyar- landless labourer who receives half of produce.

Bigha- Unit of measurement of land equivalent to one third of an acre.

Basti- Homestead land or home surrounding land.

Bora/Borah- An officer assigned with military duty over twenty *paiks*.

Brahmottar- Rent free grant for the support of the Hindu religious priests.

Chamua- Rich peasants who serve as members of *paik* without physical presence by direct payment of tax to the government's treasure.

Chukanidar- under tenant.

Debottar- Rent free land granted for maintenance of religious deity.

Dharmottar- Rent free grant land owned by religious institutions.

Duar- Mountain pass. Adjacent place of foothills and plain area.

Gamati- Usufruct land given to *paiks*.

Gola- Depot, store.

Got- Squad or Unit of *paik* consisting of three to four members.

Kala Azar- Black Fever.

Kani- Opium.

Kharikatana- Crown land.

Khat- Tract of waste land of their own.

Khel- Ahom state service of voluntary organization or a unit or division of people for specific purpose.

Khiraj- Fully assessed tax estate.

Khelwari- System of assigning duty to the male person for utilization of land and military service to the Ahom.

Lakhiraj- Tax exempted estate or rent free land.

Maund- Wight Measurement equivalent to 40 kg.

Moouza- A Revenue Circle or a Fiscal Unit.

Nal- Stick used for measurement of land.

Nisf-khiraj- Half assessed tax estate.

Paik- Voluntary labour and militiaman of Ahom.

Pharingati- Dry highland.

Pura- A measurement of land equivalent to two acres of land.

Rajkhowa- An officer under Ahom rule commanding over three thousand *paiks*.

Rupit- Arable land or wet paddy growing land.

Ryot- A peasant whose main occupation is cultivation.

Ryotwari- Land and Revenue Settlement directly established with the actual cultivators.

Saikia- An officer under Ahom government supervising over hundred *paiks*.

Satgharia- Seven clan of the Ahom royal family.

Satra- Religious temple of Vaishnavism.

Zamindar- A hereditary collector of revenue.

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CHAPTER -I

INTRODUCTION

Change is a fundamental aspect of nature mostly triggered by external agency that brings changing of existing structure and institutions in a new course of development. The agrarian transition of the Brahmaputra valley is the phenomena that represent socio-economic, institutional and structural transitions integrated with land, its processes of utilization and supervision giving way to intensification of agricultural production that shifted the process of production from traditional food production to commercial crop production for overseas markets. In the second decade of the nineteenth century the East India Company has annexed the Brahmaputra valley with the British empire. Following the occupation of the Brahmaputra valley, the colonial government was in urgent need of huge capital to meet the expenses as a result, the colonial authority has made changes in land administration and revenue system. The only prospect for maximum revenue generation was found in land where agriculture constituted principal agrarian economy of the region. So as to meet the colonial expectation, institutional reform was needed for smooth flow of revenue to the state treasury. Thus, by abolishing old agrarian institution new land administration were introduced as per the interest of the British. As a result, all the land was surveyed for ascertaining exact revenue from land thereafter land was classified into *basti*, *rupit* and *faringahti*. Following the cadastral survey, more realistic of land assessment was carried out and rate of land revenue fixed accordingly. For the efficient revenue collection, earlier system of payment in kind no longer remained as mode of revenue payment instead monetized form of revenue payment was introduced in 1840.¹

The vast tracts of the Brahmaputra valley having low density of population offered living space for outside settlers. Since ages, Brahmaputra River has been serving as a lifeline

to social livelihood that occupied an extent of over 78,496 km hectares.² Due to its abundant land resources, the colonial administration has undertaken multiple colonizing schemes to bring large acres of wasteland under cultivation for which a considerable extent of land was given on lease for tea and other valuable crops cultivation. However, the irony is that, the local inhabitants refused to extend physical assistance to the planters due to low wage and paucity of competing working spirit. As a result, a large number of agricultural working forces was brought from central India for tea cultivation and peasants from East Bengal for jute and other cash crops cultivation.

The penetration of immigrant settlers benefited the British by expanding agriculture and exposed a new working spirit and technique of growing commercial crops having more economic potential for self-empowerment in monetary terms to meet the needs of the household maintenance and revenue demand of the revenue officials. The money agencies such as Marwari traders and Cooperative Societies facilitated the monetary assistance for the cultivators especially for commercial crops cultivation. During the colonial period, use of modern technology embedding non-organic substances, mechanical power, and improved varieties of seeds were adopted. The Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Societies took an effective role in intensification of agricultural output.³

1.1 Significance of the Agrarian Transition

The agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley has brought a scene of unusual transition during the colonial period. The advent of British administration brought dynamism and transition of pre-colonial pattern of agrarian system in the Brahmaputra valley in a holistic manner. Few years down the line, the British had turned the Brahmaputra valley into an agricultural colony of capitalism and supplier of raw materials for international markets.⁴ Indeed, change is a continuous process thus its occurrence is inevitable. The agrarian change of the Brahmaputra valley was the phenomena that represented socio-economic, institutional and structural transitions integrated with land and its process of utilization and supervision gave way to enhancement of agricultural production by prompting level of production beyond traditional subsistence economy for overseas markets. Undoubtedly, during the colonial period, profit-oriented agricultural production meant for overseas markets and investment in land emerged as a significant tendency by cultivators. So as to materialize the colonial prospect, it has carried out modification and liquidation of erstwhile agrarian

systems that subsequently favoured the investors, cultivators and administrators from land. The process of transformation was shaped by a multidimensional range of global and local factors. The flow of investment and rural credit facilitated intensification of cash crop production and consumable crops as well. To this extent, the British favoured the intrusion of East Bengal settlers into the Brahmaputra valley which later added greater proportion of land utilization and mass production followed by the colonial economy gaining much benefit from this development.

The immigration of skillful labourers had added significant impact on extension of commercial crops production and developments of barren land into productive land i.e., *char* areas of land which were often left out by indigenous ethnic communities. Thus, the pre-British epoch of Assam by and large represented a semi-feudal system of socio-economic structure based on joint proprietorship of land and absence of private property of land for common masses providing limited access to economic prosperity. Paucity of equal distribution of land and right to ownership put impediment to intensification of economically more valuable crops and large-scale agricultural production for export. Several factors were attributed to have caused the subsistence economy of the Ahom period. The slow pace of economic progress was viewed as an encumbrance to the colonial master for their thirst for accumulation of wealth from the colony.

The Brahmaputra valley is an agricultural region where it has contributed towards the empire building and large group of population. Since the Ahom period, the entire population was organized into a *paik* system allowing limited access to land holding and rights over use of land. In the process of land utilization and accrue ment of cultivable land condition was applied where men had to join the organization of militia and labourers better known as *paik* system. There were no independent ownership rights over land which was imperative for sustainable and surplus production. Thus, the economic status of the family in general and state in particular. However, during the colonial period, land was classified into various categories due to fixation of assessment and revenue accumulation.

A series of agrarian reforms took place between 19th and first quarter of the 20th centuries by the colonial master in Brahmaputra valley that allowed liberalization of land holding and accrue ment of more land to the peasants. The concept of tax proliferation and cash payment of land tax have compelled the cultivators to work harder to meet the revenue

demand. The land reform policy ensured permanent security to the land owners by issuing land *patta* and also invited the capitalist to invest their capital in land for surplus production of cash crops meant for supply to world markets. The development of capitalist form of agriculture in the Brahmaputra valley had resulted in augmentation of substantial markets. The expansion of markets had offered a platform of commercial transaction for cultivators as well as the British agents to gain more profit from agrarian production. The development of commercial activity had established a flow of currency that was required for payment of cash revenue to the British revenue officials. The development of economic activity and colonial interest in the development activity of cash crops cultivation has eventually established a close network of export markets with global markets which never happened prior to the administration of the British in the Brahmaputra valley.

The agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley is marked by unequal distribution of land and its productive utilization, cropping pattern, income etc. The proliferation of population triggered by immigration of East Bengal settlers intensified the conversion of forest areas into agricultural land for cultivation. In addition to this, *char* areas or the sandy soil was not even spared by the immigrants; instead, it was turned into agricultural land by growing cash crops. The development of cash crop cultivation was induced by the global network of trade. Indeed, certain ethnic groups could not keep pace with the growing revenue demand of the British revenue officials that resulted in relinquishing of land and internal migration to escape payment of cash revenue.

1.2 An Outline of the Pre-colonial Agrarian System in the Brahmaputra Valley

The agrarian change in the Brahmaputra valley in colonial times without addressing the agrarian system of the pre-colonial period structured on semi-feudal nature where its primary economy was based on agriculture having limited access to global market and modern capitalism. The stable agriculture was also seen during the rule of Varman dynasty, Salasthamba dynasty and Pala dynasty⁵ where rice occupied the main occupation crop.⁶ Along with cultivation of rice, cultivation of sugarcane, mustar and pulses were carried out in small proportion. The method of cultivation was mainly shifting cultivation followed by burning forest and scratching the surface of the soil for sowing seeds and *Jhum* was seen in hills areas.

The use of plough, construction of artificial canal or irrigation was carried out to maneuver the streams of water especially for the high land which could not receive an adequate volume of water for growing rice. In this regard, the Chinese traveler Yuan Chwang or Hiuen Tsang and clearly made a reference to artificial irrigation adopted by the Kacharis of ancient Assam living in the Brahmaputra valley.⁷

From 600 CE to 1200 CE, the issuance of land to the religious groups and institutions became a common phenomenon in Kamarupa corroborated by the epigraphic records and mandated by the king.⁸ According to H.K. Barpujari, “Land as usual formed the main source of revenue to the state and its proper utilization, thus was the chief concern of administration.”⁹ The Nidhanpur Copper plate inscription and Doobi Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman were the most famous grants of ancient Assam corresponding to the Varmana dynasty. The copper plate inscriptions of Nidhanpur supplied valid information as to the granting of land to about two hundred and five Brahmanas in the Chandrapuri Vishaya.¹⁰ The main purpose of land grant was to remunerate the individuals in the form of land for extending service to the state. So as to disseminate Aryanism through *Varnasrama dharma*, a policy of land grant was practiced which would serve a deep sense of respect for the ruler and ensure a strong central authority.¹¹ The constant land grant promoted the active role of the grantee’s participating in expansion of agriculture converting virgin land into agricultural land bearing an independent right of utility.¹²

During the Ahom rule, the practice of land grant was continued. According to Assam Buranji, ‘Pratap Singh set the debut of religious grant of land viz. *Debottar*, *Brahmottar* and *Dharmottar*. The land accrued by Brahmins was known as *Brahmottar*.¹³ Namgarh, Temple and Mosque were another religious institution being donated by the king with land for the maintenance which was known as *Debottar*. Besides, for the maintenance of deities, groups of religious faith were being granted land which was known as *Debottar*. However, these lands possessed special privilege of tax exemption and beneficiaries availed the benefit of exhaustive autonomy and permanent inheritance. In the process of land utilization, aforementioned lands were by and large cultivated by unfree labourers who were mostly attached to the temple. On the other hand, the king had granted vast tracts of land to the high-ranking Ahom officers (*Satgharia*). The *Satgharia* accrued several acres of land on account of joint participation in conquest of territory of neighbouring states. These high ranking aristocrats occupied an important official post.¹⁴ In the 13th to 19th centuries, marked the

hegemony of Ahom who had adopted the administrative system in the line of the South Asian country of Burma. The economy of Ahom was largely dependent upon agriculture having self-sufficiency in domestic food production ensuring food security without promoting intensive external trade with mainstream of India and outside the country except having trade network with the countries of Bhutan, Burma and Tibet where some trade activity was witnessed in the *duars* of Bhutan or border areas of the Brahmaputra valley. The colonization of Ahom in the Brahmaputra valley added a new phase of economic boost and intensive use of land for agriculture stressed on wet rice cultivation facilitated by ploughshare.¹⁵

The *paik* system was initially introduced by Momai Tammuli Barbarua during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha.¹⁶ The *paik* system is a part of Ahom administration where men of 16 to 50 ages are inducted to the state service. The main role of *paik* was associated with engagement in agriculture at times of peace and they extended military assistance to the king at times of war. Since the economy of the Ahom was dependent upon agriculture as a result, the state claimed complete monopoly over land and *paiks* were directly engaged in production of agriculture for the purpose of utilization of land from where revenue is generated in the form of labour especially in times of peace. During the time of war, they were inducted as militiamen. For the greater economic interest two *puras* of land were being allocated to the members of *paik*.¹⁷ Due to being an integral part of the egalitarian and semi feudal socio-economic structure *paiks* were provided limited access to land and proprietorship. The *paik* system had similar characteristics with the *pronoia* system of Byzantium; under this system the usufruct of the greatest part of public land was ceded to individuals in exchange for their providing services, mostly military.”¹⁸

The *paik* system was a systematic state organized mechanism that engaged the entire adult men as a labour force for extensive utilization of vast tracts of cultivable land. They worked as labour in the agricultural land in alternative months among the members of *got* (unit) constituting three to four members of *paiks*. As such a large number of *paiks* were turned as voluntary labourers for agricultural production and to engage them in public work, for which each of them was allocated with two *puras* of land designated as *gomati* or usufruct land for their service.¹⁹ *Gomati* lands did not possess transferable, salable and heritable rights. For exhaustive efficacy, the entire *paiks* were split into unit embedding of either three or

four *paiks* where $\frac{1}{4}$ of the members of the *got* had to extend his labour over a period of 3 to 4 months for utilization of land.²⁰

The *paiks* were directly regulated by the king as well as Gohains. Accordingly, Buragohain, Bargohain and Barpatragohain constituted a fold of military officers entrusted with big numbers of *paiks*. Following the Gohains, Phukan commanded over 6,000 *paiks*, Bar Gohain 4,000 and Barpatra Gohain 6,000 respectively. Apart from them there were junior officers being inducted in the Ahom administration and placed next to Gohains, commanding over a smaller number of *paiks*, for example Hazarika commanding over 1000 *paiks*, Saikia about 100 *paiks*, Bora about 20 *paiks*.²¹

The land system in the westernmost part of the Brahmaputra valley i.e., Goalpara possessed a distinct mixed system of *zamindari* and *ryotwari* systems. This region was under the administration of several rulers, as a result, a dynamic land system was rolled out that remained the legacy of their predecessors. As per the reports, practice of private property existed in lower Brahmaputra valley that covered parts of Kamrup and Goalpara districts which were part of the Mughal and Koch empires. To this extent manifold reports were being recorded as regards the practice of limited monetization in rural society attributed to rudimentary ethnic based socio-economic agrarian structure. These factors, restrained greater circulation and minting of coin currency. However, the Ahom accepted that exchange of labour as equal to payment of rent for land used. Thus, paucity of available cash money for transaction forced the Mughal administrators to roll out an innovative mechanism to be materialized for the efficacy of revenue exploitation promoted private ownership of land that subsequently resulted in land sale across the plain districts of lower Assam. Thus, when the Ahom recovered the territory of western Assam, they retained the former practice implemented by Mughals.

In the Brahmaputra valley there prevailed considerable extent of wasteland and char land created by human act and natural phenomena. Various diseases and anti-social elements were attributed to creation of waste and char land. The mighty Brahmaputra river, and its tributaries persistently triggered seasonal inundation that sometimes changed the landscape and damaged the crops. One of such examples can be referred to Majuli, the largest island of Asia, which was created by natural disaster.²² Another factor behind the creation of wasteland happened to be *Kala Azar* disease that spread across the Brahmaputra valley

forcing many families to leave the land. As reported by the Mills, ‘long civil and internal wars attributed to the accession of throne by Gaurinath Singh in 1780 to 1826 caused displacement of cultivators leading to without cultivation.’²³ At the time of internal unrest, Goalpara district turned out to be a safe refuge for thousands of men of ranks and priestly families of the Ahom under whom a large amount of land was possessed. Atrocities and unrest had a negative impact on the socio-economic life of the Brahmaputra valley that resulted in mass displacement and abandonment of large acres of land without cultivation. In fact, in the case Goalpara district, large portion of char areas were created by inundation of the Brahmaputra river that often raised its water body covering low lying plain areas and constantly dumping silt that normally covered the fertile riverbank land and made the agricultural field unproductive until it was reclaimed by the Eastern Bengal settlers.

The cropping pattern of the Brahmaputra valley in pre-colonial period mainly embedded mono-cropping and fallowing systems. It was a tendency of the *ryots* who cultivated the land for a maximum period of one to two years following that land was kept for improvement of soil productivity for a certain period of time. Due to abundant land, the practice of fallowing was largely adopted by the local inhabitants. The absence of a scientific way of farming and being obsessed with the traditional methods of farming provided less efficacy in agriculture. Furthermore, domestic food production having no commercial interest was witnessed during Ahom hegemony. Indeed, rice cultivation was found as intense food production of pre-colonial Assam. Cultivation of rice was usually carried out in two seasons i.e., summer and winter. *Bao* or *Sali* is represented as summer crops and *Ahu* rice represented as winter crop. The *Ahu* or summer rice embeds process of cultivation that involves weeding, sowing and transplantation and sowing of seed is done in the months of March or April and harvested in June and July. Thus, cultivation of *Sali* rice considered as a winter crop underwent the process of sowing, seedlings, irrigating and transplantation. However, the process of sowing *Sali* rice is carried out in June and July and harvested in the months of November and December.²⁴ Interestingly, cultivation of substantial cash crops was not being developed during the Ahom period. However, cultivation of poppy, cotton, oilseeds was performed for the household use regardless of sale. Of domestic production, rice cultivation accounted for the largest food production that had supported the non-farming section of town dwellers. Transplantation of rice also resulted in surplus produce for domestic consumption. Indeed, agricultural implements facilitated greater operation of

agricultural land and resulted in surplus production and boost to the economy. There are certain agricultural implements that contributed tremendous transformation in agricultural production. These agricultural tools entailed ploughs, plough-beam, phal, ploughshare, yokes (jhungal), Bamboo-harrow (mai), hoe, sickle, cold-breaker (dalimariya), rake (jabka), iron hand bill (sika), large rake dragged by bullocks (bindha), iron spade, iron *kurpi*, *Ruah* (axe), weeding knife, wooden long-handled mallet for breaking colds etc.²⁵

1.3 Review of Literature

On this topic the agrarian change in the Brahmaputra valley, a considerable extent of work has been developed in certain aspects of agrarian system in Assam in general. However, no such systematic and comprehensive study on agrarian change has been attempted in particular. Therefore, following books are being reviewed for scope of the study and kind of information it can supply on the working proposition of the study.

Leslie Waterfield Shakespear (1918) in his book *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North Eastern Frontier* author has clearly mentioned as regards the border trade between Assam and the hilly regions of North East India where Assam or Brahmaputra valley being a plain area it has supplied its agricultural crops in exchange of some organic articles. Here, the author has also thrown some information regarding the network of trade, geography, political history and boundary extension Assam. In his work the author has supplied an account of external and internal aggression which triggered severe impact on agrarian life of the Brahmaputra valley, however the author did not attempt to provide substantial information concerning the agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley.

Irfan Habib (1963) in his book *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* provided a significant insight about extent of cultivation, trade in agricultural produce especially long-distance trade and internal movement of trading activity, means of cultivation and irrigation, material conditions of the life of the peasantry, revenue assignment consisting of Jagirs and Khalsa, land revenue administration constituting process of land revenue collection, medium of payment, role of *zamindars* and agrarian crisis of the Mughal Empire. Though, his work didn't extensively touch the agrarian system of Assam but it has supplied good knowledge about how to proceed with the proposed area of study.

B. K. Barua (1969) in his book *A Cultural History of Assam* (1963) author has brought to light scanty information as regards the land system. It also contained little

information about agriculture, crafts and industries and trade routes. However, works of the author did not supply comprehensive information regarding the agrarian change and the factors that triggered transition in agrarian structure.

Debabrata Dutta (1982) in his book *History of Assam* author has delineated the Ahom administration consisting of *paik* and *khel* system, proper description of Brahmaputra valley, social and cultural condition of pre-Ahom period, administrative control of British in Assam. The Burmese aggression and Mughal invasion in the territory of Assam or Mohammedan wars was also touched by the author. The author mainly stressed on the brief historical outlines while supplying broad insight about the content. However, in his historical literature, the author has attempted limited coverage of information regarding agrarian perspective and no such analysis of pre-colonial and colonial agrarian aspects was attempted.

Rajen Saikia (2000) in his book *Social and Economic History of Assam 1853-1921* author has thrown a pertinent light on certain aspects of land system, internal trade, cultivation of cash crops and decline of handicrafts. However, no such extensive work in agrarian change is fully outlined in his work.

Jairus Banaji (2001) in his book *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity, Gold, Labour and Aristocratic Dominance* author has delineated the late antiquity economic system, rural landscape, estate, rural labour market and peasantry of Byzantine period. Though it does not have association with a particular period and its economic dominance, it gives insinuation to trace the pre-colonial economic system of the Brahmaputra valley.

N. Jayapalan (2001) in his book entitled *Economic History of India, Ancient to Present Day* author has supplied good information regarding some agrarian aspects of ancient, medieval and modern period. The economic condition and development have been stressed entailing trade and commerce, revenue administration of pre-medieval, sultanate, Mughal, Maratha and British. In his work, the author has mentioned about the tea cultivation of Assam well. Though this work is primarily emphasized on Indian context, yet, it provides immense clues for aspects of agrarian change from the changing scenario it has covered in the author's literary work.

Jahnabi Gogoi Nath (2002) in her book *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam* presented the system of land and agrarian structure of medieval Assam stressing on the Ahom period. Classification of land during the pre-Ahom and Ahom period was also being

highlighted. Absence of private ownership of land by the individual except land grants donated to the Brahmanas, the priests, religious institutions and nobility has been discussed in this book. However, the extensive work on the colonial period has not been touched. Factors why upper Assam did not introduce a uniform system of private ownership of land were not fully specified.

Kalayan Choudhuri (2002) in his book *New History of Assam and India* presented the *paik* system that had been introduced by the Ahom king Sukhapa. Under the *paik* system, all the male persons between the age of 16 and 50 were registered to render services to the state. This system has been divided into two *Kanri paiks* and *Chamua paiks*. *Kanri paiks* were known as peasants who were entitled to render as soldiers in times of war and labourers in times of peace. *Chamua paiks* were the junior officers who were appointed in the administration. However, his writing entirely didn't touch the agrarian change of the Brahmaputra valley.

M. N. Karna (2004) in his book *Agrarian Structures and Land Reforms in Assam* presents the concept of land reforms, structure of land and process of agrarian change. He also stressed on the rural upheavals and peasant movement that were attributed to the agrarian change associated with land reform. However, his writing failed to focus on the factors that impacted agrarian change.

Stephen K. Wegren (2005) in his book *Land Reform in the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, author has supplied good information about land reform former Soviet Union consisting present independent countries of Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and other European countries of Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In his work author has worked on wide range of agrarian system embedding to land holdings of peasant farms, structure of land ownership, Individual land use, factors constraining sale of land, distribution of individual farms by size, government support programs for agriculture, growth of peasant farming, structure of livestock sector, laws to implement land reform, food consumption pattern, structure of agricultural production, private farm development, areas of major crops before land reforms. From this book, valuable insight can be drawn to develop research work in the line of proposed study.

Ramesh Chunder Dutt (2006) in his book *The Economic History of India Vol-Two*, author has explicitly thrown a light on the commercial policy of Great Britain towards India

in the eighteen and nineteenth century. Besides, policy of revenue administration has been delineated about the taxation system that triggered mass production and greater operation of land for cash crops in particular and food crops in general. Some effects of the Land Revenue system during colonial period also fell in Brahmaputra as well that brought to surface in his writing. However, the author did not touch the entire North Eastern region but his writing was mainly focused on north India.

H. K. Barpujari (2007) in his book *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume-I*, author has provided some conspicuous information as regards the agrarian structure, the process of Aryan migration to Assam, geographical setting, rural economy. The historical literary work developed by the author was mainly confined to the ancient period of Assam. However, the author did not attempt to cover the colonial period and there is no such reference to agrarian change in his work.

Edward Gait (2008) in his book *A History of Assam* author presented a few lines regarding administrative system, land revenue system, division of cultivated land, assessment of land before collection of revenue from the cultivators. Author has brought forward the initial writing about the political history of Assam. But, no such reference to the agrarian change in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam was mentioned in his writing.

Archana Verma (2010) in her work *Land Relations and Agrarian Change*, author delineates aspects of agrarian relations and how the land played an important role in the Indian economy. The composition of agrarian society, land settlement policy and exorbitant revenue generation was mentioned in her work. Besides, landlord and peasant relations were outlined in her historical literature. The work, author carried out mostly centered on Oudh region but despite its paucity of nexus with the Brahmaputra valley, it has provided similar relevance to proposed research work.

Arupjyoti Saikia (2010) in his work *Landlords, Tenants and Agrarian Relations: Revisiting a Peasant Uprising in Colonial Assam* has provided flagship information concerning curtailment of land rights of the landlords and burden of tax on peasants that eventually triggered the peasant violence. But his work failed to bring sheer insight on the *paik* system and 'waste land grant rules' that mandated the British to occupy more land for plantation of tea and for other purposes.

Arupjyoti Saikia (2011) in his book *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000* articulated the policy of Imperial Forest Department that allowed the British tea planters to occupy vast forest land and peasants from East Bengal reclaimed the grassland and floodplains of the Brahmaputra valley. The extensive work on the change in land system and mode of production and the British's policy is absolutely not being touched by him.

Stein T. Holden, Keijiro Otsuka and Klaus Deininger (2013) in their book *Land Tenure Reform in Asia and Africa* authors have conspicuously outlined the land distribution Reforms of Nepal, West Bengal, South Africa Malawi. Besides, Tenure Security and transfer of tenure rights, access to land, Forest management, forest rights, challenges of land tenure reform and market participation of small farmers are delineated. Though, their literary provide does not have close coverage of Brahmaputra valley but a wide range of Asian and African land tenure and its reforms can be taken as an important tool to develop historical literature of different aspects of agrarian change of the Brahmaputra valley.

Bollikonda Veeraiah (2013) in his book entitled *The Impact of Globalization on Changing Agrarian Relations*, author has supplied significant insight about the Indian agriculture, agrarian resources and agrarian relations and the impact of globalization that integrated into the global economy through trade, capital flows, information and communication technologies resulting in changing of agrarian structure. This perception was emphasized in the Indian agrarian context. In the same way, it can be taken as an example to relate its significance to the proposed research study which resembles in a similar manner.

Manoj Goswami (2014) in his book entitled *Char Settlers of Assam, A Demographic Study*, author has supplied valuable information concerning occupation of *char* or uncultivated land that could be known as wasteland lying in on the banks of rivers that was prone to inundation due to low terrain. The migration of the agricultural population of Eastern Bengal and cause of immigration to Assam was outlined in his historical literature. It also contained easy access to land reclamation of char areas by immigrants, where cultivation of jute and other crops were carried out.

Martin Empson (2014) in his book *Land and Labour, Marxism, Ecology and Human History*, author has mentioned about early human history, hunter gatherers, early agriculture, class, society and crisis, rise of peasants, development of modern agriculture, agriculture in 20 century, capitalism, urbanization and climate change. Here, the author has emphasized

capitalism as organized production, accumulation of wealth. The development of agriculture shaped the class society by liquidating egalitarian society following the change that underwent from subsistence to surplus production. The emergence of human dominance came from the level of surplus production people engaged in land. The author has given clear analysis about the role of technology that changed the world beginning from the Neolithic period 12000 BP that was marked as a technological development of stone tools and the inception of farming.

Amalendu Guha (2015) in his book *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy* author has slightly catered relevant information regarding, geographical setting, social structures, migration of Tai Ahom, land rights, shift from tribalism to feudalism, colonization, intrusion of hardworking and skilled peasants to the Brahmaputra valley, some aspects of agrarian structure of late nineteenth century. However, the author did not attempt to provide extensive insight regarding the agrarian change of the Brahmaputra valley.

Sangamitra Misra (2015) in her book *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* author has attempted to delineate the land, political and economic aspects of North Eastern India. Here, the author has contributed some accounts of Eastern Bengal cultivators who took shelter in the Brahmaputra valley and transformed the economy by proper utilization of waste and uncultivable land through cash crops and food crops growing. Indeed, it's a great literary work; the author did not cover a wide range of agrarian change of the Brahmaputra valley.

Amalendu Guha (2016) in his book *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, highlighted some aspects of agrarian policy covering Charter Act of 1833 that gave impetus to the East India Company and other Europeans to venture beyond the Presidency towns and occupy the land. The wasteland settlement rules of 1838 and 1854 have been included in his historical work of literature. However, the author did not attempt to cover the major aspects of agrarian life and no further reference to agrarian change was mentioned in his work.

All the aforesaid reference gives knowledge and information about the curtailment of the land rights enjoyed by the landlords and negligence of the peasants and agrarian

structure of Assam by the British administrators. However, literature on peasant's detachment of land and causes moving towards interior places hardly took a shape.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

With the fall of the Ahom political power in the Brahmaputra valley, the East India Company emerged as dominant political power that set colonial rule in from the 'treaty of Yandaboo' in 1826 A. D. At that period, the rural economy of the region was on the verge of exhaustive destruction mainly triggered by Burmese invasion. Now the question arises as to how was the colonial authority able to accumulate maximum profit from land despite slow growth of agriculture and presence of large waste and *char* lands? The change is a law of nature mostly triggered by inbuilt elements and enforced by external agencies. As such, agrarian change is a colonial framework associated with changing agrarian relations triggered by the role of the state resulting in proper utilization of land for economic benefit. The region could not hinder British colonization due to acts of external aggression triggered by the Burmese that eventually brought East India Company's intervention to help the deteriorating Ahom power.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century marked the debut of agrarian transformation in the Brahmaputra valley ranging from subsistence rural economy to mass production of commercial crops.²⁶ The change in the method of production consolidated by technology helped surplus production that was able to supply local agricultural output to the national and international markets. The process of agrarian transition has two dimensions: spatial and timeframe. However, the study is mainly focused on the spatial dimension of agrarian change. At the time of British occupation of the Brahmaputra valley, the rural economy was dependent on agriculture and agrarian structure was under feudal system. Following the political ascendancy in the region, the well-established British administration was in urgent need of perpetual flow of revenue to maintain the colonial expenses. But on account of cultivator's limited access to agricultural land not having permanent rights over land, agricultural production was mainly centered around food crops production. On the other hand, exaction of revenue in the form of labour service, absence of monetized payment, partial operation of the cash transaction in revenue payment failed to meet the expectation of the colonial government that prompted them to initiate reform in land and revenue system. The British government took an active role in formulation of agrarian policy that clogged

the old socio-economic institution and new system of land settlement and revenue system was introduced in the line of colonial prospect.

The introduction of new agrarian policy replaced the institution of *paik* system with *ryotwari* and *zamindari* system. The achievement of the colonial agenda was closely linked to agrarian policy resulting in curtailment of landlords having large acres of land without valid records of proprietorship. Thus, the *satgharia*'s (royal officials) land having special privilege of revenue exemption were also brought under assessment. Furthermore, the lands previously granted to the religious institutions and priests by the Ahom kings viz. *Devottar*, *Brahmottar* and *Dharmottar* were brought under assessment and failure to prove its legitimacy was seized by the government. The policy of land revenue enhancement worked as a tool for further aggravation of the condition of the big landholders that eventually resulted in relinquishment of large acres of land. In 1843 the colonial administration introduced abolishment of slavery that liquidated old customary practice in the region causing a punitive blow to old Ahom aristocracy, Brahmanas and Mahanta land owners, whose cultivation was mainly dependent on landless marginalized peasants. The emancipated individuals of preceding institutions subsequently engaged in agrarian occupation by reclaiming new lands and some turned as *adhiar* or usufruct who usually took land on contract from other proprietors on agreement to supply half of the produce at the time of harvest.

The colonial prospects of mass production of agriculture and maximization of profit promoted the introduction of new schemes for proper utilization of large acres of waste and *char* land lying on the bank of Brahmaputra. Through the scheme of Wasteland Grand Rule a large number of lands was allocated to the European capitalists for enterprise. Under this scheme the landholders were granted maximum flexibility in proprietorship. Besides, the *char* areas of land which were easily inundated due to low laying of land located in close proximity of Brahmaputra river, which was often neglected by the local cultivators were settled with peasant immigrants of Eastern Bengal. However, these *char* lands were reclaimed by the immigrant settlers of Eastern Bengal who were brought by the British. The hardworking and skilled peasants from Eastern Bengal changed the landscape of the *char* areas of land by cultivating commercial crops and the multi-cropping process of cultivation that marked the debut of surplus production having the potential to supply large agricultural output to the national and international markets.

After establishing the imperial rule in the Brahmaputra valley, the British have ascertained urgent needs of reformation and reorganization of the existing agrarian system for greater benefit of commercial interest of maximization of profit and accumulation of wealth. The development of capitalism in the Brahmaputra valley was represented by commercialization of agriculture that resulted in greater output of cash crop production and selection of crops cultivation mean for export that possessed more economic advantage and rural credit system operated by traders especially Marwaris, Bengalis and some local rich peasants provided security to the cultivators to purchase agricultural implements and maintain agricultural expenses. In addition, the Cooperative Societies undertook an active role in providing loans to the peasants at the rate of relatively less interest than the usual creditors operated by the traders. On the other hand, the influx of hard-working peasants of Eastern Bengal intensified reclamation of a greater proportion of land for expansion of agriculture.

Following the development of the international trade network and improvement of transport and communication left no stone unturned to integrate the rural agricultural economy of the Brahmaputra valley. The profit-oriented colonial administration of the British in the region, intentionally systematized its policy to work in the line of utmost revenue generation. The integration of commercial networks between India and international markets eventually materialized the transition of agrarian systems in the Brahmaputra valley. The agrarian revolution was a repercussion of revenue vested interest of the British.

The colonial government rolled out a new proprietorship, cash revenue payment, commercial crops production. Profuse uncultivated lands were brought under commercial crops cultivation by reforming land regulation as per the convenience of the entrepreneurs and systematic policy of immigration that welcomed skilled agricultural labourers from East Bengal for non-tea cultivation and indentured labourers of central India for tea cultivation. The British had achieved their objective of profit maximization by bringing new agrarian legislation that allowed penetration of capitalist's form outside the province, traders, flow of capitals and new technique of agricultural operation supplemented by use of inorganic substances, use of stronger agricultural implements and new varieties of seeds. Indeed, several scholars have worked on different aspects of the agrarian system of Assam in general.

The use of tools and technology in agriculture supplemented a significant assistance to agricultural production. The iron-based plough, tractors, irrigation and fertilizers were the

primary factors contributing towards intensification of agricultural production. The agricultural output improved the economic condition of the small landholders. Thus, substantial agricultural production consolidated in building a strong British imperialism in the Brahmaputra valley.

The British authority had played a crucial role in the development of commercial crops cultivation and integration of rural agricultural production with the international markets. The invitation of skilled peasants from neighbouring provinces meted out by the British for proper utilization of unused land, remained one of the colonial agrarian policies of “colonizing scheme” and “Grow more Food” that flocked numbers of non-indigenous labourers in the Brahmaputra valley who had contributed toward the economic progress of the region.

1.5 Objectives

1. To study the agrarian system and land administration of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during colonial period.
2. To highlight the process of agrarian transition and commercialization of agriculture.
3. To study the socio-economic impact of agrarian change.

1.6 Area of Study

The study has been conducted within the plain districts of the Brahmaputra valley consisting of erstwhile Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Sivsagar, Nowgaon, Darrang and Goalpara where its territory was integrated with the mighty river of Brahmaputra. However, the research study did not cover the Surma-Barak valley and Kapili valley but the sources of these areas provide immense help for the development of historical literature.

1.7 Research Questions

1. How far was the British policy successful in agrarian life of the Brahmaputra valley?
2. In what ways did the colonial authority change the agrarian system in the Brahmaputra valley?
3. Whether the global trade network established by the British induced greater levels of commercial crops cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley for export?

4. Whether policy of profit-maximization and accumulation of wealth was attributed to appropriation of land reform and revenue administration?

1.8 Methodology

The proposed study “Agrarian Change in the Brahmaputra Valley (1826-1947)” is a historical perspective dependent on scientific textual analysis of historical data under qualitative research. All primary data such as colonial reports, secretariat files, private letters, official minutes, dairies, land revenue files and gazetteers are extensively examined under scientific observations to fulfill the objective of the study. Moreover, in historical study, scientific technique of interpretation is carried out to synchronize the phenomena of the study that follow generalization. First of all, the secondary data helps to get basic information about the work done by previous researchers from where we can detect the research gap of a particular area.

For the fulfillment of the research study, all the materials of Assam State Archive, Bengal State Archive, National Archives, Delhi, Department of Historical, Antiquarian Studies and other libraries are assessed. Additionally, a thesis repository website, Shodhganga which provides relevant thesis for writing proposed research works, is being consulted.

1.9 Organization of the Chapters

The thesis has been organized into six chapters including the introduction and conclusion. For conspicuous discourse each chapter was concisely discussed below.

Chapter-I: This Chapter deals with introduction, statement of the problem, political history of the Brahmaputra valley and geographical outline, significance of the study, methodology, area of study, central argument, research questions, review of literature, objectives and organization of chapters. This chapter also concentrated discussion about critical analysis on the system of land and preceding agrarian system.

Chapter-II: In this chapter discusses the stages of land reform, land settlement, land revenue system and the process of transformation that occurred in the system of land holding, distribution of land, and the changing pattern of pre-existing British revenue collection.

Chapter-III: This chapter discusses the transition of the agrarian system that underwent the process of transition from subsistence economy to surplus economy promoting towards development of capitalism.

Chapter-IV: It will deal with the factors and process of commercialization of agriculture that brought integration of domestic agriculture with global trade.

Chapter-V: It analyzes the socio-economic impact of agrarian change. In this chapter, the emphasis will be stressed on how the changing character of the agrarian system brought dynamism in the society and economic system of the Brahmaputra valley. It also discusses how British policy promoted economic development and social change.

Chapter-VI: It deals with summary of findings, further scope of research study.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER-II

LAND ADMINISTRATION

2.1 Introduction

The fall of Ahom hegemony perpetrated by the Burmese paved the way for East India Company's intervention in the Brahmaputra valley that marked the introduction of colonial imperialism that shaped the structural and institutional setting. Until the arrival of the British, the rural economy of the Brahmaputra valley was fully agrarian as a result land formed one of the most important revenue generating assets. Thus, the principal capacity of a *ryot's* revenue generation for livelihood relied on the extent of land utilization that determined the economic condition of the household. At the time of territorial occupation of the Brahmaputra valley, the agrarian relation was on the verge of complete destruction economically and socially that was attributed to Burmese aggression. With the coming of the British, the economic structure of the Brahmaputra valley was totally changed with proper distribution of land, modification of tenancy condition, institution of farm credit systems, regulation of rents and wages, cooperative institution and modernization of agriculture.¹ Deeply rooted pre-colonial agrarian system could not meet the expense of the colonial administration who were in urgent need of substantial amount of revenue. The colonial motive of accumulation of wealth and profit maximization prompted the colonial administration to reorganize the erstwhile agrarian set up by introducing new regulation. The available fertile land of the Brahmaputra valley with low density of population had created an urgent need for reform in land relation and method of production. With the objective of revenue enhancement, several agrarian policies were introduced to bring

large acres of unproductive land under cultivation through the process of long term lease with flexible rate of rent. For the convenience of the enterprise, several revisions of land regulation were made to increase the commercial crop cultivation. This agrarian policy was also called a colonizing scheme that encouraged foreign investors in land for tea cultivation and other valuable cash crops. Along with the foreign capitalist, a large number of peasants from Bengal province known as hardworking marginalized and skilled peasants were encouraged to reclaim the char areas of land lying around the Brahmaputra valley for jute and other cash crop cultivation. Thus, with the banner of 'grow more food' policy, more Eastern Bengal immigrants were allowed to enter into the region. At that time, famine had ripped off the socio-economic condition of Bengal in 1934.²

The land revenue formed the fundamental aspect of the colonial administration in the Brahmaputra valley. The enactment of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation-1 of 1886 ensured certainty in revenue realization.³ No doubt, agrarian reform is a much broader concept than land reform that confined itself to the question of liquidation of intermediaries, regulation or termination of tenancy and distribution of land.⁴ According to Michael Lipton, "land reform comprises laws with the main goal"⁵ and he has further delineated the word 'reform' denoting major legislative change that increases the efficiency of outcomes.⁶ Another delineation as to land reform was explained by Stien T. Holden et al., according to him, "Land reforms have typically aimed at stimulating economic growth by enhancing land use efficiency and investment, reducing poverty and promoting more sustainable land management."⁷ In the eighteen and nineteenth centuries the world has witnessed significant transition from feudalism to development of commercial capitalism induced by land reform.⁸ Following the inception of British administration in the Brahmaputra valley, an urgent need of revenue was cropped up for the maintenance of the colonial expenses therefore a special attention was focused on the well-organized system of the land revenue administration for which preceding pre-colonial regulations were reorganized through legitimate legislation. No doubt, to achieve the underlying objective of the colonial administration, a holistic approach of land survey and assessment was undertaken to ascertain the exact valuation of land revenue. Thus, the monetized system of revenue collection embarked in 1840. This uniform system of revenue collection has replaced

the earlier system of *paik* system where ryots paid the revenue in the form of physical labour for which the state had allocated two *puras* of land for the state service.⁹

The colonial authority had carried out a land survey for classification of land based on productivity. As per the classification of land, the entire proportion of land was categorized into *faringati*, *rupit* and *char* areas of land.¹⁰ Of them *rupit* land constituted the most fertile land where production of rice was practiced to substantial extent. On the other hand, the discovery of tea in the Brahmaputra valley in the first quarter of the nineteenth century awakened the European minds and in the second quarter of the nineteenth century marked the success of tea cultivation that expanded more tea estates. Therefore, the expansion of tea cultivation put more pressure on the colonial government to allow privatization of land on flexible lease and low rate of rent.

The land revenue administration underwent a change that put a standstill to the preceding mode of land revenue collection instead a new system of revenue collection subject to exclusive payment of cash revenue was introduced. However, it will be vague to ascertain a clear picture of the colonial revenue system without understanding the Ahom system of revenue administration followed by the *paik* system. In addition to that the poll tax was a part of Ahom revenue system through which revenue was availed in the form of personal labour.¹¹ The British have substituted the poll tax by reorganizing the land revenue system in the form of cash payment.

For effective collection of land revenue ordinary and special settlements have been constituted. Under Ordinary Land Revenue, temporarily and permanently settled tracts were conglomerated. To this extent, Goalpara district came to be the only district in the Brahmaputra valley which constituted 19 permanently settled estates covering the extent of 1, 1518,982 acres who paid lakhs of rupees to the colonial authority through *zamindars*.¹² As reported by Maxwell, 'the Eastern Duars (*dooars*) were surveyed and demarcated by Babu Chandra Kumar, Kanungo under the superintendence of Mr. A.C. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara.'¹³ The survey and demarcation of land in Eastern Duars was to assess the entire land about its productivity and the extent of land to cover to determine the revenue turnover. On the other hand, under ordinary land revenue, there existed temporarily settled estates which were further

subdivided into classes viz. first class, second class, third class, fourth class and tea Land followed the rate of land.

According to G.P. Mishra, “Agrarian reform is some kind of specific institutional reform brought about by the state in rural India.”¹⁴ However, the agrarian reform in Assam by and large represents land reforms that encompassed transition in proprietary right, mode of revenue exaction, land tenure, reallocation of land to the landless people, measurement and assessment of land, classification of land etc. The slow pace of social and economic life integrated with the complacent nature of pre-colonial state authority and radical state monopoly over land provided little space for common people to live economically independent life in the Brahmaputra valley. The radical Ahom regulation over land use and distribution lived up to the first quarter of the nineteenth century until the advent of the British. It was apparent that the Burmese onslaught against the Ahom gave a punitive blow to the socio-economic life in the Brahmaputra valley that later gave a golden avenue to the British to occupy administrative power without local resistance. Moreover, the Brahmaputra valley being a vast fertile ground for growing substantial agriculture offered a resourceful life for hardworking people who chose to live a life by growing multi crops having a huge demand in the oversea markets.

The second quarter of the 19th century marked the history of administrative reorganization in the Brahmaputra valley, evolving a new set of foreign dominions with advanced systematic political and legislative frameworks. The better political and administrative insights of the colonial authority ruled out the customary rights that formed the basis of preceding governance and with a new set of colonial mechanisms, the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley were subjected to unprecedented cash revenue assessment. As such, the British had introduced another form of revenue better known as the *mauzadari* system. Over the years between 1836 and 1842, the *mauzadari* system was pertinently implemented in a major part of the Brahmaputra valley corresponding to the six plain districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara.¹⁵ The realization of revenue and assessment of revenue was entrusted to *mauzadars* with specific jurisdiction called *mauzas*.¹⁶

In the Brahmaputra valley, a unique system of land holding and allocation of land remained an urgent need for a surplus economy. The primary occupation of the people of Assam

proper or Brahmaputra valley was centered on cultivation. Despite land being the main resources of the settlers of the Brahmaputra valley, its economy remained under subsistence. Since the ages the major part of the Brahmaputra valley did not witness institutionalization of the concept of private ownership. But, the private ownership of land was found in Goalpara district which was partially ruled by the Mughal under the administration of Bengal province.

The agrarian relation of the Ahom rule was structured on a semi-feudal system. Apparently, there was no regular standing army in Ahom kingdom until the threat of Mughal invasion. However, voluntary militiamen were inducted into state security for defense in non-regular mode. In fact, all the maintenance of the soldier was borne with the land resources which were handed over to members of *paiks* that was treated as remuneration for state service. The earliest form of land tenure in the Brahmaputra valley was associated with the *paik* system where land was allocated to its members on condition of extending corporal service to the state. The land given to *paiks* was known as *Gomati* (paddy cultivation land) which did not include transferable rights. For better regulation the entire male persons were organized into *khel* which was subsequently subdivided into *got* that imbedded three to four members. For efficient management, officials were entrusted with a number of *paiks* based on their ranks. As regards the management of *paiks*, Francis Hamilton has articulated that, “The *paiks* were placed under four ranks of officers who according to their authority are supposed to command 1000, 100, 20 and 10 men.”¹⁷ Phukan or Barua were entrusted for overall management of the *paiks*.¹⁸

The lower part of the Brahmaputra valley possessed a unique system of land and revenue administration due to dominance of indigenous and foreign rule. The absence of strong central power and close proximity of geographical location sharing boundary with Bengal province of India prompted the invasion of Mughal. The short period of Mughal rule left their mode of revenue administration until the colonization. When Bengal was occupied by the East India Company, Goalpara also came under the control of Bengal. The Goalpara district had two types of land revenue system *ryotwari* and *zamindari* that was exclusively integrated with cash revenue. The land revenue administration in the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period had a similar pattern with the form of the Land Revenue Administration of Madras and Bengal. According to the report of the Land Revenue Administration 1887-88, the Brahmaputra valley

consisted of 539562 estates.¹⁹ However, the revenue system of Goalpara district was different from other remaining districts of the Brahmaputra valley where the *zamindari* system played a predominant role that was being introduced by the Mughal. The land revenue administration of Goalpara came under the purview of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 introduced by the British in Bengal province to collect revenue on time. However, British could not assess the land of Goalpara district according to Permanent Settlement; therefore, in 1822 a Non-Regulation Act was introduced to assess the land parallelly with the Permanent Settlement.

The colonial authority embarked upon the land reform constituting relations between farmers and land in Brahmaputra. The land reform was a precondition to constant revenue flow to state exchequer to sustain colonial administration. Land reform had close association with property rights of the peasant's ensuring security to occupancy rights. As stated in the economic theory of institutional change, more security on land ownership was consolidated by allowing the concept of private property rights.²⁰ The privatization of land promoted to saleable rights that reflected the value of the land.²¹ Thus, in the colonial period, agrarian structure and regulations on land was reframed to bring maximum revenue from land through proper utilization of land subject to redistribution of land bearing flexibility in revenue settlement.

Since the ancient period, the Brahmaputra valley witnessed a slow pace of agrarian economy with little scope for commercial prospect. Indeed, the intrusion of Ahom in the Brahmaputra valley slightly moved towards plough-based operation in cultivation that resulted in more food production without having any commercial affinity with neighbouring provinces. The land of the Brahmaputra valley offered a productive ground with minimal human labour. Besides, a great extent of land covers embedded forest land which was claimed as the royal assets. In the course of Ahom hegemony, the common man and labour possessed limited access to land operation for the purpose of agriculture. Therefore, a systematic mechanism of Ahom authority engaged all the men into land as labour not less than serf that was practiced by the feudal lords and inducted them as soldiers or militiamen at the time of war. At that point of time, the structure of land was feudal in nature of regulation where the actual cultivators were subjected to exclusive state control over cultivable land without having private proprietary rights remained a pre-colonial agrarian structure. On the other hand, royal officials, nobles, religious

institutions such as satraps, mosques and temples retained a considerable extent of land. These officers and religious people are non-cultivators. Indeed, the Ahom agrarian system was based on domestic consumption without having commercial interest. Literally, the scanty population of the Brahmaputra valley did not put pressure on substantial agricultural production. Besides, the Ahom authority strictly denied open trade relations with other provinces in India. Following the dark period of Assam inflicted by the Burmese aggression resulting in exhaustive destruction of the rural agrarian economy, the British stood as savior that restored rural agrarian life.

The colonial administration changed the slow-moving economic life of the Brahmaputra valley; various policies were rolled out for the interest of the British colonial exchequer. Farsighted experience over revenue generation was executed by assessment of land and fixation of revenue on land. Since, agriculture remained a primary source of sustainable livelihood in Brahmaputra with little interest in trade and commerce. As a result, land became an important asset of food production. No doubt, the earlier rulers had produced a subsistence economy without having a greater extent of commercial interest. On the other hand, the agrarian structure was organized into semi feudal nature where cultivators possessed minimal rights to accrue the best quality of land. It was mentioned that the king has claimed the right to proprietorship over all sorts of land including forest and pond.

2.2 Key Factors for Land Reform

1. Structure of holding.
2. Process of farming is either traditional or technological.
3. Producers or working community.
4. Relationship between producers and non-producers (consumers).

The colonial aspect of land reform was literally integrated with revenue exaction. In every event there is a cause, in the same way the colonial authority rolled out land reform to gain more revenue. The preceding structure of land and its regulation did not have consistency and regular flow of revenue. However, the form of revenue administration was deeply grounded on exchange of labour and payment of kind or cash. In this context, the Ahom did not exercise extensive circulation of cash transactions; instead, extension of physical labour was carried out

to exact the revenue from the common masses. Indeed, in every colony, the master maintained their expenditure with revenue of the native people. The very motive of the colonial master was to gain substantial revenue for the colonized people in the form of tax and utilization of resources.

The entire Brahmaputra valley possessed huge resources that were viewed as flashpoints to accumulate substantial revenue. There were several experiments of cash crops cultivation, eventually the result of tea production turned out to be a lucrative merchandise of the colonial authority. Another key factor for land reform was owing to the occupation of people where a large number of people seemed to be engaged in rice cultivation. The rice cultivation was mainly to support the non-agriculturist and settlers of towns and cities. Besides, the native inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley did not significantly switch over to commercial activities. The absence of commercial activities did not promote large scale cash crop production that has lucrative economic reimbursements. The traditional mode of cultivation without engagement of commercial activities centered around the subsistence economy. The local inhabitants were not so skillful and hardworking as compared to people from other provinces of India. The working nature of the Brahmaputra valley did not shape the economy of the region to a higher extent. The slow-moving character who was already self-sufficient in economy. Besides, a large number of people were addicted to opium drugs that were locally available and some of them were brought from outside the province. All these elements remained constrained to the persistent flow of revenue from the province which was looked upon by the colonial government as an ineffective and untimely flow of revenue.

2.3 Land Settlement

The vast tracts of the Brahmaputra valley constituted two types of land settlements, temporary and permanent. Under temporarily settled land districts mostly embedded Sibsagar, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Lakhimpur. The Eastern Duars consisting of Sidli, Chirang, Bijni, Ripu and Guma estates were also placed under temporary settlement that was earlier under the administration of Bhutan but following the 'treaty of Shinsula', it was ceded to the British followed by incorporated with Goalpara district. In 1822, colonial authority declared the Non-Regulation Act a modified version of land settlement under Permanent Settlement of 1793, in

the bordering area especially in Goalpara district. However, in reality the British did not introduce the Bengal model of land settlement due to absence of land bidders and to bring political stability in the region. Under this Act, the existing *zamindars* of Goalpara district were empowered to control the land for revenue assignment subject to flexible payment of tax without sunset law of payment and fixed rate of revenue.²²

The classification of the land into different categories was the most significant attribute of the colonial settlement pattern. Without figuring out the pre-colonial pattern of land settlement in the Brahmaputra valley structured in the *khel* system it would be vague to ascertain exact knowledge about the study on the paradigm of colonial land settlement. The Ahom rulers claimed the entire land as crown land and adopted a simple mode of land settlement providing limited access of resources to common people. All the lands held by the smallholding peasant cultivators were considered temporary land without having access to permanent ownership. Non-permanent immoveable property formed one of the simple ways of land settlement that offered subsistence agrarian economy.

Under the Ahom rule, the religious institutions received free holding of land which was donated either by the king or nobles. A considerable proportion of tracts owned by religious institutions seemed to enjoy the privilege of revenue exemption and their lands were relatively considered indecorously utilized. But Ahom king Chandra Kanta Singh brought transition in land revenue assessment, under his rule; the land owned by the religious institutions was imposed with six annas per *pura* (four bighas). This type of land revenue was called *kharikatana*. However, the exempted land revenue assessment mainly covered *debottar* (temple lands), *dharmottar* (grants to religious communities) and *brahmottar* (grants to Brahmins). All these lands were treated as private land.²³

The land where *sali* rice cultivation was consistently grown that land was brought under permanently settlement and the land that often-caused inundation due to low laying of land along with that there was newly occupied land where cultivation was practiced by clearing the forest which could not give greater agricultural output that lands were put under temporary settlement. However, prior to settlement of land a consistent survey was carried out by the colonial agency to accrue conspicuous ideas in respect to productivity of land and its

proportions. No doubt, the colonial government gained much knowledge as to the proper implementation of land revenue mechanisms. This economic prospect prompted them to initiate an effective process of settlement in the Brahmaputra as well.

Following the acquisition of Assam, the British authority has replaced pre-colonial land revenue structure with distinct tenures such as *Maudazari*, *Tashildari*, *Ryotwari*, and *Zamindari systems*.²⁴ In 1882, the *Tashildari* system was partially introduced in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Darrang.²⁵ The *Ryotwari* system played a dominant role in major parts of the Brahmaputra valley that mandated heritable and transferable rights by Settlement Rules of 1870. In this tenure, peasants claimed the right to permanent ownership of land through their consistent payment of rent. For better assessment the entire land was classified into *basti* (garden land), *rupit* (paddy land), *faringati* (tea land, char areas, high ground land). On the other hand, the *mauza* system was executed that constituted a unit system where the district was further divided into *mauza* (revenue circles) and the head of the *mauza* was called *mouzadars*. However, the types of land holding settled for ordinary cultivation constitute the following tenure.

1. *Khiraj* (full rate revenue estates)
2. *La-khiraj* (fee simple estates or revenue free holder).
3. *Nisf-Khiraj* (fee special revenue estate; *chamua*, *khats*, or half revenue paying holder); just land holder.
4. Temporary settled estates: *nisf-khiraj*, *faringati*(tea land, char areas, high ground)
5. Permanently settled estates *khiraj estate*.

As far as the extent of *khiraj* settled land is concerned, full rate of assessment is conferred upon the cultivators. The report of 1901-1902, presented that Goalpara including Eastern Duars covered over 68,912 acres of land, Kamrup about 4,20,992 acres of land, Darrang about 2,53,684 acres of land, Nowgong about 1,95,216 acres of land, Sibsagar about 4,99,471 acres of land and Lakhimpur about 2,04,639 acres of land.²⁶

Nisf-khiraj was the estate that was assessed at the rate of half revenue. In 1871, this term was rolled out by the commissioner for easy identification and subsequently settlement was

established over a period of ten years. The *nisf-khirajdar* were called land-holders. The waste land of *nisf-khiraj* was privileged with toll exemption. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the *nisf-khiraj* lands existed in Kamrup district. In *nisf-khiraj*, assessment was executed as per the extent of cultivation that have three years of preceding cultivation in the same land. However, this assessment was settled in ten years thereafter, assessment was established in twenty years.²⁷

Lakhiraj was a kind of estate where land was assessed at the rate of free revenue or half rate. This right was framed on the declaration of General Jenkins, Commissioner in 1834.²⁸ According to B.H. Baden Powell the *lakhirajdar* were called proprietors. The *lakhiraj* land encompassed *debottor*, *darmottars* and *Brahmottars*. Besides, vast tracts of wastelands were treated as *la-khiraj*. Until 1893, such land conglomerating wasteland was revenue free.²⁹ About forty percent of the region's *lakhiraj* land prevailed in Kamrup district.³⁰ In this regard, the ancient rulers Dharmapal and Vanamala were considered to be the contemporary of these grants. However, during colonial administration, the *kharikatana* tax was modified by Mr. Scott at the rate of two and the latter eight annas per *pura*.³¹

The land that was less productive and previously resigned by the indigenous cultivators on account of *kala azar*, deterioration of soil etc., were resettled for cultivation by new settlers. Some of the land was given to the enterprise for cultivation of tea on agreement of periodic settlement.³²

Table 2.1: The following table represents the year and extent of *nisf-khiraj* land being used in the districts of the Brahmaputra valley except Goalpara.³³

District	Number of <i>nisf-khiraj</i> estate	Extent of land in acres	Year of settlement
Kamrup	1,537	1,53,367	1892-1893
Darrang	91	34,145	1888-1889 to 1898-1899
Nowgong	25	5,042	1888-1889
Sibsagar	346	5,088	1889-1890
Lakhimpur	36	1,400	18889-1889 & 1891-1892
Total	2,035	1,99,042	

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

The above statement represents the settlement of *nisf-khiraj* land being enacted for the tenure of 10 years. The land held by the Darrang Raja was settled for 20 years. The effect of enacting decennial settlement in Nowgong came into force in 1887. The *nisf-khiraj* estate in Sibhsagar expired in 1889.

There are various reasons that triggered termination of *nish-khiarj* land which was later turned into full rate estates. The annual augmentation of revenue at *nish-khiraj* estates resulted in resignation of lands. The revenue policy of the British appropriated the conversion of *nish-khiraj* estates into fully assessed land. However, there was a tendency of the indigenous cultivators who prefer to hold the land for a few years to settle in another land; this was the main reason average local cultivators preferred to take the land at annual settlement. Besides, the changing attitude of the colonial revenue officials stressed more on the conversion of half rate assessed land into full rate of assessment. Such colonial revenue design split the holding of land

and considerably increased the rate of estate. There are various reasons that triggered termination of *nish-khiarj* land which was later turned into full rate estates. The annual augmentation of revenue at *nish-khiraj* estates resulted in resignation of lands. The revenue policy of the British appropriated the conversion of *nish-khiraj* estates into fully assessed land.³⁴

2.4 Land Distribution

The system of land distribution in the British colonial period was mainly associated with a complete set of regulation, cash revenue and maximum utilization of land. As delineated by Phukan, ‘Agricultural economy of a region is determined by the proper distribution of the land and the economic efficiency of the farmers is determined by the size of land holdings.’³⁵ As it brought to light from the several reports that the Assamese cultivators were relatively well off than the Kacharis who mostly lived in subsistence economy followed by the ex-tea garden coolies usually described as not the best cultivators who mostly dependent on seasonal labour in tea gardens who were addicted to local rice beer and country liquor. However, the opium habit of the Assamese people remained as equally common practice in the entire Brahmaputra valley. According to the Land Revenue Report of 1928-29, a total 4, 44,189 acres of land was settled for ordinary cultivation of food crops in the district of Lakhimpur. In Sibsagar district, total 14, 88,399 acres of land was allocated to the cultivator along with the population of 4, 45,000.³⁶ In Nowgong district, a sufficient amount of land was allocated to the hardworking peasants of East Bengal by the British administration to bring under permanent cultivation especially for jute crops.³⁷

In Darrang district the subdivisions of Magaldai and Sadar underwent a change in settlement. The composition of North Darrang district was predominantly inhabited by the Kacharis who often lived as labourers to support the family.³⁸ With regards to the economic condition of Darrang, Settlement Officer has clearly mentioned that “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof is the guiding motto of their lives, the rain is certain, the crops are good, their wants are few and there is no worry, there is no great prosperity nor is there any poverty or want.”³⁹ The large area of uncultivated land was allocated to the Eastern Bengal Settlers by the colonial authority who later turned them into permanent cultivation. As per the Land Revenue

Report of 1928-29 over 494759 acres of land in Darrang were brought under ordinary cultivation.⁴⁰

The district Kamrup comprises three types of land, low lying land known as *chaporis*, high belt is known as *rupit* where transplantation of rice was mostly practiced followed by submontane land. The *chaporis* of Barpeta subdivision constituted the largest area of uncultivated land which was later brought under extensive cultivation by the Eastern Bengal settlers. The *rupit* land was densely inhabited by the indigenous Assamese agriculturists. Undoubtedly, there was no active participation of the Assamese in trade and they did not prefer to take subsidiary occupation. However, there was a main subsidiary occupation of buffalo keeping in the professional grazer's reserves and engaging in dairy production.⁴¹ The land that was allocated for ordinary cultivation in Kamrup was about 26, 91,309 *bighas*.

Goalpara is another district located in close proximity with the Bengal border and most of the tracts are permanently settled where the owner of the land constitutes *zamindars*. The system of land assessment on the *zamindars* was relatively flexible than its counterpart of Bengal. The extent of land under permanent settlement was about 15, 18,982 acres. As per the report of 1928-29 there was about 1, 75,277 acres of land allocated for temporary settlement. The Eastern Bengal settlers were mostly found in the permanently settled estates.⁴² In this district, frequent penetration of immigrants from Eastern Bengal was found who were mostly from the marginalized peasants having little access to basic needs.

2.5 Wasteland Grant Rules

The Wasteland Grand Rule was the first agrarian policy of the East India Company where vast tracts of land in the Brahmaputra valley was granted to the planters for tea and other cash crops cultivation. This agrarian policy was introduced in 1838 and continued till 1861.⁴³ However, the Wasteland Grant Rule subsequently underwent a change in their terms and conditions. The Brahmaputra valley being a territory with abundant living space offered entrepreneurs of Indian and foreign citizens to invest their capital in the tea industry. As such, a considerable extent of waste lands was granted to the interested individuals especially the Europeans on flexible terms of lease and low rate of revenue. Accordingly, the grantees were entrusted with the term of decennial land tenure⁴⁴ and lands were granted above 100 acres

without exceeding 10,00 acres. On the other hand, the grantees were to bring $\frac{1}{4}$ of the entire land into cultivation within five years. However, non-fulfillment of stipulated government order would be liable to termination of grants. In general, if the land was covered with grass or forest then the land was assessed over a period of ten and twenty years respectively. All these provisions were the initial process of tax exemption considered by the colonial government so as to bring the entire tracts of land in a consistent manner that has maximum flexibility in holding exercised through Special Grant Rules of 6th March 1838.⁴⁵ In the period 1838 to 1861 the colonial authority had granted land on lease of maximum tenure at minimum rate of assessment for tea cultivation.⁴⁶

The next Grant Rule was introduced on 23rd October 1854 which was also called “Old Assam Rules.” With this grant, around 500 acres of land or more than it was allocated to the tea planters. Under the rules of this grant, 25 percent of the lands were permanently exempted from revenue assessment and the remaining 75 percent of the lands were granted tax exemption for a period of fifteen years. After fifteen years, this tea estate came under revenue assessment in terms of period of cultivation followed by three *annas* per acre for a period of ten year and six *annas* for seventy-four years.⁴⁷ With the end of the term of land grant to the planters, government can carry out resurvey and resettlement to the other planters or the earlier grantee can claim permanent proprietary rights over estates. In this renewal grant, $\frac{1}{8}$ of the land was allotted to bring under cultivation within five years, $\frac{1}{4}$ in ten years, 75 percent of lands in twenty years and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent in 30 years. In case, the grantees failed to accomplish the expected target then the grant was to be terminated by the government.

The Fee Simple Rules was one of the land settlements that was first introduced by Lord Canning in 1861. However, this rule was restricted by the secretary of state and a new rule was introduced in 1862 and continued till 1872.⁴⁸ Under fee simple rules a fixed rate in between 2-8 per acre of land was given in auction to the local purchasers. As such, an interested person wanting to purchase land had to either pay at once or in installments. The system of payment at the time of purchase subsequently constituted payment above 10 percent and the rest of the remaining balance was to be paid within ten years with an interest rate of 10 per cent. Thus, non-fulfillment of due payment was liable to termination of proprietary rights.

Following the separate administration in Assam in 1874, revised fee simple rule was introduced with an increased price of the land at rupees 8 per acre.⁴⁹ From 1861 to 1876 the colonial government adopted a policy to transfer the land that was exempted from land revenue.

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886, the government has sanctioned statutory rights to the land holders. Under this regulation the land holders were granted permanent, transferable and hereditary rights on payment of revenue to the British government. In this grant, no assessment had been done on free estate land which is generally known as crown land.⁵⁰ In addition to that, the government did not provide provision for transferring the land from regular cultivators to the non-cultivators. The main objective about restriction of right to transfer from cultivators to non-agriculturist was to prevent concentration of the maximum proportion of land in the hands of non-cultivators. According to the annual report of the Land Administration of 1888-1889, around 572 acres of land were granted for cultivation.⁵¹

2.6 Colonizing Scheme

The last decade of the 19th century witnessed growing revenue demand of the colonial government that promoted expansion of jute cultivation in alluvial wasteland of the Brahmaputra valley. No doubt, the expansion of cash crops in wasteland lying on the bank of Brahmaputra was projected as an efficient means of revenue generation. Under the colonizing scheme certain proportions of land was given to the individuals on payment of a premium.⁵² However, the initial attempt to bring wasteland under cultivation proved a negative result due to lack of indigenous cooperation and physical response. As a result, with the objective of colonization in wasteland East Bengal settlers were called to reclaim the land for growing cash crops. No doubt, the debut of the East Bengal peasant settlement began in the late nineteenth century.⁵³ From the early decade of the 20th century, the provincial administration attempted to bring hard working and skilled peasants from East Bengal to convert large areas of uncultivated land for jute cultivation.⁵⁴ As per the official records, large acres of available wasteland was found in the districts of Nagaon, Gaolpara, Lakhimpur, eastern part of Darrang, Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup were brought under cultivation as a part of colonizing mission.⁵⁵ With this colonizing mission, large acres of estimated land consisting of 49,47,237 acres in 1903 to 56,40,616 acres in 1920 were occupied by the Eastern Bengal settlers for jute cultivation.⁵⁶

‘Grow more Food’ programme was another colonizing mission of the Saadulla Ministry that began in 1943.⁵⁷ It was another scheme of the government to bring a large number of Bengal immigrants for settlement in the Brahmaputra valley for the purpose of agrarian expansion. It was also a period where adjacent Bengal province was severely affected by the famine that triggered the food crisis. As a result, in response to the Bengal famine, the Saadulla Government of Assam formulated a scheme to allow human settlement for Bengal peasants and intensify the cultivation of agriculture.

2.7 Land Assessment

Introduction of cash payment by the British in the Brahmaputra valley became a landmark for establishment of stronghold revenue administration based on land. As outlined by the Verma, “Government’s share was to be so fixed so as to allow the government to take its full measure and at the same time leave to each proprietor an adequate residue to cover costs of cultivation as well as a margin of profits.”⁵⁸ The measurement of land was carried out with a *nal* or Bamboo pole 12 ft. long.⁵⁹ However, the land survey and assessment of land was executed by classifying the land based on its productivity consisting of *rupit* land with the rate at Rs.1 per *bigha*. The second-class land embedded *faringati*, land that was assessed at Rs. 8 *annas* per *bigha* and the third-class land known as *patit* or fallow lands was assessed at 3 *annas* per *bigha*.⁶⁰ The assessment of the rate of revenue in the Eastern Duars lied in close proximity of the Bhutan countries was settled under ordinary Settlement Rules. Accordingly, the rate of land assessment was fixed at 8 per *bighas* for *basti*, 8 *annas* for *rupit* and 4 *annas* for *faringati* land.⁶¹ However, the rate of land assessment in Eastern Duars varied from other five districts of the Brahmaputra valley. In Duars region, the rate of assessment was fixed at 8 *annas* for *basti* and *rupit* land and 4 *annas* for *faringati* land.⁶²

2.8 Land Tenurial System

The land tenurial is the agrarian structure where land is held by the individuals from the state authority for the purpose of agriculture. Here the agrarian relationship is constituted between landholder and the state, because the state had the exhaustive monopoly over distribution of land to the cultivators on a certain timeframe. There were two types of land tenure system prevailing in the Brahmaputra valley during colonial period such as *ryotwari* and

zamindari. Under *ryotwari* tenure land is held by the individuals as independent.⁶³ The almost entire district of the Brahmaputra was brought under the *ryotwari* system excluding Goalpara district.

The *ryotwari* settlement was one of the revenue systems where settlement of land and land relations were directly established between the colonial government and actual cultivators.⁶⁴ The *Ryot* denotes a group of small holders usually identified as peasants and cultivators. According to the report, “the *ryot* holds the land on annual or decennial lease from the Government, being free to relinquish the whole or any part of his holding or to take up new lands, provided that notice is given to the revenue officers at the proper time of the year.”⁶⁵ In 1820, Sir Thomas Munro introduced *ryotwari* settlement in India for systematic assessment of land revenue. 1820. Under this settlement, Madras was the first province with such a revenue system followed by Bombay and Assam.⁶⁶ From the 1860s the *ryotwari* tenurial system was fully implemented in the Brahmaputra valley.⁶⁷ As the extent of widespread *ryotwari* settlement was concerned, Richard Morse had clearly specified that India covered one third of the land.⁶⁸ Under *ryotwari* settlement, cultivators were regarded as owners of the land and mandated them with a legal statute of right to sell, mortgage and gift the land.⁶⁹ In *ryotwari* settlement, the prevalence of joint responsibility of the unit or group of individuals was absent; instead the British government established direct revenue realization from the peasants. Under such settlement, land was separately assessed, classified and measured.⁷⁰ Initially land was settled in annual lease; subsequently by 1883, settlement was changed into a periodic lease of 10 years.⁷¹ Thereafter, the Regulation of 1886 gave statutory power to the *ryotwari* system of land revenue administration. Under this regulation, the small landholders would be auctioned for sale by the government on account of failing to meet the recovery of arrears of land revenue from the *ryots*. Moreover, in case the *ryots* mortgaged the land to a monetary agency or traders, his land would be transferred to a money lender by taking out the court degree.⁷² This system promoted private ownership of land and turned the land into a commodity. The land under such settlement relatively constituted a high rate of revenue forcing the cultivators to shift their process of cultivation from domestic food production to cash crops cultivation to procure cash to meet the demand of land tax. Sometimes switching over to non-consumable crops cultivation resulted in food insecurity and dependency upon moneylenders for loans that became intensive that

aggravated the economic condition of cultivators who later lost only means of livelihood to the moneylenders.

The establishment of a periodic and annual system of revenue settlement, land was amalgamated into *mauza*. The *mauza* is a unit of village where the process of revenue exaction was managed by *mauzadar* who was looked upon as head of the village and village headman was entrusted to supervise the relation between *mauzadars* and cultivators. These lands were by and large subjected to measuring and collection of tax by the *mauzadars*. But the waste land owned by rich *paik* included *chamua* and *nisf-khiraj* land that did not come under the purview of *mauzadar*.

The nineteenth tracts of the Goalpara district remained under permanently settled estates and eight other smaller estates constituted under temporarily settled holding.⁷³ In Goalpara the assessment of land was settled for a period of 20 years.⁷⁴ In 1793, the Permanent Settlement was first introduced in Bengal where *zamindars* became the owner of land for 11 years.⁷⁵ Due to the existing feudal system of Ahom and Mughal, British authority could not implement full-fledged Permanent Settlement in Goalpara; instead, a non-regulation tract, a kind of modified version of permanent settlement, was introduced that gave maximum liberty to the *ryots*.

2.9 Usufruct Settled Land

Under usufruct settled land small landholders or *ryots* constituted the majority of the settlers who are mostly marginalized agrarian communities. In these estates landholders possessed both annual and decennial leases. Over the years, in 1887-1888 number of temporarily settled estate accounted for 5, 25,082 acres, in 1888-1889 about 5,45,145, in 1893-1894 about 6,45,419, in 1895-99 about 6,42,526. Majority of the peasants constituted single plough cultivators.⁷⁶

2.10 Land Revenue

Under Lord Cornwallis who was entrusted with the charge of Governor General, introduced a new set of revenue procedures in the line of European District Collectors. It was he who had introduced the Board of Revenue to effectively manage the revenue affairs. Prior to the introduction of Permanent Settlement land survey was carried out that revealed the arbitrary

revenue collection against the common people which was in need of reformation. As per the proposal given by the Cornwallis to the Court of Directors, it has acknowledged the proposal thereafter proclamation was made on 22 March 1793 as to the decennial settlement in land to be held in perpetuity.⁷⁷

The land revenue was the most imperative income of the colonial state drawn from the land. In the Brahmaputra valley there existed four types of land tenures such as *mauzadari*, *tashildari*, *ryotwari* and *zamindari* which are discussed below. Until the abolishment of poll tax came into force in 1832, the East India Company continued the Ahom system of revenue collection at the rate of three rupees per *paik*. The monetized system of revenue collection began in from the 1840. The main reason behind the cash revenue system was due to the salary payment system of the British where remuneration and salary of the officials were paid in cash. However, the pre-colonial system of revenue collection and payment of salary in the form of physical labour and assignment of land respectively could not meet the systematic demand of the colonial state. The mode of revenue collection and payment in the form of kind and physical service was later organized into cash payment and realization. For the convenience of revenue administration each district was organized into *mauzas* and annual settlement of land was executed in 1833 and continued till 1835.⁷⁸ The *mauzadari* system continued prevail till the introduction of *tashildari* system in 1883. Under *mauzadari* system, the revenue was collected from the land holders by the *mauzadar* known as contractors. At the end of the annual revenue assessment *mauzadar* had to pay the total amount of revenue assessed into the treasury of the colonial state for which *mauzadar* received 10 percent as remuneration from commission.⁷⁹ However, *mauzadari* system was replaced with *tashildari* system in 1883. The *tashildari* system was first introduced in Kamrup district. Under *tashildari* system, 3 to 4 *mauzas* are merged into *tashil* and entrusted to *tashildar* for revenue collection for which he is paid regular salary.⁸⁰ From 1840, the payment and collection of revenue was totally monetized.⁸¹ The overwhelming process of monetization in revenue realization put more pressure on the farmers to procure cash to meet the revenue demand.

The responsibility of revenue collection was entrusted to *Mauzadars*, Choudhury, Baishya, Kagoti and Patgiri in districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Moreover, the revenue

settlement in Eastern Duars was brought under the ordinary Settlement Rules of Assam proper that possessed a relatively lesser rate of assessment of *basti* land about 8 *annas*, *faringati* for 4 *annas* and *rupit* land for 8 *annas*. And the rate of assessment in five districts of the Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara district was 1 rupee, 8 *annas* and 10 *annas* respectively.⁸²

2.11 Change in the Rate of Revenue

The colonial period witnessed vicissitude in land revenue compelled by manifold factors. No doubt, the rate of land revenue in the Brahmaputra valley was relatively nominal as a result; a memorandum was submitted to the Government of Bengal through the Commissioner of Assam regarding proliferation of land revenue to meet the cost of Trunk Roads construction and amelioration of steam communication.⁸³ Besides, the primary concern of the colonial authority put more stress on the line of ruling out the cultivation of food crops and switch over to mass production of commercial crops having more economic value in the markets of India as well as global. However, the displacement of indigenous cultivators from the usual mode of production came into existence following the economic policy of the British resulting in augmentation of land tax forcing the common cultivators to cough with a new spirit of competition in cultivation that assured better economic assistance to meet the revenue demand and cost of living. The main factor behind the increased rate of revenue was attributed to reclamation of uncultivated land that was brought under permanent cultivation subject to annual lease.⁸⁴ As far as the increase rate of revenue in Goalpara is concerned, there was passive resistance against the changing of the rate of rent. Thus, the third decade of the twentieth century clearly presented a sharp increase in land tax in all the 19 permanently settled estates of Goalpara district. However, it was evident that the eastern Bengal immigrants who were familiar with higher rates of paying land tax acknowledged to comply with the increment of land rent in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.⁸⁵

After the establishment of political power in the Brahmaputra valley, the British government had ruled out the preceding revenue system that was deeply rooted in physical labour. However, tax on persons better called poll tax was elevated at the rate of Rs.3 per head. Thus, different tracts of the Brahmaputra valley possessed non uniform rate likewise some parts of the territory paid up to 10 *annas* per acre. In the same way, the rate of land revenue was fixed

in 1870 that included homestead or surrounding areas of the house was fixed at Rs.3; paddy land that was often transplanted was fixed at 1-11-0 and other lands was fixed at 1-8-0.⁸⁶ However, the tenure of land settlement was fixed at decennial tenure in 1893. The already settled land was assessed at full revenue whether cultivated or uncultivated. The quota of tax-free wet paddy land per eligible adult male was fixed at two *puras* equivalent to 2.66 acres. But earlier each family was allowed to hold as much land as it could reclaim and cultivate. But with the increased number of populations the best land became limited. Another reason for the introduction of a fixed quota of tax-exempt landholding was the growing pressure on the treasury, as a result of confrontation with the Mughals.⁸⁷

Table 2.2: The area of *Khiraj* land and revenue drawn (1901-02).⁸⁸

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

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

2.12 Conclusion

The above discussion centered on the role of colonial authority that brought dynamism in systematization of agrarian structure for smooth flow of revenue from land to state exchequer. The charter of 1833 turned out to be a milestone for bringing administrative change in the region that promoted reformation of the land and revenue system.⁸⁹ The previous agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley consisting of non-regular flow of revenue and non-egalitarian process

of land holding proved to be an ineffective process of exhaustive assessment which compelled the colonial authority to make reformation on land and revenue administration. The Ahom system of revenue realization in the form of labour regardless of cash no longer remained as an effective mode of revenue realization from the *ryots*. Besides, several Ahom officials who enjoyed the special privilege of revenue exemption from large holdings of land were brought under assessment. In addition, the religious institutions and religious leaders' estates were later attached to revenue assessment and excess land was seized by the government on account of failing to prove the valid records of holding. On the other hand, due to constant enhancement of land revenue and conversion of annual leased land into periodic assessment of land, the *ryots* preferred to become as *adiyar* (sharecropper) to avoid compulsory fiscal burden for which they looked forward to rich *paiks* such as *chamuas* or the land owned by religious institutions for lease.

The abundant land resources offered living space for the indigenous inhabitants that resulted in frequent disposal of assessed land and new land was occupied. Frequent movement of people in search of new land by relinquishing their erstwhile lands became a custom for the people and given greater liberty of agricultural production. The new policy of the British initially terminated the preceding rights mandated by predecessors and uniform regulation over land was executed in the line of recovering estimated revenue from agricultural land. Survey of land carried out by the revenue department where classification of land was made based on productivity accordingly assessment of land was fixed. This survey had accounted for the entire land and assessment was initiated as per the types of land. The assessment of land having the government's share in the produce of land considered as rent was calculated as the amount of the government to draw an approximate annual fiscal from agricultural land. On the other hand, low density of population in the Brahmaputra valley resulted in paucity of extensive utilization of land resources and posed serious revenue loss. However, following the agrarian policy the farmers received more benefits by accruing greater autonomy in utilization of land for agriculture. Besides, large scale cultivation was carried out due to the escalation of population into the Brahmaputra valley from adjacent provinces. The Land Reform gave way to an intensive process of monetization in land revenue that was earlier executed in the form of labour and share of produce. The Goalpara Tenancy Act of 1929 recognized the right of land occupancy

of the tenants ensuring the security and certainty for the settled ryots held as de facto land holding.⁹⁰

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CHAPTER-III

TRANSITION OF AGRARIAN SYSTEM

3.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2 Reorganization of Land Ownership

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

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

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

3.3 Agrarian Setting

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 Agrarianization of Wasteland

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

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

3.5 Technological Change

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

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

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

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

3.6 Pattern of Crops Distribution

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.7 Changing Pattern of Agricultural Production

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

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

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

3.8 Paddy Seed Experiment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.9 Change in Land Property Regulation

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

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

3.10 Change in Control of Land

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

3.11 Change in Tenancy System

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.12 Change in Land Tenurial System

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

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

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

3.13 Emergence of Special Crops Grower

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

3.14 Dynamics of Land Revenue

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

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

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

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

3.15 Agrarian labour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.16 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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.”¹ 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.”² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ Throughout the medieval period, the rulers of the Brahmaputra valley maintained a close door policy with the mainland of India in terms of trade.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.'⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² Jenkin's scheme for commercialization of agriculture in 1834 contained amelioration of agriculture and paradigm shift from giving way to intensive commercial crops cultivation.¹³

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.¹⁴
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 1869¹⁵ 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 ton¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 valley¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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* system²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 1757.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 19th century, monopoly on opium remained an effective imperial mechanism for solving the acute plight of remittance and Britain's ample balance of payments.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹ 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.³²

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.”³³ Following the establishment of several cooperative credit societies in the region wealthy landowners ruled out the credit operation of the Marwari traders.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ By the early 19th century, the traders of Barpeta happened to be vigorous in Assam.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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.⁴³ However, the sixteenth century marked the early circulation of coins in a small quantity.⁴⁴ Following the coin minting of Ahom, the coins of Koch and Kachari kings are circulated from 1555.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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 1943.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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 19th century witnessed an influx of immigration of Eastern Bengal settlers called ‘Grow More Food.’⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ The construction of the railway network reduced the cost of transportation and expanded trade.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ The construction of roads was approved by the Governor General in Council in 1840.⁵⁸ Thus, the colonial government of Assam first constructed Grand Trunk Road in 1866 under the guidance of two engineers.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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.⁶² Thereafter, Jorhat Provincial Railway and Tezpur-Balipara Railway was formed in 1885 for transportation of tea and labourers to Jorhat and Tezpur tea estates.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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.'⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.’⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ Several gardens of Assam located in Dhubri Subsidiary Jail Garden, Gauhati Jail Garden received seeds from Messrs. Sutton & Sons, England.⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ In India, a fertilizer plant was established in Tamil Nadu under Madras province.⁷⁵ 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 P₂O₃ (Phosphorus trioxide) and 40 K₂O (Potassium oxide) per hectare in every three years as a fertilizing component.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ By and large, climate, soil and season determined the growth of jute cultivation. The 20th 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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ According to Barpujari, ‘Since 1890, jute cultivation expanded rapidly in western portion of the district of Goalpara.’⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷

Mustard: Mustard is the most important *rabi* crop of the Brahmaputra valley normally grown with summer rice.⁸⁸ By and large sowing of seed is done in November and harvested in the month of February.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ However, due to the prolonged outbreak of civil war, the number of traders in the pre-colonial period seemed to be very low.⁹² 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.⁹³ Till the year 1895-1896, the total export of mustard accounted for 7 to 14 percent.⁹⁴

Table 4.2: Export of Mustard seeds from the Brahmaputra valley in different years.⁹⁵

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 1769-1805.⁹⁶ 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.'⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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 1853.¹⁰¹ To this extent, the gaining momentum of the monetized economy triggered extensive cultivation of poppy for procuring cash money.¹⁰² 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.”¹⁰³ Later cultivation of opium was prohibited in 1860.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the department of agriculture also distributed roller and iron pas for sugarcane mills.¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸

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

Articles	1980-81	1900-1901	1903-04
Jute	852	1510	1799
Oilseeds	36,08	25,36	42,18
Rice	3274	3136	4218
Tea	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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ 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.

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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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CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

The above discussion centred around the changing agrarian relations and agrarian system of the Brahmaputra valley triggered by the British through enactment of agrarian policy. The colonial authority introduced a series of agrarian policies in the line of profit accumulation especially from land. In the process of land reform, the British administrators used legislation as an instrument for upholding the land rights. The rural economy was mainly dependent upon agriculture as a result land turned as the most valuable assets of the people and it was in this land where initial policy was formulated for accrument of maximum revenue. The British achieved their policy of profit maximization through legislation that reorganized the preceding agrarian institutions and structures. The Special Grant Rules of 1838 was the first colonial policy that allowed maximum flexibility to the European planters in the Brahmaputra valley followed by Grand Rule was introduced in 1854. Under the Grant Rule, over 500 acre of land was given to the planters with a concession of 25 percent revenue assessment. In addition, the longer the planters held the land, the more the concession of revenue increased. The debut of colonial agrarian policy began with the settlement rule of 1870. The agrarian policy introduced by the British government brought a sense of security and flexibility in landholding. The colonial government took the initiative of land survey for classification and proper assessment of revenue. Through land survey, land has been classified into *basti*, *rupit* and *faringati* that entails homestead land, paddy land and dry land respectively. Besides, for the assessment, the colonial authority has introduced three types of estates such as *lakhiraj*, *nisfkhiraj* and *khiraj*. The several big landholders having special privileges granted by preceding rulers no longer retained their privileges of revenue exemption instead subjected to revenue

assessment such estates were known as land owned by the *Satgharia*, *Bramottar*, *Devottar*, and *Dharmottar* land. The colonial authority has distributed the land to the peasants on account of revenue payment. On the other hand, there were large tracts of uncultivated land known as *char* or *chapor* land which were often neglected by the indigenous cultivators. These lands were given free hand to the cultivators to reclaim the land for cultivation. The Eastern Bengal settlers who had migrated to this region, changed the entire landscape of *char* land by growing crops. It was in this part of the Brahmaputra valley where extensive cultivation of jute was mostly carried out by the immigrants of Eastern Bengal.

For the systematic revenue realization, payment of cash was made as a uniform medium of revenue payment to the revenue official by replacing hitherto levying of tax in the form of physical labour known as *paik* system. Until 1832, the colonial government retained the existing *paik* system subject to poll tax constituted Rs.3 per *paik*. No doubt the Brahmaputra valley had two types of revenue settlement such as *ryotwari* and *zamindari*. The direct settlement with the people known as *ryotwari* system was predominantly exercised in almost entire districts of the Brahmaputra valley but *zamindari* system was partially found in Goalpara district only. The colonial authority had frequently changed the rate of revenue to meet the colonial maintenance. The increased rate of revenue forced some of the big land holders and ordinary peasants to give up the land on account of defaulting. No doubt, the colonial policy of revenue enhancement that attempted to forcefully drive the peasants away from their land to turn as labour in the tea garden could not make exhaustive success. However, creation of local labour policy was subsequently substituted by bringing indentured and cheap labour from central India. Fee Simple Rule was another revenue settlement where interested individuals were allowed to purchase the land at a fixed rate of Rs. 2-8 per acre.

The process of agrarian change has been intensified following the British occupation of Assam. Soon after the British takeover of Assam, erstwhile customary rights and socio-economic structure of the Ahom no longer remained intact. It was through legislation, the East India Company systematically carried out the process of reorganization in existing land proprietorship where the earlier system of non-transferable and temporary landholding of land was granted with permanent ownership. The peasant's permanent ownership of land increased the capacity of greater utility and expanded the cultivation of land to a profitable extent. Such policy developed a positive spirit of the farmers to embark on agricultural

production having close attachment toward their land. The empowering of peasants with personal right of ownership had a close nexus with the colonial scheme of maximizing profit where land seemed to offer much revenue to the government. The Assam Land Revenue Regulation of 1886 conferred individual ownership of land rights which resulted in the concept of private property. Issuance of land *patta* came to be another colonial scheme that granted permanent rights over land on payment of perpetual revenue to the British. The scheme of wasteland settlement introduced by the British gave way to surplus production and supplied huge revenue to the colonial exchequer. Under this scheme, large tracts of unproductive land were converted into commercial estates by granting to European entrepreneurs and settlers from Eastern Bengal. Besides, technology has immensely helped the process of production. Along with traditional agricultural appliances, modern tractors, improved seeds and fertilizers contributed towards surplus yields of crops.

Over the years, monocropping was predominantly practised in agriculture. The method of multi cropping of agriculture benefited the peasants with better economic support and able to cope with the changing revenue demand of the British. The active role of the traders supported the peasants with new seeds and advanced loans that helped them to meet the maintenance of agricultural activity and surplus production of crops. The widespread practice of multi cropping was mostly carried out by the settlers of Eastern Bengal considered as hardworking and specialized in growing cash crops such as jute.

The frequent transition in the rate of revenue triggered relinquishment of large tracts of land. Several reports brought to light that so as to avoid the burden of tax cultivators often give up their land and turn as sharecroppers by taking the land from landlords. The tenancy system existed in permanently settled districts such as Goalpara and temporarily settled five districts of the Brahmaputra valley. Tenancy is an agrarian institution where land was normally given on lease contract where share of produce was either equally distributed or the share of produce varied depending on the terms of contract. Apart from that there existed several types of lease contract such as fixed produce, share crops, fixed money, usufructuary mortgage and others. However, sharecropping or *Adhiars* constituted the dominant form of tenancy in the Brahmaputra valley. The Tenancy Act came in 1929 in Goalpara but the Tenancy Act for the five districts of the Brahmaputra valley was introduced in 1934. The Tenancy Act provided greater protection of the landless or marginalized peasants against the illegitimate eviction and rent exploitation of the landowners. In addition,

from the Tenancy Act, the landless peasants availed the benefit of occupancy rights over land. The Tenancy Act had reduced the dominance of Marwaris in money lending operations.

Until the end of the 19th century the rural economy was composed of capital intensive plantation and subsistence economy.¹ Agriculture being the basis of the state's economy, the colonial government focused more on land from where revenue could be accrued. The change in landholding granted permanent, heritable and transferable rights to the peasants that added self-autonomy on agricultural production promoting surplus yield. With the colonizing mission, the vast tracts of land were provided to the retired tea cultivators followed by with the campaign of 'grow more food' considerable number of Muslim immigrants were brought to the waste and *char* lands to grow commercial crops.

The role of the colonial state and the policy of profit maximization for development of capitalism promoted the commercialization of agriculture. The colonial administration in the Brahmaputra valley changed the process of production by changing the agrarian relation and mode of transaction. The Charter of 1833, marked a milestone for the foreign capitalists that brought large investment for commercial crops cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley. Jenkin's scheme of colonizing large tracts of land for commercial crops production benefited the government which granted wastelands to the planters for cultivation of tea. With the economic prospect primary emphasis on agriculture was stressed on commercial crops cultivation. The monetized system of revenue payment triggered a paradigm shift from traditional crop production to cultivation of cash crops that increased the economic condition of the peasants to meet the revenue demand of the British. The colonial government directly encouraged the commercialization of agriculture to gain maximum profit by supplying local agricultural produce to the international markets. The British reached their target of profit maximization by bringing all the unproductive land under cultivation.

The commercialization of agriculture brought integration of the rural economy with the overseas market ensuring better prices for agricultural produce. This represented greater fiscal income of the farmers who relied on commercial crop production either in mixed crop production or monocropping than the food crop production. It has provided better economic support to the livelihood and well-being of the farmers who were involved in cultivation of agriculture. Growing importance of cash crop cultivation has established a direct nexus with

international markets. The integration of rural production of agriculture with international markets allowed more participation of the local cultivators in cash crop production. The active role of rural credit operated by traders and cooperative societies empowered the cultivators to meet requirements of agricultural tools and pay rent to the British. From the 20th century the Marwari traders provided advance loans to the cultivators for the cultivation of commercial crops such as mustard and jute.² The widespread operation of cooperative society dominated the rural credit facilities benefiting cultivators and they gradually ruled out the money lending system of the Marwaris. The Assam Moneylender's Act of 1934 fixed the rate of secured loan at 12.5 percent and for unsecured loan 18.75 percent respectively.³

The discovery of commercial crop potential paved the way for development of capitalism in the Brahmaputra valley that gradually promoted a concept of private property on land and independent means of management. The commercial production of crops provided a shelter for hard working immigrants from Eastern Bengal who had resorted to cultivation of cash crops specially jute, mustard and indigo by reclaiming *char* and less productive land. The participation of immigrated peasants from Bengal in agriculture brought significant agricultural production, specialization of crops and more revenue to the colonial exchequer. With the campaign of grow more food large number of Bengali Muslim immigrants set their footprints in the Brahmaputra valley who had extensively contributed in conversion of unproductive land into surplus production of commercial crops that ultimately met the global markets. For the enhancement of agricultural output, the inorganic substances were used for killing pests and fertilization. Use of chemical fertilizer was first used in tea cultivation. Subsequently, due to commercialization of agriculture the chemical fertilizer was used in other cash crops as well that increased the agricultural output.

The Department of Agriculture took an active role in providing agricultural implements, new seeds, tractors, rollers, crushers, fertilizers, and agricultural education. Apart from that the regular awareness drive was carried out by the Department as to pest resistance, demonstration of new or improved seeds etc. The active role of the Agricultural Department empowered the peasants with mechanical aid and supply of improved seeds that later predominantly improved the condition of the peasants.

The expansion of tea cultivation increased inland and river communication required for transportation. The means of transport was carried out by the country boat, steamers and

railway. The intensity of surplus production of tea and jute grew when it reached the international markets. The development of communication facilitated faster transportation of agricultural produce, reduced the time and cost of transport and supplied labour to the tea gardens. No doubt the tea cultivation mostly benefited the planters but cultivation of jute and mustard raised the economic condition of the peasants. The overseas market network provided a better platform for more production of commercial crops that promised better financial security.

The transition in the agrarian system brought significant impact on the society and economy of the region. The repercussion of the agrarian transition was reflected in the landscape where large scale cultivation in wasteland turned into a revenue generating resource for the colonial government. The absence of proper knowledge about commercial crops and its markets hardly elevated the economic condition of the peasant community from subsistence. However, the arrival of planters and marginalized hard working peasants from Eastern Bengal left no stone unturned especially in bringing those dry land under cultivation. The surplus production of agriculture gave rise to market elevation.

The monetized form of revenue realization and unprecedented rate of revenue enhancement compelled the *ryots* to rely on the moneylenders where most of the borrowers failed to return the capital and interest amount of loan to the money lending agency that often triggered rural indebtedness. The manifestation of rural indebtedness was seen in peasant unrest occurring in Nowgong district known as Phulaguri Dhawa and Patharughat in Mangaldai under Darrang district. However, the only peasants who could repay the loan to the loaners were Eastern Bengal settlers. Apart from the peasants, a considerable number of big landlords lost their land on account of revenue enhancement who could pay the revenue to the revenue officials.

The development of capitalism promoted the ideology of maximum profit appropriation, accumulation of wealth and resources. This ideology induced the concept of private property and payment of land revenue in cash. Prior to the establishment of British administration in India, land was never used as a marketable commodity. Privatization of land came into existence owing to commercialization of agriculture. A concept of private ownership of land was found in western parts of the Brahmaputra specially in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Goalpara where mode of transaction was exercised either in cash

or kind that offered buying capacity of new seeds and payment of tax to the British revenue officials. The penetration of Mughals, brought implementation of Bengal model of revenue administration in western parts of the Brahmaputra valley to accrue revenue in decentralized form by assigning the responsibility in the hands of particular persons.

The colonizing scheme introduced by the British succeeded the mission by allowing vast tracts of land to be occupied by the hardworking peasants from outside the Brahmaputra valley. The abundant land without cultivation remained an impediment to the colonial prospect of revenue generation. Besides, low density, indifferent nature and demand of high wages of the local inhabitants prompted the British to bring cheap and economically deprived labour from central India for tea cultivation and hardworking peasants from the Eastern Bengal. The penetration of outside settlers changed the landscape of the Brahmaputra valley and benefited the British by engaging in commercial crop cultivation that supplied large quantities of agricultural products to the international markets. However, frequent immigration of Eastern Bengal settlers into the region created a big menace to the indigenous people and the British authority. The influx of immigrants changed the demography and encroached the government's land. So as to avoid conflict between local and immigrant inhabitants 'Line System' was introduced by the colonial government that demarcated the boundary of the human settlement based on communal segregation of Muslim or indigenous community either in separate or mixed settlement. The migration of Bengal settlers continued until India got Independence. No doubt, initially the British called the immigrants from Eastern Bengal to reclaim the unproductive land subsequently due to perpetual penetration into the Brahmaputra valley, the British had to discourage them by creating the 'Line System'. However, despite preventive measures, immigration of Eastern Bengal settlers continued even after Independence.

The colonial motive of surplus agricultural production was stressed on supply of agricultural produce to the overseas market. The role of the colonial administration had materialized their economic prospects by carrying out modification and liquidation of the erstwhile agrarian system in favour of investors, cultivators. The process of agrarian transformation was shaped by a multidimensional range of global and local factors. The flow of investment and rural credit facilities intensified the cultivation of commercial crops to promote surplus production to meet the demand of international markets. The British favoured the intrusion of East Bengal settlers in the Brahmaputra valley and justified the

settlement of immigrants with a colonizing scheme that was needed for greater proportion of land utilization and mass production from where much revenue was drawn. The immigration of skilled peasants from East Bengal had carried out extension of commercial crops production in productive land i.e., *char* areas of land which was often left out by indigenous ethnic communities due to their preference to *rupit* land for rice cultivation.

Endnotes

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