

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



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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 produced, 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.

Further Scope of Study

The onset of colonial imperialism in the Brahmaputra valley paved the way for several advanced communities of mainland India who had significantly more experience in commercial activities than the local inhabitants. They played vital role in the operation of the credit system throughout the Brahmaputra valley. For the future development of historical literature, this area has to be studied in depth.

Endnotes

¹Amalendu Guha, “Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1980, pp. 82-83.

²*Report of The Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30*, Vol.1, The Government of India, Central Publication Branch, Calcutta, 1930, p.2.

³Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, Anwasha Publications, Guwahati, 2016, p. 165.