

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 immovable 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 Sibsaagar expired in 1889.

There are various reasons that triggered termination of *nisf-khiarj* land which was later turned into full rate estates. The annual augmentation of revenue at *nisf-khiraj* estates resulted in resignation of lands. The revenue policy of the British appropriated the conversion of *nisf-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 *nisf-khiarj* land which was later turned into full rate estates. The annual augmentation of revenue at *nisf-khiraj* estates resulted in resignation of lands. The revenue policy of the British appropriated the conversion of *nisf-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 valley 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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