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Occasional Paper No. 25

**ASSAMESE PEASANT SOCIETY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY :
STRUCTURE AND TREND**

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CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

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ASSAMESE PEASANT SOCIETY IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY :
STRUCTURE AND TRENDS

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ASSAMESE PEASANT SOCIETY IN THE LATE 19TH
CENTURY : STRUCTURE AND TRENDS

An attempt will be made in this paper to outline the evolution of the ryotwari land settlement in post-annexation Assam Proper and, given the objectives of the colonial rule, to examine also its impact on the restructuring of the social classes there. The purpose is to throw light on the basic conditions of the 19th-century Assamese society, which was then undergoing a process of adaptation to imperial priorities, and also analyse frustrations that led to the great peasant upsurge of 1893-94. A detailed study of the latter event is, however, not within the limited scope of this paper.

Assam Proper in our period consisted of five districts and had an area of about twenty thousand square miles or so - all in a thinly-populated alluvial plain, of which no more than 4,000 square miles were made of low hills (see Appendix - Table 1). Only these districts were ruled by the Ahoms before 1826. In our period, less than 20 per cent of this area was settled for revenue; the area put under crops was even less - only about 14 per cent, even by the end of the nineteenth century. The availability of vast tracts of cultivable wastelands remained an important feature of the agrarian economy. The present study, therefore, may be of some relevance in understanding the process of change also in India's certain other regions which were similarly endowed with conditions of land-abundance and burdened with some vestiges of tribalism.

GENESIS OF THE LAND REVENUE SYSTEM

Socio-Historical Roots :

At the time of its annexation in 1826, the public revenue system of Assam Proper was found to be organized not on the basis of land area in occupation, but on a personal basis — on the extraction from its subjects, primarily of labour-rent and, only in some cases, of rent in kind or a cash compensation (poll tax) in lieu of it. There was a hierarchy of officers for managing and utilizing the militia or manpower pool which consisted of the entire adult male population. These militiamen enjoyed usufruct of about three acres of wet rice lands per head. For them such landholding was a matter of both right and privilege. Wet rice lands were deemed to belong to the State and were distributed on an egalitarian basis, as mentioned above, subject to a redistribution whenever necessary. When one was exempted from the obligation of contributing his labour or produce-share, he had to pay a poll tax in cash. When one held wet rice lands in excess of the prescribed quota, then also he had to pay for the surplus land a levy in cash.¹

No rent was claimed by the State on account of the other categories of land in private possession. Homestead and garden lands in one's possession were clearly deemed as private property, subject to a degree of clan control. The rest of cultivable lands were so abundant/^{in supply} and inferior that the question of private property rights over these did not generally arise. In pre-British times, one could occupy any amount of such lands for rent-free seasonal cultivation. Otherwise, these remained common grazing grounds. For the maintenance of the King, his officers and the priests, there were privileged farms worked by assigned militiamen and/or private serfs and slaves. These were indeed feudal estates in a largely semi-tribal, semi-feudal society.²

1. Edward Gait, A History of Assam (Calcutta, 1926), pp. 239-42; William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam (London, 1841), pp. 199-204.
2. Gait, fn.1, pp.239-42 and Robinson, fn.1, pp.203-05. For the pre-British land system see also this Centre's Occasional Paper No.19 - "Medieval North-

Given the policies and perspectives of British colonialization, such a mode of revenue collection and property structure had to be changed. By 1840 the mode of collection was fully monetized and given a territorial basis. All public claims to personal labour* and produce-share were given up and, in their place, a land tax payable uniformly in cash by individual landholders was introduced. In 1843 the institution of slavery was abolished and slaves liberated. The Usury Laws Repeal Act, 1855, came handy for courts to uphold contractual rates of interest. These early steps towards monetization put the Assamese peasantry under severe strains, since the marketing of farm output remained difficult well until the middle decades of the 19th century. Peasants had to sell a considerable part of their output to meet the revenue demand, while their consumption-oriented petty mode of production persisted. Even some features of tribalism, such as rotation of land for shifting cultivation, cooperative labour forms and slash-and-burn methods, continued to be largely combined with agriculture at the household level. In short, despite a new bourgeois concept of property rights imposed from above, 'the magic touch of property' was nowhere to be seen in any form.

The rule of property that was envisaged for Assam Proper was not however modelled on the Bengal system of Cornwallis. By 1840 the latter had already fallen into disrepute, and the official thinking was no longer in favour of a permanent settlement with middlemen. The Government reserved to itself the proprietary right in all lands and allowed their occupants only permanent, heritable and transferable rights of occupancy, subject to a regular tax payment. An exception was however made in the case of some revenue-free landlord holdings, which were found to have been created under erstwhile royal charters on a permanent basis. These — all religious endowments — survived the resumption proceedings of 1834-1860 and remained perpetually revenue-free (la-khiraj) leases with full proprietary rights. Fee-simple or revenue-free grants of wastelands, made inter alia during 1862-1876 with a view to encouraging tea cultivation, were also vested with full proprietary rights. In all other cases, the state remained, in theory, the proprietor; its land revenue demand represented the rent and those,

including religious institutions and tea companies, who paid this rent were its khas ryots. This was clearly a form of what was known as a ryotwari settlement.³

During the initial years of transition, somewhat chaotic conditions had prevailed in the matter of land revenue settlement. Each district was divided into several fiscal divisions, called parganahs and mauzas. Rents were collected from landholding ryots of each such division through an officer, styled as Chaudhury, Patgiri, Mauzadar or Bishaya who used to be appointed by the Government on a short-term basis. This officer got assistance from a village accountant styled as Patwari, Thakuria or Kakati. In general, ryots' lands were measured annually or from time to time, and the public assessment was fixed uniformly for a term extending from one to five years. The officer in charge of the fiscal division had also the same tenure. He was allowed a percentage commission to cover his remuneration and incidental expenses. Not being salaried, he was more a revenue farmer or contractor than a regular public servant. He was permitted to appropriate any increase in the assessment arising out of extended cultivation, just as he was held responsible also for any decrease. "This half-khas and half-farming system", as A.J. Moffat Mills found it in 1854, needed thorough reforms, particularly in the matter of tenure. Mills wanted the next land settlement to be on a 20-year basis.⁴

3. B.H. Baden Powell, The Land Systems of British India, Vol.III (London, 1892), pp. 402-15.

In 1896-97, the planters owned in Assam Proper altogether 182,366 acres of wastelands on fee-simple terms. The purchase money, they had paid to the Government of Assam for these lands, amounted to Rs.936,745 and no more.

- Government of Assam, Land Revenue Administration Report of the Assam Valley Districts for the year 1897-98 (Shillong, 1898), p. 69.

4. Anandaram Dhekiyal-Phukan "Observations on the administration of the province of Assam" in A.J. Moffat Mills, Report on the Province of Assam (Calcutta, 1854), Appendix J, pp. XXXII-XXXIII; and pp.8-10.

Decennial settlements, first introduced under the Settlement Rules of 1870 in partial response to Mills, remained more an exception than the rule until 1883. Consequently, the prevailing system of short leases continued to cause instability of interest in land and oppression of the ryots by their revenue officers. The risks of collection were great, but the commission allowed to the revenue officer was small. Consequently, he was driven "to exact the uttermost farthing from the ryots". His lease was of short duration, his tenure of office was insecure and he was, therefore, not interested in keeping up cultivation to the utmost. This hampered expansion of the cultivated acreage.⁵

Cultivation was further affected by the devastating black fever (kalazar) epidemic that swept over the three western districts of Assam Proper during the years 1888-1901. High mortality from the black fever was first noticed in the Tarai region of the Garo Hills in 1882. It spread gradually through the Goalpara Subdivision and, then, entered the South Bank portion of Kamrup in 1888 and reached Nowgong by 1891. Over the decade 1891-1901, the decrease of population was 7.1 per cent and 24.8 per cent, respectively, in the districts of Kamrup and Nowgong; and 9 percent, in the Mangaldai Subdivision of Darrang.

There was chaos also in the matter of defining the nature and extent of the land rights conferred on the ryots. The legacy of such rights, notwithstanding the fact of occasional sales of certain types of land even in pre-British and early British times, was ill-understood. In 1849 Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, declared that the ryots had indeed proprietary right in their lands of all descriptions. In 1867 the Bengal Government was not prepared to endorse this declaration. Nevertheless, under the Settlement Rules of 1870 — these had no force of law — ryots' land transfer rights were expressly recognized in all cases of decennial leases, subject to registration of such transfers. But such rights were denied in the case of leases for a lesser period. This discrimination was not however tenable.

5. ibid, p. 8 and Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1893-94 (Shillong 1895) — 74

Local officers found in 1871 that the rights and interests of not only the decennially settled, but also of the annually settled ryots were in practice recognized as heritable and transferable.⁶ In 1879 W.W. Hunter summed up the position as follows :

"According to local usage and custom, which has been confirmed by the Courts, the tenant is held to have a right of occupancy in the land covered by his lease, so long as he continues to pay the Government revenue punctually. If, however, the land is required for public purposes, the Government has the right of resumption upon making the tenant compensation for any houses, crops, trees etc. on the land. The leases are generally for a period of one year, and the right of transfer is tacitly acknowledged. But holdings settled for a term of years are expressly declared by the Assam Settlement Rules to be heritable and transferable on condition of the transfer being registered."⁷

Impact of New Ideology

It was in this context of the unsettled conditions of revenue collection and ryotwari rights that Anandaram Dhekiyal-Phukan (1829-59) submitted his famous memorandum in 1853 to A.J. Moffatt Mills, Judge of the Sadar Diwani and Nizamat Adalat, Calcutta, who was commissioned to enquire into the Assam situation.⁸

6. Government of India, Note on Land Transfer and Agricultural Indebtedness in India, (Calcutta, 1895), pp. 66-67.

7. W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol.1 (London, 1879), p. 49.

8. See fn. 4.

Educated in the Hindu College, Calcutta, and government servant since 1847, Dhekiyal-Phukan imbibed his political faith and ideas of progress largely from what was known as the Young Bengal movement. In course of his memorandum to Mills, he admonished the British Government for providing Assam with "the administration of an Asiatic Government rather than that of enlightened England". Not yet losing his faith on the potentially regenerating role of the British rule in India, he pointed out :

"We are further of opinion, that the object of the Providence in raising up England to rule the destinies of Assam, has not been duly and properly fulfilled. The general civilization of the country, the introduction of the arts and sciences of Europe, the improvement of the civil and social state of the people, and enlightenment of their minds, are subjects which never hitherto appeared to have attracted the slightest attention of a Government in every respect admirably qualified to effect those improvements."⁹

Dhekiyal-Phukan had read Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England - an eighteenth-century work that was known to have had an impact on Adam Smith. This acquaintance with Blackstone appears as well to have influenced Dhekiyal-Phukan's attitudes to property and authority. He, too, upheld the economic importance of both small properties and an ordered ranking of authority as a stable foundation to all legal and rational governments.¹⁰

In his view, the Cornwallis System that had brought in its wake "powerful and opulent" zamindars in Bengal with big properties was not to be emulated in Assam. "The preservation of the ancient Ryotwari system in

9. ibid., pp.XXXi-XXXii.

10. Dhekiyal-Phukan's pioneering treatise on law in Bengali - Ain O Byāvasthā Sangraha : Notes on Laws of Bengal, Vol.1 (Calcutta, 1855) - was indeed modelled on W. Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1765-69). See Gunabhiram Barua, Anandarām Dhekiyāl Phukanar Jivancharitra (in Assamese, 1880; 2nd edn., 1915; reprint, Gauhati, 1971).

Assam and recognition of the Ryots' rights as proprietors of their respective holdings", he conceded, "is the greatest boon which ... the British Government has conferred on the country". Yet the actual working of this ryotwari system was, according to him, "far from being much favourable to the advancement of cultivation and the general improvement of the country".¹¹

Why was it so? Dhekiyal-Phukan had his answer. Revenue settlements for short terms - generally for one year - lacked adequate incentives for good management. Assessment on ryots used to be made without an accurate survey and was often found to be oppressive. What seemed therefore expedient to him for laying the foundation of progressive improvements in agriculture was a long-term revenue settlement so that both the revenue officers and the ryots could have greater security and interest in land. He suggested that the term of leases be extended to 20-25 years; that the assessment be fixed on an actual survey for this entire period; that, at the expiry of each settlement, the incumbent revenue officers be generally re-appointed; and that these officers be allowed, as a matter of incentive as before, to appropriate any increase in the revenue yield which was entirely due to extension of cultivation during the lease period. Elaborating on the last point, he further submitted that they should also be allowed "to let out all the unoccupied and waste lands within their farms on such terms as they may deem best conducive to their interests" - a measure which was likely to reclaim the vast waste lands. Dhekiyal-Phukan also pleaded that all privileged tenures made in favour of religious institutions in the past be retained, since these essentially represented endowments benefiting the public.¹² It was his belief that the functionaries and trustees who were misusing the properties of such endowments

11. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn. 4, pp. xxxii and xxxiv.

12. *ibid*, pp. xxxiv and xliii.

for private gains could be stopped from doing so through the exercise of government supervision.

The implications and direction of all these arguments were clear. If the ryots were oppressed, and if an extension of cultivation was thereby hampered under the current system, the revenue officers as such were not to be blamed. There were sufficient checks within the system itself to keep them under control. For, every ryot in Assam Proper "is the absolute master of his own lands, from which he is never liable to be ousted until he relinquishes it out of his free will". Dhekiyal-Phukan, therefore, continued to argue :

"His liabilities too are ascertained under the immediate superintendance of the public revenue authorities, and clearly laid down in the pottahs issued to him under the seal and signature of the collectors, so that any attempt at exaction is easily detected and restrained, and the native officers of collection can exercise no other control over the Ryots than the mere collection of revenue".¹³

According to Dhekiyal-Phukan, then, what was wrong with the system was not the prevailing mode of collection through a network of contract-bound commission agents of quasi-official status, but the short tenures of such contracts. The Chaudhuris, Patgiris, Mauzadars and Bishayas and their assistants -- the Patwaris, Thakurias and Kakatis --- they all represented a rural gentry that had roots in the old regime and had some landed properties. Given due status and reorientation, they were expected to provide the rural society with men of some property and authority whom the common ryots could look up to as symbols of stability, authority and progress. This - though not spelt out in so many words -- appears to have been the logic behind Dhekiyal-Phukan's stand. He wanted for this rural gentry a modest share of

13. *ibid*, p. xxxiv.

the surplus that the State extracted from the peasantry. Only, they were not to be hereditary and big proprietors like the Bengal zamindars. In a note to the Commissioner of Assam in November 1855, Dhekiyal-Phukan re-emphasized the need for a class of intermediaries, intervening between the Government and the ryots. He was then pleading for the creation of some chamua properties in Nowgong with the belief that ~~such~~ landed middlemen could be expected to act for general welfare. This explains why he was also keen to see that the age-old privileged tenures in existence were not destroyed, but brought under close public supervision.¹⁴

Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin (1815-1902), who retired as a deputy magistrate in 1876, shared with Dhekiyal-Phukan the same high-caste and landed gentry background, but not his grounding in western education. He, too, opposed the idea of a permanent zamindari settlement and advised Mills in favour of a 20-years' settlement with the revenue officers. Sadar-Amin was, however, more concerned with the immediate interests of his own class, rather than with an ideology of general welfare.¹⁵ Dhekiyal-Phukan's concern, on the contrary, stemmed from his ideological position - his faith in property, liberty and a degree of ranking of authority, as essential pre-requisites of social progress. He would not however leave the ryots' property and liberty at the mercy of the revenue officers. For he had personal knowledge of what abuse such officers could make of their authority with a view to exploiting the ryots. Sadar-Amin was of opinion that the highest punishment for oppression on the part of a revenue officer should be only a heavy fine and not his dismissal. But Dhekiyal-Phukan believed that the revenue officer needed to be dismissed, whenever oppression or fraud on his part was proved.¹⁶

- Chamuadars
14. Barua, fn. 10, p. 130. Mauzadars, Lakhirajdars and Nisf-Khirajdars -- these were the main components of the landed middle class, as envisaged by Dhekiyal-Phukan. A big full rate paying estate which paid the land revenue directly to the Government, instead of through a Mauzadar, was known as chamua, and its holder as Chamuadar. Only a few Chamuadars were there.
 15. Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin, Sadarāminar Ātmajīvanī (in Assamese, Kumudchandra Bardalai, ed., Gauhati, 1960) pp. 73-78.
 16. Barua, fn. 10, pp. 69-71.

Further concrete measures for the protection of the ryots and their liberty and rights, he thought, would be necessary when the settlements with revenue officers were made on a long-term basis. Bengal's sad experience had convinced him that the ignorance, poverty and weakness of the peasantry would not admit of their seeking redress against injustices by application to the regular courts. He therefore recommended that the current system of supervision by the Collectors, both in the matter of assessing ryot's lands and of issuing pottahs to them, be not discontinued. His other advice was that "distrainment might in all cases be issued by the Revenue or Judicial officers, stationed at each thannah, on the application of the farmers [i.e. the revenue officers-A], and that the latter be not permitted to exercise that power independently without the cognizance of a public authority."¹⁷

In Dhekiyal-Phukan's scheme of things, then, there was to be a lightly-assessed numerous class of small peasant proprietors at the base; a small class of rural gentry with security and some moderate-sized properties, immediately above it; and the Government at the apex. Whatever rent was legitimately extracted from the base was to be mutually shared by the Government and the intermediary class of rural gentry. Given its caste background and social context, could the rural gentry be an entrepreneurial agency for advancement of cultivation? Dhekiyal-Phukan did not enter into this question directly. He, however, had noted in 1847 in another context that the caste system was admittedly a hindrance to production in contemporary Bengal, but less so in Assam Proper.¹⁸ Unlike in Bengal and other parts of India, "the Assamese, one and all, from the poorest peasant to the nobility were devoted to agricultural pursuits"; and tillage, he observed, "was not exclusively the occupation of the cultivating caste."¹⁹ Hence, the Assamese

17. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn. 4, pp xxxv-xxxvi.

18. Dhekiyal-Phukan, "Inglendar Vivaran", Arunoday (Assamese monthly, Sibsagar), Vol. 2, No. 4, April 1847.

19. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn. 4, p. xxxviii.

rural gentry was not necessarily divorced from production. Yet he looked forward in search of an entrepreneurial agency, not to the rural gentry (they had by then started sping the Bengali high-caste society), not even to the small peasant proprietors, but to the Government. For, as landlord it was the Government that appropriated the major share of the total realizable rent. We shall return to this point in a moment.

Dhekiyal-Phukan was impatient for an immediate all-round modernization. So much so that like the British rulers he, too, would not put much faith on a process of autonomous development. Agriculture was yet at a rude stage with vestiges of tribalism entrenched therein. There was no point in waiting for the introduction of improvements 'by chance' or 'in the ordinary progress of events', but improvements needed to be expedited 'with certainty and at once'— so had David Scott, the first Commissioner of Assam, argued as early as 1831 — "when a Government is placed so very far in advance of its subjects in point of information as in our case in Assam". While Scott had looked up to the Government for "that preliminary interference which can alone prove effectual in the existing state of society", Francis Jenkins who long held the reins of Assam administration after him, had a different plan. He was keen on leaving the task mainly to immigrating Englishmen of capital and expected them "to offer a better prospect for the speedy realization of improvements than any measures that could be adopted in the present ignorant and demoralized state of native inhabitants."²⁰ He believed that only by helping English capitalists to take over the control of the region's land resources could a break-through be made in agriculture.

20. David Scott to Swinton, Chief Secy. to Govt. at Fort William, 17 April 1830, Foreign Political Proceedings, 7 May 1830, No. 51; Scott to Swinton, 18 May 1831, *ibid*, 10 June 1831, No. 50, para 49-50; report on Assam from F. Jenkins to Secy. to Govt. at Fort William, 22 July 1833, *ibid*, 11 Feb. 1835, No. 90.

Later, in 1856, Jenkins appears to have somewhat modified his stand in so far as he pressed for wasteland grants to some native capitalists as well. - Jenkins to Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, in April 1856 in Revenue Proceedings, 22 May 1856, No. 29.

Whatever might be the appropriate strategy for the region's colonial development, all agreed that there was need for contentment and stability in the rural society, even as the rapid monetization and property structures were being adapted to imperial priorities. This could be achieved through/a ^{the good offices of} class of intermediaries, loyal to the British. On this point, the non-official approach of the enlightened local gentry was not much different from the official one. Dhekiyal-Phukan's, and for that matter also Sedar-Amin's, aspirations did not essentially fail to find expression in the final recommendations that Mills made to the policy-makers. "It is my desire..." he reported

"to raise up gradually an influential class of middlemen as men between the Ryots and the Government, to do away with constant interference in village concerns which now overwhelm the Collectors, to give a money value to the land, and at the same time afford efficient protection to the Ryots."²¹

In Mills' scheme, the right of every ryot would also be known and fixed, the extent of his holding and rent determined and he would enter into long-term engagements direct with the Collector.²² This was also what Dhekiyal-Phukan wanted, although on many other points — the question of the prohibition of opium trade, for instance — Mills simply ignored the modernist approach of the latter.

To sum up, both Dhekiyal-Phukan and Mills wanted the independent ryots and the rural gentry to coexist within the revenue structure. A rural society of small proprietors, led by men of some rank and property and supervised by administrative authorities — this was what both of them aimed at. In no quarters was expressed any concern however for the large body of

21. Mills, fn. 4, p. 18.

22. *ibid.*

under-ryots who held land not directly from the Government but from the proprietary landholders. These tenants-at-will and their problems were overlooked. Even a liberal thinker like Dhekiyal-Phukan showed only a limited concern for the plight of tenants of private landlords. The proliferation of numerous Chamua estates during the British times through fraudulent transfer of individual ryots' pottahs to revenue-collectors, who, themselves, aspired to be Chamuadars, did not escape his notice. He deplored the absence of specific rules that could have protected the affected ryots. He pleaded that necessary measures be introduced "for the protection of the agriculturist class". However there is no evidence that any similar concern was expressed by him for the cause of under-ryots or tenants of private landlords in general. His silence on the plight of the numerous tenants of Lakhirajdars, Nisfkhirajdars, Khatdars and other substantial ryots was somewhat intriguing, particularly in the context of his own personal association with such tenant exploitation.²³ To be fair to Dhekiyal-Phukan, it must be said however that throughout our period neither in official nor in private circles was tenancy held to be an acute problem. This will be discussed again in Section VI of this paper.

23. For Dhekiyal-Phukan's landed interests, see Barua, fn. 10, pp. 25, 33, 41, 49 and 118. For the quote and the related point, Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn. 4, p. xxxvii.

II

STRUCTURE OF THE LAND REVENUE SYSTEM

Land revenue administration and policy took shape through a series of measures during the years 1854-1893. Most important of these were as follows :

- (i) the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1860;
- (ii) almost a 100 percent increase in the land revenue rates in 1867-68;
- (iii) the framing of the Settlement Rules, 1870;
- (iv) the separation of Assam from Bengal and its formation as a Chief Commissioner's Province on 6 February 1874;
- (v) the establishment of a provincial department of agriculture in 1882;
- (vi) the recasting of the Settlement Rules in 1883 to make decennial bases the major practice henceforth;
- (vii) the promulgation of the Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886, replacing the aforesaid Settlement Rules;
- (viii) the Cadastral Survey Operations of 1883-93; and
- (ix) a major revamping of the land revenue rates in 1892-93.

Besides these, there were other measures specifically affecting the planters, such as, the Wastelands Settlement Rules, 1854; Fee Simple Rules, 1862; and the Thirty Years' Lease Rules, 1876.

Broadly, two types of peasant cultivation were there : (i) permanent and (ii) fluctuating. Permanent cultivation was carried on both in rupit (wet or transplanted) rice fields and on basti (homestead)/bari (garden) lands. The fluctuating or shifting cultivation which was reminiscent in many ways of tribal jhum (slash-and-burn) culture was, on the other hand, carried on in flood-prone or submontane jungly grasslands, for growing early-maturing rice (ahu), mustard-seed and pulses etc. during the relatively dry season. These lands, known as faringati, rapidly exhausted their fertility within two to

three years, despite crop rotation to a limited extent. Hence, these lands had to be given rest for several years thereafter. As was stated, neither these nor homestead and garden lands were, in general, subjected to any kind of rent payments in pre-British times.

British administration found revenue assessment on a long-term basis feasible only in the case of permanently cultivable lands, i.e., rupit hasti ~~and~~ bari lands. Assessment of faringati lands, on the other hand, was found practicable on a year-to-year basis alone. For, the ryots were in the habit of relinquishing every year a good part of such lands in their possession. Even after the large-scale conversion of annual leases into decennial ones after 1883, the system of annual settlements did not become obsolete. In 1886-87, for instance, full rate-paying ryots held 409,659 acres on annual leases and 1020,315 acres on decennial leases.²⁴ It was not before the Settlement of 1902-12 that the decennial leases were replaced by 20-year leases; but annual leases continued to remain in practice even thereafter.

Unlike the Rules of 1870, the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886 had the force of law. Under these Regulations, the common landholders' (i.e., the Government ryots') tenurial rights were, for the first time, properly defined in legal terms. All holders of decennial leases, and those who were found paying land revenue rates directly to the Government for the previous ten years, were recognized as ryots enjoying permanent, heritable and transferable right of use and occupancy in their lands. This was subject to an assessment which could be revised at the time of the next settlement. In the case of annual settlement, the existing practice, in all its details, was allowed to continue. The annually settled plots of land could be resumed by the Government for public purposes without paying any compensation for the land as before. Besides, the ryots continued to have the option of relinquishing any time/^{any} quantum of land under either category.²⁵

24. Assam Administration Report, 1886-87, cited in Baden-Powell, fn. 3, p. 405

25. Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Being Regulation I of 1886 (P. C. Dey Chaudhuri, ed., Dacca, 1886), pp. 1-127, particularly chapt. 5.

The Regulations of 1886, thus, provided a complete legal basis to the region's ryotwari system of land revenue administration that had gradually taken shape in course of the preceding six decades of British rule. A ryot's land could now be put on auction sale anywhere in Assam Proper by the Government—formerly it was possible only in Kamrup under provisions of Act 8 of 1835 — if distraint of moveable property was found inadequate for recovering arrears of land revenue from him.²⁶ If mortgaged to a moneylendar, land could now be lawfully transferred to him at ease by a court decree.²⁷

Yet another important development was the overhauling of the revenue collection machinery to stabilize and strengthen the Assamese rural gentry, the need for which was keenly felt as early as 1853. This overhauling was made under the 1870 Rules and was confirmed by the 1886 Regulations.

The Mauzadari System:

During the early decades, the revenue officers were not necessarily residents of the respective fiscal divisions they held charge of, nor did they have uniform designations and status. All such local variations were eliminated under the Settlement Rules of 1870 so that they could be uniformly designated as Mauzadars with identical functions. For appointment as a Mauzadar, one had to be an influential and well-to-do resident of the relevant mauza or fiscal division, which could vary in area from a few square miles to 200. He was responsible for collecting and depositing the whole of the land revenue demanded from his mauza by a stipulated date. His other function was to act within his /executant of the District Collector's orders. If any ryot had not paid the two instalments of his dues by the scheduled dates, it was the Mauzadar's duty to put in a bakijai or statement showing the arrears. On its receipt, the

26. *ibid* and Hunter, fn. 7., p. 68.

27. In India, the Usury Laws Repeal Act, 1855, had laid down that the courts should decree the rate of interest agreed to between the parties and not necessarily uphold the custom. The Code of Civil Procedure, 1859, laid down in detail specific rules for the conduct of civil suits.

District Collector was to issue the attachment order. If the arrear amount was not realized within 15 days, the attached properties were sold. For his over-all services, the Mauzadar was allowed a 10 per cent commission on the first slab of collection (initially Rs 5000/- which was later raised gradually to Rs 10,000/-) and 5 per cent on the remaining portion. His annual income from this source therefore was apparently quite modest; in some cases, even meagre. An attempt was made during 1883--1896 to replace these Mauzadars gradually by salaried and full-fledged government officers, designated as Tahsildars. They were given a wider territorial jurisdiction with a view to making the working of the system less expensive. The average area of a Tahsil was 211 sq. miles and the average population 47,000. On 31 March 1896, there were 25 Tahsildars and 97 Mauzadars in Assam Proper, and they were assisted by 40 Kanungos and 917 Mandals.²⁸ But this new experiment was abandoned in 1896. In due course, all Tahsildars were progressively replaced once more by Mauzadars and each of the Tahsil units was broken up into several mauzas. A Mauzadar's successor was ordinarily appointed from the same family, while there was no such binding in the case of other appointments.

28. Hunter, fn. 7, pp 52-53 and 64-68; H.Z. Darrah, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Note on the Work Done by the Land Records Department in the Assam Valley Districts (Shillong, 1894), pp. 6-9; Annual Report of the Administration of Land Revenue in Assam for 1895-96 (Shillong, 1896), p. 11.

On the average, each Tahsildar replaced five Mauzadars. Of the 103 Mauzadars in the Brahmaputra Valley, as of 31 March 1896, as many as 13 had a commission income of less than Rs 240 per year and 81, of Rs 600 and above. The remaining 1 had their annual commission within the range of Rs 240 - Rs 600. — Land Revenue Administration Report of the Assam Valley Districts for the year 1897-98, fn. 3, p. 76.

A mauza was divided into several circles, each containing not less 200 houses and entrusted to a petty village-based government servant designated as Mandal. His function was to help the Mauzadar in land measurement and the maintenance of village records. Village accountants, who were earlier known as Thakuria, Patwari or Kakati until 1870, were since then uniformly transformed into Mandals, their salaries ranging from Rs 6 to Rs 12 per month. Though low-paid and not as respectable, they too, like the Mauzadars, were men of means and had other sources of income, since both were in a position to manipulate the land records for a consideration.²⁹ The Mauzadari system, by and large, fulfilled the objectives highlighted by Mills and Dhekiyal-Phukan. It nurtured a stable and loyal, but not very rich, rural gentry that could be relied upon and boosted by the colonial rulers to assume leadership in the rural areas. Tahsildars, Mauzadars, Kanungos and Mandals -- their families, numbering some 1200 or so -- constituted this loyal base.

The modus operandi of the revenue system itself helped the Mauzadar to emerge as a substantial landholder in his mauza, if he was not one already. It was often the case that, instead of instituting bakijai cases, he converted the accumulated arrear revenue into a loan by making the cultivator execute a bond and, in due course, acquired the land.³⁰ Even otherwise, he could recover in the Civil Court any advances, he may have made to a ryot on account of revenue, within the period of limitation fixed for all money debts.³¹ According to H.Z. Darrah, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, the Mandal was to his circle what the Mauzadar was to his mauza. He "carried on cultivation as his main business, working as a mandal when he had time or found it convenient. He was very indifferent as to his pay ... Usually he allowed it to accumulate for months."³²

29. Darrah, fn. 28, pp. 5, 9 and 20; W.E. Ward's 'Introduction' to The Land Revenue Manual (3rd edn, Shillong, 1917), p. lxiii.

30. Evidence of J.C. Maitra in Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30, Vol. II, Evidence (Shillong, 1930), p. 414.

31. Hunter, fn. 7, p. 68.

32. Darrah, fn. 28, p. 9.

To complete the rural hierarchy, most villages had a village headman or Gaonburha, confirmed as such by the Government. He belonged to one of the cultivating castes and was rewarded with some revenue concession and status for his assistance to the Mauzadar and the Mandal. There were more than 5000 Gaonburhas in all.^{32a} While the Mandal was a regular government employee, the positions of the Mauzadar and the Gaonburhas were quasi-official. The vertical linkage from the District Collector down to the Gaonburha — the latter, a vital but less dependable link with the toiling peasants — provided the main bulwark of the colonial polity in rural areas, and it contributed to the process of an increasing differentiation therein. The planter-dominated local boards set up for rural self-government constituted the other bulwark. These consisted of planters' elected representatives as well as ex-officio and nominated European and Indian members.

Peasants and Planters:

The process of colonialization did not leave the Assamese peasants where they were. In the scheme of imperial objectives, the development of a British-owned tea industry within the empire had a high priority. Assam had suitable wastelands for the purpose, but not enough labour. Nor were local public resources adequate for meeting the budgetary expenditures that were needed to build an infrastructure for the planters. One facet of the agrarian policy in Assam, therefore, was to tax the peasantry heavily to the point of flushing them out into the labour market and, at the same time, to augment the public revenue resources. The first purpose however remained unfulfilled, despite repeated tax enhancements.

32a. On 31 March 1898, there were in all 5,083 Gaonburhas, 95 Mandals, 40 Kanungos, 26 Tahsildars and 98 Mauzadars in Assam Procr. See Land Revenue Administrative Report of the Assam Valley Districts 1897-98, fn. 3, p. 74.

Between 1826 and 1853, the land revenue rates were enhanced on several occasions. Administration claimed that the pitch of land revenue was yet not beyond what the rate-payers could afford ^{to pay.} Dhekiyal-Phukan however submitted that "the assessment on the several descriptions of lands in Assam does not appear to have been fixed with reference to their actual capabilities". He argued that "an enhancement of the rates under the present circumstances of the Province, without any marked improvement in agriculture and commerce, would be to over-burden the people with taxes, which they could but ill afford to bear". Assessment on some of the rupit lands, he said, was found to be nearly equal in value to one half of their gross produce.³³

Dhekiyal-Phukan further argued that a tax enhancement could be justified only after the Government had exerted itself to improve the region's agricultural prospects. Poor cattle breeds, lack of manuring and irrigation, ryots' ignorance of potential cash crops, absence of multiple cropping and paucity of seed grains — these were identified by him as the major maladies of the peasant economy. He entreated the Government to step in and teach the peasants better management of their production. Immediate and concrete action, that he suggested, was to make an initial public investment to the tune of rupees six to seven lakhs, (i.e., a sum equivalent to a year's land revenue collection) with a view to enabling the Government "to procure the requisite supply of implements and seeds etc. and to secure the services of an establishment of agriculturists from Europe and Upper India for a period of two years" to work towards that end. He also emphasized the need for official initiative in the matter of training local people in techniques of manufacturing and modern husbandry. That nothing was done for uplifting agriculture during the last 28 years of British rule was a matter of "regret and surprise" for him. "Unless, therefore, the Government provides the people with better and improved means of cultivating their lands", he concluded, "an increase of assessment will inevitably lead to an increase of unhappiness of the people".³⁴

33. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn. 4, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

34. *ibid.*, pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

The official policy of tax enhancement nevertheless went on unabated even after 1853, despite Dhakyal-Phukan's protests. As was mentioned, in 1867-68 the Government almost doubled the existing rates without taking the trouble of a detailed field-to-field survey and settlement work. Such work was taken up and completed only during 1883-93 to prepare the ground for another over-all tax enhancement of 53 per cent. This, however, had to be finally reduced to an enhancement of 32.7 per cent because of ^{the} massive peasant resistance.³⁵

The result of peasant-squeezing over the years was inhibiting. While the total land revenue demand more than quadrupled between 1865-66 and 1897-98 (from about Rs 1 million to more than Rs 4 millions), the growth of cultivated acreage under all crops other than tea remained, according to Sir Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam (1896-1902), as low as 7 per cent.³⁶ There was no visible increase in productivity meanwhile. Under the pressure of an increasing immigrant population, the prices of paddy and other peasant crops had recorded a rising trend, but such prices could not be higher than the rates at which these could be obtained from Bengal. Hence, Assamese peasants' gains from the rising prices remained modest and did not justify the tax squeeze. The 1893 tax enhancement was particularly objectionable in view of the devastating black fever epidemic that had been depopulating the Assamese villages since 1888.

35. Assam Valley Reassessment Report (Shillong, August 1893), pp. 37-38; Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1893-94 (Shillong, 1895), pp. 34 and 122.

36. Cotton's note to Government of India in 1898 as reproduced in the Indian Daily News Office, The Colonization of Waste-Lands in Assam Being a Reprint of the Official Correspondence between the Government of India and the Chief Commissioner of Assam (Calcutta, 1898), p. 35. For this reference, I am indebted to Ms Keya Deb.

While coming to his conclusion, Cotton had taken care to exclude all additions to the cropped area that had resulted from the detection of concealed lands in course of the cadastral survey.

The policy of increasing taxation failed to achieve its major objective — that of increasing the supply of local labour to the plantation sector. Labour supply was entirely local during the period before 1859. For, the tea industry was till then quite small with an employment potential not exceeding 10,000. Given the constraints of an abnormally low population and unattractive wage offers, the indenture of labour from outside the province emerged ^{thereafter} as the major form of plantation labour supply. After 1865-66, it became almost the sole form of such supply. Of the 307 thousand tea plantation workers employed in Assam Proper in 1901, for instance, only 6.5 per cent or 20,000 workers were reportedly of local origin. Of the latter, 14,000 were Boro-kachari tribals.³⁷

The other revenue source, second in importance only to land revenue, was the opium excise for which the peasantry constituted almost the sole tax base. During the early years of British rule, the peasants were allowed and even encouraged to increase their opium consumption. In 1860 local opium cultivation was prohibited, but not its trade. As Government remained the sole source of opium since then, its excise revenue could henceforth be maximized through a monopoly pricing policy. Such a policy was also in tune with some planters' plea that high and increasing opium prices would solve their labour problem since, to procure the drug, the Assamese peasants would have to earn more and more. The fact that 1,689 maunds of the drug were retailed through 2,740 licensed vendors in 1875-76 and 1,272 maunds through 843 such vendors in 1891-92 indicates how widespread the vice was. Because of the inelasticity of the demand, the frequent price hikes — gradually from Rs 24 per seer in 1860 to Rs 37 in 1890-91 — only increased the total expenditure incurred by the peasants on this drug.³⁸

37. Assam District Gazetteers (Calcutta : Allahabad, 1905-1906), pp. V - 81 and 144.

38. For details see Amalendu Guha, "Imperialism of opium in Assam 1773-1921", Calcutta Historical Journal, Vol 1, No. 2; Jan-June 1977, pp. 226-245; also 'Memorial of the Assam Company to the G-G-in-Council', 1 May 1857 in Miscellaneous Revenue Proceedings, 3 Sept. 1857, No. 59.

A third facet of the taxation policy was open discrimination in favour of the planters, almost all of whom were Europeans. Over the years 1839-1901, the planters were settled with 642 thousand acres or some one-fifth of the total settled area of Assam Proper. They held more than 85 per cent of their lands on privileged terms. For instance, of the 595,842 acres held by them in 1893, 55 per cent were fee simple (perpetually revenue-free) and another 30.3 per cent were assessed at low concessional rates -- much lower than what the peasants paid for lands of similar quality. Only for 14.7 per cent of their holdings did the planters pay rates comparable to what was paid on the peasant holdings. The frequent tax enhancements were always meant for peasants, and not for the planters. Besides, wastelands were settled on privileged terms only with European planters in general. This policy had been recommended by Mills in 1854 on the ground that the natives "have no capital, and their only resource is to seduce other Ryots to settle in these grants so that as much or even more becomes waste in one place than is replaced in the other."³⁹

A colonial theory of development was thus there to rationalize the discrimination. Its premises were that special concessions were necessary to attract capital and enterprise which alone could bring the wastelands under cultivation; that heavy taxation was a necessary disincentive to the habitual laziness of the local peasantry to force them to seek employment in plantation and that the planter-generated demand for farm products would accelerate growth in the peasant sector in due course. Planters were therefore inducted as the biggest and 'progressive' landowners in every rural district. In the wake of the Ripon reforms, 1882, they were also given the control of the newly set-up local boards on the plea that, of all rural interest-groups concerned, they alone had the necessary competence and stake in the maintenance and development of roads.⁴⁰

39. Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, p. 19 and Mills, fn. 4, p. 16.

40. Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947 (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 11-12 and 30-31.

The peasant was thus made the sacrificial goat at the altar of colonial development. A concern for application of the Ricardian rent theory in search of a scientific tax was seen elsewhere in India earlier since the days of James Mill in the East India House. But it was no more invoked when the revenue settlement was made in Assam Proper. Darrah, the architect of the 1892-93 revenue resettlement, argued that the official statistics on cultivation and living costs (which he himself had painstakingly collected) would be of no use for ascertaining the net produce that was elusive. Nor could the prevailing rent rates ~~be~~ paid to private landlords by their tenants provide a guide-line -- according to him -- in this respect. For, such rates rarely exceeded the current Government revenue rates.⁴¹ How to apply the net produce criterion then, if the object was to enhance the latter rates ?

Darrah bluntly admitted that "even if the cost of living and cost of cultivation were accurately ascertained, there would probably be so small a margin over and above this that no proposed enhancement, however small, would be justified...". When calculated at market rates, the money cost of production could even be shown to exceed the money value of produce, but this fact -- he argued -- did not prove anything. Hence, he discarded the net produce approach and concluded :

"in a country like Assam, where the supply affects the market, but the demand is powerless to produce any alteration in the supply, the cost of production has no necessary connection with the value of the produce."

He claimed no scientific accuracy, nor did he bother himself with whether the rate-payer had a surplus over and above his normal costs, when in December 1892 he recommended a 53 per cent increase in the total land revenue demand.⁴² His only plea was that there had been no tax enhancement since the last one in 1867-68 and that prices of agricultural products had meanwhile been increasing.

41. Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, p. 44.

42. *ibid*, pp.15, 38 and 44.

Forms of Property

The agrarian property structures, as these emerged through the colonial rule, were multi-form and varied - vertically as well as laterally. There were two broad groups of landholders - (i) those who were settled for special cultivation, i.e. the tea planters (mostly British-owned corporate bodies) and (ii) those who were settled for ordinary cultivation. The area settled for special cultivation - we shall call it the plantation sector - was concentrated in the hands of a small number of tea companies and individual planters. Hence, the average holding per estate was large in size, and it was held in compact blocks. The area settled for ordinary cultivation - we shall call it the peasant sector - was held by numerous individuals and, only in some cases, in compact blocks by religious institutions like temples and monasteries. The average size of owned holdings per household was therefore small in the peasant sector. It could be estimated at about 5 to 6 acres.⁴³ Yet another point to note is that the plantation sector did not have actually even one-third of its total acreage under crops, while the peasant sector had nine-tenth or so.

43. According to the 1881 census, the average holding of settled land held by the 430,000 land revenue rate payers in the ryotwari area of the Brahmaputra Valley was about 4½ acres. This appears to be a low estimate and the basis of the calculation also is not revealed. Our own exercises suggest that the average holding of assessed lands in Assam Proper per landholding household was higher than that. The basis of our calculation is as follows.

In 1881, there were 281,495 rural households in Assam Proper. Of these, plantation households numbered estimatedly 35,181. So, the estimated number of households in the non-plantation, rural sector comes to 246,314. In 1884-85 -- the earliest year for which we have reliable data -- there were 1360,073 acres of assessed land under ryotwari settlement in the same area. From these two figures, the average holding could be roughly worked out at 5.5 acres. Again, 31 landholding households and one 10-household village community, covered by the Dufferin Inquiry (1888) owned between them, 617.5 bigas in all. This yields an average holding of 5 acres per household, given the fact that poor households were over-represented in the samples claimed to represent "lower classes of population."

Sources: Census of India, 1881, Assam Report, p. 121 and Table India, Returns of Agricultural Statistics of British / Vol. I, 1884-85, Form C-9; Dufferin Inquiry : Proc. No. 10. fn.47, examples in appendix C and Note 3, appendix B.

The plantation and peasant sectors could again be each divided into two or more sub-categories, in accordance with differences in their tenural terms. In the first sector, there were ^{mainly} two types of landholding -- (i) fee simple and (ii) concessional rate-paying, together accounting for 23 per cent of the settled rural area. Besides, an insignificant proportion of the full rate paying khiraj lands settled for ordinary cultivation were also held by the planters. By 1897-98, such planter-held khiraj lands amounted to 4 per cent of the total settled area in Assam Proper. [See Table - 2].

Fee-simple lands in the plantation sector and la-khiraj lands in the peasant sector were revenue-free leases on a perpetual basis. Hence, their holders were deemed as proprietary landholders. Temple properties came under this category and, though institutionally held, were actually under private management, largely benefiting certain individuals. The rest of the landholders in either sector were called the common landholders. When the lease was not for less than ten years, such landholders enjoyed a permanent, heritable right of use and occupancy, as were stated earlier. In other words, they had de facto proprietary rights. In the 1870s, Hunter noted that the proprietary right in the nisf-khiraj estates, which were both heritable and transferable, belonged to their holders and not to the State. However, after 1886, the status of the Nisfkhirajdars was no more to be recognized so. Baden-Powell included them within the category of common landholders, together with the full rate paying ryots, both being liable to attachment of their properties for recovery of arrears of revenue.⁴⁴ The relative shares of (i) revenue-free, (ii) half rate paying and (iii) full rate paying lands in the peasant sector, as proportions of the total settled area, are shown in Table - 2 for the single year, 1897-98. The relevant shares of the above three categories were, respectively, 3.4 per cent, 8.2 per cent and 61.2 per cent in that year. This means that 4.7 per cent of all lands in the peasant sector were revenue-free, 11.2 per cent, half rate paying; and the remaining 84.1 per cent, full rate paying. These proportions were, more or less, valid for the last two decades of the 19th century.

44. For details Baden-Powell, fn. 3, p. 406 and Hunter, fn. 7, pp. 50 & 68.

It is to be noted that the revenue-free and half-rate payable estates included considerable tracts of wastelands, though not to the same degree as ^{/in the case of the} plantation estates. For such wastelands, no land revenue was payable in the first case; and, even in the case of the half-rate payers, such wastelands were in fact revenue-free until 1893. In the case of full rate paying estates, on the other hand, farinagati rates were applicable to all such occupied wastelands. These estates therefore did not hold much vacant lands beyond what was needed for fallowing to a marginal extent. Government wastelands were abundantly available all around for settlement on a year-to-year basis. Hence, only that much of wastelands was taken as could be cultivated. Relinquishments and new acquisitions of leases affecting thousands of acres of such lands were a regular annual feature of rural economy. Besides, there was also a tribal population practising or pure shifting cultivation, though its scope was being increasingly ~~by~~ the expanding tea plantations over the century.

In the plantation sector, that had rapidly developed as and there were two broad classes — the capitalists and the workers, the relations with the former combining the forms of slavery, serfdom and labour. How capitalist was the plantation system in essence cannot be discussed within the limited scope of this paper. In the peasant sector going a stunted growth, the class situation was even more complex. The remaining part of this paper will be a focus almost exclusively on one could refer to this Centre's Occasional Paper No. 24 — "Imperial Plantations on the Agrarian Structure of the Brahmaputra Valley" (Dasgupta).

III

THE BIG LANDHOLDERS: THEIR LANDLORD ECONOMY.

Having acquainted ourselves with the broad frame of the given property structures, let us now look into the formative process through which new classes emerged in the Assamese agrarian society-- some really new and some new in the sense that they were adapted to the new colonial situation.

In pre-British times, there were broadly three classes of people in Assam Proper:⁴⁵ -

- (i) the aristocracy, i.e. the feudal landlords, both temporal and spiritual, who had revenue-free landed properties and servile dependants to work these;
- (ii) the servile population, i.e. the serfs, slaves and tenants who were exclusively dependent on these landlords and cultivated their lands; and
- (iii) the numerous peasantry holding land directly from the State and paying a rent to it in some form or other.

An overwhelming majority of the population belonged to the last-mentioned class of peasants, designated as State paiks. Generally, trading and craft activities were carried on only as part-time occupations by some landlords and peasants. This structure more or less continued up to the first decade of British rule in the region.

45. This simplified classification ignores some complexities. There were surely differences between serfs, tenants and slaves, but, these differences got blurred and, excepting for full-fledged domestic slaves, all of them had more or less the same working conditions as dependent peasants. They were, in essence, serfs.

Incidentally, in course of a representation to Mills, Maniram Dewan divided the population into eight groups, without further elaboration, as follows:- (1) Upper classes, (2) respectable people, (3) middling classes, (4) chamua paiks, (5) kanree paiks, (6) temple paiks, (7) Mohantas and (8) hill tribes. Obviously, these were status-groups, rather than social classes.

One traditional way of indicating economic differentiation in the countryside was to classify the households on the basis of the number of ploughs one operated and not the amount of his landholding. For, under conditions of land-abundance, landholding as such was of lesser significance than one's command over capital. Households were thus grouped into four broad categories for purposes of a levy in the 1830s, as follows.⁴⁶

- (i) uttam (superior), i.e., those with three or more ploughs each;
- (ii) madhyam (middling), i.e., those with two ploughs each;
- (iii) samanya (common), e.e., those with one plough each; and
- (iv) prakṛita (inferior), i.e., the ploughless who worked with a borrowed plough or were slaves or bondsmen.

The plough criterion as a measure of rural economic differentiation did not fall into disuse even thereafter. An official investigator in 1888, for instance, noted that out of a total of 50 households in the village Teliagaon of Nowgong, 3 had 3 ploughs each, 2 had 2 ploughs each, 35 had one plough each, and 10 had none.⁴⁷ In general, the first category represented the rural rich - both landlords and rich peasants -- and the last category, the village poor. However, economic differentiation could not be, always and satisfactorily, indicated by the number of ploughs. Nor could it be by the number of granaries either -- the other criterion traditionally applied for that purpose. Even those who were neither landlords nor rich peasants, might have had three or more ploughs each, if the family size was big and its composition favourable. Under the circumstances, one has to find out a more reliable criterion for defining the contours of the classes formed within the post-annexation Assamese society.

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46. Bogle to Offg Chief Secy. to Government at Fort William, Foreign Political, 30 May 1833, No.93(NAI) and Sadar-amin, fn. 15, pp. 2 and 17.
 47. See H. Z. Darrah, "Conditions of the people of Assam", in Government of India, Proceedings of the Revenue and Agricultural Department for December 1888 Famine Reports Proc. No. 10- Appendix C, data collected by S.C. Banerjee, pp.78-80. Henceforth, this source will be referred to as the Dufferein Inquiry, since the enquiry was ordered by Lord Dufferein the Viceroy.

In forcibly breaking up the old society, the Raj was guided largely by political considerations. It had no over-all urge for liquidating all pre-capitalist forms of property and labour, unless such a need was felt in the interest of the plantation sector (~~for the sake of the abolition of slavery~~). Hence, there was a survival - even preservation - of many such forms, if that did not come in the way of the planters.

Of the scores of large revenue-free holdings belonging to the secular nobility, many were confiscated to the State after the annexation or allowed to be sold off for arrears of revenue (newly imposed and payable in cash); a few only survived as ~~full-rate~~ half-rate paying estates. In this process, the old secular nobility was practically done away with. Not so in the case of the spiritual nobility. Of the estates held by Brahmins and managers of various religious institutions, some survived the resumption proceedings of 1834-60 unscathed, while others were reduced to the half-rate paying landholder's status. In any case, these surviving landlord estates of both descriptions -- their number ranged between 2,000 to 3,000 over the last quarter of the 19th century -- continued to exert influence. Out of the 1733, 267 acres settled for cultivation by 1880, as much as 318,540 acres or 18.3 per cent were ^{/reportedly} found settled with 'big' landlords styled as Lakhirajders, Nisfkhirajders, Khatdars and Chamusdars.⁴⁸ While the first two were holders of privileged tenures, the last two were full-rate paying, substantial ryots. All these landholders' holdings were constituted of three parts : (i) own cultivation carried on by family members and bondsmen, (ii) cultivation carried on by tenants and (iii) considerable tracts of wastelands.

48. W. E. Ward's note dated 15 January 1880 on the land revenue system of Assam, para 80 cited by F.C. Daukes, Offg. Secy. to Chief Commissioner, Assam to GOI, in Rev. and Agr. Dept., 12 July 1888, Dufferein Inquiry. Proc. No. 9, fn. 47, pp. 1-9.

The word 'big' has to be understood only in a relative sense in the context of resource-poor Assam.

Comparable breakdown figures indicating the specific types of big land-holdings are not readily available to us. However, some stray figures available for select years could be used to indicate the pattern. There were altogether 2,035 half-rate paying estates holding 199,042 acres - i.e. 97.8 acres per estate -- in 1887-88. The number of these estates increased to 2,479 by 1895-96 while the area held by them had meanwhile decreased to 195,000 acres, i.e. 78.7 acres per estate. These figures suggest that the Nisfkhirdars, or half rate payers, accounted for some 60 per cent acreage of the big landholdings.⁴⁹

There were, also, 139 la-khiraj or revenue-free estates (mostly tax and religious trust lands) in all with a total landholding of 83,756 acres - i.e., 603 acres per estate -- in 1895-96. These together apparently account for about a quarter of the total acreage held by the big landholders. Chamudars and Khatdars who paid full rates, then, accounted for the remaining 15 per cent or so. One full rate-paying estate in Kamrup was known to have had compact area of 515 acres and two others, between them, held 815 acres in 1895-96.⁵⁰ As to the degree of concentration of landholding within our 'big landholder category, we have no further data except, again, for some stray information. In 1893-94, there were 1,217 big landholders, each of whom paid revenue at least for 100 bighas or 33 acres. Almost all of them were Nisfkhirdars; and only a few, Chamudars and Khatdars. This also means that at least half of the nisf-khiraj estates were of a size less than 33 acres each.⁵¹ In this connexion, it should be noted that, being heritable and transferable, many of the 'big' landholdings had already undergone a process of subdivision and fragmentation and remained no longer big. Some even ceased to be viable.

49. Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the year 1888-1889 (Shillong, 1889), p. 102; Annual Report of the Administration of Land Revenue in Assam for 1895-96, fn. 28, Statement No.9 - p. 53.

50. Ward's 'Introduction', fn. 29, pp. lxxvii and xxxii.

51. Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, Appendix F - p. 71.

Most of the big landholdings and more than half of the Assamese Brahmins were concentrated in Kamrup — the most populous of the five districts under consideration. About 84.5 per cent of the region's half-rate paying acreage and 39.6 per cent of the revenue-free (la-khiraj) acreage were concentrated in this district in 1895-96. Its landholding pattern, therefore, was much more landlord-oriented than in any other district of Assam Proper. Of the total area of 591,706 acres, found settled with the peasant sector of Kamrup in 1900-01, 25.3 per cent were covered by nisf-khiraj estates and 5.6 per cent by la-khiraj estates. Besides, a few Chanuadars and Khatdars were also there. Thus an estimated one-third of the peasant sector was covered by big landholding estates numbering a couple of thousands or so. Of them, at least 1,074 had each a holding of 33 acres or above.⁵² Of all the districts, Kamrup therefore accounted for the largest concentration of tenants.

The big landholders (mostly of high-caste origins) who had survived were quick to shift their loyalties to the new regime, and they tried to avail of modern education and other opportunities brought by it. Mauzadars, government servants and men of professions rose mostly from families with a landholding and high caste background. Those who were not were also quick to acquire land. Thus, the class of big landholders got extended and, in our period, it was constituted of two broad sections — (i) one backward-looking, with old roots and values, and (ii) another forward-looking, striking new roots and acquiring new values. The difference was, of course, more of culture than of roots, a degree of Anglicization and the generation gap making all that difference. In a contemporary satirical poem, the former were called dangariyas (country squires) and the latter, babus.⁵³ Both babus and dangariyas

52. The basic data for this paragraph are collated from Ward's 'Introduction', fn. 29, pp. lxxvii and xxxi; Assam District Gazetteers, fn. 37, pp. IV -166 and 262; Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, Appendix 3 - p. 71.

53. Mau (Assamese monthly, Calcutta), vol 1, 1886-87. In pre-British times, the epithet 'dangariya' was applicable to only members of the nobility. Later, its meaning was diluted to include also members of the gentry.

were found amongst the early Assamese tea planters; the fact that the latter did not know English was of no consequence in this respect. It was from the big landholding category of both varieties that the core of the modern Assamese middle class was born.

The economic basis of this class might be further elaborated with some illustrative materials. A deceased ^{Mauzadar} in 1870 reportedly left behind 5,000 acres of half and full rate paying lands, 50 pairs of plough bullocks, 50 bondsmen and 40 granaries.⁵⁴ Obviously, a part of the holding used to be cultivated on his own account, a part by his tenants, and the rest remained waste. Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin, of whom a reference was made, held around 1862 altogether 476 acres of land in several compact blocks. Of this, 301 acres were held on khiraj terms and ¹⁷⁵ acres on la-khiraj terms. These were most tenant-cultivated, while his own cultivation was carried on by 13 bondsmen. His lands were later to be divided amongst six heirs.⁵⁵ Or, take Madhavchandra Bardalai (1847-1907), a high-ranking government servant who was reportedly drawing Rs 800/- per month towards the end of the 19th century. For his 80-member household in Gauhati town, supplies of foodgrains were regularly drawn from his khats or estates. He had 15 to 16 bondsmen attached to this household 3 to 4 horse carriages, one elephant and 20 cows.⁵⁶

Another interesting case was that of one Hatibarua - impoverished scion of an Ahom noble family. His father was victimized and relieved of his privileges on charges of non-cooperation with British rule. Hatibarua himself

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54. Prafulla Chandra Barua, Uttamchandra Barua Jivani (in Assamese, Gauhati, 1962), p. 91. Being heavily indebted, the family lost most of its lands subsequently. The deceased Mauzadar's son, Uttamchandra, also became a Mauzadar and after 1897, he and his relatives were settled with about 464 acres of wastelands.
55. Sadar-Amin, fn. 15, pp. 230-31 and p. XV.
56. Nalinibala Devi, Eri Ahā Dinbor (in Assamese, Gauhati, 1976), pp. 3-5.

was however later appointed as a Mauzadar, but was soon dismissed on charges of revenue defalcation. Finally, as a result of the Abolition of Slavery Act, 1843, he lost all his slaves and began to live by selling his lands and ornaments. At the age of 70 in 1888, he was left with only 8 acres of land and a pair of plough buffaloes. Despite his having two adult sons, he was largely dependent for his cultivation on a hired ploughman and casual labour.⁵⁷ Yet he could no more be deemed as a landlord or even as a rich peasant by any standard. His dependence on hired labour for sowing and harvesting was largely because of the all-male composition of his household.

How big or small could a big landholder's own operational holding be? We have no data for an answer to this question. Surely it could vary according to circumstances like other collateral sources of income and soil quality. Writing about Kamrup in 1879, Hunter suggested:

"A farm of above a hundred bighas or thirty-three acres is considered to be a very large holding for a husbandman and anything below twenty bighas or seven acres is a small one. Sixty bighas or twenty acres make a very comfortable farm for a peasant family."⁵⁸

Taking the one from Hunter and also considering the fact that once-big landholdings remained no more so because of fragmentation by way of partitions and sales, we might perhaps suggest that all landholders of Kamrup, irrespective of their origins, who held 20 acres each, or above, could be deemed as constituting the category of big landholders. For other districts, this lower limit could be brought down to 15 acres. To cultivate that much of land at least three plough units would be necessary. Given the social context and origins of the big landholding estates, we could further point out that these landholders, even while having their own cultivation,

57. Dufferein Inquiry; Proc. No.10, n.47, Appendix C, data collected by Gunabhiram Barua, pp. 60-61.

58. Hunter, n. 7, p. 46.

did not contribute any manual labour. Besides, they also sublet to tenants. Hence, they could be deemed as landlords, and those who held 10 to 20 acres each in Kamrup and 7½ to 15 acres each in other districts could be deemed as petty or impoverished landlords, if they did not contribute any manual labour. But any attempt at putting them into a watertight compartment in isolation from rich peasants and middle classes would be self-defeating. The new and old classes were in a melting pot. Who were landlords and who were rich peasants. The caste factor could perhaps be taken as the dividing line. Landholders of the cultivating castes took their own cultivation more seriously and with greater personal involvement, while those of high castes increasingly shifted to middle class professions and services; both however meanwhile retaining their tenantry, in greater or lesser degree.

IV

THE SMALL LANDHOLDERS : THEIR PEASANT ECONOMY

Big landholders were not many in number; the numerous, unprivileged, small landholders accounted for almost all the temporarily-settled estates. Such estates numbered 525,082 in 1887-88, 545,145 in 1888-89, 645,419 in 1893-94 and 642,526 in 1895-96. A landholder did not necessarily have one estate only; in general, one had at least two estates representing, respectively, his decennial and annual leases. Besides, separate pottahs were often issued for detached parcels of land belonging to the same ryot, so that the number of so-called estates did not represent the number of peasant holdings. The average peasant holding was bigger in size than an average estate. On the basis of available related figures, we estimate it at about 5 to 6 acres.⁵⁹ The landholding peasantry could again be stratified into several strata - rich, middle and poor -- on the basis of some working criterion.

Many of the peasants owned and operated more than one plough, and some owned none. The overwhelming majority, however, were single-plough cultivators. A typical peasant held most of his lands on a decennial and some on an annual lease. The three types of land -- basti/bari (homestead/garden), rupit (wet) and faringati (dry) -- accounted, respectively, for 9, 54 and 37 per cent or so of an average holding.⁶⁰ If not endowed in the

59. See fn. 43. For the number of estates, the relevant Administration Reports for the Province of Assam. Near about 28 per cent of the estates were in Kamrup.

/relatively reliable

The earliest year for which we have data for the net cropped area in Assam Proper is 1882-83. In that year, the net acreage under crops other than tea was 1106 thousand acres. Dividing this figure by the number of non-plantation rural houses, as of 1881, we get 4.5 acres per house. Net cropped area per landholding household was actually a little more than this, since the total cultivated acreage remained under-reported because of concealments.

60. Commissioner's Revenue Report cited by Darrah in his letter to Secy. to the Chief Commissioner, dated Shillong, 22 May 1892 reproduced in Appendix A, Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, p. 44.

same manner, the cultivators tended to maintain the proportion through an adjusting process of mutual leasing-in and leasing-out of tiny plots. Leasing-in from the big landholders — i.e. the Lakhirajdars, Nisfkhirajdars, Chamuadars, Khatdars and other landed gentry like the Mauzadars — was one way of increasing their land resources.

The other way to get extra land was to break up some virgin lands and get these settled on an annual lease. By applying to an officer on the spot, any amount of such lands could be taken up and held in occupation by anybody as long as a revenue rate of 8 annas per bigha (as applicable to all faringati lands during the period 1867-1892) was paid by him. To encourage breaking up of wastelands, Rule 25 of the Resettlement Rules of 1892-93 provided that the lease of such wastelands would be continued for the first ten years of occupancy at this old rate, irrespective of their soil quality and the revised new rates.⁶¹

How big could a single-plough peasant farm be? A farm of 6 bighās/^{/in} Lakhimpur, 10 bighas in Nowgong and Darrang and 15 bighas in Kamrup was reckoned by Hunter as a very small one. A single pair of oxen was reportedly capable of cultivating about 12 to 18 bighas of land.⁶² Even such farms, when owned by men of high castes, invariably needed hired labour in some form or other, while the owners hired themselves out, whenever possible, for superior types of work or went into professions for a survival. Under these circumstances, those who operated holdings up to the size of 18 bighas (6 acres) could be deemed as poor peasants, some of them verging on the middle peasant category.

61. Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, p. 18.

62. Hunter, fn. 7, pp. 46, 131, 192-93, 255 and 373. Apparently, Hunter's observation/rupit lands under/sali variety requiring more intensive /the ploughing, the average capacity of a pair of oxen or a single buffalo could not have been more than 8 to 12 bighas. /was valid in respect of only the faringati lands. In the case of

Rural poverty largely stemmed from the fact that production was at a low and near-primitive level. It was largely a legacy of the past. Double-cropping and crop-rotation were practised only on a limited scale -- the former never exceeding 13 per cent of the net cropped acreage (other than under tea) -- while faringati lands continued to be largely subjected to shifting plough cultivation.⁶³ Yet, because of natural soil fertility, the average yield of threshed (but unhusked) paddy grain per acre could be favourably compared with that in other parts of India. This average came out to be 1512 lbs per acre (6.2 maunds per bigha) in the case of sali (aman) variety of rice and 1322 lbs per acre (5.4 mds per bigha) in the case of quick-maturing ahu (aush) rice.⁶⁴ Considerable scope of free grazing and collecting activities in forests and government wastelands, and ^{also the} pursuit of one or more of supplementary activities like spinning, weaving, sericulture, basketry etc. at the household level, hampered occupational specialization. Wrote Gunabhiram Barua in 1888 - "Caste system is very lax. We are our own barbers, basket-makers, washermen, oilmen, drummers etc." Even potters, blacksmiths and fishermen who represented specialized groups were part-time cultivators. Take the case of Juvon Dom, 56, head of an 11-member household. He claimed fishing as his main occupation that sustained his family for about 3 months of the year. Yet he had a pair of bullocks and 14 bighas of self-cultivated land -- all this again of non-faringati quality -- which supplied him with part of his paddy requirements. Besides, raw cotton bought in the market was spun and woven into cloth by female members of the family for home use. A lag in efficiency was obvious in this case, because of the lack of specialization. For, Juvon complained that the family could not afford two meals a day for at least a month in the lean season.⁶⁵

63. See Table 11 in A. Guha, "Socio-economic changes in agrarian Assam", M. Chaudhuri, ed., Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871-1961 (Simla, 1969), for the early official source data on double-cropping.

64. The average yield was worked out from 1896 experimental cuttings in the first case and 703 such cuttings in the second case. The highest yield was found to be ~~xxxxxxx~~ over 3,200 lbs per acre (about 12.3 mds per bigha). - Duffrein Inquiry, Proc. No.10, fn. 47, pp. 2-3.

65. Data collected by G. Barua, *ibid*, Appendix C, pp. 55-56.

It was difficult to decide who was a rich, poor or middle peasant, simply on the basis of his holding size or the hiring-in/hiring-out criterion. Take the case of Kolaram Ganak, about 60, and head of a 9-member household, in the village of Bokagaon near Dharamtul in Nowgong. The household had about 43 bighas of land, all self-cultivated with 3 bullocks and 3 buffaloes. It was indeed described as "very well-to-do" and debt-free. Women of the household, as usual with all Assamese families, did a little weaving with home-made raw silk and cotton yarn bought from the market. Around 1888, even this household, rather than hiring-in, was casually hiring out male labour to nearby tea gardens for augmenting its cash resources.⁶⁶ It was surely not poor and, could be put into the middle peasant category. Or, take the case of Jinaram Kakati, 46, head of a 16-member family. Had about 44 bighas of self-cultivated land and enough buffalo and bullock power to cultivate that much. Like Ganak he, too, produced a variety of crops aiming at self-sufficiency while marketing only a small surplus. His homestead garden products were partly sold and partly bartered for salt. Family members pressed mustard-seeds for oil at home by using a crude wooden device. They also carried on spinning and weaving, on a considerable scale, and collected firewood from unreserved forests to meet part of household needs. He was fairly well-to-do no doubt. Though indebted to the extent of Rs. 40, he had Rs. 146 worth of jewellery and Rs. 46 worth of silk clothes. Though he employed considerable amount of hired labour-this probably because of his caste status -- by no means did he fulfil the requirements of an enterprising farmer. Towards religious purposes he spent annually about Rs.35 - a sum equivalent to what he paid as land revenue. Hence, his savings were obviously not spent on farm improvements.⁶⁷

66. Data Collected by H.Z. Darrah, *ibid*, Appendix C, pp. 46 - 49.

67. Data Collected by G. Barua, *ibid*, Appendix C, pp. 53-55.

The burden of land revenue as a proportion of the gross produce could be as high as one-half in some exceptional cases, as was pointed out in 1853 by Dhekiyal-Phukan. In general, however, it was surely decreasing with the rising prices of agricultural commodities. After the resettlement of 1892-93, while the average value-product per bigha of wet rice lands could be roughly estimated at anything between Rs. 5 and Rs. 7, the relevant land revenue rate was Re 1 per bigha, i.e., an equivalent of one-fifth to one-seventh of the gross produce or near about that.⁶⁸ What was more important a consideration for the peasant, however, was the proportion it bore to his marketable surplus. The estimated cash requirements of Kolaram Ganak, for example, were said to total up to about Rs. 130. Of this a little over one-fourth was needed to meet the land revenue demand; and the rest, for the purchase of certain necessities like salt, tobacco, cloths, sugar, oil, cotton yarn and bell-metal vessels. It was to meet his cash requirements that he produced a surplus for the market.⁶⁹ In his household, none was addicted to opium.

The burden of land revenue was heaviest on the poor peasants, since they had negligible or no marketable surplus over the costs of production. The land revenue demand therefore was hardly met by most

68. The difference between the prices of unhusked paddy and husked rice was quite high because of the labour shortage phenomenon. The price received by the actual peasants was also much lower than the price at which businessmen sold to the non-peasant sector. In 1838, a village trader was buying unhusked paddy at 10 annas a md and, at the same time, selling clean rice at Rs. 2/- per md. For stray data on paddy being sold at 10 annas per md in that year see Dufferein Inquiry : No. 10, no. 47, Appendix C, pp. 37, 48-49 and 57-58. This was accepted as the average price by Darrah in his note.

69. See fn. 66.

peasants out of a real surplus. What they brought to the market was at the cost of not even profits but ~~also~~ bare subsistence; sometimes, even the seed grain. In other words, the State as landlord not only took away, by and large, the differential rent, but, also often encroached on profits if any. It even encroached upon the peasantry's subsistence in most cases. As a result, in most cases, land had no value; there was no land market as such. One of the investigators for the Dufferein Inquiry observed : "Feringati land is hardly ever sold, but when there is competition, Rs. 1-8 per acre or one year's revenue is the usual price." Even rupit lands of inferior quality fetched about the same price and those of good quality only upto Rs 15 an acre.⁷⁰ It was at the time of paying the land revenue, and in lean months, that the cultivators borrowed from the traders, landlords and rich peasants.

70. Observations of S. C. Banerjee cited by Darrah, Dufferein Inquiry : Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, p. 9.

V

FORMS OF HIRED LABOUR

The scope of hiring labour was limited. The three forms of resorting to non-household labour were (i) mutual cooperation, (ii) bonded labour and (iii) wage labour. Of these, the first was widely practised by peasants when household labour was not found enough for the timely completion of harvesting or sowing operation or for house-building. On such occasions, co-villagers -- if formally approached -- were custom-bound to help their neighbours and were in return entertained with refreshments or a feast. For the landlord and rich peasant economy, however, bonded labour emerged as the most important form.

In pre-British Assamese society, an estimated five to nine per cent of the population were in the unfree or bonded labour category, their customary status ranging from agrestic slavery and serfdom to that of mortgaged labour and dependent tenancy.⁷¹ Agrestic slavery was not practised in its classical form. Hence, slaves, serfs and unredeemed mortgaged labour could hardly be distinguished from each other. The official informants of the Indian Law Commission on Slavery therefore put most of them in the broad slave category.⁷² The case of dependent tenantry being different, a discussion on their status is postponed to another section of this paper.

Formal abolition of slavery in 1845 did not bring an end to this practice. Though legally free, many erstwhile slaves and their children continued to work for their masters as before for yet another generation. The medieval practice of extending credit on the mortgage of one's labour power had not lost its legitimacy either. Its legitimacy was, on the

71. See A. Guha, "Land rights and social classes in medieval Assam", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 3, Sept. 1966, pp. 230-33.

72. Report from the Indian Law Commissioners Relative to Slavery in the East Indies (Parliamentary Paper, Vol. 28, 1841), pp. 96-98, 405 and Appendix VI, Nos 1-5; Robinson, fn. 1, pp. 279-80.

contrary, enhanced by the introduction of apparently similar practices also in the modern sector of the economy. Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859 (in force until 1926) and Sections 490 and 492 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, which were introduced to help European employers in solving their labour and servant problem, may be mentioned in this context. The Transport of Native Labourers' Act, 1863 and its amendments, the Inland Emigration Act, 1882 and its amendments and the Assam Labour and Immigration Act, 1901 -- in fact, a whole series of labour legislation was directed towards legitimizing and extending a bonded (indentured) form of labour in the Assam plantations. Hence, no surprise that the traditional bonded labour forms were tolerated and even allowed to continue in the peasant sector to provide moral sanction to the indentured labour system of the plantation sector. In the given situation of a limited market growth, an exacting land revenue demand and a profit-motivated opium excise policy, peasants often had to borrow cash on the mortgage of their own labour power. Sometimes, one's labour was mortgaged so that his brother or father could get funds to buy a bullock or redeem his mortgaged land. Of the bonded labourers, only some were ex-slaves; all others were poor peasants. If the sum borrowed was heavy, chances of redemption were generally remote. In the Census of 1891, 3,009 persons in Kamrup and 857 in the rest of Assam Proper were recorded as belonging to the occupational category of farm servants -- most of them presumably bonded -- and their dependants.

Under the Bandhā system of labour, a loan was advanced on a written agreement and sometimes without it. The borrower, as bonded under the system, tilled the owner's land and worked as a general servant, getting allowance of the interest and a monthly deduction from the principal. If he was neither fed nor clothed, the deduction allowed was relatively large. But it did not generally exceed two rupees a month, the actual amount varying with other circumstances. In other cases, i.e. when the Bandhā was fed

and/or clothed, the deduction was much less. Around 1888, an able-bodied man, who was fed but not clothed by his master, had to work for 20 months towards settling an advance of Rs.20/-. In this case, a month's wage was deemed equivalent to the food, interest and a rupee in cash. If he borrowed Rs 40, then he was credited with only 12 annas per month, as the interest on the debt was larger. If the borrower was both fed and clothed, or if the borrowed sum far exceeded Rs 40, then the borrower often got nothing deducted from the principal sum; he had to work in lieu of interest alone. Under such circumstances, he could be redeemed from his bondage only if somebody came forward on his behalf to repay the principal amount. His condition therefore differed little from that of a permanent bondsman.⁷³

Under the Marakiyā system of labour, the service of one's plough bullocks or buffaloes was lent out to a needy peasant during the ploughing season. The borrower ploughed the lender's land for two days and his own land for one day, and in that proportion for the whole season. When only one bullock was borrowed, he worked for one day in three days for the lender and two days for himself. Often, because of untimely or inadequate ploughing, his own cultivation yielded poor results.

The Marakiyā was bound to work for the lender during the ploughing season only — that, too, for limited days and only the morning hours, the traditional ploughing time. For the remaining free time, he could mind his own business or work for others. What form of labour did he then represent, bonded or free? According to John Butler, the Marakiyā was not an equal of his employer; neither was he a servant, nor a slave, "but partaking of all". According to Gunabhiram Barua, he was essentially a free labourer. However, as long as he remained plough-poor and hence had to repeatedly

73. Dufferein Inquiry, Proc. No.10, fn.47, notes submitted by S.C. Banerjee and G. Barua, -pp.7-8 and 32.

resort to the Marakiyā arrangement, his cultivation went on deteriorating from bad to worse. Plough-rich competitors for his service in the neighbourhood were also not many. Hence, he often became totally dependent on his patron and, in that case, he was only slightly in a better situation than a Bandhā. Often in lieu of the service of his master's plough, the Marakiyā was given the produce of a certain portion of the latter's field.⁷⁴

Some illustrative materials are provided by the Dufferein Inquiry into the conditions of "the lower classes of population" that was conducted in 1886. Of the 32 individual households covered by the Inquiry in Assam Proper, one had no land at all and was totally ruined, and ten were found to be associated with one or the other form of bonded labour or both. In Table - 3, household size, landholding, the number of draught animals and cows owned and the estimated cash requirements for land revenue and opium for these latter ten households are shown. Of these ten households, all indebted to a varying degree and half of them opium consumers, two had a pair of bullocks each, three had one bullock each and five had none. Given their meagre land resources and crop yields, the burden of land revenue -- and, in four cases, also of rent payable to private landlords -- was anything but light. In the case of all the five opium-addicted households, the opium excise made the burden of cash obligations all the more crushing. Two households offered their male labour on both Marakiyā and Bandhā terms; six, only on Marakiyā terms and two, only on Bandhā terms. Besides, those family members, who were not bonded, worked also for wages, whenever some work was found.

Three of the ten cases may be closely looked into. Tokaru Kalita, 25, head of a 4-member family, was the poorest man in his village, Balasidhi in the Chaygaon Mauza of Kamrup, except for a lone beggar. The family got only part subsistence from their three bighas of self-cultivated lands. Tokaru had executed a stamped bond for a loan of Rs.100 from a Marwari trader. As per

74. Ibid, pp. 7-8, 32 and 32n. Captain John Butler, Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam (London, 1854), pp. 228-29.

agreement, Tokaru's brother worked as a general servant and cartman for the latter. He was allowed interest and an annual deduction of Rs 12 towards the loan settlement; the employer neither fed nor clothed him. Another brother was a Tahsildar's bonded servant against a loan of Rs. 40. He received food, clothings, allowance of interest and an annual deduction of Rs 6 towards the repayment. For the household's third loan of Rs 12, there was no such labour mortgage involved. The first loan was utilized to settle old paternal debts; the second, for paying land revenue and buying some necessaries like paddy; and the third, for buying paddy. Finally, Tokaru's pair of bullocks being old, he was considering whether to mortgage his own labour also. In this particular case, opium addiction was a major cause of impoverishment, though not the sole one.⁷⁵

But, even when free from opium addiction, other poor households hardly fared better. Settlement of an old paternal debt cost Mihiram Keot, 45, head of a 4-member family, as much as half of his 20 bighas of paternal lands, besides a milch cow with calf and a cash sum of Rs. 5. His own debt of Rs. 20 to a Brahmin shopkeeper, whom he was supposed to serve in bondage, had also to be finally liquidated by mortgaging the remaining 10 bighas. Later, as his only pair of bullocks had to be sold off at Rs. 30 to meet the expenses of the belated legitimization of his marriage under social pressure, he ended up as a Marakiyā of the village Gaonburha. The household's remaining assets consisted of a few bighas of land belonging to his wife, Rs. 15 worth of gold ornaments, Rs. 12 worth of clothes, about Rs. 9 worth of brass and bell-metal utensils, a loom valued Re 1 and a dao valued 8 as.⁷⁶

75. Data collected by H. Z. Darrah, Dufferein Inquiry : Proc. No. 10, N. N., Appendix C, pp. 41 - 42.

76. Data collected by S.C. Banerjee, Appendix C, *ibid*, pp. 70-72.

A 9-member Household, one of the four poorest in the village of Rangagora in Nowgong, was ruined by two successive crop failures due to vagaries of weather. To supplement income, the householder not only worked for wages, but also gathered a second picking (do-dalia) from the paddy shoots of others' harvested fields and even begged. To pay the land revenue, he used to borrow every year Rs 8 from a trader by pledging his musterd-seed crop at a price stipulated in advance. Because of the crop failure, his outstanding debt to the trader increased to Rs 16. He had also to borrow another Rs 4 for buying paddy. Owing only one bullock, he had to enter into Marakiya terms for the service of another. Amongst his assets were 10 bighas of land, a plough, a loom, two mats for furniture, some Rs 6 worth of brass and bell-metal utensils, clothings of an estimated value of Rs 12 and no jewellery. His eldest son, aged 10, went naked.⁷⁷

Examples need not be multiplied to describe the situation. Both labour and capital were relatively scarce -- the latter perhaps more -- in relation to land. Paucity of capital rather than of land was the main cause of peasants' impoverishment. Those who had spare draught animals or enough cash to advance were alone able to have a secure supply of hired labour. Amongst the employers were not only the big landholders including the Mauzadars, Tahsildars and Mandals but also cultivating Brahmin priests, village traders and rich peasants. Monetization and penetration of merchant capital into the rural economy were new factors that tended to sustain the incidence of bondage amongst the peasants. It remained the main labour form.

Contemporary observers noted that the wage rates for free agricultural labour were relatively high, since such labour was scarce. While bonded male labour was used for ploughing -- a masculine job, it was female wage labour which was sought after for sowing, transplanted, paddy-husking

77. *ibid*, pp. 72-74. Some of the value estimates in this case are ours and are based on stray price data found elsewhere in the same source.

and, largely, also for harvesting operations. Wage payment was made mainly in kind and, to some extent, also in money. The usual ~~mode~~ payment in Kamrup for a day's work around 1888 was one seer of rice and about 8 to 9 seers of paddy -- all this worth 3 annas -- for paddy-reaping; and one seer of rice and two seers of mustard-seed -- together worth 4 annas -- for gathering the mustard-crop. Sometimes, the payment was made in the form of the produce of half of a bigha of good land, which was equivalent to about Rs 4, for transplanting or reaping work during the season. As one could work intermittently for four to five employers during the same period, the arrangement was no worse than the daily rate. These wage-rates were indeed not low by current standards. For, the daily wage rate paid for road work by the PWD was 4 annas per day, and the rate paid in plantations to free labour near about the same. In the case of indentured labour, it was even less than the stipulated minimum wage of Rs 5 for men per month and Rs 4 for women.⁷⁸

Contemporary observers highlighted the fact that there was no agricultural labour class as such in Assam Proper. Yet one finds that poor peasants, belonging to the Boro-Kachari tribe (a plains tribe of Kamrup and Darrang) were quite mobile in search of unskilled wage jobs. Almost all tea gardens employed, to some extent, local labour, mostly Boro-Kachari by ethnicity. In 1901, for instance, 14,000 Boro-Kachari labourers were found working in plantations. Many worked on roads and other contract jobs. In the late winter, Boro-Kachari villagers in large numbers used to cross over from Darrang to Nowgong to be employed by Marwari mustard-seed traders as their porters.⁷⁹ Some of them were also found on the construction sites of the railways and the Post and Telegraph Department.

78. Dufferein Inquiry, Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, pp. 8-13; the 1883-1899 annual average figures for tea garden wages obtained during inspections cited in Proceedings of the Indian Legislative Council, 1901, vol. 40, p. 94.

79. See fn. 37 and Dufferein Inquiry: Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, pp. 8-13.

However, the supply of Boro-Kachari labour for wage work was not steady. Nor was it available without payment of an advance and a wage higher than what was paid to indentured labour. They went out for such work generally with a view to saving enough for paying the customary bride-price or meeting the land revenue demand. As soon as the purpose was fulfilled, they reverted to personal cultivation.

To sum up, all those who took up wage work did so on a casual basis. Generally, surplus members of large-sized peasant families and widows, children and such persons as were turned into paupers, were available for wage work. Such employment was relatively more in vogue in Kamrup than in any other district, for this simple reason that, relatively, more of landlords and Brahmins were there in the former district. According to Darrah's note on the "condition of the people of Assam",— "The women of poorer classes ... are largely employed by the wealthier cultivators in transplanting paddy. In Kamrup the boys and youngmen of a village earn something almost every year by turning cane mills. Larger cultivators regularly employ their poorer neighbours in cutting paddy and sometimes in ploughing."⁸⁰

Easy availability of land on ownership or tenancy terms inhibited the growth of an agricultural labour class as such from within the Assamese society. In fact, only 368 persons in Kamrup and 364 in the rest of Assam Proper were found — dependants inclusive — in the occupational class of field labourers at the Census of 1891. Even if under-reported, this was not far off the mark. By the turn of the century, however, time-expired indentured tea garden workers began, in trickles, to swell the ranks of agricultural labour, particularly, in the tea districts.

80. *ibid*, fn. 47, p. 13.

The Dufferein Inquiry illustrates how wage labour was employed in the peasant sector. The case of a Brahmin cultivator of village Chalchali in Nowgong who had only part sustenance from his 21 bighas of owned lands -- all of non-faringati quality -- provides us with an interesting illustration of how various labour forms could be combined in one and the same farm. Besides supervising cultivation, he and his brother practised, respectively, as a village physician and a priest. They employed one ploughman, paying him the produce of 4 bighas on an annual basis and another, paying him Rs 6 in cash for the season. They also contributed Rs 3 annually towards sharing the service of a village cowherd. Half-a-bigha was leased-out at a cash rent which was double the land revenue rate payable to the government. Besides, 56 women reapers were engaged during the season, their total wage-bill amounting to Rs 7.88, i.e., 2.25 annas per reaper.⁸¹ In most parts of Assam Proper excepting Kamrup, even women of Brahmin and other high-caste families generally took part in sowing and transplanting and, to a lesser degree, also in reaping. For menfolk of these castes, ploughing was not socially permitted, but many other agricultural operations were.

81. Data collected by G. Barua, *ibid*, Appendix C, pp. 61-62.

VI

TENANTRY

Tenancy as a form of labour had pre-British origins, since land grantees in former times were also permanently assigned portions of the subject population to render henceforth their services to these grantees instead of to the State. At the same time, many slaves were gradually transformed into serfs and, then in due course, into tenants-at-will. The lingering Civil War (1770 - 1806) and the chaos of Burmese incursions (1817-25) intensified this transformation process. After the British conquest, therefore, large bodies of tenants were found, mostly in compact blocks, in the surviving landed estates; they were paying rent in one form or other to their landlords. For instance, two estates -- one held by a Brahmin preceptor and another by a temple -- accounted, between them, for no less than a thousand tenants in 1863.⁸²

Originally, such tenants owed labour services and/or in-kind payments to their landlords. In due course, particularly in the period of rapid monetization in the 19th century, these obligations were largely converted into their money equivalents. This was facilitated, amongst others, by two factors -- (i) that the rate-paying section of the landlords had themselves to pay their dues to the Government in cash and (ii) that landlords in general needed cash also for other purposes like consumption of newly-introduced manufactured goods and ^{for} children's education. Realization of rent in cash was particularly convenient for absentee landlords. The growing administrative towns with new job facilities were attracting many such landlords. By the 1880s, therefore, almost all the tenants were found paying a cash rent, supplemented by only token services and in-kind payments. Share-cropping or produce-rent (adhi) prevailed only to a marginal extent; that, too, only in the case of rupit lands in densely-populated tracts where such lands were valuable.

82. Phatikchandra Barooah "Enquiries into the status of cultivating ryots in la-khiraj and nisf-khiraj estates in Kamrup" dated 13 March 1863 to D. C. Kamrup (Transcript Nos. 244 and 255, Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati.)

It is somewhat puzzling that, despite conditions of land abundance, the incidence of tenancy was on the increase, during the British period. This was however due to a complex causation. A tendency towards accumulation of leases in the hands of those who had ready money, such as pleaders and government servants, was observed in the vicinities of towns as early as 1868. They needed tenants.⁸³ Middlemen like Mauzadars also found tenancy convenient for getting their newly-acquired lands cultivated. Liberated slaves, runaway tea garden coolies and dispossessed indebted peasants were amongst those who welcomed such rehabilitation on tenancy terms. Besides, as Dhekiyal-Phukan and Mills had noted, many ryots were in the habit of making fictitious transfer of their pottahs to influential middlemen, whom they themselves chose as their patrons with Government connivance. Their purpose in doing so was to avoid facing the rapacious tax-gatherers directly. The same phenomenon was noted also by Darrah in his note in 1868. In that process the ryots were often gradually reduced to the status of tenants, and their patrons were transformed into Khatdars and Chamuadars.⁸⁴

There were other instances of how the Government complicated matters. Privileged landholders were at one time encouraged to make their estates compact by exchanging with the Government some of their outlying plots and, in that bargain, erstwhile Government ryots lost their well-recognized occupancy rights to become landlords' tenants-at-will.⁸⁵

As to the extent of tenancy, no data at all are available for the period prior to the 1880s. The cadastral survey operations of 1863-93 "ascertained that about 18 per cent of the settled area" was leased-out in the district of Kamrup "but in no other district it exceeded 6 per cent."⁸⁶

83. Dufferein Inquiry : Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, p. 5.

84. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn.4, p. xxxvii; Mills, *ibid*, pp. 17-18; Dufferein Inquiry : Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, p. 6.

85. Baden-Powell, fn. 3, pp. 410, 416 and 416n.

86. Consolidated tenancy statement appended to letter from Director of Land Records, No.4883 dated 1 Nov 1893, Revenue A Proceedings, cited in Ward's "Introduction", fn. 29, pp. xxxii and xxxiii.

At the end of the century, the proportion of leased-out to total settled area was officially estimated at about 25 per cent for Kamrup, 9 per cent for Darrang and 7 per cent for Sibsagar. It remained still below 6 per cent in Nowgong and Lakhimpur. The number of tenants including dependants, as recorded by the authorities in the latter four districts, increased from 23,128 in 1891 to 49,662 by 1901. For Kamrup the relevant number in 1891 was 77,683, but we have no comparable figure for any subsequent date. All these data lack precision and were perhaps not exhaustive, because of administrative failings on the part of the enquiring authorities.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, they are adequate for indicating the trend. In more populous and more landlord-infested Kamrup, the number of tenants and their working dependants could perhaps be roughly estimated at no less than a lac and a half, around 1901. In 1891, the tenants and their dependants constituted 15.7 per cent of the district's agricultural population in Kamrup, while it was 1 per cent in Lakhimpur and less than 4 per cent in any other district (see Table - 4).

The aforesaid data also establish the fact that tenancy arrangements were made, in most cases, under the Chukāni system, i.e., on the basis of a cash rent. Of the total leased-out area in the individual districts, 98.3 per cent in Lakhimpur, 90.3 per cent in Darrang and 89.5 per cent in Nowgong related to the Chukāni form of tenancy, while the corresponding percentage shares accounted for by the Ādhi or produce-sharing system were 1.7 per cent, and 10.5 per cent, respectively, in these districts.⁸⁸ Even in Kamrup and Sibsagar, the Chukāni or cash rent continued to be the predominant form of tenant obligations. One variant of the system was Khanduā, i.e., leasing-out for one crop season only. This was practised on a petty scale by peasants who, for one reason or other, were not in a position to cultivate all their lands

87. Assam District Gazetteers, fn.37, pp. IV-166, V-165-6, VI-155-6, VII-169-70, VIII-213-14; E.A. Gait, Census of India: 1891 Assam, Ch.XI - P. 300.

88. Assam District Gazetteers, fn. 37, pp. IV-166, V-165-6, VI-156-6, VII-169-70, and VIII-213-4.

in a particular year or season.⁸⁹

Another significant fact that was highlighted, again and again, by British officials on the spot was that the money rates of rent did not useually exceed the Government Khiraaj rates, except in the case of valuable lands.⁹⁰ A margin was therefore left to the concerned rent-receiving landlords only when they held land revenue-free or at half rates. In other words, usually the Lakhirajdars and Nisfkhiraajdars alone enjoyed such a margin, and not the Chamuadars and Khatdars. The latter were in some cases compensated with a 10 per cent commission on the collection. In such cases, they paid their revenue dues directly to the Government and not through any Mauzadar.

However, there were other sources of gains for all of them. Land was not infrequently measured up by the landlord with a shorter rod than what was standard; this in itself could have yielded a 25 to 30 per cent gain. Chukāni tenants were also often called upon to pay various ~~esses~~ such as salami (8 as. to Rs 2), camp expenses or bahā-kharach (6 as.), puja and wedding expenses, etc., which went to swell the normal rent dues. As a matter of long-standing convention, the tenants had also to provide labour services at call and beckon or for a stipulated number of days in the year. The Assam Administration Report for the year 1882-83 summed up the situation as follows:

"Landholders' profit consists in working of his own home farm lands and in the command of his tenants' services for supplies, carriage and 'housebuilding' and for repairing and harvesting crops in his home farm, and in such occasional contributions as he is able to levy."⁹¹

89. "Note 3 by J. Knox Wight, Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar" in Dufferein Inquiry: Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, p. 30.

90. Durrerein Inquiry, Proc. No. 10, fn. 47, p. 6; Assam Valley Reassessment Report, fn. 35, Appendix-A, p. 44.

91. Assam District Gazetteers, fn. 37, pp. IV-167, V - 165 and VII - 169-70; quote from Assam Administration Report, 1882-83 cited by Baden-Powell, fn. 3, p. 406.

Until the end of the 19th century, the ādhi system was of marginal importance in Assam Proper excepting for Kamrup. Though not the major form of rent payment even in the latter district, its incidence was nonetheless found to be "considerable" by Darrah. There were variations in the operation of the system from district to district. Nevertheless, the essential features of the system could be generalized as follows. Firstly, no extra payments in kind or cash, over and above the stipulated produce-share, were generally called for. Secondly, the system was generally associated with only the rupit variety of land. For it was only productive wet lands that could be leased out on ādhi terms. Payment of Government revenue remaining the landlord's responsibility, the principle of half shares was implemented with modifications, varying according to such circumstances as soil fertility and respective contributions of the two parties involved. Consequently, five distinct forms of produce-sharing were there :-

- i) bokā-ādhi or division of the field in equal parts, after ^{/tenant} the/ had cultivated the land up to the stage of puddling, each party taking charge of its part thereafter.
- ii) gāchch-ādhi or equal division of the standing crop on the fields, each party reaping and transporting its own share;
- iii) dāl-ādhi or equal division of the harvested bundles, each party threshing and transporting its own share;
- iv) guti-ādhi or equal division of the threshed grain, each party taking thereafter its own share; and
- v) chukti-ādhi (thika-ādhi) or the handing over to the landlord of a fixed quantum of grain.⁹²

92. This classification is based on a note submitted to the Director of Land Records and Agriculture and reproduced in Assam District Gazetteers, fn. 37, pp. V - 164-65.

Clearly, the last-mentioned form of crop-sharing resembled the Chukāni rather than the ādhi in the matter of the fixity of the rent.

In practice, the rent burden under different forms of ādhi tended to be the same as that under the chukāni form through adjustments like landlords' contributions towards seeds or transplantation costs or both. The resultant real difference, was not therefore always as great as it appeared to be in form. All rent payments, whether at rates equivalent to or double the Government rates or at half the gross produce, were complicated also by such factors as loans to be realized during the tenancy period, landlord's contribution towards bullock power in use and, in the case of privileged estates, survivals of old, feudal practices. Under the circumstances, both chukāni and ādhi tenants were pushed, more or less, to the verge of or below the same subsistence level.

As the paddy price and the demand for good lands were rising, lease terms under both the systems tended to be more and more stringent over the years. In thickly populated tracts -- such as Khata and West Banghag in Kamrup, Sipajhar in Darrang, Chalchali in Nowgong and Morabazar in Sibsagar -- and in areas close to towns and ex-tea garden coolies' settlements, lands were often leased-out at Rs 2 to Rs 3 a bigha, or at two to five times the Government rates. Ex-tea garden coolies, in particular, were among the highest rate payers. They preferred to settle down near tea gardens, so that they could supplement their ^{/farm} incomes with wages earned as casual and seasonal plantation workers. For them it was more economic to pay high rents than moving out to distant government waste lands.

93

Whether operating one plough or more, the full tenants were worse-off than the owner-cultivators on two counts. Firstly, they had more often than not a bigger rent burden to bear (in cash and kind put together) and, secondly,

they lacked any occupancy and transfer rights. Concentrated as they were in compact blocks in big landholders' estates, the bulk of the tenantry constituted a dependent peasantry. Amongst extra-economic means that obliged them to submit to their landlords' exactions were the weight of custom and religious ties. Those who were only part-tenants and who leased-in lands from small landholders were relatively free, provided they were not in debt bondage.

The 1888 data furnish us with examples of two fairly independent tenants in contrasting economic positions. Pura Bar-Kalita, 25, head of a 5-member family, of village Pub-Sitara in mauza Panduri of Kamrup, owned 17 bibhas of non-rupit land. From three different sources he also leased-in 3 bighas and 12 bighas of rupit lands, paying rents equivalent to Government Khiraj rates for the first two lots and half produce for the third lot. The two last-mentioned lots, i.e., 20 bighas in all, or half of his operational holding, were taken from a Nisfkhirajdar. Pura had two pairs of plough bullocks, but one he lost very recently due to cattle disease. He could also afford a boy servant serving him in debt-bondage. These and other details suggest that Pura was rightly described as "fairly well-to-do" by Darrah who visited him on 17 April 1888. Pura borrowed Rs 60 (part from a relative and part from a Marwari) interest-free and, at the same time, lent to a fellow tribal peasant a sum of Rs 20 on interest at the usual rate of one anna per month per rupee. These facts also indicate Pura's viability. Land revenue and cash rent he paid, together, accounted for more than one-fifth of his estimated cash requirements amounting to Rs 101.⁹⁴

Gopal Katani, 28, head of a 3-member family, in village Teliagaon of Nowgong, had neither land of his own nor cattle. He leased-in 7 bighas of non-rupit lands at rents equivalent to Government Khiraj rates and had just broken up two bighas of virgin lands for an annual settlement. He had to

94. Data collected by Darrah, Dufferein Inquiry: Prod. No. 10, fn. 47, appendix C, pp. 49-51.

cultivate these lands with borrowed bullocks on Marakiyā terms. Under such circumstances, it was difficult for him to meet his cash requirements, the rent alone amounting to Rs 6. He had even to borrow two maunds of paddy for consumption. One way of earning extra cash for him was to cut fuel-wood and thatching-grass in the forest for sale. Both Pura and Gopal were tenants. But the former had still some potentiality of growing into a rich peasant if circumstances so favoured, while the latter was on the precarious margin of mere existence with two bare meals a day.⁹⁵

Whether their landlords were big or small, institutional or otherwise, no tenant enjoyed any kind of legal rights of occupancy and transfer over the lands they tilled. They were merely tenants-at-will, though protected to some extent only by custom, and remained so all over Assam Proper until the Assam (Temporarily Settled Districts) Tenancy Act, 1935 came into force in 1937. Under such conditions, how was it that the tenants accepted the given burdens of rent rather than moving out to the virgin lands that were available within a reasonable distance at relatively cheaper rates? The official explanation was that peasants opted for tenancy often because of habitual indolence. They did not supposedly like to undertake all the troubles of the timely marketing of their crops for paying the two date-bound land revenue instalments or of keeping records, which hazards were incidental to ryotwari landholdings. Inadequacy of this explanation is obvious. The relevant point to note is that rupit lands, in particular, had no abundant supply. Available wastelands in their natural conditions were all of non-rupit variety, and these could sometimes be converted into rupit lands only by human enterprise. Reclamation of jungle-infested lands itself for cultivation, not to speak of their conversion into rupit, needed some investment. In fact big-scale reclamation became feasible and viable only after 1911. It was then that the means of communication and the conditions of supply of labour and rural credit improved. But by then, there appeared

95. Data collected by S.C. Banerjee, *ibid*, appendix C, pp. 75 - 78.

other competitors of the scene - the immigrant peasants from East Bengal who were more competent for the job.⁹⁶ Yet another point to note is that those Tahsils and the Mauzas where the incidence of tenancy was high were also areas of high population density, with not much wastelands in their vicinity.

Other factors impeding the mobility of the Assamese tenantry were the debt bondage and the religious links they had with their landlords, many of whom represented the temples and monasteries. Besides, the patron-client relationship often gave a feeling of security to the tenant against all other odds, which security was not there for the small landholding peasant. Some peasants therefore preferred security in bondage to freedom with insecurity.

It is also often asked why the tenants and other poor peasants did not move out for wage employment into the neighbouring tea gardens? Obviously, the income differential, if any, and conditions of service offered by the plantations were not found sufficiently attractive or congenial by them. In other words, the reservation price of local agricultural labour was high. Throughout our period, some Assamese peasants did go out to work in the plantations, but generally only at a wage rate higher than what the indentured coolie received. They also tended to quit the plantations at the approach of the sowing season or after they had saved sufficiently to go back to their old vocations. Under the circumstances, there was no reason why the Assamese peasants would continue to be sought after by the planters. The latter were interested in getting much cheaper and more controllable labour from

outside the province. Meanwhile local labour, particularly from Kamrup and Mangaldai subdivision, continued to go in and out of the plantations in trickles.

Tenancy got extended also through the settlement of out-of-contract ex-plantation labourers on privately-held wastelands. Tea planters and other private landholders increasingly rented out their surplus lands to this category of men. Even some plantation workers, whose names were still on the muster rolls, were given plots of land for cultivation by their employers. By leasing out lands in these ways, the planters received not only a small extra income, but also the advantage of a tighter control over their labour supply.⁹⁷ The Government of India appreciated this fact and thought of exempting the tea planters when, in the 1890s, they proposed measures to check the growing practice of subletting in Assam, as a matter of general policy.⁹⁸ Subletting of surplus plantation lands began in our period, but came into prominence only during the next century.

97. Guha, fn. 40, pp.14 and 101-2.

98. Govt. of India to Chief Commissioner, Assam, No.2678-129-5, dated 17 Sept. 1895, Assam Secretariat File No. Rev. A. Oct., 1898, Nos.87, 88 and 96.

VII

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION : ITS NATURE

Differentiation in the 19th century Assamese agrarian society, however, did not proceed far, and the secondary and tertiary sectors of its economy continued to provide livelihood to only a small proportion of the population. This was evident from the pattern of population distribution over the broad occupational classes of the 1891 census. According to this Census, as much as 85 per cent of the population in the Brahmaputra Valley (i.e. Assam Proper and Goalpara) subsisted on agriculture (pasturing inclusive), while the corresponding figure for the two Bengali-speaking Surma Valley districts (Sylhet and Cachar) was only 70 per cent. In other words, the proportion of people supported by the non-agricultural sectors in the Brahmaputra Valley was only 15 per cent or just half of what prevailed in the Province's Bengali-speaking region.⁹⁹

Even this sectoral breakdown did not adequately reflect the rusticity of the then Assamese society. One-third to one-half of the persons included in the non-agricultural sectors were partly dependent for their subsistence upon agriculture. Similarly, most of the agricultural households, too, were partly dependent for their living on handicrafts. If this was the situation, urbanization worth its name, obviously, could not be expected to have taken place. Persons living in towns with a population of 5,000 and above constituted hardly 1.8 per cent of the population of Assam Proper any time during the

99. Statement No.182 in Census of India, 1891. Assam Report. Vol.1, Pt.2 - Ch.11, p.294.

century. Such towns numbered three during 1872-1881, four in 1891 and five in 1901. None of these towns had any time a population exceeding 14,000; and all these together hardly had a population exceeding 36,000. The so-called towns were still largely over-grown villages with the responsibility of policing the neighbourhoods. There was no urbanizing trend despite considerable colonial investments in tea, light railways, steamer-ways, coal, oil and saw mills within the region. This was due to the fact that the developing industries were of an extractive nature and, therefore, had only limited spread effects.¹⁰⁰

Even this stunted process of urbanization and colonial industrialization touched mostly the immigrant population. So far as the indigenous people were concerned, they faced a simultaneous counter-process of deindustrialization. Local peasant and artisan handicrafts were being steadily pushed out by imported manufactures. High mortality, unchecked by health measures, was another depressing factor. Within the region's slowly rising population - from 1496 thousands in 1872 to 2157 thousands in 1901 - the indigenous component was decreasing or remained stationary, while the immigrant component went on increasing all the time, in both absolute and relative terms.¹⁰¹ The impact of the lingering black fever (kala-azar) epidemic since 1888 and the high immigration rate together were responsible for this shift in the population composition.

100. Census of India, 1891. Assam Tables, Vol.2, Table 4; Hunter, fn.7, pp.40, 119, 188, 245 and 365; Report of the Administration of the Province of Assam 1905-6, pp.84-85; Imperial Gazetteer of India, - (New Ed. 908), pp.VII-85, XI-184 and 342, XII-183, XIV-333, XVI-121, XIX-224 and 229. Also see Ananddu Guha, "A big push without a take-off : a case study of Assam (1871-1901)", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.5, No.3, September 1968, pp.199-221.

101. Guha, fn.40, pp.38-39.

Consumption of mill-made goods in the region began to increase rapidly, particularly after 1880, as is evident from the available data on the rail and river-borne trade. For instance, the inflow of cotton twist and yarn into the Brahmaputra Valley - two-thirds of this of European manufacture - increased from 5,406 mds in 1883-84 to 17,230 mds in 1889-90 and 21,448 mds in 1895-96. The value of piece-goods brought from outside the Valley, on the other hand, meanwhile increased from Rs. 12 lakhs to Rs. 30 lakhs in 1889-90 and to Rs. 49 lakhs in 1895-96. These piece-goods were entirely of European manufacture in the initial years. Even as late as 1889-90, e.g., 43,010 mds of these incoming piece-goods were of European and only 146 mds of Indian manufacture. By 1895-96, the total supply of such mill-made piece-goods to the Brahmaputra Valley, increased to 67,289 mds.¹⁰² In terms of yardage, this might be estimated at some 22 million yards or about 9 yards per head of population. That the local handloom production was considerably affected by the imports is therefore obvious. Much more rapid was the decline of spinning, since the handlooms which were still active were increasingly resorting to the use of machine yarn. Per capita consumption of handloom cloth, woven locally from mill yarn brought from outside the region could be estimated at about 2.8 yards for the year 1895-96.¹⁰³

Had there been adequate public investments on the lines earlier suggested by Dhokiyal-Phukan, the decline of weaving and spinning in peasant households could have, in the long run, increased the scope of

102. Relevant trade data are culled from Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam (Annual Series) for the years 1883-84 to 1895-96.

103. For conversion, one lb. of mill yarn or cloth is taken as equivalent of four yards of cloth.

occupational specialization and, hence, also the efficiency of peasant cultivation. But no such investments were there. On the contrary, the traditional centres of artisan production were allowed to decay. The gold and silver filligree works of Barpeta town, the sericulture and silk-weaving industry of Sualkuchi village and the bell-metal industry of Sarthebari village - none of these did receive adequate encouragement from the State. This was so despite the wide acceptance of the view that new skills needed to be formed for their survival. David Scott, for instance, had pointed out as early as 1831 that technical education at public cost was a first step towards creating an export potential in the region. ¹⁰⁴

While expressing a similar concern for technical education, Dhekiyal-Phukan made yet another significant point in 1853. "No permanent advancement in agriculture could be effected", he said, "until the people are relieved from the necessity of relying on a foreign country for the requisite implements of husbandry". He envisaged in clear terms that agriculture without industrialization had no future. "No nation can secure to itself the blessings and comforts of civilized life", he argued, "until it has manufactures of its own; and, in short, no country can rise to wealth or importance that is deficient or imperfectly versed in the art of manufacture". ¹⁰⁵ Thirtytwo years later, Balinarayan Bara (1852-1927) - also ^a moderate like Dhekiyal-Phukan in his political views - harped on the same theme when he wrote :

104. Scott to Swinton, 18 May 1831, para 49, Foreign Political Proceedings, 10 June 1831 (NAI).

105. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn.4, pp.xxxix-xl.

"If we have suffered any loss through the British rule, it is in the field of our indigenous industries. These have nearly become extinct. ... As a matter of fact, the chief want of this country is industries. No country has even become great, or a nation, solely through the exercise of intellectual faculties".¹⁰⁶

For Bara, too, technical education was important, since "the industries would flourish if the trades of the carpenter, the blacksmith, the bell-metal worker, the brazier, the potter etc. are demonstrated and taught".¹⁰⁷ Scott, Dhekiyal-Phukan and Bara - each of them was differently motivated. Yet they all recommended the erection of modern production techniques on the existing base of traditional manual processes. Solid progress could only occur, they thought, when linked with the local technological base. They also believed that the state had a role to play in this respect. The policy-makers were hardly influenced by such intellectual pressures. To the utter neglect of the old crafts and husbandry, their public finance was geared to developing and benefiting the tea industry and its infrastructure, while agriculture and handicrafts remained neglected.

106. Excerpt from Mau, I, February 1887, as reproduced in Translation in I.N. Borra, Bolinarayan Borrah His Life, Work and Musings (Calcutta, 1967), pp.57-58.

107. Quote from Mau, I, December 1886, *ibid*, p.49. Bara further submitted - "Our object is to close, as far as possible, the doors to the offices and to open the way to the trades". According to him, mass education could wait until a wide base of technical education alongside of the necessary level of higher education was well-established in Assam.

Once the policy of proletarianizing the Assamese peasantry to ensure local supply of cheap wage labour to the planters had visibly failed, the Raj was bent upon creating a 'modern' sector outside it with almost all the inputs brought in from outside the Province. The resultant economic growth therefore largely by-passed the peasant society. Thomas Welsh had reported from Assam Proper in 1794 that rice was produced "in very great abundance" there, and that "a scarcity had never been known to happen from natural causes". There was even an export potential, he thought, which could be drawn upon in times of famines in Bengal.¹⁰⁸ Yet during the second half of the 19th century, the Brahmaputra Valley was converted into a net rice-importing region; and, despite steadily increasing rice imports, acute scarcities leading to starvation deaths were reported from certain areas in 1851, 1858 and 1896.¹⁰⁹

While London and Calcutta-based British monopoly houses controlled the region's modern industrial sector, Marwari merchant capital established its octopus-like grip over the expanding network of internal trade that linked this important hinterland with the port city of Calcutta. A few native-born Assamese were no doubt in trade - some of them were new entrants - but their existence was just marginal. Reported an official observer in 1888 :

"The trading community chiefly consists of Europeans, Bengali shop-keepers chiefly from

108. Thomas Welsh, "Assam : an interesting account of the ancient system of government in Assam", Foreign Political Consultations; 24 February 1794, No.13A (NAI).

109. Dhekiyal-Phukan, fn.4, no.xxxviii-xxxix; Barua, fn.10, pp.139-40; The Bengali (Calcutta), 17 October 1896.

Dacca and Marwari merchants. The last-mentioned is the most numerous and influential class, with the exception, of course, of the tea planters....

The Marwari traders ... are to be found in almost every important village. They keep supplies of salt, cotton twist and piece-goods, brass vessels, underdried sugar etc. and exchange these commodities for money, but more generally for paddy, rice, mustard, silk cocoons, silk thread and silk cloth. When required they make advances to the cultivators, and the rate of interest charged is usually one anna per rupee per month or 75 per cent. But these advances are by no means common as the Assamese prefer apparently to borrow from each other".¹¹⁰

In the wake of the monetization and merchant capital penetration, the number of money-lenders and credit-advancing village shopkeepers was presumably increasing. But they were not many till 1891. If the Census of 1891 is to be believed, there were - dependants inclusive - 1519 persons who were supported by money-lending (of them 1211 in Kamrup alone) as their main occupation and 620 persons, supported by petty shop-keeping in Assam Proper in that year. The total number found in the Commerce sector (i.e. persons engaged in activities relating to commerce, moneylending, transport and storage and their dependants) was 22,178 of whom 9,390 or 41 per cent were concentrated in Kamrup.¹¹¹

110. Darrah's Note, Differerein Inquiry : Proc. No.10, fn.47, p.9.

111. Data culled from Census of India, 1891, Assam Tables, Vol.2, Table XVII; Statement No.196 in Census of India, 1891, Assam Report, Vol.1, pt.2, p.307. Out of the 9,801 money-lenders and their dependants in the Province of Assam in 1891, 7,902 were in the Summa Valley, 1,793 in the Brahmaputra Valley and 106 in the hills districts. There might be an understatement involved in the number of shop-keepers.

As the peasant economy lacked internal dynamics, the demand for agricultural credit as such remained modest. Such credit was mostly forthcoming from relatively more solvent members of the peasantry and from landlords, on customary terms. However, the Marwari trader-banker, too, had meanwhile firmly set his foot. Credit was generally extended not on the mortgage of land, but of the standing crop or of the debtor's own labour-power. This was so because land, in most cases, had no value.

Mustard-seed remained practically the sole cash crop after the cultivation of opium was prohibited in 1860. The proportion of gross cultivated acreage that was under mustard crop in the peasant sector fluctuated within the range of 6 to 10 per cent. It was a crop that could be produced and disposed off easily. A flourishing inter-regional trade in this crop was ^{therefore} a legacy of the medieval times. It continued to remain largely in the hands of the peasant traders of Kamrup until they also began to be subordinated to Marwari merchant capital in due course. Their retreat from the trade was only a matter of time. ¹¹²

As land revenue had to be paid in two instalments - one in October and another in January - when the mustard crop was still standing in the field, poor peasants had often to borrow from the traders by pledging delivery of their harvested crop at pre-fixed prices. It is interesting to note that a sizeable part of the mustard-seed output did not enter into local consumption, but was sold outside the valley, while vegetable oil (mustard oil, chiefly) was regularly imported from the

112. "Barpeta is one of the few places in Assam where the Assamese have displayed any commercial aptitude. They retain all business in their own hands, and there is a considerable trade in mustard seed and other country produce". Even so, the population of Barpeta town considerably declined, and continuously, during 1872-1901. Imperial Gazetteer of India, fn.100, p.vii-85.

rest of India.¹¹³ This happened because the local oil-extraction technology was, by and large, primitive, and ^{it} made no use of the cattle-powered ghani. The cultivation of mustard-seed, which was usually sown on faringati lands, was so dependent on the vagaries of weather and was, therefore, so insecure that the peasant hardly took any particular care of it. Cultivation of mustard continued to be largely on the basis of slash-and-burn and fallowing methods. Though a major cash crop, it gave the peasant practically no scope for introducing improvements.

Nor were the property relations, built over the years under review, congenial to productive capital accumulation. ^Amajor part of the surplus extracted from the peasant sector accumulated in the hands of the Government. Another part of the surplus realized in the form of usurious interest augmented, by and large, the immigrant merchant capital - mostly that of the Marwaris. Neither the Government nor the merchants, however, did anything to improve agriculture.

The smaller and residual part of the surplus that accrued to the rural rich was indeed too small and dissipated for meaningful investments in agriculture. The amount of land, whether held directly from the Government, or in one's own right (la-khiraj), was no sure indication of his or her pecuniary condition. Since most lands had no market value, a big landholder might, at the same time, be extremely capital-poor.

113. For instance, 744,113 mds of oilseeds were despatched out from and 47,796 mds of vegetable oil were brought into the Brahmaputra Valley in 1884-85. The corresponding figures for 1895-96 were 587,250 mds and 52,001 mds, respectively. See Report of the Administration of the Province of Assam (Annual Series) for the years 1884-85 and 1895-96 - relevant tables on chief exports and imports by boats and steamers (Brahmaputra Valley).

No development of productive forces was therefore visible within the peasant sector. This is why there was continued net inflow of rice, betel-nuts, edible oil, gur and other food-stuff from the rest of India into the land-abundant Brahmaputra Valley throughout the late 19th century. In other words, the increasing demand from a rising tea industry and concomitant population rise failed to boost peasant production.

The surplus accruing to the rural rich only sufficed to maintain their higher than average standard of living. If there was "no danger of their falling below their present condition of rural respectability", because of high fertility of the soil, there was "no prospect of their ever rising above it" either. This was how Sir Henry Cotton, the liberal Chief Commissioner of Assam, assessed the situation in course of his note dated 24 September 1898 which was submitted to the Government of India.¹¹⁴

Under the circumstances, the landed gentry and, later, also the relatively more solvent section of the peasantry increasingly looked forward for their sons to new openings like professions and salaried jobs, rather than to the promotion of productive cultivation. Those who had ventured into trade or tea cultivation from time to time burnt their fingers too quickly and quit these fields. A few, who survived, persisted as hangers-on and adjuncts of their European patrons. They learnt to live with humiliation at the edge of the economic empire the foreign capitalists built. Mainly, the landed gentry, and, to some extent, also the upper strata of the peasantry—these formed the seed-plot

114. Assam Secretariat File. Revenue A. November 1898, Nos. 128-38,
K.W. No.2.

of the new Assamese middle class - new because of its orientation to western education and colonial collaboration.

The promotion of a rural middle class of moderate means on the basis of rent collection and petty agriculture within the given colonial set-up - no matter however idolized by Dhekiyal-Phukan - was a misnomer in terms. The colonial policy-makers accepted the idea. But how could they fulfil the other pre-conditions that Dhekiyal-Phukan had laid down as necessary for its success? How could the alien state play a positive role, that was wishfully expected of it, in the matter of industrialization in particular? What followed therefore was a disastrous caricature of Dhekiyal-Phukan's recommended programme. There was no upliftment of agriculture and artisan crafts, and the new middle class that had emerged remained a rickety one. Towards the close of the century, Cotton, an admirer since 1867 of Comte's positivism and, at the same time, also of Bengal's landed aristocracy, found the Assamese converted into

"a people of petty agriculturists reduced to one dead level of a peasant proletariat, with no substantial middle class as forms the backbone of the nation in more favoured countries and no upper class on whom they can lean for guidance and assistance during an emergency". 115

115. Cotton's note dated 24 September 1898, para 10, Assam Secretariat File. Rev. A, November, 1898, No. 128-38, K.W. No. 2.

Cotton blamed the ryotwari system in operation for its failure to promote a viable middle class through the provision of opportunities of subletting and concluded that the absence of such an indigenous class was at the root of the social stagnation and decay. For,

"... the Administration is compelled to fall back for its requirement in large measure on the middle class population of the Surma Valley and Bengal. ... Capital does not exist ... each man cultivates as much as he requires for his own needs and no more. There is no healthy increase of population, no material extension of agriculture, no development of trade, no flow of enterprise and it is needless to add, no accumulation of wealth".¹¹⁶

Cotton's liberalism and positivism did not help him to discover the basic malady that lay in the inherent role of the colonial State. Rather, he found fault with the small property philosophy of the ryotwari settlement and, in course of his controversy with the Government of India, called for a reversal of the policy in the area of wastelands settlement. Assam needed, according to him, a more substantial class of landed intermediaries than what it already had. Such a middle class could be promoted, he thought, by allowing unrestricted subletting rights to landholding ryots and by settling wastelands with men of capital from other provinces, if necessary, who were capable of attracting tenants mostly from outside the region. His Colonization

Scheme, however, did not find favour with the Government of India, then headed by Curzon. For, they thought that the tea industry "is already doing and ultimately will do much more, in the course of the next ten years, to colonize Assam than any capitalist who may be attracted under the proposed colonization scheme". Besides, they also apprehended that if the intention was to create a residential aristocracy by inviting wealthy middlemen from outside the province, there was every possibility of their turning into absentee landlords.¹¹⁷

The real reason behind the rejection of the scheme, however, was the Government's fear that co-existence with such a substantial Indian aristocracy in the rural areas would not be acceptable to the European planters. For, any large-scale settlement of tenants on wastelands for ordinary cultivation under any scheme, would have surely affected the labour supply of the plantations.

Cotton's advice was over-ruled by the Government of India in yet another matter of importance - its policy towards subletting of settled lands. They wanted to put a stop to the practice of subletting of lands settled for ordinary cultivation while allowing the privilege, as a special case, only to the planters. This was not to the interest of

117. Assam Secretariat File. Rev. A. March 1899, No.55, particularly para 30.

Cotton's Colonization Scheme was, in essence, the same as what Jenkins had proposed as early as 1833. Both had put their faith on men of capital as landed middlemen for ushering in agrarian improvements, and both looked forward to conversion of small peasants into tenants. The only difference was that while Jenkins welcomed exclusively Englishmen of capital, Cotton would also admit wealthy natives. - 'report on Assam from F. Jenkins', see fn. 20.

the Assamese middle class, and they protested. We learn from Cotton's note that a constitutional agitation against the proposed ban on sub-letting was spear-headed by their several organizations - the Committee for Assam Conference, the Ryot Sabhas and the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha.¹¹⁸ When Curzon came on a visit to Assam in 1900, one of the major demands voiced there related to this question of subletting. In course of a public address presented to him, it was said :

"It seems to us that the Assamese ryots hardly derived any benefits from the direct settlement of land on short leases and that no extension of cultivation has been possible through such a measure in Assam. We believe that if long-term settlements are introduced without, at the same time, enhancing the revenue rates and also with the right of subletting maintained in tact, the present miserable conditions of the Assamese ryots would be largely ameliorated". [translated from the Assamese text.]

Lengthening of the existing term of land settlement, no further enhancement of land revenue rates, unrestricted subletting rights and representation in the Indian legislature - these were the four important demands that the frustrated Assamese middle class preferred to place before the Viceroy at the threshold of the 20th century.¹¹⁹ Unlike

118. Assam Secretariat File, Rev. A, Oct. 1898, Nos. 87, 88 and 96.

119. Addresses Presented to His Excellency the Right Hon'ble Lord Curzon of Kedleston ... the Viceroy, Assam, March 1900 (Shillong, 1900), pp.21-23.

their predecessors, some of them, a little later, even began to appreciate the Bengal zamindari system as a model for Assam.¹²⁰ Cotton's glorification of the Bengal zamindari system, no less than his exposure of planters' oppressions, did indeed leave an ideological impact on his nationalist admirers.

120. For example, Lakshminath Bezbarua (1868-1938). He had not failed to protest against the oppression of the coolies by British planters in the 1880s. Yet he regretted later that the Assamese gentry, unlike their Bengali counterpart, did not get the benefit of a permanent zamindari settlement. See Hiren Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese middle class", Social Scientist, 13, August 1973, p.19.

VIII

SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The temporary ryotwari settlement of Assam Proper nurtured a numerous class of peasant proprietors and, alongside of it, also a much smaller class of landed middlemen of superior status and means so that the former could look forward for guidance to the latter in their mutual efforts at improving agriculture.

Landlords, self-employed peasant proprietors and the tenantry - these were the three broad social classes identifiable within the peasant sector, on the basis of ^{/the} production relations. Some peasant proprietors, who also employed wage labour, did so only casually and to a marginal extent. Consciousness of belonging to distinct classes, however, was at a low level. This often permitted the grouping of the first two categories under the common label of "ryot". On the other hand, no open class conflicts between the landlords and their landless tenants were yet visible within the largely custom-determined society. Nor were tenants and peasant proprietors distinctly separate like water-tight compartments; quite a large number of them were partly both. There was yet no agricultural labour class as such, despite the employment of bonded and free casual labour to some degree. Such a class was yet in the process of its formation from amongst the poor peasants and out-of-contract tea garden coolies. It appears from the 1891 Census figures that, together with dependants, the landlords (non-cultivating proprietors) constituted 0.8 per cent, the peasants (cultivating proprietors) 89 per cent, the tenants 7 per cent and the farm servants

and field labourers 0.3 per cent of the total agricultural population. Three per cent of the total population could not be put under any of these specified categories [See Table - 4]. Obviously, some of this last category, too, were field labourers. Finally, the Assamese middle class, even when town-dwelling, was integrally a part of the peasant society. It emerged largely from the landlord class and, marginally, also from the upper strata of the peasantry. By and large, it continued to enjoy, amongst other sources of income, also a rent income and uncertain profits from cultivation to a small extent.

Given all the constraints of a colonial situation as well as a semi-tribal, semi-feudal legacy, the ryotwari system did not yield results as were wishfully expected of it. Neither the landlord elements nor the peasants emerged as enterprising producers. Under the system not enough surplus was left to them for fructification in agriculture. Nor was any other productive avenue left open for them, given the British monopoly domination in industries and Marwari domination in internal trade. The only avenue open before them was investment in education of their children so that they could be transformed into human capital. Hence with one foot in land, they set the other foot on the threshold of salaried jobs and professions.

However, here too the openings were extremely limited and competition from immigrating aspirants from other provinces keen. The Assamese middle class, given its largely high-caste and landholding background, found its land nexus too precious to sever. It needed its foothold in land, if not for any other reason, as a measure of security against all uncertainties that could be there in service or

professions or in their occasional entrepreneurial ventures on a petty scale. Such uncertainties stemmed from ^{/their} dependence on colonial patronage. It was therefore but natural that the class would clamour for unrestricted right of subletting and tenant exploitation, for a moratorium on further tax enhancements and for long-term land settlements.

The Assamese middle class also increasingly felt the need for a wider social base for the organizations it set up to voice these demands during the last two decades of the 19th century.¹²¹ Therefore, while speaking for itself, it always tried to speak for the entire peasantry (however faltering its language might have been) from one and the same platform. It was possible to do so since most of the demands were common. Tenancy was not yet an acute problem to come in the way of such an alliance. However, whenever the peasantry was roused to action and they gave a militant turn to the agitation against imperialism, the middle class leaders vacillated and parted company half way. Nevertheless, their anti-imperialist propensities were there. Their constitutional agitations, too, contributed to preparing the ground for anti-imperialist mass upsurges like the Raj Mel movement of 1893-94. Seeds of a militant nationalist outlook for this class were not altogether absent in the 1890s, and their germination only awaited a more opportune climate, yet to be ushered in by more intensified struggles of the toiling people. Vacillations and compromising attitudes remained meanwhile as

121. These organizations were Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha, Tezpur Ryot Sabha, Nowgong Ryot Association and the Upper Assam Associations. The Assam Association, with a Valley-wide jurisdiction, was founded in 1903.

inherent characteristics of the class, linked as it was, by and large, also with feudal modes of exploitation and culture.¹²²

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122. Feeble beginnings of such an outlook could be traced in the poetry of Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1853-1936) and in Ratneswar Mahanta's attempt at restoring Maniram Dewan's image as an anti-imperialist martyr in the 1890s. See J. Bhuyan, ed., Ratneswar Mahanta Rachanavali (Gauhati, 1977), p.225.

Table - 1
AREA AND POPULATION OF ASSAM PROPER

District	Area in sq.m. (as of 1901)	P o p u l a t i o n				Density per sq.m. (as of 1901)
		1872	1881	1891	1901	
Kamrup	3,858	561,681	644,960	634,249	589,187	153
Darrang	3,418	235,720	273,012	307,440	337,313	99
Nowgong	3,843	260,238	314,893	347,307	261,160	68
Sibsagar	4,996	317,799	392,545	480,659	597,969	120
Lakhimpur	4,529	121,267	179,893	254,053	371,396	88
Total of Assam Proper	20,644	1,496,705	1,805,303	2,023,708	2,157,025	106
No. of Towns and Villages					7,348	

Source : East Bengal and Assam Administration Report 1905-06, pp.84-87. Pre-1901 figures given here do not necessarily tally with those in the original Census Reports, because of subsequent official revision. Also see Imperial Gazetteer of India, fn.100, VI-p.120.

Note : The faster rate of population growth in the two last-mentioned districts was largely due to continuous immigration in the wake of the expansion of the tea industry and, also, the absence of the lingering post-1888 black fever epidemic. Darrang was also an important tea district, with a high rate of immigration that was largely neutralized by an increased death rate.

Assam Proper together with the district of Goalpara constituted the Brahmaputra Valley - the homeland of the Assamese. Goalpara coming under the British rule in 1765, was mostly under the permanent settlement during our period. Only a small portion of the district - Eastern Duars - was under the ryotwari settlement. This is why Goalpara is not covered by this study.

Table - 2

TENURE-WISE CLASSIFICATION OF SETTLED
ACREAGE IN ASSAM PROPER 1897-98

I. Settled for Ordinary Cultivation		1,843,414(76.8)
(a) La-khiraj (Revenue-free)	82,910(3.4)	
(b) Nisf-khiraj (Half Rate Paying)	192,702(8.2)	
(c) Khiraj (Full Rate Paying) excluding planter-held portion	1,468,798(61.2)	
(d) Khiraj (Full Rate Paying) held by planters	97,004(4.0)	
II. Settled for Special Cultivation Under Wastelands Grants Rules		555,570(23.2)
(a) Fee Simple (Revenue-free)	331,878(13.4)	
(b) Rate Paying (Concessional)	223,692(9.8)	
III. Total Settled Acreage for Cultivation	2,398,984(100)	2,398,984(100)

Note : Town lands and grants for mining, together amounting to only a few thousand acres, are not covered by the table. Under La-khiraj head are included also 4,301 acres representing other petty revenue-free tenures which were on an ex gratia footing.

Source : Processed from detailed statistics in Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Districts for the Year 1897-98, fn. 3, Table VI, pp.101-02.

Table - 3

AVAILABLE DATA ON TEN HOUSEHOLDS HIRING OUT LABOUR

Sl. No.	Name and Household Size	Land Owned (Bighas)				Land Leased (Bighas) In(+)/Out(-)	Operational Farm Size (Bighas)	No. of Cattle		Rent Obligations (Rs.)		Cash Need for Opium	Form of Labour in the Household
		Basti	Rupit	Faringati	Total			Plough Bullock	Milch Cow	L. Rev.	Cash Rent		
1.	Hudo Kalita : 3	...	1.06	...	1.06	+ 2.00 (F) (in exchange of service)	3.06	1	...	0.75	...	...	MBW
2.	Tokuru Kelita : 4	...	2.76	...	2.76	+ 0.25 (B)	3.01	2	...	1.88	0.25	17.00	BW
3.	Hadi Rabha : 3	2.24	4.12	...	6.36	- 4.12 (R)	2.24*	...	...	5.12	...	34.25+	BW
4.	Dhanraj Lalung : 11 ^a	1.35	15.01	0.79	17.15	...	17.15	2	2	11.18	...	...	MW
5.	Aharu Lalung : 6	1.00	5.00	...	6.00	...	6.00*	...	...	5.00	...	39.32	MBW
6.	Namal Shekh : 4 (estd.)	2.00	8.50	...	10.50	...	10.50	1	...	8.00	...	10.50	M
7.	Balad Keot : 3	0.37	3.50	2.00	5.87	- 1.00 (R) (mortgaged out)	4.87	...	...	3.88	...	22.50	MW
8.	Mihiram Keot : 4	0.50	5.80	8.00	14.30	+ 3.00 (R) - 0.30 (B+R)	17.00	...	...	8.12	1.88	...	M
9.	Anonymous : 9	1.31	8.12	1.43	10.86	+ 2.00 (F)	12.86	1	...	8.05	1.00	...	MW
10.	Gopal Katani : 3	...	...	2.00	2.00	+ 5.20 (R) + 2.00 (R) + 0.25 (B)	9.45	...	...	1.00	4.75	...	M

Note: a : Two duo-local matrilineal families treated as one.

* : Wholly or largely left uncultivated, as could not be leased out.

+ : Claimed, but believed to be an over-statement.

Abbreviations: B = Basti, R = Rupit, F = Faringati

M = Marakiya, i.e., labour-rent, paid for the use of another's plough cattle for the season.

B = Bonded labour in settlement of an advance.

W = Wage work.

Source : Data tabulated from Dufferein Inquiry,
Proc. No. 10, Appendix C.

Table - 4

CLASSIFICATION OF AGRICULTURAL POPULATION IN ASSAM
PROPER : 1891 (DEPENDANTS INCLUSIVE)

District	(1)		(2)		(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Persons holding land directly from Govt. (including privileged tenure holders)		Tenants, (i.e. persons renting land from lease holders)		Occupying Land, but status Un-specified	Farm Servants	Field Labour	Total
	Cultivating	Non-Cultivating	Cultivating	Non-Cultivating				
Kamrup	384,528	8,108	77,162(15.7)	521	18,819	3,009	368	492,515
Darrang	213,484	2,392	8,314(3.7)	14	2,115	352	30	226,701
Nowgong	278,022	218	3,322(1.2)	61	8,620	255	49	290,547
Sibsagar	285,784	520	9,838(3.3)	14	2,167	119	86	298,528
Lakhimpur	134,980	87	1,592(1.1)	1	11,629	131	99	148,519
	1,296,798(89.0)	11,325(0.8)	100,228(6.9)	611	43,350(3.0)	3,866(0.3)	632	1,456,810(100)

Tenants as % of total district population :

Kamrup - 12.2%
Darrang - 2.7%
Sibsagar - 2.2%

Source : Processed from E.A. Gait Census of India 1891 Assam. Part II - Tables, Table XVII, pp.318-19. Plantation Workers and their dependants are not included in this agricultural population.

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Results of research work individually undertaken by the Centre's staff :

1. **SUNIL MUNSI** : Geography of Transportation in Eastern India under the British Raj, Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi & Co. (in press)
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2. **KRISHNA BHARADWAJ** : Classical Political Economy and Rise to Dominance of Supply and Demand Theories (R. C. Dutt Lectures on Political Economy, 1976) Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1978
3. **B. N. GANGULI** : Some Aspects of Classical Political Economy in the Nineteenth Century Indian Perspective (R. C. Dutt Lectures on Political Economy, 1977) Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1979