Development of Agriculture in Assam during Colonial Period

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Abstract: *Since ancient period, the people of Assam practiced agricultural activity as the main source of livelihood. The self-sufficient agricultural system continued till the advent of British in Assam. The advent of British brought overwhelming development in agriculture that replaced the agrarian practices with new agrarian reform on land which ensured security and easy access to land reclamation for extensive cultivation in terms of commercial aspects. The commercial aspects in agriculture facilitated the credit facilities to the cultivators and also welcomed more hardworking peasants into Assam from outside the province that enabled rapid growth in agricultural production.*

Keywords: *Agriculture, land, colonial policy, cultivators, labours, credit facilities, crops, and migration.*

Introduction

Assam being predominantly agricultural province of India, agriculture played a flagship role in Assam's economy. Assam is situated between 22^0 19′ and 28^0 16′ North and 89^0 42′ and 97^0 12′ East (Imperial Gazetteer of India 1909:6). Assam or Brahmaputra valley, excluding Surma valley comprising six districts Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar including Goalpara, is located in the extreme north-eastern region of India. The Brahmaputra river contributed a lifeline for peoples' livelihood that covered over 78,496 km hectares (Ricard &

Hagen 2010: 1). The mighty river of Brahmaputra with several tributaries created fertile land with its multitude of low land setting and deposit of million tons of sediments. The alluvial plain of Brahmaputra valley is about 450 miles in length and 30 miles in breadth (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam 1983: 3). The major sources of Tributary River on the north of Brahmaputra River are Dibang, Dihang, Subansiri, Bhareli, Dhansiri, Barnadi, Manas, Champamati, Saralbhanga and Sankosh. The rivers like Noa, BuriDihing, Disang, Dikho, Jhanzi and Dhansiri lie on the south bank (Imperial Gazetteer of India 1909: 16).

Historically, the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by the several rulers. Among them Ahom had ruled for over six centuries by subjugating Kachari kings. Furthermore, the political condition of Assam was affected by the periodical invasion of Mahammadan rulers. The political upheaval of Ahom provided space for Koch power to avail the political opportunity to expand their boundary towards major parts of Assam. The internal political chaos of the Koch kingdom provided full advantage to the Mughal power who had attempted to extend the empire to Assam. Due to Ahom internal political conflict, another external power put their footprint on the soil of Assam on invitation of Ahom, which opened a new political chapter of Burmese rule in Assam that marked a *monardhin*. A political instability in Assam was caused by aggressive rule of the Burmese, which finally confronted the East India Company who had already controlled the eastern frontier of Bengal province. In 1838, the entire Assam came under the British hegemony and being administered from Bengal province till the formation of Assam province in1874. After that Assam was formed as a separate province under the Chief Commissioner (Imperial Gazetteer of India1909: 40). In 1905, Assam was merged with Dacca, Chittagong and Rajshahi commissionership of Bengal and formed Eastern Bengal and Assam province under Lieutenant Governor and Dhaka was the capital. Thus, Assam was reorganized into a separate province under Chief Commissioner in 1912. Furthermore, in 1921 Assam came under direct supervision of the Governor (Dutta 1963: 5).

General Outline of Agricultural Aspects

The origin of agriculture in world perspective can be traced back to the Neolithic period between 10,000 and 9,000 BP. Its center was located in Syria and Palestine (Mazoyer & Roudart 2006: 75). Similarly, the emergence of Indian agriculture can be established to 9000 BC that preceded the Indus valley civilization, validated with the archaeological evidence (Kumar 1988: 3-4). Human civilization passed

through different stages from nomadic hunters and gatherers to pastoral and cultivators followed by feudalism and capitalism.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, India became an exporter of raw materials to the European countries which increased the supply of agricultural merchandise (Dutta 2006: 86). International demand for special crops pushed the British colony in India to search for suitable land for growing commercial crops. The growing demand of commercial crops of India in the international market stimulated the Indian traders to financially support the local cultivators to grow the quality of commercial crops. The colonial period opened a new chapter that brought transition in agrarian structure associated with land settlement pattern, land tenure, revenue and cropping pattern in Assam. According to the report of the Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, '84 percent of the population of Brahmaputra Valley adopted agriculture as means of sustainable livelihood' (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam 1983: 44). Prior to the establishment of colonial extension in Assam the British authority had collected information regarding resources of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam through Captain Welsh and Captain Hugh Baillie (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam 1983: 48). The Charter Act of 1813 marked the beginning of a milestone for the European traders and merchants, who were authorized by the Majesty for trading activity in Asia. This was due to disruption of the British trading activity in Europe by Napoleon Bonaparte. Another Charter Act of 1833 empowered the British in acquiring substantial lands for the purpose of economic enterprise in Assam (Chandra 2009: 95-96). This Charter literally supplemented extension of tea and other cash crop cultivation in plain areas of Brahmaputra Valley. During colonial period, the British made Assam an agricultural province for generating revenue and to supply raw materials to the European markets (Kalita 2017: 6).

The erstwhile land system of Assam changed with the growing importance of commercialization of agriculture. The bonded share croppers were freed after the abolition of *paik* and *khel* systems of Ahom. The new system of land assessment under the British created opportunities for the cultivators. They could access land under reclamation on the promise to pay revenue (Baden-Powell 1882: 731). So as to fix the land revenue, land was classified based on the productivity of crops and it was systematically distributed to the cultivators subjected to land revenue collection. The land assessment brought to light huge acres of fertile land lying vacant due to sparse population, from which more revenue could be drawn. Thus, to enhance the revenue, vast tracts of land were allotted to the tea planters. The tea planters were forced to comply with certain terms and conditions of the Wasteland Grant Rule that clearly specified that certain portions of the land had

to be brought under cultivation (Report on the Physical and Political Geography of The Province of Assam1896: 168). However, the planters faced labour problem in Assam due to the self-sufficient village economy and *paik* system that influenced the local peasants mentally to work only for a short period of time in agriculture and created aversion to work for longer hours. To maximize the profit and minimize the expenditure, the colonial administration adopted a mechanism which substituted the local labour with labour from outside Assam. It minimized the cost of labour and maximized the work. This mechanism finally brought panacea to labour scarcity and high cost of labour in Assam. Besides, to increase the land revenue, colonial authority welcomed landless peasants from Eastern Bengal to Assam which followed massive agricultural expansion to meet the demand of markets.

The economy of Assam was transformed because of active participation of immigrant peasants with their skill, hard work and specialization in growing commercial crops. From 1870 onwards, waves of peasant influx into Assam from adjacent provinces began to take place which supplemented expansion of agricultural land, extensive commercial crops cultivation and exportation of local merchandise to global markets, that generated more revenue to colonial exchequer.

The most significant features about agricultural development in Assam was attributed to the colonial authority that politically resolved all the internal and external problems relating to agriculture which provided economic security to every individual to a certain extent. The surplus commercial crops produced got exposure to international markets. This was followed with supply of local agricultural commodities to the markets. David Scott and Francis Jenkins observed that the rural economy of Brahmaputra valley was improved with the export of commercial crops (Guha 2015: 182).

Land Reform

Since the ages, Assam went through a series of transformation in the land system due to the policy adopted either by native or foreign rulers. Before the British annexation of Assam, the Ahoms formed a unique set of land and revenue administration through personal service to the state and land, which was temporarily allocated to the cultivators after imposing poll or plough tax. The actual cultivators possessed limited access to landholding due to rigorous state regulation over the entire land. Except for homestead land, the entire land was considered as a joint property of the Ahom kings, who founded the Ahom kingdom in Brahmaputra Valley (Gait 2013: 270). Normally, the king used to act

on the advice of three council of ministers of the king i.e. *Buragohain*, *Borgohain* and *Barpatra-Gohain* who possessed vast tracts of land (Agnihorti 1984: 39).

Following the advent of the British rule in Assam, a series of reformation in land was executed for the convenience of revenue administration (Dutta 1968:159-160). Initial reformation reflects obliteration of personal service to the state by inducting a poll tax. Over time, poll tax was ruled out due to irregularity of revenue turnover. Subsequently, a new land revenue system was introduced based on quality of land for generating regular revenue. For the assessment, land was classified into three categories, such as, *basti* (homestead land), *rupit* land (wet land for growing rice) and *pharinghati* (less productive land) (Baden-Powell 1882:736-737). The land grants to religious institutions and priests prevailed as common practice of the king during Ahom rule. Raja Pratap Singha was the person who had introduced grants to aforementioned recipients (Choudhury 1964:28). These lands were donated as free holding along with slaves and *paiks to some extent*. This type of land was known as *lakhiraj*where land was classified into *Brahmottara* (land granted to Brahmin), *Dharmottara* (land donated to temples, Mosque and Sattras) and *Devottara* (land donated to god for maintenance of the deity). However, due to lack of agricultural labour caused by abolition of slavery in 1843, these lands were brought under revenue system during colonial period. In this process the validity of the genuine holding of land was determined and the absence of valid proof on land came under government.

To encourage cultivation of commercial crops, such as, tea, jute etc. the wasteland grant rule of 1838 was framed, which facilitated liberal terms of land tenure and rent. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 mandated statutory right to the actual owners of land and possession of land was recognized as permanent and hereditary rights on payment of revenue (Report on the Physical and Political Geography of The Province of Assam1896: 154). The *ryotwari* settlement was introduced and revenue collection was assigned to Mauzadar in Assam. However, in case of Kamrup district, because of occupation by the Mahamedans, land was organized into the pargana system and revenue collection was entrusted to Choudhury in the line of Bengal (Dutta 1968: 29). On the other hand, Goalpara district remained under the *zamindari* system (a modified Non-regulation Act of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal) due to absence of bidder in land. This zamindari system based on fixed rate of revenue was imposed with decennial tenure.

Colonial Interest

The colonial period brought a significant development in agriculture. Since, the economy of Assam was predominated by agriculture, more emphasis was given on cash crops. Thus, in order to bring transformation in agriculture, Royal Agri-Horticultural Society, Calcutta was founded by Dr. William Carey in 1820 (Randhawa 1983: 4). This society introduced new seeds and plants. The latter, Botanical gardens and Agri-Horticultural Societies undertook agricultural improvement initiatives across India. William Bentick the Governor General of British India emphasized on the principle of 'the greatest good of the greatest number' where agricultural development remained part of his initiative (Randhawa 1983: 5). Similarly, David Scott, the commissioner of Assam became a pioneer in execution of new projects in economic development that advocated extensive production of cash crops. However, the scanty population and multitude of wastelands contributed marginal revenue to the colonial state which remained a far-reaching dream of the colonial government to meet its expenditure. Therefore, colonial authority enacted new legislation in land to collect considerable revenue (Kumar & Raychaudhuri 2008: 92). However, cash revenue collection was also a significant colonial mechanism to engage cultivators in commercial crop production, which ensured cash money to meet the revenue payment.

Security in Agricultural development

The colonial authority introduced certain laws to eliminate robbery and extortion from the common cultivators, which gave security in terms of economy. In addition to that, economic and social insecurity caused by external and internal aggression during the Ahom period was politically resolved and a new system of administration was set up (Bhuyan 2013: 42). It is also important to mention that the recurrent raids from the hill tribes were ruled out by the British, which helped the cultivators to promote extensive cultivation. Thus, the colonial administration ensured peasants' confidence in agriculture which increased the sense of social security for the cultivators that resumed the practice of agriculture. For the benefit of cultivators, *ryotwari* settlement was introduced in Assam that was introduced by Thomas Munro in Madras in 1820. This brought direct settlement with the cultivators instead of middlemen which ensured more security to the peasants in their access to land for agricultural activity. This settlement ruled out the corruption and prejudice in distribution of land that was often at the mercy of *kheldars* who often took advantage of the economically weaker section of the people by exchanging better quality of land with less productive land. Moreover, the *ryotwari* system allowed more access of land to

the peasants that could be taken on lease from the government on annual or decennial tenure (Dasgupta 1983: 1281). A modified non-regulation Act of permanent settlement was further introduced in Goalpara district, which brought in a sense of security to the cultivators and more emphasis on the utility of land for extensive cultivation. Undoubtedly, permanent settlement which was first introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal province clearly specified issuance of land to the bidder on auction for eleven years with fixed revenue under the sunset law (Randhawa 1983: 4-5). However, in case of Assam, flexibility brought in a major difference in terms of revenue collection that limited the assessment of land due to coverage of large forest.

Pattern of land settlement and Tenure

Since the pre-colonial period, Assam has witnessed transition in land settlement pattern. The land was looked upon as one of the flagship resources generating assets for the state. Therefore, the land settlement and distribution of land became a main factor of agricultural development. As mentioned by Guha, 'the practice of land settlement during Ahom administration was based on personal service to the state where militia was assigned with three acres of wet rice land so long as he served the state known as *khel* and *paik* system'(Guha 1980: 36). As observed by Bhuyan, *khel* system corresponds with *mansabdari* system of Mughal administration where land was distributed according to the rank of military service (Bhuyan 1949: 84). But in the *paik* system, every male person between 15 to 50 years of age was entitled to occupy land on condition of service to state (Barpujari 2007: 6). However, the *paik* possessed no permanent right over any kind of land except for homestead plots of land.

The practice of land sale in upper Assam was restricted, but in the case of lower Assam, the phenomenon of land sale was partially practiced (Nath 2002:47-48). Until the British takeover of Assam, the pattern of land settlement was structured into semi-feudal structure. However, with the passage of time, colonial administration has followed a systematic mechanism of land settlement subjected to revenue. Before the inception of land settlement, a whole proportion of land was surveyed thereafter assessment was made based on the productivity of land that led to classification of land into permanent and ordinary cultivated land. Tea cultivation and other garden crops were included under the permanent land. Wet land, *basti* (homestead garden) and high yielding land came under ordinary land.

The erstwhile practice of *khel* system structured on egalitarian pattern was eventually replaced with *ryotwari* system that directly established land settlement

with the individuals rather than community or village (Goswami 2012:54). Through *ryotwari* settlement, individuals were granted proprietary rights validated with *patta* by the government. Apart from *ryotwari* settlement, a special settlement existed for those who possessed large estates known as *Chamuas* in Kamrup and Nowgong and *Kherajkhats* in Darrang and Lakhimpur. The measurement of land was self-executed with *nal* (pole) that consisted of 8 cubits (Saikia 2014: 31) and revenue was directly paid to the government's treasury regardless of *mauzadars* (Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam1877: 41). The following tables clearly show the different types of land tenure that existed during the colonial period in Assam.

Table 1.1: Ordinary Tenure for settled acreage in Brahmaputra valley, 1897-98 (Report on Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley 1897:101-102).

Sl. No.	**Ordinary Cultivation Tenure**	**Year 1897-1898**
1	La-Khiraj (Revenue Free)	82,210
2	Nisf-Khiraj (Half Rate Paying)	1,92,702
3	Khiraj (Full Rate Paying) held by ryots	1,468,798
4	Khiraj (Full Rate Paying) held by planters	97,004
	Total	**18,43,414**

Table 1.2: Special Tenure for settled acreage in Brahmaputra valley, 1897-98.

Sl. No.	**Special Cultivation Tenure**	**Year 1897-1898**
1	Fee Simple (Revenue Free)	3,31,878
2	Rate Paying (Occasional)	2,23,692
	Total	**5,55,570**

The total settled land under cultivation in Brahmaputra Valley during 1897-1898 accounted for 23, 98, and 984.

From the third decade of the nineteenth century Assam had witnessed a transition in agrarian structure where subsistence nature of traditional agrarian economy of Brahmaputra valley was shifted to market-oriented economy with exportation of commodities to overseas markets. With the demand of agricultural goods in the markets, the state government introduced a new land policy to reclaim uncultivated land for extensive cultivation with liberal tenure**.** However, the Waste Land Grants Settlement was revised into permanently fiscal establishment of annual tenure of cultivation. Besides, waste lands were offered to tea growing entrepreneurs under Sale Rules with fee-simple rate of purchase (Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam 1877: 6).

Process of production and extension of agriculture

The cropping pattern in agriculture determined the extent of production in land which also follows extension of agriculture. As mentioned by Saikia, 'cropping pattern of the region exposes geoclimatic, socio-cultural, economic, historical and political conditions of the region. Transition in cropping pattern is attributed to physical geography, socio-cultural behaviour and political decision of the government' (Saikia 2012). The main occupation of people was mostly dependent upon *sali* and *ahu* rice cultivation rather than non-food crop cultivation. This had confined them over years of isolation without exposure to global market. There were only two seasonal crops in Assam i.e. summer and winter crops as compared to the mainland of India. In seasonal crops, the agricultural production during Ahom period was meager. This could be attributed to limited land allotment to the cultivators. To enhance the revenue as well as to develop agricultural activity, a scientific method of cultivation was introduced. Thus, unsuitable land for seasonal agriculture was finally offered to tea planters. Despite all the effort of the colonial government, the people of Assam could not bring agriculture under the commercial purview because of subsistence village economy (Assam Land Revenue Manual 1946: 4). The growth of population followed by peasant migration of East Bengal into Assam changed the economic as well as demographic patterns. The hardworking nature of peasant immigrants manifested reclamation of land for the purpose of agriculture. Reclamation of land boosted the peasants to grow more crops. The demand of specific agricultural products in the market encouraged the cultivators to grow more

crops which gradually led to the peasants' specialization in cash crops cultivation.

During 1840-1859, tea became the center of economic development in Assam (Guha 2015: 193). Tea was mostly grown in all the plain areas of Assam. According to the Report on Physical and Political Geography of the Province of Assam 'tea was one of the most important commercial crops in Assam' (Report on the Physical and Political Geography of The Province of Assam1896: 31) and it became popular in European markets which were relatively cheaper in rate than Chinese tea. With the production of good quality of tea, more Europeans started investment of capital in tea trade that finally superseded the Chinese monopoly on tea and its supply to global markets. The introduction of cash crops such as jute and mustard in the first decade of the twentieth century further exposed the rural peasant economy of Assam to market economy (Saikia 2014: 22). This is articulated by Guha, 'poppy was unknown prior to 1770, but by the 1830s over 80 percent of the population of Assam was believed to be opium freaks' (Guha, 2015: 170). The genesis of opium cultivation in Assam seems to be ambiguous and its cultivation was found during the days of Mughal invasion in the seventeenth century. Though opium cultivation was found widespread throughout Assam but its manufacture of local opium for commercial purposes was not developed (Guha 2015: 341). The opium turned as one commercial crop in India in 19th century (Choudhuri 1970:49). According to Rajen Saikia, the cultivation of opium in Brahmaputra valley commenced from the time of Ahom king Lakshmi Singha in the 18th century (Saikia 2000: 214). The cultivation of opium in Assam came to halt in 1860 but its trading activity continued. According to the report of the Excise Department Government of Assam (1927), opium consumption in Assam by 1912 accounted for about 1,394 *maunds* which is equivalent to 55,760 Kilograms (Annual Report of the Excise Department, Government of Assam 1927:96).

Mustard seed was another cash crop that was grown to a large quantity in Assam. As mentioned by Hunter, a commercial crop of mustard seed was also exported to Bengal from Assam (Hunter 1879: 57). Large portions were normally exported to Bengal and small quantities were used for domestic purposes. Mustard was mostly grown for oil which was used for lighting lamps and for consumption.

From 1828, with the export of jute to Europe, the intensity of jute cultivation increased its momentum in Bengal and Assam (Chaudhury 1921: 211). The commercial importance of jute emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century. The

jute weaving industry was mostly in Dundee and Calcutta (Carter1909: 2). Jute fabric was generally used for making packing materials. The Crimean war had ruled out Britain's supply of Russian flax and hemp. Eventually Indian jute had entered the global market that substituted the disruption of Russian supply (Ali 2018: 1). Following the Napoleonic wars jute manufacture and trade on jute materials was revived where flax manufacturers of Dundee took keen interest in jute production (Report of the Bengal Jute Enquiry Committee 1940: 6). The interest of Dundee looked forward to Indian supply of raw jute that finally encouraged extensive cultivation of jute in Bengal and Assam. Jute cultivation was mostly carried out in *char* areas, easily inundated low land. The sandy alluvial plains lying to the north and south banks of Brahmaputra River contributed as the chief source of manure supply that made it conducive to grow jute crops. Goalpara district is recorded as the largest producer of jute in Assam (PGA 1983: 43). Some of the north Indian traders especially Marwaris showed keen interest in this article, which was mostly transported to Bengal province before it was exported to Europe. The means of water communication facilitated export of jute from Assam to Bengal by steamer where Goalpara was made a transit point (Report on Internal Trade of Bengal 1880: 48). The extensive cultivation of jute and its process of production were mostly carried out by the hardworking Muslim peasants who had immigrated to Assam from Eastern Bengal. This process of making golden fiber was a feat of skilled labour, who had acquired specialization in its production and processing. It is also mentioned that Marwari traders and some Assamese moneylenders of Barpeta issued a loan to the outside settlers to cultivate in virgin land. In fact, with their specialization in cash crops, local inhabitants were taught how to grow commercial crops (Guha 2016: 83). With the extensive production of jute in plain areas of Assam, the importance of mustard crops as commercial crops has been surpassed by jute.

Table 2.1: Acreage of jute cultivation in Goalpara (Chaudhury 1921:211).

Year	**1872**	**1880**	**1890**	**1997**	**1900**	**1906**	**1910**	**1917-1918**	**1918-1919**	**1919-1920**
Acreage	5,000	15,000	18,000	35,000	24,000	28,000	31,000	48,000	50,892	55,200

Table 2.2: Data on export of jute from Goalpara district to Bengal (Report on the River-Borne Traffic of the Lower Province of Bengal and on the Internal Trade of Calcutta and on Chittagong Port, 1880-1897).

Year	Quantity	Year	Quantity
1877-78	600 maunds	1887-88	37,295 maunds
1878-79	611 maunds	1888-89	96,977 maunds
1882-83	72,122 maunds	1891-92	76,708 maunds
1883-84	25,672 maunds	1892-93	98,540 maunds
1884-85	38,643 maunds	1893-94	1,75,132 maunds
1886-87	34,859 maunds		

Table 2.3: Export of various agricultural items from Assam during, 1880-1 and 1899-1900 (Barpujari 2007:129).

Articles	Year 1880-1801	Denomination	Year 1899-1990	Denomination
Tea	2,88,754	Maunds	12,39, 336	Maunds
Cotton	15,311	Maunds	38,840	Maunds
Oilseeds	6,89,103	Maunds	7,18,311	Maunds
Rice (in husk)	-		1,67,914	Maunds

Innovation in Agriculture

Innovation in agriculture is one of the flagship aspects of large-scale production and agricultural development. Since the introduction of iron in 1000 BC, it had a significant positive impact on the development of agriculture that subsequently

resulted in development of trade followed by urbanization. Thus, iron plough played a significant role in surplus food production in Assam as well. This iron ploughs driven by bull or buffaloes consolidated faster mobility and accelerated the process of agricultural activity.

Irrigation has literally supplemented regular supply of water into rice fields that is required for transplantation of rice and enhancement of more yield. In this context, the Kacharis were the first inhabitants in Assam who had constructed artificial irrigation for cultivation in Assam. The high agricultural fields were often in need of a water source for irrigating the land which had to be channelized by diverting the streams of water. As mentioned in the Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, Kacharis who lived in the foothills of Himalaya in Brahmaputra valley mostly engaged in construction of irrigation for agricultural purposes. In the process of artificial irrigation, villagers used to combine together and construct a canal by diverting the streams of water to paddy fields (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam 1983: 48). Following the Kacharis, the Buyans and the Ahoms engaged in construction of embankment for irrigation with the help of forced labour. In this context, British also spent considerable sum of money in construction of embankments to protect inundation from Brahmaputra and other tributary rivers. The transplantation of *sali* rice was one of the high yielding crops that were feasible only with the facilitation of artificial irrigation and embankment or dams.

Introduction of wheeled bullock carts by Marwari traders provided important means of transport that facilitated faster mobility at the time of cultivation and harvest which later enhanced the agricultural activity during British rule in Assam (Guha 2015: 171).

The intensity of the industrial revolution has finally touched the colony of British in India in general and Assam in particular. The mechanization in agriculture finally accelerated the process of production.

Mobilization of Agricultural Labour

During the Ahom period most of the agricultural activities were performed by the forced labour known as *paiks*. According to Chandan Kumar Sharma, "the *paik* system was a state-organized system of compulsory labour exploitation who did not have a minimum right over goods produced by them and had to render physical compulsory service to the state without any wage for 3 months a year" (Sharma 1996: 34-35). In this process, all the male persons were engaged in land as well as militia. Apart from forced labour, slavery prevailed as common

practice during Ahom period. They were called as *Das, Dasi, Golam* or *Bandi*(Nath 2002: 127). According to the reports of Francis Hamilton and Walter Hamilton, 'slaves were abundant in Assam where every blue blood possessed several of them who were mostly native inhabitants and came from economically marginalized backgrounds with limited access to means of livelihood' (Bhuyan 1940: 371). The abolition of slavery in Assam released thousands of slaves followed by reclamation of land, which was allowed to them for cultivation. Another group of agricultural labour included native and outside settlers who were engaged in tea cultivation. Following the establishment of tea gardens in Assam, the company had encountered inadequacy in labour for maintaining its activity. Initially, the Bodo Kacharis were employed in tea gardens as labourers who had partially extended their hand to the British during off season when their agricultural field was free of crops. According to Guha, 'till 1859 the entire supply of labour to tea cultivation was local origin' (Guha 2015: 65). However, with the extension of more estates demand for labour surged and there were no longer local people to turn as labourer. This labour crisis impelled the colonial government to adopt a policy of labour substitution to resolve labour insufficiency by a forced drive process from the adjacent provinces. Eventually the Act VII. of 1873 entrusted licensed contractors to recruit indentured labourers from outside Assam for tea cultivation (Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam 1877: 137). In addition, the introduction of the railway facilitated the faster movement of labourers from outside the province. The Assam District Gazetteers report of 1905 reveals that over 1,44,876 indentured labours were brought to Assam from Chotanagpur, Bengal province, United province, Central province and Madras province (Allen 1905: 137). Another group of skilled and hardworking labourers from East Bengal were welcomed by the British to reclaim *char* areas of virgin land in Assam to extend agriculture. This group of peasants played a significant role in economic development of Assam. Due to their hardworking nature, they were encouraged by the colonial administration to occupy more land for growing jute and other crops. The 'Grow more Food' campaign was also attributed to large scale production and immigration of peasants from Eastern Bengal (Dev 1985: 73). It was a policy of the government to draw revenue from unused land by converting them for cash crop cultivation. The hardworking peasants of Eastern Bengal who were already hard pressed by high density of population, recurrent famine, scarcity of food, harsh treatment of *zamindars* and for other internal factors in their own province were forced to look for better opportunity for livelihood that finally offered a place for them in Assam. With the growth of jute trade in the international

market and low density of population with vast uncultivated land forced the British authority to invite hardworking peasants from Eastern Bengal (Chand 2017: 16-17). The census report of 1911 unambiguously shows that 30 percent of population increased in Goalpara district especially *char* areas of land was occupied by peasants from adjacent provinces for extensive cultivation, who took greater risk against inundation (Census of India 1913: 60). A continuous process of mass exodus from Eastern Bengal into Assam caused unprecedented pressure on land that subsequently forced the British administration to introduce the 'Line System' in Assam that earmarked an area of settlement into four categories by segregating on communal lines (Kar 2013: 4).

3.1: Table shows immigration of indentured labourers to Assam tea estates from 1876 to 1885 and 1895 to 1901 (Metilus 1903:150-166).

Year	Number of Indentured Labourers	Year	Number of Indentured Labourers	Year	Number of Indentured Labourers
1876	34,283	1882	22,559	1897	95,031
1877	31,897	1883	32,148	1898	49,169
1878	43,061	1884	45,511	1899	31,908
1879	24,712	1885	29,398	1900	62,733
1880	15,913	1895	72,837	1901	26,233
1881	17,116	1896	81,115		

Transaction, Credit and Mercantile Operation

The modern form of monetized transaction gradually replaced the earlier practice of barter and minimum cash transactions have been seen in some parts of Assam. However, in western Assam, cash transactions were partially operated especially in jute and salt trade (Guha 2015: 172). One of the interesting facts is that salt was used as a commodity for exchanging goods with the forest materials and agricultural products. Subsequently, it came to light that owing to the dearth of cash in Assam, administration was impelled to admit nonperishable articles such as ivory, gold, *muga*, silk, *munjit* and cotton cloths as settlement of land

revenue. These articles were subsequently sold to the traders for money (Guha 2015:180). The smooth phenomenon of money transaction was facilitated by import and export trade between Assam and mainland India.

With the introduction of a cash revenue payment system and stress on cultivation of commercial crops, most of the peasants had to rely on creditors. These creditors seemed to be Marwari traders and some local rice dealers, who had acted as moneylender to the cultivators. The credit facilities helped the cultivators to continue their regular practice of cultivation, to purchase agricultural tools, procure better seeds and pay the revenue to the *mauzadars* or *zamindars*.

In the first decade of the 20th century, a new Indian capitalist group emerged in India. However, in the case of Assam, initially, they worked as petty traders before turning into full-fledged Indian capitalists. This community embarked on starting up with the shop in Assam that subsequently spread to every corner of rural markets and began money lending operation and accumulation of agricultural produce (Pavlov 1964: 155-156). According to M'Cosh, 'Marwaris are immigrants to Assam who came from Marwar in Rajasthan. By and large, these people were mostly affluent whose profession was associated with trade and commerce (M'Cosh 1837: 25).' Introduction of steamer boat facilitated external trade with adjacent Bengal province (Hunter 1879:56). Following the introduction of railway in Assam, transportation of agricultural goods became easier, cost of transport declined and traders took keen interest in economic activity especially on agricultural produce (Hurd II 1975: 267). The rapid development of means of transport encouraged traders to engage more on trade that resulted in more demand on agricultural produce. Thus, cultivators were encouraged to carry out extensive cultivation for export.

Conclusion

The colonial administration in Assam brought in a drastic transition in agrarian economy that mainly switched over to reformation of land which enhanced the extent of cultivation and ensured better security of *ryots* in their land holding. Interestingly, the erstwhile rural agrarian economy was gradually replaced with a commercial based economy. In fact, the former stagnant economy was attributed to political turmoil and semi-feudal nature of administration where ownership of land was structured through joint conquest that restricted private ownership of land of the common people. Over the years, paucity of advanced local merchant groups, limited circulation of cash and traditional method of

cultivation remained deterrence to further economic growth in Assam. However, colonial administration has fetched a systematic mechanism of wasteland legislation that offered to private enterprise to turn up more profit and consolidate substantial revenue to colonial exchequer. Monetized system and proliferation of revenue on traditional crops were another colonial mechanism to directly engage the cultivators on land for large scale production of non-food crops to meet overseas market demand or turn them as labour in their estates. Thus, for the extensive cultivation, hardworking skilled labourers were hired from adjacent provinces. 'Grow more Food' campaign was another policy that invited more immigrants from Eastern Bengal to Assam for extensive cultivation on virgin lands. In the process of extensive cash crop production advanced communities played a dynamic role of financial assistance to economically marginalized peasant communities who had provided advance loans to the cultivators for buying seeds and agricultural appliances.

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