CONCLUSION

From the foregoing account it is evident that the early years of Company's rule was a period of instability and confusion, and of unsuccessful attempts to collect revenue through the agency of native functionaries. Since the main function of the government was confined mainly to the collection of revenue, the prosperity of the province instead of improving recorded a steep decline. The failure of the system has been attributed to the introduction of "European principles of government without the aid of European integrity". The collectors of revenue failed to work under a system totally foreign to them. Consequently government demand accumulated in arrears, vast areas of lands were thrown out of cultivation, and the ryots were exposed to the rapacity of unscrupulous revenue agents whose extortion and oppression compelled them to leave their hearth and homes and to find shelter elsewhere. The period also witnessed the occurrence of a series of revolts organised by the ex-official aristocracy who lost their rights and immunities with the changes in administration.

The failure of Scott's complicated system of revenue administration and the uprisings of the ex-nobility necessitated a thorough reorganisation of the whole system of revenue administration. On the suggestions made by Captain Bogle and Lieutenant Matthie the poll tax was replaced by a tax on land in Lower and Central Assam while Upper Assam was handed over
to Purandar Singha, a scion of the former royal family. The introduction of the new system was, however, a long process: for in the district of Darrang the indigenous khelwari system continued; and a regular land tax was introduced there only in 1843. In the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur the new system was extended in 1838-39, when the territory was resumed after the failure of the experiment with the Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam. The innovation was on the whole successful; it brought confidence in the peasantry as is borne out by the return of large number of ryots who had left their homes during the period of revenue mismanagement. Further, the introduction of land tax augmented the revenues of the government. To crown all, the ryotwari principle of direct dealing with each cultivator was accepted as the basis of the new system of land settlement. But in reality instead of introducing a pure ryotwari system of administration, the province was kept under khas management. Although in both ryotwari and khas systems there was no middleman between the ryot and the government and every cultivator was assessed separately on the basis of the land he held, in the latter system the government assumed the role of a landlord and the ryots were treated as tenants whereas in the former the ryots themselves were the real owners of their holdings. By placing the province under khas management the ryots of Assam were denied of their proprietary rights on land and were thus reduced to the position of mere tenants. In the absence of any valid tenure the cultivators-
felt their position absolutely insecure, and consequently took little interest in cultivation.

Shortly afterwards even this khas management was modified by introducing "a profit and loss" settlement for a term of years with the subordinate revenue collectors or mouzadars. This innovation altered the position of the revenue collector who now combined in himself the functions of both a farmer of revenue and a government officer. This "half khas half farming" system too, did not work well and the high hopes of the local authorities for large extension of cultivation through the exertion of mouzadars remained unrealised. Rather it led to a decrease in the number of ryotwari holdings in the province. For instance, the number of landholdings even in Kamrup, the most populous district in the province, decreased from 75,463 in 1850 to 71,668 in 1857, and still further in 1864. Moreover the expectations of the local authorities of creating a class of large landholders and of colonising Assam by inviting ryots from other provinces remained unfulfilled. Besides, the new system was also marked by the absence of uniformity in assessment, collection, or in other details of revenue administration of the province. On the part of the government, the system, however, ensured effective collection of revenues with least trouble and

1. Hunter, W.W., A Statistical Account of Assam, p. 4'.
at a cheaper cost. Since the primary settlement was concluded with the mouzadar, it also offered the government every opportunity to increase the rate of land revenue at any time and on any pretext.

Failure of the system to achieve the desired objectives brought before the government the question whether to retain it with necessary modifications, or to replace it by a new one. After prolonged deliberations the farming of land revenue with the mouzadars for a term of years was done away with, but they were retained only as revenue collectors on commission basis. The government now encouraged the ryots to take lease for a term of ten years by granting them a proprietary right on their holdings. They were further assured that there would be no enhancement of revenue during the term of the lease.

From the revenue point of view the settlements made after 1868 were highly successful. But they were not followed by a corresponding increase in the resources of the agricultural community, nor was there any considerable extension of cultivation. In 1853, a little more than one million acres of lands were under cultivation, and the revenue collected was Rs 7,41,971. In 1866 the revenue rose to Rs 12,38,200.

2. RDP., 1872; 27 March, No. 116: Colonisation of Waste Lands in Assam, Ibid.
the cultivation to 13,24,498 acres. In 1874, when Assam was constituted as a separate province the land revenue amounted to Rs 21,32,008, but the land under cultivation stood at one million and a quarter of acres. The above figures clearly show that there was a three-fold increase of land revenue during the period of twenty one years from 1853 to 1874, whereas the land under ordinary cultivation had increased only by twenty five per cent during the same period. Unable to bear this unprecedented increase, many ryots abandoned their cultivation and sought employment in tea gardens. This transfer of ryots from subsistence farming to plantation jobs resulted in a decrease in the production of food grains. This is borne out by the fact that in 1873 not less than three lakh maunds of rice had to be imported to meet the requirements of the province. During the eighties and early nineties there was further increase in the import of rice from Bengal.

Not only was there a steady rise in revenue on land but also a number of odious taxes were introduced on agricultural products. These were productive of great irritation and resentment of the ryots which manifested itself in a series of popular outbreaks in the later half of the nineteenth century.

1. Colonisation of Waste Lands in Assam: see Cotton's note, 22 September, 1898
2. Ibid.
first agrarian revolt occurred at Phulaguri, in the district of Nowgong, in October 1861 wherein the infuriated mob killed Lieutenant Singer, the Junior Assistant Commissioner.\(^1\) A fresh wave of riot took place in several places in the district of Kamrup and Nowgong in 1868, following the enhancement of revenue from 25 to 50 per cent.\(^2\) When the assessment was again raised to 70 to 80 per cent, and in some cases even 100 per cent in 1894, the ryots of Kamrup not only refused to pay the taxes but put every obstacle in the collection of revenue. Inevitably, frictions developed into hostilities between ryots and police in villages of Rangiya, Kapla and Lachima in the district of Kamrup, and Patharughat in the district of Darrang, resulting in heavy casualties.\(^3\) The uprisings of the agricultural ryots caused a deep stir all over the country. This abnormal rise in revenue and other handicaps of the Assamese ryots has been brilliantly summarised in the editorial of the Indian Nation on 12 April 1894, as follows:

Formerly the Assam ryot was the proprietor of his land. If he made any default to pay revenue, his land was sold at auction, the surplus of the sale proceeds being paid to him after deducting arrear costs. But at present he is neither a

\[^1\] For details see Barpujari, H.K. (ed.), Political History of Assam, 1826-1919, pp. 90-92

\[^2\] RDP., 1869; November, No. 103

\[^3\] Barpujari (Ed.), op.cit., pp. 96ff
landholder, a settlement-holder or a tenant-at-will liable to be ejected or to have his lease cancelled on breach of any of the conditions of lease.

At present the ryot cannot transfer his land to another without permission of the Deputy Commissioner. Formerly there was no such restriction.

The number of pattas or lease has been multiplied and the ryot may have from five to ten pattas. For a single cottah of land, if it be situated near a public road, a patta bearing an eight anna stamp may be demanded.

The burdens which now press upon the land in Assam are considerably heavier than on land owned by zamindars in Bengal.¹

The Amrita Bazar Patrika also observed in its editorial that "in the Deccan the fury of the ryots was directed against money-lenders, in Bengal against indigo-planters in 1860, in Pabna against zamindars in 1872, but in Assam, at this movement, it is open rebellion against the Government."² Even in the Imperial Legislature Dr Rash Behari Ghosh questioned the propriety of raising the rate of assessment and the repressive

1. Editorial, The Indian Nation, 12 April, 1894
2. Editorial, The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 12 February 1894
measures adopted by the local authorities to suppress the popular risings. 1 The Chief Commissioner was, therefore, obliged to reduce the rates of assessment by twenty six per cent at the first instance. 2 The rates were further reduced by the orders of the Government of India at first to 53% and later 32.7%. 3

The revenue policy of the government, particularly the liberal grants of waste lands, turned Assam into a foreigners' paradise. The success of the experimental plantations in lower Assam and the operations of the Assam Company created a stir in the speculative world. In 1859 out of 54,860 acres of land occupied by different tea Companies 7,599 acres were under actual cultivation, of which the Assam Company alone held 5,784 acres. 4 By 1873 waste land held by different speculators amounted to 2,35,852 acres, of which 31,303 were under cultivation. 5 The development of tea industry demanded importation of immigrant labourers which was greatly facilitated by the introduction of railways and regular steamer service along the Brahmaputra. In 1826 the population of the valley was estimated at 850,000 souls

1. See Barpujari, (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 102
5. Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam, 1871-72, para 98
which stood at 10,59,513 in 1853. In 1872, out of a population of 14,96,000, the total number of non-indigenous people was estimated at about 80,000 of which 40,000 were imported labourers working in tea gardens. By 1881 the non-indigenous population increased to about three lakhs in a total population of about 18,05000, and in 1901 the number of immigrants reached to about six lakhs.

The influx of immigrants and improvement in communication and transport stimulated industry and trade, both internal and external. The local people however derived little benefit from these developments. The ryot remained satisfied with his small pittance of land where he grew the necessaries of his life. His mode of cultivation continued to be primitive and the implements he used were of archaic type. The local gentry, on the other hand, had "neither the means nor even the inclination" to form a class of landed proprietors like the Zaminders of Bengal. Though indigenous industries like spinning and weaving of cotton and silk continued to exist, their products could hardly compete with the articles imported from abroad. In external trade, there had been a constant drainage of wealth out of Assam to enrich the speculators abroad. Within the state the whole traffic was chiefly carried on by the kayas, or the merchants from Karwar. "The Assamese", in the words of a contemporary, "see a set of

1. CD., 1834; 3 December, No. 4, para 1; Dhekial Phukan, Paliram, Assam Buranji, Mills, op.cit., Appendix-A
2. Guha, op.cit., p. 210
strangers in the land getting rich before their own eyes, none ever follow their example and they appear to have no inclination to enter into competition with those foreigners.”

In his report to the Board of Revenue in 1850, the Commissioner of Assam wrote that there was not even half a dozen persons "who could pretend to any wealth in the whole province." In 1853 Maniram Dewan deplored that previously there were in every village two to five respectable ryots possessing granaries filled with grain, but not a single such ryot was to be found even in hundred villages at that time. This position did not improve even at the close of the nineteenth century as mentioned by W.W. Hunter and B.C. Allen in their district reports.

2. BRC., 1850; March 8, No. 66; Jenkins to Secretary, Board of Revenue 13 February, 1850
3. Mills, op.cit., see District of Sibsagar, Appendix K.