CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SIPAJHAR REGION

The Sipajhar region, the area of study, is the westernmost part of the Darrang District. The name of the region dates back to the ancient time. It is believed that, the name Sipajhar comes from the river "Chifa" mentioned in the Vedic period. 47 The place even in the Vedic period can be identified from the names of certain rivers viz., Chifa, Anjachi, Kulsi and Birpatni. In Sipajhar mouza, the dead river course which now passes through Sipajhar village is believed to be the "Chifa" of Vedic period. The area around it came to be known as Sipajhar. The river Kulsi, the present easternmost boundary of Sipajhar region, is still flowing through the Rainakuchi mouza. The river Barnai, the present westernmost boundary of Darrang District, might be the river "Birpatni". The river Ahini in between Barnai and Kulsi might have the river "Anjachi" mentioned in the Rigveda.

The region considered for the present work covers the Development Block area of Sipajhar with 178 villages. The historical significance of the area has noticeable impact on the present distribution of settlements. The area was once a part of the ancient kingdom of "Kamrupa" and was included in its "Svarnapith" division. During the period from 2500 B.C. to 1st century A.D. the region was ruled by a number of legendary kings who belonged to the Kirat and Asur dynasty. According to the pre-historic literature the inhabitants of this region were of the Mongoloid stocks.

An assessment of the early history of the study area reveals that from 1st century A.D. to 1947 A.D., i.e., prior to the formation of independent India, it was ruled by eight different sets of rulers:

(1) The Sudra and Khatriya kings (from 1st century A.D. to 4th century A.D.)

48. Block means a Development Block which is the smallest national and State planning unit in India till 1991, covering a number of settlements. Blocks vary in areal extent. But since 1992, Panchayat became the smallest planning unit.

49. Acharyya, N.N. : Asamar Aitihasik Bhuchitrawali, Gauhati, Assam, 1968, p. 2

(ii) The Barman Kings (from 5th century A.D. to 7th century A.D.)

(iii) The Salastambha Kings (from 8th century A.D. to 10th century A.D.)

(iv) The Brahmapala Kings (from 10th century A.D. to 12th century A.D.)

(v) The Bara-Bhuyan Kings (from 13th century A.D. to 15th century A.D.)

(vi) The Koch Kings (from 1515 A.D. to 1637 A.D.)

(vii) Protected Koch Kings of the Ahoms or Darrangi Kings (from 1638 A.D. to 1826 A.D.)


During the period of eighteen hundred years prior to the British rule, the present Sipajhar region witnessed several decisive battles during the transfer of power from one set of monarchs to the other set and in course of successive invasion of Mughals from out side of present Assam in 1564 A.D., 1581 A.D., 1620 A.D., 1635 A.D., 1662 A.D. and in 1671 A.D. The frequent battles fought in the region among different political forces has created socio-political instability and lack of security feelings among the early inhabitants in the region. This had resulted low density
of population and hampered the normal growth of settlements. There are ample evidences in the historical literatures of the region that the indigenous people in pre-British Assam had migrated from one part to another depending on socio-political situation prevailing from time to time.

The land revenue administration of the region can be clearly traced back till the installation of the protectorate Koch Kings or the "Darrangi Rajas" by the Ahom Kings since 1638 A.D. As evidenced by the historical literatures, the land revenue administration during the rule of the independent Koch Kings (1515 A.D. to 1637 A.D.) was closely similar to those of the Ahom Kings. Since the invasion of the Koch territory by the Ahoms and the subsequent installation of protectorate Koch Kings in 1638 A.D., the unique land revenue system of Ahom administration came into force in the region with local modifications. During the period of 1638 A.D. to 1826 A.D., the Ahom kings like any other part of their territory assumed the absolute right over both land and its occupancy in the study area. The status of the protectorate Koch Kings was like that of a local Governor and he acted on behalf of the Ahom King as a land

revenue administrator. Balitnarayan or Dharmanarayan was the first of such protectorate Koch Kings.

Under the Ahom system of land revenue administration no individuals could acquire ownership over land. Individuals were treated as the possessor of the land without any proprietary rights. In that system commonly known as "pikan system" of revenue administration, the occupants of land had to pay the state specified manual labour or in lieu of that higher rate of poletax. But, the major disadvantage of the system was that the rate of land revenue was different in different parts of the territory. This was because of the fact that the revenue administration of a particular area was left to the protectorate Kings or appointed officials of the area and his revenue assessment was final for that area. The protectorate King or the appointed official assessed revenue on the basis of the revenue he had to pay to the King. The differential rates of revenue among various parts of the territory resulted in migration of the cultivators from high rent paying areas to low rent paying areas. The only areas of higher population within the high rent paying areas were the revenue free grant lands of the Ahom Kings, which were commonly known as "Dharmottar", "Debottar" and "Brahmottar" lands. In the case of Darrang District, first land survey was carried out by an Ahom Officer Dhaniram under the
direction of Ahom King Rudra Singha in 1707 A.D. and a higher rate of revenue was imposed. The rates of assessment were further raised in subsequent surveys. The popular discontent found expression in angry demonstrations at the Ahom capital. In the case of the study area the protectorate Koch Kings introduced a number of "Nispridar" with full powers of revenue assessment and collection. Such Nispridars were liable to the protectorate King for payment of revenue specified for his area and finally the protectorate King was liable to the Ahom King for payment of revenue specified for his territory. Thus, the Nispridars being the supreme authority for their tenants imposed differential rates of land revenue within small spatial units under their authority. This had led even to migration of people at micro-spatial level. Interestingly, the study area is characterised by very high density of indigenous population in the Darrang District. The high concentration of indigenous population is the result of the liberal revenue assessment of the area by the Nispridars of the protected Koch Kings of the region. But adverse conditions prevailed in other parts of the Ahom territory.

53. Ibid., p. 75.
During the period 1818 A.D. to 1824 A.D. prior to the British rule, the Burmese invaded Assam and let loose a reign of terror among the people of the ancient territory of Assam. Following the raids and torture of the Burmese invaders in areas south of the Brahmaputra, many people migrated to the northern parts of the territory. A considerable proportion of this influx settled in areas comprising the present Sipajhar region. The majority of the non-Koch population of the area had migrated and settled here during that period. This factor also contributed to higher indigenous population of the area.

Although Assam was placed under British rule in 1826 A.D., the undivided Darrang district was formally constituted in 1833 A.D., with Mangaldai as district headquarters. But two years latter the district headquarters was shifted to Tezpur, situated in the present Sonitpur District. The system of permanent occupancy of land with individual land ownership was, for the first time, introduced by Britishers through the proclamation of the Assam land and revenue regulation, 1886. There after, immediately after the imposition of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886, the cultivators of the area

54. Till 1983, the Darrang District covered the present districts of Darrang and Sonitpur of Assam.
protested against the hike in the revenue rates as well as their mode of payment in monetary currency before the British Government. Such protests were registered by the cultivators at Britishers' revenue office located at Patharighat in the area. Finally, the refusal of the British administration to concede to the demands of the cultivators led to the "massacre of Patharighat" of 1894 - the region's historically significant peasant revolution that resulted in the death of 140 peasants. After the suppression of this peasant revolution, the situation became congenial for the Britishers for the execution of their revenue policies.

Under the new system of land occupancy, there seems to have a steady growth of population and settlements in the region. Thus, spatial organization of settlements in this study area is related to the history of settlement, particularly from the beginning of the British rule in Assam.


56. As per historical record the figure of death is 140 persons, but as per Government record it was declared to be 17 persons.