This chapter on demography, society and economy shall broadly analyze the population of Assam valley, with reference to its growth, distribution of working force according to occupation, immigration, economic nature of the immigrant, pattern of land use under different agricultural crops and status of industry and trade as it difficult to trace the specific causes of social transformation that condition the behaviour of peoples and social aggregates, without a reference to the extant society and economy. Also, no serious and systematic comprehension of social structure has been possible without some knowledge of the economy, for much of the ordering of social life depends upon the kind of economic relationship which people enter into in the course of earning a livelihood. In addition, the social classes and their identities are never structured in vacuum but their nature and relationships in specific historical conjunctures depend on such objective forces as modes of production. For example, the discovery of tea with its significant base-the wastelands together with coal and petroleum changed dramatically every aspect of the subsequent nineteenth-century society in the Assam valley.

The chapter shall enquire into the broad nature of the region’s economy in terms of continuity and change in production, consumption and competition and proceeds in the following sequence of: decline; growth and an illustration of the economic forces affecting both the sequences. Two consequences follow as a result of demographic transition: first an increase impacts positively upon economy by
bringing down death rates and secondly economic change usually brings in population growth through migration.

In general, existing literature has confirmed the importance of demographic changes in stimulating a country’s economic growth, with mixed empirical results though. According to these studies changes in age structure mainly influenced by reduced fertility play a significant role in economic growth when a decrease in the young dependent population growth leads to a higher fraction of working-age population. ‘Population pessimists’ like Coale and Hoover believed population is detrimental to economic development, as it tends to hike up demographic overhead while overwhelming capital accumulation and technological progress. On the other hand, ‘population optimists’ stress the importance of population growth in advancing productivity, promoting technological innovation and capturing economies of scale. Still, some studies found no significant effects of population growth on economic growth, giving rise to ‘population neutralism’.

As a reconciliation of these positions, a few studies stated that the different perspectives of the relationship between population growth and economic growth really just reflect different phases a country go through. Theoretically, the Solow-Swan growth model establishes the linkage between population growth and economic growth. This is also the model that many previous studies on the subject

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2 For detail see, Boserup, (1981); Hirschman (1958); and Simon (1981).
matter adopted. In this neoclassical model, which assumes constant returns to scale and diminishing marginal returns to factors of production, the output per worker is a function of capital per worker, which is determined by savings per worker, population growth and capital depreciation rates. While at the steady-state output per worker is constant and the total output grows at the rate of population growth, the population growth rate is critical in determining the steady state in the first place. If the population growth rate decreases, the steady-state level of output per worker increases. Thus, the Solow-Swan model theoretically predicts a negative impact of population growth on economic growth at steady state.4

Empirically, to break the impasse in the population debate, researchers have shifted their attention to the changes in demographic components that underlie the overall population growth. One of the most important studies is on India by Coale and Hoover in 1958 using data analysis and projections. By looking at population size, age distribution and corresponding growth rate, they point out that a larger population may lead to falling per capita income because of diminishing returns to scale although optimal population size yielding maximum per capita output can shift with the passage of time. Furthermore, a higher rate of population growth implies a higher level of investment needed to achieve a given per capita output or, in other words, a decrease in the capital available for each worker if the supply of capital is inelastic. This prevents an increase in the average productivity of the

work force and, hence, the average per capita income. While the distribution of population by age is mainly influenced by fertility, with the same resources and capital available, a lower birth-rate population should have higher per capita output due to a smaller fraction of dependent children. In a study using data of 70 countries covering the period from 1965 to 1990, Bloom, Canning and Malaney established a two-way causality between demographic changes and economic growth. They confirmed to a negative effect of growth in total population and positive effect of growth in working-age population on economic growth. In reverse, they further find a negative impact of higher income on fertility rates.

Analysis of demographic transition of any region through an economic perspective is a difficult task as ‘economy’ encompasses the hinterland and its produce, trade and manufacture as well as markets and the commercial and financial capital. The difficulty becomes more pronounced for the province of colonial Assam, keeping in view the profound social and political changes, which took place in the nineteenth century. A rich corpus of economic histories helps, through the process of elimination though, to assess the economic impact on demographic change and vice versa. Literature in the form of agrarian histories examined how peasants responded to demand for raw material and grain. Historians have also looked for the growth-inducing impact of markets, or explained their lack where they did not

appear. Both of these explanations involve studying the interaction between markets, and the social, cultural, ecological, and demographic contexts in which they emerge. The business histories examined the sequence of survival, decline and growth of industries and trade; sources of capital in industry and trade, and the markets where their output was sold.\textsuperscript{7} From about the 1860s, regional accounts of economic change continued for many decades to report migration and settlement of labour communities to induce plantation, boost up cultivation, and to set up as shop-keepers in towns and tea gardens that lacked such services. All these studies inveterate the fact that for structural organisations and growth processes in economy, demography has been a determinant factor. Therefore, writing history of demography in relation to its impact on the economy during colonial rule in Assam, demands an understanding of the demographic pattern and its bonds with the various components of economy.

This may be understood against the backdrop of the pre-colonial economic system in the region. Assam, like other regional economies in Indian was dependent on the plough. The economy in pre-colonial Assam had been predominantly agricultural and self-sufficient in nature. Agriculture for the rural population in an underdeveloped region like Assam was taken as a way of life rather than a business or commercial proposition. The farmers here were not speculative, mobile or calculating like their counterparts in other parts of the country and the world. Prior to her colonial connection, it was a principle with the Ahom rulers, that both the

land and the subject were the property of the state. This system went into an almost inextricable confusion during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasions. During the period mentioned rice and mustard was produced abundantly. In fact Captain Welsh who visited the country in 1792-94 C.E. asserted that scarcity from natural causes was unknown.

The agrarian nature of the economic structure of pre-colonial Assam that produced mainly for consumption within the family or household continued with few changes during the colonial rule. However, a change was visible as far was commercial agriculture was concerned and an increase in areas under cultivation. This change was brought in by a change in the government with its thrust towards a market-oriented economy in order to maximize the government revenue. Along with the production of food crops peculiar to the region, cash crops namely tea and jute found a place in the list of agricultural products with a boost from the administration. This was achieved with a marked change in the

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8 The state economy during Ahom rule was determined by the unique system of ‘Paik’. Here all lands belonged to the state which was granted to the people in lieu of service or tax. For the purpose population was divided into two categories: agricultural workers and goods producers. While the former cultivated the state’s as well as his own land through the system of ‘got’ and enjoyed a homestead land without having to pay tax the later paid a kind of income tax. Further, the Paiks were also required to participate in battles and lend his service to works of public utility when required. A Paik was always an able bodied male between 15 to 50 years of age.

9 Assam had its share of long wars that proved deadly indeed during the six hundred years under Ahom rule. Considering the demographic impact of wars, as discussed in the introduction, these wars did kill enough people to make a real dent in the total population of a region and a major one during the Burmese invasion of 1817-1821 A.D. In most part of the region, population stagnated in size, even though the period was a time of relatively high fertility.

demographic pattern of the region. Population size it is believed limits the size of economy, therefore, Amiya Bagchi has highlighted the need to study the many aspects of demographic change in economic history as specific processes embedded in historically determinate and changing production regimes.\textsuperscript{11}

Since eighteenth century population became an organic part of economic thought as seen in the inevitable chapters on population in treatises on economics, historians and social scientists had begun analysis of population in the period before industrialisation with the Malthusian model. Malthus in his work correlated for the first time population growth and changes with other socio-economic changes. Any agrarian economy with high degree of self sufficiency, relatively slow change in technique and unimportant role of market exchange was demographically characterized by a high average death as well as birth rates. The high birth rate was necessary for a community with high death rate to continue its existence. When the high death rate is brought down due to preventive check with fertility rate still remaining high, a region tends to experience an explosion in population growth. This phenomenon explained by the theory of demographic transition contains a significant generalization that the decline in the birth rates typically occurs after a time lag, in comparison with the decline in mortality. This happens because death rates are brought down relatively quickly through advanced methods of disease control, public health, and better nutrition. However, it takes a longer period for a society to adjust to change and alter its reproductive behaviour,

evolved during high death rate periods, to suit the new situation of relative prosperity and longer life spans. The historical implication of this lag between the decline in the death rate and the decline in the birth rate is such that a region experiences substantial growth in population and a rapid one at least by previous standard. Apart from preventive checks, population rate also increases due to immigration.

A survey of the decennial Census Reports from the year 1872 to 1941 and other official reports and enumerations since 1826 shows that population of the region, though initially retarded, had been increasing rapidly. The population of the region which was roughly estimated between 7 to 8 lakhs in 1826 increased from 1,916,697 in 1872 to 5,695,659 in 1941. Population growth in the inter Census decades was attributed to factors such as natural growth of the old population, large scale expansion of the tea industry which imported a large number of coolies into the province, and the immigration from East Bengal and Nepal.

Demographic change and economic development have been related mutually. Any discussion on the factual basis of growth or decline of economy vis-à-vis statistical change in population has been addressed considering the age composition of population and the employment statistics in the Censuses. Both these components have been analyzed in order to establish the propositions above. Of the demographic determinants affecting economy the most important variable has undoubtedly been the age structure of the population because it determines the

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size of the working force. Changes in population age structure have important effects on economic performance, as reflected in measures such as the level of national income per capita and its rate of growth. Income per capita for the total population will grow if income per capita and the percentage of population in the working ages grow. Thus, if other things are held constant, changes in population age structure translate into changes in the growth rate of income per capita. Some authors like Bloom, Canning and Malaney describe such a period of rising working-age proportions as a demographic bonus period during which compositional changes in population temporarily boost levels of income per capita and rates of economic growth.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, changes in population growth rate, size and age structure are also intrinsically related to changes in migration, fertility and mortality.

The age structure of the population of during colonial rule in Assam\textsuperscript{15} point toward two significant conclusions; one, the maximum number of population was under the age group of 20-40 and secondly, population showed a downward trend twice between the age group of 0-5 and 15-20 and again between 20 and 40; and 60 and above. The decreasing trend in the first part points toward high death rate but that there was a sudden increase between the groups of 20 to 40 points towards the fact that the gain was largely due to migration. By 1905-06 the adult labour force on the plantations in Assam rose to 417,262.\textsuperscript{16} Of these only few thousands were local people, the rest migrated.


\textsuperscript{15} See Table 1 in Appendix II.

Record both of growth and decline in economy can be discerned from the size of the workforce associated with various occupations. Six pre-independence Censuses from 1881-1931, presented an occupational distribution of the workforce for the period. In the Censuses occupations were classified into four broad and twelve sub-classes. While the division and ordering of the broad classes continued since 1911, the division of the sub-classes were modified in each enumeration. The Censuses enumerated and classified workers, dependents and working dependents separately. In the Census of 1931, information relating to the number of person of each sex who earned their living by working at a particular occupation, the number of person in each occupation who has subsidiary occupation, the number of dependents who assist in the work of the family without earning wages and the number of non-working dependents was gathered.

According to 1931 enumeration, out of every 1,000 people in the province 548 were non working dependents and 452 were workers i.e., earners plus working dependents. Again out of the 452 mentioned workers as many as 373 were employed in some form of pasture and agriculture, the balance being distributed between fishing, mines, industry, transport, trade, public administration and liberal arts and miscellaneous. Due to a change in the definition of earner in the case of women and children in 1931 Census, only 563,897 women returned as earners against a figure of 1,145,711 in the Census of 1921. Table 3.1 below shows the percentage of working force Brahmaputra valley by broad categories for the Census decennials since 1901-1931.
Table 3.1: Percentage of Total Working Force in the Brahmaputra Valley, 1901-1931

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Working force as % of total population</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural labour</th>
<th>Plantation</th>
<th>Manufacturing, Mining and Construction</th>
<th>Trade</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
<th>Unclassified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Censuses of India 1911, 1921 and 1931 and Census of India 1931, Report on Assam, Subsidiary Table IV, p. 139.

Although the list of occupations was extremely numerous the numbers associated, except in agriculture, was a vast minority. The heading agriculturist which conveys man’s connection with land was divided into landed proprietor and tenant cultivators, agricultural labourers and persons engaged on tea gardens. In 1881 Census, out of total 2,225,271 populations in the Brahmaputra valley 1,137,982, of those who have any definite occupation were classed as agriculturist and the proportion of agriculturists to persons who are returned of other specified occupation range was near to 90 per cent. In 1911 the number dependent on agriculture in the Brahmaputra valley was 877 per mile. The proportion divided district wise records Sibsagar with 916 per mile followed by Nowgong with 911. Nowgong is remarkable in being dependent on agriculture though it was not a major tea district. The number supported by ordinary cultivation in the province was 761 persons per mile according to the Census of 1921. The extent to which Assam was dependent upon agriculture including non-cultivating proprietors,
cultivating owners, tenant cultivators agricultural labourers, person associated with *jhum* or shifting cultivation and cultivators planters, managers, clerks and labourers associated with special crops like *pan* vine, tea and fruits and vegetables can be inferred from Table 2 in Appendix which shown the proportion of earners under agriculture to total earners in Assam.

Demographically, as the figures in Table 3.1 reflect that the population associated with agriculture was certainly ‘on growth’ but was there a growth in the agricultural production? Apparently not, as the import and export list clearly reflected that production was not enough and importation of food grain was a required necessity. In 1890 the import value of rice (both husked and unhusked) amounted to rupees 273.1 and 100.1 lakhs respectively. Detailed works on agricultural productivity and agrarian growth provides data which leads us to the conclusion that agriculture stagnated and output of food grain declined clearly against a large growth of population. Between 1903 and 1920, the growth of paddy acreage was only 12 per cent. Yield of principal crops did not change and the commercial tea did not always shared good fortune. For example, the Census of 1921 shows that in 1917-18, the price of rice fell with high yield and prohibition of export. Thus, the average retail price of common rice which was 13 seers per rupee in the beginning of the decade fell to 10 seers in 1917.

Again an excerpt of the same Census mentioned regarding the district of Lakhimpur that its population increased fivefold since 1872 and land settled for ordinary cultivation increased from 247,000 to 347,000 acres, but rice has still to

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be imported to feed the tea garden population. Thus, the change in agriculture was thus only structural and not in terms of real growth. The estimated underproduction was due to the non-commercial nature of the economy. The rural nature of the region also largely contributed towards this non-market choice of occupation. The agricultural pattern of the region shows that the Upper Brahmaputra valley comprising of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Darrang districts specialized in the cultivation of rice, sugarcane, oilseed and pulses and eventually under colonial domination, became the tea-map of the country as a whole. In the Lower Brahmaputra valley comprising the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Goalpara the crop pattern included rice, pulses, oilseeds sugarcane, jute, potato and tobacco. The table 3.2 shows the percentage of cultivated area under various crops.

Table 3.2: District-Wise Percentage of Gross Cultivated Area in the Census Year of 1941

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Food grains other than rice</th>
<th>Oil seeds</th>
<th>Jute</th>
<th>Tea</th>
<th>Fruits and vegetables including root crops</th>
<th>Other crops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Assam Tables, 1941.

18 Census of India, Report for the Province of Assam, 1921, pp. 13-14.
About 11.2 percent or 945,000 persons of Assam were supported by the growing of special products and a 97 percent of these belonged to tea gardens. Tea was referred in the Census of 1931 as the ‘economic barometer’ of the region but its cultivation was not a smooth affair in the region. After the discovery of the tea bush in 1838, experiments followed for its commercial cultivation with foreign, local and inland immigrant labours. While the foreign Chinese labours proved expensive, the locals showed reluctance in the enterprise. British officials preoccupied with increasing Assam’s revenue potential therefore settled the problem with immigrant population. Also until the latter half of the nineteenth century the region though abounded in ‘waste lands’ amounting to one-half the extent of its area, the initial pace of bringing these lands under cultivation was slow due to scarcity of labour. In 1872 the total area taken up by tea planters in the Brahmaputra valley was 364,990 acres but only 27,000 acres were brought under cultivation. The total area of wastelands settled with planters in Assam valley, excluding Goalpara increased from slightly over three lakh acres in 1871 to 6.4 lakh acres by 1901. Thus, impact of immigrants on the economy of colonial Assam, especially in the agricultural sphere since 1891 had been significant.

The increase in work force resulted in the increase as well as change in land use. In the Brahmaputra valley, excluding the permanently settled Goalpara district,

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19 In 1835 the population of the Brahmaputra valley was estimated at 799,519. The land-man ratio was such that the local were never fully enticed to work for wage in the gardens. Recruitment of labour from outside the region proved troublesome initially. The task was accomplished through various Acts, false perusal and coercion.

20 The nature and characteristics immigration into Assam during colonial rule and its impact on the economy of the province has been classified in Table 1 of introduction. In this chapter the discussion has been limited to those who were demographically significant.
settled land during 1881 enumerations was held by about 430,000 persons who pay on an average or more than Rs 6 a head and held on an average of about 4½ acres a piece. Tea acreage by the end of the decade of 1901 leaped up by 63.8 thousand acres. By 1901 the cropped area under rice and other crops was recorded as 357,135 acres in the valley. In 1903-4 the total settled area of Assam proper was 2,562,000 acres, the area of land held at half rates was 189,000 acres, and land held revenue free was 81,000 acres. The total area settled in the Assam valley districts during 1915-16 was 5,114,707 acres, which rose to 6,283,542 acres in 1929-30. The total settled area of the British part of the province increased from 14,444 square miles in 1921 to 15,733 square miles in 1931. For this large increase of 1,289 square miles in the settled area, the Assam valley was almost entirely responsible.

The most notable change was the increase of acreage under tea since 1839. Cultivation of tea in the province was introduced on an experimental basis in 1838 and after a span of fifty years the acreage under tea increased to 1,64,639 acres. In 1858 Sibsagar possessed fifteen tea gardens to which the state granted 13,977 acres from its estimated 1,612,636 acres of wasteland holdings. In the upper districts of the valley the percentage of area under tea varied from 14 per cent in Darrang to over 26 per cent in Lakhimpur. Of the 6,779,978 area of cultivable wastelands in the temporarily settled Brahmaputra valley districts 1,258,277 acres were cultivated by year 1875-76 and within the next 25 years the cultivated area increased to 1,685,078 acres. By the turn of the century there were 764 tea gardens in Assam, spreading over an area of 244,653 acres. 21

21 See Table 3 in Appendix II for area and population under tea garden.
These gardens were a source of employment for 400,000 persons who were instrumental in producing 145 million pounds of tea per year. By 1901 Indian tea obtained 57 per cent of the British market. Land revenue increased from 57 lakhs in 1901-02 to over 67 lakhs in 1909-10. The labour force on tea gardens increased by nearly 114,000 persons between 1901 and middle of 1910 which soared even higher between 1911 and 1921, when the tea industry imported 769,000 labourers. Another 422,000 came during the decade of 1931. This labour force settled down in the tea estates leading to increase in land occupancy in the tea districts of the valley.

Taking advantage of their surplus freehold land, planters also rented plots to labourers who completed their contracted term. The practice came into vogue in the early years of the indentured labour system. The Census of 1901 showed a substantial rise in cultivating tenants due to the practice. The state also leased wasteland to the labourers. By June 1920 it leased 223,331 acres of land in the Brahmaputra valley. In later years another 21,683 acres of private land was leased out to tenants in the valley.

Not alone to the tea migrant, land was also brought under cultivation by the East Bengal peasant immigrants. The new settlers after 1911 not only augmented population but also created important changes in the agrarian landscape. Nearly 85 percent of these immigrants settled permanently with their families mainly on the vast cultivable wastelands lying in the lower and the central districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. They migrated due to economic as well as

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22 See Table 4 in Appendix II for land occupancy under labour population in the tea estates of different districts.
ecological reasons. The Census of 1891 categorically stated that no cultivators from overcrowded Bengal did come to Assam.\textsuperscript{23} Of the total population, three-fifths in Kamrup and five-sevenths in Darrang and Nowgong were composed of these immigrants. The magnitude of immigrants into the district of Goalpara was highest. The population of the district which increased by only 1.36 percent and 2 percent during 1881-1891 and 1891-1901 respectively, increased by 26.07 percent during 1901-1911. They opened up lands which were out of cultivation.

The East Bengal migrants introduced jute, an important new cash crop that they grew commercially by 1913-14 in the districts of Sylhet, Goalpara, and Kamrup. The Census of 1931 extracting a report from the District Officer of Nowgong shows that between 1924 and 1930 there was an increase of 68,958 acres of land settled with migrants from the Mymensingh district of Bengal. Between 1930 and 1950, some 1,508,000 acres mostly in the Brahmaputra valley were settled by the East Bengal migrants. In 1895-96 the total settled area was 3,959,365 acres of which 1,586,674 acres belonged to the Goalpara district alone. The total demand of ordinary land revenue was Rs. 4,413,927 whereas the total land settled and revenue collected under tea was 624,926 acres and Rs. 289,655 respectively. The percentage of the area under tea to total settled areas under ordinary cultivation tea was 15.77 percent and percentage revenue demand was 6.56 percent.\textsuperscript{24} During 1903-4 the total land revenue and cesses in the valley amounted to 50,35,000 in rupees.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Census of India 1891, Report on Assam, pp. 67.
\textsuperscript{24} E.A. Gait, \textit{Land Revenue Manual}, p. LV
\textsuperscript{25} Allen, Gait and Howard, \textit{Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India}, p. 512.
The rate of economic development is measured not in terms of agricultural growth alone but more importantly in industrial and commercial growth. Development economists are unanimous on the opinion the economic development involves evolution from a predominantly agrarian peasant economy to an economy with a greater division of labour, using more elaborate tools and equipments, more urbanized, more oriented to the market sale of products and characterized by rapid and pervasive changes in technique which also includes improvement in transportation, and communication. J. Krishnamurthy in the second volume of *The Cambridge Economic History of India* begins his chapter, *The Occupational Structure* with the following line, ‘Economic growth is associated with a relative shift in the structure of the workforce away from agriculture, towards industry and services’.26 The pre-colonial industries in Assam were such situations where both production and consumption were primarily rural. Traces of urban industries for either urban consumption or rural consumption were not clearly visible. The discussion therefore, has been limited to the former set. The distinguished attributes of rural industries at least in Indian were: production for subsistence for household, community or village; primarily barter, grain-based exchange; peasantry-dominated social relations of production; and narrow or non-diversified markets and skills. These attributes were very much noticeable in Assam. The Census of 1921 included information relating to the industrial and economic condition of the people with special enquiry on the position of cottage industries of

the province. It carried out a special industrial Census of all establishments employing 10 or more persons.

The ordinary Census returns of occupation were supplemented by an Industrial Census. In these Censuses too a factory was defined as an establishment employing 10 or more persons and occupied in producing some article or putting some process into an article to adapt it for use, transport or sale. Therefore, tea although mainly a matter of agriculture was held to be a manufactured article for the purpose of industrial Census, and even gardens with no factories were included since they contributed to the process of production. Information on the structure of the workforce is available from the decennial Censuses for the late nineteenth and twentieth century, all which relates to British rule in the province. Excluding working dependents the number of persons in Assam who actually earn their living by industry was only 98,702 of which 71,240 were male and 27,462 female. Table 5 in Appendix II shows the distribution of male working force in Assam for the Census years of 1911 and 1951.

The numbers of employees shown by the Industrial Census do not agree with those shown under the several heads in the ordinary Census, due to difference in method of collection of data but these are not without significance. The figures in the table above shows that during half the century that followed there was a slight shift from agriculture probably towards manufacturing and services. Notwithstanding the plenty of natural resources in the region only 205,000 persons or about 2.5 percent of the population in the province were supported by industry according to the Census of 1921.27 Industries in pre-colonial Assam existed in the form of cottage

27 Census of India, Report on Assam, 1921, p.171
as well as artisanal. Cottage industries in Assam included handlooms and spindles, cotton hand grinding machines, oil ghanis, sugarcane mills, brass and bell metal work shops, potter, and carpenter workshops, blacksmithies, dairy establishments commercial sewing machines and tailoring shops etc. In Hunter’s *A Statistical Account of Assam* the artisan castes listed were *Kamar* (blacksmith), *Kansari* (brazier), *Kumbhar* (potter), *Hira* (potter), *Sonar* (goldsmith), *Sunri* (distiller), *Sutradhar* (carpenter), *Teli* (oilmen). The Census of 1921 shows that except handlooms and spindles the numbers supported by the other industries were small. Of the 4,21,367 handlooms recorded the number returned for Brahmaputra valley was 358,913 while for spindles it was 145,656 out of total 229,463 in the province. The number of workers dependent on industry in the district of Kamrup according to the Census of 1911 was in the following sequence of descending order potters, brass workers, workers in precious stones etc., and textile.  

Industries connected with chemical products consisted of four mustard oil mill, situated in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Lakhimpur. The new mills depended largely on Marwari capital and the employment created though benefited local labours, was relatively small. The industries associated with textile works included two *rhea* factories in Kamrup and a few small jute processes in Goalpara. Though there was at least one loom in every household of the valley, there was no cotton mill in the province. There were a few small mustard oil and rice mills, generally owned by Marwari merchants, 12 power mills and 19 handsaw mills making tea boxes and scantlings etc. The period saw the emergence of new and heavy industries in the form of industries exploiting the surface of earth and

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extraction of minerals, auxiliary industries such as wood and wood craft (as expected in a province with extensive areas under forest) etc. Though the list of organized industries was not imposing, whatever existed, if developed could have well subsisted and aided in the return of prosperity. But the obstacles to development proved strong.

Local workshops were greatly impaired by the import of cheap machine made goods and by the general move towards agriculture as a source of livelihood. Other obstacles recorded were difficulty in communication or shortness in capital etc. Many traditional industries like brass work declined from the non-availability of inputs, let aside cheaper material, than before. The metals were subjected to two basic processes: forging and casting, the products of which could be quite different. In general, forging on sheet metal tended to serve the utilitarian end of the market, whereas casting render a diversified range of goods. In Assam the former technique was on use. The sheets were however, not locally available and thus the skill suffered when there was a stoppage of raw material during the war and discontinuance due to increasing cost of importation, in favour of cultivation by many Morias\footnote{The \textit{Morias} were a section of Muslim settlers in the Upper Brahmaputra valley who were held back during the \textit{Ahom}-Mughal wars that took place in the seventeenth century. They were war prisoners and were engaged in different occupation by the then \textit{Ahom} administration before finally settling down to brass work. They were termed so due to the nature of work associated with brass i.e., beating the brass sheets to give shape to a desired product. In local Assamese language the term \textit{mara} or \textit{moriya} is used to mean to beat.} in the Assam valley.

A noteworthy feature in the Census of occupation was low return in the proportions of traditional enterprises. In 1921 the occupation returned by members of certain castes are set out for comparison with the total numbers of the castes and
their traditional occupations. The returns revealed a tendency to discard tradition occupation in favour of agriculture. Why this tendency evolved is a question the following sections will try to answer with a stylization derived from data compiled in the Censuses for the province. The proclivity was observed among the population of degraded occupation in entirety. Weaving, according to the Census of 1921, was an established custom of the housewife in the Brahmaputra valley where there was an average of one loom to every two houses occupied. According to the Census of 1881 the numbers employed under industry was 14,567 males against 23,710 female. The high return of woman must have been due to a large return of weavers and spinners in this category. But except in the case of cotton cloth made by some Bengal immigrants and silk by the Assamese there was no serious sale of cloth. The Census of 1921 reports that in the Upper Brahmaputra valley districts, Miri and Abor tribes got their cotton rug sold in the markets. The development of the art of weaving in Assam has history a unique to the region. Prior to the advent of the Ahoms weaving was confined to the Tantis who formed a separate professional caste. The tribes in the Brahmaputra valley also had developed their own style of weaving. Under the Ahoms weaving of cloth had been ‘extended to all sections including those of the upper caste in the valley’ but ‘commercial motive was conspicuous in its absence’.

Silk in pre-colonial Assam had been mainly an elite item and frequently traded over long distances. Like in other parts of the country patronage did exist in the


31 loc. cit
region too. Silk weavers receiving patronage was confirmed by Hunter in *A Statistical Account of Assam*. It was not a luxury in that narrow a sense, but a durable good consumed by “the higher classes”, broadly defined. This demand probably declined from the middle of the nineteenth century. The middle class who could afford to compensate for these losses, tended to have quite different tastes. Cotton was grown locally by the tribes and both the hill and plain production together yielded a surplus even for the market of Bengal. While silk had a “good and rising demand” presumably from the embroidery industries of Murshidabad and Dacca in Bengal. By 1840 even advance were paid for guaranteed supply. The *eri* silk, had a large market in Bhutan, Tibet, and the neighbouring hills.\(^{32}\) With the art of weaving silk and cotton was associated another art of making gold and silver threads ‘*guna*’ for embroidery. These were made by a class of artisans known as *Gunakati*. But this was apparently a field where competition was restrained.

Industrial growth spurred by the World War II in cotton-producing areas of south and west India therefore failed to effect similar growth in the valley. Weaving here was subject to a stagnant market and limited opportunities. Parallel to hierarchy in social relations, there was a hierarchy in economic activity and both the hierarchies were often correlated. In an undeveloped country where religious beliefs and social customs play an important role in shaping the economic activities of the people, a great diversity of these amongst the inhabitants affects the economic life profoundly. In Assam the occupations which were socially despised were those associated with the river - boatmen and fishing and those associated with production and manufacturing of fabrics. About the weaver class Chattopadhaya,

by citing Kane pointed out that ‘they are referred to in the Mahabhashya of Patanjali as Sudras’. He also added another dimension though, through his analysis of the Assam epigraphs. According to Chattopadhyaya the information in epigraphic records ‘reveals that they were really a professional group and not a professional caste as it has been taken by several writers’. Therefore, we find that

of 9,715 working Nadiyals (fishermen) only 2,225 returned fishing or fish trading as their chief means of livelihood and nearly all the rest were entered as cultivators, although 1,482 of these had fishing as a subsidiary occupation. Of 61,000 working Yogi about 3,600 had weaving as principal and 3,400 as subsidiary occupation. The great majority of the rest came under cultivation. This suggests that the nature of weaving and social status were associated in Assam.

In contrast, the silk weavers in the twentieth century usually controlled a part of the trade in cloth and raw material in the rest of the country The Kewats were an exception; about 80 percent of the 43,000 workers returned as fishermen. In some cases in the Brahmaputra valley those who took to handicrafts in place of cultivation were rather looked down by their caste fellows, e.g., in the case of Kalitas working as goldsmiths or blacksmiths; needless to say this was not the case when men of cultivating castes became clerks. The Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30 in its report concluded that the cottage industries in Assam ‘are stagnant and indeed have taken a step backward’. Social prejudice, innate conservatism and failure to adopt improved methods as well as indolence are cited by the committee as the reason which has led to a decline in the cottage industries of the province. The Committee observed a positive correlation between

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The non-progressiveness of the cottage industries in Assam and social disapproval of
castes due to their association with certain jobs. The example of Katani or the pat
worm rearers was cited in this context to establish their conclusion. Of the 490
recorded under rearer of silkworm 483 depended on eri or muga worms and only 7
on pat worm. Breeders eschewed admitting a connection with the profession as it
was regarded as degrading. The urge for social uplift, therefore, affected record of
occupation as it did into religion, caste and language.

The general tendency to adopt and return as associated agriculture as a more
respectable occupation than the actual principal one was reflected by a heavy fall
in the number of fishermen and boatmen. Therefore, one notices such returns like
halwa (agricultural) Keot and jalwa (fisherman) Keot, Jaladha, and Kaibatta. The
Jaladha and Kaibarttas were traditionally fishermen by occupation but returned
themselves as agriculturalists in the Census enumerations. Again the Census of
1881 reveals that some artisan castes in the Assam valley attach Kalita to their
names by way of asserting their Aryan origin, thus we have Kumhar Kalita and
Nat Kalita as distinguished from less honourable potters and dancers. These
brittiyal or artisan Kalitas were regarded as inferior, and cannot marry nor eat with
the agriculturist. The same was true though partly in such occupation as weaving
not because the occupation was disreputable but because of its association with a
caste name Jogi or Yogi which was sought to be discarded. The Jogi castes shared

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34 In Assam silk of various quality were traditionally produced by feeding the worms to som plant
or mulberry. Since the worms fed on the leaves or pat these are termed so. The three varieties of
silk worm reared in Assam valley were mulberry fed worm which produces a white coloured
silk, som fed muga yielded a golden silk. Mention has been made of white muga silk produced
by worm fed on mezankari (tetranthera polyantha) trees. The third variety of silk worm reared
is called eri (attacus ricini)

35 Provincial Banking Committee Report, 1929, as cited in the Census of Assam, 1931, p. 125.
varied position in the then local society. W.W. Hunter mentioned that silk culture and its manufacture being one of the most prominent industries prevalent during the *Ahom* rule they greatly encouraged this industry. Land as well as privilege of exemptions from personal labour to the state was granted to the *Jogis* associated with weaving silk.\(^{36}\)

The main networks of textile production and trade that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century from the mass migration of artisans in northern India were conspicuous by its absence in Brahmaputra valley. The Censuses to ascertain the original or traditional occupation introduced the column of subsidiary occupation; but admitted that the greatest inaccuracies appeared in that particular column. Therefore, not much information is available to estimate the difference. Owing to social and caste movements the return under ‘fishing’ was less than 1 percent which was much lower than the actual number associated with the occupation.\(^{37}\)

Though the number returned under fishing as principal occupation was on constant decline fish dealers formed the largest proportion in the number supported by trade. The traditional industries such as weaving, gold washing and gold smithy, jewellery craft, wood and ivory carving, iron making, pottery, dyeing, salt, oil pressing, bell metal works etc survived with varied fortune, for various domestic products which so long satisfied the need of the people came to be replaced by imported ware.

Commercialization in the nineteenth century had upset the trades by altering the structure of production and transaction costs as well as tastes. The impact of import


was felt at various levels with varying intensity. The import of wares led to the
growth of markets, which played an important role in changing the character of the
economy of the region. Expanded cash transactions as well as increasing imports
drove the producers out of barter. Moreover, delicate conflicts between utility and
craftsmanship began to impact increasingly upon the choice of settling down for
cheaper or imported ware with cheaper price. Normally demand for relatively
standardized subsistence goods induces in expanding commerce and the presence
of new goods tend to imply more intense competition for the rural producer,
typically forcing him to migrate toward trade. But it did not in Assam. The new
competition in Assam rendered the rural producer handicapped by the near absence
of labour. In textile the rural coarse weaver did not command great craftsman-ship.
Nor did the weaver have access to entrepreneurial resources such as business
organization or credit. While credit facilities from banks for such enterprises was
yet to take off the commercial group of money lenders were few and far between.
They numbered only 2,414 in 1881. Though metal craftsmen in Assam produced a
consumer good ranging from the utilitarian to objects of display the specific skills
involved started facing serious threat from mechanized processes. The craft though
survived locally there was no pressures to raise productivity and quality even after
large increase in population and consequently, no sharper intra-craft competition,
institutional and technological changes followed.

In these situations the colonial rulers by codification of caste and community
distinction led to ‘agriculturization’ of economy in the region. Cultivation did not
involve great knowledge, nor did grain require a costly search for markets. But the
crafts did require special knowledge, and a search for markets. The specialized
trades involved higher risks in contrast to agriculture; therefore, it was an easier choice for a producer to become a cultivator. The caste barriers present in trade and manufacture were generally lower in agriculture. The new cultivators who were originally manufacturers, artisans or traders must have established themselves as tiller of the soil only rather than landowner, landowner-cultivator or rent-receiver. The absence of industrialization in Assam was not structural, but a result of minimal growth in rural (not necessarily local) demand for industry. The oil pressing industry for example should have been much developed and employing a considerable number of workers owing to the abundant cultivation of mustard seeds as already mentioned. But the return of 1881 showed that only 1,351 person were engaged with the skill. The raw seeds had a ready market in Bengal, and ironically Assam was the ready consumer of the finished product.

With colonial connection and Industrial Revolution, the composition of buyers changed, the elites withdrew, and buyers became distant and anonymous, and in need of cheap standardized goods. There was a whole hierarchy of sited spot-markets, from the rural regular hats, irregular hats and fairs to site less spot-market the local peddlar in the region. The traditional markets or hats faced stiff competition with the capitalist economy. At Jamuguri in Sibasagar district there was a Naga hat where a certain amount of trade in cotton and other hill produce was carried out. A mela, was held from December – March at Ghograpara in Darrang to which Bhutiya traders and hill men brought ponies, livestock, blankets,

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38 The term refers to market place (usually weekly or bi-weekly) where exchange of goods and commodities were carried out. These were regarded petty in comparison to regular markets or bazaars.

39 Mela or fairs were held usually once in a year to carry on trading activities of various commodities.
lac, musk, ivory and walnuts for sell. A certain number of new hats were started to provide for the new population i.e., for the Eastern Bengal settlers in the Assam valley districts. While weaving was almost universal among the Assamese, they rarely weave for sale and a great part of what was sold was silk. Cotton clothes from England held over half the trade followed by Bombay and Japan in the markets.\textsuperscript{40} Yarn was almost all imported abroad and a certain quantity from Bombay.\textsuperscript{41}

The increase of population did not cause any startling variation in the numbers subsisting on trade. The number of population as recorded to have been supported by trade was 28 per mile in the Brahmaputra valley. The conditions of trade in the interior comprised of regular markets or bazaars\textsuperscript{42} and petty and minor hats including a number of tea garden bazaars. Practically all of these are distributing centres for various kinds of imported goods, as well as marts for rice and food products of the neighbourhood. Trade in Assam was mostly carried on in the local hats or rural markets. In Assam according to the Census of 1931 less than 3 percent of the total number of earners and working dependants were engaged in trade. The indigenous caste structure of Assam does not reflect the existence of any trading caste of significance. They were conspicuously absent in the Upper Brahmaputra valley, but in the Lower Brahmaputra valley there existed a small trading community called the Vaishya Saud (Sunri), a counterpart of the Saha caste of Bengal. The Kalita craftsmen of Kamrup, silk weavers and bell metal artisans used to sell their goods as itinerant traders.

\textsuperscript{40} Report on the Census of Assam, 1921, p.168.
\textsuperscript{41} See Table 6 in Appendix II for volume of trade in cloth.
\textsuperscript{42} Local term for large and daily market places.
Trade in Assam consisted both export and import items. Apart from tea the bulk of the exports consisted of raw products. The import included manufactured goods. There was also a large importation of food grains since the valley did not produce enough to feed its burgeoning population. The principal items of import were cotton piece goods, husked rice, salt, sugar, kerosene, mustard and other oils, gram and pulses, tobacco and metals. The chief exports were tea, unhusked rice oilseeds, coal lime, timber, jute, raw cotton, lac, hides, oranges and rubber. The backward condition of the province is illuminated by the fact that it exports unhusked rice and oilseeds, and imports husked rice and mustard oil. The rice imported was consumed mainly by the tea labourers in the Upper districts of the valley. Generally there was no single village shop stocking all kinds of articles. Permanent shops usually dealt in different commodities and were owned by different classes of trader – for instance a Marwari cloth shop, an up countryman selling groceries or grains and a Dacca Muhammadan dealing in miscellaneous or fancy goods.43

In conclusion it may be stated that the ways in which economy and society in Assam changed between 1700 and 1900 were extremely complex and provide few clear-cut answers to questions of ‘better’ or ‘worse’. The colonial rulers brought in a money economy and introduced the plantation system, in which agricultural work was done for profit. For a while the local inhabitants remained aloof, and the traditional village economy continued to operate side by side with the plantations. This agriculture based industrialization saw a period of transition in the demographic pattern of the region. In the colonial period, migration, monetization, and reform movements weakened the practice of traditional occupation. Moreover,

43 Census of India, Report on Assam, 1921, p. 166.
the abandonment of profession by the traditional families resulted in the importation of labour and workers from other parts of the province. Sometime not even the assisting hands were available locally. The vacuum thus created was absorbed by the people from economically hard hit areas.

Thus the 1911-20 decade which witnessed a great expansion in the tea industry due to World War I was characterized by a decline in the export of tea from the plantations in Assam in the decade of 1931-41. The effect of the sequence of depression, boom and depression on the acreage and population statistics of the industry has been illustrated in Table 3 (see Appendix) which shows how moderate the expansion of the industry has been compared with the great expansion which took place between 1911 and 1921. The average income of the people cannot be estimates with any exactitude in terms of money in an agricultural country. The Census of 1921 estimated the amount roughly to an equivalent of about Rs. 56 per head per annum on the basis of outturn of crop grown and other productions. The average monthly wage of agricultural was Rs. 8 to Rs. 12 during 1898-1901 and plantation labourers was between Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 in 1864. The economy of Assam, after its coming under the foreign yoke can be said to have been reorganized rather than developed. Economists have pointed out that underdevelopment is reproduced by capitalism through dependence, or direct export of surplus, or unequal exchange.\(^{44}\)

The smallness of the number in the commercial class indicates to how small Assam was as a trading country. There were 61,351 persons returned as following

commercial occupations, and this designation includes traders proper, as well as
 carriers and intermediaries of trade. The great mass of the traders were grouped
 under the head of general dealers i.e., petty shopkeepers and a fifth of these were
 women. But the overall fall in regional production and consumption extremely
difficult to measure. Measured in terms of any of the other indices, however, the
Assam’s transition was a weak one. Industrial organization did change, as the
displacement of domestic labour suggests. The traditional workshops did not
become real factories. The revolution, which widespread adoption of machinery
can induce in both productivity and organization, was weak in the region. There
was a structural change in employment but not in incomes. Economy in colonial
India was a story of steady and significant decline. In other words, Assam did
industrialize in the limited sense of expanding wage employment in industries
intensive in manual labour, but did not experience significant structural change or
economic development.

A broad analysis of the provincial population change in the relevant period failed
to reveal any systematic relation between growth in population and growth in
productivity. There are two types of data on the profile of decline: demographic
and structural. The former consists of information on how specific groups of
occupational castes declined in relation to other groups of occupational castes in
the local society and the latter on the decline of established skill workshops. Data
on growth was of migration and land use. One basic conclusion is that the
determinants of growth- demographic as well as economic are complex. To
establish a correlation between the two requires a careful investigation of the
quintessential supply-demand structure as well as behaviour of the working force
to arrive at an explanation. A rough comparison between the rates of population growth and change in acreage, under both tea and food grain, though revealed a one-to-one correlation but failed to confirm a relationship of growth. While positive growth did not effect economic growth; it had its impact on the emergence of new and distinct settlement pattern in the valley.