CHAPTER 5
SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHY: AN ANALYSIS

An analysis of social demography of colonial Assam points to the fact that population growth is dependent on larger structures of social interaction, closely rooted in specific historical circumstances. The present work has tried to draw attention to historical social demography in the making of Assam’s varied socio-economic and political structure from the mid nineteenth century to the fourth decade of the twentieth century. This chapter is a summary of the ground covered in this thesis highlighting the principal points which emerge as conclusions of the study. Both determinants and consequences of population change and growth have been discussed, in the decadal time series of these components during the colonial period. The past significantly determines the present but the larger contexts within which the individual variables are located are often lost sight of. This work started with the very general hypothesis that for an understanding of the present social structures, the past and the context are crucial for deciphering the process of change and that the past historical demographic trends played a crucial role in determining the nature of demographic present. Related to this proposition was the assumption that specific contexts were associated with particular demographic dynamics. In demography, change has often been seen as endogenous to the social structures. Historical demographers have attempted to model demographic-economic-urbanization interaction for different parts of the world in the past societies.
The demographic change has also been related to specific pattern of expanded reproduction of labour.

In accordance with the objectives put forth, and through the methodological procedures, the following hypotheses were tested: population growth and change in Assam valley was dependent on larger structures of social interaction; the population growth here was directly related to increase in labour force which brings in division of labour leading to growth in production, income or wage; and increase in population changes human settlement and land use pattern leading to urbanization. The theoretical frame of reference was based upon the hypothesis that demographic change takes place as a society changes due to interaction between political and economic forces. The aspect of change due to migration and social movement has been the focal point of interest in this theoretical approach. The scope of this study was limited to the measurement of the population-inhabitants as well as migrants within the state and, therefore, it was basically demographic in discussion. But the entire process of change is not based solely on demographically induced factors. These factors are part of a multifaceted process of colonial activities that includes economic forces, government, technological advances, and expectations. The chapters are an analysis of the social demography in a resource-rich and culturally diverse region that experienced sudden and complex demographic change.

In this study on *Social Demography of Colonial Assam* the first chapter, *Introduction* presented the framework of the study along with the historical and demographic background of the researched area. The history of Assam was
distinguished by period a stupendous population composition initially as a result of colonial administrative designs their arbitrary redrawing of provincial boundaries which inevitably left Assam with 'strange bed-fellows' and a margin of 'slightest of numbers', demographically. Prior to this, the locals (Assamese, if we can use the term) assimilated all their erstwhile rulers, the Ahoms, a tribe of Burma. Subsequently it assumed the status of Chief Commissionership in 1874 and in 1921 it took the shape of a Governor's province. The chapter illustrated the characteristics of the studied period as a backdrop to understand the subsequent changes. **Significantly Assam experienced an abnormally high rate of population increase among the Indian states as an outcome of the unprecedented immigration, in the period between 1901 and 1941. The period was also marked by economic collapse, changing configurations of agrarian power and assertion of new identities.** Demographic forces in colonial Assam created the changing conditions of living in both workplaces and socially created space.

The second chapter, *Social Demography: Caste, Ethnicity and Religion* analysed the relation between change in demography and emergence of particular social structure. The factual accounts and the discussion in the chapter examined the implications of highly general, ‘scientifically’ defined categories in population, in the fields of knowledge and in the emergence of a complex social structure. Here we have seen **how colonial knowledge brought in notion of inequality.** The social lives and practices of forest dwellers, shifting as well as settled cultivators, pastoralists, fisherman, and artisans were all crucially affected by the way they were seen by state and society, as well as
the self-conceptions of their own practice. The whole span of colonial Assam’s demographic structure has reflected a trend towards absorption of different tribal groups into caste Hindu society at varying levels and passing from an egalitarian to hierarchical social structure. The study found that the process was the consequence of both assimilative tendencies and exploitative forces at work which culminated in significant increase in the population of high social castes as well as in the speakers of Assamese language. The pressures for demographic change has been traced to the aspirations (and vulnerabilities) that come with improving economic conditions; to shifting attitudes about authority, or to anticipation of new economic and/or identity threats and opportunities ahead. The assimilative attitude was therefore as Pierre Bourdieu, a process for acquiring capital - economic, social as well as cultural.¹

The population pattern of the region which developed as a result of historical forces was an extraordinary mixture of castes and tribes. They had equal existence in the social set up without much conflict and more importantly the numbers of different ethnic groups did not suffer much decline. To understand the shifting trend in social composition different demographic as well as non demographic determinants were therefore analysed. On examination of the trends in fertility, nuptiality and mortality showed that high nuptiality age clearly exerted a significant influence on regulating fertility levels in the Brahmaputra Valley among its inhabitants. Organised on the basis of caste, race and language the population of the Valley had different fertility and mortality

rates. Fertility rates differed with the migrant population and indigenous population according to occupational differences. Also the decline in population due to natural causes was never selective. Thus there was no major evidence from any region in the valley to conclude that a particular group was decimated, while others remained untouched when a calamity occurred.

The change started with change in government and the ideologies that accompanied it. The complex system of colonial administration which changed over the period from 1826, had an imposing impact on the demographic pattern in Assam. The change can be crudely but simply described as related to colonial ruling strategies, understanding of social superiority which was partly influenced by the indigenous upper caste employees and Census enumerators and process of immigration. In a restrictive society the powerful identities were determined by religion based hierarchy, abstract notion of racial purity etc. Therefore, many of those generally regarded as lower castes have concentrated their efforts at improvement in social status on the caste column at the Census. In order to achieve this end they tended towards more orthodoxy in religious matters, considering that non-orthodoxy will be regarded as ‘uncivilised’ practices. Social and political movements made serious attempts to improve the status of castes regarded as untouchable at the cost of discarding the age old customs, language and even occupation. The social orientation thus developed also had its impact on the pattern of occupation in the valley.

Another role in changing the social composition of people was played by the force of migration especially in the linguistic pattern of the region. The unusually large rate of migration into the state during the British rule and the
varied array of ethnic groups struggling to be noticed and to be respected resulted in a situation of ethnic transformation. The chapter reflected that social structure in Assam identified as ‘fluid’ and identities a loosely bounded entity and the population which was previously not seen as either the strictly ‘social’ base or the narrowly ‘religious’ categories was begun to be seen as a product of specific social concerns. Colonial rule ‘colonized the body as well as the mind’ of the subject population, through the authoritative gaze that moves around various institutional areas in society culminating into the way (gaze) of looking at ourselves. Individuals strive to live by the accepted knowledge of what constitutes a ‘norm’ within society and thus modify themselves in order to remain in accordance with these accepted ‘norms’. Therefore the choices made and positions taken by them reflected ‘weak-mindedness as a cognitive venture against oppression’.

The colonial conception of race, castes and tribes pushed off the stage the values built around social customs, language/dialect, physical strength etc. The referred growth and change had only statistical existence as reflected in the discussion of the Commissioner for Census of Assam, 1921 regarding change in social structure. He concluded that culture and wealth are the only ladders by which the castes on the ground floor may hope to climb to a higher rung in society; and when they have climbed they do not attain to religious equality or to commensality. An example of successful social uplift was recorded in the case of the Shahas of Surma Valley was cited in the Report of 1931. The Shaha caste, it was mentioned, though technically unclean ‘jal-achal’ commanded considerable respect in the Sylhet district due to their wealth and influence.
They were even, by a peculiar social convention permitted to purchase their brides from the higher castes.\textsuperscript{2} Situation similar like the \textit{Shahas} was, however, not evident in the Brahmputra Valley districts trading caste like the \textit{Brittial Banias}.

Apart from these, one category that featured in the list of occupation in 1881 Census was ‘unspecified’. The category included the beggars and vagrants. Surprisingly the number representing them was 28,058 which were quite strong in those days with abundant lands and much hyped ‘self-sufficiency’ in economy. The list of infirmity was also much low to justify the enumerated figure.\textsuperscript{3} The number must have been due to different system of calculation but the Census Officer also pointed out to another possibility of inclusion of some other social groups like prisoners and prostitutes into this column. In a country infested with wars and resistances it was not uncommon to have prisoners but the mention of prostitutes is interesting. Since a little less than half (12,595) of the figure above consisted of female the proposition must have been not without reason. The number of people associated with legal profession, licensed medical practice and mechanical works were few.

Therefore, the findings are partly compatible with the basic hypothesis of this section of the study, that population growth and change in the Assam Valley was dependent on larger structures of social interaction. Beyond the strictly economic implications of migration its effects on society are complex,


\textsuperscript{3} The infirms like lepers, and to a certain extent the blind and deaf and mutes were usually forced to begging.
often conflictive, long lasting, and possibly much wider than those of a strictly economic nature. Nevertheless, considering the volumes of immigration involved, immigrants’ cultural and religious differences vis-à-vis the host societies, and the fact that the immigrants’ desire to remain in the host country appeared to be very high, we may surmise that the effects will be lasting. These changes had multiple effects on family life and eventually on fundamental aspects of social organization.

In the third chapter, *Demography, Society and Economy* the economic determinants of demographic behaviour have been considered. The political system in Assam in the pre-colonial period favoured an inward-orientation and rigid control of trade and investment thereby insulating the economy from markets outside the region with rules tending to regulate the entry of foreigners. There existed no incentive for any emergence of competitive industries with differing attitude among the elites toward private capital. The backwardness of Assam, in fact is also reflected in its general dependence on primeval agriculture with a low productive turn-out, highly vulnerable to frequent floods geographically isolated with rather poor transport and communication facilities. While standard theories of economic growth are often conclusive regarding the impact of demographic change, this causal link is empirically more difficult to establish due to myriad other economic influences on regional growth. To understand the labour force participation of various groups in development process of the country, data on economic activity have been analysed to assess where each of these groups stands in the labour structure of the country. Knowledge on proportional participation of each group in total labour force and
their division in various areas of production are studied as the degree of participation of labour force in the production of economic goods and services is an indicator of economic development of a country. Higher participation may produce more economic goods and services and bring more wages to the household. Rates of labour force participation alone may not be sufficient to gauze economic development, rather transition of labours from primary sector to secondary and tertiary activities is said to bring rapid changes in the economic progress. This effect is only partially reflected in the framework presented here as there has been no shift of labourers from agricultural to non-agricultural industries.

This study shows that in the period economic change was actually due to reorganisation rather than real growth in the Brahmaputra valley and was significantly affected by demographic changes. The decrease in total population growth which led to negative on economic growth was outweighed by robust growth in the working-age population due to migration which had positive impact. 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, 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. 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. 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. The modernizing activities of the colonial rulers were sufficient to stimulate growth in population and output, but not to increase per capita income. A modern industrial and commercial sector was created on limited scale with a heavy dependence on British managing agencies and very limited diffusion of modern skill to Indians.

In the fourth chapter, Interface between Demographic Change, Socio-Economic Reorganisation and Population Settlement Pattern, the population of Assam valley has been considered in its relation to the land i.e., settlement pattern of the communities. The settlement pattern in this chapter has been seen as a process resulted from the way in which the valley experienced demographic transition. After analysing the demographic aspect of urbanization in the valley the finding pointed out that the stage of social aggregation at which a community ceases to be rural and passes into the category of urban can no where be sharply defined. This chapter has argued that urbanization and urban growth are best comprehended as resulting from the demographic transition. The findings indicated that the demographic change which the region confronted as a result of the great transformation in polity and economy,
among other changes, also lead to a change in settlement pattern. But the depressed space in urbanization was due to the following features: high mortality rate, the living population consisting of a large number of peasant-cum-labourers and the artisans being mainly rural. In the Assam valley the basic feature of urbanization can therefore be summarised as asymmetrical, which occurred mostly without industrialization and strong economic base. The migration induced demographic explosion was but poverty induced rural migration which occurred not due to urban pull but due to rural push and this distressed migration initiated urban decay. In terms of a demographic measure of urbanization, the period experienced a slow upward trend in the proportion of total population living in the towns. The factors conditioning urban growth like functional differentiation were conspicuous by its absence. The problem have acquired severity as migrants have shown high selectivity in choosing their destinations (understandably linked with availability of employment and other opportunities), leading to regionally unbalanced urbanization. Thus the hypothesis that demographic growth changes human settlement and land use pattern leading to urbanization was not conclusively proved. There was only increase in settled space due to migration but the agricultural nature of the migrants who were rather poor did not contributed towards urbanization or urban growth.

The fifth chapter, *Social Demography: An Analysis* summarizes the findings of the entire research on social demography on colonial Assam. The attempt in this research was to understand demographic change as both the cause and effect of social and economic structure change. The basic objectives of this
study, measuring the pattern of demographic change as related to social and economic forces was found partly compatible with the hypothesized trends. The change in the social composition of population was largely determined by the existing social condition and political intervention in the Valley. **An analysis of the findings and their relation to the hypothesis put forth in the third and fourth chapter which studied the relation between demographic growth and development of economy and urbanization show a negative correlation.** That population processes and perception of demographic structures were intimately linked with ways in which social organizations have been established in the context of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. While summarizing why and how a population matter, a few examples of has been sighted. On the onset of mortality regime on the eve of colonial control of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, neither economy nor administration was possible for the new rulers. Thus new methods were developed which was reflected in the rising population levels and their impact on the organization of social and political relationships in the valley. In the entire process it was basically the effects of immigration which played significant role in determining the social demographic pattern in the Brahmaputra Valley. The changes were not only reflected in population size, but also in a multitude of other complex structures. Further, the processes of generalization, construction, and aggregation involved in assembling demographic knowledge created new possibilities for configuring and reconfiguring social relations and processes in keeping with a great variety of interests in the subsequent period in the valley. In sum, the natural growth of population, undoubtedly, has been significant; the effects of migration to social composition and agricultural change have been important, nevertheless.