CHAPTER II
RESPONSE AND REACTION TO BRITISH RULE

It is generally agreed that the Boro-Kacharis, a branch of Indo- Mongoloid race, was the ruling dynasty of Assam in the distant past. Though due to dearth of reliable sources it is difficult to reconstruct their early political life, yet, it is believed that the earliest known king of the Boro race was Mahiranga. The capital of Mahiranga is assumed to be at Mahiranka “a top hill called Mairang Parbat said to be still existent at a distance of seven miles from Guwahati in Shillong-Guwahati Road.” However, very little is known about how and when Mahiranga established his kingdom. They were referred to as 'Kirata Rulers' in ancient scriptures and it was assumed that, 'he must (Mahiranga) had founded the Kirata kingdom sometimes before Naraka and a time when the Alpine may have already settled in Eastern India.' Ancient literatures further state that, Mahiranga was succeeded by Hatakasura, Sambasura, Ratnasura and Ghatakasura and the last Kirata king Ghatakasura was overthrown by Naraka who then established the Bhouma dynasty in Kamrupa. Naraka have been referred to as an ‘adventurous prince from Mithila founded the kingdom of Pragjyotish in the Brahmaputra valley by subduing the Kirata or tribal chiefs and the people.’ It is believed from the study of various records that, Naraka shifted the capital of new found dynasty

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43 Baruah, N : Early Assam state formation, political centres, cultural zones, Guwahati, - Delhi, 2007, p, 30.
from Moirang Parbat to Pragjyotishpur and he is said to have ‘made it inaccessible even to the Gods.’ Some historians are of the view that, usurpation of Naraka to the throne of Pragjyotishpur is the first instance of Aryan settlement in Eastern India. How far this assumption is correct is a matter of further research.

So far as the references in ancient literatures are concerned, it is needless to say that, these sources give ample evidences that Kiratas or tribal chiefs, to whom the present day Boro- Kacharis trace their decent, once played a crucial role in the political life of Eastern India.

With the establishment of Bhouma dynasty by Naraka in ancient Kamrupa, the Kiratas might have lost their political dominance over Kamrupa. However, ancient Sanskrit literatures of the period confirm the fact that, the Kirata chiefs continued to rule in other parts of Eastern India and they formed the bulk of the population even in Kamrupa. As a testimony to this fact, we may refer to Bhagavat, Bishnu Puran and Kalika Purana, the ancient literatures of the period in which we find mention of a king named Banasura as the contemporary ruler and close friend of Naraka of Pragjyotishpura. The capital of Banasura's kingdom was said to have been Sonitpur, which is assumed to be the present day Tezpur. Some of these ancient scriptures have mentioned the extent of Banasura's territory as "...... in the east as far as the modern district of Lakhimpur and in the west probably to North Bengal." The appellation ‘Asur’ after the name Bana provides ample evidences that, he belonged to a non-Aryan decent who formed the bulk of the population of Eastern India.

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45 Ibid. p,86.
However, many historians are of the belief that subsequent rulers of Pragjyotishpur-Kamrupa, namely, Varmanas, Salastambhas and Palas too were non-Aryans although all of these rulers had claimed their decent from the Bhouma-Naraka line of dynasty. Suniti Kr. Chatterjee described the Varmanas to be 'neo-Ksatriyas' and Salastambhas as 'a great chief of the Mlechchahs.' R.M. Nath states that "...after Bhaskar Varma line, the dynasty of a Mlechcha king beginning the Salastambha came to power from 655AD to 985 AD and had their capital at Harupeswar near present Tezpur." Ram Nath is also of the opinion that Pragjyotishpur remained as the capital of the Kamrupa kingdom during the rule of Naraka, Bhagadatta and Bhaskar Varman after which the focus of political domination shifted to Harupeswara and Durjaya during the time of Salastambhas and Palas. As per records, the Varmans ruled Kamrupa from the mid 4th century to the 7th century AD. whereas the Salastambha rulers ruled from 2nd half of the 7th century to 9th century AD.

It is pertinent to state that as the focus of present chapter is on Response and Reaction to British Rule of the Boro-Kacharis people, it is felt that, some amount of discussion should be held on the political domination of the Kiratas over this portion of the land and the extent of pressure that they had to confront with in order to preserve their distinct political identity in different periods of time. Further, it would also help in analyzing the role of Kachari people in the subsequent periods of study on the ground that almost all historians have so far associated the Boro-Kacharis with the ancient Kiratas, a fact which is accepted even by the intellectuals among the Boro-Kachari community. Therefore, in the

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46 Nath, Ram: *Readings in the History and Culture of Assam*, Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Guwahati, 1984, p. 54.
preliminary stage a humble attempt has been made here to throw some light on their rule, extent of power that they exercised and the amount of resistance they posed against the British administration.

The Boros before 13th Century:

It is already an established fact that, the rule of Varman dynasty came to an end with the death of Bhaskar Varman. Historians are of the view that, Bhaskara Varman remained a bachelor throughout his life, therefore, there was no rightful heir to succeed him. Thus, taking advantage of the vacuum in the line of succession to the throne of Kamrupa, Salastambha, whom K.L.Baruah termed to be the "Governor of Mech country under Kumar Bhaskar Varman" occupied the throne of Kamrupa. It is assumed that, Salastambha came to power at around 655 AD and the dynasty established by him continued till 985 AD with their capital at Harupeswara which is believed to be the present day Tezpur. Considerable controversy is there among the historians of early Kamrupa regarding the ethnic identity of the Salastambha rulers. Borgaon Copper Plate Inscription of Ratnapala mentions Salastambha, as Mlechchanatha (leader of the Mlechchas), on the other hand, some historians are of the view that, "Salastambha may have been a local aboriginal chief originally owing allegiance to the Brahmana or Brahma-Ksatriya king of the dynasty of Pusya varman and successfully utilized an opportunity of extirpating his overlord." 47 Various sources of the period reveal that, during the time of Salastambha line of rulers, the kingdom of Kamrupa touched a new zenith which was unparallel in the history of early Kamrupa. They

47 Baruah, N: Early Assam state formation, political centres, cultural zones, Guwahati-Delhi, 2007 p, 54.
were believed to have exercised political supremacy over adjoing areas beyond contemporary geographical boundary of Kamrupa, in distant lands and some of their kings had even assumed high sounding titles like Maharajadhiraja, Parameswara, Parambhattaraka etc. for the first time in the annals of history of eastern India which is no doubt a fact of great political significance. It is also further stated that, “the famous king of Salastambha line of kings was Hajjarvarman, who was a learned king and credited to have dug the famous Hajjar Pukhuri at Tezpur.” 48 Ancient records of the period give ample scope to prove that, the Salastambhas were once a powerful rulers and although they belonged to Kiratas/Mech ethnically, they gradually imbibed Vedic culture like their predecessors and felt proud to associate their decent from Naraka’s Bhouma dynasty in the later years.

Epigraphic records reveal that, during the rule of Salastambha rulers the capital of Kamrupa was shifted from Pragjyotishpur to Harupeswara, on the bank of river Brahmaputra, the reason behind such move is however not mentioned anywhere.

The rule of Kiratas in Kamrupa, is not mentioned beyond the Salastambhas dynasty although it is believed that the bulk of the populations of the areas comprised of Kiratas only. The political domination of the Kamrupa rulers is assumed to have lasted till 11th century AD till the Pala rulers after which the whole of the Brahmaputra valley witnessed the emergence of many local rulers each occupying different parts under different names.

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The presence of Kirata domination in the Kapili Valley prior to emergence of Varman dynasty is referred to as “Davaka or Kapili kingdom.” This kingdom is mentioned as Trivega also in different literatures of the period. Historians dealing with ancient India are of the view that, the Trivega state was said to have been founded around 5th century AD by Pratanddana by conquering the Kiratas. It is also mentioned that the land on which the Trivega state was founded was earlier “a part of Kirata-desha or Kirata bhumi.”

It has also been observed that, in order to extend the geographical boundary of the Trivega kingdom Pratarddana, who was the 25th king of the dynasty had to face stubborn resistance from the Kirata chiefs who were in occupation of vast tract of areas in the neighbourhood. It is also believed that, Pratarddana could not occupy the whole of Kiratabhumi but only a portion of it, which means the Kiratas were a force to be reckoned with in that particular area prior to founding of the Trivega kingdom. While discussing the geographical extent of the Trivega kingdom, K.L. Barua has observed that, “the Kapili valley, the North Cachar hills and also perhaps the modern district of Cachar to the west of Manipur,” were included in the Trivega kingdom. According to the genealogy of the Tripura kingdom, Sri Rajamala, 16 rulers had ruled the Trivega kingdom near about for 500 years from 1st century AD to the 5th century A.D. after which this kingdom was absorbed into Hidimba kingdom. It means, the Kiratas could not forget the loss which they had incurred to the Trivegas. Thus, as soon as opportunity came, they struck back and reoccupied their lost possession which they continued to hold till mid 6th century AD, after which the Davaka region was once again said to have been parceled out to Varmana’s of Kamrupa. It is

49 Baruah, N : Early Assam state formation political centres cultural zones, Guwahati-Delhi, 2007, p. 75.
50 Ibid, p,77.
pertinent to state here that, perhaps Kirata chiefs who had been in occupation of substantial portion of land of the region under their different chiefs must have by then realized the futility of remaining mere chiefs in order to be able to defend their land from hostile neighbours. Therefore, they formed a Hidimba kingdom under one king chosen by them. It can be therefore assumed that, because of such development no reference to the Hidimba kingdom is found in the early history of Eastern India.

The history of Kamrupa as well as the whole of the Brahmaputra valley is left without any reliable information excepting a few scanty records of Pala rulers who were said to have occupied the throne of Kamrupa after the downfall of the Salastambha rulers. It can be hypothetically stated that, perhaps after the fall of Pala rulers, the subsequent kings of the Kamrupa became very weak to exert considerable influence over their subjects who formed (mostly) feudatory chiefs. Gradually these tribal chiefs became independent of one another once again. The picture of the valley however changed and became clearer from the 13th century onward when the Ahoms, a branch of Shan tribe living in Upper Burma appeared in the scene. Their “appearance on the scene not only changed the whole course of Assam history, but has provided us from time to time forward, with a connected and reliable account of the progress of events there.” 51 The ‘Ahom Buranji’ written under the instruction of the Ahom Swargadeos, which are their greatest contribution to Assam history, record the existence of a number of small kingdoms as well as tribal chiefs exercising their control over different parts of the entire region independently which cut across present geographical boundary of

the region including in the Himalayan foot hills. From these records we have been able to learn that "a line of Chutiya kings ruled the country east of the Subansiri and the Disang, with the exception of a strip to the south and south east, where a several small Bodo tribes enjoyed a precarious independenc." 52 On the other hand, the Kacharis were said to have been occupying the tracts of area which was lying "......from the river Dikhou in the east to the Kapili in the west and covering the present district of North Cachar on the west." 53 Besides, there were Bhuyans between the area "west of the Kacharis on the south bank, and of the Chutiyas on the north," 54 and on the western portion of the Brahmaputra valley there lied the Kamata kingdom. As far as the records of this period go, it can be stated that, all these kings and feudatory chiefs were independent of one another and ruling their respective territories according to their prevailing customs and traditions.

Regarding status of these rulers, it has been observed that, "Amongst the numerous kingdoms in the Upper Brahmaputra valley, which emerged on the political scene following the extinction of the Palas, those of the Chutiyas and the Kacharis, both of whom were indigenous people of Assam, were the most powerful." 55 All the historians of medieval Assam however agree to one point that, both the Chutiyas as well as the Kacharis who are mostly mentioned as the eastern and western branch and also the Morans, Borahis with whom the Ahoms came into conflict while entering Assam in the 13th century were "branches of the great Boro people." 56 In course of time, the Morans, Borahis and Chutiyas were

52 Ibid, p, 38.
subdued consequent upon protracted warfare and their kingdoms absorbed within the fold of newly established Ahom kingdoms. With the loss of political identity to the Ahoms, these ethnic communities since then ceased to exist as a separate cultural identity but became a part of greater cultural milieu of Assamese society in the years ahead. But, the Kachari kingdom which existed in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra in the areas between rivers Dikhou to Kallang including the Dhansiri valley with its capital at Dimapur continued to exist with varying fortunes. The jurisdiction of Kachari kingdom during 15th century A.D. with its capital at Dimapur “was located between Kamata to the west, and Ahom kingdom in the east.” 57 But, continuous strife with the Ahoms specially from the 15th century A.D onward compelled the Kachari nobility to shift their capital from Dimapur to “Maibong on the bank of Mahur river,” 58 which is believed to have taken place in the 16th century A.D. Available records of the period also reveal that, while at Maibong, the Kachari king is said to have married the daughter of Tippera king and as a dowry of which the Kachari king received the valley of the Barak and its tributaries. Thus, from this time onwards, it is seen that the Kachari kings began to expand their territory towards south in the plains of Barak valley and finally in 18th century A.D. they once again shifted their capital from Maibong to Khaspur in the plains of Barak Valley. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his forward to the comprehensive monograph of the Dimasa-Kachari coins has observed that “it was between Maibong and Khaspur that the Dimasa kingdom bloomed a full fledged Brahmanical state of the type noticed almost through out the Indian sub

58 Baruah, S.L. : A comprehensive History of Assam, New Delhi, 2003, p.188.
continent." By then, the Kachari kingdom came to be known as *Hedembarajya* and traced their decent from Ghatatkocha, son of Mahabharata hero Bhima. He further stated that, "The kingdom in this phase was a union of the Dimasa predominated northern hills and Bengali inhabited southern plains." Extension of Kachari kingdom towards plains of Barak valley in due course of time brought about considerable change in their tribal way of functioning and running of the administration. In order to retain their domination over the newly acquired territory they were compelled to make lots of adjustment in their existing customs and culture in order to accommodate others. Under the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism, the Kachari kings began to assume Hindu names and titles and also started issuing coins in their names on certain occasions something which had so far been unknown in the history of Kachari kingdom.

**The Boros in the 19th Century A.D.:**

Throughout the medieval period and till the coming of the British to Assam consequent upon signing of the *Treaty of Yandaboo* in 1826, though the Kacharis was compelled to move from one place to another they could not be subjugated by the Ahoms permanently unlike the Morans, Borahis and Chutiyas. In other words, it can be stated that, the Kachari kingdom could neither be subjugated nor assimilated completely by the former. The Kachari dynasty continued to survive against all odds in different parts of the NE region by following a policy of 'adaptation and adjustment' of the cultural tradition and customs of the newly occupied land and its people. However, the destiny of Kachari kingdom took a
difficult turn when the East India Company set its foot in the Eastern India. Internal conflict among the nobility and weak leadership of the rulers paved the way for British domination of the Kachari dynasty.

In 1813 Govinda Chandra ascended the throne of Kachari kingdom after the demise of his brother Krishna Chandra who died without having any issue. As a result, though Govinda Chandra was still a minor yet took over the reign of the kingdom being a member of the royal family. However, the reign of Govinda Chandra soon became a very unpopular one on account of his marriage with elder brother’s wife “which was permitted neither by Hindu nor by Dimasa custom.” So, there irrupted internal dissension and bickering in the nobility as well as the aristocracy. Tularam Senapati, son of Kahidan who was posted in the ‘northern hilly tract’ by Govinda Chandra continued his rebellion against the king which his father had started and declared himself independent of greater Kachari kingdom. Though, Govinda Chandra tried hard to subjugate Kahidan when the latter was alive, he was unable to control him and Kahidan's control over the northern hill tract had to be acknowledged by the king. However, Kahidan was treacherously murdered by the King at which his son Tularam Senapati fled to Manipur and sought the help of Manipuri king to regain his lost territory and also to give a lesson to Govinda Chandra. Thus, Tularam Senapati with the help of the Manipuri soldiers, attacked the Dimasa kingdom. Govinda Chandra, on the other hand unable to defend his kingdom took refuge in British territory from where he sought their help. Though, within a very short time with the help of British soldiers Govinda Chandra, could reoccupy his lost territory he was assassinated by his

foes in 1830. As a result, the territory of Govinda Chandra was occupied by the British in 1832 on the ground that, “there was no descendant of the late king and in compliance with the frequent and earnestly expressed wishes of the people of Kachar.”

Though, the territory occupied by Dimasa king, Govinda Chandra, was brought under the administrative control of the British in 1832, full control over the entire erstwhile Kachari kingdom known as Dimasa kingdom in the later years was yet to be made. The central and northern portion of the kingdom was under the occupation of Tularam Senapati, who took possession of these tracts of territory with the help of Manipuri king and with the departure of Govinda Chandra he became an undisputed ruler of Dimasa kingdom. But consequent upon various development of strategic importance in the area, the territory of Tularam Senapati too was parceled out to the British in two phases viz. Central portion of Cachar in 1835 and northern hilly portion in the year 1854.

Thus, the Kachari kingdom which was situated in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra between the Kallang and Dikhou river in 13th century A.D. when the Ahoms had entered in the Eastern India continued to exist till 1854 in the present day Barak valley as an independent kingdom. The Ahoms for whom the Kacharis had to retreat from the Brahmaputra valley towards the end of 15th century to Barak valley had by then ceased to exist as a distinct political entity but brought under the administrative control of the British in two phases viz. first, just after the Treaty of Yandaboo and finally, in 1838 after the futile attempt of the East India Company to restore the destiny of the Kingdom to the former Ahom

prince, Purandar Singha, who was considered to be "the person best fitted to be
the head of the State" in the year 1832 on his agreeing to pay an annual tribute
of Rs.50,000/- and "to obey the orders of the Political Agent and to administer
justice on the principles prevailing in Company's territory." Purandar Singha,
was restored to his erstwhile Ahom kingdom, though the geographical boundary of
his kingdom was reduced to a considerable extent from "Dhansiri and Dihing on
the south bank and Biswanath and Sadiya on the north bank." However, very
soon, the East India Company found Purandar Singha incapable of fulfilling his
promises. High rate of taxation imposed on his subjects to meet the tribute to be
paid to his new master coupled with new administrative measures which he was
compelled to introduce under the instruction of the Company officials made him
unpopular amongst his aristocracy. Thus, on the pretext of misgovernance, his
territory was annexed by the Company in the year 1838.

Response of the Boros to the New Regime:

When the East India Company arrived in the socio-political scene of the
entire Brahmaputra valley, they came across many Boro-Kachari people in
different parts of the entire Eastern India including Bengal whom in their records
have mentioned as Mech, Cacharis etc. W. W. Hunter, has stated that, "they are
scattered through out the Assam and parts of Eastern Bengal." He further
stated that, "Cacharis and Meches form a strong element in the military and police
force of this part of country (Goalpara), and throughout Assam...they are strong

65 Ibid, p.469.
66 Ibid, p.469.
built, stout and bold and make good sepoys...they were first employed as such by the old kings of Kamrupa." 68

From the above statement it can be assumed that, the Kacharis were not confined only in a fixed geographical area but spread over to large areas. Further, on account of disturbed political situation in the Brahmaputra valley, especially towards the end of Ahom monarchy, and also due to their protracted struggle with the Ahom kingdom they had to migrate from one place to the other. Such migration was perhaps confined only to the kings and their nobility; and it never led to large scale migration of bulk of Kachari subjects, as a result of which they continued to remain in their former places under the Ahom rulers as their subjects. Thus, they were compelled to endure whatever changes were brought about in socio-economic sphere by the subsequent Ahom rulers.

Meanwhile, if we analyze the relationship between the Ahoms and Kacharis from the available records, it is pretty clear that their relationship throughout the long period of 600 years of Ahom rule was never a cordial one. Though on certain occasions, the Kachari kings were defeated by the Ahoms and at times became _thapita sanchita_ kings like any other kings of the time, yet very soon there were attempts by the former to regain their lost prestige and possession in the slightest pretext. Thus, the Ahoms never could permanently subjugate the Kacharis and their effort in this direction remained incomplete and "the Kacharis enjoyed their autonomy for a long time under kings of their own," 69 which was a source of pride and inspiration for all the Boro-Kachari people living in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley and beyond.

68 Ibid,
69 Ibid, p,191.
Thus, such population with strong racial and political identity of their own naturally would not succumb to much external pressure which threatened their very existence beyond certain limit.

In view of strained relationship between the Ahom and Kacharis, there is every reason to suppose that, unlike other ethnic groups of the valley, the Kacharis population did not enjoy much privileged position during the long years of Ahom rule. This can be guessed from records of British officials namely W.W. Hunter, who was the Director General of Statistics with Government of India when the Statistical Account of Assam was compiled in the year 1874. In this record while discussing the social condition of the Cacharis or Mechés living in Eastern Dwars he has stated that, "the social condition of the Mechés is extremely low, and they have not progressed beyond the stage of nomadic cultivators…their mode of existence is from hand to mouth, and there appears to be no reason to suppose that their material condition in former times was better than now." 70

So, from the above expression it can be assumed that, the socio-economic condition of the Boro-Kachari people of the Brahmaputra valley in the 19th century was in a deplorable state. He, however also mentioned that, the Boro-Kachari people living in Eastern Dwars were immigrants from eastern Assam which he assumed took place because the people wanted to escape from the oppressive ruler of the later Ahom kings as well as Burmese rule. As a result, they could not have a settled life for which, it is stated further by W.W. Hunter that, "The Mechés and Cacharis do not seem to have achieved any form of polity of their own; they have few traditions, no ancient songs, no monuments, no written

character, and no literature of any kind."  

The statement of Hunter is sufficient ground to believe that, the entire Brahmaputra valley witnessed a series of internal dissentions and civil strife in the 18th century due to Moamaria rebellion followed by occupation of the Burmese rule in early 19th century. The extent of lawlessness and atrocities was the greatest in Upper and Central Assam region for which a lot of migration of common people in general, but of the peasantry in particular, had taken place to other areas especially in Goalpara and Darrang districts, where the sphere of influence of Ahom kingdom was somewhat loose.

British rule brought about dramatic changes in the economy, polity and social life of the North- Eastern region and their main concern seemed to be "to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation." With such envisaged aim in mind the East India Company started to formulate administrative and fiscal measures for administrating their newly acquired province. According to the estimation of the Company's officials "Lower Assam alone would yield a revenue of more than three lakh of rupees" so without any delay this region was annexed by the Company. Likewise, realizing the strategic importance of Khamti and Singphoes as a shield between the newly acquired province of the British and "any invader from the other side of the hills," their respective chiefs were recognized as a sovereign within their territories and were expected to rule according to their traditions and customs. Capt. Neufville was appointed as

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71 Ibid, p.119.
74 Ibid, p.20.
Political Agent of Upper Assam with Headquarter at Biswanath on whom the military defences of Khamti and Sighpho territories was also bestowed. Upper Assam was restored to former Ahom prince, on account of their belief that, its immediate occupation by the East India Company would be the "most uneconomic" exercise at that period of time.

Though the former Ahom nobility was restored in Upper Assam, he had to administer the territory according to the Agent to the Governor General through civil authorities. Effort was made to administer the territory through an "Executive composed partly of civilians and partly of soldiers upon a mixed system into which the spirit of Regulations is infused in such a way as to cause it to harmonize and blend itself with all that is good in the spirit of the native institutions." Thus, administration of civil, justice, supervision of collection of revenue and maintenance of law and order fell into the hands of Political Agent to the Governor General NE Frontier. Subsequently, David Scott, who was appointed as Commissioner and Joint Magistrate of Cooch Behar and Rongpur in 1816 was made Political Agent to the Governor General NE frontier of Bengal as well as Civil Commissioner of Rongpur.

Thus after being assigned the new job, David Scott made careful study of the entire province with all its merits and demerits and took up strategies for administering the newly conquered territory and it was stated that "Scott was so

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75 Ibid, p,22.
76 Ibid, p,22.
much impressed with the intrinsic worth of the former government that he strongly urged its re-introduction with modification as may be considered necessary." 77

Under the new regime, for administrative convenience the whole Assam was partitioned into 2 divisions—Upper Assam and Lower Assam with headquarters at Rangpur and Gauhati respectively. Accordingly, David Scott was appointed as Senior Commissioner of Lower Assam Division and Colonel Richards as Junior Commissioner of Upper Assam Division. In addition to administering the Lower Assam Division, David Scott had to oversee the overall administration of the new province in order to maintain uniformity in administration. In Upper Assam, the Company officials desisted from introducing radical change in administrative set up on the ground that it might be counter productive and therefore, retained the earlier system of administration with minor modifications where ever necessary. Thus, former khel system was retained with slight modification in terms of "personal service by commutation money at the rate of Rs. 3.00 per head." 78 In order to appease the former Ahom nobilities, they were employed in some responsible posts under the supervision of British officials.

In Lower Assam, a tax of Rs. 2.00 was imposed on every paik in lieu of which he was given 3 puras of land. Besides a plough tax at the rate of Rs. 1.00 and a capitation tax at the rate of Rs.1.00 per head was imposed in Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong respectively. Very soon, tax on the rent free grants,

professional tax, custom duties began to be imposed on the subjects who were indulging in trade and commerce of small magnitude.

Though initially, the British Government did not contemplate introducing any radical changes in the administrative system, yet whatever change was introduced, it proved to be too advanced for the people to cope up with. The introduction of cash in place of barter, the need to maintain records in black and white, the replacement of personal service by monetary transaction in the erstwhile Khel system created apprehension in the minds of both nobility and the masses. As such, dissatisfaction surfaced initially among the nobility which very soon spread to peasantry on whom the burden of taxation became unbearable with every passing day due to experimentation of new administrative and revenue measure to sustain the "enlightened British administration." Thus, there occurred a series of rebellions against the oppressive revenue policies of the British Government. Though these rebellions were curbed easily by the British, yet they had far reaching consequences in the days to come.

Keeping above general perspective of the period in mind, the fate of the Boro Kachari people living in Brahmaputra valley is discussed here. With the occupation of Tularam Senapati's territory by the British in 1854 the Boro-Kacharis ceased to exist as a ruling class of people. They became a displaced community. The erstwhile ruling class as well as the aristocracy among them, due to conversion to higher caste of Hindu religion while they were in the helm of affairs, completely assimilated with the dominant sections of non tribal people amidst whom they had been living for years. On the other hand, general Boro-

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Kachari community remained isolated and clung to their own religion, customs and traditions. In economic activities also they continued to pursue agricultural activities with their age old tools and techniques. Though, trade and commerce on a small scale had already started among certain communities of the Brahmaputra valley, the Boros were unable to take advantage of such developments to augment their income primarily because of their isolation from the rests. The majority of the Boros were involved in agricultural activity, (both settled and shifting) and they engaged themselves mostly in monocropping as they believed that, "multi cropping robbed the land of its fertility." 80 Assam was a land abundant country and its soils were fertile for any type of agricultural activity, so no extra labour was required for tilling the soil. Thus, if the peasants found that, the fields were unproductive, they sought for other areas which was likely to yield better crop. In a land abundant economy, traditional agricultural activity posed no problem.

However, with the coming of the British, the "system of recorded land right" 81 was introduced. This meant that, they could no longer move from place to place in search of fertile land but were compelled to cultivate on those plots of land which had been given to them against payment of tax. Further, in order to give major boost to the State exchequer people from outside the province were encouraged to immigrate and settle in the vast hitherto vacant land so as "to ensure maximum utilization of the rich and cultivable wasteland lying fallow for want of sufficient numbers of cultivators." 82 As per the new administrative measures a flood gate for immigration of landless peasants from densely

80 Pegu, Jadav: Reclaiming Identity A Discourse on Bodo History, Kok, 2004, p,63.
81 Ibid,p,61.
populated East Bengal to Assam was opened. Thus, for the beginning the Boro-Kachari community had to face competition in their traditional economic activity and also land alienation thereby giving them a severe blow to their economic survival. Educationally, the Boros had not made much headway. Hence, although they suffered economically they had no alternative vocation to fall back upon. Moreover, they were not organized as a community to voice their grievances. So, in the circumstances they remained silent spectators of the British maneuvers.

Unable to compete with the new hard working immigrants in agricultural activity and also not being able to come to terms with British masters on revenue measures, the majority of them had to desert their land and migrate from place to place in search of better land for cultivation. And finally, towards the end of 19th century and early part of 20th century, the bulk of the Boro peasantry occupied the vast reserved forest areas "all along the northern belt of Assam" 83 which remained unabated for a considerable period of time.

Early anti British uprising and the Boros:

With every passing day and also with new experiences, the people began to realize that, the British would not return to their homeland as promised initially but had come to stay here which would be counter productive for the native people. Thus, they resolved to drive the British out and establish their age old rule with all their privileges and honors. With this motive in mind, a series of anti British rebellions were unleashed by the Ahom nobility in the beginning of the 19th century in 1828-1830. However, the general masses were outside the purview of these early anti-British uprisings led by the nobility as a result of which they could

83 Ibid, p,34.
not be sustained for long and were easily crushed. Meanwhile, like the nobility, the common masses of the Brahmaputra valley also realized from their experiences with the new masters that the immediate concern of the latter was nothing but extortion of land even to the detriment of the welfare of their subjects. Thus, they too resolved to protest against any new system introduced by their masters which goes against their general welfare. Protest by common people of such nature for the first time in the Brahmaputra valley was however said to have been initiated by the Kachari laborers working in Assam Company in the 1840’s. It is pertinent to mention here that, East India Company who had come to Assam “not for conquest but to destroy our enemies” \(^{84}\) meanwhile discovered tea plant in Upper Assam as early as in 1823. Very soon they learnt that, tea produced in Assam was of high quality, therefore they decided to concentrate for extensive cultivation of tea in Assam in order to compete with China, which was the only tea producing country of standard quality in the world. Thus, the British took up every administrative measure to facilitate to enter into business in tea and appealed the British businessmen in England to start tea plantation in Assam. Therefore, they opened Assam Company in 1837 initially in England and then in Calcutta. The Company formally started its activity for tea cultivation on a large scale in India from the year 1839. An office of Assam Company was also opened at Gargaon, in Upper Assam, and the activity of the Company started from June 1839. Slowly after being convinced of the benefits of the tea industry, the Assam Company acquired large tracts of hitherto fallow land under tea cultivation at very nominal rates. But, one of the main problems with which the Company officials came across was lack

of skilled and unskilled manpower to work as laborers in the tea plantations. The local population was neither interested nor had any necessity to work in tea industries; if they were ever employed also they would work in the lean season after their agricultural activities were over. Unable to get laborers to work in the tea industries on permanent basis, they had to import Chinese laborers from China and elsewhere. But, such enterprises often proved to be costly affairs due to disturbed contemporary political scenario in the valley; as a result, they were bound to recruit local laborers. But, the people of Assam in general and local inhabitants in particular were still reluctant to work as labourers in tea industries; as a result, labourers had to be brought from surplus populated districts. The Boro-Kachari of Darrang district were mostly recruited to work as laborers in Assam tea Company in addition to "peasants from adjacent villages who were also employed in their off seasons through contractors." 85 As labourers were difficult to find, they had plenty of bargaining power. Besides, by the 1840's the general atmosphere of the valley had become quite anti- British. Therefore, the common people too tried to weaken the British rule on any pretext. The Kachari labourers working in the Assam Company organized the first strike against their British in 1848 for default on the part of their masters to pay their regular wages as agreed upon "along with assurance for no further default in payment of wages in the future." 86 In 1857 also they resorted to a similar strike in order to show solidarity with the spirit of Revolt of the Sepoys which had broken out throughout the country. In 1859, they resorted to a strike demanding a better deal in the existing wage structure. They refused to cooperate with their European masters.

86 Pegu, Jadav: Reclaiming Identity A Discourse on Bodo History, Kok, 2004, p.76.
and struck work during the reception by the local planters to the naval brigade which had come to Sivasagar. The leader of the Kachari labour movement, Madhuram Koch, was apprehended, tried along with mutineers of Sepoy Mutiny and sent to seven years rigorous imprisonment on the ground of taking active part in labour movement and also fraternizing with the cause of Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

Though the sporadic revolt of the Kachari laborers working in Assam Company could not cause much damage to the European masters, yet it compelled them to review their labour recruitment policy as they now became skeptical about employing further Kachari labourers. Instead they preferred to look for alternative sources for labour. Thus, Tranport of Native Labourers Act was passed in 1863 for facilitating recruitment of labourers from outside the province. This resulted in large scale immigration of workers “from those areas of India where distress and scarcity were acute, viz., Bihar, Orissa and Chotanagpur,” to work as coolies in the tea gardens established by Europeans. In the long run this paved way for changing the total demographic scenario of the province.

A similar type of anti-British uprising, by another group of Kacharis, namely the Dimasa Kacharis, working in railway construction work in NC Hills occurred in 1880’s in a place called Maibong. It has already been observed that the territory of the last Dimasa Kachari kingdom of Tularam Senapati was annexed to British dominion in 1854. Since then, the British had come to realize the vast potentialities of natural resources of the area specially of its bamboo, wood, rubber, elephant as well as its scenic beauty. Hence, they were very much interested in exploiting its resources and potentialities to further their commercial

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interest. Thus, in order to market the produce of NC Hills to the outside world, they wanted to establish a link with it by constructing railway lines. So, under the supervision of a British official, construction of a railway line connecting Lumding to Haflong was undertaken. As stated earlier, in NC Hills also the British officials faced shortage of labourers to work in railway construction work. Difficult geographical location of the construction site also posed a severe problem. The recruitment of labourers from outside the region along with difficulty in procuring regular food supply to the construction site were additional problems. As a result, they had to employ local Dimasa Kachari labourers in the construction work. However, the local labourers were paid very low wages for which they stopped work under the leadership of Sambudhan Fonglo, "who soon came to be known as Sambudhan Deo." 88 The refusal on the part of the laborers working in the construction of railway lines greatly infuriated their European masters, who inflicted punitive torture on the former. Meanwhile, Sambudhan Fonglo gathered a large number of followers with traditional weapons at Maibong and decided to oust the British and "re-establish the Dimasa Kachari rule." 89 Thus, they burnt down all the British establishments on the way to Gunjan, the British Head Quarters in N.C. Hills. On 15 January 1882, they attacked and burnt down the administrative buildings at Gunjan. This resulted in several clashes between the forces of the British, led by Major Boyd, and Dimasa rebels at Maibong. In this clash Major Boyd was seriously wounded as a result of which he soon died. Sambudhan Fonglo continued his fight against the British in hideouts but like any other rebellion of the time, it could not sustain for long. Superior arms and ammunition

89 ibid, p,63.
and disciplined organizational structure of the British forces enabled the latter to quell the uprising very easily. Protracted clash with the British wounded Sambudhan in his hideout and eventually he died in 1883. With his death the struggle of the Dimasa people, another branch of Boro-Kachari people, to regain their lost kingdom in their own land too came to an end.

Peasant Uprising and the Boro-Kacharis:

Thus, from the aforesaid discussions it is apparent that, the 19th century witnessed growing discontent of the people with the new regime which they expressed through protests from time to time. Had there been unity of action and purpose among all the aggrieved people, the situation in the North Eastern region in general and Assam in particular would have been different. But, unity was difficult for various reasons. Meanwhile, the people of Assam were experiencing the designs of British colonialism in real terms.

The rebellion of 1857 led to transfer of power from the hands of East India Company to the Crown of England. But this shift in the center of political power did not bring about any noticeable change in the system of administration in British occupied India. The system of increasing the rate of revenue with every new assessment on land was continued by the crown. The revolt of 1857 imposed severe financial burden on the British Government. Thus, it was decided to tide over the financial stress by resorting to imposition of new taxes on the native people. In this context it is worth mentioning that, under the Ahoms, there existed land tax and khels and parganas were placed under the administrative control of a Ahom nobles who were not only authorized to collect revenue in kind but also
administer justice under their jurisdiction. But, the British had modified this arrangement and "introduced the system of placing parganas under the chaudhuries," ⁹⁰ who were authorized to collect revenue without having land of their own. In lieu of his service to the British Government, he was to get commission at the rate of 10% on the collected revenue as their remuneration. In addition to collection of revenue, the Chaudhuries were also authorized to administer justice in the form of a magistrate "in petty criminal cases." ⁹¹

We have already discussed that, David Scott had abolished the system of rendering personal service and had introduced a poll tax at the rate of rs.3/- per paik in a year. However, in course of time, the system of poll tax was given away in favour of fixing the rate of revenue after assessment of the land. Accordingly for facilitating assessment of land and fixing revenue thereof, the lands were classified as "basti (homestead), rupti land in which transplanted rice, Sali grown, Bao Sali or land for growing Bao rice and faringati, or land crowing dry crops such as mustard and ahu rice." ⁹² After the assessment of the land as classified above, different rate of taxes were imposed which were gradually increased in due course of time. As the tax had to be paid through Chaudhuries, it was often found that, they resorted to extortion as they had no other source of earning other than the commission on the revenue collected. As cash was in short supply, the general peasantry found it extremely difficult to pay their dues in cash which often resulted in rural indebtedness. Besides, other taxes were levied on those who were

⁹⁰ Hazarika, B.B. : Political life in Assam During the Nineteenth Century, New Delhi, 1986. p,346.
⁹¹ Ibid, p,346.
⁹² Ibid, p,346.
engaged in trade and commerce, fishing, gold washing, timber, gazing etc. Further, the Government imposed new taxes in addition to the existing ones.

Accordingly, income tax which was introduced in rest of India in 1860 was extended to Assam in 1861 as well, followed by imposition of stamp duties, excise duties etc. In addition to these, "license duties for cutting timber and reeds... taxes on gazing land" 93 were introduced. Finally, the Government banned the cultivation of poppy plants in 1861 on the ground that it severely affected the government revenue on the plea that, "per capita consumption of opium was stated to highest in the province" 94 and that, "when the ryots will have to pay dearly for the drug they'll restrict its immoderate use" 95 and made the native people solely dependent on abkari opium which was introduced in the province in 1851-52.

Already the general peasantry was hard pressed owing to increase in the rate of tax on land and with the imposition of ban on cultivation of poppy it greatly aggravated their economic hardship. The prohibitory order of the Government on cultivation of poppy plants shattered the domestic economy of tribal areas.

As the burden of taxation on the people reached beyond the capacity for endurance, they decided to press the Government for getting respite from the oppressive revenue measures by way of representation. But, such effort on the part of the peasantry failed to get favorable response from the authorities. Instead they received insult and humiliation, So, unable to get their demand met, the peasantry took the ultimate decision "not to pay the taxes and to devise ways and

93 Ibid, p,383.
means to bring their grievances to the notice of the authorities." 96 Thus, the peasant movement against Government policy of enhancement on land revenue and others broke out in Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang districts of British Assam. These areas had sizeable sections of tribal communities belonging to Bodo race and between the years 1861-1894 under the banner of Raijmels several agurian uprisings occurred. It first broke out in Phulaguri, a tribal stronghold dominated by Lalung tribes and situated at around 12 k.m. from present agaon town. The ultimate cause of uprising at Phulaguri was the prohibition of poppy cultivation and "threatened taxes on areca nuts and betel vines" 97 by the British Government.

The peasants of Nagaon area, most of whom were tribals, gathered in front of District Commissioner’s court at Nagaon to represent their grievances through peaceful means. But, the authority instead of listening to their woes adopted strong measures like detention and imposition of fine against the peasantry. So, unable to get due attention from the authority in addressing their grievances, the peasantry were compelled to take very tough decision and decided 'not to pay tax at all'. They further decided to convene raijmels at Phulaguri for five consecutive days from 15 October onwards to deliberate on the matter amongst all peasants. As the authority tried to crush the rebellion, the mob who had gathered at Phulaguri turned violent and Lt. Singer, Assistant, Commissioner of Nagaon, was killed. Many agitating peasants lost their lives. Many more were arrested and faced death sentences or deportation.

96 Ibid, p.90.
97 Hazarika, B.B.: Political life in Assam in the nineteenth century, Delhi,1986, p.383
After the uprising at Phulaguri, Government undertook some measures to enquire about circumstances leading to bloodshed in course of agitation of the ryots and on the basis of enquiry report they even took actions against erring officials for failing to handle the situation sensibly. Yet, the experience of Phulaguri did not deter the British Government from enhancing the rate of revenue further, nor stop them from adhering to their earlier policy to supply abkari opium to the common people. Meanwhile, the strength of the police force was enhanced in order to enable them to quell any disturbance in the days ahead which had became a regular feature specially since 1857. So, in order to feed these growing number of forces, the Government recommended further increase of revenue “on rupti and non rupti lands in the Assam valley from 25% to 50%” which was further increased to “70-80 % in some cases even to 100%” in the year 1893. Thus like Phulaguri, it evoked large scale protest of peasantry living in Rangia, Lachima, Nalbari, Barama, Bajali in Kamrup district and Patharughat in Darrang district between the years 1893-1894 under the organization of Raijmels. However, the peasant uprisings of Kamrup and Patharughat were not only for no tax campaign but also for excommunicating those people who disobeyed the decision of the Raij. The rebellion of peasantry at Rangia was targeted not only against the British but also against the Marwari traders, termed as keyas who had by then monopolized the internal trade in the province and it was believed by the general peasantry that, “their presence had caused the enhancement of land revenue.”

It is sated that, the peasant uprising at Rangia continued for two months and the police resorted to firing over the gathering of peasantry on 10 January. Thus, the

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99 File No176, 1894, Some Public Proceedings of Home Deptt. regarding recent riots in Assam.
stand taken up by the *Raij* seemed highly provocative to sustain British interest in Assam. Therefore, the Government undertook drastic measures against holding of such *mels* without seeking prior permission from the Deputy Commissioner of respective districts. As the agitation of peasantry against the British Government in Kamrup district, especially in Rangia area, were often followed by destruction and looting of *Keya's* shop, many ring leaders of the agitating mobs were arrested and punished for creating lawlessness.

The seat of peasant uprisings in Kamrup district through holding of *raijmails* were reported to be Rangia, Lachima, Sarukhetri, Bolagaon and Bajali whereas Patharughat in Mangaldoi sub division of Darrang district "as a result orders were issued for attachment of all the licensed guns in the Rangia, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali Tahsils, these being centres of dissatisfaction."  

Though these uprisings of the peasants against the British Government were the earliest attempts of the common people to forge together and voice their grievances against revenue policy of the British Government; yet they failed to achieve its desired objectives due to their inherent weaknesses as well as superior might of their opponent. But their significance lies in the fact that all sections of people including "educated and well to do middle class consisting of small land owners, government servants, *mauzadars*, traders and merchants who were no less affected by recent taxes on income, trades and dealings," supported the peasantry. In these regards the role of Boro-Kacharis, the largest plain tribal population of Assam, can not be undermined. In fact, it can also be said that, they were the worst sufferer of existing revenue system of British

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colonialism therefore, their participation in these early British uprisings is all the more significant. It is also evident from the letter of R.B. Mc Cabe, Deputy Commissioner Kamrup to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley written on 12th January 1894 in which he stated that,

"At Rangia on 24th Dec 1893, and subsequent disturbance there... a crowd from 200 to 250 men chiefly Kacharis raided the Rangia Hat and looted all the stalls appropriating property which I estimated at about Rs. 300/-. They then, attended 'mel' held at Bolagaon close to Rangia and on their return journey at 5 p.m. destructed all the huts in the hat, threatening to return on the 30th Dec and loot the kyah's shops on the pretence that their presence had caused the enhancement of land revenue."

Regarding peasant uprising at Balagaon in the and year 1894, it is also stated that, "...near about 3000 peasants mostly belonging to Kachari had assembled at Balagaon, a village where majority tribal communities reside to protest against the rule of British colonialism and economic oppression. Majority assembled peasants were Kachari community. Out of many prominent leaders of Raijmel, Parashu Ram Boro was one amongst them... the officer of Rangia thana during the occurrence of peasant uprising at Balagaon was Padma Ram Kochari... when he was ordered by his European master to open fire at the agitating ryots gathered at Balagaon to protest against revenue measure introduced by the British Government, but Padma Ram Kochari refrained from opening fire against his own
kinsmen instead blank fired in the open air; thereby averted large scale causalities on the part of the peasantry." 102

From the above and also from the study of available records of the period one thing is clear; that, till late 19th century, the Boro-Kacharis had no other vocation except engaging themselves in agricultural activities as education was yet to dawn amidst them so as to enable them to look for alternative vocation in life. Though, a section did work in tea gardens, yet work in the tea gardens did not appeal to the majority for a variety of reasons. With colonization, Assam was linked to the rest of India in all aspects. Taking advantage of uniform administrative and revenue measures, hordes of people from other parts of India came here for trade and commerce as well as to seek jobs under the British government. In this context, mention may be made of the Marwari traders who carried out, much of the export traffic, and the nearly the whole of the import traffic of the valley103. Further, they also monopolized the banking and wholesale business of the valley104. Like the Marwaris, some natives of Kamrup district had meanwhile established themselves in the lucrative export trade in mustard. The Boro-Kacharis were unable to take advantage of such opportunities and were hard pressed on all fronts.

The Boro-Kacharis had traditional trading practices through various mountain passes along the Himalayan foot hills with Bhutan, Towang and used to bring their goods “to fairs held at Darranga and Subankhata in the north of

103 Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, reprint, Delhi, 1983, p.64.
104 Ibid, p.64.
Kamrup and at Udalguri and Ghagrapara in Darrang. The trade was carried out through barter system. The item of export in these markets were rubber, cotton cloth, yarn and silk whereas articles of imports were rubber, wax and ponies. This border trade had augmented the Bodo economy considerably. However, political disturbances arising out of Moamaria rebellion, followed by occupation of the province by the Burmese and then by the British, threw the entire province into turmoil. This completely shattered the border trade. As a result, the economy of the Bodos further weakened. The British, realizing the importance of border trade which was in existence in large scale prior to their occupation, resumed it. However, the resumption of border trade by the British invited others also to venture into in area which had hitherto been monopoly of the Boro-Kacharis living in these regions. The volume of trade also increased to a considerable extent and monetary transaction replaced barter system. So, very soon, the Boro-Kacharis found themselves ousted from their traditional lucrative border trade as well. Therefore, when they were compelled to pay increasing taxes, they rose into revolt.

Thus to conclude, it can be stated that, in 19th century Assam, the Boro-Kacharis who had been living in isolation for long showed an interest in intermingling with the larger Assamese society thereby facilitating integration with the greater cultural milieu of the State as one of its important components. Henceforth, like the other communities, they also played a crucial role in the political development of the province. In this context we can particularly cite the example of the peasant uprisings which are termed as ‘mass movements’ of the


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people Assam. The Boro-Kacharis, being the largest plain tribal population of the Brahmaputra valley till date, played a significant role in these uprisings. Without their participation these uprisings could not have assumed the colour of mass uprisings. Although these uprisings were local in nature, yet they contributed tremendously in compelling the British Government to review their policies towards the native people. Further, they paved the way for Boro-Kachari participation in different phases of freedom movement of larger nature that followed.