Chapter I

Colonial Impact on Tribal Economic Life in the Brahmaputra Valley, 1860-1920
This chapter tries to locate the ‘tribal’ communities in the agrarian economy of Assam. The tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley constitute an important section of the region’s peasantry and labour. The period prior to the expansion of colonial rule saw the gradual marginalisation of these peasant communities and the consolidation of British rule only accelerated this process. This study attempts to look generally at the colonial stereotypes of the people and peasantry in Brahmaputra valley and specifically at the emerging differentiation in socio-cultural and economic levels of the ‘tribal’ peasantry in the area.

The British occupation of the province of Assam happened at a later period of British colonialism, i.e. 1826. The evolution of a land revenue policy took some time but the British proceeded to effect changes in the existing system of taxation. First paiks were commuted from rendering service to paying cash at the rate Rs.3 per year. This was followed by abolition of slavery, which "served to raise the cultivator from the status of a serf to that of a free tenant and to set the agricultural labourer free from the bonds of customs."¹ The British imagined that with freedom from slavery and bonded feudal relations, these people would lead to the growth of the peasant base and expansion of agriculture. When the province was annexed to the empire in 1826 the revenue system of Assam was not organised on the usual method of unit-wise taxation of the land, but taxed the adult male population on a personal basis: reminiscent of the Paik system. But as the colonial designs on Assam grew it necessitated certain changes in the revenue policies. By 1840 the revenue collection was fully monetized and devised on regional/geographical basis. Some typical characteristics of the 19th century peasant

agriculture was that, “some features of tribalism, such as rotation of land, cooperative labour forms, and slash and burn methods continued to co-exist with the use of the plough in agriculture.”

During this time, the raiyats’ lands were measured annually or when necessary, and the assessment was fixed uniformly for a term extending from one to five years. Then decennial settlements, introduced in 1870, functioned till 1883, when revenue amount and settlement rules began to be the norm. But soon it was evident that long term revenue assessment was only feasible on the permanent cultivable i.e. rupit, basti and bari lands. Assessment of land under fluctuating cultivation or shifting was only practicable on an annual basis, given the nature of relinquishment of major portion of the land in possession. So the system of annual leases continued to co-exist even when twenty-year leases replaced the decennial leases with the settlement of 1902-12. Gradually the land tax was substituted for all other; yet debates regarding the taxation of certain communities considered being different from the caste Hindu dominant peasantry continued well into the early part of the 20th century.

Assam was not unlike the rest of the provinces as far as the impacts of the agrarian policies were concerned. The colonial revenue interest in this ‘land abundant’ area was different from the rest of the country due to the presence of the plantation economy with its large land owners, which played an important role in changing the agrarian scene in the area. From these dominant concerns emerged ideas that constructed certain stereotypes, which were to influence agrarian policy, as the concern for creating

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3 Land on which transplanted rice (sali) is grown.
4 Homestead and garden land.
5 Homestead and garden land of medium quality.
the labour and revenue were primary. These twin concerns were tied up with a certain stereotype of a 'lazy', 'indolent', 'opium addicted' native. But as revenue concerns grew and the colonial survey and resettlement and assessment penetrated more areas there emerged in the colonial discourse several categories of natives, i.e. the tribal peasant who was simple, illiterate, happy and in many cases, only people willing to provide labour to colonial ventures as the caste Hindus were debarred by social norms against menial labours of such level. Colonial perception of the economic prosperity of the people was located in close relation with the consumption of opium and liquor and unwillingness or inability to move beyond subsistence. Thus emerged the stereotype of the lazy, indolent native, in the context of a situation where there was labour scarcity and the tea gardens thrived on an imported labour force.

The attitudes mentioned above are quite evident from the report on the condition of the lower classes of Assam. Mr. Luttman-Johnson, commissioner of the Assam Valley districts, wrote, "... like the rest of Eastern India, my division suffers from excess of means of subsistence...living is so easily earned that the people are demoralised, that is they are too contented, have few ambitions, develop no new wants." The general picture that emerges is that of an indolent race of people who dislike labour and for whom procuring the minimum means of subsistence was enough. Though the people did manage to get two meals which were by the colonial standards enough for subsistence, the tribal communities were often put down in colonial records as being more backward compared to other communities, especially the caste Hindu Assamese peasantry.

7 Condition of the People of Assam, File no.824 of 1888, nos. 1-4, Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner dated, 12th July, 1888, p.2.
Even in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, there was a comparative index covering the hard working communities with the "indolent" ones. The tribal communities especially the Kacharis were hard working, and "with the exception of the imported tea garden coolie and the Kacharis of Kamrup and Darrang, there is no class of professional labourers in Assam." The economy of the province was totally dependent on wet rice cultivation, which was also the staple food and also the main item of trade other than tea. The main crops of paddy were — sali or the transplanted rice, ahu or the early rice and bao or the broadcast winter rice, among which there were variations. Sali was the most valuable and heaviest yield also came from it. But very high and very low lands were unsuitable for it. It also took a longer period to mature/yield. Ahu was also largely broadcast but occasionally transplanted and then it was known as Kharma or farma. It was grown in lands either too high or too low for either sali or bao, which was known in revenue assessment terms as faringati. Bao was grown in low-lying areas where no other crop could be grown. It was the most important paddy crop after sali.

The general impression constructed by the colonial state maintained certain stereotypes of the communities, therefore the condition of the people appeared to be on the whole satisfactory and there was not much indebtedness among the Assamese Hindus, but the ex-coolies and the Kacharis were in the hands of the kayas or Marwari traders. This general attitude of the colonial administration continued and was well reflected in the observations in the Assessment report of the Tinsukia group of Lakhimpur district on the question of labour and poverty:

8 Ibid. p.8.
9 Land that was too high for transplanted rice.
“... nearly all cases the Assamese owe their lack of prosperity to the excessive use of opium and their consequent lack of enterprise. They have a very low standard of comfort, their marriage expenses are not very high, and they make a great part of their own clothes.”10

As mentioned by Gunabhiram Barua Rai Bahadur, Extra Assistant Commissioner, abundance of land caused the “excessive indulgence of the Assamese, and his strong dislike to anything involving the least labour, the matter will contain nothing surprising...anything which causes the slightest inconvenience is ‘bordukh’.”11 As regards labour, it was noted “with the exception of the imported tea garden coolie and the Kacharis of Kamrup and Darrang, there is no class of professional labourers in Assam.”12

The reason cited was that the

“Assamese strongly dislikes to leave his neighbourhood. Almost the only class who can be induced to migrate in search of work are the Kacharis. They can be sometimes induced by recruiters to go from lower to upper Assam to work on road or other contract jobs. They get an advance, generally in October, which enables them to pay the revenue that may be due, and then start for the scene of their labour. They usually earn Rs.7 to 10 a month. They generally return, when it is necessary to look after their cultivation, in March or April.”13

The other occupation and collateral source of income, which the tribal peasantry engaged in other than agriculture, was rearing of silk cocoons and weaving the endi cloth, labouring in the rubber plantation, clearing forests, making boats for sale and for domestic use, collection of forest products, hunting and fishing, and raising and breeding

11 Condition of the People of Assam, file no. 824 R. of 1888, nos.1-4, p.6.
12 Ibid. p.8.
13 Ibid. p.9.
of livestock. Most of these were an integral part of their lifestyle and livelihood before the colonial penetration and commercialisation and control of resources.

The colonial state always had to contend with the scarcity of labour in the tea gardens throughout the 19th century, though labour was imported from the Chota Nagpur and Telengana region and later there was a natural growth of population of the ex-coolies. The demand for labour persisted and in lower Assam this demand began to be met eventually from within the local communities. The presence of Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas, Garos and Mikirs gradually increased in numbers in the tea gardens. Many of the gardens in Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang imported no labour whatever. The few gardens in Kamrup and many in Nowgong were manned almost entirely by local coolies. It was chiefly in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur district that foreign labour had to be imported.

Nature of Homesteads: Comparison between Caste Hindu Peasantry and Tribal Peasantry

In the 19th century, the composition of the peasantry in Assam was of two major categories, the caste Hindu peasantry and the tribal peasantry and from the late 19th century the immigrant Muslim peasants from East Bengal, the Nepali graziers who settled down as agriculturists and the ex-coolies.

This brings us to the interesting question whether the Assamese Hindu raiyat was different and generally economically better off than his tribal counterpart in the Brahmaputra valley. This section will look at the economic and geographical bases of differentiation of two peasant communities in the region. The local variations in mode of

\[14\] Ibid. p. 9-11.
cultivation and specific geographical location of each group were important. The tribal
communities of the plains, though a part of the valley settled agriculture, retained more
tribal customs and were animists or relatively recent converts to Hinduism, and whose
land was also typically more marginal land – either because it was higher, adjoining the
foothills, or lower, adjoining the river.\textsuperscript{15} The nature of the land cultivated and prosperity
was connected. Like in the case of the Kacharis/Bodos who were spread largely over the
districts of Kamrup and Darrang, because of their numbers and also because they still
occupied prime areas in especially Kamrup, were more exposed to the competition for
land and hence their growing political awareness and importance. Even in 1888,
collective knowledge of the report the impressionistic categorisation drawn speaks of the
relative prosperity and indolence of the Assamese; the tribes like the Kacharis, Lalungs
and Mikirs were not included within that definition.

J. Knox Wight, Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, perpetuates the notion that hired
labour was an unknown category in Assam meaning that at least the caste Hindu people
need not to or did not sell labour as a rule.\textsuperscript{16}

However the reason of not working in the tea gardens might have been more
social mores than economic prosperity. In the early years of the tea industry, when labour
was scarce in tea gardens, i.e., before the regular hiring of coolies from Bengal and the
northwest, and when fewer Kacharis and hill tribes came to work, Assamese labour was
used by managers of gardens. But gradually the native caste Hindu Assamese employed
decreased, because they were found to be ‘lazy’. and refused to be disciplined as coolies,

\textsuperscript{15} Keith Peter Ogborn, “The Development of Nationalist Politics in the Assam Valley. 1929-39”,
\textsuperscript{16} Condition of the People of Assam, File no. 824 R. of 1888, nos.1-4, p.29
and since their presence and existence as a permanent labour supply could not be depended upon other labour was preferred.\textsuperscript{17}

In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis were the largest agrarian community after the Assamese Hindu peasantry. But their lifestyles were very distinct from that of the caste Hindu Assamese being marginalised socially, economically and geographically. Writing about the Kacharis of the Bijni group Mr. Barnes wrote in 1904 that they were the poorest raiyats in the district of Kamrup, the poverty being “less in consequence of their away from good markets than of general ignorance and improvidence”.\textsuperscript{18} The assessment reports of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century clearly demonstrate the colonial ideas about the lives of the tribal communities in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. These reports were of certain groups of villages in each district. They discuss the conditions of the people, access to markets, trade, and the rate of revenue paid and the incidence.

It is very obvious from the colonial land revenue records that lifestyles and conditions of each community varied greatly, even in the plains of Brahmaputra valley. The natural conditions together with social and cultural norms – were explained to be reasons of backwardness and prosperity. Colonialism had its own preferred communities linked with its twin concern of (a.) labour for tea gardens and (b.) development of a peasant community, which would settle the ‘abundant’ land of the province.

The ‘plains tribes’ in the Brahmaputra valley often lived in areas further from the valley in submontane areas. Towards the north of the Brahmaputra in lower Assam, Bijni, Bojali and Baska group of Kamrup had very similar topography, being located in the

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
slopes of the extension of the Bhutan hills. The character of the soil, method of cultivation and population also varied in a similar manner. Likewise the “methods of ordinary cultivation vary with the different peoples inhabiting the area.”19 Since various communities inhabit certain areas, the geography of the areas affected the mode of cultivation.

To the north where the altitude was higher, the population was predominantly Kachari, who cultivated their land with the help of irrigation. And in the south in the lower areas the inhabitants were predominantly Assamese Hindus, whose cultivation of transplanted paddy was dependent on rainfall or overflowing of the streams. Further south were the immigrants from East Bengal who settled near the rivers.20 The north of the Bojali group was similar in many features to the Baska and the Borbhag, where there were “a large proportion of Kachari lands, very largely irrigated by artificial channels called ‘dongs’ but with poor bastis”, and then a belt mainly of good rice land and basti inhabited mainly by Assamese Hindus.21 Similarly the location of different people was visible in the manner it shifted from the fertile areas towards the hills:

“The Nepalis and Kacharis occur in the north, while the non-Kacharis – the Assamese as well as immigrants from East Bengal - are found in the south.... The Kacharis cultivate the low levels with sali; on the higher levels they carry on a fluctuating cultivation of mustard and ahu.”22

Again we find that there is a parallel being drawn that the “similarity in physical features leads on to similarity in agricultural development,” or that methods of ordinary

19 Ibid.
cultivation vary with different peoples inhabiting the area as observed by S. P. Desai in 1927 both in Bojali and Bijni Groups. The cultivation in the Chapaguri mauza in Bojali was similar to the Baska group as they relied on irrigation by streams to cultivate paddy.

The general impression of the Kachari village conditions was that they were often economically and situationally worse compared to the caste Hindu villages. Their own mobility and the progressive pushing back of some of these groups by other communities like the caste Hindu peasantry and by the immigrant peasantry from their former areas may have been the reason. Terrain wise too, the most difficult land to cultivate was tilled by them.

These communities were primarily dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, mostly paddy cultivation of the non-transplanting variety. The general impression is one of poverty, which was probably true for the whole of the province at the turn of the century. But as it is evident from the colonial records, the tribal peasantry fared worst because of the cash economy and the colonial land revenue regime, which led to poverty and indebtedness.

The tribal communities, the Kacharis, the Lalungs, Rabhas, Mikirs, Miris were spread over the Brahmaputra valley. But there were certain areas where the concentration of these communities was high. The Kacharis were concentrated in Goalpara, certain areas of Kamrup and Darrang district. The Mikirs are concentrated in Nowgong, especially in the hill regions and very small areas of Kamrup district. The Miris almost

\[\text{Op. Cit., p.4 and p.5.}\]
exclusively confined to Lakhimpur and Sibsagar. So the discussion focuses on these people and the information available, which are far from sufficient to reconstruct their lives.

It is evident that these communities represented a large component of the peasantry, as mentioned in the report on the condition of the people of Assam that "a large proportion, probably 50% of the peasantry of the Brahmaputra valley belong to aboriginal classes..." \(^{24}\)

**Agrarian Regional Characteristics**

The report of the Charduar Group of Darrang mentions that the general condition of the people on the whole was satisfactory, they being, "peaceful and unenterprising agriculturists," \(^ {25}\) but also noted that the Assamese Hindus were not much indebted to the Marwari Kayas as the ex-coolies and Kacharis. \(^ {26}\) The former and the Kacharis supplemented their income by working in the tea gardens, and therefore were seen not to be badly off. The Koches and the Kacharis of Balipara area supplemented their income by working in the rubber plantations. \(^ {27}\)

Local variations existed. A different picture emerges in the interior areas of Darrang like the Panchnoi, the centre of the mauza was described to be a 'howling waste...' while cultivation was possible around the Dhekiajuli Tea garden, which

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\(^ {24}\) Condition of the People of Assam, File no. 824 R. of 1888, nos.1-4, p.3.


\(^ {26}\) Ibid., p. 1.

\(^ {27}\) Ibid., p.7.
consisted mainly "of a nucleus of indigenous Kachari villages surrounded by colonies of ex-coolies from the Tezpur garden".\(^{28}\)

The case cited above in all probability represented the dominant scenario of tribal villages at the turn of the century. But situations do not alter drastically 20 years after. The Baska group report of the Kamrup district noted that the "non-Kacharis (Hindus and Mohammedans) have decent homesteads stocked with fruit trees, bamboos etc., and go in for a little sugarcane cultivation. The Kachari on the other hand shortens his field season by substituting *Kharma* for *asra, ahu* cultivation."\(^{29}\)

**The Kacharis**

Backwardness was traced to the nature of the people. The Kacharis, it was pre-supposed, were not inclined to invest in "the cultivation of valuable homesteads", since it was not 'his line' and "his pigs would make it a difficult matter anyway" and due of his superstitious nature, the Kacharis thought that the shady trees were harmful.\(^{30}\) Despite irrigation, in the Baska area and the two crops that are grown i.e. transplanted *sali* and *ahu*, the homesteads of these areas were no better than the Kachari homesteads in the south of Baska, which was because of poor soil. Cultivation continued even in the 1920s to be at the mercy of wild animals liable to depredation and life itself was beset with dangers and discomforts – climatic and otherwise.\(^{31}\)


\(^{30}\) Ibid., p.6-7.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p.17
The inhabitants of the Baska group were mostly “Kacharis and kindred people Koches, Chutias, ex-coolies and Nepalis”\textsuperscript{32} hinting at a difference, which signified that they were not like caste Hindus. Their lives were no different from the other Kacharis in the other groups of Darrang or in other parts. They were mentioned even in the Kariapara Duar Report for their known ‘drinking propensities’, which was such that, “paddy was borrowed often from kayas and fellow villagers,”\textsuperscript{33} to brew more rice beer, while the Assamese Hindus did not consume liquor.\textsuperscript{34} The Saranias, Mahalias, Koches and such converts were perceived to be slightly better off because religion forbade them to consume liquor but they too were thriftless and “no different as far as the consumption of opium was concerned.”\textsuperscript{35} A general perception was that most of rural Assam was addicted to opium especially the labouring classes.

It is also evident that tribal villages in other districts were in no better condition than that of Darrang villages. The backwardness of these ‘aboriginal’ people was attributed to the locations they preferred inhabiting, “the general unhealthiness of the area” and the “neglect in the matter of sanitation, education and communication,”\textsuperscript{36} led to the poor conditions. The general standard of life prevailing in this area was lower than that of the rupit mahal, which was inhabited by the Assamese Hindu peasantry.\textsuperscript{37} As mentioned in the report for the Patidarrang group of Kamrup,

\textsuperscript{33} Assessment Report of the Borhag Group, Kamrup District, H. C. Barnes, 1905, p.2
\textsuperscript{34} Assessment Report of the Panchnoi Group, Darrang District, J.W. Mc Swiney, 1909, p.6
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p.6
\textsuperscript{36} Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kamrup District, S.P. Desai, March 1928, p.17.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p.18
"Kuarbaha, Pub-Kachari Mahal and the northern part of Panduri and Patidarrang were similar in most respects to the southern villages of the Baska group. The inhabitants were largely Cacharis, and the villages had, large and generally fertile pathars, divided from each other by strips of jungle grass"\(^{38}\)

and surrounded by thick forest and therefore whatever cultivation happened was often destroyed by wild animals. In these areas, like in the north of Panduri and south of Kaurbaha and north of Pub Kachari Mahal and certain villages in Patidarrang the raiyats were distinctly poor and their villages had a destitute appearance and possessed little productive basti, which was partly also due to kala-azar fever. This area was also not very well connected and therefore trade had not penetrated.\(^{39}\)

The Bijni mauza, which was said to be exclusively peopled by Kacharis was mostly highland in the north with grass jungle and ravines, south of which were the "Kachari villages with their patches of cultivation scattered at wide intervals over a large area, amid grass jungle of varying thickness."\(^{40}\)

Away from this difficult terrain in the southwest from the submontane jungle area, the thickly populated Hindu villages were located.\(^{41}\) The soil of those submontane villages was poor, the river courses unstable tending towards inundation, therefore transplanted rice was out of question and the general look of the bastis was as if they were deserted. The geography of the region was averse to development. It was noted:

"The Kachari villages in Bijni, as elsewhere, are practically destitute of trees and garden crops, except for the castor-oil plant, on which the eri silk worm is reared. ... but every house has a small patch, and the area must be considerable. The

\(^{39}\) Ibid, p.4.
\(^{40}\) Assessment Report of the Bijni Group, Kamrup District, H. C. Barnes, 1905, p. I
\(^{41}\) Assessment of the Bijni Group, Kamrup District, H.C. Barnes, 1904, p.1.
Kacharis assert that they are unable to cultivate sugarcane because of their pigs. 42

North of the group few Kachari villages have irrigated lands, where otherwise no agriculture would have been possible.

Similarly in Kamrup District, in lower Assam, the Bijni area (a collection of mauzas) was peopled almost exclusively by Kacharis; the communication was poor there being only one road, the Kordoiguri road, in the extreme east of the mauza which joined the trunk road at Bhowanipur. 43 In this area of Kamrup, the Hindu peasantry, the Koches and Kalitas were the most numerous of the peasant classes; the Musalmans and the Kacharis are distinctly in the minority. But the Kacharis of the north of this group were better off in comparison of the Baska group, which, probably was inhabited by the poorest raiyats. But in the south of this tract were the inundated villages and on the north a number of Kachari and other villages somewhat disadvantageously placed as regards communication, where the prices obtained by sale of produce were less and where the people were distinctly not prosperous. 44

In the Bojali group of Kamrup District, the bulk of the population was Hindu and Kachari, the concentration of the latter was chiefly in the Chapaguri mauza, which the Hindus considered “an unhealthy and feverish tract.” 45 The condition of the Hindus and the Musalmans of the Bojali Group were considerably better than that of the Kacharis,

42 Ibid., p. 3
43 Assessment Report of the Bijni Group, Kamrup District, 1904, p. 1
44 Assessment Report of the Borbhag Group, Kamrup District, H.C. Barnes, 1905, p. 1, 10
45 Assessment Report of the Bojali Group, Kamrup District, H.C. Barnes, 1903, p. 5
who are usually 'illiterate and backward'. Though there was some improvement, the Kachari villages still had

"basti areas poor in vegetation, and pathars that grow mainly transplanted paddy, kharma and sali. Broadcast ahu, achra or dhulia - is rarely met with, the reason apparently being that the crop ripens at a time when the Kachari wishes to be free attending to his main rupit cultivation." 47

Very little of anything else was cultivated, a little pulse and some mustard and in some areas people were cultivating potatoes. The reason behind the poverty of the Kachari bastis was located in the differences that were there between the Assamese Hindu peasantry and the former, especially the notion of prosperity associated with sedentary, settled wet rice cultivation and the resultant absence of mobility. With such a bias it was stated that "a few Kacharis in whom the migratory inclinations are less strong have reared homesteads containing bamboos, supari palms and other valuable trees... with the help of strong fencing and deep ditches" to keep out the 'damaging pig'. 48 Compared to these areas, the lower level rupit mahals where there was a predominantly Hindu population and therefore plough cultivation, the bastis were richer being stocked with valuable trees. 49

The Mikirs

The Mikirs of Nowgong District, though originally inhabiting the hills, had started shifting towards the plains. In fact colonialism and penetration of cash economy

46 Ibid., p. 9
49 Ibid., p. 8.
and markets brought about great change among the Mikirs (Karbis). In the Nowgong south-eastern group, the submontane villages inhabited by the Mikirs were good at transplanting rice, so transplanted Ahu or Farma or Kharma was cultivated here more than in any other district. Despite relatively better cultivation that there was poverty as it was still ‘an unhealthy and jungly tract’; and in the epidemics of Kala-azar Sahari and Jamunamukh mauzas were greatest sufferers in terms of loss of manpower. Official opinion held the caste and racial constitution of the people responsible, since they were “an unhealthy one and many of the inhabitants, belonging as they do to animistic tribes and lower Hindu castes, seem little able to offer resistance to epidemics”. Cultivation was not easy because, “wild animals used to do considerable damage to the crops” and such being the condition bastis were generally poor and little profit could be derived from them. But gradually the Mikirs were giving up rice cultivation in favour of lac cultivation, since once harvested there was ready cash from lac to pay the revenue and also buy opium. It resulted in a shortage of paddy and the Mikirs had to buy rice from the local kayas or merchants. The revenue officials expressed concern about this trend, as it is evident from the report of the Kapili group where A. R. Edwards observes,

“though the people were generally poor, in the recent years the hill Mikirs of Rangkhang have made considerable sums of money. This appears to have demoralised them; they seem to have spent their surplus earnings on opium and other luxuries and are apparently feeling the effects of a short lac crop with low prices combined with scarcity of rice”.

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50 Assessment Report of the South Eastern Group, Nowgong District, A. R. Edwards. 1908, p. 1
51 Ibid., p. 4
52 Ibid., p.8
The Kapili group consisted of 3 mauzas, which were mostly hilly and most inhabitants paid house tax. They did not practice wet rice cultivation but like most hill dwelling people, “the Mikirs of the hills make clearings in which in which they grow paddy, cotton, til etc., mixed together. Many of them especially in the Rangkhang mauza, also cultivate lac”\(^54\). In the submontane, hilly areas of Nowgong, land was divided into 3 classes according to the proximity to the hills, nature of revenue and the composition of the people. In the North Eastern group, the categories were slightly different – the largely immune, the flooded and the submontane. Though some submontane areas were fertile rupit land, it was usually good for winter rice and nothing else.\(^55\) And these villages belonged to 3\(^{rd}\) category and inhabited by mainly ex-coolies, Lalungs, Mikirs and Hindus of lower castes demonstrating the disparity in the settlement processes of territories.

In the first kind of villages the ‘majority of the inhabitants were Hindus of better castes such Kalitas and Keots’ and they had the advantage of fairly certain rice crop, access to land suitable land for mustard and pulse cultivation, and were frequently able to grow basti produce for sale and sometimes did sugarcane cultivation.\(^56\) Because of the fertile soil the ‘only advantage’ was the generally ‘good rice crop’ but to achieve that was also not easy because they had to contend against ‘wild animals and more or less unhealthy climate’. The 3\(^{rd}\) class of villages were in contrast dependent on its rice crop, which was at a ‘serious disadvantage’, and subsistence derived from rice had to be frequently supplemented by income from other occupations.\(^57\) Therefore, the first category villages and its caste Hindu population were advantageously located and more

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., p.2.


\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 9.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p.9.
prosperous than the others. As mentioned in the report of the Chapari group, of Nowgong district prosperity was not dependent on economic conditions alone, but appeared “to be partly a question of locational situation and partly one of caste”. Therefore, some of the better villages of Dhing mauza, which had a concentration of middle and upper caste Hindu population had ‘the air of comparative prosperity’ not to be seen in the other parts, which were inhabited by lower Hindu castes or animistic races. Similarly in the Central group of Nowgong, “The inhabitants of Nijsahar (excepting) the villages north of Kallang, Pakhimoria, and Singiapotani, in which mauzas there is a preponderance of Hindus of better castes,” were grouped as whole, were probably the most prosperous people in the district. The inhabitants of the other two mauzas Jagial and Kandali were largely ex-coolies and Lalungs, mainly rice growers though the crops were ‘precarious’ and had to supplement their earnings through other means. These communities suffered from the ‘usual disadvantages’ of people of their class in more or less submontane regions especially when their crops were liable to damaged by wild animals.

The Miris

Another tribe, the Miris, whose concentration was mainly in the Lakhimpur District, and in lesser numbers in Sibsagar, near the banks of Brahmaputra and its upper tributaries also displayed great disparity. North Lakhimpur was considered to be a backward tract or ‘not so progressive’ as it was ‘unhealthy and communication was defective too’. The mouzahdars appointed to collect revenue, found it inconvenient or

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59 Ibid.
60 Assessment of the Central Group, Nowgong District, 1908, p. 8.
61 Ibid.
perhaps difficult to measure the land under cultivation with Miris, "owing to their being
situated so far from other cultivation, and in spots surrounded by jungle."63 Especially
areas where there were 'hardly any Assamese' like Narainpur mauza the majority of
people being Khamptis, Deoris, Daflas and Miris, were classified as 'not prosperous',
owing to these communities' 'improvident habits' being 'greatly addicted to opium and
laopani'.64 The only people who were prosperous were the ex-coolies, because the
Assamese who lived there were of a "rather low class, mostly Ahoms, Chutiyas and
Cacharis"65, who were 'either too proud or too lazy' to carry their produce to the hat, and
consequently had to dispose it of to the kayas or merchants at much lower prices, than
those realised by the ex-coolies who carried it to the market.66 Neither was the Naobaicha
mauza very prosperous with about 300 families of ex-coolies only and the rest were
Ahoms and Chutiyas peasantry with a number of Miris in the non-cadastral tract. Even in
the Tinsukia group of Lakhimpur District, many mouzas like Buridehing and
Ujanakhankhola were not suitably located, the earlier being jungly and the crops were
subjected to destruction by wild animals and the latter being a high land suitable only for
tea and ahu cultivation.67

Despite such difficult conditions there was an increase in the village population in
the Lakhimpur group, especially due to a heavy immigration of Miris in the last few years
and their numbers in the 1911 census was returned at nearly 7000.68

63 Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce Proceedings, GOI, November, 1877.
65 Ibid., p. 6
66 Ibid.
68 Letter no. 416-209. Assessment Report of the Ranganadi Group, Lakhimpur District, S. N. Mackenzie,
p.4
East Bengal Immigrants

Changes were also greatly visible in certain areas where communication penetrated and where immigrant peasant communities had settled to cultivate. In fact the agrarian scenario in rural Assam changed drastically after the influx of East Bengal peasants. The north of Darrang, the Kachari Duars was earlier a wild waste excepting for few villages inhabited by the Kacharis and Chutiyas which was considered to be largely unculturable, the colonial government's motive of agricultural expansion was fulfilled with the advent of the Mymensing immigrants and they being land hungry and hard working had transformed the area into flourishing agricultural colonies.69

But though the condition of the land transfers, the situation of the Kacharis does not radically alter. Even twenty years later it was reported, "The Kachari bastis are generally bare except for a few clumps of bamboo and areca-nut trees here and there. In fact owing to their habit of rearing pigs, it is hardly possible for them to grow permanent crops."70 The Kacharis still grew one crop, i.e. paddy and seldom grew winter crops. But the paddy harvest was plenty on account of the irrigation, which was generally practiced in the submontane areas on the Darrang district.71

Compared to them the Assamese Hindus were relatively advanced middle class people being "thrifty, industrious and enterprising" and they occupied the best land, 'rich bastis and fertile rupit land."72 The Kacharis and people of other allied groups did not inhabit such areas but are mainly concentrated in the northern submontane tracts in

70 Ibid, p. 29-30.
72 Ibid., p.28.
Mangaldai in the Darrang district. These people did not receive the benefits of whatever positive changes were taking place, still being “simple and hardy people who have not yet been able to advance far from their primitive state” as seen by the colonial state. Agricultural progress was ascribed to people socially and culturally different from these communities or ones who had abandoned their ‘primitive ways’.

“The semi hinduised sections viz., Saranias, Mahalias and Madahis and other Christian converts who have given up laopani and do not rear pigs are generally better off than their Kachari brethren. Their bastis are comparatively superior and their standard of living distinctly higher” observed a revenue official.

Tracing and Taxing the Tribal Peasant: Debates about fluctuating Cultivation

Tribal society, economy and shifting cultivation or jhum attracted ethnographic and administrative interest, creating an uneasy dichotomy of caste and settled cultivation or plains and sedentary agriculture and hills and shifting cultivation. This would be an issue that the colonial revenue officials would grapple for a long time with respect to revenue assessment. Privileging the tribe in the plains, because of their relatively more backward situation would result in confusion among caste Hindus following similar practices.

The fluctuating nature of cultivation in Assam caused great concern since the early days of the revenue administration. The term fluctuating cultivation has wider connotation, in colonial revenue sense but more or less “cultivation,” which ‘seemed to fluctuate in space from year to year’ was designated as ‘fluctuating cultivation.’ This

73 Ibid., p.29.
74 Ibid., pp.29-30.
75 Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of Kamrup District, S.P. Desai, 1928, p.8
was the traditional method of cultivating, where land was taken up by the villagers, cultivated for 3 or 4 years and given up once the yields diminished. Fluctuating cultivation mainly took place in the *chapori*\textsuperscript{76} areas, which was based on making the optimum use of land after the deposition of silt and also in the submontane areas where it was not possible to have wet rice cultivation. This process was again repeated in another area. Cultivation in the submontane belt continued to be “partly established” or permanent and “partly fluctuating”, only rupit land in the lower levels, were not relinquished. The nature of the land was a determinate factor in the mode of cultivation among other social and economic factors.

As claimed by many, agriculture was backward and the remnants of tribalism existed, which led to an obvious absence of homogeneity. Broadly classified, there were two types of peasant cultivation—permanent and fluctuating. The nature of cultivation was permanent on both *rupit* (wet transplanted rice fields) and on *basti* (homestead)/*Bari* (garden) lands. Fluctuating or shifting cultivation was carried on in flood prone and submontane jungly grasslands known as *faringati*\textsuperscript{77} land for growing early maturing rice (ahu) mustard seed and pulses.

The pattern was very similar to the cultivation of land in the chaporis, like mustard was cultivated for 2 or 3 years and then the peasant shifted to another plot. But socio cultural beliefs also prompted people to shift,

“homesteads in the area occupied by backward people...liable to be shifted on a mere suspicion that a site was getting unhealthy -- a suspicion...generally aroused not only by

\textsuperscript{76} Riverine land that is annually submerged or, on the main land High land intervening between holas

\textsuperscript{77} Land too high for transplanted rice.
deaths in the family but also by too much shade in the homestead or by other houses springing up too close.”

Backwardness was traced to this behaviour, because of the, “migratory instinct and the damage done by the domestic pigs the homesteads” were poor in vegetation except where the trouble was taken to dig ditches and built fences to keep out pigs from the basti areas. The abundance of land and the rate of relinquishments, especially among the Kacharis, Lalung, Miris and Mikirs still were an object of worried speculation for the revenue officials. Still around 1904 a large area was annually relinquished in Bijni mauza and adjacent areas like few villages in Damkachakabausni by the Kacharis. It consisted of almost entirely of high land, where arhu and mustard were raised. Rupit land was seldom thrown up even in the submontane areas by the Kacharis though Faringati often was.

Even in Kamrup, in the Bojali group, the percentage of relinquishment varied and the percentage of the total settled area varied from 1.3 to 10.1 from 1898 to 1902. People relinquished land for various reasons besides the obvious natural ones. Relinquishments were due to inability to understand the functioning of the new rules,

“In the Cachari country it is customary to file a relinquishment petition in cases when mutation is required, the land never in fact being thrown up. The transferee being subsequently found in possession gets settlement at the next annual settlement. The Cacharis do this because it is less trouble to them to file a petition of relinquishment than to apply for mutation and produce evidence of transfer or succession. They adopt a similar course also in cases where partition is required. Others relinquished land from year to year without ever resigning possession and therefore obtain a new settlement each year. They did this in fear that in some

79 Ibid.
80 Assessment Report of the Bojali Group, Kamrup District, H. C. Barnes, 1903, p. 3.
year they may be unable to till the land, in which case they would escape settlement of the unoccupied area and the consequent obligation to pay the revenue. This was an old habit, which is dropping out of fashion in highly populated tracts.\textsuperscript{81}

Colonial perception of the Kacharis was necessarily that of a ‘wilder’ community and therefore ‘uncivilized’ compared to the caste Hindus. But there was also an official conviction that if the pressure on land increased due to other peasant communities, the tribal groups would also desist from practising fluctuating cultivation.

In sparsely occupied districts like Lakhimpur, especially backward mauzas like Narainpur percentage of relinquishment was high, due to the fact that people were new settlers, ‘foreigners’, Khamtis, Deoris, Daflas and Miris.\textsuperscript{82} Similarly Buridehing mauza in Tinsukia relinquishment was high because it was a largely a jungly mauza, where most of the crops cultivated were destroyed by wild animals\textsuperscript{83} and people shifted in search of better areas.

Colonial revenue perception also noticed that, “unlike the Kachari, the Hindu and Musalman of Central and South Kamrup are remarkably tenacious of their paternal fields…”\textsuperscript{84} and subsequently prosperous. In contrast Kacharis were depicted as ‘children of wild nature.\textsuperscript{85}

As mentioned in the Baska group report of Kamrup one interesting fact about the area was that it was ‘predominantly inhabited and cultivated by Kacharis’ the main features of whose cultivation was “the poverty of their bastis in general owing to the migratory habits of that race, which prevent them staying long enough on one site to

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Assessment Report of the Rangamati Group, Lakhimpur District, 1912, p. 6
\textsuperscript{83} Assessment Report of the Tinsukia Group, Lakhimpur, S. N. Macckenzie, 1913
\textsuperscript{84} Assessment Report of the Borbhat Group, H. C. Barnes, 1905, p.1
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 7

36
grow fruit trees". There were of course other socio-cultural reasons of the mobility that went against the logic of optimum use of land. Shifting of village sites also took place for different reasons, like "an untimely death is construed as a warning that a change in the residential site is overdue and it is by no means unusual to find a whole hamlet removing to a fresh open site after a few deaths in the village". But the percentage of relinquishment was becoming lower in areas where migratory people like the Kacharis lived. The average annual relinquishment amounted to about 2% of the total khiraj area i.e. about 3500 bighas of ordinary cultivation in the Darrang district. The Kachari habit of relinquishing pattas was also gradually diminishing. But there was confusion about the complicated processes in the revenue offices. They relinquished, "whole pattas when they mean to relinquish only a few of the daags or wish to get mutation without going through the prescribed mutation procedure, the relinquishments pure and simple would sink to a lower figure". Even in Bijni mauza it was noticed that, as in the other Kachari areas, the figures of relinquishment did not reflect reality and often such lands were not really relinquished. As in the Baska group the difficulty the Kacharis had in understanding the complex procedures of relinquishment and mutation resulted in official confusion and it was understood as a habit that was 'diminishing rapidly under the stress of various factors but is still far from the vanishing point'. In the Chapaguri mauza of the Bojali group, where the Kacharis were in majority, the relinquishments were noticeable, as in other areas, they were in fact not given up totally but only in parts, which was due to confusion regarding mutation. It was acknowledged in the official

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., p.8
90 Ibid.
report that such a case was also due to “their present state of illiteracy and ignorance of legal procedure” and their area’s “distance from the circle’s head quarters or from the mauzadar’s annual round of duties.”

The nature of fluctuating cultivation was also changing in the twentieth century. Because of the pressure on land the habit of shifting was becoming infrequent, however persisted in certain interior areas and people continued their ‘old habit of shifting their bastis from time to time.” So relinquishment was still practiced by the Kacharis in the submontane tracts where plenty of wasteland was still available and by the Mikirs (Karbis). In the submontane areas of Kamrup district, where cultivation was largely fluctuating and not permanent type, the relinquished areas were ‘appreciably large’ even late as the 1920s.

Yet, in the Chapari (riverine areas) too, the character of cultivation still continued to be fluctuating, but to a lesser degree than in the earlier period. “In these areas, lands used to be formerly to be given up after have been cultivated for 3 or 4 consecutive years when they began to deteriorate and overgrown…” but with increasing pressure on land especially in the chapari areas colonised by the immigrants the practice of relinquishment was resorted to a much less extent. But in the same chapari areas the Miris retained their old habit of giving up their lands periodically and relinquishment in the Miri areas continued, especially, since there was no competition for land yet. Both the communities (the Assamese and the Miris) were unable to ‘get over their old idea that these chapari lands become unfit for cultivation after they have been used for 3 or 4 consecutive years

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93 Ibid. p.18
at a time.\textsuperscript{96} But compared to the submontane areas, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, the chaporis where the Assamese and Miris still practice fluctuating cultivation more or less extensively, relinquished areas were larger.\textsuperscript{97}

But compared to the earlier resettlement, i.e., 1904-05, the area relinquished, on the whole, had come down drastically, which was because of presence of the other peasants "settling down of Bengal immigrants and growing scarcity of land", and the colonial officers hoped that if this trend continued the system of shifting of land would be halted altogether.\textsuperscript{98}

In the 1920s migrations also took place because of over-crowding in certain areas by the newly arrived peasants and expansion by the Assamese Hindu peasantry. So, "among the immigrating cultivators one notices Kacharis who left their old homes in Barbhag and Bajali group owing to over crowding or increasing pressure of non-Kacharis or the desire to have a free and independent life..."\textsuperscript{99} Thus mobility of the communities and their tendency to shift their home and fields continued albeit due to other pressures.

**Condition of the People: Debt and Drinking**

There was a vicious cycle of debt and advance in the tribal villages. By 1840 revenue collection was fully monetized because of colonial policies and perspectives ... there was restructuring of the revenue system, which put the peasantry under severe strain.\textsuperscript{100} The involvement of the peasant with the cash economy was minimal, being

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., p.18.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} A. Guha, Medieval and Early Assam: Society, Polity and Economy, 1991. Calcutta, p.221
restricted to the payment of revenue. Since cash was difficult to obtain, the peasant to meet the cash revenue demand had to sell a part of his rice crop or grow mustard or cash crop specifically for that purpose.\textsuperscript{101} But the overwhelmingly subsistence oriented economy persisted, and therefore, other sources of cash like working in the tea gardens came into existence. As land revenue demand came in two instalments - one in October and another in January when the crops were still standing in the fields, it caused severe problems. Because of the revenue demands in cash did not correspond with harvesting the peasants had to take advance from the local moneylenders, the marwari kayas and sometimes from the small Assamese traders. As the Bijni report states,

\begin{quote}
"the revenue was formerly due before the raiyats could realize on their sali and mustard crops, these traders advanced money on interest on special conditions, and the poorer cultivator was more or less in their hands."\textsuperscript{102} But such indebtedness mostly due to the colonial state's ever increasing revenue demands.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

The Kacharis, who were described by Mr. Barnes, Settlement Officer, as the poorest raiyats in Kamrup, for whom "improvidence continues to be the curse..."\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, there was an increasing dependence on moneylenders and businessmen who had been

\begin{quote}
"extending their operations there. Though the rate of interest is very high namely, 7½ maunds of paddy per year for a loan of Rs.20 the ease with which loans can be obtained
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. and Keith Peter Ogborn, p. 22
\textsuperscript{102} Assessment Report of Bijni Group. Kamrup District. H. C. Barnes, 1904, p.4
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} The cycles of revenue demand in an increasingly monetised economy and the time of the harvest often did not correspond.
constitutes a snare to which the improvident and short sighted Kachari and those of them that have fallen into it have been ruined by the rate of interest.”

Since cash advanced was claimed in kind, there used to be irregularities and exploitations in the system of claiming over and above the interest on the loaned money, the trader attempted to profit by manipulation. This was evident in the circumstances where in addition to the interest on the money lent, the traders make a profit by using measures (dons) of sizes varying always, though in different degrees, in their favour: “moreover, the borrower of an advance was bound by the terms to deal only with his creditor, when disposing his produce.”

Such a trend continued till much later in villages, exploitation of the peasants by false weights, the Kayas used, “bigger dons while purchasing paddy from simple people like the Kacharis and ex-coolies, specially from those to whom paddy or money” was advanced. Lifestyle of the peasantry was inevitably seen as a major handicap for progress, drinking and indebtedness were perceived connected in the lives of these people in a vicious circle, because being “a slave to his intemperate habits” they fell ‘prey to ...improvidence and ignorance’. The rice harvested to brew rice beer, that was, in the colonial perception, a waste, which the Kacharis consumed throughout especially after a new harvest, and this was the moment chosen by the “paikars, potters, fishermen and others”... to deal with them “after sense of plenty...superseded the memory of want in the mind of the Kacharis.” They were cheated by false weights.

106 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
The condition of the peasant also did not improve because of his 'ignorance'. According to the colonial government the agriculture of these communities was primitive. As in the case of the Bijni raiyats, "The extension of cultivation is apparently checked by the want of money to purchase cattle. Nothing has been distributed in Bijni mauza in the form of agricultural loans in the last two years, and so far as my observations extend, the fact that such loans can be obtained is not generally known among the Kacharis. They have nothing to offer in way of security as individuals; but money might be advanced with little risk on the joint personal security of the inhabitants of a village."110

The colonial revenue officials located the root cause of this advance and indebtedness system in the excessive drinking habit of the tribes compounded and aggravated by their generally poor condition.

Advances on paddy was often associated as in the case of the Kacharis and the Lalungs with regular drinking, because they used to brew their liquor from rice and therefore exhausted the paddy from their own fields before the next harvest. This was a problem in most of the areas, the ex-coolies and the Lalungs were largely addicted to the use of liquor, the former usually getting their supplies from shops and the latter manufacturing it themselves, while the Mikirs and the Hindus consume a great deal of opium'.111 But the use of opium was rationalised, because the colonial understanding was that it was needed in unhealthy locales like in the submontane regions as a palliative. Therefore in the 3rd class of villages which were inhabited by the Mikirs and the Lalungs,

110 Assessment Report of the Bijni Group, Kamrup District, H. C. Barnes, 1904, p.3.
there were instances of advances on paddy. A. R. Edwards, the Settlement Officer for Nowgong District around 1904-05 records in the report of the North Eastern group, “I am told that the Assamese rarely take advances on paddy whereas the ex-coolies and Mikirs frequently do” and Assamese if at all necessary on mustard and pulses.112

As the economy became more cash dependent the advancing system became more exploitative and penetrated remoter areas. As cash and cash crops like jute and mustard became more important, the nexus of traders and cash advancing became more tenacious and rooted. Even in Chaporoi areas where mustard was grown as a fluctuating crop by the Miris, their poverty and other disadvantages put them totally in control of the ‘Sualkuchi traders who came up the Brahmaputra by boats’, who often used to “advance money or supply necessaries on credit to the Miris on the stipulation of their crops.”113

The use of foreign cloths increased at that time and a large number was sold in the shops and the hats and hand woven traditional cloths like eri and mooga were sold to lesser extent and their use fell.114

Everywhere the habit of drinking of these people was associated with poverty and indebtedness. The Kacharis and Rabhas of the Charduar group used to “resemble those of the Kariapara duar, especially with regard to their condition of life and drinking propensities”.115 Because they used their paddy to brew liquor, paddy was borrowed often from Kayas and fellow villagers when stock ran down and had to be repaid with 50% interest, that is, 1½ to 2 dholes had to be returned after the winter harvest for each one

112 Ibid., p.9.
113 Final report on the Land Revenue Resettlement of the Darrang District, 1927-33, p.22
114 Ibid., p.10.
borrowed. They also borrow money and work as 'bhoronias' under their creditors, getting their meals free, they work for 6 to 7 months for advances of Rs.20 to 25'.\textsuperscript{116}

Trade too necessarily was not a manifestation of surplus produce. The fact that paddy and rice were sold throughout the Central group of Nowgong district, especially in Kandali which had a concentration of Mikir, Lalungs and ex-coolies, who were in debt and traders did "considerable sale on advances chiefly by Mikirs, Lalungs, Kacharis and ex-coolies".\textsuperscript{117} That the Assamese Hindus and Musalmans rarely sold on advances was also probably over generalised, because not all caste Hindu peasant were prosperous.

The Kacharis rarely borrowed money, i.e. cash, which was anyways in short circulation in the rural areas. But advances of paddy were quite frequent in hard times, which were usually taken from their well-to-do neighbours. They repaid after the harvest with an extra quantity by the way of interest. If they failed to pay up the advances in any case they generally cleared their debt by rendering personal service to the creditors for a limited period. Generally they were thought to be still living within a subsistence economy, with 'few wants', 'seldom spending on luxuries', 'never living beyond their means', living on the whole as supposed by the colonial authorities 'a contended life'.\textsuperscript{118}

Through the 19th century to the early years of the 20th century they still had little surplus and even lesser cash to spare. So in cases, which called for sudden 'substantial expenditure' like marriage or purchasing plough cattle, the only recourse was the moneylender.\textsuperscript{119} Marriage customs of the 'backward tribes' like the paying of 'bride

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p.6.
\textsuperscript{117} Assessment Report of Central Group, Nowgong District, A. R. Edwards, 1908, p.8.
price’, which was usually ‘about 80 to 100 rupees in amount’ also gave rise to indebtedness. As a result “cultivators of the poorer class meet such expenses by taking advances and working off the sums by keeping members of their families as bandhas.”

Since loans were easily available, moneylending thrived on poor peasants, when the season of plenty was over, or when cash expenditure was to be incurred on a bride, plough cattle and other such purposes the Kachari took recourse to loans of the nearest Barpeta shopkeeper or to the tea gardens in upper Assam for labour. The usual rate of interest charged by the shopkeeper was 5 maunds of paddy per year on a loan of Rs.20.

The typical stereotype was:

“The Cachari villages of the remoter parts of Bijni are, in my opinion, the poorest raiyats in Kamrup; they are far from any market and have to carry their produce long distance to sell, unless they dispose of it to the village shopkeeper, whose prices are not profitable: they labour under the disadvantage of having practically no roads and at the same time hardly a single river navigable in its upper reaches in the cold weather. Many grow little more rice than is sufficient for their own maintenance: most of the surplus is turned into liquor, of which they consume inordinate quantities. Their chief source of income are labour on tea gardens, to which numbers of men go every year, sale of eri cloth, and mustard crop.”

As stated in the Charduar report also though the conditions were generally satisfactory, the raiyats were unenterprising and expenses high, “marriages are expensive and cost rarely less than Rs.100, except among the Kachari population. Charduar was mostly peopled by 3 classes viz., Assamese, Hindus, Kacharis and ex-coolies settlers. The poverty and backwardness was due to the fact that “tea gardens were opened up while the indigenous inhabitants were sunk primitive ease and ignorance, from which it

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120 Ibid., and ‘Bandha’ means Bondsman.
121 Ibid.
will take them long tome to awaken thoroughly..." The conditions of the Kacharis and Rabhas were similar everywhere- impoverished and unable to survive on the produce of the land and known for their weakness for liquor, especially rice beer. Therefore the growth of the industry did not have any positive impact on the local rural people. Since a great proportion of the paddy harvested was utilised for brewing rice beer, they often had to borrow paddy from the kayas for daily consumption. "The Saranias, Mahalias and Koches are generally better off owing to their abstinence from liquor, but they are no different in their consumption of opium." In addition to the consumption of Madh by the Cacharies and kindred people, opium is eaten and in places smoked. Marriages cost between Rs.100 to Rs.120.

In the Central Group of Nowgong the Lalungs were depicted to have been addicted to liquor and opium despite their poor crops and poverty, especially in Kandali and Jagial mauza. Nijsahar, Pakhimoria and Singiapotoni, which were largely peopled by Hindus of better class or caste, the consumption and expenditure on opium was exceedingly small. People were generally not addicted to opium and "liquor of was not drunk by the Assamese Hindus and Mussalmans" and hence they were prosperous.

Conditions did not change radically for these communities at the turn of the century. In fact situations worsened as mentioned in the Baska report of 1926 there was "hardly any change in the improvident habits of the Kacharis who form a considerable portion of the population and most people are without cash". Of course when speaking

124 Ibid., p.6.
125 Ibid.
of the Kacharis were included the 'Hinduised Kacharis like the Modahis and Totlas and Saranias. Barnes as described the ordinary Kachari "simple, illiterate and peaceable; fond of rice beer and a believer in incantations as more potent than European medicine...who saved money to pay the price of hid bride but was otherwise improvident. The opium habit of the Kacharis escaped mention in that report, which was by no means negligible as was evident in the treatment of Kalaazar that the Kachari was "not so obtuse as not to see the benefit of medicines." 128 According to the 1926 report barring these changes the picture of representing the Kachari does not change even after 20 years. The quantity of paddy consumed in preparing rice beer was substantial amounting to 1/3rd or 1/2 of the total crop; further, he is often done down by the paikars using false weights and measurements on account of his simplicity or the influence of drink or opium. The Sarania, on the other hand, was "generally better off than the Kachari; abstinence from liquor left him a larger proportion of rice for sale and possibly induced more industrious habits; he was more "'civilized' but less interesting person with less knowledge of the jungle and the habits of wild animals." 129 Change of religion/lifestyle did bring about 'civilisation' and progress to certain sections: "Hinduised sections are still addicted to opium but the Christian converts have practically given up the habit. Education besides is making steady progress among the Christians, thanks to the efforts of the Missionaries who have started several schools in the areas inhabited by them." 130

128 Ibid., p.12.
129 Ibid.
Revenue Assessment and Conflicts

The land revenue increased manifold throughout the 20th century, and at different junctures the imposition of new taxes and increase in the old ones led to protest by the peasants, in organised form by the raiyat collectives, *mels* and in an unorganised manner too. The first radical change introduced by the colonial state was the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1860, which led to violent protest in Nowgong by the Lalungs.

There was a hundred percent increase in the land revenue in 1867-68 and again after the Cadastral Survey Operations there was crucial restructuring of the land gradation and consequently the land revenue. 1894 again saw a series of protests against the tax increase, which challenged the colonial authority. Revenue history of Assam consists of gradual taxing of every resource, which led to growing dissatisfaction.

Since the region was not uniform in its resources and homogenous in its social composition the taxation structure also evolved without any uniformity and gave rise to many debates. One long standing complex debate revolved around the issue or problem of taxing the caste Hindus and the Tribal communities. The earlier sections have clearly shown that these communities were relatively disadvantaged and marginalized compared to the Assamese caste Hindu peasantry. For example, Faringati, the land mostly cultivated by the tribal people was earlier not taxed.

The colonial state evolved a complex pattern of revenue system given the fluidity of the communities and absence of homogeneity. But the primary revenue concerns were to create some uniformity and discipline in the taxation structure and was also aimed towards extending agriculture and maintaining differences. The revenue officers of
Assam, especially dealing with communities, which practised shifting cultivation, believed that lower revenue rates would encourage people to settle down and give up their mobility.\(^\text{131}\)

But towards the beginning of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century the pressure on land increased and the varied system of collection was giving rise to complication, which led to concerted effort towards uniformity.

Land revenue was not the only primary tax that was collected in the Brahmaputra valley; certain communities were assessed according to different principles. Tribes that were thought to be backward and mobile were not subject to land revenue; the Mikirs paid a house tax and the Miris poll tax. The over-riding administrative concern with such communities was to bring them to practice settled cultivation and curb their mobility; therefore such incentives as house tax and poll tax were offered. Also the colonial understanding was that these communities were socially and culturally different from the caste Hindu peasantry hence the differences in the assessment system. But towards the end of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century the colonial revenue officials attempted to create uniformity in the method of assessment that resulted in a debate on the peculiarities of each communities and how far such differences should be maintained.

Since the early years, when the British were trying to work out working revenue system, dealing with different communities with varied means of cultivation proved to be a problem in the evolving of a homogenised system of revenue.

As in the case of the Miris it was decided by the colonial revenue officers to impose regular land revenue because, "the case merely being that when a Miri gives up his Miri habits and becomes an ordinary ryot, he is treated as such"\textsuperscript{132}.

The problem of uniformity was not easily resolved also because the dividing line or the boundary between caste, race and the production practices was not clear either. This is evident in the complaint made by the certain sections of the Hindu ryots of Majuli region on not being allowed to jhum. Earlier orders had permitted the Miris and the Deoris to cultivate by jhum. The Hindu cultivators, (eg, Koches, Kalitas and others) as “distinguished from the Miris”\textsuperscript{133} were not subject to the same rules and concession made to the other community. Unlike the caste Hindu peasantry the timber felling by the Miris and the Deoris for the purpose of cultivation was to be permitted, provided it was not used commercially, either its sale as firewood or making boats and other uses were prohibited.\textsuperscript{134}

As in the question of practice of jhum, the issue of making of boats and dugouts from trees without paying royalty was also debated. One group was of the opinion that difference in policy was to be maintained because there was no rationale in extending the permission to caste Hindus who were “in the habit of pursuing a less wasteful method of cultivation”.\textsuperscript{135} The case of the Miris was justified because it was the only form of

\textsuperscript{132} Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce Proceedings, November, 1877, Col. R. H. Keatings on the System of Assessing the Miris, p. 3
\textsuperscript{133} Home/Forests (B), March, 1885, Nos. 86-92, p.2.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., Letter from A. C. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to Ratneswar Mouzahdar, dt. 10\textsuperscript{th} March, 1883
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., Letter to Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, from C. J. Lyall, Official Communication, 19\textsuperscript{th} April, 1884
cultivation they were "capable of". 136 Along with such colonial ideas, it was also assumed that there should be continuation of the customs without altering it much and hence capitation tax was imposed in lieu of a regular land tax. 137 Another argument in favour of Miris and Deoris was that unlike the caste Hindus, their cultivation was "almost exclusively with the das and the hoe", while the latter customarily ploughed the fields, and the Hindus jhummed the Chapari areas and other wise had permanent cultivation. 138

But some officials felt that given the condition of the area, non-availability of good rupit land, and the reality that the Hindus do jhum to some extent, especially crops like cotton, mustard, the concession to cut unreserved trees without paying royalty or to make dugouts, the concession enjoyed by the Miris should be extended to the caste Hindu peasants also. 139

The complexity of caste mobility also twisted the problem of deciding, how caste and tribe should be taxed. J. D. Anderson, an ethnographer, and District Commissioner Sibsagar, wrote, "Jhumming is a mode of cultivation incident to the locality and not to any particular caste or race of people. Many of the so-called Hindus, again, are men of aboriginal origin and differ but little from their Miri and Deori neighbours in their ways of life and their thought". 140 Likewise in the case of the Miris, who cultivated rice as well as cold weather crop on the same land, were, assessed for both land revenue and the Rs. 3 poll tax on the head of every adult male. Some Miris were paid the land revenue in

136 Ibid.
137 Revenue, Agriculture and commerce Proceedings, November, 1877, p. 4
138 Home/Forests (B). March, 1885, Nos. 86-92, 2
139 Ibid.
140 Home/Forests (B)/July, 1885, Nos. 11-12, Exemption of the Hindu ryots of Majuli from the payment of Royalty on trees felled for jhumming.
certain parts of Majuli. This dual system continued till the early decades of the 20th century.

The board of revenue had taken a decision for the Miri villages of the Ranganadi group in the Lakhimpur district that was to ‘suspend the projected assessment of the 12 villages to land revenue’ till further orders from the Deputy Commissioner. The deputy commissioner was in favour of gradually affecting change, so those 12 Miri villages, which formerly paid poll tax continued to do so despite the orders from the board to be brought into the land revenue system.\textsuperscript{141} Since there was a heavy immigration of Miris in the last few years the authorities feared that any harsh measure of assessing revenue would drive them off to the hills again. The method of calculation was very favourable though complicated. The proposed rates was to be equal to the land revenue, “in the 12 Miri villages assessed the rates were so fixed as to produce a land revenue equal for the first 5 years to the existing poll-tax, for the next 5 years to exceed it by 2 annas in a rupee and for the last 10 years to exceed it by 4 annas in a rupee.”\textsuperscript{142} This was proposed to avoid heavy enhancement within a short period. But the colonial officials thought that it was not only a very low assessment but a very unequal one too. They feared that with such favourable rates there would a migration of Assamese people to the Miri areas therefore leading to desertion. The Assamese villages had a unit rate of 0.75 and therefore it was suggested that “it would be advisable either to forbid Assamese immigration into Miri villages, or to fix rates on the scale of a 0.75 unit for non-Miri tenants, as there seems considerable danger, without some such safeguard, of an inrush of Assamese to

\textsuperscript{141} Assessment Report of the Ranganadi Group, Lakhimpur District, S.N. MacKenzie, 1912, p.4
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
take advantage of such favourable rates".\textsuperscript{143} There was another administrative disadvantage, which was that the system required that every year the rates were recalculated to maintain a total revenue equal to the poll-tax, as new land taken up and relinquished would otherwise have caused variation in the total revenue considerably.\textsuperscript{144} Moreover the Miris would never understand why the same piece of land, which paid 6 annas last year, should pay 8 annas this year and 7 annas the next. And it was thought that as cultivation extends especially because of non-Miris it would place the revenue officers in a dilemma as to the assessment method.

The Mikirs of Nowgong and Kamrup were also not subject to land revenue. They paid house tax, which was principled on taxing the number of houses in the villages irrespective of the people there. This was so because the Mikirs practiced jhum or shifting cultivation, hence had no fixed area, which could be taxed.

As clarified by H. Luttman-Johnson, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, the main objective of the ‘assumed’ moderate and flexible taxation as to induce the Mikirs to gradually settle in the plains and shift to plough cultivation from hoe cultivation. He was of the opinion that he was “unwilling to assess any of these people to land revenue if such assessment would drive them back into jhumming habits ... and relapse into their former barbarism”.\textsuperscript{145} There was confusion in the administration about the decision regarding who were the hill people, Lalungs and Hojais living in the same area were assessed for land revenues, where as the Mikirs were sometimes assessed in a

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Revenue and Agriculture, Part B, October, 1892, Nos. 19-23, (Assessment of House and Hoe Tax in Nowgong), p. 1
similar manner and sometimes not. Ethnographic knowledge became crucial to revenue administration and given the fluidity of the social structure decisions were often shaped by the locational variations. Though it was stressed after a period of time, the assessment should change because, 'distinction in assessment' would lead to continuation of the old hoe style of cultivation.  

The complexities of society that confronted the colonial officers reportedly challenged their efforts towards successful collection of revenue and expansion of taxation structure. Like the Miris, the Mikirs were taxed, not on the basis of land, but their identity as mobile backward tribes, they were subjected to the house tax. But the Mikir social and family structure soon became an impediment to effective tax collection. The modern colonial notion of 'house' conflicted with the Mikir notion of 'house', where sometimes 4 to 5 families lived on one chang under one roof. Major Halliday agreed that it was not an easy task to define the term to define the term 'house', a definition that would apply to all the tribes of Assam was 'impossibility'. Therefore, there was an attempt to create a functional definition, which was the basis of the house tax in the Jaintiya and the Naga Hills. The colonial state was caught between the conflicting ideas – of getting the most revenue out of the existing system and efforts not to antagonise the people and dissuade them form migrating. But colonial revenue interest dominated other considerations when they were debating the possibilities of imposing the poll-tax on every adult male. But many officials felt that such a move would have caused panic or

146 Ibid. p. 4

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disturbance among the Mikirs. Yet, there existed an overwhelming concern about the revenue lost during the collection of the house tax due to 'strange' custom. An attempt was made to prove that such communal sharing of a house was not a customary rule but just an effort to evade paying taxes. But, the house tax persisted till much later times because of the colonial state's impression that regular land revenue could not be imposed on the hill dwelling people and the jhumming communities.

All these measures, which differentiated between Hills and Plains, were inherent in the colonial ideas about dealing with the backward 'tribal' communities. Hence the concern that the Lalungs and the Kacharis could not claim the house tax because they "cultivate land by means of cattle, have good rupit fields, and are settled down in the plains".

Areas, which were inhabited by the tribes, still moderately assessed like in the Bijni mauza, which was "intentional, as so many of the Kachari villages are required and have agreed to give special assistance to the general administration."

The stereotyping of the contented, carefree, hard working 'tribal' continued well into the 20s in contrast to the lazy, opium addicted cunning Assamese Hindu peasant. Therefore the revenue reports are full of appreciation of the regular paying of taxes on their part, especially the Kacharis, who "in particular consider the king's dues as the first

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148 Ibid., p. 3
149 Ibid., p.6
150 Ibid.
charge on their crops and pay the revenue by selling mustard and paddy."\textsuperscript{152} It also adds that other communities were not so 'conscientious.'

Revenue assessments were likewise largely differentiated even in the plains on the basis of land quality and the people and their mode of cultivation. In some areas like Paschim Baska, revenue demand for villages was reduced because of 'remoteness' and since most of the inhabitants were Kacharis. In some cases, despite being 1\textsuperscript{st} or 2\textsuperscript{nd} class villages, the revenue assessment was reduced because the inhabitants like Miris and Lalungs were considered to be poor cultivators.\textsuperscript{153} So there existed a very clear understanding of social and economic differentiation which separated the caste Hindu population from the tribal communities in the colonial revenue administration.

Non-Agricultural Occupations: Livelihood and Labour

Circumstantial motives forced people to move towards means of livelihood other than agriculture. Though, as claimed by the colonial reports, the people were considered to be contented or not 'too badly off' as in the case of the Kacharis, there was obviously a growing need for other means of livelihood. Agricultural produce was always not enough for subsistence especially for these communities; especially because revenue demand was in cash, which was short. In fact subsistence was very fragile and dependence on a single crop of rice gradually necessitated seeking other forms of occupation and also led to indebtedness. The presence of tea gardens provided occupation for people, especially, the tribal communities, the Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas and Mikirs did become labourers in

\footnote{\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., p.14}  
\footnote{\textsuperscript{153} Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Assam Valley. by H. Z. Darrah, September, 1888, pp. 104,105,152-53}
the tea gardens. Though most of this labour force was seasonal and they disappeared as the sowing or the harvesting season neared. The Kacharis, often and the ex-coolie settlers generally supplemented their income by working in the tea gardens.\textsuperscript{154} As we see from the colonial records the province of Assam was always a labour scarce place. In the initial years the tea industry faced a lot of problems due to that. As typified by Gunabhiram Barua most people had active “dislike for menial labour” and “would till the land and enjoy independence rather than render service as coolies or labourers.”\textsuperscript{155}

Colonialism did produce certain changes, which gave rise transformations in the way people eked their livelihoods. The Kacharis of Darrang were not badly off despite not being engaged in trade because, they mostly supplemented their income by tea garden work, “apart from the Koches and Kacharis of Balipara who work in the government rubber plantation, the Kacharis of the south of Bargaon ... in the north of Borchola, cut dugouts, which they sell to Kamrupis, who trade on the Brahmaputra; they can make around Rs. 10 per head per month”.\textsuperscript{156}

As we have noted earlier the colonial state with its demand for revenue in cash created indebtedness among the peasantry especially among the tribal communities. Though the colonial records trace the reasons of indebtedness in the ‘propensity for drinking’ among these communities and opium consumption among the caste Hindu Assamese. Such is the condition that, “paddy is borrowed often from the kayas and fellow villages when stock runs down and has to be repaid with 50% interest, that is, 1 \frac{1}{2}

\textsuperscript{154} Assessment Report of the Charduar Group, Darrang District, J.M. McSwiney, 1910, Shillong, p.1
\textsuperscript{155} Condition of the People of Assam, File no. 824R of 1888, nos. 1-4, p.2.
\textsuperscript{156} Assessment Report of the Charduar Group, Darrang District, J. McSwiney. 1910, pp. 7, 10.
to 2 dhols have to be returned after the winter harvest for each one borrowed. The Kacharis also sold their labour and work as ‘bhoronias’ under their creditors, getting their meals free; they work for 6 to 7 months for advances of Rs.20 to 25. The Saranias, Mahalias and Koches were generally better off owing to their abstinence from liquor, but they are no different in their consumption of opium which led to forced labour.”

Likewise, “the inhabitants of Bijni (mostly Kacharis) have various sources of income other than rice cultivation, e.g., labour on tea garden and the rearing of eri silk, mustard seed and Lac insect”. Their chief source of income was labour on tea gardens, to which numbers of men went every year, sale of eri cloth, and mustard crop which they cultivated to pay revenues or debts.”

Although the whole population is dependent on agriculture, “among the Cacharis nearly all the men not required to till the land go annually to upper Assam or Mangaldai to work on tea gardens, the majority returning about October, probably in time to plough for the mustard crop.” The labour supply was dependent on the agricultural cycle, the poverty of the people, and especially on the availability of plough cattle as observed by a colonial revenue official:

“the number of these coolies available in particular year depends largely upon the number of plough cattle in existence; for each pair of bullocks one man generally stays at home, the superfluous men seeking work. Whenever, therefore, cattle diseases are more than usually prevalent, a larger number of coolies is available.”

157 Ibid. p.6
159 Ibid., p.4.
160 Ibid., p.3.
They are usually the poorest raiyats, like the peasants of the Cachari villages in the remotest part of Bijni in Kamrup district.

"Many grew little more rice than is sufficient for their own maintenance: most of the surplus is turned into liquor, of which they consume inordinate quantities. Their chief sources of income are labour on tea gardens, to which numbers of the men go every year, sale of eri cloth, and mustard crop."\(^{161}\)

Even in the Borbhag group of villages,

"part of the surplus population goes to the tea gardens in upper Assam: in 1902, 589 men are reported to have gone. The official figure is probably below the fact: among the better class of raiyats a certain stigma is attached to coolie labour owing to vague fears connecting such work with liability to impressment by government."\(^{162}\)

Consequently, the object of enumeration ordered was probably misunderstood. Often coolies were drawn from all classes of cultivators, who "usually take advances from their headmen or recruiters in December or January, and the money pay the year's revenue and leave shortly after, returning about October. In tea gardens they are frequently termed Cacharis, whatever their caste."\(^{163}\)

In Nowgong district's Southern group, inhabited mostly by 'animistic tribes' like the Lalungs and Mikirs, though the people were dependent on their rice crop and frequently take advances on them they also did petty trading and daily labour.\(^{164}\)

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\(^{161}\) Ibid., p. 4
\(^{162}\) Assessment Report of the Borbhag Group, Kamrup District, H. C. Barnes. 1905, p. 11
\(^{163}\) Ibid. p. 5
\(^{164}\) Assessment Report of the South Eastern Group, Nowgong, 1908, by A. R. Edwards, p. 8
Mikirs also by this time started producing lac, for the market and lac trade was becoming so important that they had stopped cultivating rice. The lac produced by the mikirs was collected by the kayas in the Mikirs hats. Though the method of exchange was mostly like earlier times, barter, they used to bring “down lac, eri cocoons, cotton, canes from the hills” these were exchanged for goods of the plains and articles like mustard and pulse mostly grown outside the group were exported from Chapparmukh. The Mikirs bring down cotton, ‘eri cocoons’, mats etc. and kayas trade with them for rice and other essential things. There was growing prosperity among the Mikirs because “of recent years the hill Mikirs of Rangkhang have made considerable sums of money by growing Lac.” Many of them have abandoned rice for lac cultivation, with the result that they have to purchase rice.” The Mikirs and Lalungs of the North Eastern group of villages of Nowgong were mainly dependent on its rice crops, which was low and income derived from agriculture was frequently supplemented in the case of the ex-coolies and Mikirs by work on tea gardens.

Even in the Chapari mauzas, the animistic races were not so prosperous and dried fish and poultry are sold to some extent by Lalungs, but that was not regular trade but occasional way to earn cash. Furthermore, even in the Central group, especially, villages where the Lalungs and the Mikirs were predominant though the inhabitants mainly grew rice, with “which they supplement their income to a considerable extent by

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165 Ibid.
166 Assessment Report of Kapili Group, Nowgong, 1908 by A. R. Edwards, p.4
167 Ibid. p.6
168 Assessment Report of the North Eastern Group of the Nowgong, 1908, by A. R. Edwards, p.9
work on the neighbouring tea gardens and by reaping crops for the well-to-do holders of *pam* rice land.”  

As regards labour, “with the necessity for so much labour, the exception of the imported tea garden coolie and the Kacharis of Kamrup and Darrang, there is no class of professional labourers in Assam.” Because the “Assamese strongly dislikes to leave his neighbourhood, almost the only class who can be induced to migrate in search of work are the Kacharis. They can be sometimes induced by recruiters to go from lower to upper Assam to work on road or other contract jobs. They get an advance, generally in October, which enables them to pay the revenue that may be due, and then start for the scene of their labour. They usually earn Rs.7 to 10 a month. They generally return, when it is necessary to look after their cultivation, in March or April.” The main occupations, which the tribal peasantry were engaged in, were rearing of silk cocoons, labouring in the tea gardens.

The colonial state always had to contend with the scarcity of labour in the tea gardens, though labour was imported from the Chotanagpur and Telengana region, supplemented by a natural growth among the ex-coolies. The demand for labour persisted and in lower Assam this demand was largely met, at least seasonally, from within the local communities, “Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas, Garos and Mikirs are to be found in gradually increasing numbers of tea gardens. Many of the gardens in Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang import no labour whatever. The few in Kamrup are manned almost

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170 Assessment Report of the Central Group, Nowgong District, A. R. Edwards, 1908, p.8
171 Ibid. p.8
172 Ibid. p.9
entirely by local coolies. So are many in Nowgong. It is chiefly in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur that foreign labour has to be imported.\footnote{Ibid., p. 8}

The pay was often barely enough for subsistence and to stay out of debt. Labour was not the means for earning luxury but often a desperate means of survival. "The pay that an Assamese (Kachari) coolie can earn on a tea garden varies from Rs.7 to Rs.10 (per season), according to whether he does extra work or not. Besides those who have regularly taken to working all the year round on gardens, there are a very large number who work for a few months in order to make up some requisite sum of money. They work generally from the end of the rice planting season in July or August till the harvest begins in November, but those who can arrange to have their crops gathered frequently remain on till the planting season begins again. It is to these that this species of employment affords an additional source of income."\footnote{Ibid., p. 11}

By 1926 things were not very different, the chief subsidiary sources income of the ‘members of backward tribes’, which inhabited the submontane areas of Kamrup being "manufacture of and sale of endi cloth by their women folk and labour on tea garden or other capitalistic concerns by the men folk."\footnote{Report on the Land Revenue Settlement, Kamrup District, S.P. Desai, 1928, p.18} Though the number of people who went to the tea gardens was not so high as before, a fair number of people still had travelled to the gardens of upper Assam for a few months in the year and come back with a certain amount of money. The claim of the colonial government was that there was relative
prosperity and therefore indebtedness had decreased and "the number of Kacharis yearly going to tea gardens is believed to have appreciably gone down." 

The conditions of rural Assam in the late 19th century indicate an increasing marginalisation of tribal communities. As the economy became more commercialised and cash became crucial in transaction these communities came under a lot of strain. Such developments also widened the gulf between different classes and communities. The development of spatial inequalities were crucial to the process of marginalisation, where these communities were constantly pushed back and gradually came to lose control over their natural resources. Colonial land revenue regimes and forest laws pushed these communities to the margins of survival and geographical dislocation led to widening disparities among communities in the Brahmaputra valley.