Chapter - II

Society in Assam: Pre-Colonial Situation and Colonial Transformation

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Background

Before embarking upon the substantive theme of our study, it would be worthwhile to present briefly the background of Assamese society and its history. In order to understand the contemporary society and issues involved therein, it is imperative to look into the relevant past. Therefore, we are also trying to look back first at the past, particularly the nature of society in the pre-colonial Assam, secondly to study the process of transformation of Assam under the colonialism, and lastly to look into social transformation in Assam that took place during the post-colonial period. It is hoped that our analysis of society in pre-colonial Assam and social transformation during the colonial period (1826-1947) would enable us to provide historical and sociological background in which the post-colonial society in Assam and the Assam movement are very deeply embedded.

The Pre-colonial Society in Assam

By the way of preliminary remarks, it should be pointed
out that the pre-colonial society in Assam, was fundamentally semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature which ensured the mixture of more than one classical mode of production. It generated a very limited surplus and obviously had a very limited market. Though, it was an oppressive system with its resultant backward economy even compared to Mughal India, it must be admitted, that, it was largely a self-sufficient economy, and therefore, it could maintain its significant distance from the rest of India. This together with its geographical factors, can help us in explaining the perpetuation of Ahom rule for long 600 years (1228-1926). It must also be clarified that the Ahom kingdom did not include the district of Goalpara, North-Cachar, Cachar and other hill areas which were part of political Assam from the colonial period till late 1963 and early 1972. The pre-colonial Ahom-Assam included only the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and parts of Karbi-Anglong districts. Besides Brahmaputra valley's westernmost Goalpara district, colonial Assam included hill areas of nearly entire north-eastern India, Cachar district and part of Bengal. We find therefore that colonial Assam was territorially much larger than pre-colonial Assam. The same also applies to post-colonial Assam. Ever present Assam is much larger than pre-colonial Ahom Assam.
The geographical location of Assam at the eastern most part of the Indian sub-continent occupies a peculiar position. Being surrounded by Tibet and Bhutan on the northern side, China on North-eastern side, Burma on southern side and India (Bengal) and Nepal on the western side, Assam had all the features of a frontier region. Assam has been the meeting place of two great world civilizations i.e., Indian and Chinese. It had been receiving various races, languages, culture and religions. It is estimated that at the time of immigration of the Aryans into India, various groups belonging to the Mongoloid race entered Assam from different directions -- China, Tibet, and Burma. Later the Aryans came in obviously through Bengal to Assam. Interaction, assimilation and integration of various culture and civilizations produced a distinctive synthesis of Assam's culture, economy, polity and society. Though, Assam was largely successful in maintaining her isolation from India, it would be wrong to ignore Assam's connections with India. About the ancient relations Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1970: 16) observed "The Kirata or Mongoloid people were certainly very well-known to the Vedic Aryans and we find mention of them in Vajur and Artharva Vedas ". Even the epic Mahabharata mentioned about Assam's Indo-Mongoloid king Bhagadatta together with his Kirata and Cino or Chinese soldiers fought the battle of Kurukshetra.
as an ally of Kauravas. Prof. Chatterji further observes that at the time of closing part of the Vedic age, round about 1000, B.C., the Mongoloid ruling figure in Assam had come to the fold of Brahminical world as developed in the mid-land India and this paved the way for entire non-Aryan people to merge into the Brahminical Hindu fold (Ibid 16,17). We however, feel that this Brahminical Hinduization process, which sociologists would like to call sanskrirtization was not complete. It remained incomplete even in colonial and post-colonial Assam.

After the Mahabharata connection, in the history, we find that Assam's (then Kamrup) king Bhaskar Varman had significant connections with the Indian kingdom under Harsha-Vardhan. In 644 A.D. Bhaskar Varman visited India and maintained cordial relations not only with India but also with China. During Bhaskar Varman's rule, great Chinese scholar Huen Tsang who was studying at Nalanda visited Assam and left an account. He noted the Mongoloid features of the people of Assam. According to Chatterji (Ibid : 15) there was evidence that Assam formed highway not only for trade but also for exchange of ideas between India and Burma and South West China (Szechuan and Yannan) from atleast the closing of the first millennium B.C.

Migration of various groups to Assam did not take
place at one time, it look place gradually from time to time throughout its history since ancient period from different directions. A very significant group that entered Assam from Burma in 13th country through the passage of Patkai Hills were the Ahoms, a Tai-Shan tribe which gave Assam its ruling dynasty from 1228 till the British colonial annexation in 1826. Significantly before the arrival of Ahoms, many Muslims entered Assam and settled down permanently. Though very limited in number, the Ahom rulers too, encouraged migration of priests, learned men and technicians etc. from outside Assam, i.e., India. And obviously, they were Aryans. There were many social groups which we can describe with the help of a chart (Chart No. 2.1).

Social groups

Chart 2.1 presents us a broad idea about the various groups that lived in pre-colonial Assam. Successive waves of migration at different times and from different directions (i.e. China, India, Burma, Tibet etc.) since ancient times made the population of Assam diverse with multiplicity of race, religion and culture. Though, we find the presence of the Aryan groups composed of various castes and Muslims; however, it must be admitted that overwhelming majority of the social
SOCIAL GROUPS IN
PRE-COLONIAL ASSAM

LANGUAGE: ASAMIYA

HINDUS
- CASTE HINDU ASAMIYAS ➔ BRAHmins, GOSAINS, GANAKS, KALITAS
- NON CASTE ASAMIYAS ➔ KOCn-RAJBANSHIS, AHOMS, CHUTIYAS, MOTAKS, MORAN ETC.
- ASAMIYAS OF OPPRESSED CASTE ➔ KAIBARTAS, MALI, HIRA BONIA, SUTRADHAR, KUMAR ETC.
- HINDUIZED MONGOLOID TRIBALS ➔ BODOS, MISHINGS, DEURIS, KACHARLALUNG, MECH ETC.

MUSLIMS
- ASAMIYA MUSLIMS ➔ SYEDS, SHEIKHS, JULAHAS, MORIAS ETC.

BUDDHISTS
- AITON, PHEKI LAL ETC.

SIKHS
- A TINY GROUP OF ASAMIYA SIKHS
groups racially belonged to the non-Aryan Mongoloid groups. This has been the most distinctive feature of Assam's demography and society since ancient times. All the Mongoloid groups who came to Assam at different stages of time, belonged to Tibeto-Burman stock and very distinctively, the Ahoms belonged to the Sino-Tai linguistic family.

Despite its Mongoloid pre-dominance, Hinduism too played a very important role as it could embrace most of the Mongoloid groups living in the Brahmaputra valley into its fold through the ongoing process of sanskritization. As we have noted earlier that the sanskritization process was slow and remained incomplete in Assam. Therefore, among most of the Mongoloid groups, we find the continuity of certain rituals and practices of their pre-Hindu days together with the sanskritized rituals and practices.

Though caste system in Assam was relatively loose compared to the rest of India, yet the Brahmins and other high castes played very significant elite role in the society. During the later stage of the Ahom rule, the Brahmin priests could successfully, reduce the importance of the traditional Ahom priest, i.e., Deodhai-Bailungs, Grahapras/Daivajna/Ganaks who were astrologer caste and literate caste like Kaith/Kayasthas, in addition to the Ahom rulers played decisively significant
role both in polity and society in pre-colonial Assam.

As a result of pan-Indian Bhakti movement, Vaisnavism attained popularity in medieval Assam. Saint Sankardeva (1449-1568) popularized Vaisnavism among the masses in Assam. Gradually, the Satras (monasteries) of Vaisnavism became popular and powerful institutions. This later led to conflict between the clerics of dominant Shaktaism (Sivite) and emerging Vaisnavism. The Ahom kings at times treated both the sects equally and patronized them accordingly with liberal grant of revenue free lands. And, at times, particularly at the later stage, they favoured the Shaktaism more than the Vaisnavism. Even at times, clerics of Vaisnavism faced state persecution because of their popularity which threatened the clerics of Shaktaism i.e., the Brahmin priests on one hand, and state on the other; because of growing economic power of the Satras as a semi-paralleled feudal institution with the state. Obviously the Brahmin priests and the Ahom rulers did not like the growth of the Satras as powerful religio-feudal institution and they together started persecuting the clerics of Vaisnavism particularly during 18th century and early 19th century which resulted in the rebellion of the Mora Vaisnavas (For details of rebellion see Bhuyan 1974, Neog 1965, 1982, Dewan 1838, Bora 1993, Gait 1905, etc.). The rebellion virtually transformed into a longdrawn
civil war in a semi-feudal society wherein the Ahom state failed to resolve the internal conflict and pave the way for external intervention which finally led to Assam's incorporation into the British colony. However, it would be relevant to record here that with the emergence of Visnavism, Asamiya language literature and performing arts like dance and drama developed very significantly in Assam. The popularity of Vaisnavism with its rich culture backed by a rich literature helped in reducing the gap of Assam's isolation with India. It also obviously helped in detribalizing the society in Assam.

Besides two sects of Hinduism, we find a significant number of followers of Islam in pre-colonial Assam (for details, see Hussain 1987A, 1987B, 1988, Bhuyan 1975, Barua 1985, Choudhuri 1982, Sattar 1972, Gohain 1988B, Ali 1986, Saikia 1986 etc.). According to a report published in 1841 a British administrator estimated Assam's Muslim population at one-sixth of the total population at one-sixth of the total population of Assam (Rabinson 1841: 252). The Muslims had syncretized Islam in Assam and obviously there were no Muslim and non-Muslim conflict in pre-colonial Assam. It is a historical fact that the Muslim of Assam together with others in the Ahom militia fought against the Mughal Army in many battles including that of famous Saraighat in 1671.
In addition to Hinduism and Islam, there were small groups following Sikhism and Buddhism in Assam. Though they were not very large group, they added to variety to Assam's demographic composition and richness of culture. We have noted earlier that the sanskritization process remained weak and incomplete in Assam; therefore, it can be safely assumed that some form of primitive religion/animism prevailed in pre-colonial Assam very significantly. Obviously, animism was rooted strongly in the hills of Assam/north east. Though, we have broadly specified 33 social groups in pre-colonial Assam, it would be erroneous to isolate them independently, rather they operated through mutual interdependence under the Ahom state.

Class structure of Pre-colonial Society in Assam

Our understanding of society would remain incomplete unless we study the class structure of pre-colonial society in Assam in addition to the social groups. We would try to comprehend the nature of class structure and its functioning in pre-colonial Assam. This would enable us to comprehend the issues like continuity and discontinuity in the ruling classes, their composition, formation of middle class and nationality in contemporary Assam.
Chart 2.2

CLASS STRUCTURE OF PRE-COLONIAL SOCIETY IN ASSAM

RULING CLASS

HIGHER ARISTOCRACY
AHOM KINGS, ROYAL MEMBERS, MINISTERS

MIDDLE ARISTOCRACY
SIVAITE BRAHMIN PRIEST, VAISHNAVITE: BRAHMINS, KAYASTHA, KALITA PRIESTS, GANAKS, LANDED VASSALS

LOWER ARISTOCRACY
OFFICIALS OF LOWER RANK IN AHOM STATE, CHAMUA PAIKS AND MERCHANTS

TOILING CLASS

PAIKS—PEASANTS CUM MILITIA MEN OF AHOM STATE, ARTISANS, SMALL MERCHANTS AND FISHERMEN

SLAVES AND SERFS
BANDI, GOLAM, BETI, BOHATIA, DASH, BONDHA, LAGUA, LICKSHAW
The chart 2.2 presents a picture in nutshell about the class structure of pre-colonial society in Assam. We have broadly divided classes into two i.e., ruling classes and toiling classes. For us ruling class (or classes) is that small group which dominates and controls directly or indirectly all aspects of social life by virtue of its economic position. They appropriate the labour of the toiling classes. A ruling class not only dominates over material forces but also the intellectual forces of society. The toiling class (or classes) is the large group of people which is oppressed and exploited by the ruling class. This was done mainly through the appropriation of labour of toiling classes by a small group of ruling class.

The ruling classes in pre-colonial Assam was mainly composed of three groups of hierarchically distinct aristocracies i.e. (1) higher aristocracy, (2) middle aristocracy and (3) lower aristocracy. They were the non-productive and non-labouring classes dependent on appropriation of labour of the toiling classes. The higher aristocracy was composed of king, members of the royal family, minister and high officials of the Ahom state. Though, the king was at the apex of the power structure, he normally appointed the ministers. But the
continuity of king to a large extent depended on his council of ministers. Together with the king, they were the most powerful among the three groups of aristocracies we have mentioned. The second group of aristocracy i.e., the middle aristocracy was mainly composed of priestly classes like Sivaite Brahmins priest, Vaisnava Brahmin, Kayastha and Kalita priests; Grahabipras/Ganaks/Daivangya — the astrologers; and a small group of Muslim clerics. The Ahom state maintained the tradition of having Deodhai-Bailung priests — a legacy of Shan-Tai culture. However, with the acceptance of Hinduism by the ruling Ahom clans and emergence of the Brahmin priests very strongly reduced the importance of Deodhai-Bailung priests. In the middle aristocracy, in addition to multi-religious, multi-sect plural clergy, it would be necessary to include the lord vassals, learned Brahmins, learned Muslims and officers of the Ahom state occupying their position in the middle of the hierarchy. The strength of the middle aristocracy rested on the land allotted to them by the state and their position as collaborators of the first group of aristocracy. It is necessary to state here that the middle aristocracy was largely secular in its compositions. Various groups and sub-groups within the middle aristocracy had uneven power depending on their proximity and distance from the royal clan.
The lower aristocracy mainly composed of the officers of lower rank in the Ahom state, Chamua paiks --- the peasants who were not required to do physical labour & the merchants. It was secular in composition. Because of having state granted land and their exemption from doing physical labour, the lower aristocracy was dependent on the appropriation of labour of the toiling masses. However, in terms of power and privileges, they were far below the middle and the higher aristocracies. All these three aristocracies formed the ruling classes in pre-colonial Assam.

The toiling classes in pre-colonial Assam were the (1) Paiks —— militiamen-cum-peasants, fishermen, artisans, and small merchants etc. At the bottom of stratification stood the bondsmen, serfs and slaves. The Paiks were the largest class in pre-colonial Assam. In order to understand the toiling classes it is necessary to go into details of the peculiar militia and land system in Ahom Assam.

The Ahom state did not have a regular paid army. Its militia system composed of the men drawn mainly from the non-ruling classes and non-slaves, i.e., the Paiks, the militiamen-cum-peasants. The Paiks used to fight as militia men to expand and defend the Ahom territory during the war.
At the time of peace, their service was utilized for public works such as road and bridge building, vassal building, temple building, embankment building besides working in fisheries, forest and mines. Significantly, the paiks were not paid militiamen or state servant. For his service to the state, a paik gets 2 puras or nearly 3 acres of land from the state (for Details see colonial historian Gait 1905: 233-246, Hamilton 1940: 478-505). The entire adult population in the age group 15-60 had the obligation to periodic militia service to the state. The Paiks were organized on a unit (Got) basis, each unit composed of 3 paiks, each to serve the state for 4 months on rotation. When a Paik is on a militia service, the remaining 2 of his unit are obliged to cultivate land of the absentee paik who was serving the state. However, in an emergency situation the rule of rotation did not apply and all the paiks of the unit had to serve the militia together. It would also be important to note here that land did not become a salable or purchasable commodity, its allotment decisively dependent on the state — the real owner of land who distributed land inequally between the ruling classes and toiling classes and various sub-groups within these classes. The slaves had no land.

As the ministers and officers of the Ahom state were not salaried, depending on the position in the power structure,
they used to get land for individual private estate (khat) and services of the paiks through the state apparatus. Besides, there were provisions to provide revenue free land to religious institutions and priestly classes. This provision benefited largely the Brahmin clerics leading Shaktaism and Gossain-Mohantas leading Vaisnavism in Assam. Significantly, Islamic religious institutions too received revenue free land in Ahom Assam but it did not benefit a priestly class --- as there was no priestly class in strict sense among the Asamiya Muslims (Hussain 1988B: 278). Their institutions belonged to the community and managed by the local jamat collectively. The non-cleric-learnedmen mainly of high caste origin benefited immensely from land allotted to them by the state. The land the members of the ruling classes received from the state developed into large private feudal estate. Needless to say these feudal estates exploited the toiling classes and appropriated their labour through the coercive state apparatus.

The paik system neither falls into classical slavery nor in classical feudalism. But, it was similar to institutionalized slavery wherein the state was the owner of the slave masses. Similar type of system prevailed in South East Asia prior to Ahom's arrival in Assam from the same region. For our
analytical purpose, we would prefer to regard the system as a developed stage of classical slavery in an underdeveloped feudal social structure. It must be mentioned that in addition to paiks, the toiling classes in Ahom Assam included a large number of slaves, serfs, and bondsmen locally known as Bandi, Beti, Golam, Dash, Bohotiya, Logwa, lickshau etc. Guha (1984: 503) observed:

"Slavery that prevailed in the region was both domestic and agrestic. Prisoners of war, persons purchased from the hill tribes, condemned criminals, and persons born of slaves constituted a major section of this service class. Slaves could be bought and sold. Though there was no organized market for such transactions, slaves were often an export item in the trade with Bengal, Bhutan and Upper Burma, and they featured prominently in the marriage of rich men's daughters. There were also instances of peasants voluntarily selling themselves or their wives and daughters. No strict distinction appears to have been maintained between serfdom and slavery in the absence of the classical form of a dehumanized slavery. Serf and bondsmen often lapsed into conditions of slavery in the course of time"......

Guha (Ibid) has estimated that slaves, serfs and bondsmen constituted 5% to 9% of total population. Obviously the paiks were the largest class in pre-colonial Assam. We should also note that some of the paiks were also forced to become lickshau— a slave in the office holders estate and household for a limited period. But their plight was worse than the general slaves "as all paiks including lickshau had
to face the war hazard when their turn came but slaves did not have to" (Ibid : 503).

With the increased centralization of polity and economy, and their resultant exploitation, the plight of paiks and slaves worsened. Therefore, in order to avoid the ordeal many of them tried to liberate them individually and collectively from the oppressive system by becoming Bhaktas (Monks) of Vaisnavism, as Bhaktas were exempted from the obligatory labour service to the state. Meanwhile, the Vaisnava satra became powerful by accruing large tract of land and appropriation of labour of their paiks and mass followers. And, they attained such position from where they could dare to challenge the declining Ahom state. Though the clerics of the satras, themselves were a fraction of the ruling aristocracy; their popularity increased because the toiling classes experienced severe state oppression, for Vaisnavism provided them an alternative ideology and way for escapement. The Vaisnavite clerics led the moamoria rebellion which transformed into a prolonged civil war in pre-colonial Assam, leading to the intervention of the Burmese and British and finally Assam's incorporation into the British colonial system. We need to note that the oppression of the paiks and slaves, and their
attempt to liberate themselves from the institutional state oppression under a sectarian leadership; and the conflict between the Vaisnavite clerics and the Ahom ruling classes were two major internal contradictions which together with two other external contradictions, i.e., the Burmese and the British intervention led to the collapse of 600 years old Ahom state. Thus the semi-tribal and semi-feudal society in Assam entered into the stage of colonial subjugation.

As an inherent part of its semi-tribal and semi-feudal nature of society in Assam, it did produce neither a middle class nor an entrepreneur class of its own, its level of technology was low and the process of urbanization was near absent. It had obviously no provision for modern education. However, sanskrit tools, satras; and Madrasas provided religious education to their respective followers. And, the Asamiya as a nation or nationality did not emerge in pre-colonial Assam. It would be pertinent to state that the condition of Asamiya language improved in a myriad tongued society. Even, the ruling Ahoms gave-up their Tai language and adopted Asamiya language, so also, the people who came from northern India. Development of Asamiya literature and performing arts particularly with the emergence of Vaisnavism, and finally the collective
resistances against the Mughals substantially contributed in cementing the unity and stability of the Asamiya as a pre-national collectivity in pre-colonial Assam.

The Colonial Phase:

The Incorporation

We have noted briefly the internal contradictions which the Ahom rulers failed to resolve paved a way for neighbouring Burmese ruler's military intervention which proved, extremely barbarous to the entire society in the Brahmaputra valley. Entire society was engulfed by uncertainties and gloom. At this critical stage, the British rulers who had already enslaved nearly entire Indian sub-continent, were looking for colonizing Assam from Bengal where they had consolidated their rule long back, and got the real opportunity to grab. They grabbed it successfully, ostensibly, in order to save Assame, they took the responsibility of driving out the marauding Burmese from Assam. The British colonization in 1826 was so tacit that many Asamiyas even could not understand that they were being made dependent subjects of a British colony after the retreat of the Burmese from the Brahmaputra valley. The realization of the colonial subjugation came later to the Asamiyas. By the time they realized their
subjugated position, the Asamiyas were in no position to offer any significant resistance against the British colonialism. The situation under which the British colonized Assam, saved the Asamiyas from the brutalities of the invading Burmese soldiers; the Asamiyas as a highly disorganized and frustrated community at that time felt relieved and rescued from a long drawn turmoil.

The colonization gradually broke the isolation of Assam by making it a part of British India and thereby linking it with colonial capitalist world economy. This break to the traditional isolation is a historically very significant event for Assam and the Asamiyas. The penetration of colonialism added new complexities with serious socio-political and economic ramifications into the semi-feudal and semi-tribal society in Assam.

The Province of Assam in British India:

Initially the colonial rulers made Assam a new division of Bengal. However in 1874, Assam was made a new province of British India and the same arrangement by and large, continued till the collapse of colonial rules in 1947. Very significantly, the new province of Assam included Sylhet region
of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, entire Hill areas of northeast and Cachar district in addition to traditional Asamiya homeland the Brahmaputra valley which they have been sharing with many tribal groups like Bodos, Michings, Rabhas, Lalungs etc. Though, the province was named Assam, it was in fact --- "an amalgam of Asamiya speaking, Bengali speaking and myriad tongued hills tribal areas in which Asamiya was claimed mother tongue of less than a quarter and Bengalis more than 40 per cent of the population (Guha 1980 : 1701). The size of pre-colonial Assam swelled significantly in colonial Assam wherein the Asamiyas became a minority and second largest group after the Bengalis. Sylhet which was never a part of Assam, historically and ethnically belonged to Bengal was added to Assam by reducing the size of real Bengal. Obviously, it was a colonial design to weaken both the Asamiyas and the Bangalis, and to pave the way for reactionary Asamiya-Bengali competition and conflict under the colonial aegis. This played an important role in colonial as well as in post-colonial Assam. We propose to discuss the problem of Asamiya-Bangali relations later in more details. It would suffice to state here briefly that the drastic changes in the territory of pre-colonial Assam and colonial economy opened the floodgate of social and demographic transformation of Assam with serious social implications.
Colonial Administration: Decline of Pre-colonial Aristocracy:

Assam's incorporation into the colonial system led to the abandonment of the Ahom way of administration which was replaced by a new British-Mughal system of administration. Initially, the colonizers in the interest of their colony patronized the pre-colonial Asamiya aristocracy in their administration. Though, Assam had the rich tradition of writing Buranjis (chronicles) since the arrival of the Ahoms in 1228, the pre-colonial aristocracy had neither knowledge nor experience of keeping written and formal records of administration revenue or land. As this aristocracy did not fit into new system based on modern bureaucratic principles like maintaining formal and written records, moderate western education became a pre-condition for entry into jobs in the new colonial administration. The British colonizers had no intention of educating/training the Asamiyas immediately in order to ensure their continuity in the new colonial set-up. This led to the decline of the pre-British Asamiya aristocracy immediately and more significantly it delayed the process of formation of middle class among the Asamiyas. This also pertinently explains the reason behind the import of the Baboos from neighbouring Bengal to man to the junior level positions of the colonial administration in Assam. According to Guha
without any investment in western education in Assam, the colonizers profitably availed the service of the already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency (Guha 1977: 58). It would be worthwhile to recollect that the British colonized Bengal much earlier and a new middle class emerged with the expansion of western education in Bengal Presidency from the Bengali Hindus mainly drawn from the high castes like Brahmins, Kayashthas, Vaidyas etc. (see Misra 1961, Seal 1971, Broomfield 1968 etc.). The Muslim response to the middle class formation was feeble and very slow in Bengal Presidency. Therefore, those who came to Assam to work in the colonial administration were largely Bangali Hindus. In the absence of an Asamiya middle class in the early colonial Assam, the Bengalis monopolized nearly all jobs meant for the Indians in the colonial administration. In addition to that, many more Bengalis came to Assam as lawyers, teachers, private doctors, small traders and shop-keepers, jewellers, tailors etc. They became very conspicuous in the colonial administration and emerging urban centres in Assam.

**Colonial Land Revenue System:**

The colonial state introduced qualitatively different land revenue system against pre-colonial *Paik* system, known as *reyotwari* system in all districts of the Brahmaputra valley.
with exception to Goalpara district which retained the Zamindari system like Bengal. In contrast to earlier system wherein the paik had to offer periodic service to the state for land, in other words, he had to pay his land revenue in the form of physical labour. The colonial system monetized the land revenue system wherein the land user had to pay the land revenue in the form of money. Again, in contrast to pre-colonial system, land became a salable, purchasable and heritable commodity in colonial Assam. The colonial state used land as a major source to mobilize its revenue. The popular revolt of 1857 imposed severe financial strains on the colonial government (Banerjee : 1928 : 110, 112). Already colonial rulers had imposed Jalkar or water tax for fishing in the rivers and beels, miscellaneous taxes for cutting timber (Gorkhati) and Khusary — the taxes of grazing cattles (Mills 1824 : 323). As there was no other things to tax, the colonial state increased the land revenue substantially in the post 1857 revolt period. The rate of land revenue doubled within a short period between 1857-1865. This augmented the tax burden of the peasantry. Besides, the peasants were not used to pay land revenue in the form of money.

We have already noted the decline of pre-colonial aristocracy in the new colonial set-up. Their position further
worsened as a result of new land revenue system and abolition of slaves, serfs and paiks which had affected their large private estates (khats). Slavery was officially abolished in 1843. In the absence of feudal privileges under the colonial system, most of their estates became unproductive and even most of them were not in a position to pay the land revenue in the form of money under the colonial system. The Ahom aristocracy declined and their status transformed from aristocracy to general masses in Assam. However, the clerics of shaktaism (sivaite) i.e., the Brahmin priests and the Gossain-Mohanta clerics of vaisnavism did not decline unlike others of the same pre-colonial aristocracy and this was because of continuity of the state patronage they used to receive from the colonial rulers. Their privileges over large tracts of land continued and because of their spiritual leadership in a backward society, they could continue with/of their feudal privileges like appropriation of labour of their followers.

The colonial rulers did not want to antagonize the powerful clerics particularly the Gossain-Mohantas of Vaisnava satras. According to Gohain, by offering special feudal privileges to the Gossain-Mohantas the colonial rulers tried to obtain loyalty from masses through the powerful satras.
(Gohain 1978 : 40). In Sibsagar district alone, the Gossains of Auniati satra, Dokhinpat satra and Kamalabari satra owned respectively 21,000; 10,400 and 5,900 acres of revenue free land in addition to large tracts of land on concessional land revenue (Ibid : 40). This is what a section of Asamiya clerics received patronage and collaborated with the colonial state. In addition to Gossain - Mohantas, Brahmins, Kayashthas, Gonaks and a section of Kalitas and Asamiya Muslims because of their literate background and their means though very limited to generate some surplus through some of their feudal privileges, they formed the larger chunk of the Asamiya middle class which emerged in late 19th century Assam. Guha (1977 : 341-43) has shown that the dominant majority of the leading personalities of Asamiya middle class of last quarter of 19th century belonged to the Asamiya high castes. Only a very few belonged to the Asamiya Muslims and the Ahoms. The vast majority of the other social groups by and large failed to enter the emerging middle class in the colonial situation. Nearly the same social composition of the Asamiya middle class continued till the end of colonial rule in Assam. It would be necessary to keep this aspect in mind to understand the middle class formation in colonial Assam.

It would be worthwhile to point out that by the time Assam was colonized, the population of Assam proper, i.e.,
the Brahmaputra valley declined very substantially due to earlier civil war and Burmese intrusion. In 1826, the population of the Brahmaputra valley was estimated at 830,000 persons. (Barpujari 1977 : 59). According to Mill’s report in 1853, population of the Brahmaputra valley was 12,01,151 (Mills 1854 : 56). According to Barpujari (Ibid : 59), the population of the valley rose to about 15 lakhs in 1872. However, the Census data gives us some what a different data about the population in 1872.

Table: 2.1:

Population of Brahmaputra valley as in 1853 and 1872 (In thousand)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>1853</th>
<th>1872</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Valley</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>1,880</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 gives us a picture about population structure in Assam between 1853-1872. There may be some disputes about the estimates, but there is no dispute at all about the abundance of land in Assam and very low density of population during that period. The depopulated state of Assam's society found reflection in first modern Asamiya personality Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan (1830-1859). He pleaded in early fifties of 19th century (Phukan in Mills 1854 and Neog 1977 : 75) that in order to improve the precarious conditions of agriculture in Assam, in addition to European technology and implements, the government should import sufficient number of men from Europe and Upper India to Assam.

As a part of important colonial strategy, the colonial rulers taxed the peasants excessively and as a response to this, we find several significant peasants upsurges in colonial Assam against the enhancement of land revenue, first in 1861 & again in 1891. These upsurges were not tangibly successful, nevertheless, these reflected the colonial oppression on the peasantry and determination of peasantry to fight against the colonial land revenue system. According to Baruah (1983 : 63) this had forced the colonial rulers to bring down the revenue rate slightly to pacify the peasants.
As there were severe limitations in enhancing the land revenue burden on the peasants, the colonial rulers tried to bring more land under cultivation so as to augment their revenue base. Therefore, they had directly or indirectly patronized migration of peasants from thickly populated East Bengal to Assam's waste land. In 1911, Goalpara, the westernmost bordering district of Assam had the density of 152 persons per sq. mile whereas its neighbouring Mymensingh district had the density of 724 persons per sq. mile (Census of India, 1911, Davis 1951: 118). Nowgong district of which later had largest concentration/Mymensingh peasants, had the density of only 79 persons per sq. mile in 1911. The colonial policy encouraged large scale migration of peasants from Mymensingh, most of them were Muslims oppressed by Hindu Zamindars. Obviously, the oppressed peasants responded positively and started migrating to Assam. This process was set to motion by colonial policy of the augmenting its revenue from land. Migration from a nationally different region found resistance from the receiving region. We propose to discuss this issue in more details in a later chapter however, at this stage, it should be noted here that the massive migration of peasants from thickly populated Mymensingh to
thinly populated Brahmaputra valley took place fundamentally in the interest of British colonialism in India and their motive to generate more land revenue. On the other hand the powerful British tea-planters; observes Guha (1977 :97), 
"who found acute shortage of labour for the plantations, urged upon the government to enhance the land revenue rates so that the poor peasants could be flushed-out of their villages to work for wages on the plantation."

Revenue from Opium

In their strategy for augmenting the revenue in the colony, the rulers themselves monopolized the sale of opium through government agencies at a very exorbitant price. Next to land, Guha (1977 :55) observed "opium was the most important source of revenue in colonial Assam. A mound (about 37 kg.) of opium would have cost the colonial government Rs. 290 at ex-factory cost in 1883-84, but, it, brought forth a gross revenue of Rs. 1,040...... It was a gold mine...... The government opium policy was one of maximizing the revenue through a system of monopoly pricing" (Ibid : 55).

The colonial policy obviously affected the opium addicted Asamiya peasants and migrant labourers in new tea-plantation. It affected their health, productivity,
morality and economic conditions very deeply. It also produced a new group of Asamiya middlemen in opium business. A good section of rich families in Upper Assam today, particularly owes their root in the boom of opium business in colonial Assam. At the earlier stage, the response of Asamiya middle class was apathetic towards the evil of opium. A distinguished historian has pointed out pertinently that some of the distinguished Asamiya leaders like Jagannath Barua (1851-1907), Devicharan Barua (1864-1926) and their Sarvajanik Sabha of Jorhat in a memorandum to the Royal Commission on opium 1893 offered their support to opium excise policy (Ibid :88). However, with the growth of popularity of national movement for freedom under the leadership of India National Congress, the colonial policy of opium faced strong opposition from the Congress and the masses.

Economic changes in colonial Assam:

(A) **Tea Plantation**:

Apparently one of the important gifts that Assam received from the British colonialism was the tea-plantation. As an inherent rule of colonialism, the British rulers tried to exploit Assam economically to the maximum. As the mother
country, England had to import tea, they were looking for starting their own plantation in their colony. Needless to say that their mother country was absolutely unfit for tea-plantation. They found Assam physically most suitable region for growing tea plants in large scale on industrial line. This was obviously a gigantic task. The powerful British capital backed by their own colonial state apparatus succeeded in their venture and soon Assam became one of the important tea producer in the world.

As we propose to discuss more in details on tea-plantation and migration of its labour force from outside Assam in a later chapter. Here, we would make a few brief comments on its impact on the colonial society in Assam. Guha (1977; 1968) has shown that the massive tea-plantation did fundamentally serve the interest of the British capital, not of the masses in colonial Assam. In the absence of local labour force, the most important impact that the society had was the beginning of mass-migration of labour mostly tribals from Jharkhand region to Assam. Their massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly in Assam. Devis (1951: 115) observed that such massive migration made Assam demographically the fastest growing province in India.
A new and distinct social group 'tea-labour' belonging to various tribes from outside Assam emerged in Assam. According to colonial historian Gait (1905 : 362), the population of tea-labour in 1921 was 1.3 million or one-sixth of total population of Assam. Obviously they were the most oppressed social group in colonial Assam. Though slavery was abolished in 1843 a new form of slavery emerged in tea-estates where tea-labourers were treated like slaves by their planter masters.

Because of inseparable bond between the capital and state, the British planters became most powerful group in colonial Assam playing a very decisive role in economy and politics. The colonial state did not hide its explicit bias towards the British planters. They received large tracts of land on extremely soft or free term whereas, the colonial state discriminated the indigenous Asamiya planters. After seeing the tremendous success of the British tea-planters, few Asamiyas too, tried to penetrate into the plantation business. Quite a few mostly from Asamiya high castes and Asamiya Muslims succeeded in the business inspite of colonial discrimination. Their position was that of a Liliput surrounded by the British Gullivers from all sides. Nevertheless, the Asamiya
tea-planters were significantly the first group of Asamiya capitalist though they were very weak and insignificant compared to their British counterparts. The new Asamiya planters obviously became a collaborator class under the colonial constraints.

Though the Asamiya masses did not benefit much from tea-plantation, quite a few got middle class jobs in the plantations as Baboos. The labour had almost slave status in the estates separated from indigenous Asamiyas and own kinsmen working in other tea-estates. Even the national movement for freedom in which the Asamiya peasantry and the plains tribals took very significant role, the plantation labourers were forced to confine to four walls of the estates. They remained isolated and oppressed in the tea-estates. This severely hampered their process of assimilation and integration with the Asamiya masses. The tea-plantation added new elements and complexities in the composition of social groups and classes in colonial Assam.

8. Communication:

In order to send tea to the market through Calcutta port, the colonial rulers had to improve the communication net-work throughout the province. Compared to pre-colonial
system, communication improved very significantly in colonial Assam. In addition to steamer and road transport, a new railway net-work was established by the end of 19th century. By 1903, Assam had 715 miles of railway lines, an impressive development indeed in a colonial situation. In addition to tea, coal and petroleum industry under the colonial aegis forced the colonial state to build-up communication net-work as an integral infrastructure for profitable exploitation of the region. Needless to say the tea-producing districts had better communication system than the non-tea producing districts of colonial Assam.

C. Petroleum and Coal:

After tea-plantation the colonial rulers exploited the petroleum and coal mines in Assam. In 1889, oil was discovered at Digboi. However, the refinery was established only in 1901 at Digboi. The British capitalists were not very much keen in investing in petroleum industry because of having their access to oil in neighbouring Burma in the south-east and Iran in the west. The coal mines too received luke-warm attention because they had already exploited the coal mines in Bihar and Jharkhand region. In the absence of industry and
abundance of woods; the coal had lesser demand. Most of the coal produced in Assam used for running steam engines; factories of tea-estates. The major industry in Assam was obviously the tea-plantation and it had attracted the British capital most. Except tea no other industry developed substantially in colonial Assam. The new market forces crippled the pre-colonial small industries. Though the government and the British sector progressed significantly, Guha (1977 : 35) observes that it "failed to induce a commensurate growth of the indigenous private sector. What was developed in amazing tempo was the British owned and British managed part of economy, with labour and middlemen services almost entirely recruited from other Indian provinces."

Migration:

The colonial economy opened the floodgates of migration to Assam --- mainly to the Brahmaputra valley. The East Bengal peasants mainly from neighbouring Mymensingh district migrated to Assam's wasteland. Their migration helped to increase the quantum of colonial revenue and agricultural production. An eminent economist observed "One welcome result of the influx of these farm settlers is the improvement of farming practices........ developed the
whole agricultural system in Assam, helped to improve the health of countryside by clearing jungles and marshes, and converted the wild areas into populous agricultural region. The introduction of jute, vegetables etc. as commercial crop in Assam has largely been due to the immigrants" (Goswami 1988:29). As most of the peasant migrants were Muslims, it increased the Muslim population in colonial Assam significantly. We propose to discuss more on Muslims of Assam in a later chapter in relations to the Assamiya nationality and its identity crisis.

We have already noted the massive import of labour force from outside Assam, mostly from Jharkhand region to Assam's tea-plantations. The Bengali Baboos too, migrated to Assam along with the colonial rulers to occupy the secondary positions in the colonial administrative set-up. Their consolidation was later challenged by the emerging Assamiya middle class. Besides Marwaris from Rajputana who also migrated to Assam as a collaborator of the colonial Assam. Many Biharis came to Assam in search of livelihood and were prepared to do any toilsome job. On the other hand, as an integral part of the British colonial expansion and consolidation many Nepalis came to Assam. We propose to discuss each of these migrants communities vis-a-vis the Assamiya nationality and identity in later chapters in
more details. However, it would be pertinent to note here that the massive migration to Assam took place under the colonial aegis and it radically transformed the society, demography, economy and politics in colonial Assam with severe implications for post-colonial Assam, and Assamiya nationality.

**Social Groups, Class and Nationality:**

As a result of massive migration of various groups, distinct and new social groups gradually emerged in colonial Assam in addition to existing pre-colonial social group (Chart 2.1). The chart 2.3 specifies the distinct new social group in colonial Assam.

The Europeans though very small in size were obviously the most powerful social group in colonial Assam. Most of them were officers in the colonial administration both civil and military, the tea-planters and Christian missionaries. The Bengalis came from Bengal to assist the colonial rulers as their subordinate ally. Besides, some of the Bengalis were engaged in various professions and small business. The Nepalis too came to Assam as a part of colonial army. In the absence of an indigenous business caste or class the Marwaris filled-up the vacuum in business. Many Biharis came in as labourers. The migrant Muslim peasants from East Bengal occupied most of the waste and low lying land in colonial
### CHART 2.3

**NEW MAJOR SOCIAL GROUPS OF COLONIAL ASSAM***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality/Community</th>
<th>Major Occupation</th>
<th>Size and social standing in Assam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. British</td>
<td>Colonial administration: Civil and Military</td>
<td>Small but most powerful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tea Planters</td>
<td>Small and powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member of Christian Missions</td>
<td>Small and influential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Americans</td>
<td>- do -</td>
<td>Small and influential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Marwaris</td>
<td>Trade &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>Small and rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hindu Bengalis</td>
<td>Middle class jobs in colonial admin.</td>
<td>Larger than Groups 1, 2, 3 and collaborator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nepali</td>
<td>Army, dairy and construction</td>
<td>Small, hardworking and largely oppressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Biharis</td>
<td>Labours</td>
<td>Small, poor and oppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Muslim Bengalis</td>
<td>Peasants</td>
<td>Large, poor and oppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Black Tribal:</td>
<td>Plantation labour</td>
<td>- do -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In addition to the social groups included in the chart 2.1.
Assam. The plantation labour came from various places from both north and south India and toiled to build massive tea-estates in Assam. In addition to new seven groups as mentioned in the Chart 2.3, there were two other small group in colonial Assam i.e., (i) the Chinese and (ii) the Afgans. Most of the Chinese were engaged in small business craft, carpentry and shoe-making etc. Most of the Afgans who were popularly known as Kabuliwala in Assam, engaged in money lending business. Needless to say, all these migrations were propelled by the distorted development under colonial limitations. Migration altered the social composition of society very drastically. The society became very heterogeneous and more complex; economically linked with the capitalist world.

In order to understand the colonial society, in addition to social groups it would be necessary to comprehend the emerging class structure and dynamics in colonial Assam. After the British colonization, the pre-colonial aristocracy started declining gradually. However, significantly the high caste Asamiya Hindus succeeded to maintain their position because of similar and selective land revenue policy of the colonial rulers towards them. Like the Ahom rulers, the colonial rulers too patronized the Hindu clerics by maintaining a
liberal policy and state patronage. Their ownership of reasonably large tract of land together with their positive response to modern education helped them to avert their decline in colonial situation. However, the other group of the pre-colonial acristocracy including the Ahoms declined in colonial Assam. Though slavery was abolished in 1843, the social and economic forces did not allow the total collapse of slavery in colonial Assam.

The colonial land and revenue system produced a new class of Mauzadar, the revenue collecting agents for a cluster of villages, throughout the Brahmaputra valley except Goalpara. They became important as collaborators of the British colonialism and mediator between the rulers and the ruled in colonial Assam. Most of the Mauzadars were appointed mainly from the high caste Asamiyas and the Asamiya Muslims. They joined and supported the colonial policy of oppression and exploitation of peasants. Getting Mauzadarship was an important recognition of social status and power. Appointment of Mauzadar from non-Asamiya social groups were resented by the members of pre-colonial aristocracy in colonial Assam. For instance in mid 19th century, Maniram Dewan (1806-1858) in a petition to the colonial rulers opposed such move to appoint non-Asamiyas in no uncertain terms.
"...... while the members of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees of Sylhet have been appointed to Mauzadarship and for us respectable Assamese to become riot of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification. (Mills 1854: Appendix: KB 607)

Obviously Dewan's petition represents the class interests of a declining aristocracy in colonial Assam. It also represents their search for a strategy for survival in a vastly changed situation. It would be pertinent to point out that the Asamiya middle class which gradually emerged in the later 19th century, a good number of them came from the Mauzadar families who could afford western education and send their boys to Calcutta or Dacca for education.

The colonial rulers and the planters backed by the colonial state and capital were obviously at the top of class structure in colonial Assam. Next to them in the hierarchy but much below the British ruling group stood a very few Asamiya planters and Marwari traders. Next to them stood relatively large Bengali middle class and small Asamiya middle class and petty traders in towns. The Zamindars in Goalpara district and Mauzadar in the rest of the Brahmaputra valley formed the rural gentry. Most of the members of the emerging Asamiva middle
class largely belonged to the Asamiya high castes and had their rural link as absentee landlords. Below them stood the fragmented peasantry — medium and small. The landless agricultural labourers, migrated East Bengal peasants and tea-plantation labours most of whom were the tribals from Jharkhand region stood virtually at the bottom of class structure of colonial Assam.

We would like to make a few sociologically relevant points on education briefly. By and large, education was neglected in colonial Assam. The response to western education among the Asamiyas was crippled by suppressing Asamiya language from 1837 to 1874. Asamiya was replaced by Bengali language. We propose to discuss the problem of language and conflict between Asamiya and Bengali language in more details as a part of our study of Asamiya national questions later in this thesis. However, at this stage, it would suffice to state that the colonial suppression of a popular language in its homeland and its replacement by another language of a neighbouring province of a much bigger nationality created conditions for conflict between the speakers of two sister languages which helped their colonial masters to hide their interest and divide the subjugated people of the same colony in the name of language. Suppression of Asamiya language also to a large extent suppressed the popular
urge for western education. As Bengal already had a large number of surplus unemployeds, therefore, the colonial rulers did not care to expand education in Assam. Besides, the popular enthusiasms for development of education was nearly absent unlike northern and other parts of India where non-governmental associations took initiative for expanding education for their areas and communities.

The first and second high school in Assam were respectively started as late as in 1835 and 1841. Bengal got its first University (of Calcutta) in 1857 and Assam had to wait for the establishment of a University till the collapse of colonial rule. The first University (Gauhati) of Assam was officially started only in 1948. Even to start a college Assam had to pass whole 19th century. The first college (Cotton College) in the Brahmaputra valley was established at Guwahati only in 1901. These indicators established the belated development of education in Assam and its relative educational backwardness compared with Bengal. Even under such colonial constraints, a new Calcutta oriented Asamiya middle class gradually emerged in the late 19th century. Obviously, it was a weak and very small middle class located in colonial hinterland. This tiny middle class was mainly
composed of high castes like Brahmins, Kayasthas, Gonaks, Kalitas, Gossain-Mohantas and few Asamiya Muslims. The incipient Asamiya middle class took special interest in the development of Asamiya language and literature. Gradually, language became an important and perhaps the most sensitive symbol of the Asamiya middle class and the nationality.

The colonial situation imposed on the Asamiya middle class a stiff competition from the migrant Bengali middle class in Assam. In such a situation, the middle class had to play a collaborative role with relations to the colonial rulers. However, with the emergence of national movement for independence, popularity of Congress and consolidation of Asamiya middle class in the 20th century gradually a larger section of this class could by and large overcome their collaborative role with colonialism. In order to reach this stage, the Asamiya middle class had to pass through two important phases of political development at the Brahmaputra valley level. (1) In the first phase roughly between 1880 to 1903, in which many associations were formed at the local as well as district level to express their class and also popular grievances through petitions and memorials to the colonial rulers. During this period, Asamiya magazines particularly 'Mau' focussed on political issues,
though, it largely played a collaborative role in colonial situation having neither sympathy for peasants' upsurge nor for the oppressed plantation labours. (2) Gradually, the district level politics transformed into a valley level politics. The Assam Association was formed in 1903. During its short existence, in addition to its class demand, it had successfully raised certain important political issues like colonial policy on opium, democratization of local bodies where the Europeans and planters had decisive say, more power to provincial legislative council, expansion of education etc. Around 1917, according to Guha (1981 : 21) the Assam Association experienced a fundamental transformation, it had sent its delegates numbering 17 to the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress. Between 1917-20, it realized the importance of linking its valley politics with the larger national politics. In 1920, the Assam Association merged with the Indian National Congress. Rest of the history of the Congress and the freedom movement is too well known to spell out in details here.

With the merger of the Assam Association with the Indian National Congress, the Asamiya middle class gradually abandoned its collaborative politics with colonialism. The national movement for independence of India, helped the
emerging Asamiya nationality to identify itself with the great Indian nationalism. It broke the political isolation and marked its integration with the Indian nationalism. However, it must also be admitted that though small in size, a section of the Asamiya middle class continued its collaborationist politics till the end of IInd World War. During this period (1920-1947), the Asamiyas had gradually became an integral part of multinational Indian society with a distinct regional identity. Both, the Asamiya middle class and the Asamiya nationality formation process had their root in the later 19th century under the inherent limitations of colonialism. The Asamiya middle class was both weak and small compared to their neighbouring Bengali middle class. The distorted transformation of semi-tribal and semi-feudal society in colonial Assam had its affect on the Asamiya nationality formation. The colonial rulers had obviously encouraged national hostility and exclusiveness though themselves made Assam a plural province with serious unevenness. The Asamiya nationality remained a weak, underdeveloped and small in colonial Assam having not much of confidence in its own destiny. The horizon of the Asamiya nationality very significantly did not expand much inspite of massive increase
in Assam's population, it largely confined to the social
groups of pre-colonial Assam. In sharp contrast to pre-colonial
society, the colonial society in Assam along with distorted
process of westernization experienced complex linguistic and
religious communalization of both society and politics under
the colonial patronage.