Chapter Three

Enigma of the Interior
Assam Proper and the Impossibility of Enclosed Histories

Agriculture seems to be the Purloined Letter of Assam history. Its visibility helps it to go unnoticed: we remain happily oblivious of the ways in which it staged the everyday enactment of the boundary enclosing Assam proper. The arena of Assam proper was primarily a taxable territory—a land of settled arable farming capable of producing an exportable surplus, at least that was what the law wanted it to be. Ryots, a term the British had picked up from Mughal Bengal, were the principal inhabitants of Assam Proper: the smallholders working on individual plots, deriving sustenance almost entirely from agrarian occupations. As Regulation X of 1822 emphatically stated, “the system of government established by the general Regulations” for “the inhabitants of the cultivated country” was “wholly inapplicable” to the “savage tribes” who were hardly acquainted with “the arts of civilized life”.1 Wet rice cultivation with heavy plow was certainly taken to be the art of civilized life, and the British officers in Assam spent much time and energy in standardizing and privileging this particular farming practice over all others across the entire stretch of

1 The full text of this Regulation is available in Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 250-3
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Assam proper. To rephrase an early twentieth-century Chief Commissioner, the ryot was the only effective bulwark against his "savage neighbours." 2

Indeed, even in the early state documents, the ryot was principally profiled as a taxable, protection-craving subject standing in sharp contrast to the revenue-exempted, invading savage. One was peaceable, sedentary and useful; the other was troublesome, nomadic and worthless, although the disengagement of the two was not always as easy as this binary suggested. In this chapter we wish to simultaneously address the complexities of this disengagement and the genealogies of the Assamese ryot. After all, the category of Assam proper initially emerged only as a gloss for the districts settled under ryotwari tenures.

Labor of Division

There was something strange about the ryotwari settlement in Assam proper. On the one hand, the settlement operations, as in most other parts of the British Indian empire, claimed to confront the ryot as a set of external orders and regulations, coming from a distinct location called the State. The world of the ryot was offered as the free-standing social world into which the State power extended. On the other hand, as the ryot was scarcely older than ryotwari in Assam, the operations could never assume a position of temporal subsequence. The preexistence of the social world of the ryot could never be squarely affirmed in a province with the least Mughal antecedents. Trapped as they were in this tension, the early settlement operations in Assam proper were already an act of obscuration: the State was hardly the exterior constraint that it wished to remain. We shall try to illustrate this point through a discussion of the new regime of land assessment. In an aside, we must however note that the stock descriptions of "the colonial revenue system" omit the diversities which the British Indian land revenue administration came to generate in the process of creating a homogenous landscape of assessable and arable fields. In these descriptions, the unswerving progression of the land assessment schemes appears as ineluctable as the march of the imperial army. In any case, the nationalist demonology has little more to offer than an inverted self-image of the imperialist. On the contrary, we wish to seize on the hesitancies

and ambiguities of the process, redirecting the reader’s attention to the checkered course of land assessment in the region.

On 7 March 1828, the erstwhile Nāmānī area was formally brought under the British law, and it took five more years to formally introduce the first rounds of land assessment. As we have already indicated in Chapter One, the new administrative dissection of Nāmānī (now translated as Lower Assam) into the broad districts of Kamrup, Darrang, and Nagaon was worked out only in the process of this land assessment. A district, after all, implied a degree of administrative homogeneity which was scarcely at hand in the late eighteen twenties. However, as our previous discussion suggests, the attempt to re-territorialize the khel and the pungnsus constituted the first effort at creating this homogeneity. The next step, every official agreed, was to move from khelwm to ṛtwrũ: to replace the cluttered “corporations”3 with the individuated figure of the taxable subject. Hamilton Vetch anticipated much of our textbook histories when he said that the commutation of bodily services into an annual 3 rupees tax “at once raised the cultivator from a serf to a free tenant.” That the “lands he had occupied as a pyke” was still available to the ṛtw “on payment of a moderate rent” appeared to Vetch as an irrefutable proof of the efficiency and kindness of the British Indian system. It was the abolition of the paík system, according to Vetch, which “pressed heavy on the upper classes” and “very greatly improved” the situation of “the lower orders.”4 Such neat stories of graduation of paíks into ṛtws effectively gloss over a number of difficulties which the nineteenth-century officials had to face. The very first of these difficulties related to the individuation of the paík.

No standard history finds it worth mentioning that the British, for the first time in the erstwhile Tungkhungia jurisdiction, posited the category of paík, instead of gót or khel, at the discursive center of revenue collection. The Tungkhungia accounts were always represented in terms of khel-wise revenue,5 while the royal grants were usually made in terms of gót.6

3 That was how Scott translated the khel in 1831. See D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government, Fort William, dated 18 May 1831, No. 50, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 10 June 1831, Nos. 50 – 59 [NAI]
4 H. Vetch, Deputy Commissioner of Assam, to A. J. Moffatt Mills, Sudder Judge on Deputation, dated Gowhatty, 22 June 1853, in Moffatt Mills, Report, 68-9. For the gold washers and braziers it was charged at 5 rupees, and for the fishermen at 3 rupees albeit without the land
6 See, for a typical instance, “Decree of General Jenkins in connection with Brahmottar land of Parbatia Gossains in Kamrup”, Bengal Government Papers, 1848, File No. 404 [ASA]. In very few cases, as in the
Even in the 1826 Agreements signed by David Scott, the wealth of the Bor Senpati and the Sadiya Khowa Gohain was distinctly calculated in terms of “Gotes”, and not “Pykes.”

Moffatt Mills mentions that in the earliest days of the “revenue system introduced by the British … the Paicks were generally assessed at nine rupees per Ghot.”

Writing in the late nineteenth century, Padmeswar Naobaisha Phukan distinctly remembered that “it was only in the days of the sahils” that the custom of calculating in terms of individual paiks [“paā paik”] replaced the earlier unit of “gt paik.” In the process of emplotting the figure of the paik at the midpoint of the discourse, the British effected a discursive extrication of the singular cultivator who, as the final (in-dividual) unit of the tax-paying population, was individually responsible for the payment of revenue. This repositioning of the paik figure – effecting its appearance outside the strictures of the collectives of gt and khel – was saliently tied to its hypostatization. In the order of the imperial archive, the fact of being a paik was not derivative of being classed under a particular group for a specified purpose; the paik was a prefiguration of the ryat.

As three energetic British Collectors set out to reorder the revenue management in Lower Assam in 1833 (Bogle in Kamrup, Matthie in Darrang and Rutherford in Nagaon), “[e]ach officer had some peculiar system to abolish.” However, each of them confirmed that even then the unit of collection and calculation was gt, and not paik. Matthie, for example, reported that “the population is divided into Gote Pykes which consists of four persons and upon which is levied annually 13 Rupees 4 annas for what they get 24 poorahs of land half of which is denominated Gao Muttee [and] the other half Jumma Muttee.” Each gt, said Matthie, had to annually pay 8 Rupees for 12 pooras of its “Gao Muttee” land (which was called “Gao Dhun”), and 5 Rupees 4 Annas for its “Jumma Muttee” land. It is interesting to see that both Matthie and Bogle were interested to derive the “Amount of Assessment per...
Pyke” under a separate head, although they themselves came to the conclusion that there were notable variations between the “amounts” of “Pyke Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4”, as the “[t]otal assessment is made on the basis of a Gote of 4 Pykes.” In other words, a got was collectively responsible for furnishing the stipulated sum and was collectively allocated a specified area. Individual desertion could not be cited as an excuse for any payment failure. If a member of a got “runs into” untraceable destinations, according to Rutherford, “those that remain are faced to make up the rent due from their deserted brethren.”

The practice of calculating individual revenue obligations of the paik missed the calendrical aspect of a got. The grouping represented, to borrow a phrase from Amalendu Guha, “one man-year of service to the State” spread out among three or four individuals. One member of each got was obliged to be present, in rotation, “for such work as might be required of him, and during his absence from home the other members were expected to cultivate his land and keep his family supplied with food.” In “Upper Assam”, where the inhabitants were divided into “Gôts of three paiks”, theoretically each paik had to work for four months for “the State.” The levy of one man from each got was called the mel, of two the dowl, and of three the teval.” Furnishing paiks to the authorities “according to the custom of the country”, as the 1826 Agreements clarify, meant sending them by turn, “by Mal, Dewal, Teeal.” As the British officers came to define a paik in terms of the “service” which he “owe[d] … to the State”, they did not recognize that “the State’s” claim to this “service” was constrained by the custom of alternation, that “the State’s” relationship with an individual paik was necessarily discontinuous and intermittent, at least in theory, whereas that with a got was constant and unvarying.

If the formulation seems too elusive at the moment, its effects may not. In shifting the onus from the got to the paik, the British reorganized both the sequence and the place of paikan

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11 Quoted in A. Bogle, Officiating Collector, North Eastern Rungpore, to T. C. Robertson, the Agent to the Governor-General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated 10 July 1833, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86 - 111 [NA]. Bogle confirmed this to be the custom in his area too.
12 Quoted in Extract Political Letter to India, dated 3 December 1834, No. 14, F/4/1505, 59028 [OIOC]
13 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 133
14 Rutherford, quoted in Extract Political Letter to India, dated 3 December 1834, No. 14, F/4/1505, 59028 [OIOC]
15 Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, 11
17 Bengal Political Department, 10 March 1830, No 3, E/4/727, CXII [OIOC]
“service.” Abstracted from the different local networks of allegiance and conditions of obligation, the standardized figure of the *paik* came to derive its meaning from each member's alleged share in a *got*’s “Gao Muttee.” Such a staging of the *paik* in the British revenue documents was evidently linked to the progressive demilitarization of the figure: the *got* as a militia pool carried little sense to the new government. The *paiks* were described by Rutherford as men “who are either amenable to the sources of the State as militia men, laborers in the Sirkaree Khats, or purchase exemption by an annual payment of three rupees per man, for which they receive two poorahs of land.” There were variations in official descriptions, but each and every officer held on to the condition of “two poorahs”, conveniently dodging or underplaying the fact that there were substantial numbers of non-cultivating *paiks* — “such as were not field labourers” — fishermen, gold-washers, metal-workers, and cloth-makers, most of whom neither paid a *gādhan* (“Gao Dhun”) nor received a *gāmiti* (“Gao Muttee”). In *gāmiti*, the officers could see the germ of individual plots, and in *gādhan* the kernel of a land tax, even if Vetch clearly admitted that the famous “two poorahs” of a *paik* “belonged to the khel, or community of which he was a member, and could not be alienated” Brodie testified to the same effect. Let us first clarify that the expression “two poorahs” did not necessarily denote an absolute area statement in the pre-British calculations. Complex scales of correspondence between productivity and tillage were at work. “[W]hen the Roopeet lands were limited, or the population great, the Pykes had to put up with less than their legal share, or they could take up inferior lands in a proportion of double or treble quantities according to the presumed qualities of the lands.” Moreover, “there was great room for favoritism”, Jenkins said, “and nothing was more common than complaints that whilst some Pykes had double their proper quantities of lands, others had very small portions, or none at all.” The process of defining

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19 See Guha, *The Ahom Political System*, for a standard discussion of the military requirements of a *got*.
20 Quoted in Extract Political Letter to India, dated 3 December 1834, No. 14, F/4/1505, 59028 [OIOC]
23 Ibid, 3. Moffatt Mills and other officers reused to accept this view.
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and fixing the extent of a *poora* is yet to be subjected to critical investigation, but it can be safely said that in the abstracted tabular space of official calculations, the emphasis on "two poorahs" helped to create an idyllic uniform image of the rural landscape. "[T]here is no germ of any village community in any part of Assam", reported Jenkins. "Every *ryot* is equal to and independent of every other *ryot* of whatever caste", said the same official who had reported only a few months ago of the distinctions and discriminations in the rural landholding pattern, "and there never were village servants. All contractors of taxes from the highest Phokun to the lowest Bora of a village were officers of Government, and were liable to dismiss, though in most instances a successor to a vacant appointment caused by death was generally taken from the same family."

In the mind's eye, the *paiks* had already become *ryots*; the *gô hôlders* had already become tax contractors; *khêtawri* had already begun to resemble *ryôtawri*. The situation, however, was a little less smooth on the ground.

"[T]he whole of the free male population of Assam owe service to the State", observed Scott in 1828. These "Payicks", said he, were different from the "slaves or bondsmen", who

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25 There is some indirect evidence to suggest that although traditionally a *poora* used to be calculated as four hundred *târs*, a *poora* — very much like a *bigha* in contemporary Bengal — "was not an area of land in our sense, a square the same size at any place on a specific latitude on our grid map, but a piece of land which satisfied the requirement that the *tenure holder* be able to farm some piece of land whose productivity accorded with his status rights; it was a "fair share" as the people of that village or ruling brotherhood defined equity in relation to different families or caste." Cf. Walter J. Neale, "Land is to Rule", in Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 5. Therefore, it was not surprising that various measurements of a *poora* were available in different parts of the Tungkhungia kingdom. By the end of the eighteen thirties, however, a rough estimation of 52, 900 square feet (slightly more than 1.21 English Statute acres) was fixed as the extent of a *poora*. W. Robinson, *A Grammar of the Assamese Language* (Serampore: Serampore Press, 1839), 75. More accurately, the measurement would be 52893 square feet or 5877 square yards. Moffatt Mills, *Report*, 321 mentions that "the introduction of a standard *beegah*" took place in the district of Kamrup after Bogle's settlement of 1833-4. "The Assam poorah ... is nearly equal to a Scottish acre, or 1¼ acre English." J. W. Masters, the superintendent of the Southern station of the Company in Assam to A. de H. Larpent, Chairman, Assam Company, Dated Nazeerah, 12 February 1842, in Assam Company, *Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate Street, on the 6th May, 1842, with an Appendix* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1842), 32. As we shall later see in this chapter, as late as 1860 a *poora* was often taken to mean a certain amount of crop produced on a plot of land.

26 Quoted in [Henry Hopkinson] Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 342, dated Gowhatty, 21 September 1867, in "Improvement of Land Revenue Administration of Assam and Remission of Assessment", 1859-72 Board of Revenue Papers, Part-I, SC No. 1-92, File No. 145 [ASA].

Emphasis added
“serve[d] private individuals for their lives.” The distinction invites our attention, because the juridical construal of the paiks as “freemen”, which is still central to our historiography, involved a particular understanding of the State as a public authority. Freedom of the paiks, according to this construal, primarily lay in the fact that the legitimate appropriator of their services was not any “private individual”, but “the State” itself, the great anonymous structure of impersonal authority. However, in keeping with our preliminary discussion of concurrent sovereignties, we wish to point at the problems of imagining “the Ahom State” as a logical forerunner of “the British Indian state.”

“In time of peace it was the custom to employ the paiks on public works,” we are told, “and this is how the enormous tanks and the high embanked roads of Upper Assam, which are still a source of wonder to all who see them, came into existence.” The functions of “the high embanked roads” or the ālis are very much open to critical reexamination; but usually it is thought that they “were constructed with the double object, as highways above the line of flood, and as ‘bunds’ (i.e. embankments) to control the inundations of their rivers.” Major Briggs, who provided this definition in 1863, was the Superintendent of Public Works in Assam. Characteristically celebrating the tradition of “the Ahom public works”, he contended that the “constant endeavour” of his Department was “to unite their efforts with ours, though years roll between us, and to complete, repair, and bring into use, what internecine wars and foreign invasions prevented them from doing.”

The invention of the Ahom intent was crucial; in their presumed functions of roads and embankments, the ālis could be understood as instruments of universal use without any reference to the operations of the Tungkhungia property regime. No historian can be on a firm ground today in ascertaining the limits of the control of use of the ālis or the sāgers (“the enormous tanks”) in the Tungkhungia period. But the constant nineteenth-century references to the disuse, neglect and even abandonment of the ālis and the sāgers in the absence of a strong Ahom

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27 Bengal Political Consultations, 3 April 1828, File No. 18019. [OIOC]
28 Gait, History, 239. An interesting attempt at reconstructing the list of the Ahom ālis is available in A. Barua, “Geographical Background and the Development of Communication in Medieval Assam”, in Nagen Hazarika, (ed.), Ti Chow Fa - 769 L. S. (Dispur: Souvenir Capital me dam me fie celebration, 1997), 62-4
29 Quoted in G. W. Macgeorge, Ways and Works in India: Being an account of the public works in that country from the earliest times up to the present day (Westminster: Constable & Co., 1894), 71
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elite certainly force one to rethink the claims of their centrality in the quotidian lives of the people. How public were the “public works of the Ahom state”?

It was clearly not a question to be entertained in the English archive. There was a certain convenience in understanding the Tungkhungia seizure of manpower for the irrigation and construction projects as a form of “public service” and labeling the contemporary Konbaung or Singpho seizures as instances of “slave raids.” In order to think of the paikan services beyond the grids of such convenience, we must first resolve what exactly distinguished the paiks from the “slaves.” The plain answer is, there was no absolute and unsurpassable boundary operational at all times in all places. The enormous confidence with which the historians usually paint a neat Tungkhungia world of subjugation is somewhat baffling. It continues to be believed that the ideal paik had soldierly duties, could not be bought or sold in the market, was not accessible for the entire stretch of a year and possessed the theoretical capacity to substitute manual labor with money sums. None of these privileges was available to an ideal “slave.” Moreover, the paik belonged to “the State” while the slaves were “permanent and hereditary possessions” of the elite individuals or families.

Two difficulties, at least, confront this legal abstraction. First, while two overarching categories – paiks and slaves – organized the early British understanding in this regard, the survival of a large number of vernacular terms indicates the remarkable level of stratification within each totalized condition. What exactly were the differences between the likchau and the khinwals. How did one distinguish between a babatia and a lagua? Why were the bandibatis priced differently than the gatis? No direct answer is forthcoming from the standard histories. Second, thinking the so-called Ahom State outside of, and as distinct from, the network of the elite individuals or families blurs the simple fact that the paikan obligations were not impersonally exacted. What is described as paikan service to the State was usually experienced by an individual paik as service to his specific got-holder.

Let us look at the category of likchau, for example. Commentators as separated in time and purpose as Francis Jenkins and Amalendu Guha agree that the likchau belonged to the class

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30 See, for example, the correspondences between C. Metcalf, H. Hopkinson and W. Muir in “Neglected State of the Roads in Assam”, Foreign Department, Political-A, April 1865, 101-103 [NAI]
31 Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, 565
32 Cf. Moneeram, buranjivivek ratna, 218.
33 Amalendu Guha, who has done most to popularize a neat picture of the Ahom slave-world, appears inexplicably inattentive to the problems of treating the twentieth-century fabrications of buranjis as pristine precolonial sources. See Chapter Four for a discussion of this issue.

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of paiks. Guha defines them as nearly one-ninth of “all registered paiks” who “served their terms as servitors ... of the nobles/officers in command.” 34 Jenkins insisted that these particular paiks “possessed no fixed estates cultivated by the Pykes, for the Liksoos were attached to the Offices [“of the State”] and resumable.” 35 Accordingly, Scott is reported to have “granted likchaus and land” to various ex-Tungkhungia officials and “bhadraloks” in 1825-6. 36 If the State control over the likchaus seems relatively stiffer than the other paiks from these descriptions, then the 1826 Kuboolyut of the Bor Senapati reveals a quite different trend. In reporting the details of the “Pykes belonging to the Phokuns, Burrooahs, Brahmins, and others that are under me”, the Matak chief stated that out of the total 420 “Gotes” under his jurisdiction, “42 Gotes are my own Liksos, 11 belong to the Hazaree Keeaahs, 5 Sykeaahs, 15 Burakayees, 42 are Raj Sumunlyahs (provide rice), 5 to the Naogs.” The service of these 120 gos, both Scott and the Bor Senapati appear to have agreed “according to the custom of the country”, was not accessible to the State. “300 Gotes remain, deducting these. Of these 150 are fighting men, 150 laborers: these I will furnish”, said the Matak chief. 37 Most of the aforementioned criteria of an ideal paik were inapplicable to a likchaus. His exclusively agrestic obligations, his tied status to the estates of the got-holders, his lack of rights to “pykar land” and the consequent inability to substitute manual labor with cash render him almost indistinguishable from the khatons, who, we are told, belonged to the class of “slaves” and worked the khat of the got-holders. 38 As the reader may recognize, this is not at all to argue that there was no distinction operative between the various groups of the working population; on the contrary, let us say, there were too many, and the simple binary of paiks and “slaves” seems inadequate, even disingenuous, in explaining the situation. Just as the likchaus smudge the boundary between a model paik and a textbook “slave”, at another end of the spectrum the category dhana fuzzes the line

34 Guha, The Ahom Political System, 23. See also Guha, baisnavadar parā māyāmarīyā bidrohalai, 18
35 F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Revenue, Assam, to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated Gowahtty, 13 November 1849, No. 192, in “Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam”, 1849-50, Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No. 11 [b], 59, IOR MF 1/ Fiche No. 868 [OIOC]
36 Moneeram, buranjī vivekratna, 224
between the paiks and the a-paikans. Vetch translated the term a-paikan ("oppkhari") or non-paik as "respectable." By the end of the eighteen twenties, the term "bhadralok" (along with bhal-munshia), carrying a somewhat similar meaning, was in circulation in Namani to distinguish a rank of people from the paiks. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, a Duaria Barua at Hadirachauki who eventually became a sheristadar in the Scott administration, clarified in 1829 that "in Assam those who do not have to pay tax through bodily services [śārīrīk nōjaswa] are called charmā or independent [svaṭtanvā]. In that case they are considered in the bhadrālok class." Muneeram Datta, who employed his detailed knowledge of the Tungkhungia customs in the service of the British Indian authorities and later the Assam Company, mentioned in 1838 that there were three slabs of the extraordinary kungari tax in 1822 for every household of the "a-paikan bhadraloks" (Rs. 10/15, Rs. 50/60, and Rs. 100/120) while each paikan got had to pay Rs. 5. How, then, are we going to approach the figure of the paik? — In terms of servility, dependence and physical work which distinguished it from the charmā? Or in terms of freedom and customary rights which set it apart from the "slave"? Posed in this manner, the question already offers the paiks as a stable middle ground lying between the poles of utter slavery and absolute freedom. However, there were charmás "amongst" the paiks too, and it was customary for the highest Tungkhungia officials to frequently represent themselves as paiks of the Swargadeo. The paikan-apikan divide cannot be taken to imply an unchanging categorical distinction between the unfree and the free, just as the slave-paik binary puts substantial overlaps out of sight. In the absence of conclusive evidence at this state of research, we find it more worthwhile to think through the history of such "boundary-speech" as developed and deployed by the early nineteenth-

39 H. Vetch, Deputy Commissioner of Assam, to A. J. M. Mills, Sudder Judge on Deputation, dated Gowhatta, 22 June 1853, in Moffatt Mills, Report, 71
40 Dhekiyal Phukan, asām buranji, 52
41 Moneeram, buranjī vivekrainā, 217. Goonabhiram Borooah, in his 1884 history, uses the phrase "a-paikan charmū" in this context. See Borooah, asām buranjī, 117
42 Guha, baisnaviidar parā māyāmariyā bidrohalai, 20. Guha has rather unquestionably popularized Bhuyan’s casual classification of paiks into charmū paiks and kāndī paiks. The publication of Padmeswar Naobaisha Phukan’s 1901 asam buranjī, ed. Lakshmi Nath Tamuli (1901. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 2005) opens up a new possibility by staging the fundamental difference as one between the "khelūdā" and the "charmūdā."
43 Moneeram, buranjī vivekrainā, 106
century British officers in order to mark the several “insides” and “outsides” of an identity than treating the categories as clear-cut totalities.\textsuperscript{44}

In other words, we must address the complicated process of the staging of the \textit{paik}. The articulation of a definite boundary between a slave and a \textit{paik} was a logical corollary of the extrication of an abstract median figure from a got. In 1825 when David Scott was prompted by the reports of “a partial famine” to issue a proclamation “permitting Payicks, or persons owing service to the State, to sell themselves as slaves or bondsmen”, he was confident that though “repugnant to the feelings of Englishmen”, the action was “agreeable to the former custom of the country in similar cases.” Accordingly, the Government of Bengal “relinquished all claim to the services of those inhabitants of Assam, who, under the sanction of [Scott’s] proclamation, contracted an obligation to serve private individuals for their lives, during the pressure of the famine.”\textsuperscript{45} The euphemism of “serv[ing] private individuals for their lives”, however, did not satisfy the vigorous defenders of the free labor ideology in London. “Slavery in every form is an evil of great magnitude, and peculiarly revolting to the moral feelings of Englishmen”, regretted the Court of Directors. “Mr. Scott should have felt that the extension of slavery was an evil of no ordinary importance” whereas some “temporary relief from the Government would have obviated that dreadful necessity of selling themselves as slaves for life.”\textsuperscript{46} Although Scott defended his action in an uncommonly bold language claiming that the option of slavery was much more agreeable to the \textit{paiks} themselves than the remaining alternative of death from starvation,\textsuperscript{47} the force of the Court’s letter was felt in the subsequent administrative measures adopted in the frontier.

The convertibility of \textit{paiks} into “slaves” was to be restrained, Scott was told; rather, the task was to commute “slaves” into \textit{paiks}. History had to move in one direction in the enlightened nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{44} We owe this particular use of the phrase “boundary-speech” to Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, \textit{Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 342

\textsuperscript{45} Extract Political Letter from Bengal, Dated 8 May 1829, F/4/1115, File No. 29887 [OIOC]

\textsuperscript{46} Bengal Political Department, 10 March 1830, No 3, E/4/272, No. CXII [OIOC]

\textsuperscript{47} “That slavery ... is repugnant to the feelings of Englishmen, I am well aware. But the question in this case to be considered was not whether slavery should, under ordinary circumstances, be patronized and encouraged, but whether I should, in defence to the speculative opinions of my own countrymen, and in defiance of the wishes and feelings of those who were alone interested in the result, doom to certain death hundreds, if not thousands, of a starving population by refusing them permission to obtain the means of saving their lives upon terms, which to them at least seemed advantageous.” Quoted in Meena Sharma Barkataki, \textit{British Administration in North-East India (1826-1874): A Study of their Social Policy} (Delhi: Mittal, 1983), 41
In the envisioning of the paiks as properties of the impersonal State, there was a sad recognition that "slaves", as personal properties, could not be taxed. Allegedly, a thorough reading of the pera kakat or "settlement papers" compiled during the reign of Hsonenhpa Pramatta Singha (c. 1744-51) led David Scott to believe that the revenue of Kamrup had been traditionally settled under the semi-hereditary class of Chaudhuris, who much like their contemporary zamindars in Mughal Bengal were not officially recognized as proprietors of the soil but held superior right over the lands from which they collected revenue.⁴⁸ As was common with the early nineteenth-century orientalist administrators, the developments of the intervening years were seen as unlawful deviations from the true customs of the country. Scott decided to "restore" things to their original status as understood in terms of the pera kakat. In Lower Assam, the Pergunnahs were as far as possible let to Assamese under the demarcation of Chowdry ... on a very moderate assessment varying from seven annas to one rupee per poorah", recounted Rutherford. "The rents of each Pergunnah was [sic] farmed to the individual who was bound to pay the stipulated amount into the treasury but no adequate measures in practice appear to have been adopted to secure the ryots from extortion."⁴⁹ Between 1825 and 1833, the parganas, tahles and mahals of Lower Assam were put on auction, and a number of a-paikan bhadhales were encouraged to bribe their way to Chaudhuri-ship.⁵⁰ By 1833 the official accounts began to reveal the Chaudhuris as a typically unscrupulous and oppressive lot. Tales of their corruption, mismanagement and unkindness filled the Collector trio's reports. The Chaudhuris' "dreadful extortion ... has beggared the ryots and rendered a large portion of a country waste", complained Rutherford, who was particularly shocked by "the evident loss of the State" caused by the desertion of the cultivators. Mahals after mahals were reported to be in arrears. Thousands of paiks were seen gathering "just without the line of boundary, some in the act of leaving, others already settled, driven there [in the "Bootan" jurisdiction] as they said by the extortion of the Chowdries." While Robertson groaned that the last four years' unrealized dues in Assam "now amount to upwards of five lacs of

⁴⁸ Barpujari (ed.), Comprehensive History of Assam, vol. IV, 30-1
⁴⁹ Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14 [NAI]
⁵⁰ Ibid. "To obtain office [a Chaudhuri] had to fill the pockets of the petty officials at the court. If installed, he was required to furnish a security and also to deposit in advance revenue for six months before he had collected any. To meet his immediate liabilities he had to borrow money at interests varying from 50 to 120 per cent per annum." H. K. Barpujari, Assam in the Days of the Company (1826-1858) (Gauhati: Spectrum, 1980), 45
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Rupees”, Matthie testified that the ryots had fully paid “their part.” Bogle located the main problem in the structure of taxation: “Even persons of intelligence would be puzzled to say how much a ryot would have to pay to the Government. To the unfortunate peasantry the account must have been wholly incomprehensible.”

“In but one instance,” wrote Bogle, “do I find that the system actually in force corresponds to that set forth in collection papers.” Despite Scott’s claims, the pera kakat was not running the system. “[T]here has long been one assessment in the office and another in the pergunnah”, said Bogle, “each Chowdrie has gone on a plan on his own. Every domain is assessed in a different manner and the greatest confusion exists throughout the whole.”

Nevertheless, in an attempt to draw a general picture, Bogle listed seven kinds of “claims” that a Chaudhuri usually had over the individual cultivators:

1. Khurreeketane or House Tax as per classes
2. Goa Dhun or Poll Tax per Pyke 2 rupees
3. Jumma Muttee Tax: 7 annas per poorah 1.5
4. Commission 6.4 per cent
5. Mooltana 8 annas per cent
6. Profit and Loss 1 per cent
7. Buroinee varying from 12½ per cent to 37½ besides whatever seem may have been his share of the tax on such lands attached to the villages as could not be let to individuals.

The new commissioner Francis Jenkins exclaimed, “I can see myself no reason, for instance, in the nature of the laws of the country calling for such a diversity of rates.” Without “minute valuations”, “considerable agricultural knowledge and local experience”, said Jenkins, it was impossible for the European officers to determine the accurate amount of each cultivator’s revenue obligations as long as the claims continued to be judged in percentage.

The simplification of the assessment seems to be required no less for the protection of the Ryotts from fraud and injustice, than to save the executive officers from that burden of

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51 Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14 [NAI]
52 A. Bogle, Officating Collector, Goalpara, to T. C. Robertson, the Agent to the Governor-General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated 10 February 1833, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86 – 111 [NAI]
53 Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14 [NAI]
minute detail which they now vainly labour under and which deprives them of the least leisure for the suggestion and superintendence of any plans for the general amelioration of their districts. The present state of things has had a most unhappy aspect in causing the population to be always removing from one district to the other and to prevent this without which no steady improvement can well be expected. It seems not only necessary to simplify the rates of assessment for each particular district but also as far as practicable to introduce a general rate of taxation throughout the districts of Lower Assam.\footnote{F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated 22 July 1833, in Foreign Department (P.C.), 11 February 1835, Nos. 82-106 [NAI]}

The simplification of assessment and the abstraction of the paik defined themselves in function of each other. Calculability of taxes and identifiability of the tax-payers were equally important conditions. In the "old system", said Jenkins,

slaves were not taxed, and in consequence of this exemption and the plague of the Poll Taxes and personal services, many Pykes were content to be called slaves of the families who could afford them adequate protection; this led to such extensive concealments of Pykes, that Mr. Scott instituted an inquiry into the titles by which slaves were held, and the result was that upwards of 12,000 persons were restored to the ranks of the Pykes. Many however amongst these were improperly retained in slavery, having been originally the children of ryots or bondmen.\footnote{F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Revenue, Assam, to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated Gowahatty, 13 November 1849, No. 192, in "Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam", 1849-50, Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No. 11 [b], IOR MF 1/ Fiche No. 868 [OIOC]}

It is unsurprising to see that in less than hundred years' time, this reclassification was reported by Gait as an act of liberation: "David Scott is said to have released 12000 slaves in Kamrup alone."\footnote{Gait, History of Assam, 242} Emancipation, as has so perceptively been said, was after all "a test, a test of the slaves": "Would the slaves show themselves to be universal men and women, responsive to the rationality of the market?"\footnote{Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt and Rebecca J. Scott, Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 21} An effort was made towards this end by employing these released or reclassified "slaves" to work the unoccupied "waste lands."\footnote{T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier, to Macsween, the Secretary of the Government of India, Judicial Department, dated 25 August 1834, Judicial (Civil) Proceedings, Government of Bengal, No. 19 [WBSA]} Allowing the "waste lands a remission of rent for the first three years", said Rutherford, "had contributed to retaining many of the inhabitants in the country, who would otherwise
have deserted it.” 59 An elaborate scheme of registration was adopted in 1830 to give it a try. John Neufville, the Political Agent of Upper Assam, was directed by Scott “to open a register for a period of six months to record the names of all slaves within his jurisdiction.” It was proclaimed that the unregistered “slaves” would be considered “free” after the expiration of the period. Every transfer or “sale” of “slaves” was henceforth to be registered with the British officials. 60 Classification was an important matter. In the new compulsory “slave register”, the “private individuals” were required to enter the names of their servitors specifying their legal status. If a person was catalogued as a “slave”, then the “master” had to pay an annual tax for each of his “slaves.” On the other hand, he was exempted from such a tax in the case of a “bondsman”, over whom he could have only time-bound and specified claims. 61

A number of studies point out today that drawing the line between coerced and free labor had always been a contested enterprise, since “[p]ractically all labor is elicited by confronting workers with a choice between work and a set of more or less disagreeable alternatives to work.” 62 As we begin to probe the compulsions which came to constitute the range of alternatives in early nineteenth-century Assam, we understand that the classificatory struggle

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59 Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14 [NAI]

60 At this point we may mention that according to the Bengal Regulation X of 1811, “[t]he importation of slaves whether by land or sea, into the places immediately dependent on the Presidency of Fort William” was “strictly prohibited.” But the Regulation said nothing about “slavery” as existent in these places. (The full text of the regulation, passed by the Vice President in Council, is available in Extract Bengal Judicial Consultations, 6 August 1811, No. 125 [WBSA]). In other words, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, “internal slavery” was permitted in British Bengal but bringing in “slaves” from the foreign territories was identified as a punishable offence. (See Amal Kumar Chattopadhyaya, Slavery in the Bengal Presidency, 1772-1843 (London: Golden Eagle Publishing House, 1977) for a detailed discussion.) As David Scott very soon discovered, it had a crucial implication for the territory occupied during the course of the Burma War. In July 1825 it was considered “unnecessary that the government should at present determine whether Assam is or is not to be considered as a foreign territory.”(Circular letter of Governor-General-in-Council, 3 July 1825, in Extract Bengal Judicial Consultations, 21 July 1825, No. 125 [WBSA]) Scott, in his multiple letters to the Council and the Nizamat Court, insisted that no specific policy concerning slavery could be adopted in the north-eastern frontier without a definitive legal status of the occupied territories. If the occupied territory was to be considered as situated within the jurisdiction of the Bengal Regulations, then “the importation of slaves” would merely be a “transfer”, an internal relocation of moveable properties. On the other hand, if the territory was to be judged as “foreign”, then the relocation would be liable to penal action. (See Sharma Barkataki, British Administration in North-East India, 140-4 for a concise account of these correspondences.) By 1828, in Lower Assam, at least, the problem was solved. It was declared a part of the Bengal Presidency and the sale of “slaves” became duly legalized and formalized.

61 Sharma Barkataki, British Administration in North-East India, 146-50

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actually revolved around a strategic deployment of the *gimiti-gādhām* principle. The distinction between a *paik* and a "slave" was eventually worked out as the gap between an occupant cultivator and a landless worker. In April 1833 "the pyke system" was officially put to rest, and hope was expressed that "the reduction of taxation to an assessment on the land or ploughs and a house tax" would bring the Assamese *paiks* into line with the Indian *ryāx*. It was in the same year that the Charter Act provided for a centralized administration for the scattered British Indian territories and the British parliament theoretically agreed to abolish slavery throughout the empire. Lower Assam was now considered an integral part of a new spatial sequence. Extracted from the *gt* and abstracted from other portions of the subordinate population, the *paik* of Lower Assam was christened the *ryāx*.

In their frenetic pursuit of the taxable individual, the British authorities were led to unforeseen encounters. Jenkins' characteristic proposal "to introduce a general rate of taxation" throughout the districts of British Assam was dependent on the success of convertibility of the majority of the ex-Tungkhungia subjects into tax-paying *ryāx*. In Lower Assam, each *paik* was said to be assessed according to the quantity of land in his occupation. The local officials insisted on issuing *patta* "to all Paiks which would put them on the same footing as the Khood Khast cultivators (in Bengal).

The lands may thus be now considered as the bona fide property of the occupants, but still it is not so legally, nor is it I believe generally so understood by the natives themselves, but it is to be hoped that the tenure of the land will be soon no longer dubious by the Government proclaiming by a declaratory enactment a proprietary right to the land actually in the occupation of the present holders.

Although the proposal to confer proprietary rights upon the *ryāx* was brought up time and again by the frontier officials, and although the Board of Revenue was theoretically in accord with them, the Supreme Government was not extremely enthused about the matter. The local officials were directed to concern themselves more about the ways of instituting a uniform land assessment than about the legal details of a tenurial regime.

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63 "Minute by the Governor-General, 8 April 1833", in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86–111 [NAI]
64 "Memorandum regarding the Management of Upper Assam under a Native Prince by Major White", in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86–111 [NAI]
65 Jenkins, *Valley of the Burhampooter*.
66 See the correspondences in Revenue Department, 16 March 1841, Nos. 48-50 [WBSA]
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Assembling the Assessable

It is important to note that the ceremonial abolition of "the pyke system" did not immediately bring about a uniform rate or mode of assessment throughout Lower Assam. In fact, it proved particularly difficult to generalize the abstract gamiti-gadhlan principle as the European officers came to recognize that the idea of levying tax on "land" presupposed a particular form of land use by the cultivators which was not very common in the area. "With respect to the value of land generally", Bogle observed in 1833, "as an article of property it does not at present appear to be much prized."

There is so much of it that the inhabitants appear to be at no less to obtain as much as they can cultivate, and I understand they seldom retain the same spot for more than three or four years, as at the end of that time it is so much exhausted that it is more profitable for them to allow it to run waste and direct their labours to clearing away jungle to the extent of their wants, as the jungle is chiefly the Khugras or reed grass, it is very easily cut down, it is then burnt which operates like manure to the soil, and [in] the course of a few months it is ready for the seed. The crops obtained from the first sowings are very rich. "Although it is not customary to cultivate the same place for any length of time", said Bogle, "this does not seem to be attributable so much to any fault in the soil as to indolence in the people." We shall have numerous other occasions in this dissertation to discuss indolence and the more predictable mythologies of the empire. At present, we wish to draw attention to this particular mode of cultivation. The proposed "simplification of assessment" involved stable and measured area-units defined by survey which could be multiplied by a general unit-rate to produce the exact amount of assessment for a particular plot. Its radical incompatibility with the prevailing culture of itinerancy, as described by Bogle, is understandable. The proposals to confer proprietary rights upon the Nyas were made with the precise hope that such arrangements would keep the cultivator tied to a defined, locatable and assessable plot. Rutherford was disturbed to find

67 A. Bogle, Officiating Collector, Goalpara, to the Commissioner of Revenue, 17th Division, dated 25 February 1833, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86 – 111 [NAI]
68 What we call itinerant cultivation has been alternatively called "shifting plough cultivation" and "fluctuating cultivation" by Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam. Our unease with these two terms may become clear in the course of discussion. Briefly, one of these terms explicitly prioritizes the instrument (although without adequate data) and the other implicitly echoes the imperial concern about productivity.
that an Assamese who has no movables but what he can carry with him and where building materials are so easily to be had, must find it is his interest to clear and cultivate a patch of land for two years, then evacuate and proceed to another spot in another Pergunnah and there prosecute the same system. There are many who live in this way so the evident loss of the State for the land cultivated by the individual for one year became waste again by desertion, and may thus be taken up ad infinitum.

"I do not believe the Assamese would adopt this method from choice," argued Rutherford, "as although an idle set, they are sincerely attached to their homes." His favorite targets were the non-European revenue officials, the Chaudhuris (in Nāmani) and the Kheldars (in Ujāni). Their "oppression" and "mismanagement" forced the ṯak to be perpetually on move.69 The categories of compulsion and choice – whether the Assamese ṯak was a helpless victim of the cruel native collectors or a willful idle who avoided the troubles of weeding and manuring his plot – structured the particular insensitivity of the official discussion towards the question of the cultivators' access to a wider range of land than contained in the "two poorahs" of gamati land.70 Moreover, itinerancy was a fairly common weapon of the weak to evade the revenue demand of the powerful. Bogle indeed thought that in some particular areas "the circumstance forms a good argument for the institution of a plough tax [...] which would certainly be less troublesome than an impost on land, the number of ploughs being easier ascertained than the extent of surface."71

Rutherford also recommended to continue “the plough and hoe-tax in Raha, Morung, Jummona Mookh and Chapoooree mehals” of Nagaon.72 Like Bogle’s “Pergunnahs bordering on the Bhramapootra,” these too were identified as char and chaupari areas – “islands surrounded by deep channels, and covered with reed and grass jungle” – where the cultivators had to wager their efforts on an uncertainty defined by the remarkable fertility of the land as well as the frequency of early and unpredictable inundations that often swept

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69 Quoted in India Political Despatch from the Court of Directors, Foreign Department, 3 December 1834, No. 14 [NAI]
70 Sunjib Baruah points out that after all the gamati “was only a small part of the land to which the peasant households had access. Peasants had access to surrounding land both for occasional cultivation, to collect fish, fruits, and vegetables and for essential non-agricultural purposes such as collecting house-building material and raw material for basket-weaving, etc. and to raise silkworms. [The] ga-mati was not the only ‘property’ from which a family had to make a living.” Baruah, Durable Disorder, 90
71 Bogle also expected that a plow tax would encourage people to maximize the use of their plows and bring more land under cultivation for which they would not be separately assessed. A. Bogle, Officiating Collector, Goalpara, to the Commissioner of Revenue, 17th Division, dated 25 February 1833, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 30 May 1833, Nos. 86 – 111 [NAI]. Emphasis added.
72 Moffatt Mills, Report, 450
away the crop. Ever since the settlements of 1833-34, plow-tax has continued to be seen as a concession to a certain whimsical geography. What such representations pathetically miss is that the geographical argument was only one, and in fact a dispensable, part of the imperial reasoning.

In the dhur-chapui areas of Darrang, for example, Matthie did not allow plow tax in 1833-4, but instead "farmed out" the mahals to "the highest bidders." Moreover, within a few years the substitution of plow (and hoe) taxes by "proper land assessments" began to take place in the very areas that Bogle and Rutherford had kept separated for allegedly geographical reasons. In 1840-41, "the plough-tax was discontinued in [those] Pergunnahs bordering the Bhramapootra" where Bogle had noticed the predominance of itinerant cultivation, "and all the lands were assessed at one Rupee per poorah, except the Furringhattee, on which a rate of fourteen annas was fixed." We shall shortly discuss the related question of differential rates and the categories of land classification. At the moment, let us take note of the fact that in Nagaon, "[i]n 1839-40, the land-tax was introduced in five mehals, in place of the plough-tax," and again, "[f]rom 1841-42 to 1851-52 the land-tax, in place of the plough-tax, was gradually extended year by year to the remaining mouzahs." The geographical explanation of plow-tax, therefore, falls to pieces when we see that without any corresponding attempt at restructuring the reportedly flood-prone geographies, the authorities slowly continued to convert the plow-tax terrains into land-tax terrains. This conversion was primarily directed at restraining the practices of itinerant cultivation. This in turn points at the availability of a particular stereotypical repertoire to the entire British Indian establishment of taxation in the frontier - a repertoire that grew out of the firm scientific conviction of the British officials that civilizational advancement and itinerant cultivation were mutually incompatible. While as an instrument of crop growing, plow - compared to hoe, dao and sticks - was believed to be representing a considerable "upward shift of the production function" and of general "improvement," it was not a favorite measure of taxation since the plow, by itself, was no guarantee for the stability of cultivated plots. But such stability was essential for the imperial settlement operations. The implications

73 Ibid, 446
75 Ibid, 321, 450

Enigma of the Interior
of the much-trumpeted “emancipation” of the paiks from the obligations of the gos, we submit, are better understood in the context of the immediate reterritorialization to which they were at once subjected.

“The Assamese never cultivate the churs and generally leave the bank of the river totally uncultivated,” reported Robertson in 1833 while explaining to his superiors why “a long dreary track of land and jungle is ... interposed between the two divisions of central Assam.”

Jenkins possibly proved himself to be a more accurate observer when he maintained that there were “parts” in the province, “where by reason of heavy inundations the lands were not constantly cultivated.”

It seems that we cannot begin with a ready assumption about the constancy of “wet rice cultivation” in early nineteenth-century Assam (as opposed to the inconstancy of dry agriculture); rather the need is to critically address the very constitution of this “commonsense” assumption. “Some features of tribalism,” writes Guha, somewhat abruptly, “such as rotation of land, cooperative labour forms and slash-and-burn methods continued to coexist with the use of the plough in agriculture.”

On the contrary, we submit, histories driven by such notion of “coexistence” are necessarily blind to the complexities of the disentangling process through which these “features of tribalism” were separated from “the use of the plough in agriculture.”

“[T]t is frequently hard to know whether what are the finest rice lands one year will not be thrown out of cultivation the next,” wrote an exasperated Brodie in 1840. Like many of his European colleagues, he thought that the “inconstancy” of cultivation was a simple reflection of “the insecurity of the crops” which, in turn, was proportional to technological disadvantages such as neglect of the “bunds” or river dams.

There were, again, some others amongst the European officers of the province, for whom the inconstancy was a function of the innately listless nature of the Assamese, a “habit” of the idler race. As late as 1860, Assam was typically described in the Government documents as “a sparingly cultivated

77 T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Guwahatty, 25 April 1833, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 6 June 1833, Nos. 106-8 [NAI]
79 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 221
80 Brodie, Officiating Magistrate, Seebisgar, to F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North Eastern Frontier, No. 95, dated 7 July 1840, in Foreign Department, Political Branch, 16 March 1840, Nos. 108 - 109 [NAI]
country ... with a scanty population of migratory habits, and having sequestered churs and scattered cultivation in the midst of forests."\textsuperscript{81} Both the approaches, however, shared a common contempt about the practice of itinerancy, and much like what Bela Malik notes in the context of the so-called \textit{jhum} cultivation in the British Garo Hills, this contempt tended to inform the calculated inattention to the details of the "throwing away of land" in early nineteenth-century Assam proper.\textsuperscript{82} Consequently, our present attempt to indicate the centrality of the practice from the minorized references in the imperial archive can only offer a broad and provisional narrative which has to be necessarily qualified by further and intensive research.

That some of the most detailed discussions of the "throwing away" or "resignation of lands" are available in the 1854 Report of Moffatt Mills is not a coincidence. A Calcutta judge with "considerable experience in making settlements," Moffatt Mills was deputed in 1853 to review the condition of the imperial revenue administration in Assam proper, particularly to reappraise the viability of extending the periodical scope of \textit{nejumi} settlement (which had been mostly annual). He was invariably told by all "the local authorities" that "the only objection to granting long leases arises from the present system of allowing the Ryots to resign their lands." To the Government envisioning of Assam proper as a bounded space with a fully operational regime of property, the widespread practice of "giving in Isteefah [resignation]" was a serious obstruction.

A great quantity of land is resigned yearly, but the same extent of land is almost invariably again taken up. ... On the Mouzahdars [of the mouzas settled on leases] attempting to realize rents from the lands thrown up, the Ryots threatened to resign, when the Mouzahdar cancelled their own leases and took annual settlement.

On the whole, Moffatt Mills thought, "[t]he circumstances of Assam are peculiar." Although the "Government is the landlord, and it is in its power to impose such conditions in regard to the resignation of lands ... as it may deem proper," still "the Ryot has been

\textsuperscript{81} F. H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Agent to the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, dated Head Quarters, Chota Nagpur, 20 January 1860 in \textit{SELECTIONS}

\textsuperscript{82} "[None of the imperial] approaches actually tried to look beyond the phenomenological, and so \textit{jhum} was not really understood by policy makers in the colonial period, a lacuna compounded by the absence of a land revenue levy in the upland regions of north-east India. Empirical surveys on land use practices, productivity, soil types and cropping patterns were never undertaken in areas under \textit{jhum}. Consequently, \textit{jhum} as a practice tended to be captured through superficial and impressionistic categories." Bela Malik, "The 'Problem' of Shifting Cultivation in the Garo Hills of North-East India, 1860 – 1970", \textit{Conservation and Society}, 1: 2 (2003), 87-115
never debarred from relinquishing his holding, though he engaged to pay the rent fixed on it for the term of the settlement, on his giving proper notice. The Calcutta judge, committed as he was to the agenda of making "the period of the next settlement ... fixed for twenty years," made little attempt to understand the practice which had forced the almighty Government to such "peculiar" negotiations in the province. Agreeing with the "Chowdrees of Kamrup," who as tax collectors were understandably susceptible to losses ensuing from such "resignations," he was confident that the *Istefabs* usually "arise from caprice," and recommended a few measures "with a view to check the migratory habits of the cultivators." Although Moffatt Mills wrote that "[i]n well-cultivated villages there are few or no resignations; they occur wholly on the Chappooree mehals," his own and other officers' repeated references to the "problem" do not endorse this brief effort to scale down the extent of the practice. According to his own testimony, "in many of the better cultivated Mouzahs the lands are liable to frequent alterations, ... they are only cultivated for one or two years in succession and then resigned for other virgin land." Indeed, this effectively confirms our previous contention that the *char-chapuri* geography of the early nineteenth-century revenue registers was more an effect of the complex relationship between the prevalent agricultural practices in the riverine low lands and the ideological imperatives of imperial taxation than a straight topographic description.

This was possible because instituting a line between the *chapuri* and the *rupi* lands ("low, flat fields of late-maturing transplanted paddy") was far more difficult than effecting a boundary between "the hills" and "the plains." Throughout the middle of the alluvial plain of the so-called Brahmaputra Valley lay the *chapuri mazes*, scattered on both banks of the river. The proverbial volatility of the Brahmaputra - its shifting course, crashing banks,

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83 Ibid, 6, 12
84 "That resignation of holdings be tendered by the Mouzahdar on or before the 1st January for the ensuing Bengallee year. ... That the Ryots shall not be permitted to resign portions of the land, but that they shall be required to resign the whole of their lands ... That the Mouzahdar shall be bound to exchange exhausted lands of a resident Ryot for new lands ... That resignations of assessed Lakhiraj tenures shall be received, but only on the understanding that the tenures shall lapse to the State ... That ... the revenue of the bari land be remitted on [specific] conditions." Ibid, 12-3. There is at least one passing allusion to the "rationality" of the practice in the autobiography of Harakanta Sharma, the Sadar Amin actively engaged in the early nineteenth-century settlement operations. Harakanta recounted that he had pointed out to Dalton, who was insistent on making a ten-year settlement with the ryots, that it was often a necessity for the "jotrahin" ("jotra-less") ryot to resign his land, but Dalton did not listen. Harakanta Sharma Majundar Barua, *sadarāminar âmujîwani*, edited by Kumudchandra Bardalai (c. 1890; Guwahati: Lawyers' Book Stall, 1991), 41-2. The meaning of the term "jotra" is not clear.
85 Moffatt Mills, *Report*, 7
86 Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, 11
temporary islands and incalculable inundations—not only frequently rendered the European maps of the chapuri areas useless, but also helped structure a form of cultivation there that tried to keep pace with it. In the npúi lands, where alluvium was believed to be more consolidated, relatively more stable settlements (growing the transplanted sāli, instead of the early-maturing abu, which was more common in the chapuri area) were reported to be in existence. These were the tracts which Jenkins described as “so elevated that the inundation spreads over them very gradually.” But for a non-local officer, the difference was often almost impossible to tell apart, because the shifting course of the river and the extent of the consequent annual sand and clay deposits could not be foretold. In 1837 Jenkins noted that “the different cultivations are so very much intermixed as they are throughout Assam” that it was difficult to represent them in the form of a map. And as Butler described in 1847, the forms of cultivation did not greatly differ, and more often than not the same cultivators worked both the areas. What was routinely depicted as inconstancy of cultivation was actually inconstancy of cultivated plots or “peasant holdings.”

Decades later, the Land Revenue Administration Report of the Assam Valley Districts indicated the difference between the respectable ancient English custom of “fallowing” and this “most uncivilized” practice of the Assamese nyās saying that in Assam the cultivator does not retain his holding, and, when the land ceases to yield abundantly, and without imposing on him the labour of eradicating the weeds which became prolific after the second or third year of cultivation, he throws up the land altogether and goes in search of fresh soil; in the majority of cases he never contemplates a return to what he has resigned, though others may doubtless take the land up again at some future day...

Beneath the striking similarity of Rutherford’s 1834 account and this 1885 description runs a common, perceptible fear of the defenders of the property regime: the untraceable cultivator is also untaxable. In 1834, a confident Jenkins indeed reported to the Calcutta authorities that “from increased means of European surveillance, by the total abolition of all irregular

87 As Wilcox noted in 1828, for most of these areas Rennell’s map became obsolete in less than fifty years: “I soon perceived that, instead of merely correcting Rennell’s map for the alterations that have taken place, I must construct one anew; so little resemblance is now to be recognised with the former state of things.” Quoted in Goswami, Rivers and History, 66.
88 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 9-11
89 Jenkins, Valley of the Burhampooter.
90 Ibid.
91 [Butler], Sketch of Assam, 21-3
92 Land Revenue Administration Report of the Assam Valley Districts, 1884-85 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 4
cesses, and the effect of an exact measurement of the lands, we have now the power of preventing any concealment.” 93 But, as any user of the imperial archive knows, the official complaints about “fugitive cultivation” in Assam proper never stopped to buzz in the corridors of the Revenue Department throughout the nineteenth century. 94 It is in this context that the correspondence between the measures of land assessment and the scales of racism becomes unmistakable.

The current orthodoxy has one of its earliest echoes in an 1833 Revenue Department note which briefly defined “the Assamese” as those “who cultivate only with the plough.” 95 In the absence of details, it is difficult to crosscheck the verity of the ascription of an absolute distinction between the plow-users and the hoe or axe-users. The circuits of mobility to which there are veiled references in the official documents certainly cut across the British Indian geographies of Hills and Plains. From the detailed response of Jenkins to a 34-point questionnaire of The Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Calcutta in 1837, it becomes clear that at least by the eighteen thirties a number of “rude tribes [were] hir[ing] themselves [out] as labourers” in the rice-fields of Assam proper. All of them, said Jenkins, “are equally hardy and equally expert labourers with the axe or hoe, willingly turning their hands to any employment they may be required for.” It is interesting to note that he did not see these people as non-Assamese, but rather as “the various races, into which the Assamese are divided,” namely, “the Dooms”, “the Cacharees,” “the Meekirs,” “the Lalungs,” “the Garrows” and “the Rabbahs.” Indeed, in explicit allusion to these people, Jenkins said, “I have no doubt but the supply will keep paces with any demand for agricultural workmen that may be required.” 96 Whether all these cultivators were “plow-users” or not is a question to which there is not a ready answer. But it seems reasonable to contend that plow was neither an ethnic secret nor absolutely central to the self-understanding of its users.

Actually, nonuse of plow was not so much a concern of the early British authorities as was the prevalence of itinerant cultivation. Jenkins had great hopes about the “Cacharees,” who

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93 F. Jenkins, the Agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier, to C. Trevelyan, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Political Department, dated Gohwatty, 2 August 1834, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 21 August 1834, Nos. 56-57 [NAI]
94 For a typical declaration of rewards for the “discoverers of concealed cultivation” in Darrang, see Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department (A), August 1877, File No. 30, Sl. No. 113 [ASA]
95 “Notes on Fisher’s Letter”, dated 8 March 1833, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 6 June 1833, Nos. 106-8 [NAI]
96 Jenkins, Valley of the Burhampooter.
had brought “the Pergunnah of Chatgaree in the District of Durnung ... into a high state of cultivation.” Similarly he exalted “the stock of the ancient Koches and Meches” for their “quiet industrious habits” and physical strength and was happy to report that “they are all equally employed in agricultural occupations.” The problem was, as Hodgson would phrase it in the gap of a few years, these people were “erratic cultivators of the wilds.”

For ages transcending memory or tradition, they have passed beyond the savage or hunter state, and the nomadic or herdsman’s estate, and have advanced to the third or agricultural grade of social progress, but so as to indicate a not entirely broken connexion with the precedent condition of things; for, though cultivators, all and exclusively, they are nomadic cultivators, so little connected with any one spot that neither the Bodo nor Dhimal language possesses a name for village.

As late as 1865, the officers routinely lamented “the constant migration of the Kacharies from village to village within the limits of the same pergunnahs.” Hodgson insisted that although the Kacharis had “no large herds or flocks of their own, to induce them to wander,” they still discovered “in the exhaustion of the worked soil necessity, or in the high productiveness of the new, a temptation, to perpetual movement.”

They never cultivate the same field beyond the second year, or remain in the same village beyond the fourth to sixth year. After the lapse of 4 or 5 years they frequently return to their old fields and resume their cultivation, if in the interim the jungle has grown well, and they have not been anticipated by others, for there is no pretence of appropriation other than possessory, and if, therefore, another party have preceded them, or, if the slow growth of the jungle give no significant promise of a good stratum of ashes for the land when cleared by fire, they move on to another site, new or old. If old, they resume the identical fields they tilled before, but never the old houses or site of the old village, that being deemed unlucky. In general, however, they prefer new land to old, and having still abundance of unbroken forest around them, they are in constant movement, more especially as, should they find a new spot prove unfertile, they decamp after the first harvest is got in.

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97 Ibid.
98 Brian Houghton Hodgson, “On Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Koch, Bodo and Dimal people, with a general description of the climate they dwell in”, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. XVIII (1849), 714
99 C. T. Metcalfe, Civil Officer, Dooar Field Force, to the Junior Secretary, Government of Bengal, No. 324, dated 6 March 1865, in “Neglected State of the Roads in Assam”, Foreign Department (Political-A), April 1865, 101-103 [NAI]. Emphasis in original.
100 Hodgson, Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, 714-5
The understanding of the itinerant cultivators as distinctly pre-proprietorial people was inevitably bound up with the question of taxation. We shall not be mistaken in stating that the dominant approach of the early nineteenth-century imperial administration was to generate two semantically corresponding sets of ethnicity and taxation. Between 1825 and 1831, David Scott had made a series of arrangements with the local powerholders scattered alike in hills and valleys which confirmed their exemption from taxation in return for their “loyalty and friendship.” But in 1833, Jenkins clearly said that he did not believe “that we can have ever contemplated placing the different guars of these petty tribes on the footing of independent and allied states although we have at present granted them immunity from all assessments.” He felt that this was particularly unreasonable because these groups were “in the possession of a fertile tract of country equal to the comfortable subsistence of a million of people.” He concluded with a sigh that “they have made the better bargain at the expense of the more docile Assamese and the rest of our subject[s].”101 This clear statement carries many forces within itself, some of which we shall address in Chapter Six, and some here. In brief, Jenkins inaugurated a policy which was to remain operative in the north-eastern frontier of British India for the rest of the imperial career. The groups based in the more distant and higher ranges of the hills – frequently called “perfect savages” – were to remain exempted from taxation, while the hoe or axe-using “semi-savages,” allegedly residing in the lower ranges or in plains immediately beyond the limits of the settled districts, were to be encouraged to take to plow agriculture through an offer of rent-free land for a fixed period of time after which they would be gradually subjected to relatively lighter assessment. The plow-using “Assamese ryots,” occupying the heart of the valley would of course be brought under the force of full assessment. As the reader may anticipate, the problem often was one of fixing the lines, because the diverse agrarian landscapes did not neatly correspond to Jenkins’s geographical imagination. Moreover, as we have already mentioned, the wet rice regime was not necessarily locked in an oppositional relationship with the dry rice regimes scattered in different parts of the region but often found “an auxiliary labor pool” in them.

In the language of taxation, the difficulties were expressed in a range of taxes that we may collectively call transitional. From the moment of their institution, these taxes were understood to be temporary arrangements which would prepare the semi-savages for full land assessments. Against the tenor of the textbook histories, it is important to emphasize

101 Jenkins, Report on the North-East Frontier, 16-7
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that references to plow-tax, poll-tax, capitation-tax, hearth-tax, and house-tax in nineteenth-century Assam were not necessarily surviving traces of a pre-British "system." On the contrary, these anomalies were often consciously constituted in the process of making Assam proper a fiscally compacted unit. "Throwing the entire burden on land" was a common expression among the Haileybury-educated officers in the nineteenth century. In Lower Assam that burden was officially thrown on March 1, 1836, when all forms of "capitation tax" were declared "abolished," with special power to the Commissioner for determining the exact operational scope of the order.\textsuperscript{102} For extensive areas in Darrang ("Chooteah, Char Dowar and Now Dowar"), this meant that "the tax on the hearths" was to be replaced by a tax on the "Boree [\textit{b}\textit{a}ri] lands" or "the garden land," land adjacent to the cultivator's home which had previously been exempted from taxation.\textsuperscript{103} The former tax on the hearths, "Chooroo" (or "Sooroos"), was of two rates, "one rupee for the rich, and eight annas for the poor."\textsuperscript{104} The new tax on \textit{b}\textit{a}ri \textit{m}u\textit{t}i was a flat rate of 12 annas, and most probably the poor did not prefer it to "Chooroo." In some areas of Nagaon, at least, where the same set of arrangements were effected in the same year, the "taxation of the gardens [\textit{b}\textit{a}ri \textit{m}u\textit{t}i] caused great dissatisfaction, which led almost to open insurrection, but the Magistrate's prompt measures quelled the disturbance, and the people silently acquiesced in the measure."\textsuperscript{105}

It is really interesting to note that in the same year capitation tax was imposed for the first time on "the Assamese \textit{ry}os" who had been heretofore subjects of the Sadiya Khowa Gohain.\textsuperscript{106} As we have mentioned in Chapter One, the Khamti chief was recently deposed from his station, and now the cultivators working for and under his authority became British subjects, the first \textit{ry}os in Lakhimpur. As this instance of abolishing capitation tax in one district and instituting it in another in the same year candidly suggests, taxation had to correspond to the perceived "stage" of the cultivator. The clearest statement of the official policy is available in a late nineteenth-century directive from Calcutta where the higher authorities clarified that a house tax "would be a retrograde measure" if the Hozais of Nagaon were already cultivating with plow. "If, on the other hand, the Hozais are \textit{jhurang}

\textsuperscript{102} Shrutidev Goswami, \textit{Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam 1826-1874} (Delhi: Mittal, 1987), 20
\textsuperscript{103} Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 402
\textsuperscript{104} Matthie, \textit{Report on Darrang}, 4
\textsuperscript{105} Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 450
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 649
nomads, there can be no objection to a house-tax in their case.” Similarly, the abstraction of land tax was not considered to be suited to those who had been subjects of a savage chief until yesterday. It was in 1841 that “capitation tax was abolished and commuted into an assessment on the land in Lower Matak country,” while in spite of a series of “commutation” in 1852, most of the “Upper Matak country” continued to be assessed at “a capitation tax of two Rupees” for long. Similarly, plow-tax was imposed for the first time in 1841 in the Darrang mutals of “Dowar Kurriaparra, Dowar Baree Goomah and Dowar Khilling,” which till then were not assessed, only to convert them into land-tax areas in 1843.

In Sibsagar, “plow and hoe taxes were retained” in Majuli in the first settlement of 1839 on the ground of its being “principally [a] chur or Chapooroo,” only to be replaced by a land-tax in 1841, as if the intervening two years had altered the geographical landscape of Majuli.

The unity of the taxation landscape of Assam proper was ironically disrupted by its slow but continuous expansion, as discussed in the previous chapter. The expansion of settlement operations and of tea gardens, the “clearings of jungles,” and the projects of road building unavoidably brought the British Indian administration into contact with several small groups of cultivators scattered in different parts of the province whose land-use scope was increasingly restricted by this expansion. Under the rule of the transitional taxes, the cultivators were to be carefully watched and monitored by the European district officers, on whose recommendations the Agent prolonged or ended the transitional period. As some of the abovementioned instances show, in certain areas this conversion could be quick and effective, while in certain others it took a longer time. Accessibility of the specific area, the effective extent of the British seizure of the sequence of circulation, and modes and intensities of resistance from the cultivators appear to have been major determinants in this regard.

“Such is the migrating disposition of the Merees that I doubt the expediency of...”

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107 “Special Enquiries into the Decrease of Revenue in Nowgong”, Revenue and Agriculture Department, October 1899, Nos. 91-103 [ASA]
108 Moffatt Mills, Report, 402
110 In 1836, the [Nagaon] “Mikirs were formed into grades or classes and taxed at four Rupees for a first-rate house, three Rupees for a second-rate house, and one Rupee and eight annas for a third-rate house.” But displeasure of the Mikirs forced the British “to adopt one universal rate for the whole tribe, and accordingly each house, whether large or small, was taxed at two Rupees and four annas a house ...; for this sum each person may cultivate any extent of land he thinks proper.” Ibid, 447. For related details, see Goswami, Aspects of Revenue Administration, 25
commuting the poll-tax into a land assessment at present,” observed Moffatt Mills. “They are an industrious people; they reclaim lands, cultivate them for two or at most three years, and then go to another place, where they employ themselves in a similar manner.” Dalton, according to Moffatt Mills, had an “admirable” plan, that is, of inducing “them to congregate at one or two selected spots on the banks of the Bhramapootra where forest lands abound, and form a colony.”

Locatability, we repeat, was the first condition of taxability.

Dalton confirmed that in their hill settlements, the Miris grew both ṭali (“but [it] is not planted out: they sow the seed as we sow peas”) and ḍmu, and admitted that it was more the required availability of sun than any innate civilizational backwardness which prevented the Miris from taking extensively to rice cultivation. They concentrated instead on red pepper and tobacco (“which succeeds admirably” and) which were traded with the rice-growers in the valley beneath, their own home-grown cereals being bobosa dhān and goom dhān. In the plains of Assam proper, the Miris and the Kacharis were the principal growers of mustard, which by the middle of the century was “almost the only article exported” from the province except tea. As a tea planter bitterly complained to the Ainslie Committee in 1868, “The Cacharees are naturally a migratory race, and never make permanent settlements. A great many have taken to growing mustards on the churs, which is largely exported.”

Itinerant cultivation, clearly, did not prevent them from being partially integrated into the new regime of agricultural commodity production. But taxation was a different game. In the north-eastern frontier, it was charged with the dual functions of a revenue arrangement and an ethnic catalogue. The transitional taxes were considered waiting rooms of civilization.

At least until the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of such waiting rooms were allowed at the heart of almost every district of Assam proper. In Nagaon vast areas were reported to be occupied by “the rude tribes of Mikirs, Nagas, Cacharees, Kookees and

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111 Moffatt Mills, Report, 651
112 “Each village has a certain extent of ground, comprising hills, sides of hills and valleys, which they have been in the habit of cultivating from time immemorial; but not more than a fifth of this ground is under cultivation each season. They cultivate each patch two successive years, and then suffer it to be fallow for four or five, taking up again the ground that has been longest fallow in lieu. They have a superstition, which deters them from breaking up fresh grounds so long as their “Gra” or fallow is sufficient — a dread of offending the spirits of the woods and forest by unnecessarily cutting down the trees.” E. J. T. Dalton, “Report of a visit to the hills in the neighbourhood of the Soobanshiri River (with a map),” Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. XIV (1845), 264-5. Bobosa dhān was classified as Elentine caracana and goom dhān was translated as “Tea woys” by William Griffith in 1837. Griffith, Journal of a visit to the Mishmee Hills in Assam, 834. Dalton described the grain of bobosa as “large, pear-shaped.”
113 Statement of J. Heriot (Manager of the Nowgong Division of the Upper Assam Company), 28 January 1868, in RCSPTC, 13
Lalong's" who successfully resisted the introduction of land assessment and paid varying rates of house-tax. In Darrang, there were separate *mubals* for "Booteahs," "Dufflahs," and "Meerees," who initially retained a portion of land rent-free for some years and after the expiration of the period were assessed at a rate slightly lower than the other *ru*. In Sibsagar, the lands of the Miris were brought under full assessment in 1844 while the Naga Katakas continued to hold rent-free *khats* until 1921. In Lakhimpur, as we have already mentioned, "the Upper Matak country" and many Miri cultivators continued to pay capitation taxes (which were increased from time to time) but some others were brought under land assessment, and a number of them had to taste the worst of both worlds as they were forced to pay both land and capitation taxes.\(^{114}\) It is rather intriguing to see that the baffling diversities mentioned in Moffatt Mill's 1854 *Report* are completely absent in Hopkinson's 1867 *Report* on the basis of which rates of land assessment were almost doubled throughout Assam proper. Even the subsequent settlement reports scarcely mention about transitional taxes in the five *petani* districts. Did Assam proper finally become a consistent land-tax terrain by the middle of the eighteen sixties? Or is this impression just an effect of the altered reporting strategies of the imperial administration?\(^{115}\) In any case, there is little scope for doubt that the coordinated efforts of the imperial administration to ensure tax-wise evenness within the jurisdictional confines of Assam proper did manage to produce a condition in which the earlier problematic of itinerant cultivation could be successfully overwritten by a new question of productivity and related abstractions. As we turn to that question in the next section, it seems important to remind the reader once more that the fiscal unity of Assam proper was continually deferred by its jurisdictional extension. With the numerous small-scale additions to the settled districts, a range of transitional taxes continued to be generated on the fringes of Assam proper until the end of the nineteen thirties. This may help us to understand the specific nature of the British Indian taxation regime in the north-eastern frontier: land assessments did not necessarily follow the so-called expansion of the agrarian frontier; rather, it often happened...

\(^{114}\) Collated from scattered references in Moffatt Mills, *Report*.

\(^{115}\) By this time, David Ludden points out, "the institutions of imperial bureaucracy, ideologies of development, and analytical sciences of management had been combined with industrial technology to form the material and cultural context for agrarian life that we call modernity. Until then, official documents still recorded aspects of agrarian societies that eluded state control and official understanding, but, form this point onward, texts render the countryside through the lens of the modern state's minute and comprehensive managerial empiricism." David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, The New Cambridge History of India IV: 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7
in the reverse way. "[O]ver half a century of proximity to civilisation had failed to redeem the tribes from their native savagery," observed a Local Government memo on the Abors in 1907. Therefore, it was deemed "necessary to assert the rights of the British Government." Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam endorsed the district officers' suggestion "to impose a poll-tax or house-tax on all Abors settled between the "Inner" and "Outer" lines who have not yet been called upon to pay it" and "to levy a tax from the residents of hill villages beyond the "Outer" line on the land cultivated by them between the 'Inner' and the 'Outer' lines". The Governor General, however, did not wish to rush, and the proposal was shelved for the time being.116

Three years after General Bower's army devastated the Abor Hills in the winter of 1911-2, at least six large Padam Abor villages (Bomjur, Dambuk, Silluk, Mimasipo, Mebo and Aiyeng) and a number of smaller Mishmi settlements between the Dibang and the Dihong were forcibly brought within Assam proper. In the following year, "the process was extended to the Pasi-Minyong and Minyong villages near Passighat, and to those Singphos and Nagas living to the south and west of Noa Dihing." In fact, by the end of the Great War, "the remaining Abors as far as the Simen River, the rest of the Singphos and all the Khamtis have been assessed to poll-tax and are now British subjects." The concerned officer clarified,

The test applied in bringing a village under administration was the fact of having any portion of its cultivation in the plains. None of the Padam villages now British are exactly in the plains, but the greater part of the cultivation of each is. The same test was not found practicable in the case of the Pasi-Minyongs, Minyongs, and Galongs in the Pasighat subdivision. There between the Dihong and Simen I made the Bapur Tome Ridge the boundary and taxed every village on its slopes and spurs running down to the plains.117

Such candid confessions shake us out of our trustful slumber on the bed of imperial categories. The expansion of Assam proper is usually described as the inevitable expansion

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116 Shuckburgh, North-Eastern Frontier of India, 12-3
117 "General Administration Report on the Central and Eastern Sections of the North-East Frontier for 1917-18", quoted in Annual Report on the Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1917-18 (Shillong: Assam Superintendent of Printing Office, 1918), 2. By 1919, it was declared that "[t]he whole of the plains area of the district is now under administration and all Khamtis and Singphos and all Abors and Mishmis who live or have cultivation in the plains as far as the foot of the hills pay poll-tax." ["Annual Administration Report on the Sadiya Frontier Tract for the year 1918-19", quoted in Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1918-19 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1919), 3] Between 1920 and 1930, a great number of small, uncatalogued Abor settlements were assessed to poll-tax [Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1929-30 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1930), 3].
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of the agrarian frontier, as the ineluctable supercession of the dry rice regime by the wet rice regime.118 This excerpt, on the contrary, points at the facileness of such assumptions of neutralized sociality. Shortly after Bower’s expedition, his Assistant Political Officer, Arthur Harold Walter Bentinck, had reported with a cynical satisfaction that “[T]he Abors have reached a period of their history at which they must either adopt new methods [of agriculture], such as we are able to teach them, or must risk their whole existence.”

[Their] methods of agriculture have brought them to such a pass that unless they are superceded by better every child that grows up brings them nearer starvation; already hillsides are so steep that it is surprising that even a plant can maintain its hold ... have been brought under cultivation, and there are many clearings on whose fresh lap the swart star can look very sparely indeed. Fields are cropped for three years in succession, and the jungle is then allowed to grow up again for as long as possible, varying from about six years where the pressure on the soil is greatest, as at Riga, to as much as 10-12 years in a few more fortunate villages. For many miles together there is no virgin soil left, and my impression from seeing many score of jhum in all stages was that the soil, partly from too rapid rotation and partly from the tendency of grass jungle (kha og and ikn) to replace and check the saplings, is steadily deteriorating, while some of the oldest lands, on account of repeated jharing, steep hill-sides, and heavy rains, are suffering from denudation. The position, though serious, is one that can be met by improved methods, as, for instance, terracing like that practised in the Naga Hills, and improved implements, which will enable more to be done than a mere scratching of the surface.119

This long description, typical of the official understanding of jhum at that time, characteristically depicts the crisis faced by the Abor cultivators as the singular product of the form’s intrinsic backwardness. What it omits — such as the issues of curtailment of the land-use scope or the Forest Department’s encroachments — are not difficult to imagine.120 But we are interested in a slightly different issue: the estrangement and defamiliarization of jhum, its territorialization in “the Hills” and the concomitant ascription of superiority to the agricultural methods “such as we are able to teach them.” By 1929, while reporting the existence of “hot feelings” between “the Minyong and Pangi tribes of the Abors,” the Political Officer at Sadiya explicitly said “that unless the Abors living in the upper hills will

118 Barpujari (ed), Comprehensive History of Assam, vol. V
119 Quoted in Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 234-5

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take up wet rice cultivation, or abandoning their previous policy of isolation, come down yearly to the plains, as do the Mishmis, in search of work which will support them for several months and enable them to return with a certain stock of food-stuffs, lack of cultivable lands and pressure of population must lead to war, this being the only other outlet for them."\(^{121}\) By and large, this faith in the predestined superiority of "wet rice cultivation" (and its correlate form of wage labor) has remained the unstated agreement among the administrators and historians of British Assam. In 1936, it was reported that "[a]n effort is being made to extend wet rice cultivation amongst the [Minyongs], as land shortage is breaking up the bigger villages in the foot hills."\(^{122}\) In 1939, again, we hear of "[e]ndeavours ... being made to introduce terraced rice cultivation" in the area.\(^{123}\) It is only by purging the elements of territorial conquest from the history of the expansion of wet rice frontier that the discourse of agriculture could become a neutralized discourse of improvement.

**The Ideology of Agriculture**

Disgusted with the difficulties of itinerant cultivation in Assam, the Home Secretary conceded in 1867 that it was almost impossible to consistently hold on to Jenkins's dream of making "[e]very ryot ... equal to and independent of every other ryot."

Where the cultivation ... is so fugitive and uncertain that no reliance can be placed on the continued occupation of the cultivators, the settlement might be made absolutely with the Mouzahdar in the first instance as farmer, with the promise of the proprietary rights if his management should prove successful. Where, on the other hand, the occupiers are permanent, but are not willing to engage for the profit or loss of their respective quotas of revenue, the Mouzahdar would be simply the farmer, bound to collect only the quota of revenue of each occupier of land, but enjoying the profit of the breaking up of such portions

\(^{121}\) *Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1928-29* (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1929), 3
\(^{122}\) *Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1935-36* (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1936), 3
\(^{123}\) *Annual Report on Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1938-39* (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1939), 1
of the waste land within the village boundaries as he might be able to reclaim during the settlement.\footnote{124} In a certain sense, Bayley’s directives only added legal recognition to a process which was already operative in large areas of Assam proper.\footnote{125} But what is more interesting in the correspondence is the specific entwinement of “proprietary rights” and “successful management.” \\textit{Ryotwari} in British India was built upon a sense of failure. It was adopted after the imperial dream of promoting agrarian transformation through the agency of the \textit{zamindars} foundered in Bengal.\footnote{126} But the “improving ambitions” continued to animate various governmental and nongovernmental efforts at securing good and scientific management of peasant “estates.”\footnote{127} 

It is impossible not to deplore the same defective state in the Agricultural, as in every other science in this country. Look where you will – examine the whole scheme of this Indian system, and you find the same results – poverty, inferiority, degradation in every shape. For all these evils knowledge, knowledge, knowledge, is the universal cure.

These three lines from William Bentinck’s reply to the Address of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India formed the epigram of Piddington’s twenty-four-page pamphlet \textit{On the Scientific Principles of Agriculture} published in 1839. “Agricultural knowledge, if diffused amongst the people, would both create revenue, and make its payment less onerous,” argued Piddington.

If we are ever to make India what in theory it has always been \textit{on the point of becoming}, it is surely time to abandon the notion that a surplus revenue is to arise from the taxation of a soil abandoned to the ignorant care of men whose only interest it is to exhaust it, for there is scarcely a writer on the subject who does not assert, that the soil is already overtaxed, and there are few who will not concur with me too, in saying that in all the older districts it is

\footnote{124} E. C. Bayley, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, to H. L. Dampier, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 2818, dated Simla, 27 July 1867, in “Improvement of Land Revenue Administration of Assam and Remission of Assessment”, 1859-72 Board of Revenue Papers, Part-I, SC No. 1-92, File No. 145 [ASA].

\footnote{125} The mumadars of Assam proper had already outgrown the textbook functions of “revenue farmers” and commanded substantial authority over considerable areas of land. See Manorama Sharma, \textit{Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony} (Delhi: Ajanta, 1990) for a concise discussion.


\footnote{127} Ranajit Guha, “Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), \textit{Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 240-4
rapidly becoming exhausted, and a diminution of the land tax on this very ground, has been, I believe, publicly urged in some instances.\textsuperscript{128}

Similarly, "[t]he introduction of improvements in the art of agriculture ... is the only means which can increase the general resources of the country," wrote Anundram Dakaél Phookun in 1853, "ameliorate the condition of the people, raise them to wealth or affluence, advance manufactures and commerce, and teach the Assamese the arts and luxuries of civilized life."

The generalized scheme of improvement through agriculture would only succeed if there was a corresponding improvement of agriculture. The first Assamese to rise to the position of the Sub Assistant Commissioner in British Indian bureaucracy, Anundram was educated in Hindoo College, Calcutta at the Assam administration’s expense. In the premier institution of western education in British India, Anundram was successfully taught the responsibilities of being modern, and when he entered the government service in 1847, he was already firmly committed to the ideology of improvement.\textsuperscript{129} Echoing most of his friends in Calcutta, Anundram requested the Assam authorities to

bring out from Europe and Upper India a sufficient number of men well versed in the art of agriculture, to teach the people the better management of their farms, to instruct them in the cultivation of every variety of valuable products, in improved methods of irrigation, drainage, and embankments, and in short every other necessary means connected with agriculture; that every village be furnished from Europe with a supply of the most useful and important agricultural implements and machines, ploughs, harrows hoes, spades &c, as well as an improved breed of cattle, viz., Bullocks, &c., from Bengal and Upper India; and that a sufficient stock of seeds, plants, and every other species of produce, both Indian and European, be distributed to each village.\textsuperscript{130}

Actually, these were the precise objectives of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Calcutta: to replace the "`heathen' jungles and `slovenly' agriculture with tidy homesteads, neatly tilled fields and industrious peasants."\textsuperscript{131} The landscaping of Assam proper in the cast of the idealized English countryside, however, was easier dreamed than done. As Moffatt Mills realized, even the attempt to fix a "homestead" was ridden with many difficulties, since

\textsuperscript{130} "Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam by Baboo Anundram Dakaél Phookun", Appendix J, in Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 103-4
\textsuperscript{131} David Arnold, "Agriculture and ‘Improvement’ in Early Colonial India: A Pre-History of Development", \textit{Journal of Agrarian Change}, 5: 4 (2005), 515
what the नाग claimed as his bari-mati often lay scattered in a number of villages. Moffatt Mills, in fact, recommended the Government to “restrict his rights to his paternal acres or to such lands as he occupies in his own village. He cannot have, and has not, any hereditary rights of occupancy of lands in other villages, which he cultivates one year and throws up the next.” \[132\]

The fixing of a stable tillage plot and the plotting of the नाग on the map of taxation were mutually reinforcing phenomena.

After three years of intense preparation, an agricultural exhibition was organized for the first time in the province during the last week of December 1866. The two districts of Upper Assam – Sibsagar and Lakhimpur – were characteristically not represented in the exhibition, but token participation came from the districts of Darrang, Nagaon, Kamrup and Goalpara. During the preparatory period, hopes were expressed that the exhibition would acquire “a general gathering to promote a science on which the wealth and prosperity of India, as well as of every individual landholder and cultivator of the soil, must always mainly depend.”

The novelty of an exhibition of this nature will, no doubt, be an attraction to many, but it is desirable that they should all be made as much as possible to understand the advantage they may derive from seeing in one place a collection of the finest cattle and other live-stock produced in Bengal and imported from other countries, of the most elaborate and powerful machinery and the best implements applicable to agricultural purposes.

The Goalpara Committee originally consisted of the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur Sconce, the trusted clerk Moonshee Kafaitoolla, and the local zamindars like Baboo Ramlochan Sirkar, Baboo Pritheeram Chowdry Roy Bahadur and Baboo Protab Chunder Burrooah. But it is interesting to see that in the very first meeting the Committee resolved to co-opt representatives of other zamindars, kayts and Bengali traders, an “amlah of the Gowalparah court”, vakeels, “Garrow Surburakhars”, “some of the leading Garrow luskurs” and the Jongpen (“Jumpe sahib”) of Cheerang Duar. The inclusion of the “Bhutia” and the “Garo” representatives indirectly confirms our previous contention that the line dividing the plow-cultivation and hoe-cultivation was not absolute. It was decided that apart from crops etc, samples of live-stock, spinning wheel, plow and other agricultural implements would

\[132\] Moffatt Mills, Report, 6
also be exhibited. The enthusiastic reformer Goonabhiram Borooah declared a prize of Rs. 25 for "the best Assamese plough exhibited." 133

However, the final exhibition was more than disappointing. Although the Agent Henry Hopkinson and his Secretary A. C. Campbell were themselves present along with the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, Extra Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldai and a number of "native gentlemen" (like Kafaitoolla, Radhikaram Phukan, Balaram Phukan, Lakkhidhar Barua, Chandranath Chaudhuri, and Dulal Chandra), the actual cultivators were not to be seen in great numbers. Prizes worth twelve thousand rupees were declared and an additional amount of two thousand rupees was spent on infrastructure. Only three hundred rupees could be recovered from the sale of tickets. 134

The show was poor on the whole and the jurors were unable in many instances for want of suitable entries to award prizes; considering this was the first exhibition which has been held here and the hesitation with which the natives of Assam [view] any attempts at improvement this shortcoming is not surprising. 135

In his carefully prepared speech in Assamese, the Judicial Commissioner Bivar urged the cultivators to increase productivity and diversify crops. 136 These two were in fact the consistent slogans of the improvement establishment in Assam, and they do allow us to think some of the issues of agrarian history anew. As Richard Drayton suggests, in the imperial lexicon, diversification of crops frequently meant introduction of "improved plant species." 137 David Scott introduced potatoes into the Khasi Hills in 1830. 138 Elliot's plans for growing potatoes in the Naga Hills really took off in the late eighteen eighties, but "the Angamis refused to have anything to do with it and it was only Gurkhas and Kukis who cultivated it." 139 Potato was a common precursor of wet rice in the areas beyond Assam proper. Such introductions were not only aimed at displacing some of the traditional home-

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133 F. R. Cockerell, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal to F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, No. 5200, dated Fort William 11 November 1863, in "Corresponding regarding the Agricultural Exhibition", Commissioner's Office, 1864-67, File No. 441 [ASA]
134 B. R. Phookan, "teipurar krisi pradarsan", onrundoi (January 1867), 5-8
135 Lamb, Deputy Commissioner, Durrung, to H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier, dated Tezpore, 29 January 1867, in "Corresponding regarding the Agricultural Exhibition", Commissioner's Office, 1864-67, File No. 441 [ASA]
136 Phookan, teipurar krisi pradarsan, 7-8
138 Khasi and Jaintia Hills Administration Report for 1875-76 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1876)
139 Reid, History of the Frontier Areas, 110
grown staples like bobosa dhin and goom dhin, they were also intimately tied to the imperial project of shuffling production geographies. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, for example, Egyptian cotton was tried in Hazaribagh, Russian flax in Aligarh, Mauritian sugarcane in Jabalpur and South Carolinian rice in the delta of Bengal. Keeping with these experiments, Californian potato was introduced in Cherra in 1843,\(^{140}\) Carolina rice in Nagaon in 1873,\(^ {141}\) Japanese pea seeds in Lower Assam in 1882,\(^ {142}\) Australian wheat in Goalpara in 1885,\(^ {143}\) and grass seeds from Guinea in the Brahmaputra delta in the same year.\(^ {144}\) All of these experiments failed as disastrously as the attempt to introduce Assam rubber into West Indies, Egypt, and Ceylon.\(^ {145}\) By the end of the century, however, Liberian coffee did well in Sylhet, and the small government plantation of Malta oranges, lemons and citrons which had been started near Theriaghat in 1885 became commercially viable.\(^ {146}\)

This allusion to the abstract geographies of production helps us to address the larger question concerning enhancement of productivity. The issue was almost inseparable from the evolving culture of land classification in British Assam. For most part of the first half of the nineteenth century, land in Assam was treated of in two classes: “Rice lands” (rupit) and “Other lands” (fairingat). Jenkins, who had always prided himself on the “low rate of assessment” in Assam, wrote in 1833 that “[t]he rate, I think, should not be increased.”

I am aware that it has been proposed occasionally to have a greater variety of rates on the land, but any attempt at a minute valuation of lands or crops cannot in my opinion be followed by any benefit to the Government, and must be harassing and unsatisfactory to the people. ..... The introduction of a supposed real valuation of lands, with reference to their

\(^{140}\) Nilangshu Mukherjee, Saroj K. Sanyal, Ashit K. Mukhopadhyay, Manoj Ranjan Ghosh and Arunendu Mukhopadhyay (eds), History of Agricultural Education in Bengal (Mohanpur: Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya, 1998), 136

\(^{141}\) Jogendranarayan Bhuyan, kunabinga šatikār asam-samvād (Dibrugarh: Assamese Department, Dibrugarh University, 1990), 42-3

\(^{142}\) First Report of the Agricultural Department in Assam, from October 1882 to the 31st March 1884 by E. Stack, Director of Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1884), 15

\(^{143}\) Report of the Agricultural Department in Assam, for 1884-85 by H. Z. Darrah, Offg. Director of Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1885), 19, and Report of the Agricultural Department in Assam, for 1885-86 by H. Z. Darrah, Offg. Director of Agriculture, Assam (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1886), 19.

\(^{144}\) Ibid, 20

\(^{145}\) Wright, Rubber Cultivation, 623. See also the correspondences in “Proposed supply of Ficus elastica seed from Assam to the Governor of Lagos in Africa”, Revenue and Agricultural Department (Revenue Branch), June 1890, Proceeding Nos. 89-91, Part B [NAI]

\(^{146}\) Annual Report of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam, for 1896-97 by F. J. Monahan, Offg. Director of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Press, 1897), 22
kinds and the facilities of disposing of the produce, has been advocated, but I think any such scheme will be fallacious for the most part, however conducted, and would be very apt to run into maximum rates for all lands.147

The next Agent surely was much more confident about the precision of science. Within three months of receiving charge from Jenkins, Henry Hopkinson proposed in May 1861 that the land tax should be doubled in Assam, and “the increased revenue so obtained be spent in works of public utility.” In July, the Board of Revenue reported favorably.

With regards to Roopeeit Lands, the District Officers had all recommended an increase, in Durrung and Nowgong from Rupee 1-6 to Rupee 1-8 per poora, or 9 per cent; in Seebshaugor and Luckimpore from Rupee 1-4 to Rupee 1-8, or 20 per cent; the rate in Kamroop remaining at its existing figure of Rupee 1-8 per poora. The Board, however, agreed with [Jenkins] in recommending that the rates for Roopeeit Lands should not be raised. These lands, already taxed higher than the “other lands”, required more care and labor, and were more exposed to risk from bad seasons and inundations. It was at the same time of great importance to encourage the rice crop as much as possible; and the migratory habits of the population, arising from the facilities for taking up new lands for cultivation, rendered it, in the Board’s opinion, altogether inexpedient that the rate on Roopeeit Lands should be increased. In this view the Government finally agreed.

In regard to “other lands” the Board entirely agreed with the District Officers and [Jenkins] that the rates might be raised in Nowgong and Durrung from Rupee 1 to Rupee 1-2, or about 12 per cent, in Seebshaugor from 14 annas to Rupee 1, or about 33 per cent, more valuable crops, the price of which had also latterly greatly risen, being grown on these “other lands”. More than this the Board was not prepared to recommend, in view of the recent stoppage of Opium cultivation, and the existing and prospective impost of assessed taxes.

Under Government Order No. 956 A, dated the 9th September 1861, this proposed increase in the assessment of “other lands” was accordingly sanctioned.

Hopkinson further separated the “homestead and garden lands” (basti) from the category of “Other lands” (farangati), and proposed a “separate and highest rate” for this category. All through Assam proper basti was assessed at Rupees 3 per poora, nupit at Rupees 1-14 per poora, and farangati at Rupees 1-8 per poora.148 The chuparis were included in the last category.

147 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier, to A. J. Moffatt Mills, Sudder Judge on Deputation, dated Gowhatty, 23 May 1853, in Moffatt Mills, Report, 61
148 T. B. Lane, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower provinces, to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, No. 3219 B, dated 18 June 1867, in “Improvement of Land Revenue
Chapter Three

Until the resettlement of 1908, these remained the three official categories of land in Assam. In that year, some *rupit* lands were returned as *bao* and indexed as a separate set. These four categories were further divided into several "soil classes", "according to the use to which they could be put by the cultivator." But what was truly novel about the scheme was the allocation of the "factors" - the numbers assigned to each soil class indicating its "relative productive value." The table of "factors" in Nagaon, for instance, was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Land</th>
<th>Soil Classes</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basti</td>
<td>Bhalbari</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bari</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Takalabari</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rupit</td>
<td>Salitali</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bashatalitali</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lahitali</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balialahitali</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>Jalatak</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dalani</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faringati</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was explained in a subsequent Resettlement Report that

[1] the factor being the index of the comparative value of each class, a *biga* of each class of land has as many soil units as the factor represents; or in other words the "soil unit" is a common measure which being multiplied by the factor gives the index of the comparative value of each class. A *biga* of *lahitali* (Factor-16) has 16 soil units; a *biga* of *bao* (Factor-12) 12 soil units; a *biga* of *faringati* (factor-10) 10 soil units. To make the comparative value easily understandable factor 16 is assigned to the land which produces the common and well-known agricultural produce of the district (and this was transplanted *lahitali* in [Nowgong] district), and the factors for other classes are fixed with reference to this.

It was claimed on behalf of the Government that the "factors" were arrived at only after detailed "consultations with representative villagers" about specificities of soil quality, productivity, marketing facilities, liability to flood or drought, destruction caused by animals, state of health, agricultural indebtedness, and "other general economic conditions." Hence, the subsequent fixing of the unit rates was considered "scientific and accurate:"

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*Administrations of Assam and Remission of Assessment", 1859-72 Board of Revenue Papers, Part-I, SC No. 1-92, File No. 145 [ASA]*

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multiplied by the factor gives the *bigha* rate of the class in annas."149 By the end of the
nineteenth century, the "(1) proportion of settled area to waste, (2) proportion of fluctuating
to permanent cultivation, and (3) average sizes of the fields" had already been reduced to
three "numerical co-efficients" in the expert discourse. Based on these considerations, the
villages were tabulated on the basis of their relative "values."150 Thrown open to the force of
abstraction, the baffling topographic details of the landscape of Assam proper were now
flattened into unequivocally distinct categories of productivity. The classification (of *basti,
nupt, hou and faringsat*), significantly, did not mean anything for the tea gardens: for all lands
taken up under ordinary rules for the cultivation of tea were assessed in the following
manner: 12 annas a *bigha* in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Tezpur; 10 annas in Nagaon and 9
annas in Mangaldai and Kamrup.151 Tea was improvement incarnate.

Indeed, as the Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton pointed out in 1898, the improvement of
the "rice-producing sector" became increasingly important for the tea industry: "the raiyats
cultivate as much food as they need for their own consumption. But they cultivate very little
more, and the large immigrant population employed on the tea gardens has to be fed, for the
most part, on imported rice." To go by Cotton's statistics, in 1876-77 the net import of rice
from Bengal into the Brahmaputra Valley was 411,431 *maur* , which almost steadily rose to
963, 947 *maur* in 1896-97. Bengal itself, said Cotton, occasionally imported rice from
Burma. "And yet the area of uncultivated land in Assam suitable for rice cultivation is
practically unlimited, and the only limit of the exportation of rice from Assam to Bengal
ought to be the capacity of Bengal to receive it."152

The discourse of agricultural productivity received its force from the requirements of the
"plantation sector." The well-being of peasant economy – as H. Z. Darrah, the longest-

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149 S. N. Dutta, *Report on the Resettlement of the Nowgong District during the years 1926 (October) to
1932 (January)* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1933), 20-1
150 *Final Report on the Re-Assessment of the Assam Valley, 1893* (title page missing in the copy consulted
in Secretariat Administration (Record and Library) Department, Guwahati), 3
151 *Final Report on the Re-Assessment of the Assam Valley, 1893*, 6
152 "Note of the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation in Assam and the
Colonization of Waste-lands in the Province," The Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of
Assam to T. W. Holderness, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and
Agriculture, No. 544 Rev. / 4834 R, dated Shillong, the 27th September, 1898, in *The Colonization of
Waste-Lands in Assam being a reprint of the official correspondence between the Government of India and
the Chief Commissioner of Assam, together with comments and criticisms on the scheme and its reception
by the Government of India* (Calcutta: The "Indian Daily News" Office, 1899). *Final Report on the Re-
Assessment of the Assam Valley, 1893* also emphasized this connection.
serving Director of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture in Assam, argued in 1893 — was dependent on the health of the tea economy:

It is because the presence of the foreign coolie has furnished the Assam ryot with a ready market for his surplus produce and increased the demand for it that prices have risen in so marked a manner during the last twenty years. The more foreign labour is imported the larger the market and the greater the demand. The greater the demand the higher the price and, as a natural consequence, the more money available for the man who produces what will command that price.153

Even such impeccable economic reason, Darrah noted with understandable sadness, failed to alter “the unconquerable indolence of the Assamese.”154 The calculations of productivity endorsed systematic chastisement of the ryot who refused to produce marketable surplus.

“Our village cultivators are by nature lethargic,” said a middle-class sermonizer.

They wash off their hands after plowing once a year. But in Bengal or other places of India the cultivators do not take rest. They cultivate throughout the year. We do not have to say much, even the coolies of the tea gardens in our country, the Nepalis etc; they are more industrious than our cultivators. A garden coolie frequently earns more than a village cultivator. And the 'basti-walah' coolie’s income is of course greater.155

For the improvement campaigners, it became a routine narrative technique to quote and condemn the country proverb “There is neither dearth nor glut in Assam” (asima akalo nai bharalo na). If the adage were true, asked Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, “then how can we say that the Assamese are happier than the Nagas and the Daflas?”156 Bhudhar Chaudhury referred to the proverb as a typical indicator of “rustic ignorance and superstition.” Such “outdated mindset,” according to him, was the main obstacle to the growth of agricultural productivity in Assam.157 In a detailed essay serialized in the periodical Ushā, Chaudhury discussed the other obstacles, namely, shortage of funds, impoverished livestock, unscientific instruments, disregard of manures, and indolence of the Assamese ryot. He particularly insisted on the use of plows which “completely upturn the soil” instead of “just scratch[ing] it.” He recommended the use of Sealy’s Turnover Plow, St. Jessop’s Plow, Ransome’s

153 Final Report on the Re-Assessment of the Assam Valley, 1893 (title page missing in the copy consulted in Secretariat Administration (Record and Library) Department, Guwahati), 16
154 Ibid, 9
156 Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, “asamar unnati”, jonāki, 2: 2 (c. 1889), 130
157 Bhudhar Chaudhury, “kheti”, ushā, 1: 1 (c. 1906), 22
English Plow, Watt's D. E. Plow, Hindustani Plow, Sherpuri Plow, and Bhagalpuri Plow instead of the "traditional Assamese plow." All these plows, he said, could be ordered from the Calcutta shops and although their price (between Rs. 5 and Rs. 16) might be prohibitive for the poor peasants, the "middle-class farmers" could easily afford them. In fact, argued Chaudhury, without increased and active participation of the middle class, agriculture would never improve in Assam. The middle class would import better buffaloes from Bengal, concentrate on cash crops like mustard and sugarcane, introduce machineries like "crosskil rollers" and drills, set up cooperative credit society and, most importantly, "enclose" the fields, "as they did it in England a hundred years ago." In different articles Sarveshwar Sharma and Binandachandra Phukan voiced almost the same concerns. One can hardly miss the imprint of the idealized figure of the English gentleman farmer in such discussions. "Even half of our people do not cultivate," said Binandachandra Phukan in 1889. "We have been worse than all other nations in learning and knowledge, business, industry and science. We are now inferior in agriculture too." Referring to the government statistics that 62.5 per cent of Assam residents survived on imported rice, Phukan referred to the glory of the great Aryan civilization and asked "how far down can we fall?"

In 1925, R. N. Phukan, the Director of Agriculture in Assam, expressed satisfaction in noting "that middle class gentlemen are evincing more and more interest in agriculture. Fruit growing has become very popular with them and a few have taken to mixed farming."

The number of such middle class farmers is daily increasing. The gentlemen are helpful to the Department in various ways. They are growing improved seed in their farms and with proper arrangement and to a very limited extent, their farms may supply as in fact they are now supplying the want of departmental seed farms in the province. It is by far easier for the department to reach the ordinary cultivators through them. To solve labour difficulties many of them are purchasing tractors.

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158 Bhudhar Chaudhury, "kheti", ushā, 1: 2 (c. 1906), 48
159 Bhudhar Chaudhury, "kheti", ushā, 1: 3 (c. 1906); Bhudhar Chaudhury, "kheti", ushā, 1: 4 (c. 1906)
160 Binanda Chandra Phukan, "asamiyār kheti", jonākā, 2: 1 (c. 1889); Sarveshwar Sharma Kataki, "āmār jātīya abanati", ushā, 4: 9 (c. 1911)
162 Binanda Chandra Phukan, "asamiyār kheti", jonākā, 2: 1 (c. 1889), 117
163 Report of the Agricultural Department, Assam for the year 1924-25 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Government Press, 1925), 26-7d

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Between an abstracted terrain of production and an invested site of belongingness intervened the ideology of agriculture which organized the spatial coherence of Assam proper in the imperial discourse of improvement. The agrarian was hardly the degree zero of the social.

God's and their Gardens

“I feel that I am now in the real heart of old Assam,” said Frederic John Napier Thesiger, the Third Baron of Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, as he addressed the “abbots and monks” of Majuli in 1920.\(^\text{164}\) Indeed, much of the propriety of Assam proper is derivate of the ascription of ancientness and permanence of the Vaishnavite satra networks. Almost all the present-day histories assert an uninterrupted centrality of satras in “the Assamese social life” from the second half of the fifteenth century to the present day ignoring its troubled engagement with the British Indian administration.\(^\text{165}\) While this section cannot deal with the entire range of such claims, we do wish to point at some of the complexities in the remaining pages.

During the Moamariya insurgency and Ava’s occupation of the Tungkhungia territories, most of the royally patronized adhikârs had fled with their personnel leaving many of their valuable possessions including the lâkhîraj or rent-free lands in the valley. It was only from the mid-1830s, by the time the British had formally and firmly established themselves in the area, that they began to return from [Koch] Bihar and the adjacent regions. Over the next three decades the imperial administration in Assam was flooded with incessant petitions by the adhikârs “claiming back” their lâkhîraj lands.\(^\text{166}\) By 1853, almost 700 cases regarding lâkhîraj grants were filed in the government courts.\(^\text{167}\) Most of the petitions typically declared that “the original copper plates and inscriptions [of the Tungkhungia grants] were lost in the

\(^{164}\) "Viceroy’s Reply", annexed to “Notes on the Gossains” by Madhab Chandra Bardoloi, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Tezpur, 17 October 1904, Transcript No. 264, Transcript Volume No. 59 [DHAS]

\(^{165}\) S. N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam (Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1966)

\(^{166}\) Revenue Proceedings 15 September 1840, No 43; 15 September 1840, No. 80; 30 August 1845, No. 703; 4 December 1847, No. 809; 23 August 1851, No. 867; 21 November 1857, No. 868; 9 January 1858, No. 889; 31 January 1861, No. 889 [WBSA]

\(^{167}\) Harakanta Sharma Majundar Barua, sadarâminar âtmajîwâni, edited by Kumudchandra Bardalai (c. 1890; Guwahati: Lawyers’ Book Stall, 1991), 42
atrocities of the Mans and the Morans. Many of the local officers, however, were suspicious of the claims. For example, Brodie, the Collector of Nowgong, remarked in 1835, 

It certainly may have happened that during the Burmese rule, and through the confusion that then existed, some individuals may have lost their title-deeds, but this could not have been very general, for people naturally look to the security of such proofs of their rights nearly as much as they would to the safety of their lives. The necessary conclusion I come to, therefore, is, that a considerable number of the claims are without any real foundation.

The question was important as the total quantity of land claimed only in Brodie's division was between 17,000 and 18,000 poorahs, which was almost equal to the whole of the cultivation at Nowgong, and which paid about one-third of the revenue obtained from the entire division.

I have only seen one sunud, and this appeared to be nothing more than a grant of 128 poorahs of house-land, with thirty bhokuts or servants of the temple, to a Brahmin, who was, he and his heirs, for ever to pray for the welfare of the Rajah. Nothing appears to have been said on the subject of exemption from taxation, but this perhaps has happened because any taxation that existed was of a very limited nature. Since, however, the principle of a reduced tax has been admitted in some measure, it would, I think, be well to keep to that rule, and to charge half the ordinary rate on all lands which may be admitted as real grants by the former kings of Assam.

Archibald Bogle certainly summarized the feelings of most of his European colleagues when he quipped that “[o]ur troops did not conquer the Province for the Brahmins.” He reasoned “that every right or privilege given under the former Rajahs of Assam was extinguished by the Burmese invasion, and that the British Government has in no way pledged itself to revive them.”

therefore, as they have by our aid obtained peaceful possession of their lands, which they had in many instances entirely lost, they have no reason to complain if they are required to pay full cess for them, nor can they reasonably expect that the policy observed by our Government with regard to Bengal and other ceded districts should be followed here, for there is a wide difference between the acquisitions of an infant power gained by treaties and negotiations, and the conquest of a great empire made at the point of the bayonet.

168 Statement of The Adhikar of the Dakhinpat Satra, in Bardalai, Notes on the Gossains; the previously cited documents and other statements in the Notes are replete with this claim.
169 Quoted in Moffatt Mills, Report, 25
170 Quoted in ibid, 25-6.
Jenkins, the Agent, however, was not in agreement with his subordinates. "They are objects of great veneration," he wrote of the adhikārs. "We should not unduly antagonize the Gossains," particularly, "when we know little of the circumstances" in which the grants had originally been made.\footnote{Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, to the Board of Revenue, Fort William, dated 22 June 1836, No. 59, in 'Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, 12 April 1836, No. 554', in Ms. 9934: "Conditions for Grants of Land in Assam, Enclosed in Letter to Mr. Prideaux" [GL]} Finding the right "agent of improvement," as we have already mentioned, was a serious difficulty in the non-zarindari landscape of Assam proper. In the institution of satra, Jenkins had a hope to find one. Jenkins's policy of liberally confirming the lākhiraj grants was upheld by the higher authorities who were predictably interested in ready legitimation of their rule.

But legitimation was hardly a one-way traffic. During their occupation, the Ava forces reportedly demanded three hundred rupees from the Kamalabari Satra as "tribute." To meet this demand, the adhikār Bhushandev Satriya sold his adhikār rights to two other personnel of the satra, namely Krishnakanta Mahanta and Jagannath Bapu, leaving the satra with three heads even after the Ava forces were ousted. The problem of increasing differences between the adhikārs could not be solved even during the brief administration of Purandar Singha, and subsequently Lt. Col. Richards, the Junior Commissioner of Lower Assam was urged to choose the legitimate head of the satra.\footnote{Kamalakanta Dev Goswami, uttar kamalabāri satrar itibritta (Majuli: North Kamalabari Satra, 1997), 32-7} Richards even issued a sanad to Shambhunath, the Brahmin adhikār (the nominee of Bhushandev) confirming his status as the "only mahanta."\footnote{The texts of the sanads dated August 2, 1825 and July 24, 1826 are available in Dev Goswami, uttar kamalabāri satrar itibritta, 36-7} The dissenters were led to establish a separate satra (Na-Satra).

Such instances by no means became rare in the course of the century, and the fascinating histories of fabricating an authentic satra tradition under the shadow of imperial patronage still await their historian. However, our concern here is the strange relationship between the politics of authentication and that of rent-free land grants. "It has been the privilege and pleasure of the British rulers not only to confirm and perpetuate the grants of the land, either revenue-free or at concessional rates, which were made to the abbots by the pious kings of old, but to afford special protection to the abbots and their disciples in all times of trouble and invasion," said Chelmsford in his address.
The abbots on their part have always been to the fore in placing all their material resources - elephants, manpower, boats and supplies - at the disposal of the British Government whenever frontier expeditions or other emergencies made a call upon the loyalty of its subjects. And apart from this material help the moral help of the good abbots has always been very great. They have been unwaveringly on the side of law and order, and quiet good-citizenship. Both by their example and by their precept the abbots of the Majuli have made the people of the Brahmaputra Valley what they are today - one of the most peaceable lovable races in India, nature’s true gentlemen.174

Articulated amidst a fear that Assam was not to remain free from the emerging surge of Indian nationalism, Chelmsford’s address neatly summarized the nature of the collaboration. The big satras like Auniati and Dakhinpat not only secured large land grants, but on their assessment was also revised every year “on cultivated area only,” and not on the entire grant - a privilege that was usually reserved for the tea planters.175 In 1881, G. E. Campbell, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, granted 454.59 acres at a throw-away price for the establishment of a Brahmin satra. In fact, the new satra was named the Grant Satra.176

On the other hand, the minor satras had to undergo several trying experiences. In the early twentieth century, for example, the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts asked the Gossaín of the Tiphuk satra in Lakhimpur to seek permission to move his satra from its original site to the Buri Dihing Mauza, and to requested a grant of some acres under 30 years’ lease rules since “it appears that land in the neighbourhood of the site now occupied by the Satra will, if the Satra is moved, be in demand for the cultivation of tea coolies and ex-tea coolies.”177 Tiphuk was a satra of the Morans, jhum cultivators who mostly grew ahu and other highland crops.178 From the other end, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur wrote, “The Buri Dihing Mauza to which they propose going to is now very sparsely populated, and there is no doubt that the removal of the satra would be an important factoring its future development. There is a good demand for land in the vicinity of the

174 Chelmsford, Viceroy's Reply
175 S. N. Dutta, Report on the Resettlement of the Nowgong District during the years 1926 (October) to 1932 (January) (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1933), 33
176 Karuna Bara (ed.), ufanų bąpughar (Majuli: North Kamalabari Satra, 2005), x. See also Dev Goswami, uttar kamalābāri satrar iitibrta, 42-3, 76.
177 Revenue and Agriculture, January 1905, 1-5. ASA.
178 Previous reference: Memorandum No. 2822 L. R. 7 December 1895, Letter no. 4656 Revenue 26 November 1895.
present site, and once the satra is moved, it is probable that a very large area would be taken up by managers for the settlement of their coolies." 179