CHAPTER III

SETTLING THE VALLEY:
MATERIAL CHANGE AND THE REDRAWING OF THE LANDSCAPE

During the many centuries of feudal rule preceding colonialism, there developed certain distinguishable features and patterns of settlement in the Valley, the major determining factor of such features and patterns being the prevailing nature of organizing production. The major productive activity was the cultivation of rice, for which the "original conditions of production", climate, soil, availability of natural water source, etc. was suitable in the Valley. The most numerous of the classes in the society therefore were the peasantry. Among the geophysical factors influencing the settlement of the peasants was the location, quality and elevation of the cultivable soil. They preferred to set up villages and settle in areas where the surrounding soil was suitable for rice cultivation; had good homestead land where garden crops could be grown; where climate was healthy and deadly diseases were not extant; which were in safe distance from the devastating floods and erosion of the numerous rivers crisscrossing the Valley; where necessary resources of life such as grass, thatch, bamboo, wood,
fish, etc. were easily and freely procurable; and so on. In addition, and equally or more importantly, there were political and social factors involved, such as the nature and rate of taxation, the number and degree of obligations, level of exploitation by high state officials and estate-holders, possibility of attack or war by neighbouring people, etc.

The changes in one or many of these favourable conditions might force the peasants to immigrate collectively or individually. It was common to find that whole villages with all its institutions would remove itself as a body and get resettled in another place, at times even retaining the former village name. A large number of villages in the Brahmaputra Valley had to move frequently, and this was regarded as a very common phenomenon. For instance, continued emigration of a large number of subjects from the Ahom Raja’s country in Upper Assam to the Matak and British territories was reported by the Company's Political Agent for “Upper Assam” in 1836. The emigrants were of considerable number consisting mostly of ‘Dooms’ and ‘Murriahs’ (Kaivarttas and Moamorias), though it is not clear as to what had caused such movement. An enquiry was ordered to be conducted by the Political Agent of the North East Frontier. This was to ascertain the number of subjects emigrating from the Ahom territory to the British and other territories between 1826 and 1836, and to find the reasons for this. It was not clear to the colonial state whether this exodus was due to the perceived mismanagement and “oppression” of the Raja under British ‘protection’, or due to circumstances beyond his control.

Large tracts of the western Asom districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Goalpara and Darrang attained the character of relatively permanent settlement during the medieval period much before the eastern Asom, where there was a subsequent development of permanent rice cultivation after the introduction and expansion

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1 "With reference to the reported desertion of the Ryots from the Rajah’s country [Raja Puranadar Singh of Upper Assam] I beg to inform you that government will expect a particular report on the Rajah’s misconduct of his country, and the cause of the immigration of the inhabitants.” F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Major A. White, Political Agent of Upper Assam, Bishnath, No.288, 21 October 1836, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA.

2 F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Major A. White, Political Agent of Upper Assam, Bishnath, No.293, 26 October 1836, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA.
of the *paik* system of obligatory labour to the Ahom State. The introduction and expansion of the *paik* system from the late sixteenth century onwards became the foundation of the fast expanding Ahom state that occupied almost all of the Brahmaputra Valley by the seventeenth century. The organization of *paik* system of mandatory physical labour spread throughout the Ahom state, and the *khels* under which the *gots* or units of *paiks* were organised, were established throughout the region. Resettlement in new areas, reclamation of forest and marshy land, and expansion of cultivation along with an enhanced appropriation of surplus labour and produce to sustain a growing state and its ruling class took place in great earnestness from sixteenth century onwards while the state oversaw this process of displacement and resettlement of its subject population. Apart from strengthening agrarian production, the *paik* system was instrumental in bringing tribal social formations under the command of the feudal production system, enforcing the intermixing of different production processes. Moreover, forced migration was used by the state to rein in political opponents, by weakening the internal organisation of recalcitrant communities opposed to the Ahom state, and forcefully resettling them over a vast region.²

The settlement pattern was defined by the ecological zones of the Valley, and three such kinds of zones or tracts were distinguishable on each bank of the River Brahmaputra, with their own peculiarities and characteristics. The first tract was the closest to the river starting from its banks to a few kilometers inland, from where the second kind began and extended further inland for another few kilometers, an area of flood-immune plains with fertile soil, where transplanted rice cultivation, the most important crop in the Valley, was extensively carried out. This gave way to the third kind—the submontane tract—which was at the foot of the hill ranges that surround the Valley from three sides. A vivid description of the two of these distinct tracts of land on both banks of the Brahmaputra could be found in the *Assessment Report* of the Bojali Group in Kamrup district. The submontane tract as was in "the north of the [Barpeta] subdivision along the Bhutan frontier, which follows the foot of the hills there is

belt of high land, roughly 20 miles in breadth, gradually descending in level as it recedes from the hills. This includes the deadly terai... as well as the villages south of the terai, where cultivation is permanent."⁴ The second or the middle tract was at its south, which was "the flooded tract, once full of villages containing partly permanent and chiefly fluctuating cultivation, now covered with swamps and almost destitute of cultivated fields. The remaining villages, mostly bare of trees, which generally failed to survive the heavy inundations of 1897 and the following years, present a miserable appearance, and the cultivation round them is extremely precarious."⁵ Further to the south of this tract on the north bank was the third kind of land closest to the Brahmaputra and consisting of

the riverain villages where annual inundation is, and has been, regular from time immemorial. Here the village sites are generally permanent and the cultivation is fluctuating. Although liable to frequent floods, this tract has this advantage over what may be called the water-logged area, that on the fall of the river the flood water drains off rapidly and thus interferes less with cultivation.⁶

Of the various zones of the terrain in the Brahmaputra Valley, the nature of vegetation and the varieties of crops generally cultivated on them, an account is given in the Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1911-12. It noted that the tract on either side of the Brahmaputra generally fell into four classes. The first was the chapari or the land in the immediate neighbourhood of the river, which was heavily flooded during the rains. It was, as a rule, covered with high grass jungle, which had to be cut down and burned before it could be brought under cultivation. However, when the floods did not rise too soon, it yielded excellent crops of ahu (ashu, aus), or early rice. The seed was sown in March or April, and reaped soon after the setting in of the rains from June to August. Behind the chapori was a belt of low-lying land, in which bao, a long-stemmed variety of rice, was grown. It was usually sown in April or May and reaped in November and December. Ahu was sometimes mixed with bao in

⁴ Assessment Report of the Bojali Group of Villages, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, May 1902, ASA.
⁵ ibid.
⁶ ibid.
expectation of a crop before the river rises. The level of the terrain then gradually rose above the reach of ordinary floods, and *sali*, or transplanted winter rice, here was the staple crop. It was sown in nursery beds called *kothiyatoli*, the seedlings were transplanted in June or July when they were about two months old, and the harvest was reaped in November, December and January. *Sali* was divided into two main varieties, *bor* and *lahi*. The former had a heavier yield, but matured later and required more water than *lahi*, and was therefore usually planted on lower land. Beyond this was the submontane tract—where the level of the land was higher, and the fields were often irrigated from hill-streams. The chief crop was the *sali* variety of rice, or a transplanted form of *ahu* known as *kharma*. This land was practically immune from all risks of flood, and in fact had to be irrigated through the construction of *dongs* to render the cultivation.7

Similarly, referring specifically to the Kamrup district but which could be generally applied to the other districts of the Valley as well, the *Banking Committee Enquiry Report* of 1929 too identified these three natural divisions. “On both banks we have three natural divisions—low land near the river, liable to flood (called the Chaporis), a higher belt inland where transplanted paddy is grown (on the north bank this is known as the Rupit mahal) and the submontane tract near the hills.”8 The most densely populated and predominantly rice-producing *rupit* land cultivated by “Assamese cultivators” was on the middle tract. The density of the population could exceed 800 per square mile in this tract, as was the case in south Nalbari. Here the standard of living was higher than the standard prevailing in either the *chaporis* or the submontane areas. Conditions in the *chaporis* in comparison were far less favourable, paddy cultivation being more uncertain, communications less easy and the opportunities for subsidiary occupations more limited than the “*rupit mahal*” or the transplant-rice lands. The submontane tract likewise was less favourably situated in respect to cultivation as also in avenues for the disposal of surplus produce. These parts were also considered unhealthy. Here the inhabitants

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belonged mainly to the "backward tribes", and these factors altogether led to a general living standard of its inhabitants that was lower than the *rupit mahal.*

Something similar is indicated in the Census report of 1881 as well, but the distinctions were not made very clear and definite: "There are three large belts... in the north of the Brahmaputra Valley, running along the base of the Himalayas, and one in the centre of that valley where the river is too constantly shifting its course for permanent cultivation to be possible, in which there are no villages or hardly any, while the actual villages and population are congregated in the remaining portion" of the Valley. While discussing the settlement pattern in the Valley, it is necessary to keep these geographical and ecological distinctions in mind, as there was a zone-wise distribution of the population in the Valley.

*The Land on the River*

The *chars* or the islands on the River Brahmaputra and the *chaporis* or the high lands on its banks with its own peculiarities constituted one such natural division in the Valley. The cultivation in the *chars* and *chaporis* were fluctuating, and was called *pam* cultivation, which in general supplemented the peasant's permanent cultivation of rice with mustard, pulses and other high value winter crops. The *chars* and *chaporis* of the Brahmaputra were permanently inhabited till the end of nineteenth century by only a few communities of Mishings, Kaivartas or Nadiyals. Others stayed on the *chars* and *chaporis* – whether they were *pamuas* or graziers – only temporarily. The riverine people practiced cultivation of a fluctuating nature on the banks of the Brahmaputra, though in a smaller extent than the people of the other two tracts.

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11 *Chars* on the Brahmaputra are formed due to the turbulences in its current. Depending on their size, composition and other factors, these *chars* can take relatively permanent character existing for decades or even centuries, or they can be very temporary, vanishing within the same year, and often even less. *Chaporis* contained reed jungle and other species of grass are its common natural vegetation if they were not entirely covered by dry sand, where nothing could grow. A *chapori* is defined in the official documents as "riverain land which is annually submerged, also immune high land covered with grass jungle." 'Glossary of Vernacular Terms', Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Rev. A, February 1906, Revenue Department, ASA.
In the period under review, it was common for the people of the 'rupit mahal' region to take up land for temporary cultivation in the riverine chars and chaporis, but the reverse was not the case: the riverine people hardly owned land in the submontane region where permanent habitation and cultivation existed, and even if they did, the land was of relatively inferior quality than that of the their more prosperous neighbours. The chapori lands which were generally classified uniformly as 'faringati' or wasteland in government's revenue records were not necessarily uniform in soil quality or crops grown. As the Chief Commissioner of Assam noted in 1904, "There are differences of soil. But they are not constant, as the annual floods effect great changes by the deposition of soil and sand. And a dense growth of high grass entirely obscures the natural features of the surface soil, so long as it is uncultivated." 12

On these extensive inundated lowlands chaporis of the Brahmaputra, the cultivators grew early rice for home consumption, and pulse and mustard for sale. The cash income thus obtained provided the land revenue payable not only upon these chapori lands, but also upon some portion of the established rice lands. "Peasants cultivated some amounts of chapori land in addition to their permanent village holdings...In well-established villages relinquishments [of land] were few in number. But in the chaporis, where the land was generally given up after two or three years' of cropping, [relinquishment requests] were annually filed by thousands." 13 In such tracts, since the agrarian production of winter rice, mustard and pulses during the dry season was highly variable, the occupants had to pay the land revenue six weeks before the date of payment was normally due in the early twentieth century. 14 One flood a year was considered as a normal occurrence. Generally the floods occur in the Asom from middle of June to September in the Brahmaputra and in the north bank rivers, and up to

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12 From F. J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Government of India, Shillong, 4 December 1903, "Reassessment of the Assam Valley Districts", Rev. A, June 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

13 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.406R-1051R, Shillong 16 April 1903, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue and Agricultural Department, January 1904, ASA.

14 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.406R-1051R, Shillong 16 April 1903, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue and Agricultural Department, January 1904, ASA.
October in some south-bank tributaries. If the floods came relatively early, in June or early part of July but did not recur again in the later months, it generally harmed the *ahu* crops and the *sali* seedlings, but time was still available in the season to grow the *sali* seedlings once again for transplant during August and September. If a flood took place between mid-July and mid-August, not much damage was done to the *ahu* crop, as most of it was already harvested. Such floods however destroyed the *sali* seedlings and left no time for an attempt to grow them again. A flood occurring at such a time also damaged the *bao* crop to various degrees. If the flood came very late in the season, i.e., in September or October, it generally did great damage to the standing *sali* crop.\(^\text{15}\) Thus, cultivation in the Valley had to be carried out according to the opportunities and constraints of the climate, floods and the terrain, making use of the advantages from them while trying to negate its ill-effects.\(^\text{16}\)

Much of these riverine lands in Goalpara district were divided up by the colonial government in *mahals* or estates, and were rented out on annual or temporary leases under the Regulation II of 1819 of the Bengal Code during mid-nineteenth century. The Commissioner of Assam mentioned transactions related to two such *chars* called Noabad and Dar in the district in 1854, and noted, “these are farmed on temporary leases which expired at the close of the year and the collector states that the new settlement of Noabad has not been so favourable as the previous one, owing to the quantity of the chur that has been cut away by the river of late years and I may add [that] the old settlements proved a very unprofitable one for the farmer.”\(^\text{17}\) This practice was carried on until regular revenue survey rules were extended to these regions in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

About the character of tract and its cultivation, the Settlement Officer of Nowgong reported that in general the soil in the in the villages nearest to the


\(^{16}\) ibid.

\(^{17}\) From Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, No.165, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.
Brahmaputra was sandy. What was locally called *maubalia* land was mostly found a little further inland. The “old Assamese cultivation” was mostly in such clayey soil. In a large number of villages near the Leteri River of that district, sand was found within 1½ to 2 feet below the surface of the *maubalia* soil or the soil made of fine sand. In such areas,

The Assamese used to practice their *pam* cultivation...The area is annually submerged by the Brahmaputra flood and the soil which gives its best to jute cultivation comes out of water with its richness restored after the rains. Unless the floods are untimely, i.e., occur before the jute is high enough not to go completely under water or after the sali crop has been transplanted late in the season, the annual inundations are a natural process of fertilisation and most welcome. Without a normal flood even the steeping of jute for extracting the fibre becomes difficult in many places.\(^{18}\)

The permanent inhabitants of these tracts practiced fluctuating cultivation – shifting cultivation in some places like the Majuli – but had to supplement with other occupations. In fact, it is said that these communities were commonly thought to be more dependent on the River Brahmaputra than the land. In a period spanning over centuries, the riverine communities formed the most intimate relations with the Brahmaputra and its major tributaries. They developed a thorough and deep knowledge and understanding of the river while engaging with productive activities. Their knowledge of the terrain and the character of the Brahmaputra equipped them to inhabit the river and its banks with relative safety. Their settlement on the close proximity to the river was adapted to its character. They looked at the river with awe and revered it, the river was at the center of their lives, their culture, their society, even though within the larger society their culture and their lives occupied the lowest possible status. The riverine tracts, before they were permanently inhabited in great numbers by the immigrant peasants from East Bengal by the beginning of the twentieth century, was predominantly inhabited by the poorest, most

marginalised classes of the society, i.e., members of various tribal communities as well as the oppressed castes, including the 'outcastes'/untouchables' of the Hindu society. As the Assessment Report of Southern Jorhat Group noted in 1905,

The fact that the greater part of the group has been opened out in recent years is reflected the very large proportion of Bengalis (tea garden labourers) and Assamese of the lower castes — Kacharis, Ahoms and Chutiyas. Hinduized Cacharis call themselves Ahoms and Chutiyas abd higher class Ahoms are only found in Lahing. The population of Lahing mauza, containing as it does a number of very old villages, is mixed and made up of largely Brahmins, higher class Ahoms, Kolitas, whose condition is better than that of most group raiyats, even though Lahing is the least fertile mauza of the group.19

This riverine tract on and around the Brahmaputra traversing the district of Sibsagar in the east-west direction, was assessed for land revenue under the South Bank Fluctuating Group. It constituted the riverine mauzas of Jakaichuk, Kuarpur, Thaura Panidihing and Simaluguri in Sibsagar subdivision; Teok, Hazari, Chaukhat, Baligaon Parbatia and Misamara in Jorhat subdivision; and Dergaon, Rangamati and Namdayang in Golaghat subdivision. According to the Assessment Report of this group of villages for 1906, it comprised of "the whole of the strip of land lying on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra, which, owing to its being flooded every year, is capable only of fluctuating cultivation. The length of the strip is 130 miles and the average breadth about 4 miles. The total area is 522.1 square miles and comprises 89 cadastral and extension villages and 437.7 square miles of non-cadastral land."20

It was said that in the fifteen years preceding 1906, there were three heavy floods in the region, but the floods in this group were "neither as heavy nor as disastrous as in the Majuli". Majuli, considered to be one of the largest river-island in the world, with more than seven hundred square kilometers of area, was a char of the Brahmaputra. It was just to the north of the Group and was

20 'Assessment Report: South Bank Fluctuating Group', Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, February 1906, ASA.
divided by a channel of the river. This contrast in the impact of floods was because "The great distinction between the cultivation of the South Bank and of the Majuli is that in the former the amount of pam cultivation by the raiyats of established villages is as considerable as that done by residents of the group, while in Majuli there is scarcely any pam cultivation." There might not have been as many pams or temporary hutments in Majuli, but this by no means indicate that the nature of cultivation in Majuli was permanent. When maps were prepared for each village of Sibsagar, Nowgong and Kamrup districts to identify the percentage of settled cultivated land annually relinquished by the tenants in 1901-02, it was found that while 64 percent of Sibsagar villages relinquished less than five percent of their land, in contrast "there are certain tracts in which a very large proportion of cultivated area is annually abandoned". To the colonial authorities, Majuli offered an extreme instance of this kind, where "no less than 87 out of 125 villages showing percentage [of relinquishment] exceeding 50", clearly indicating the wide practice of fluctuating and temporary cultivation as any other part of the riverine tract on the Brahmaputra.

Official communications of 1883-85 reveals that Mishing and Deori communities of Majuli were allowed by a government order to practice jhum or fluctuating cultivation, which was otherwise considered to be a "wasteful method of cultivation." The justification given for this exception was that it was "the only form of cultivation of which they are at present capable", unlike the "Hindus". The Mishing and Deori raiyats of Majuli in particular extensively cultivated cotton, mustard and ahu through jhum on the high jungle lands on the chapori which were annually cleared by using the hoe. Cultivators of other agricultural communities described as Hindus gave up their jhum cultivation on the wooden tracts to a large extent in 1880s after it was prohibited by the government. However, the Mishings and Deoris continued this form of cultivation, even though the extent was reported to be lesser than before, and in far off places so

21 ibid.
22 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.937R, Shillong 26 September 1903, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, February 1905, Rev.-A, ASA.
23 C. J. Lyall, Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, No.432, Guwahati 19 April 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
as to avoid prosecution and payment of royalty on the felling of timber that was required for clearing up the land. The colonial government’s perception was that while the “Hindu” agrarian communities supplemented the produce of *jhum* to their permanent rice cultivation, for the tribal communities of Majuli who had little or no permanent rice land, *jhum* was almost always the sole mode of cultivation and source of crops. The Chief Commissioner observed in 1884, “There is a good deal of Jhumming for mustard done by Hindu cultivators in the majuli, but their main dependence is on their permanent rice cultivation, it is believed, differed from that of the Miris Deoris.” Therefore they were “bound to grow for support” *ahu* and mustard crops, though they almost entirely gave up cotton cultivation by the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The prohibition on *jhum*, one government official observed with concern in 1883, had resulted in a decline of the cropped area in the riverine *chapori* lands of Majuli. He argued that the general reason behind the banning of *jhum* – the presumed destruction of valuable forests – could not be applied to Majuli. The jungles of the river island where *jhum* was generally practiced, were full of Som, Soalu (Simalu) and Uriam trees, which were excluded from the list of trees classified as valuable by the Forest Department, and hence were not reserved. Though Som and Simalu were considered to be valuable for rearing silk-worms in other parts of the province, these were hardly used for this purpose in Majuli. Similarly, Urium was regarded as inferior to even Koroi and Ajar, both unreserved trees in the province and abundantly available in the region. The officer was therefore of the opinion that the need to check the reduction of the cropped area far outweighed the harm done by the felling of these trees during *jhum* in Majuli, and suggested the prohibition on it be withdrawn. If it was done, he hoped that more jungle lands would be annually taken up and brought under cultivation, thereby considerably increasing government revenue.

24 Office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, No.1608, Shillong 8 July 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
25 C. J. Lyall, Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, No.432, Guwahati 19 April 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
26 Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Jorhat to the Assistant Commissioner, Jorhat, No. E(8), Camp Salmara 1 March 1883, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
The government agreed to this proposal made in 1883, but with one condition. The understanding that unlike their neighbouring "Hindu" peasants, the tribal communities of Majuli were entirely dependent on jhum cultivation on the *chapori* lands, resulted in the subsequent allowing of the Mishings and Deoris of Majuli to undertake shifting cultivation, while excluding the others. The rationale behind this decision of the Sibsagar Deputy Commissioner Lyall was explained by his successor W. C. S. Clarke. He noted, "The Officiating Commissioner Lyall decided after inquiry that the extension of privilege conceded to the Miris and Miris who live by jhumming was not necessary in the case of the Hindu ryots of the Majuli, who had permanent cultivation and who only jhum the chapori lands to raise their mustard crop."27

This resulted in the demand for similar concessions by "Hindu" cultivators of Majuli, which included Koch, Kalita and other non-tribal communities in 1885. Brojanath Bezbaroa, a member of the Jorhat Local Board, contested the government's opinion that there existed a marked distinction between the life-ways of the caste-Hindus and the tribal communities of Majuli. While forwarding a petition from Ratan Gaonbura and others, he wrote to the Chief Commissioner in June that year,

the mode of cultivation adopted by the Hindoos of Majuli is just the same as the one adopted by the Miris and Deoris, and there is perfect similarity in the methods and modes of cultivation between the two races (the Hindoos and the Miri and Deoris). In majuli the Hindoos in no way any particular advantage over the Miris and Deoris so far as regards cultivation; the former as much put to inconvenience with the two classes of people being the same. The Hindoos of majuli are as much entitled to concession as the Miris and Deoris are. So the Hindus may be equally entitled to exemption from payment of royalty on trees that might be felled for the purpose of jhumming.28

27 Col. W. C. S. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar to the Assistant Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1503, Sibsagar 10 October 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
28 Brojnath Bezbaroa, Member of the Jorhat Local Board, to the Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, No.34, Jorhat 25 June 1885, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
In response, the opinion expressed by the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts in 1884 was, “What is allowed to one class should be allowed to others”.  

He held that even though jhum was an undesirable form of cultivation that needed to be restricted as far as possible, in those tracts where there was no possibility of the extension of permanent cultivation, this “privilege” had to be extended to “all classes”. The forested areas with valuable timber in it, however, were to be preserved where jhum needed to be prohibited. The incumbent district officer in charge of Sibsagar too seemed to have gone against the prevailing official viewpoint which apparently worked under a strictly compartmentalized notion of the differences among the people of the Valley. Anderson noted, “I am inclined to attach some weight to the argument that jhumming is a mode of cultivation incident to the locality and not to any particular caste or race of people. Many of the so called Hindus again, are men of aboriginal origin and differ but little from their Miri and Deori neighbours in their ways of life and thought.” The final decision whether to extend the “concession” or “privilege” of royalty-free felling of trees for jhum cultivation to peasants other than the Mishings and Deoris in the island was left to the Deputy Commissioner’s examination in the ensuing winter season.

When the floods occurred, the residents of the South Bank Fluctuating Group, in the first decades of the twentieth century, at worst had to leave their houses for a few days and take shelter with their cattle on high lands further inland. It was reported that they seldom lost their cattle or store of paddy, though it was known and expected that the standing crops of ahu and sali would suffer from floods to some extent almost every year. It was observed that during the decade of 1891-1901 there was a considerable increase in the population in this fluctuating group with predominantly temporary cultivation. In fact, the number

29 The Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the W. C. S. Clark, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, No.458, 27 March 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
30 I. D. Anderson, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.959, Sibsagar 27 June 1885, Nos.11/12, Home Forest-B, July 1885, NAI.
31 Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, Revenue Department, Sibsagar 8 July 1885, Nos.11/12, Home Forest-B, July 1885, NAI.
of villages in the group falling under Sibsagar subdivision grew from 1,254 to 1,650 in this period, while in Jorhat subdivision it increased from 3,950 to 6,079. Though the corresponding data for Golaghat subdivision in 1891 was not available, by 1901 the number of villages stood at 11,481, and it was assumed that the increase was in proportion to the other two subdivisions.

In the South Bank Fluctuating Group, the inhabitants were said to be "half Hindus and half Miris", and the pomuas or pam cultivators belonging to the "Hindu half" of the group's population, included all classes of people from the "established" or permanent villages, which were separated from the riverine pam tract by a line of embanked roads. The 'Miris' or the Mishing community on the other hand, were its permanent inhabitants, and going by the figures of 1901, had more than a thousand villages on the riverine tract. They generally did not own land on the permanently settled villages at a distance from the Brahmaputra, and therefore they had no option of temporarily leaving their homes during high floods like the 'Hindu' pam cultivators, who cultivated "chapori land only to supplement the cultivation which they have in their own villages, either because they have not enough land or in order to obtain a surplus." As such, their way of living was attuned to the floods. For instance, unlike that of the pamuas, their houses were constructed on elevated platforms made of bamboo and reed. The occupations other than cultivation in this tract were "fishing and lime-making by Doms, pottery by Kumars, and eri-silk weaving by the women of all Hindu castes." 32

On this narrow strip of land adjacent to the Brahmaputra River on its both banks developed important urban townships and centers of trade, such as Guwahati, Dhuburi, Goalpara, etc. But leaving aside these settlements, there was rarely any dense and permanent habitation on the lands in close proximity to the Brahmaputra. Urban settlements, if any of the medieval centres of administration and trade could be called so, developed very little, and these were more near to "glorified villages" than cities even during nineteenth century. The division of labour between town and country was hardly distinguishable, with the only

32 'Assessment Report: South Bank Fluctuating Group', Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, February 1906, ASA.
exceptions being Goalpara and Barpeta. The latter is of particular importance because even till the first decade of colonial rule, Barpeta had the highest urban population and the biggest urban settlement within the whole of Brahmaputra Valley. This was primarily due to the large volume of trade controlled by Barpeta merchants who developed trading networks across the Valley.

*The Submontane Tract*

The submontane tract along the foothills did not retain water and moisture because of its steeper gradient. And since the flood waters rarely reached this tract, the soil was usually less fertile and inferior in quality, and was therefore not generally suitable for the cultivation of rice. This was a region primarily populated by villages of various tribal communities: Bodos, Kacharis, Rabhas, Tiwas, Garos, Nagas, Mishings, and others. The peculiarities of the production process in this region also shaped the nature of settlement in this region. Similar to the riverine tract, here too the cultivators were more heavily dependent on fluctuating cultivation and had to change their habitat more frequently. There was a greater dependence on supplementary occupations and productive activities such as animal rearing, fishing and day-labour, hunting and foraging, weaving etc. Cultivation required a larger sphere of area under it because productivity was low and labour-intensive, the population was sparse and density thin, villages were few and far between, were more secluded from and less connected to the centres and routes of trade in the Valley.

Describing the settlement pattern of Karaibari purgunnah, which was acquired from a “Hill Rajah” of Koch lineage that paid tribute to the British through a military campaign, Jenkins noted in 1854 that “The greater part of the whole estate by far is still uncultivated and what is cultivated is divided between zemindary ryots and the Garrows [the Garo tribal community].”33 Further, it was observed that even though the two groups were intermixed in some regions, the

33 Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letter No.21, 30 January 1854, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.
Garos in main occupied the hills while "the ryots the plains or rather small villages between the hills and along the Berhampootur at their foot." The "zamindari ryots" and the Garos were allowed to take up "any new lands they please and abandon their old lands and they are constantly changing their farms and the sites of their villages."35

The Census of Assam in 1881 profiled the inhabitants of this tract under the heading 'Geographical Distribution of Races'. It noted, "Though largely intermingled, these various races are still distinguishable in the main as belonging each to some particular locality in the valley of the Brahmaputra."36 The Bodos being the most numerous, covered the widest area. They were settled in all the Brahmaputra Valley districts, though their numbers were higher in the western and central regions of the Valley, covering the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. Those who converted to Vaishnavism were known as Koch and were "mixed up with the Hindu population", while the unconverted section or the Bodos referred to in the colonial documents as Kacharis, Mechess, and Rabhas inhabited the submontane tract on either bank of the Brahmaputra, living mainly on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, while the Lalungs were on its southern bank.37 They made use of irrigation by bringing the water of the hill streams on to their fields through little artificial channels called dongs constructed by the collective voluntary labour of the tribal villagers.

Dongs were an old method employed by the Bodo peasants of Darrang district to irrigate their fields in the submontane region that usually did not retain rain-water as much as in the plains areas. The water of rivers and streams ensuing from the Bhutan Hills were therefore channelized through the dongs or canals to make the otherwise dry lands cultivable. The dongs were small channels cut from hill streams from which the water was diverted by putting temporary bunds or weirs. During the earthquake of 1897 many of these dongs were said to have

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34 ibid.
35 ibid.
36 *Report on the Census of Assam, 1881*, 'Castes and Tribes', p.64.
37 ibid., pp.64-65.
choked with sand, temporarily disturbing the irrigation of the fields. The cultivators had, however, cleared most of them and the system was almost restored to its old state.\footnote{Ibid., p.33.} In parts of Kamrup district on the south bank of the Brahmaputra too such irrigation was practiced. These irrigated lands in the south bank was
generally described by people as nijaratali (cultivation watered by a hill stream or Nijara), and more rarely as dongtoli; the word used to describe the Kachari irrigation. On the south bank irrigation is practically confined to stretches of rice land immediately adjoining or winding among the hills, from which numerous small streams issue. The water of these small streams is distributed over the rice fields by small ditches. The supply varies rapidly with each change in the weather and in periods of drought generally fails. In other words, while the irrigated rice land in normal seasons is vastly superior to ordinary land, in periods of drought its superiority is not so marked. The irrigation is thus not efficient as the irrigation from rivers issuing from the Bhutan Hills\footnote{Assessment Report: South Bank Group, Kamrup District, Rev. A, October 1905, Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, ASA.}

Similarly, the submontane belt of land at the foot of the Bhutan Hills in the Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang district in the north bank was reported to be “inhabited mainly by the Kacharis and other allied people”.\footnote{D. K. Mukherjee, “Reassessment Report of the Khallingduar Group of Villages in the Mangaldai Subdivision of the Darrang District”, File Nos. 270-282, Rev. A, December 1931, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.} As for the terrain, “Practically the whole of this group can be described as a submontane tract sloping considerably throughout, towards the south from the foot of the hills. In the north there is a broad belt of very high land which contains most of the best tea gardens in the subdivision”, while the lands to the south were “peopled chiefly by Assamese Hindus.”\footnote{Ibid.} Here,

the bigger streams do not benefit cultivation to any extent as the water rises suddenly and come down with violent rushes during the rains and subsides again very quickly. The Nanai and the Lachmi rather cause some damage to cultivation by floods or by shifting their courses, in certain villages on their
banks. Of the smaller hill streams, Kulsi and Batiamari only are dammed and fully utilized for the purpose of irrigation. It is however the smaller streams which take their rise from the springs that form the main source from which water is obtained to irrigate the rice lands... The main crop grown in this group is paddy and cultivation is practically carried on throughout the group by means of irrigation, the facilities for which are afforded by the numerous hill streams traversing the group. There is an elaborate system of irrigation channels, the construction and maintenance of which involves considerable organised labour on the part of the people. For this purpose, bunds are put up across the streams in their upper reaches and water is diverted into channels called *dongs* which have often to be dug through high lands for considerable distances. On reaching the cultivated area, the water is distributed over the fields by smaller channels called *balans*. In fact, paddy cultivation would hardly have been possible in most parts of this sloping and submontane area without this process of irrigation."42

They were also praised by the colonial officials presumably having no "contempt for daily labour which is so marked a characteristic of the Assamese. They readily work in tea gardens and in 1901 nearly 14,000 Kacharis were censused on the plantations."43 A government report of 1929 brings out the distinction between these two groups of people, when it observes the condition of the peasantry in parts of Nowgong district,

In the North Eastern group [of villages in Nowgong district] the indigenous Assamese predominates. The better class Assamese are fairly prosperous, rarely in serious debt and can maintain a reasonable standard of living. They are the most advanced next to the central group... there are very few who are very poor. The standard of life is rising and there seems to be little difficulty in maintaining it. The Lalungs, Mikirs, and Cacharis are rarely prosperous; they utilise much of rice in making rice beer. But the average debt among them is not heavy; their credit is poor, and when they want spare cash, they work on roads or in gardens. The ex-coolies are fairly poor. They are often in debt and as a class they are more

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42 ibid.
in the hands of the Mahajans than any others in the group except the Eastern Bengal immigrants.44

The ‘rupit mahal’ or ‘the tract of rice-fields’ between the riverine and the submontane tracts was the most populous area of settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley. Most of the permanent rice cultivation was undertaken here. During the nearly six hundred years of Ahom rule in the region, the area under settled rice cultivation grew extensively; forest areas were brought under cultivation and new grounds lying unused were broken for transplant paddy cultivation. Centering on the cultivation of transplant rice grew the culture of mustard, pulses, sugar-cane, opium, garden produce, and so on. These rice producing regions with its dense concentration of population and high revenue generation were the mainstay of Ahom political power. It was in these tracts that population of the Valley was highly concentrated in the colonial period as well.

**Demographic Trends in the Valley in the Nineteenth Century**

From the year 1769 when the first Moamoria peasants' rebellion broke out till the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, the Brahmaputra Valley under the Ahom kings was considered to be a politically volatile period, when the powerful Ahom ruling class had to confront a serious challenge to its authority from within the society. It engaged in a prolonged civil war that lasted for more than two decades and which succeeded in deposing the monarch, even if temporarily. As a result of the political and social upheavals of the period, the independence of the Ahom rulers was severely compromised, allowing for concessions to British colonial interests and paving way for their direct military intervention in the last decade of eighteenth century. In 1817 the Ahom rulers accepted the supremacy of the Burmese monarch as a price for helping to quell struggles for power within different factions of the ruling class. From this time on, the rulers of Asom permanently lost its independence, their political power first usurped by the Burmese and subsequently by the British.

But the starting point and the first manifestation of the internal crisis leading to the foreign conquest of Asom was the great Moamoria peasants’ rebellion, which was initially an upsurge against the perceived injustice and exploitation of the ruling class, and triggered by the conflict between the heads of two religious sects. Peasants in arms, participated en-masse from the communities known collectively as the Moamorias, but not exclusively, as the ‘Singphos’, Chutiyas etc. were also known to be part of this widespread rebellion, also gave expression to their hatred for the ruling powers of that period. It was a rebellion of the peasant class, though the leadership was from the nobility and the religious heads. The Moamoria rebels not only succeeded in smashing the institutions of Ahom political power in the countryside of eastern Asom, but could also hold on to their territories for many years. Initially starting off as a localized resistance, it soon acquired its political goal and purpose: that of completely destroying Ahom political power and capturing its centre, Rangpur. In defeats it took the form of a sustained and broad-based civil war for more than twenty years with frequent shifts in the balance of power, and led to a destruction of the country when royal troops overran the rebel-held territories and destroyed everything on its way. Settled villages and fields of the rebels were destroyed, and a large part of the survivors forced to migrate to the hills and forests, or to the neighbouring kingdoms. When the British started to take up survey work of their recently acquired possessions, the survey officers came across vast areas which carried the marks of permanent occupation and habitation in the recent past, but now were abandoned and covered by jungle. In this period of civil war between 1770 and 1826, as has been remarked elsewhere, the population in Asom "dwindled down to less than half of what it had been; their smiling fields were overtaken by jungle."  

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It has been also widely observed that the Burmese occupation of the kingdom of Asom was disastrous for the subjects, particularly the lower classes. Much of the stories of 'Burmese cruelties and atrocities' have taken mythological proportions at the hands of the imperialist historiographers, to show in contrast the 'British benevolence' who saved it from its plight. However, with the experience of the civil war, a historian would be hard pressed to determine whether the native rulers or the Burmese were more severe on their adversaries, given the customs and the context of those times.\textsuperscript{47}

The population and settlement patterns of the Brahmaputra Valley therefore were going through remarkable flux during the second half of the eighteenth century, a trend which partially continued well into the colonial period. As the following tables indicate, the population in the Brahmaputra Valley districts increased in the twenty years beginning in 1835. These statistics, particularly the first set (i.e., of 1835) could be highly inaccurate and deceptive, as the colonial state did not have the mechanism to carry out a reliable census in the area of their control in the Valley as yet. Nevertheless, these are the only figures that one gets from that period, and even if it is possible that the numbers shown are below the actual population in the three British districts at that time, it is indicative of a steady rise in the population in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Population figures for the three eastern Asom districts, 1835\textsuperscript{48}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Area (sq. m.)</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Density per sq. m.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>89,519</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>2,520</td>
<td>243,317</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>5,790</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,610</td>
<td>422,836</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{47} Tilak Chandra Majumdar names the \textit{satras} attacked by the Burmese in the undivided Nagaon district. In this district there were all total 197 \textit{satras}. Tilak Chandra Majumdar, \textit{Abibhakta Nagaon Zilar Sattra Darpan}, Nagaon: Majumdar Puthi Prakashan, 2005.

\textsuperscript{48} Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Revenue Department, No. 5, 3 February 1836, File No. 298, Bengal Government (B.G.) Papers, ASA.
A section of this population, however, was not due to natural growth, but simply because more territories were added to the districts of Darrang, Kamrup and Nowgong from 1835 onwards. While the area under these three districts was 9,610 square miles in 1835, it expanded by 5291 square miles (a rise of 55.06 percent) to 14,901 square miles in 1853, thereby considerably enhancing the population of these districts. If these figures are to be relied on, there is a visible growth of population between 1835 and 1853 in the Valley. The density of population of the three western Asom districts grew from 44 persons per square mile to that of 55 per square mile.49

### Population of the Brahmaputra Valley ('Assam Proper') in 1853

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of Zillah</th>
<th>Total Area (sq. m.)</th>
<th>Area under Cultivation (sq. m.)</th>
<th>Population (Lakhs)</th>
<th>Inhabitants In each Sq. M.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kamroop</td>
<td>3345</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>3,87,775</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>8712</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>2,41,300</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Durrung</td>
<td>2844</td>
<td>346.75</td>
<td>1,85,569</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>5440</td>
<td>256.17</td>
<td>1,59,573</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Luckimpoor</td>
<td>9900</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>85,269</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total of Assam Proper</td>
<td>30,241</td>
<td>1575</td>
<td>10,59,513</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gowelparra</td>
<td>4104</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>1,41,638</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>34,345</td>
<td>2252</td>
<td>12,01,151</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of the figures presented in the statistical tables of 1853 and 1877-78 demonstrates that there was a rise in the population of all the Brahmaputra districts during this quarter century. While in this period, more territory was added to Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang, it was also taken away from Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Even then, in none of the last three districts, the population declined in absolute terms, and the area under cultivation expanded in each of the districts. Even though the total area within the six Brahmaputra Valley districts declined from 34,345 to 21,475 square miles due to administrative alterations and creation of new administrative units/districts and

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49 Figures are rounded off. The exact figures are 43.999 and 54.670 respectively.
thereby transferring a portion of the population out of the region, the total population increased from little more than 12 lakhs (1.2 million) to nearly 19 lakhs (1.9 million) in this period, an increase by more than 63 percent in 25 years. The density of population too more than doubled from 35 to 88 persons per square mile in this period. The area under cultivation in the same period grew considerably from 2,252 square miles to 3,307 square miles, showing an increase of 68 per cent. It was a result of gradual clearing of the fallow cultivable lands in the plains of the Brahmaputra, and also an increase in the land under permanent or stable settlement and agriculture.

Population of the Brahmaputra Valley Districts in 1877-78

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Area (sq. m.)</th>
<th>Cultivated (sq. m.)</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Density per sq. m.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>4,433</td>
<td>1,040</td>
<td>407,714</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3,631</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>561,681</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3,418</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>236,009</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3,415</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>256,390</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>296,589</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>3,723</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>121,267</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21,475</td>
<td>3,307</td>
<td>1,879,650</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of inhabitants in Assam Proper, i.e., in the six Brahmaputra valley districts, was calculated to be 35 persons per square mile in the middle of nineteenth century. Such percentages are, however, extremely deceptive, in that they obfuscate and iron over regional differences in population patterns. Kamrup had the highest ratio of cultivated area to the total area (16.80%), and also the most densely populated district. The population of Kamrup by far outnumbered other districts. Certain divisions of Kamrup were comparable in its density to highly dense districts of Bengal or Gangetic plains, having a density of more than a thousand heads a mile. Darrang district in 1835 had a high population density of 65 persons per mile and land area was under cultivation 12.20%. In Goalpara

51 Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam, 1877-78, Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1879, Statistical Returns D: Population, p. xiii. These figures roughly correspond to the estimate of 24,43,000 persons for the year 1874 arrived at by Amalendu Guha, which included the population of Cachar, Garo Hills and other hills districts in addition to Assam Proper and Goalpara. See Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, p.27.
district 16.50% of the total land area had been brought under cultivation, even though it had a smaller population compared to other eastern Assam districts of Kamrup and Darrang.

This evidence is contrary to the strongly prevalent colonial opinion, which assumed the force of a truism by late nineteenth century, that the peasantry in Assam were characterised by indolence and lack of enterprise. However, if the colonial records are to be believed, there was only a marginal increase in the population in the Valley in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The 1881 census, the second of the decennial census operations undertaken by the colonial state in Assam, noted, "In the five upper districts of the Assam valley the population is sparse. They are divided into mauzas or revenue collection circles, each of which is in charge of a mauzadar or native revenue collector... The difficulty in this area lay in the fact that the villages are rarely compact, scattered houses and hamlets being found in all parts of the mauza."52

### Population of the Brahmaputra Valley in 188153

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Area in sq. miles</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>3,897</td>
<td>446,232</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3,631</td>
<td>644,960</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3,418</td>
<td>273,333</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3,417</td>
<td>310,579</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>370,274</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>3,723</td>
<td>179,893</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>20,941</td>
<td>2,225,271</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census operations for 1881 counted 22,155 villages in Assam, of which 10,024 were in the six Brahmaputra Valley districts. Of this, an overwhelming

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53 ibid., 'General Area and Population', p.22.
number of villages amounting to 82.3% had a population of less than 500 inhabitants, out of which 67.6% villages had less than 200 inhabitants.54

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Area (sq. miles)</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2,958</td>
<td>452,304</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3,660</td>
<td>634,249</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3,415</td>
<td>307,440</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3,260</td>
<td>344,462</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>2,822</td>
<td>457,274</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>3,723</td>
<td>254,053</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>19,838</td>
<td>2,449,782</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that while there was a marginal growth of population density in Darrang and a marginal decline in Kamrup, the average density sharply grew in the districts of Goalpara, Sibsagar, Nowgong and Lakhimpur in the fifteen years between 1881 and 1896. In absolute terms, though the area under the six Brahmaputra Valley districts declined by 1,103 square miles in the period between 1881 and 1895-96, there was an addition of 2,24,511 persons.

The overall steady growth of population between 1872-1901, combined with other factors resulted in growing pressure on land and an expansion of the area under cultivation, primarily in the intermediate tract designated as the ‘rupit mahal’, reducing the availability of land for future expansion in this tract, in spite of the widespread kala-azar or Black Fever that carried away a substantial section of the population in the last decade of the twentieth century.56 This growth in population was aided by immigration of both tea-garden workers and Eastern Bengal peasants. While the migration of tea garden workers was

54 ibid., ‘Towns and Villages’, p.137.
56 Guha remarks that the growth rate of population experienced during 1872-81 slowed down in the two decades of 1881-1901, and especially during 1891-1901, when this rate was 5.7 percent in the Brahmaputra Valley and a little more than 6 percent in Barak Valley. He further says that the “situation was more serious in the former than what the total figures reveal. Had there been no continuous immigration, the population would have actually gone down.” In fact, the indigenous population of the Valley is said to have declined by 7.7 percent during 1881-1901. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, pp.38-39.
primarily to the eastern Asom districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar in the Brahmaputra Valley, that of the East Bengal peasants was limited to the western Asom district of Goalpara in the first decade of the twentieth century. The following table shows the average annual immigration figures for tea garden labourers between 1876 and 1901 to the tea districts of Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Avg. No. of Immigrants Each Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876-1880</td>
<td>29,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-1885</td>
<td>29,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886-1890</td>
<td>41,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1895</td>
<td>55,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-1900</td>
<td>63,991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This expansion of cultivation was carried out by clearing forests and reed jungles not only in the 'rupit mahal', but also pushed the margins of the submontane tract and the chapori land. The availability of land was further constricted or limited by two other major factors: the demarcation of reserved forests after the formation of the provincial Forest Department in 1870s, and the leasing of estates from land considered to be 'waste' for commercial purposes, most importantly for tea cultivation after 1850s.

The Census figures of 1911 showed the continuation of the overall trend of population growth. Importantly for the State, the growth rate of the indigenous population which was identified as 'Assamese' that showed a decline of 7 percent in 1901 turned around in 1911, and showed an increase at a rate of 11 percent.

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57 P. G. Metilus, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1096G, Gauhati 11 May 1903, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam for Revenue and Agricultural Department, Nos.150-166, Rev.-A, June 1903, ASA. The total figures of tea garden workers immigrating to the Brahmaputra Valley districts between 1876 to 1885 were, 1876:34,283; 1877:31,897; 1878:43,061; 1879:24,712; 1880:15,913; 1881:17,116; 1882:22,559; 1883:32,148; 1884:45,511; 1885:29,398 while between 1895 and 1901 the figures were 1895:72,837; 1896:81,115; 1897:95,031; 1898:49,169; 1899:31,908; 1900:62,733; 1901:26,233. These figures are said to be reliably available from the year 1876 onwards.
Only Darrang, one of the district's most populous subdivisions, maintained a declining trend which was due to the continuation of widespread deaths from *kala-azar* in Mangaldai. The following table gives the population figures from the Census of 1911.

### Population of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1911

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Area in Sq. Miles</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>3954</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3858</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3418</td>
<td>110</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3843</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>4996</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>4529</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>24598</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>61471</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Brahmaputra Valley showed a population growth of 18.7 percent between 1901 and 1911, of which 16.7 percent was said to be due to 'natural' growth. The increase attributed to 'unnatural' growth was mainly from immigration, and particularly to Goalpara from the neighbouring districts of Bengal, and was "so far confined to the areas near the Brahmaputra."

The fluctuations in the population were most visible in the permanently inhabited and cultivated tracts of the Valley, where the bulk of the population was concentrated. The density of population in the Brahmaputra Valley was less in relation to the neighbouring province of Bengal, and this was a cause of concern for the colonial authorities. Only a smaller portion of the total 'wasteland' grants allotted at concessional rates of revenue for tea cultivation were brought under the crop, and it was believed that a still greater degree of agrarian expansion in 'land-abundant' Asom was required for the progress of the province. But it was questionable whether Asom was as abundant in 'wastes' as

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it was made out to be by the colonial government, so as to attempt schemes of land 'reclamation'. As the latter developments demonstrated, and discussed in the following chapters, that agricultural land was already in scarcity by the turn of the nineteenth century in the flood-immune tracts of the six Brahmaputra Valley districts. This was accentuated by the closing-off of forest areas, grasslands, tea grants, and so on. This was to force the peasants to take up permanent habitation and cultivation in the flood-plains of the Brahmaputra – the riverine *chaporis* and *chars* lands beginning with the early decades of the twentieth century.

**Closing-off of Forests**

The areas of settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley – both permanent and temporary and cutting across the three distinct tracts discussed above – were interspersed with lands covered with hills, forests, jungles, reed, water-bodies, etc. depending on the extent and expansion of cultivation and human habitation. These lands were valuable and important sources of the people of the Valley for food, fodder, fuel, fish, building material, and other necessities. Though some of these were constituted as estates and *mahals* and *khats* and were entrusted to, auctioned or rented out to various officers or holders by the Ahom state, and the access to these estates was prohibited or restricted to the subjects, most of the land with such resources as a whole were freely accessed and used by them, and oftentimes during periods of crises such as heavy floods, famines, or wars, these became the last resort for survival. These were the suitable lands in reserve which were available to the people if they had to change their habitation and resettle in a new place due to social, political and economic reasons. Populations moved from one place to another to escape the ravages of war, disease, erosion and floods, drought, growth of population, to evade the burden of high rates of taxation or obligations, and so on. Forests and fallow lands, which were in abundance and within easy reach, were cleared and new villages were established by people on the move. Ready access to material for survival and sustenance even during the first years of clearing ground and settlement from the adjoining forests made the process of migration easier. If the tracts leased
out for tea greatly reduced the best areas available for future expansion of cultivation and settlement in the Valley, the formation of Forest Reserves and Grazing Reserves, selling off of mahals or estates of forest, grass, cane, etc. also brought about similar results. The best quality land available for the future expansion of permanent agriculture was cut down in the Valley by the end of nineteenth century. The access to the produce of forests, hills and rivers etc. were over time made more restrictive or even altogether prohibitive through various means during the colonial period.

Many forests were declared as reserved forests by the colonial government, a process which got further intensified after the formation of the provincial Forest Department. The colonial government downplayed the dependence of cultivators on forest produce in Assam. The administration Report of 1878-79 noted,

Broadly speaking, it may be said that the indigenous agricultural population in Assam does not to any great extent depend upon the forests for the supply of their requirements in wood and timber, with the exception of canoes and trees for boat building. The splendid bamboo plantations and groves of trees which surround each hamlet furnish them, as a rule, with all the material they require for building and other purposes. And it may be added that Forest Administration in Assam has become necessary, not so much in order to provide permanently for the requirements of the indigenous agricultural population, as to provide the wood and other forest produce required by the extension of the tea industry, by the growth of trade and the development lines and means of communication.59

The Report on the Census of Assam of 1881 itself contradicts the above opinion, when it notes that for the Bodo people "Rice is the staple diet, but this is supplemented by a plentiful supply of vegetables, sometimes procured from the neighbouring forest, and it is seldom that they do not manage to procure some kind of animal food, flesh or fish, of which latter they are very fond."60


60 Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, 'Castes and Tribes', p.70.
aspect of rural life, however, was not typical for one particular community of the Valley alone, but could be extended to other communities of the Valley as well.

The declaration of Koklabari forest in Kamrup district in 1914 as a reserved forest was a typical instance of this process of dispossession. Lieutenant Colonel P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division wrote to the Chief Commissioner of Assam,

As there were many objections from the adjacent villages, and it was apprehended that the formation of the reserve would bring in its train complications with the Bhutanese, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup at first did not consider the proposed reservation to be expedient. In consideration, however, of the fact that the area, if protected from fire, might grow good timber which might prove valuable hereafter, the Deputy Commissioner was asked to make an enquiry into the matter. The subdivisional officer of Barpeta who held an enquiry into the case reports that the neighbouring raiyats who obtain forest produce from the proposed reserve for domestic use still object to the proposed reservation. The subdivisional officer consulted several leading men of the locality and they also oppose the proposal. They know that the supply of forest produce will not be stopped altogether, but they fear that they will be unnecessarily harassed by the subordinates of the forest department after the area is reserved.61

The apprehensions and objections of the raiyats were however considered by the colonial administrators to be “unduly alarmist as there is ample land left for them outside the proposed reserve and the forest authorities”, and thereby recommended the reservation of the forest. Previous to this letter, the Conservator of Forests also wrote in the similar vain on the subject to the Chief Commissioner,

I have the honour to submit a copy of a letter...from the Divisional Forest Officer, Kamrup, containing a proposal for the reservation of a forest tract, about 20

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61 Lt. Colonel P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division to the Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.186R, Gauhati, 22 March 1914, Rev.-A, June 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA, emphasis added.
square miles in area, at the foot of the Bhutan Hills in the Kamrup district. It will be seen from the remark of the Deputy Commissioner made on the DFO’s letter that many objections have already been raised to the proposed reservation. But as the DFO reports that there are no villages within three miles of the area proposed and the surrounding population has no right in or over it, the nature of the objections said to have been raised is not quite clear. All such objections can, however, be dealt with during the settlement proceedings, and I would request that a preliminary notification under section 5 of the Assam Forest Regulation may be issued as soon as possible.  

The above process led to the declaration of the Koklabari forest as a government reserve by the Revenue Department in April 1914. In the process, inhabitants of both the Valley as well as the surrounding hills were deprived from legitimate entitlements to the forest produce. While the objecting raiyats as well as the “leading men” in the above instance were all from the Valley, a large part of the forests in the hills were also brought under government control, seeking to deny the tribal society of a crucial source of reproducing life.

Similar instances of denying villagers access to forests so far used by them, could be witnessed in case of reservation of Borrajran and Bharjan Forests in Lakhimpur in 1916, near the town of Tinsukia. The Bishputia villagers objected to the proposed reserve on the ground that “they want to be able to graze their cattle and get fuel and timber from the area under consideration.” The government rejected the demand by arguing that the village was a mile away from the forest, and presumed that they never used the forest for grazing, because it was a tree jungle, and that the Bishputia villagers had access to other grazing fields. The objections of the inhabitants of Borbheta village on the northern border of the forest were similarly overruled, because according to the government, though villagers “say they have been there for 10 years, but look

62 A. V. Monro, Conservator of Forests, Assam to the Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.219A, Shillong 21 August 1912, Rev.-A, June 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA, emphasis added.

63 Proceedings under Sections 6-8 of the Assam Forest Regulation, VII of 1891’, by L. C. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner & Forest Settlement Officer, Lakhimpur, W. F. L. Tottenham, Conservator of Forests, Eastern Circle, Assam to Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.A-53, Shillong 2 August 1916, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1916, ASA.
like recent settlers and have not developed the land they have already taken up."\(^64\)

The encroachment and forcing upon the tribal society of an alien law regarding control over forests was clearly evident in Captain Maxwell's report, the commander of the military expedition of December 1883 sent to take on the recalcitrant Aka tribes, who found that demarcation of the boundary, and the *gazetting of the forests as forest reserves, at once precluded* [the Akas] *from following their usual pursuits as regards this tract of country*; and for the purposes of hunting the most valuable preserves lie at the foot of the hills. Whatever the grievance may be worth, it is certain, I think, that in the savage mind a grievance did exist, and *an experience of hill tribes teaches me that a "land" grievance is the most deeply rooted of all grievances and is next to impossible to smooth.*\(^65\)

During the first decade of the twentieth century, area under reserved forests in five of the six Brahmaputra Valley districts had gone up, and covered more than one-tenth of its total geographical area, as can be observed from the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Area under R.F. in 1901 (Sq. Miles)</th>
<th>Area under R.F. in 1911 (Sq. Miles)</th>
<th>Total Area in 1911 (Sq. Miles)</th>
<th>Percentage of Area under R.F. in 1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>3954</td>
<td>22.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>3858</td>
<td>6.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>3418</td>
<td>9.83</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>3843</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>1043</td>
<td>5208</td>
<td>20.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>4207</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2549</strong></td>
<td><strong>3055</strong></td>
<td><strong>2448</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^64\) Ibid.

\(^65\) Quoted in Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas*, p.269, emphasis added.

Added to this process of closing off of forests was the policy of leasing out vast tracts of 'waste lands' for tea cultivation at throwaway prices to European companies and individuals who encroached upon the lands which were of great value to the communities that were living in their vicinity.

'Reclamation' of Land for Tea

In the colonial government's scheme of things, Asom on its north-eastern frontier had little intrinsic worth when it occupied the country in 1820s. The annexation of Asom was primarily to safeguard its Bengal possessions from the probable incursions of the Burma and the Bhutan kingdoms. Asom was to perform the primary role of a buffer state between Bengal and Burma, without putting an additional financial burden on imperial treasury for administering Asom. The colonial state perceived Asom as a kingdom of abundant land, lying unused at the hands of an indolent and non-enterprising people, and thereby handing over a much smaller amount of revenue to the state than its true potential. The 'discovery' of tea in the early years of British occupation raised the hopes of making Asom a remunerative territorial possession of the East India Company.

Tea required land which was free from inundations and had a good drainage system, etc. Lands close to the big rivers where inundations were regular was therefore not preferred, and so were the low-lying areas close to the river-beds where water could accumulate. So the strip of land attached to the river on both the banks of the Brahmaputra and its major tributaries were not the first choice for actual tea cultivation. Char and chapori lands in this land too were not considered fit for tea cultivation. The two preferred tracts for tea gardens were the undulating submontane tracts on the middle of the rivers and the hill ranges which was immune from Brahmaputra's floods, as well as the tract on the foothills of the hill ranges. And these were the tracts that were eagerly taken up by speculators and tea planters during the great 'Assam Tea Fever' of the nineteenth century. As one government report noted in the beginning of the
twentieth century, "At the foot of the [Naga] Hills there is a continuous line of tea gardens and in the neighbourhood of Nazira there are also some isolated blocks of tea cultivation." These tracts were normally covered by forests of various kinds. These were the lands which were normally taken up for new settlements by migrating people of the Valley for diverse reasons. These lands were regularly broken up and forests cleared off in order to make way for new village homesteads and paddy fields. A large portion of the lands which could have come under the plough in future was set aside for tea culture. These were amongst the best land available for rice cultivation in the Valley, parts of which were now earmarked for meeting the demands of the colonial economy.

The regions assigned 'wasteland' neither were empty of human habitation, nor were they a waste for the inhabitants of the Valley. Various forest-dwelling communities inhabited these forest tracts, and depended on the sources of livelihood provided by it. Very few of them had anything to show of their rights or entitlements to ownership or property of the tracts they occupied. Most of the forest dwelling people lived in a subsistence economy; they were the original inhabitants and custodians of these forests. But they were thrown out of their forests both in the plains and the foothills by force or with a little remuneration to the heads of the communities, compelling them to move away in search of new settlements.

The land leased out as estates for the purpose of tea cultivation engaged in large scale encroachment on the common lands designated as 'government land' far outstripping their legally allotted amounts of land. At an initial stages of tea industry in Asom, the Commissioner of Assam informed the Tea Committee in Fort William in October 1836 that C. A. Bruce, the superintendent of government tea plantations in eastern Asom had located a few natural tea forests in the Matak country, and of Bruce's efforts to win over the chief, Matak Bar Senapati, much like what he had already arranged with the 'Singpho' chiefs, so that tea empire could expand unhindered by pushing the tribal communities out of their

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67 "Reassessment Report: Southwest Sibsagar Group, Kamrup District", Rev.-A, February 1906, Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, ASA.
land. Jenkins wrote that Bruce informed him about his efforts during “a recent visit [to] the Mattock country in the discovery of tea plants in several new localities, in reconciling the Bur Senaputtee, who had evinced a good deal of jealousy in regard to our occupation of the tea plants, to the proceedings of government and inducing him to take upon himself the charge of the preservation of all the tea in his district.”

The Commissioner was hopeful that “it will not be long before Mr. Bruce will be able to repeat an equal success in his negotiations with the Singpho chiefs, in persuading them also to feel that it is their interest to promote the views of government”, an indication of the colonial intent to bring the influential sections of the tribal communities as accomplices to its rule. The contempt or even opposition of the chiefs to this intrusion of the British through acquisition of land was understandable, since among other reasons, the land sought by Bruce was cultivated or cultivable village lands. The object of the tea superintendent to go to the Matak country was to observe an ‘unintentional experiment’ on naturally growing tea-plants “on a patch of land where they had been cut down and deprived of the shade of the large forest trees by the villagers in preparing the grounds for a rice crop.” From the great quantity of tea-plants found to be growing in the wild in and around Sadiya, the government considered the need to protect them and the land on which they grew for future development, and for which to engage the native chiefs of that region for its growth, preservation, and protection. Not only that, colonialism envisaged the making of native chiefs the medium of propagating tea culture. It was not long before the Bar Senapati, the chief of the Matak country and the Sadiya Khowa Gohain, the Khampti chief of Sadiya, were made to accede to the demands of the tea industry by giving away

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68 F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to G. I. Gordon, Secretary to the Tea Committee, Fort William, No.287, October 1836, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA, emphasis added.

69 ibid.

70 C. A. Bruce “suggests the expediency of adverting the plantations at Sadiya and distributing the plants amongst the native chiefs. This recommendation seems to me worthy of adoption for we are not certain, I think from the great quantities of tea plant lately brought to light, of securing a sufficiency of the indigenous plants without having recourse to any artificial plantations of these plantations whatever or at least at the expense of government for it appears certain that if the Chinese manufacturers succeed in making tea, that will be in demand for exportation, the native chiefs will take care to propagate the plant to any required extent on being remunerated for the leave’s supplies.” ibid.
revenue-free land grants and government pensions to their families, but in turn
taking away the control and management of their feudatories and the power to
put its resources at the command of international finance capital.71 Even when
the colonial government intended to protect the rights of the tribal communities
of their land and resources, it was in the final analysis, undertaken only to
protect its own interest. As Jenkins wrote to Lieutenant Brodie,

I have not the slightest wish to deprecate [the Nagas] of any part of their hills;
my sole aim is to secure to them their own lands in perpetuity and to prevent
their being now tricked out of what may seem of little value. The progress of tea
cultivation may shortly make every foot of land valuable to them and feeling that
they are now in their non age politically speaking, it seems our duty to protect
their interests. Their interests are however really ours; the naga hills may
become a den of robbers, if we allow these tribes to be unfairly dealt with and
we may be involve in most serious disturbances in consequence. But the day is
probably not distant when our supremacy must be fully acknowledged over all
the naga hills and the resources of these mountainous tracts may become of very
great importance. I look upon them as a certain heritage of our government and
if they now be guarded from spoliation they may hereafter be very valuable to
the state.72

Jenkins however was prompt in making it amply clear that it was not due to any
feeling of ‘paternalism’ as many imperialist historians has ascribed to the British
that such an approach was to be adopted, when he noted, “I beg to explain
explicitly that I have no wish whatsoever that the nagas should not be engaged to
cultivate tea, or their hills to be cleared but my sole apprehension is that... the
nagas may be cheated and the future interests of the government endangered.” But
the Nagas, like many other tribal communities, were in fact cheated and “tricked

71 By the middle of 1840, according to the suggestions made by the Commissioner of Assam, the
family of the late Matak Bar Senapati was to “receive one-third of the net revenue of the [Matak]
district, subject to a reconsideration when the assessment made upon the lands, with reference to the
quality of lands to be assigned to each.” Apart from this, each noble family was to get a piece of
land, containing cultivated fields an jungle, in the immediate vicinity of their residence, and a
pension. F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Captain Vetch, Political Agent Upper Assam,
No.378, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA.
72 Francis Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, N. E. F. to Lt. Brodie, Political Assistant in Charge
of Zillah Seebpore, 18 September 1840, May-October 1840, Vol.VI, Series XI, ASA.

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out" of their land through a gradual process in the coming decades which was started by the 'discoverers of tea' in Asom by Bruce, when tea estates - real or fraudulent - aggressively set out to acquire the lands of tribal communities in the foothills of eastern Asom.

The Commissioner of Revenue for the Assam Division was forced in 1843 to enquire into complaints of large-scale illegal land-grab against the Assam Company that had various commercial interests in the Valley, and to ask for a list of all grants made to the company together with a sketch map showing their relative position. The Sudder Board of Revenue in its letter to the Commissioner of Revenue noted, "Herring's letter accuses that whereas by the rules for grants of tea lands in Assam laid down by Lord Auckland, no company or individual can hold more than 20,000 acres. The Assam Company at the time of my application holds in one grant alone 70,000 acres and in their other numerous Barries along the Dibroo river in the Muttock country and in the southern division at least as much more."73

The grave possibility of land speculators 'tricking' the tribal communities out of their land was in the know of the colonial state. The Nagas who occupied the plains and foothills of the Brahmaputra valley where tea-plants and mineral resources were identified were particularly susceptible to such dispossession. The consideration of the fallout of such practices for the state however was based not on the concern that the tribes might lose out on valuable resources, but more on the apprehension that it might lead to discontent among the Nagas which would bring in disputes where the state then would be obliged to intervene, an eventuality that it sought to avoid. The state therefore strictly prohibited direct negotiation of speculators with the Nagas for land, which had already caused much trouble for the state. It was only through the state officials

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73 From the Board of Revenue, Bengal Government, Fort William, to the Commissioner of Revenue for the Division of Assam, No.5, 21 February 1843, Letter Received from the Board of Revenue, 1843, ASA.
that such transactions and transfers of land had to be initiated.\textsuperscript{74} As Jenkins warned,

I have not the slightest wish to deprecate [the Nagas] of any part of their hills; my sole object is to secure to them their own land in perpetuity and prevent their being now tricked out of what may seem of little value. The progress of tea cultivation may shortly make every foot of land valuable to them and feeling that they are now in their non age politically speaking, it seems our duty to protect their interest. Their interests are however really ours; the naga hills may become a den of robbers, if we allow these tribes to be unfairly dealt with and we may be involved in most serious disturbances in consequence.\textsuperscript{75}

The patronizing tone and 'protectionism' of the official rhetoric notwithstanding, the colonial state was of course not averse to the use of force if persuasions and engaging with chiefs of tribal communities did not yield the desired results. The state was confident that those who could not be broken down by bribes could definitely be made to yield by the application of military force, and the possibility of this was not lost to the tribal chiefs too. For instance, it was during this period that two Garo villages Hullal and Khoorgoon owed the government Rupees 128

\textsuperscript{74} From F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Lieutenant Brodie, Political Agent in Charge of Zillah Seebpore, No.660, 19 September 1840, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 6, May-October 1840, ASA. Jenkins wrote, "you should strictly prohibit any speculators from entering into engagements with the Nagas except through or Captain Vetch. If the lands as Mr. Bruce says on our side of the Namsang, any reference to the Naga chiefs appears greatly to be deprecated in it may lead them hereafter to prefer claims to lands to which they have no right, and from their knowledge of Mr. Bruce's having held appointment under he government they may suppose his interference was of an official character. I think therefore, when Mr. Strong goes to Jaipore you will take care to have it made known that the gentlemen employed in the tea manufactories merely private individuals and have no authority from our government whatsoever... With regard to the boundary between us and the nagas [sic] I think this subject is of any little consequence; situated as the nagas are between us and the neighbouring great power, we must consider all the nagas on this side [of] the ridge of the Patkye as under our protection, and more specially those who are dependent on assam for their ordinary supplies of provisions. Knowing also the rude construction of these communities and their very backward state of civilization, we are specially concerned that they shall not have cause to offence against any of the people of the plains for fear of an indiscriminate retaliation upon our subjects and we must therefore as they are perfectly incapable of judging for themselves, take upon ourselves to see that they are not imposed upon. This cannot be done except all engagements are made with the cognizance of our officials... But the day is probably not distant when our supremacy must be fully acknowledged over all the naga hills and the resources of these mountainous tracts may become of very great importance I took upon them as a certain heritage of our government and if they now be guarded from spoliation they may hereafter be very valuable to the state... I have no wish whatsoever that the nagas should not be engaged to cultivate tea, or their hills to be cleared, but my sole apprehension is that if the engagements are not made with your full knowledge and approvals the nagas may be cheated and the future interests of the government damaged."

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
and 32 of *Nuzzerannzh (Nazrana)* respectively, and it was suspected that the intermediate Garo village of Subkheejora prevented or dissuaded these two villages from paying their due. The Commissioner ordered the troops to march upto the villages, collect the Nazrana, and also to levy a fine of Rs.3 per household from the third village which allegedly prevented the two Hullal and Khoorgoon from making the payments. But in case of the villagers failing to come up with the fine, the troops were ordered to consider the villagers as enemies, march into their territory and burn the villages.76 The commanding officer was also directed to make known in the vicinity of the two villages that the government "will most severely punish any people who may attack them for being obedient to us and you must endeavour to make this extensively known among all the neighbouring class likely to annoy them."77

The use of force to subdue the independent tribes continued throughout the colonial period, which also was used for determining the shape and nature of future settlement in the Valley. Colonialism, with its instruments of coercive power as well as through bribery and corruption of a section of the dominant class within the tribal communities of both hills and plains, usurped their land and most of the traditionally recognised rights, pushed them into specified areas with most of the valuable land producing crops, timber, tea, coal, petroleum, and other resources taken away. Communities were branded either as Hill Tribes or Plains Tribes, and sought to be confined to the hills or the plains, thereby forcefully severing or constraining the old ties between hills and plains, and regulating through the Inner Line system.

The line dividing the plains and the hills was also envisaged as the line between civilization and savagery, between the settled and the mobile, between taxability of land and its non-taxability, etc. This plains-hill division was institutionalized

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76 From F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to J. Strong, No. 392, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA. "If these last referred villages do not come to you, you will be good enough to request Lt. Abbot to march into their village with you and if you are of opinion that their disobedience was occasioned by conspiracy and that they have withheld payment under false pretences you will be pleased to impose a fine upon them and should they desert their villages and you can come to no terms after waiting some days you will be pleased to burn their villages and destroy all the crops and such grain as you do not consume or cannot carry off."

77 Ibid.
with the Inner Line, a conveniently amorphous and flexible border between the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hills. It was flexible in that whenever it was felt that a prospectively profitable tract was demanded by the tea gardens, petroleum and coal prospectors, etc., the Line could be pushed up the hills and jungles to bring them inside the British administered area. In fact the colonial state in the initial decades of its rule gave a free hand to speculators and the agents of private companies to acquire land directly from tribal chiefs by all means possible: through fraud, cheating, manipulation and bribery, and so on. The customary rights and entitlements of the tribal communities over these common lands were thus trampled upon or severely restricted. Persuasion, threat and intimidation, fine, looting, burning and killing, setting one tribal community against another or one section of a community against another, using one tribe to attack and defeat another tribal opponent, sowing discord, suspicion and animosity amongst tribal communities and clans, this was how a 'civilized' State was established and consolidated in the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hills.

Whether in the hills or in the valley, the colonial state successfully nurtured and protected an influential section from amongst the indigenous communities who were instrumental in consolidating foreign rule in the region. They became an important column in the defense of the colonial economy, for which they were remunerated through various means, one of them being the posa, or 'protection money'. Still coercion and force was liberally used by the colonial authorities in the frontiers, the scale, extent and frequency of this violence against the 'hill-tribes' was so high as to make even the Governor General anxious in 1840, and had to demand restraint and discretion of the British military officers engaged in the frontier in directing State violence against the recalcitrant tribal communities. The Valley worked as the centre from where the colonial policies,

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76 The Commissioner of Assam wrote to Captain Vetch, the Political Agent of Upper Assam, "His Lordship [the Governor General/Viceroy] regrets extremely to observe the frequent necessity of resorting to measures at retaliation, and I have to request your entrust attention to the measures which his Lordship desires you to adopt in all cases of aggression by the hill tribes, and I trust you will duly inculcate on the officers under you the great anxiety of Government to win over the barbarous mountaineers by kindness and conciliation rather than to coerce them by severe measures of reprisal and punishment." From F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Captain Vetch, Political Agent,
campaigns and rules were directed and extended all around. Hill communities were induced to settle in the plains when it favoured the latter diplomatically, politically, and militarily, which would open up opportunities to the government to make use of them in its relations with the hill communities.\textsuperscript{79}

Similar were the course of events in those tracts of the Brahmaputtra Valley, mostly on its upper reaches, where minerals such as coal, petroleum, lime-stone, etc. were discovered and were profusely covered by forests, and leased out for exploration. The history of the Inner Line is replete with instances where all the valuable tracts in the plains as well as in the foothills were brought under the jurisdiction of the plains districts, pushed many of the tribal communities living there inside the Inner Line towards the hills and acquired their lands, and created an artificial distinction between the plains and the hills. This process tagged tribal communities in different artificial categories such as 'Hill Tribes', 'Plain Tribes', etc. and carved out different political and administrative units as Hills and Plains.\textsuperscript{80} Many communities lost possession of their ancestral lands and its produce, and were forced not only to change their place of settlement but also forcing transitions in their ways of life.

The manner in which the colonial government tweaked its own laws in order to facilitate the takeover of the land by private corporations hitherto controlled and used by the tribal communities is quite evident from the extension of the Lakhimpur Inner Line boundary in 1914, though this is by no means the only instance of its kind. Rather, the entire history of colonialism in the Brahmaputra Valley and in the region termed the North Eastern Frontier of British India in general is replete with a series of measures through which the indigenous people

\textsuperscript{79} "I am much gratified to find that the Gang Borahs [village headmen] of Sumigooding [an Angami Naga village] have come in, and that there is some prospect of your making an arrangement with them to settle on our lands and to detach them from the Angamee community... I sanction the expense of the presents to the Gang Borahs." F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to Lt. H. Biggie, Officiating Collector, Nowgong, No.388, 27 May 1840, Series XI: Letters Issued to Miscellaneous Quarters, Vol. 1, 1836, ASA.

\textsuperscript{80} The Census Report of Assam for 1881 noted, "The districts of the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys are known as the "plains" portion of Assam, and the hill tracts intervening between the two valleys are the "Hill Districts." The different portions differ considerably in their conditions, and are differently administered." Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, Introductory Chapter, p.1.
were dispossessed of their land and resources by using all means ranging from open use of violence or threat of it, to the employing of compensation, etc. In the present case, the Assam oil Company which was already running its refinery in Digboi in eastern Asom from 1899 – the first one in British India – applied in 1911 for a prospecting license in an area beyond the Inner Line boundary at the junction of the Dihing and Namchik rivers, where large deposits of oil and coal reportedly existed.

P. R. T. Gurdon, the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts was at pains to point out that just a few scattered villages inhabited by “Khamtis, Singphos and Duanias, with a few Nagas” were said to have existed in the area. The Naga villages were four in number – Napang, Khasang, Majan and Namphai consisting of five, six, ten and twenty houses respectively. The people of the area, the Commissioner asserted, “are under no sort of political control. Each village has its Gaonbura [village headman] after whom the village is named. The Gaonbura... decides disputes if there any chances to arise.” It was further proclaimed that “no political difficulties need be expected from the few scattered inhabitants”. So it was not surprising that the government agreed with Gurdon’s conclusion “that the mere fact that parts of the areas fall outside the Inner Line should not stand in the way of their development, [and] that the Inner Line should be extended in either case so as to include the whole area.”

The accent of the Government of India to the proposed extension was received in early 1914, and the area included within the Inner Line subsequently.

This process of dispossession in the region was accentuated by the ‘tea fever’ reaching a high pitch in the middle of the nineteenth century, and speculation on land was a swift business. Hundreds of speculators were descending on to the ‘tea districts’ of eastern Asom to grab land at throwaway prices from the government and sell it to prospective tea planters at high rates to earn windfall profits.

81 Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam in the Revenue and General Department, No.688C, Camp Dibrugarh 4 August 1911, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev. Misc.-A, April 1914, ASA.
82 N. E. Perry, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, Shillong 9 March 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev. Misc.-A, April 1914, ASA.
profits in the sale of land. As the state saw it, the rapacious British speculators could go to any extent in acquiring any prospective land, even with the risk of bringing the state into undesirable conflict over land rights with tribal communities in the process.

Such was the manner in which tribal land was acquired that the state had to intervene, as in case with one speculator Edwin Vanquolin who obtained a large tract of land on lease south of Ladoigarh from the Namsangia Nagas. The Commissioner of Assam communicated such a case to the Bengal Government, so that it saw "what some planters would like to do, and what they would do if not checked." The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar district wrote to the Commissioner about this case earlier,

South of Ladoigur, and not far from the Gelekee Guard-house, is a piece of land which was formerly rented to a Mr. Brooke, who cultivated with tea. After the raid on the Gelekee ground, the manager, Mr. Smith went away, and the place was abandoned, and the pottah was in 1868 cancelled... It lately came to my knowledge that Mr. Vanquolin has commenced clearing on this land, and accordingly I sent for that gentleman, and today he appeared before me, and, in answer to questions put by me, presented a deed executed by four Sundikois of the Namsangia Chang, giving him the land on a yearly rent of Rs. 20. The land originally rented to Mr. Brook. The land [is] now given by the Nagas to Mr. Vanquolin. I would request to be informed whether Mr. Vanquolin should be allowed to remain on this land or whether he should be informed that by residing there he does so at his own risk. I would not recommend the adopting the latter course, for it will only make the Nagas still more punctitious [sic] as to what belongs to them and what does not; moreover, it may lead to other people taking up land south of the Ghur [Ladoigur], and eventually cause complications with the tribes. Certainly, if we allow settlers to take up land south of the Ghur, we tacitly admit the land does not belong to us.

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83 H. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, Shillong, to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, No.1594, 24 August 1872, File No.141-251, Papers 2, B.G., 1872, ASA.

84 Major A. E. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagor, to the Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, No.760, 10 August 1872, File No.141-251, Papers 2, B.G., 1872, ASA, emphasis added.
The Commissioner replied by directing that Vanqulin must not be permitted to hold the lease or to make any cultivation on the land in question, and to tell the Sundikois of the Namsangia Nagas "most explicitly" that although the British Government chose to abstain from any interference with such cultivation as the Nagas might carry on within British jurisdiction but beyond the regularly settled mauzas, "it nevertheless does not recognize the right of the Nagas to lease or alienate those lands in favour of anybody, whether European or Native, and they must strictly abstain from doing anything of the kind. The Lieutenant Governor fully agreed to and approved of the Commissioner's decision not to allow Vanqulin to occupy the land.

That the above was not an isolated incident, and that there was sharp contradiction developing between tea interest and the peasantry over questions of ownership, access, use and settlement of land in the Brahmaputra Valley is evidenced by a similar incident of forceful occupation of village common land by tea plantation. Raiyats of eight villages of Golaghat subdivision in Sibsagar district addressed a petition to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in February 1899 where they complained of

the oppression, hardship, and calamity to which we have been, and are likely to be, subjected to in consequence of the tea plantations made in the midst of our villages by Mr. C. E. Peterson, in spite of the existence of the orders of refusal of land by several Assistant Commissioners of Golaghat, and in defiance of the appellate courts of the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, the Commissioner of Assam and your honoured self, who have concurrently refused lands to Mr. C. E. Peterson, out of feelings and sympathy for us, the poor raiyats, who have mainly to depend upon the very lands (wanted by Mr. Peterson) for grazing purposes,

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85 J. J. S. Driberg, Officiating Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsaugor, No.1603T, 24 August 1872, File No.141-251, Papers 2, B.G., 1872, ASA.
86 T. J. Chichele Plowden, Officiating Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Commissioner of Assam, No.4160, 18 September 1872, File No.141-251, Papers 2, B.G., 1872, ASA.

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habitation, extension of cultivation, and expansion of villages along with the
growth and increase of the population. 87

The petition then went on to describe "the plans and devices which Mr. Peterson
has taken recourse to in order to take up lands, bit by bit and plot by plot, for his
tea cultivation on account of his failure to get lands from the authorities." Mr.
Peterson, the proprietor of the Dygroom Tea Estate, applied in 1895 for 700
bighas of land in Maukhoa mauza, Golaghat for the expansion of his estate. The
raiyats, coming to know of this application, put in their objection to the transfer
of this 'Government land' for tea purposes. The manager of the nearby Halmira
Tea Estate also placed an application requesting for the settlement of the same
piece of land stating that his Estate had more claims since "the land applied for
by Mr. Peterson in the Maukhoa mauza, village Gharkatia, had been, in or about
the year 1881-82, applied for by Mr. Stevenson, manager of the Halmira Tea
Estate, and had been refused to him on the grounds that it was wanted by the
raiyats for grazing purposes and for thatch-cutting." 88 Subsequent to this
application, the colonial government recognised that "this is grass land, very
useful for thatching-grass and pasture, and has a water spring in it, from which
water is used by the neighbouring villagers and cattle in dry season." 89

The petitioners went on to state that "Subsequently Mr. Peterson having made
his muharir, chaukidar and others apply for some of the very lands refused to
him by the authorities, fenced about 94 bighas of lands, and then he himself
applied for patta of 13½ acres of [the same piece of] land which he
had...cultivated with tea." After the raiyats again submitted their objections, the
district officer ordered in February 1897 that all lands occupied by Mr. Peterson
in contravention of official orders prohibiting transfer of land be cancelled, his
applications for more land in his name or his subordinates be rejected, and that
he be not allowed any more land in the area in future. An area of 47 bighas which

87 Petition from Tankesvar Surma and others, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Golaghat 17
February 1899, Rev.-A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
88 ibid.
89 Inspection Report by Dandadhar Barua, Tahsildar, 30 November 1895, ibid.
Mr. Peterson had illegally occupied and cultivated with tea in the grazing grounds, however, was allowed to him.

Ever since Mr. Peterson has obtained 47 bighas of land, he has realised or extorted from us about Rs.190 as damage on account of our cattle and buffaloes going into the land from the year 1896 to 1898... Not being satisfied with all these oppressions, Mr. Peterson caused one Chinac Koch, who had gone to his field to release his cattle by paying fine, to be severely beaten, which resulted in a criminal case; but it was subsequently compromised. From the 4th June to 6th August, for two months, we refrained from going to his garden to release our cattle lest we would be similarly assaulted... [Mr. Peterson] has destroyed all the thatching-grass by setting fire to it, and hoed all the lands, leaving only 6 or 7 nOLS from the villagers' homestead. Some of his cultivation is so close to the raiyat's houses that it is impossible for them to stay there. ...Mr. Peterson thus makes his device and plan to get hold of the land and to practice upon oppression which, he thinks, will, in course of time, compel us to leave our heaths and homes, and to make room for the extension of his tea garden."

The raiyats complained that the land was occupied in collusion with local government servants such as the sheristadar, tahsildar and the mandal. Indeed, the tea planter stepped up his incursions after the filing of the petition against him, with the result that two of the signatories of the petition were compelled to quit their homes by Mr. Peterson, who ordered planting of tea so close to their homes that they could not even find a way out to go to their neighbours or to their fields, a second petition complained.90 Official enquiries followed, and found the objections raised by the raiyats to be correct, that the tea planter "has got settlement for parts of the land by trick, which is not uncommon"91, that taking advantage of the lax revenue administration in Golaghat "he applied for small parcels of this land in his own name, and for others benami through his

90 Petition from Tankesvar Surma and others, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Golaghat 31 October 1899, Rev.- A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
91 From H. C. Barnes, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No.513R, Sibsagar 6 July 1899, Revenue A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
chaukidar, until he has gradually obtained possession of 277 bighas of the very land which was originally refused to him."\(^{92}\)

It was clear that the European tea-planters wielded enormous powers to influence the colonial state's decisions on the ground, and could easily get around unfavourable orders passed even by the highest colonial authority of the province, the Chief Commissioner. Indeed, it was clear that in a case of conflict between tea planters and peasants, it would be the former on the whole who would receive state's support and favour. In this case too, it was quite apparent that not only the native government servants were guilty of the illegal transfer of land to the tea estate in question, but higher colonial officials as well. As the Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton observed, "Mr. Jackson [the concerned Subdivisional officer], was certainly to blame, and passed a very improper order when he granted two leases in the reserved area, – one of 100 bighas and one of 91 bighas, on 11\(^{th}\) November 1898. He may not have been aware that the lease of this tract had already been prohibited, but seeing that he made a local enquiry, and appears to have gone fully into the facts of the case, it is almost incredible that he should have been ignorant"\(^{93}\). This indicated to a conversion of interest between the state's officers and the tea planter.

For the efforts of the planter, he was rewarded with a 'legal' settlement of the land which he had occupied in the village grazing field, even though he did so in contravention of the colonial legal procedure. Law was not allowed to become an impediment to the interests of plantation capital, which could be conveniently tweaked without much difficulty, an occurrence which was not uncommon in Asom, the State itself admitted. The land already settled with Mr. Peterson in the grazing field, even though was against government orders, was allowed to stand, on the plea that it would not be a 'legal' action on the part of the State to cancel them because these pattas were issued by a competent government authority.

\(^{92}\) From Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.748R, Shillong 2 January 1900, Revenue A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

\(^{93}\) ibid.
and because the grazing field was not declared as a grazing reserve. A government enquiry was constituted to examine the apparent collusion of interest between colonial servants and the tea planter, conducted by the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, and his report of March 1900 to the government absolved all the officials of any willful conceit or corrupt practice, and the 'mistakes' were attributed to negligence or carelessness, for which mild 'censures' were undertaken.

Force and oppression, trick and deceit, however, was resorted to by the planters only when the colonial State seemed to take steps contradictory to their interests, as was in the above case. But such instances were relatively less, compared to those where the State firmly stood with the plantation owners, individually and as a class. The almost insatiable demand for land by the tea industry was met by dispossessing indigenous inhabitants—in both hills and plains—from their lands, grazing fields, water-bodies, and forests etc. which were crucial for their survival. The land occupied by the tea industry was amongst the best available tracts of high lands immune from floods in the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and such land under the ownership of tea planters in the Brahmaputra Valley by the end of nineteenth century was not inconsiderable. As many studies have shown, only a small portion of this land was under actual tea cultivation, and there were various uses that these lands held by the planters were put to, apart from expansion of tea cultivation. But this effectively limited or reduced the land available for a growing peasant population of the Valley for agrarian

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94 P. G. Melitus, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 2381L, Gauhati 17 November 1899, Rev.-A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA. The Chief Commissioner agreed to this view by the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, and issued the following order, “Although the settlement of the lands referred to within the area which had been refused to the Halmirah tea estate and to Mr. Peterson, was improper and injudicious, yet, as the settlements have been actually made by officers duly empowered to make them, the Chief Commissioner considers it more than doubtful whether the settlements made on periodic lease can properly be cancelled now. Mr. Peterson should, however, be required to vacate at once any lands which he has cultivated without obtaining settlement, and care should be taken not to settle other lands with him in this locality.” ‘Resolution’, Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the General Department, No.12R, Shillong, 2 January, Rev.-A, January 1900, Nos.50-64, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

95 From B. B. Newbould, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No. 2 Confidential, Sibsagar 5 March 1900, Rev.-A, August 1900, Nos.184-199, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
expansion, and thereby accentuated the scarcity of cultivable land in flood-immune tract in the twentieth century.

It is in this context of a growing population of the Valley and an increasing pressure on the land available for future cultivation in the *rupit* or rice-tract of Asom in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century that we proceed to scrutinize the colonial policy of settling the Valley's uninhabited tracts with landless and poverty-stricken peasants from Eastern Bengal. Almost all of them were impoverished Muslim tenant cultivators under oppressive Hindu *zamindars* and landlords bound by exploitative production relations, with little or no claims on landed property back home.96 These peasants, who were considered to be more advanced agriculturalists adept in raising cash crops were perceived by the colonial state as the answer to the 'indolent' Asom peasants, and to the 'problem' of land abundance. This colonial policy also triggered the forging of a new relationship with the Brahmaputra, as we shall examine in the next chapter.