CHAPTER II

RIVERINE OCCUPATIONS

Productive activities in the Brahmaputra Valley were in many ways related to the rivers, agriculture among them being the most prominent and the peasantry the most numerous of the social classes, whose lands were fertilized by the silt brought down by the annual inundations, at the same time filling their ponds and lakes with fresh spawn and water. But by no means were peasants the only ones who had a close relation with the rivers. The potters collected the clay loam from the river banks, as well as the colour which was naturally found there. The rivers were a source of much of their demand for wood to run the furnaces, as in fact was the case with all the riverine communities, for whom catching timber brought down by the floods was an important activity during the monsoons. The lives of the fisher-people and boatmen were also closely integrated with the rivers, they most often living in close proximity to the river. We also find that the river-islands on the Brahmaputra were important grazing grounds, and the grazers, cattle-owners and milkmen regularly occupied and inhabited these islands along with the peasants who practiced pam cultivation on these fertile islands in the winters. Of course, as it would be obvious, those communities and villages which were dependent on the river were invariably the poorest and
most destitute ones, having hardly any access to permanent cultivable land or the other means of production for taking up cultivation, or means of saving a surplus. The more numerous of these riverine communities in the Valley were the Kibartas/Nadiyals and the Mishings, with their distinctive *chang* or raised houses above the flood level on the river banks. Then there were the gold-washer communities collectively called the Sonowals by their profession, who eked out their living by seasonally working the rivers for gold predominantly during Ahom rule, more as an obligatory royal service than a chosen profession.

Even though the degree and the kind of relationship to the rivers varied, almost every household or village in the Valley was familiar with the rivers. Almost every family owned a boat for transport during the rainy season, when the fields and hearths transformed into huge sheets of water running for miles at end. The river in the colonial period signified much more than a mere source of devastating floods, or as an anathema to growth and development, as the late twentieth century imagination of the rivers propagated by the State would like its subjects to believe. In fact, this relationship was much more complex to be captured by such a linear and one-sided attribution.

*Washing for Gold: The Sonowals*

It is said that most of the rivers in the Brahmaputra Valley carries rich sediments of gold, and in the pre-colonial period gold-washing held considerable significance for the ruling monarchy as a source of the precious metal. According to the Mughal chronicler Shahabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumlah in his expedition to Assam in 1662,

> Gold is washed from the sand of the Brahmaputra. Ten or twelve thousand Assamese are engaged in this employment, and they pay to the Raja's government one *tola* of gold per head per year. But this gold is of a low standard of purity; a *tola* of it fetches only eight or nine rupees. It is said that gold can be
procured from the sand at all places on the bank of the Brahmaputra; but the only people who know how to gather it are those Assamese. ¹

The hill streams were considered to be better source of the gold dust in comparison to those running through the Valley, and those with a fast current more preferable than the ones with a slower flow, with the best gold supposedly to be found in the most winding streams with the strongest currents.² As such, the gold of the Brahmaputra was of poor quality, compared to many of its tributaries ensuing from the surrounding hills that had faster currents. Of all these rivers, Maniram Dewan – who wrote a treatise on the subject in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal – identified a few of the major rivers to be most productive. These were the rivers Seedang, Kakoi, Kadam, Somdiri, Diju, Bhairabi, ‘Joongloong', Jajee, and Disoi. Captain Hannay added the rivers Boroli and Subansiri in the list, while according to him Disoi and ‘Joglo’ contained the purest and the best gold. In the ‘Joglo’ river, Hannay informed, the metal was found in large grains, about the size of a grain of rice. The color of the gold in Disoi and ‘Joglo’ was said to be of a deep yellow, and it was so much valued that the jewels of the royal family was prepared from the gold procured from the two rivers.³

Other officers of the East India Company also corroborated these references to the gold-carrying rivers of Assam. Lieutenant James Matthie, collector and magistrate of Darrang in his report to the commissioner Francis Jenkins in 1835 wrote that the gold “considered the most precious is found in the river Jengloo, which runs from the northern mountains, and enters the Brahmaputra above Suddeah.”⁴ In the second category were the rivers Borohu, Dikrai, Subansiri, Borgong, Bareli and Dhansiri on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and the

⁴ Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835, Lt. James Matthie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General’s Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, File No.298, Bengal Government Papers (B.G.), ASA.
Desai and Dikhow on its south bank.\textsuperscript{5} The most inferior quality, Matthie reported, was procured from the Brahmaputra.\textsuperscript{6}

Captain Hannay estimated that a considerably numerous class of people who were skillful in gold-washing existed in Asom under the Ahom kings. From the above estimate as well as the number of contracts that existed between them and the state as to the mode and rate of revenue payment, he assumed that this work contributed considerable quantities of gold to the royal treasury.\textsuperscript{7} This group of people obliged to collect gold by royal decree was designated as Sonowals.

The colonial documents however are ambiguous in their description of the Sonowals. Capt. Hannay noted, "The gold-washers of Assam are designated sonewahls, but as they were distributed in different parts of the country and placed under the authority of Phokans, Booroohs, and other chiefs, they were known only by the names of 'Khel' or tribe of chief, under whom they resided."\textsuperscript{8} People of all classes and castes could be part of the Sonowal \textit{khels}, though they were primarily constituted by the 'Beeheahs' – identified by Hannay as a "tribe of Ahoms" – and the Kacharis. According to this account, the Sonowal Kacharis of Sadia and the region in its vicinity were a distinct group who were entirely under Ahom Raja himself, and were to supply the state with gold when called upon to do so. As Matthie's description goes, the Sonowals of Darrang district were also organised under \textit{khels} during the Ahom rule, and in different parts of central and eastern Asom there were about 25 \textit{khels} who used to be employed in washing the sands of both the northern and southern rivers for gold dust. They supplemented this work with boat-building and foraging forest produce.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{5} Matthie, \textit{Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam}, 1835.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam}, 1835, Lieutenant James Matthie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General’s Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, File No. 298, B.G. Papers, ASA. On the gold carried by the Brahmaputra, Matthie wrote, "Some is also procurable in the bed of the Brahmaputra, but it is considered very inferior, being of a much lighter colour, and only sells for Rs.10 the tolah. The parts in which large pebbles have accumulated and under which the sand has a red or black appearance, are considered the most promising deposits of gold."
\textsuperscript{7} Captain Hannay, 'Further Information on the Gold Washings of Assam', \textit{Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal}, No.79, July 1838, p.625.
\textsuperscript{8} ibid., p.625.
\textsuperscript{9} ibid., p.626.
When Maniram Dewan wrote his note on gold-washing in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1838 – an important source of information regarding gold-washing in the Valley – eastern Assam was still under Ahom rule, although as a tributary to the British East India Company. According to Dewan, at that time there were about 150 to 160 gots or close to five hundred Sonowal paiks in the entire ‘Upper Assam’ who paid taxes to the royal treasury for the right to wash gold. Most of them resided in the north bank, while only 26 households survived in the south bank. There were 250 to 300 gots in the Matak country ruled by the Bar Senapati in addition. About ten to fifteen gots were residing in Biswanath, while 50 to 60 gots had their villages between Sadiya and Saikhowa.\(^{10}\) Though the Sonowals specialized in the task of extracting gold, “other pykes sometimes join with them and receive their share.”\(^{11}\)

Hannay, who was posted as the commanding officer in eastern Assam in 1853, wrote a paper titled ‘Notes on the Gold-fields of Assam’, where he argued that the number of people designated as Sonowals were numerous, and the region of Sadiya including Lakhimpur alone had population of close to 10,000 gold-washers. He notes,

> Although it is authenticated that the produce of the gold-washings in Assam, particularly Upper Assam, formed a very considerable source of revenue to the Assam Governments of former days, no correct data can be obtained so as to give an idea of the exact amount of gold realised yearly:- but as the Sonwals, or gold-washers, one of the constituted khels or sections of the inhabitants (according to occupation) who paid their taxes in gold, form a large portion of the population, we may reckon on its having been something considerable, when in the northern district of Suddeah alone, including Luckimpore, these Sonwal paiks amounted to 10,000.\(^{12}\)

Various factors, however, contributed to the abandoning of gold-washing as a productive activity, most of the Sonowals preferring to fall back upon paddy

\(^{10}\) ibid., p.629.


\(^{12}\) ibid., p.622.
cultivation during the colonial period, leading to the widely held belief among the colonial officials that this profession was kept alive by the Ahom royalty under obligation and coercion.

**The Process of Washing**

The process of washing for gold from the rivers was a specialized and labour-intensive one, with the remuneration for the amount of labour put being considered unprofitable. In the organisation of production, at least four labourers were required to establish one work unit. The Sonowal Kacharis of Sadiya formed four men to a *got* or basic production unit. Their method of washing required four men to each trough or *doroni* to keep up an uninterrupted operation, with one man to wash, two to bring the soil, and the fourth to dig out the sand from the river-bed, interchanging their functions at intervals to relieve each other. In a short description of the washing process, Matthie informed that the sand was first placed in small sieves made of bamboos which helped in segregating the pebbles. The sand that passed through the sieve was then placed in wooden troughs with obliquely cut bottoms. The sand was placed on the high end and water dropped on it from a vessel punctured with small holes producing a shower, carrying off the sand. This process, after repeated several times, left the precious particles. Each worker thus obtained 2 or 2.5 *tolahs* of gold on an average during the season, which Matthie says spanned from 1 November to 1 February.

Hannay, describing the common method of extracting gold from the rivers in his *Notes*, does not fail to express his admiration and favourable impression of the Sonowals. He said that the Assamese generally washed in a trough, and although for want of cleets there was some loss, "it is wonderful to see with what dexterity the left hand is used to keep the dust at the head of the trough, and to allow of a constant stream of water passing down its slope, thus washing the stuff

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13 Captain Hannay, 'Further information on the gold washings of Assam', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No.79, July 1838, p.628.
14 *ibid.*, p.627.
thoroughly in a very short time and leaving nothing but the very finest of the “schlich with its gold-dust.” Though the main instrument of washing – the trough – left much to be improved, however, considering it was light and one man could operate it easily, it was admittedly the cheapest method which could be employed in Assom. The ‘Singphos’ used an oval board for this purpose, which performed the same function of the trough with almost equal efficiency when used expertly. To Hannay, this was the best and cheapest method of extracting the gold, for not only could an expert gold-washer separate every particle of oxide and gold from the sandy rubble, but “he will after the day’s labour is over, take the schlich and gold-dust on the board, and by a peculiar dexterity of hand with the board and the water”, wash away the particles of oxide, leaving the latter at the head of the board. This minimized the necessity of using the expensive quicksilver for ‘licking up’ the oxide as was generally done before the melting of the gold could be taken up. The emphasis of the gold-washers, Hannay tells us, was to keep their know-how a closely guarded secret, reportedly giving the others the impression that only they knew the particular and specialized methods of washing gold, and that they alone knew the most favourable spots for the work.

Maniram Dewan goes to great details in narrating the method used in the processing during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The first step was to indentify the suitable place for washing, where the possibility of obtaining the metal was higher. The Sonowals first looked for a stretch of the river where the current was strong with a falling bank above it and on a sharp turn of the channel. The opposite shore of such a place, where sand from the falling bank was deposited mixed with gravel, was selected for processing. Each production consisted of a patoee (the master gold-washer) and four pallees (assistants), who washed the sand with the help of a trough called ‘dorongee’. They began by exploring the depth at which the gravelly sand could be found, with a sharp pointed bamboo called sokalee. A piece of split bamboo (bans chola) was then used to examine the sand whether there was any gold dust in it. If twelve to

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15 Memorandum on the Former Gold-washings in the Assam Valley Streams, Circular No.81, 25 October 1876, No.3666R, Gold-washing in the Assam Rivers, Pre-1874 Index, ASA.
16 ibid., p.626.
fourteen grains were found, immediately temporary huts were constructed and the operations commenced.

The deep part of the stream was embanked with sand if the stream was small and the current moderate, and with stakes and grass if it was large. The channel of the stream was thus directed over the sand so as to wash away the upper surface of the sand exposing the gold sand. This done, the bund was reopened and the stream allowed to return to its original bed. The upper sand was then carefully scrapped off and the gold-mixed sand collected with a wooden spade called *kater dohtal*. This tool was normally 1.5 cubits long and 1 cubit broad with a handle four cubits long, the blade was shaped as a crescent with holes at each corner through which a string was passed on. The string was held by two men while a third person pressed the spade down in a perpendicular position. The sand was brought in small baskets called *cookees* and thrown on a bamboo strainer called *ban* which was laid over the trough by the *dorongee*.

Water was now poured with one hand by the gold-washer over the sand while with the other hand he moved the sand about, sweeping off the larger particles of gravel from the surface of the strainer. In this way the dirty sand ran off the trough, while the clean sand and gold remained at its bottom. Every forty *cookee* or basket of sand washed was measured as one *sheea*, and a *ruttee* or more of gold produced from one *sheea* was considered to be a very good outturn. During the long days the gold-washers often could clean around thirty *sheeas* of sand, sometimes only producing one *ruttee* of gold. In the cold season when the days were shorter, only about twenty five *sheeas* could be washed, each party thus making on an average about ¼ of a *tola* daily. If they were fortunate, and "happen to fall on a good old stream that has not been disturbed for or 6 years they get 2 ruttees of gold from every sheea or washing, and then each party makes about half a tolah daily."

In the final part of the process, about an *anna's* weight of quicksilver for each tolah of gold dust was used and washed with water again. This leaves the quicksilver with the gold dust in lumps. These lumps were then put into a shell
and burnet on a fire made of charcoal from the Nahar tree. The quicksilver evaporated and the shell became lime as a result, which was then carefully taken up in a spoon and thrown into water, allowing the gold to fall into the bottom.

Though the process of procuring the gold particles was considered by Matthie to be a crude and simple one, it nevertheless was tedious and labour-intensive. It appears that this work was not enough to sustain the Sonowals for the entire year, and their economic status was not distinguishable from the other paiks. They were therefore partly dependent on cultivation as well as other productive activities for their living. Washing for gold in the rivers were undertaken only in a few months of the year, and this working period was interspersed with customary holidays. There were at least four such holidays every month, on the new and full moon days, on the first of the month, and on ekadossee or the eleventh day of the month. The gold was washed for in all streams in the cold season during the months of Magh, Fagun and Chot, roughly covering the months of January to April, and in a few streams in the months of Ahin and Kati (September and October).17

Dewan calculated the number of gold-washers in the period of Ahom rule in Sadiya region to be not less than 10,000. "Allowing, therefore, that every paik, at the lowest rate, supplied four annas weight of gold-dust yearly, the total amount would be 40,000 grs. for that district alone". Since the same system of gold-washing was also practiced in the south bank districts of the Brahmaputra, Dewan estimated that the yearly produce of gold-washing in Assam in that period amounted to £8,000 or £10,000 sterling.18

He describes the existing system of sharing the produce between the primary producers and the state officials, high and low. There was an elaborate system of collecting and sharing the profits of gold-washing, from the petty state officials up to the king. In the season of gold washing, the Sonowal paiks went as a group under the local officials—the Boras and the Saikias—to the designated spot. After

18 ibid., pp.621-625.
the Sonowals put in the back-breaking labour working for gold for the entire season under the supervision of these state officials, each paik had to pay \( \frac{1}{2} \) a tolah of gold to the state treasury as his share of tax. Not only this, an extra cess was also levied where the processing involved melting, the requirement of which depends on the quality of the gold procured. For the best quality of gold called votom, the Sonowal paiks had to give 3 ratis in addition to the \( \frac{1}{2} \) tolah, 4 ratis for the second best kind or modom, and for the inferior kind or norrom, 6 ratis or 1 anna. Apart from what was claimed by the royal treasury, a 'commission' of one rupee's weight in every 20 was collected by the Phukans and the Baruahs, Ahom state officials under whom the Boras and Saikias worked. Similarly, half a tolah for every 20 tolahs of gold was entitled for the Tekelas and the Boras, while \( \frac{3}{4} \) tolah of gold was collected by the Bhandar Kakoti. When the tax in gold was presented to the Ahom king, the Chang Kakoti, the Bhadari Ligira, the Pachoni, and the Kukurasowa Baruah—all officials of the royal court—together claimed 1\( \frac{1}{4} \) tolahs of silver for each tolah of gold deposited.\(^{19}\)

Matthie was also of the opinion that the burden of royal taxation on the Sonowals was much higher than those imposed on the peasantry. The paiks constituting the Sonowal khels paid double the amount of capitation tax payable by the other paiks, each having to pay either Rs.7 in cash or half a tolah of gold per annum to the royal treasury, he concluded.\(^{20}\) A collective payment of gold weighing 1,000 tolas was exacted from the persons washing in each of the rivers Dihang, Dibang, and Lohit, and 500 tolas from those washing for gold in the Noa Dihing and Buri Dehing Rivers.\(^{21}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p.622.
\(^{20}\) Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835, Lt. James Matthie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General's Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, File No.298, Bengal Government Papers (B.G.), ASA.
\(^{21}\) Memorandum on the former Gold-washings in the Assam Valley Streams, Circular No.81, 25 October 1876, No.3666R, Gold-washing in the Assam Rivers, Pre-1874 Index, ASA.
Gold-washing, the colonial officers argued, was not a remunerative profession. Lieutenant James Matthie, the then district magistrate of Darrang, reported in 1835 to the Chief Commissioner of Assam that there was only one khel of Sonowals in his district and two in the Nowgong district, the remainder being in eastern Asom. Those residing in Darrang were assessed as the other subjects. A very small quantity of gold was now procured, although the demand for it was very great. He admitted that "I have not been able to ascertain the real cause for the people neglecting such an apparently profitable trade." One explanation which Matthie came across was that the Sonowals were very often robbed because of their profession and possession of gold, which forced them to take up agricultural pursuits.

The explanation given by Matthie for the demise of this practice, in terms of robbery and lack of sufficient safety for the Sonowals, seems not only vague but also far fetched. The more probable factor could be the primitive techniques of gold extraction which required extensive labour, so much so that the amount of gold procured could hardly pay for it. This occupation was sustained only as long as the practice was carried out as an obligatory service to the State. But even at that period, the gold left to the producer alone, after fulfilling the requirements of the royal treasury and its functionaries, could not sustain the families of the Sonowals, and had to be supplemented by other activities, most notably cultivation. The work was abandoned after obligatory labour service was discontinued by the colonial government. One of the explanations for the decline

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22 'A Sketch of Assam: with Some Account of the Hill Tribes, by an officer in the Hon'ble East India Co.'s Bengal Native Infantry, in Civil Employ', p.138.
23 Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835, Lt. James Matthie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General's Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, File No.298, Bengal Government Papers (B.G.), ASA. Emphasis added.
of gold-washing can be found in D. A. Macleod’s opinion which was typical of the contemporary colonial view on the matter. He wrote in 1837,

Gold is found in much less quantity than is generally supposed, few people make a livelihood by washing for it, which is the more remarkable as no extra revenue is now exacted from them as in former times, when they paid thrice as much as their neighbours, besides being robbed of the fruits of labour by the Raja and people immediately over them, which would not now be the case. In former days no doubt it was very plentiful, when large numbers of people were forcibly employed by the Raja and rich nobles in search of it; but now no coercion being allowed, and the people having very great aversion to hard work, which gold washing is, never think of having recourse to it, excepting when driven to it by necessity.24

A reference to the working of gold-washing in colonial Assam was made in a letter in 1851 from Captain Vetch, political agent of Upper Assam, to the then commissioner Francis Jenkins where he reported on the inquiries made after receiving complaints from eleven parties of gold-washers who requested protection from the ‘extortions’ they were allegedly subjected to by the Abors and Miris whenever they searched for gold in the Dihong River.25 Vetch informed that all gold-washers under the erstwhile Ahom government were taxed at Rs.5 each per annum. The colonial government abolished this poll tax and introduced land revenue, while the rights of washing for gold in the numerous streams of the district were now farmed to the highest bidders. The Dihong was one such river, and the right of gold-washing for the year 1951 was leased out for Rs.80. The lease covered the stretch of the river from the point where this ‘immense’ river issued from the hills to its junction with the Brahmaputra. This stretch was little more than twenty miles in length, and the preferred locations for gold-washing were situated from twelve to seventeen miles from its mouth.26

25 *Memorandum on the former Gold-washings in the Assam Valley Streams*, Circular No.81, 25 October 1876, No.3666R, *Gold-washing in the Assam Rivers*, Pre-1874 Index, ASA.
26 ibid.
The officer also mentioned that the quantity of gold at present annually produced from the Dihong was not more than 40 or 50 *tolas*. However, this work in Dihong and other gold-producing rivers provided a ready resource to the *ryots* for earning the valuable money with which they could pay their land revenue, which the produce of the land alone hardly allowed. Vetch held that the rivers could yield much more if the washing was extensively carried on and for a longer period. But in the present conditions, the gold-washers seldom extended their operations over fifteen days at a time.27

E. A. Dalton was assigned the task of examining and reporting on the “gold-producing capabilities to the Jugloo”, a tributary of the Buri Dihing in Lakhimpur district since it was believed that “According to tradition, the tract through which the Jugloo flows contains rich gold deposits.”28 Dalton proceeded to the said river with an expert gold-washer “and some coolies” to conduct the examination through experiments. His findings were later presented to the government as a report titled *Account of a visit to the Jugloo and Seesee Rivers in Upper Assam*. Describing his journey, Dalton narrated that after about an hour’s walk from the Dihing River upstream of the Jugloo, they commenced washing in a rough wooden pan made for the occasion. The very first attempt yielded a few specks of gold, though pale in colour. The washing was continued at regular intervals while advancing, and at each site, a pan of gravel was invariably found to contain a few of such particles. As the washing progressively moved upstream and with deeper excavations on the river bed, the colour of the gold dust became brighter, indicating an improvement in the quality of the ore. Retracting their steps they proceeded up another branch of the Jugloo, and were joined by a party of gold-washers deputed by Dalton to collect specimens. They constructed two small embankments with bamboo and straw which divided the stream into three channels and enabled them to turn all the water into or out of the main channel. At the end of the day’s experiments, he “made a rough estimate of the quantity of rubble washed, and on comparing it with the gold obtained, it gave about 18

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27 ibid.
28 ibid.
grams to the ton and about 8 grains as the outturn of one man's labour for the day."^{29}

Dalton examined the Sesa River as well, which also was on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. He said that the *raiyats* on the Sesa worked for gold in spots within a short distance of their own villages, which was a lucrative occupation for the months in which they could take time off from their agricultural activities. After the harvest of paddy in January, they formed gold-washing teams and started with provisions for a week or a fortnight. If they were fortunate, they could obtain sufficient gold to pay off their land revenue. It was said that in favourable localities and conditions, 20 grains of gold was not an uncommon return for one day's labour for three men operating a trough. After conducting similar experiments with the help of the *raiyats*, Dalton calculated that the work on one trough in the Sesa yielded only 11 grains of gold from one ton of sand, a rate pronounced by the gold-washers to be very "unfavorable". Thus in his estimation, the average production at this river was not more than 15 grains for every ton of sand washed. Judging the outcome of the experiments, Dalton concluded that the most productive rivers were the Subansiri and Dibong, whose yield varied annually between a seer and a half to two seers of pure gold, while the Brahmaputra and Dibong were said to produce half a seer to three quarters. The total annual yield of the Lakhimpur district was no more than about ten seers. Each river was worked by the gold-washers who lived nearest to it, but the number of people in the occupation in comparison to earlier times had dwindled.^{30} This matches the calculation of Captain Hannay, who also estimated that the districts of Lakhimpur and Sadiya produced ten seers of pure gold in 1851-52, and the *Kayah* or the Marwari traders bought it from the producers at Rs.14 to Rs.15 per tolah of solid gold.

The colonial state recognised the need for continuing the profession of gold-washing, and farmed out leases parts of rivers for this purpose. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, it was obvious for them that the importance of this work

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^{29} ibid.

^{30} ibid.
for the subjects in general and even the erstwhile Sonowals in particular had declined considerably. In a communication to the Board of Revenue at fort William about the "poll and gold washing taxes" in November 1859, the Commissioner of Assam noted that the streams where gold was known to be found were farmed out annually as mahals or estates to the highest bidders. Nevertheless, the revenue generated under this head had reduced to such insignificance that though it was hitherto considered as a source of fixed revenues, the district collectors now proposed that these mahals could without detriment be transferred to miscellaneous headings.31

So when the British government expressed its keenness to revive the old practice and profession of gold-washing in the rivers of Asom in 1870s, the question to be addressed for the government was whether the quantity and value of the product justified the amount of labour to be employed or not. As an official Circular in 1876 noted,

The question whether gold is to be found in this Province in sufficient quantity to recompense the labour necessary to extract it has lately attracted the attention of the Chief Commissioner. It is an historical fact that at one time a great many of the streams of Assam, particularly those flowing from the Himalayas, yielded gold in considerable quantities. But with the increased value of labour, caused mainly by the introduction and expansion of the tea industry, gold-washing became unprofitable. Within the last three years, the relative values of gold and silver have considerably altered, and the methods are practiced now for extracting gold which were unknown to the native gold-washers.32

The then Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1876 considered that it would be a matter of regret if the tradition of former gold-washing operations were allowed to die out, since by doing so, "An important item of possible wealth to the

31 Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to E. J. Biver, Secretary to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letter No.112, 25 November 1859, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1859, ASA.

32 Memorandum on the former Gold-washings in the Assam Valley Streams, Circular No.81, 25 October 1876, No.3666R, Gold-washing in the Assam Rivers, Pre-1874 Index, ASA.
Province might thus perhaps be lost sight of."33 As such, the collectors of all the Brahmaputra Valley districts were directed to report on "what localities the industry was pursued, in which of them the best yield was obtained, the method adopted, and the taxes which were paid by the washers to the native Governments for the several streams. The amount of taxation or washing fee paid for each stream would probably be the best indication of its value."34 From the replies from district officers to this government circular of 1876, it was clear that only in Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts in the Valley gold-washing was carried out in any quantity. In Darrang, an entire establishment consisting of Ahom state officials such as Hazarikas, Salkias, and Boras organised and oversaw the *paiks* who were engaged in gold-washings. The Hazarikas were required to present to the Ahom Raja a certain quantity of the gold annually from their respective jurisdictions, and in case of default they had to pay a penalty in the sum of Rs.18 for each of the *paiks* they employed on behalf of the state. The Darrang collector further reported that after the occupation of the Assam Valley by the British, the Charduar and Noduar *mahals* were regularly leased out every year for gold-washing operations, as was the case with fishery *mahals*. However, "The leases of these mahals used to be put up to auction; but the price they fetched gradually becoming less and less, they have not been offered for sale since 1865-66."35

The collector of Sibsagar reported that in that district gold-washing was chiefly carried on in the Desai River under the Jorhat subdivision. It was found that there were only four remaining villages inhabited by the descendants of the Sonowals in the entire district.36 The commissioner also reported his conversation with an old man at Jorhat who could remember the times when they were engaged in this occupation. The man told that his village had long abandoned the vocation of gold-washing as it was not remunerative enough, and for those who did not engage in cultivation, there were better alternatives of making a living by working as labourers in the tea gardens where they were able

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33 ibid.  
34 ibid.  
35 ibid.  
36 ibid.
to earn more than by engaging in their traditional occupation. Nevertheless, it is
difficult to verify how many of the former gold-washers took up tea-garden work
as labourers as a "better alternative", considering all evidence indicate their
falling back on cultivation once gold-washing became non-remunerative.

In Lakhimpur district, gold-washing appeared to have been extensively pursued,
where the waters of almost every river was washed for gold. The principal rivers
containing auriferous deposits were Lohit, Dihang, Dibong, Upper Dihing, Noa
Dihing, Buri Dihing, Dikrang, Ranga Nadi, Jaising and the Subansiri, all of which
were tributaries of the Brahmaputra. According to the information of the
Lakhimpur collector, no additional tax was collected from the gold-washers
other than what was charged from the paiks, though they paid this tax in gold.37

The officer considered that this was not a profitable industry for its workers, and
only because of compulsions imposed by the king that they continued with this
vocation, and with the fall of the Ahom regime, this work also declined
drastically. In his estimate the earning for each man per season ranged between
a meager 4 annas to 12 annas, considered to be a very low rate even at that time.
Even though the leases for gold-washing mahals in Lakhimpur were continued to
be farmed out till as late as 1874-75, the sale proceeds fetched a nominal annual
sum of only Rs.7. The most productive river was the Subansiri, and nearly two
hundred men used to wash for gold by this river. But though the volume of gold
extracted was considerable, with a single party of washers collecting as much as
three-quarters of a seer of gold in a single season, the work was unprofitable. The
causes of this occupation becoming unprofitable were multiple:

The right of washing was ordinarily purchased by one of the amlah, or by some
hanger-on about the courts, who rackrented it to the actual washers. The price of
quicksilver, which was indispensable in the industry, was about Rs.3 or Rs.4 per
tola weigh, and was all lost in the process. The price of gold in the bazar ranged
from Rs. 14 to Rs. 12 per tola; but the washers had to subsist on advances

37 ibid.
obtained at ruinous rates, hypothecating their estimated outturn of gold for the season at from Rs.8 to Rs.10 per tola.\textsuperscript{38}

Very few new gold-washing and prospecting leases were applied for or sold by the end of the nineteenth century. In a communication to the Government of India, the chief commissioner of Assam informed that one Scott-Campbell of Dibrugarh was granted a gold-washing lease for ten years to wash for gold in the Subansiri River and its tributaries within British territory in the district of Lakhimpur on a rental of Rs. 10 per annum in 1882. The commissioner rued, “This lease was given in the hope that Mr. Campbell would examine the rocks carefully and get out machinery, but as a matter of fact Mr. Campbell has done nothing in this direction”.\textsuperscript{39} As a result, his recent application for a renewal of the lease for another term of ten years was turned down. Only one prospecting license was granted in 1893 to the Planters’ Stores and Agency Company Limited of Calcutta for prospecting the possibilities of gold-washing in the rivers of Lakhimpur district on a nominal annual tax of Rs.10.\textsuperscript{40}

A few months after the turn of the nineteenth century, F. E. Winsland and G. W. Sutton of Assam and London entered into an agreement with the Government of India for an annual license for prospecting gold in a stretch of the Subansiri River in Lakhimpur district on payment of Rs.100 as license fee. The license earmarked the area to be “The stretch of river Subansiri between the point known as Gogamukh three miles below the Pathalipam tea estate and the point crossed by the new Inner Line at the entrance to the gorge of the Subansiri river about 10 miles in length and the lands lying in either bank of the river within hundred feet of the river.”\textsuperscript{41} The rent agreed upon was Rs.100 per annum, and the rate of royalty on the gold to be collected was 5 percent on the value of gold extracted, while one tola was allowed to be taken free of cost. The farm wrote to the

\textsuperscript{38} ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} F. C. Daukes, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Revenue and Agricultural Department, No.3666R, 19 September 1891, \textit{Gold Washing in the Assam Rivers}, Pre-1874 Index, ASA.
\textsuperscript{41} F. E. Winsland to the Subdivisional Officer of North Lakhimpur, Joyhang, 2 February 1901, ‘Grant of A License to Messrs. F. E. Winsland and G. W. Sutton to Prospect for Gold in the Subansiri River in the North Lakhimpur Subdivision’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, June 1902, ASA.
government in February 1901 that small experimental washing of gold was started in the designated stretch of the Subansiri. But it found that the part of the bed of the river nearly a mile below Gogamukh was better suited for the method of washing employed. The farm therefore requested the government to extend the licensed stretch of the river one mile below Gogamukh till Hessamara, and it was readily agreed upon. The farm applied in January 1902 for an extension of their license for the Subansiri for one more year, and also applied for similar licenses to work on the Dihong and Noa Dihing rivers. However, the experiments carried out in the subsequent months turned out to be disappointing for the prospectors. Applying for a cancellation of the Subansiri lease and also declaring its intent to withdraw the applications for the other two rivers, F. E. Winsland, one of the proprietors of the company wrote to the government in March 1902 that in the last two months

Our syndicate have been able to secure the services of a New Zealand gold-mining expert named Harris, who is just now in Assam prospecting for minerals. This gentleman has carried out the work we intended importing a man to do next cold weather, and I much regret to say that his report is unfavourable to the prospect of gold dredging by machinery on the Subansiri river. I now, therefore, beg to withdraw on behalf of Mr. Sutton and myself from the license already granted... I also wish to withdraw my application for a license, made to the Deputy Commissioner of Dibrugarh on the 16th January 1902, for the Dihong and Noa Dihing rivers.

With such reversals, it is not surprising to find what the Annual Administration Report of Assam for 1911-12 reported, "Considerable amount of sums were expended on the exploration of the rivers of the Lakhimpur district; but gold was not found anywhere in paying quantities, and no return was obtained on the

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42 Memo. by the Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.411LR, Gauhati, 25 February 1901, 'Grant of A License to Messrs. F. E. Winsland and G. W. Sutton to Prospect for Gold in the Subansiri River in the North Lakhimpur Subdivision', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, June 1902, ASA.

43 F. E. Winsland to the Assistant Commissioner of North Lakhimpur, 12 March 1902, 'Grant of A License to Messrs. F. E. Winsland and G. W. Sutton to Prospect for Gold in the Subansiri River in the North Lakhimpur Subdivision', Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, June 1902, ASA.
capital embarked in the venture."\(^4\) This was as good as the fall of curtains as far as the old industry of gold-washing in Asom was concerned.

Why was this decline? It would be too lame an explanation to agree with the colonial explanations for the decline, who argued that the Sonowals were coerced by the obligations of the Ahom State to supply gold, and as soon as this obligation was nullified by British rule, they all fell back upon cultivation. This was a convenient justification for colonial policies that harmed and even destroyed indigenous crafts, guilds and industries. The material available does not offer itself a conclusive argument, and one need to probe into certain socio-economic transformations that were underway much before the colonial conquest of Asom. Under the prevailing feudal production relations, the Sonowal paiks produced gold for the nobility and the king, and there was hardly a market developed for gold which could sustain its independent production. In addition, the rate of taxation was higher than an ordinary paik, and the high cost of raw materials such as quicksilver left very little for the sustenance of the primary producers, so much so that they had to depend on cultivation even when gold-washing was widely practiced during the medieval period. All these factors prevented gold-washing to emerge as an independent branch of industry in Asom, with a division of labour that would allow gold-washers to become a separate class. They were none but peasants who took up this work seasonally and under royal obligation, with hardly any accumulation of capital made possible by the prevailing conditions of production. That gold-washing in Asom’s rivers was indeed a commercially non-remunerative profession without state’s patronage, was proven by the latter-day attempts at capitalist production of gold by mercantile companies. Even with highly favourable terms of license offered by the colonial state along with other encouragements, there were to be no gold-rush in Asom.

\(^4\) Report on the Administration of Assam for the Year 1911-12, Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1912, p.27.
*Fishing and the Fisher-folk*

While the practice of gold washing gradually perished in the course of the nineteenth century, that of fishing continued to be an integral part of rural life in the Brahmaputra valley. Fish constituted a common and familiar source of food, and fishing a familiar activity that for some sections of the society supplemented the other pursuits of livelihood. With the numerous rivers and water bodies in the Valley, fish was never considered to be in short supply, though the colonial government’s policy of leasing fishery *mahals* restricted the common use of many of such sources.

The Census of Assam in 1881 recorded that there were 69,404 persons engaged in fishing in the province (which included Sylhet), of whom 50,981 were male and 18,423 were female.45 The Census noted that the word ‘Kewat’ or ‘Keot’, designated to a fishing caste, appeared to be a “corrupt” form of Kaibartha, “the name of a caste... mentioned in the Laws of Manu as fishermen by occupation.” As per this report, the Kewats or Keots of Asom were held to be one of the respectable *sudra* castes, who form a large proportion of the peasantry. In western Asom districts, a distinction was noted between *halwa* and *jalwa* Keots, the former designating the peasantry and the latter fishermen. The existing caste-based social hierarchy assigned the former a superior status than the latter. Around central Asom, this distinction is replaced by the one between Great and Small Kewats, the latter being mostly washermen. No such distinction appeared to have existed among the Keots in the eastern Asom districts.46 That year’s Census figures showed the number of ‘Kaibarthas’ in the Brahmaputra Valley as 105,317 persons, a growth from 93,487 in 1872.

In its reference to the ‘Doms’, a caste with fishing as its assigned occupation, the Census of 1881 downplays their marginalised status and forms of caste-based exploitation. “The Assamese Dom is usually a fisherman. Though of an inferior caste, he is not regarded, as in Upper India, with contempt and aversion, nor does he perform any menial and disagreeable offices.” The report claimed this to be

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46 ‘Castes and Tribes’, *Report on the Census of Assam, 1881*, p.94.
evidenced by what it perceived to be their “exceptional degree of ceremonial purity” or their ability to object to carry a load of fowls.\(^{47}\) The large section of the ‘Doms’ who were the followers of the Mahapurushia belief, i.e., disciples of satras or Vaishnavite religious institution which traced their origin to Sankardev, was said to “carry their punctiliousness so far as to refuse to eat, except in clothes specially reserved for that purpose, or still wet from the bath.” This was in spite of the fact that during the late Ahom period, from the middle of seventeenth century when Brahmanical Hinduism was predominant, the nadiyals were said to be marked in the forehead with the symbol of a fish for identification, so that they could be easily differentiated from the dominant castes.\(^{48}\) Of the boatmen who plied the rivers of Asom with their country-boats, the chief commissioner Hopkinson reflected the all-too-common complain reserved to all the laboring classes of the Valley, “the Assamese Dooms, notwithstanding their increase of pay, are just as unwilling to work as ever, and are still, to all intent and purposes, impress.”\(^{49}\)

The members of the caste held the appellation ‘Dom’ in contempt, and preferred to be called as Nadiyals or Kaibarttas. In eastern Asom, though the differentiation within the caste was reported to be absent and the “whole caste seems to be on an equality”, in Kamrup a distinction was said to prevail between the “halwa Doms” who pursued agriculture, and the “jalwa Doms”, who followed their occupation and trade in fishing. The former was considered to be more honourable.\(^{50}\) The people who returned their caste as ‘Doms’ were counted to be 68,620 in 1872 and 96,779 in 1881 in the Brahmaputra Valley. The transition of the Nadiyals as a fishing community to that of an agrarian one was observed by the Settlement Officer of Nowgong, who stated in 1930,

There is a growing disinclination amongst the Nadiyals to sell fish. They now style themselves Kaibarttas and aspire to rise in the social scale by giving up

\(^{47}\) Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, ‘Castes and Tribes’, p.94.


\(^{49}\) E. H. Larsington, Secretary to the Government of India, Financial Department, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.2792, Simla 30 September 1867, File No.96G, 1871-74, Goalpara Papers, ASA.

\(^{50}\) Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, ‘Castes and Tribes’, p.95.
their hereditary profession. This is a lucrative business which is passing into the hands of the East Bengal fishermen who come in large numbers in the cold weather to work the *bils* and rivers.\(^5\)

Sydney Endle, writing about the fishing practices of the Boro tribal communities of the Darrang district on the North bank of the Brahmaputra, noted that community fishing was the most popular form of catching fish among them. The leading part was commonly taken by the women of a village or sometimes a group of villages on certain prearranged dates, who would fish a particular stream or a number of streams for a distance extending over several miles. The fishing tools used were very simple, and were commonly prepared from materials found in almost every village. Nets were rarely employed, since the hill-streams in which the fishing was conducted remained very shallow in the fishing season of winter, rarely exceeding two or three feet in depth. Two implements were commonly used: the *zakhāi* and the *pālha*, the former being employed chiefly, but not exclusively, by women, while men used the latter more frequently.

Both implements were prepared from split bamboo-work fastened together with cane. The *zakhāi* was a triangular basket, open at one end, the three triangular sides closing in to a point. It was provided with a bamboo handle some three or four feet in length. While fishing collectively, a number of women together entered the river with this *zakhāi*, spanning across the entire width of the stream. Another group similarly lined up fifty or hundred yards away, facing the other. The two groups then worked steadily towards each other, trapping the fish in between. A spear with a pointed metallic spearhead attached to a light bamboo was also used for fishing. This was thrust rapidly and firmly into the soft mud or other places where fishes and eels were supposed to be concealed.

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\(^5\) 'Assessment Report on the North-Western Group (Nowgong District)', Memo by S. N. Datta, Settlement Officer, Nowgong to the Director of Land Records, Assam, No.393S, Nowgong 31 October 1930, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, No.140-155, Rev.-A, September 1931, ASA.
Apart from the ‘traditional’ forms of fishing as discussed above, there were other, more ‘modern’ forms of fishing allegedly practiced by some Naga villagers on the River Buri Dihing (name given by the Assamese)/Namphuk (called by the Nagas) beyond the Lakhimpur Inner Line – by bombing with dynamite. The survey party tasked to extend the Lakhimpur Inner Line to include the newly discovered oil springs within the Regulation Area in 1914, reported of coming across a place near Magantaum where the River Buri Dihing/Namphuk “had been bombed for fish.” It was suspected by the survey party that the Nagas got the dynamite “by theft from coal mines to use for the purpose.”\(^{52}\) It was not clear how the “stolen” dynamite reached the Nagas, nor the identity of those who were involved in this presumed “theft”. The surveyor C. M. Thompson nevertheless suggested that the bombing be stopped in order to save the hundreds of smaller fish which were left dead in the process.

There was also some amount of commercial fishing among the tribal communities in the first decades of the twentieth century, primarily on dried fish. Small fish were left on the surface after the annual floods had subsided, which was then collected in large quantities near the banks of the Brahmaputra and carried to the Duars, where it was bartered for rice, silk and other commodities.\(^{53}\)

**Commercialisation of Fishing**

In 1835, nine years after the occupation of Asom by the British East India Company's government, the district collector of Darrang noted that there were six extensive lakes or jheels which were auctioned to the highest bidders as fisheries at Rs.155 per annum.\(^{54}\) The right to fish in the Brahmaputra River, designated a jalkar mahal, was separately farmed for Rs.135 per annum. The

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54. Lt. James Matthie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General’s Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, File No. 298, Bengal Government (B.G.) Papers, ASA.
lessee thereafter taxed each net used on the Brahmaputra according to their size and capabilities, which was said to be as per the custom under the Ahom government. The Commissioner of Assam informed the Bengal government in 1859 that the fisheries in the five districts of "Assam Proper", or the Brahmaputra Valley, i.e., Goalpara, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, were farmed out annually through public auctions.

A question as to whether the mauzadars or the revenue collectors of Asom were to be allowed to participate in government's auction of fisheries was debated within the colonial bureaucracy in 1904, resulting in divergent opinions. Forwarding the replies of the district officers on the issue, the commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts wrote to the chief commissioner of Assam that there was a strong opinion against allowing the mauzadars to bid for fisheries. He argued that the position and influence of the mauzadar, who was in effect considered to be a government servant and the head of a mauza, would give him an unfair advantage over others. However, no objection was raised to their taking settlement of fisheries outside their own mauzas in "rare cases in which they might wish to do so". The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar reported that no fishery was settled with the mauzadars in the district, nor were they allowed to bid for them. He considered it undesirable that there should be any change of the existing practice. The Goalpara Deputy Commissioner gave a more detailed explanation:

The mauzadars do not take leases of the fisheries in this district. The fisheries in the temporarily settled estates being small and unimportant, the mauzadars do not care to take lease for them. ...I am decidedly of the opinion that the mauzadars should be allowed to bid for, and take leases of, fisheries within their

55 ibid.
56 Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to E. J. Biver, Secretary to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letter No.20, 13 June 1859, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1859, ASA.
57 P. G. Melitus, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1057 LR, Gauhati 8 April 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1904, ASA.
58 Major H. W. G. Cole, Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur to Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.2813R, Dibrugarh, 19 January 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1904, ASA.
mauzas. Only in the case of very small fisheries is the lease ever taken by the man who actually fishes the fisheries. In nearly every case the leaseholder sublets his fishery and does not work it himself, and personally I see no objection to this procedure. The ordinary fisherman is certainly not in a position to take a lease of a large fishery, the average fishermen belonging to the very poorest of the poor and having no capital whatsoever. The presence of the middleman renders the realization of the government revenue far easier. I therefore see no objection to allowing the mauzadars to take leases of fisheries in their mauzas and would rather encourage it.59

None of the Deputy Commissioners of Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup, however, echoed this proposition of allowing mauzadars to bid for fisheries within their mauza. Given this overwhelming opinion, the Chief Commissioner directed in June 1904 that mauzadars should not be allowed to bid for fisheries.60 This was the decision despite his opinion expressed the previous year that "Generally the Chief Commissioner would not be disposed to any action which would lessen a mauzadar's income, especially when (as in the case of Barpeta mauzadars) they have suffered a severe loss of profit on their land revenue collections."61

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial government did not consider the revenue from the leasing of fisheries to be an important source of income. In certain regions, the topography did not allow for substantial fisheries to be considered suitable for public sale. As the District Gazetteer of Darrang published in 1905 reported, there was a steady recline in the level of the land towards the Brahmaputra, with little propensity of the surface water to collect in lakes and marshes. Therefore, "In the whole of the Sadr subdivision there are only three hills of sufficient size to justify their being sold as public fisheries, and in Mangaldai there are but six. These hills are shallow pools of no great extent

59 A. H. Cuming, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara to Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.3110G, Dhubri, 20 January 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1904, ASA.

60 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.267, 2719R, Shillong, 17 June 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1904, ASA.

61 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No.880Misc.-5232R, Shillong 19 December 1903, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, September 1904, ASA.
which form depressions in the lower parts of the district, generally near the Brahmaputra."\(^62\)

**Protecting Fish from the Fishermen: Colonial Conservation in Early Twentieth Century**

The question of protecting fisheries on rivers flowing out of forested hills was actively considered by the colonial authorities in Assam after what was reported to be a very severe destruction of fish in the Jia Bhorali River in Darrang district in 1915, pushing up the already high market price of fish. The district officials were at a loss to find the causes behind the destruction of not only those species considered to be sport but of all kinds of fish. The fact that blood-slides and viscera of some of the dead fish subjected to microscopic examination did not reveal any trace of poison prompted the government to conclude that the damage was "not attributable to any known agency".\(^63\)

As 'remedial measures', the Commissioner of Assam Valley recommended, echoing the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, that steps needed to be taken to reserve some of the main tributaries of the Jia Bhorali in its higher reaches. The rivers and tributaries identified were Mansiri, Bordikrai, Khari Dikrai, Upar Dikrai, Daigraon, and Namiri. Of these the first two were considered to be the most urgently requiring reservation, since they were claimed to be "more exposed to poaching", while Khari Dikrai and and Namiri were said to be "exposed to trapping etc. from travelling hill-men" even though they were both within the limits of reserved forests. There were many other "nameless" tributaries of Jia Bhorali that existed on the hills, and it was proposed that they be mapped, numbered or named, and "conserved" like the others, if their protection was felt necessary by the higher authorities.\(^64\) These efforts of the second decade of the twentieth century were among the first instances of colonial attempts at 'conservation' of fish in Assam.

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\(^{63}\) Lt. Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.826C, Camp Nowgong 19 July 1915, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Misc.-A, September 1915, ASA.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.
The orders of the Chief Commissioner were prompt. The district officers as well as the Political Officer of the Western Section, North East Frontier were directed "to warn the hillmen from setting weirs or traps in the Khari Dikrai and the Mansiri which fall within the forest reserve", and to consider "the feasibility and desirability of restraining hillmen from using weirs, traps and dams which are likely to have a prejudicial effect on the fish supply in the various rivers and streams issuing from the hills."65 It is worth noting that while the government was keen on protecting the fish supply on these rivers as Jia Bhorali, almost all of its tributaries were leased out in the plains for fishing. The restrictions were at the expense of the "hillmen" and villagers who inevitably were termed as the "poachers" of fish. To what extent the colonial government could in reality impose its writ of "conserving fish" under the Fisheries Act IV of 1897 on its loosely administered frontier tracts and the tribal communities of the hills, however, is a matter of conjecture, even though instances of prosecution and punishment under the law for the "crime" of fishing now made "illegal" was not uncommon.

The enthusiastic approval of the proposal for reservation of the upper riparian tributaries of the Jia Bhorali to protect them from "poachers", "trappers" and "hillmen" by the Chief Commissioner of the province was predicated by the government's need to keep the main rivers in "fair supply of fish". He also emphasised that there was no practical benefit of reserving rivers "if netting, the erection of dams and fixed engines are allowed", and ordered these to be also prohibited on the notified rivers. The only *concession* the government was ready to concede to the riparian villages was to fish with rod and line in the reserved tributaries of Jia Bhorali.66 The Political Officer in charge of the Western Section of the North Eastern Frontier replied to the Chief Commissioner almost immediately in August 1915, to say that

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65 B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Political Officer, Western Section, North Eastern Frontier, No.3300R, Shillong 9 August 1915, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Misc.-A, September 1915, ASA.

66 A. Phillipson, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No.3391R, Shillong 12 August 1915, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Misc.-A, September 1915, ASA.
both the rivers mentioned, viz., the Khari Dikrai and the Mansiri were fully looked after last season. No traps were set in either rivers; 19 persons were punished for fishing in the Mansiri within the forest reserve. The Bor Dikrai is the only tributary of the Bhorelli that is worth fishing, the upper reaches of the streams are untouched but the lower reaches are much trapped by the Nepaulis and Miris living on the Darrang bank of the river (the river divides Darrang from the Forest Tracts). Last year I warned these people and destroyed their traps. The hill Daffles fortunately for us very rarely goes in for trapping fish, I cannot remember a single instance of having seen a trap by a hill Daffla. I do not think that in any of the rivers in my district, the hillmen does much harm.67

The Political Officer asserted that the “Miris” and “Assamese Doms” were responsible for nearly all the trapping on rivers, while in the plains “Daffles” were also said to have learnt the art of fish-trapping from the Mishings. Further, he informed that “The trapping is done usually by the plains people at the foot of the hills. For instance, I am told, that in the cold weather the Miris living on the Subansiri...are out most night with flares and nets.” The reporting of fishing in the Subansiri River, not under the charge of this political officer but in Lakhimpur, prompted the Chief Commissioner to immediately send a directive to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to look into “certain malpractices prevailing on the Subansiri and... to take steps to put a stop to them.”68 Subansiri, like many other rivers aforesaid, were already made inaccessible to a large section of the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley, for whom fish was not only an important ingredient of their diet, but also a means of livelihood.

Traps and such other modes of fishing were at the same time considered to be obstructions to the natural flow of rivers, accentuating their flooding during the monsoon season. Therefore, improvement of the river channel was said to be accomplished in the Namdang River in Sibsagar in 1906 by “the removal of

67 Captain G. A. Nevill, Political Officer, Western Section, North Eastern Frontier, to Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Camp Mangaldai 22 August 1915, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Misc.-A, September 1915, ASA.
68 J. C. Kerwood, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.3997R, Shillong 2 September 1915, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Misc.-A, September 1915, ASA.
fishing traps and other obstructions... thereby hastening the flow of that river."

Dams for fishing, however, were constructed not only on the hill streams, but also on the smaller rivers in the plains. These dams were opposed by the colonial government for accentuating the floods of the rivers. As the province's Executive Engineer of the PWD reported in 1903,

Fishermen take annual leases for fisheries along certain channels. They put temporary bunds across each channel at short intervals, thereby raising considerably levels of water in that channel wherever they need. These bunds consist of stout bamboo and wooden logs as posts with horizontal bamboo tie. Behind these on the up stream side are placed fine split bamboo gratings and at the feet of these puddle clay, brushwood and other obstructions are given, so that water can only slightly flow out through the gratings, with the result that on the up stream side the water is at a standstill and higher by at least six inches to a foot than that on the down stream side where it flows with a strong current till it meets another obstruction. The channel thus consists of a series of rapids and still-water pools. Besides, all along the course, clumps of trees, 40 to 60 in number, giving a diameter of about 6 feet at bottom, are placed in the middle of the stream, with brushwood filled in the interior of clumps so as to allow fish to reside in them. These remain throughout the year and are not washed away even during high floods. Owing to these obstructions, silt is rapidly deposited in the intermediate spaces and the levels of water are raised to a very large extent, so much so that the low-lying country cannot get easily and rapidly drained on the subsidence of floods and remain submerged longer than is desirable for the transplantation of paddy. The Namdang river above Gaurisagar with its various tributaries and the Rupahi of the Rangghar pathar opposite Sibsagar may be taken as a good example of this kind. The clearance of these obstructions is therefore absolutely necessary for the free discharge of waters from the natural watercourses lying within the areas protected from the flood waters of the main rivers.

69 'Assessment Report: Southwest Sibsagar Group', Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department, February 1906, ASA.
70 'Note by Pandit Matadin Sukul, Executive Engineer, Public Works Department, Assam, on the protective embankments in sadr subdivision of Sibsagar district and portions of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts', Sibsagar 6 April 1903, Nos.180-208, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, September 1904, ASA.
The 1910s were also the period when declaration of rivers or its parts as 'fish sanctuaries' where spawning took place emerged as a colonial policy in Asom. This came in direct conflict with the government's need for revenue generation, with the interests of the fishery leaseholders, and also with and requirements of the inhabitants of the Valley and its surrounding hills through which the rivers flowed. This notion of conservation, however, should not be confused with its more contemporary meaning, i.e., protection of endangered species in order to facilitate their regeneration so as to save them from extinction. The government authorities sought to protect the fish-spawns so that the supply of fish for the market did not diminish. This particular aspect of the conservationist outlook of the colonial state is well expressed in the words of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, who noted in November 1914,

> It must be remembered that fish in this country are practically not protected at all, as they are in England and other countries. It is true that the law forbids them being destroyed by dynamite, explosives, or poisonous substances, but there are no fishing seasons, no protection of spawning grounds, no regulations as to the meshes of the nets, and so on. In short, it may broadly be stated that fish in the country are the helpless prey of man, bird and otter, and that, were it not for their extreme fecundity, the consumer by this time would have been in a very bad case.\(^{71}\)

In order to identify and declare as fish sanctuaries those rivers of Asom which were considered to be important for fish spawning, reports were asked by the colonial government from the district officers in early 1914. Fully agreeing to the desirability of this step, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley District noted that it was not only net-fishing which had resulted in the "over-fishing" in some of the province's major rivers, but also the use of dynamites and poisons. He recommended a prohibition on both these means of fishing, while at the same time pointing out that the proposed fish-sanctuaries must not diminish the

\(^{71}\) B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Districts, No.4605R, Shillong, 18 November 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
supply of fish to the market or infringe on the existing rights of the fishery leaseholders. The Goalpara district officer recommended the reservation of all the rivers of the Eastern Duars, among them the most important rivers in terms of fishing being Sankos, Aie and the Manas. The stretch of the rivers from the point they left the hills to where they entered the settlements under permanent cultivation, were sought to be reserved. Noting that fish had of late become rare after the earthquake of 1897 and also due to the “depredations” caused by *gharials* in the Manas River, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup suggested its reservation as a sanctuary. Further, the officer stated that Kalang River and its tributary Digaru also needed to be protected for their importance as fish-breeding grounds, where he complained that “much damage is done yearly by over-fishing by Doms and others with nets and various kinds of fish traps.” Moreover, “Poisoning by Khasis in the upper reaches of these rivers should also be stopped as far as this is found possible,” the officer noted.\(^\text{72}\)

The ‘illegal’ fishing of the Kaibarttas or Nadiyals as well as the Mishings who fished the Brahmaputra and its tributaries emerged as the main targets of clampdown for the colonial State by the early decades of the twentieth century. They were frequently accused of ‘poaching’ on the rivers and fisheries even when they held leases to government fisheries. The Political Officer, Central and Eastern Sections of the North-East Frontier, “warned” the “Dom lessees” of Dibrugarh and Sadiya in 1914 for “liberally interpreting” the boundaries of their fishery that spanned from the junction of Lohit and Brahmaputra to Dibrumukh. As per the government’s allegations, they fished on the Buri Suti and its tributaries the Dijmur and Songkong rivers, which were said to be outside the purview of the lease. The Mising villages inhabiting the banks of these rivers were directed to keep watch, and were made responsible for reporting to the government of any ‘illegality’ noticed to be practiced by the Kaibarttas. This the colonial officials expected to be an easy way for preventing ‘crimes’ related to ‘illegal’ fishing, as their perception was that “Miris do not like Domes”, and hence

\(^{72}\) Col. P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Under-Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, No.55C, 14 February 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA. See Appendix I for the district-wise list of rivers in the Brahmaputra Valley proposed for reservation as fish-sanctuaries in 1914.
"They will make most efficient water bailiffs and prevent poaching."73 In addition, the government accused the Kaibarrtas of completely emptying the cross-channels between the Dihong and Dibong rivers of fish by netting indiscriminately, as these channels were considered to be good spawning grounds.74

The tribal villagers of the hills and their fishing methods were seen as opposed to the interests of fish breeding, as can be seen in the Chief Commissioner's reference in February 1915 to the Someswari River the in the Garo Hills. He ordered that no fixed-nets of any sort be allowed to be used under any circumstances, nor nets be allowed to be placed across an entire stream. "This should be explained very carefully to the Garos, and if they then abuse the permission to use hand nets, the concession would be withdrawn", he noted.75 In the same vein, it was alleged by government officials that the Nagas practiced fishing by using poison and by erecting weirs on the upper reaches of the fish-carrying rivers in the Naga Hills neighbouring Sibsagar district that flowed down to the Brahmaputra Valley, though they were "not sure that it is possible to prohibit the Nagas following their ancient customs in this respect."76 Moreover, it was also admitted that these were the only modes of catching fish for the Nagas, and to prevent them from catching fish in this way was effectively to stop them from fishing entirely. However, colonial officials were "inclined" to impose this prohibition "in the interest of the general public."77 For the State, the Nagas were always free to buy fish in the plains if they wished. At the same time, rivers such as Dikhow and Dayang in their course in the Naga Hills were closed for fishing by plains fishermen in 1914.

73 Note by W. C. M. Dundas, Political Officer, Central and Eastern Sections, North-Eastern Frontier, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
74 ibid.
75 A. W. Botham, Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1030R, Shillong 5 March 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
76 F. C. Henniker, Officiating Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Districts, to the Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.2929, Silchar 7 May 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
77 H. C. Barnes, Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills, to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Districts, No.2031G, Kohima 3 January 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
At the same time, the practice of preparing and consuming dried fish was presented as another evidence of wasteful and harmful ways of fishing by the hill communities in the early twentieth century, not to say of the prejudiced and pejorative colonial view of their dietary habits. In the words of the Chief Commissioner,

It is one thing to eat fish fresh, as we see eaten in the plains... It is quite another thing to see fish eaten dried. Such fish has lately been termed by the Sanitary Commissioner as 'foul dietary', and we need not be sorry to see its supply diminished. Dried fish is often the result of a temporary excess of supply owing to extravagant and wasteful slaughter of fish in the pools in the hill sections.\(^78\)

One of the main reasons for the colonial opinion against the customary modes of fishing was that these were seen as wasteful and detrimental to the interests of conservation of fish. A case in point was the method of catching fish by temporarily damming the hill streams and rivers practiced by the tribal communities on the hills surrounding the Brahmaputra Valley. Colonial officials and observers frequently complained against these dams, alleging that such a method blocked the path of fish travelling upstream for spawning, even though it was a common knowledge that only smaller streams were dammed for this purpose. This view was reflected in the note prepared by W. C. Dundas on the fisheries in the North-East Frontier Tract in the second decade of the twentieth century. He noted that dams for fishing "are usually built in September or October just before the streams fall, and are carried away by the first flood in April. These dams may stop spawning fish going up the smaller streams, but for the same reason they do not catch many of them."\(^79\)

This view, however, was incorrect. The Chief Commissioner, questioning the validity of Dundas's observations, remarked, "The point seems to be the other way on. The fish go up to spawn in spring and return after spawning in

\(^{78}\) N. E. Parry, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.1489R, Shillong 2 April 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.

\(^{79}\) ibid.
September and October. What happens therefore is that fish which have spawned in the upper reaches of these small streams are caught on their way back in September or October.  

P. R. T. Gurdon, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts too contradicted the above opinion and observed that the fishing dams were built to intercept on their way down to the lower reaches after spawning and not on their way up the river to spawn. Fish were caught in this manner only by the end of August of early September, while the fish's spawning season was during April and May. He therefore concluded that "The dams therefore do not affect the movement of the fish going up to spawn." The truth in no way diminished the criminalization of the tribal communities like the 'Dafflas' or the 'Miris', or the oppressed caste-groups such as the 'Doms' by the colonial government.

The possible loss to the government treasury as a result of declaring certain rivers of Assam as fish-sanctuaries in 1914, where rights were leased out as fisheries for revenue, was also assessed. It was calculated that as a result of adopting this policy in the Brahmaputra Valley districts, revenue amounting to Rs.6587 had to be "sacrificed" by the provincial government. Subsequently in November of that year, the colonial government in Assam proceeded to notify several rivers in the five Brahmaputra Valley districts to be reserved as fish-sanctuaries. The need for setting up a separate mechanism in the future, equipped with sufficient staff to protect these reserved rivers, was also pointed out. The Chief Commissioner expressed doubt over the practicability of enforcing

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80 ibid.
81 P. R. T. Gurdon, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.598, Gauhati 4 October 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA.
82 N. E. Parry, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.1175R, Shillong 14 March 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA. The Chief Commissioner directed the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to report "the amount of revenue will be sacrificed" if rivers were reserved.
83 F. C. Henniker, Officiating Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.329Rev., Gauhati 26 May 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA. The district-wise break-up of this figure was as follows: Goalpara - Rs.555, Kamrup - Rs.4000, Darrang - Rs.397, Nowgong - Rs.200, Sibsagar - Rs.0, Lakhimpur - Rs.1245.
84 B. C. Allen, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.4550R, Shillong 13 November 1914, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Miscellaneous-A, February 1915, ASA. See Appendix II for the list of rivers notified as fish-sanctuaries.
a strict compliance with the prohibition of fishing on these rivers in the absence of such a separate law-enforcement mechanism.85

The commercial leasing of water-bodies such as rivers, streams and *bils* etc. as fisheries constrained or even prevented their access by surrounding villagers, in spite of the condition put in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century colonial lease-deeds that villagers could fish with lines and hook in such water-bodies for their own consumption, at times after obtaining passes from the lease-holder.86 Complaints were made to the colonial authorities about the lessees of fisheries preventing villagers from fishing, or of charging them with a fee for issuing passes. The newspaper *Assam Banti* carried news of such practices in Darrang district in its 12 February 1904 edition, where it was reported that *raiyats* of Birguri, Peithakhoa and Bahbari villages of Kamrup district requested the Chief Commissioner on tour that they be allowed certain concessions to access canes and fisheries, etc. In spite of the favourable verbal orders by the Chief Commissioner who declared the fisheries Diputa, Kholakat and Barakata to be ‘free’ for fishing, the newspaper complained, these were once again put for sale.87 The Chief Commissioner also noted that he received “complaints of unfair treatment on the part of the fishery lessees who were reported to practically deny riparian villages the concession that is granted to them by condition 1 of the fishery lease, according to which a fee of 4 annas only is to be charged for each net or basket.”88 The lessees attempted to charge this fee from each member of a family that fished and were highly reluctant in issuing passing, the villagers complained. The colonial authorities were apprehensive that the fishery system might hardly work if such conditions were allowed to prevail, and unless

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85 ibid.
86 Leasing of fisheries was also destroyed important sources of drinking water for villagers, and was opposed by them for this reason. A petition addressed to the colonial government in 1885 complained that “a large number of people [in Majuli, Sibsagar district] depend upon the fishery for their drinking water and the sale of the fishery for the purpose of catching fish deprives the ryots of the use of water for when the fishery is leased out the fisherman renders the water unfit for human consumption when they catch fish and this defiles the water.” Brajnath Bezburoa, 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.
87 ‘Abstract Translation of A Letter Published in the “Assam Banti” of 12 February 1904’, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, February 1905, ASA.
88 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, No.1133Misc.-5354R, Shillong 29 December 1903, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, February 1905, ASA.
the lessees were warned that "breaches of the condition of their lease will entail a severe penalty." Moreover, it was also suggested that the auctioned fisheries in Asom which did not yield a certain minimum amount of revenue could be thrown open for free access to the villagers, so as to avoid the recurrence of such local disputes over fishing.

The Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts responded by saying that matters relating to conflicts over the lessees and "local fishermen" could be easily settled through the intervention of the district officers to ensure that the villager's rights were honoured by the lessees, and that no further action was necessary. On the second suggestion, the officer argued that there would be difficulty in having a prefixed money-limit below which fisheries were not to be leased, as small fisheries were leased in groups, and the "value of fisheries may change or circumstances may arise rendering it advisable to lease them." He in turn suggested a mechanism through which the Deputy Commissioner was to be empowered to decline leasing out a fishery if the bid for it was less than Rs.50. In order to implement this new rule, every district officer of the Brahmaputra Valley was directed to report on the fisheries under lease in their districts, along with past complaints regarding the rights of fishing on leased fisheries, if any.

According to the report submitted by the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, 15 fisheries were under lease in 1904 in his district, and none generating annual government revenue above Rs.50, with most of the smaller fisheries settled for Rs.10. He suggested that all fisheries below Rs.20 be made open for the raiyats, the result being only a small reduction in the revenue. Noting that there were indeed some complaints from the villagers in the past regarding the charge levied from them by the leaseholders in excess of 4 annas for each net for home consumption, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong informed that these were resolved with the intervention of the district officers. The officer, however,

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89 P. G. Melitus, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.2665LR, Gauhati 20 August 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, February 1905, ASA.
indicated that the villagers too used the ambiguously defined term "net" or "basket" to their advantage in order to fish with all sorts of fishing implements, and asked for a clearer description of the nets and baskets to be allowed for a 4 anna fee. He argued,

There are different kinds of net; some are used for catching large fish and some for small fish. It is hard on the lessees to allow fishing by all kinds of nets throughout the year for annas four only. There is a kind of net locally known as porongoni jal tied to bamboo frames and thrown into the water from the shore. This kind of net can be used by all castes. I would suggest that by the word "net" only this kind of net should be allowed. Similarly, the word basket should include jakoi, polo, and juluki, and such other kind which the villagers (men and women) generally fish for home consumption.91

In Nowgong district, 24 out of 88 enlisted government fisheries generating an amount of Rs.14,653 as revenue were proposed to be made open for 'public' in 1904, and the revenue loss of Rs.372 was held to be nominal compared to the expected advantages to the raiyats and the relief to the colonial state from recurrent petty disputes. The Darrang district official reported that the complaints made against lessees were mainly from "professional fishermen" belonging to the "Doms" or Kaibarttas, and the disputes were usually about the amount to be paid to the lessees for issuing passes to fish. Efforts were made to facilitate the access of the riverine Mishing villagers to the leased fisheries for the home consumption of fish, and also to stop the poisoning of rivers as a means of fishing.92 The government proclaimed that attempts to settle small fisheries with Kaibartta fishermen was not going to succeed, and what the latter also demanded was only the protection of the concessions they enjoyed in fishing the leased water-bodies. It also rejected the suggestion of clearly defining the fishing implements allowed for availing the concession, as it was felt that such

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91 Major H. M. Halliday, Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1422R, Nowgong 19 February 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rev.-A, February 1905, ASA.
restrictions would rather curtail the concessions of the villagers than enhancing them.93

A review of the colonial government's approach towards fishing and the fisherfolk in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Asom clearly indicates that commercialisation of fishing came into direct conflict with the interests of the raiyats, and particularly affected the fishing communities like the Kaibarrrtas. More systematic control and monitoring was sought to be instituted by the state on the water-bodies which were valuable for their fish, though the small share of revenue from fisheries to the total revenue demand from the province worked as an impediment to the state in setting up of an expensive fishery establishment. Moreover, the state could not complete ignore or deny the demands of the raiyats and other inhabitants of the Valley to fish in water bodies free of cost, but this was allowed only as a matter of 'privilege' or 'concession' and not as a right. The concerns for conserving fish for securing a steady supply to the urban markets prompted the British authorities to declare stretches of some rivers of Asom as fish-sanctuaries in the early decades of the twentieth century, where 'destruction' of fish by netting, trapping, poisoning etc. was declared 'illegal', and certain communities were criminalised as habitual offenders. However, such prohibitions remained a dead-letter in parts of the Valley and also in the hills surrounding it, as the state also was not in a position to impose its writ on the "loosely administered areas" on the North East Frontier of the British Indian Empire, nor did it find it fit to antagonise the hill communities through penalties and punishment for what was considered to be "petty offenses" such as 'illegal' fishing. In the valley, however, the regulations related to fishing were more strictly imposed, and the fishing communities and tribal communities in the plains and inhabiting the rivers were often at the receiving end of colonial rule of law. The market in fish primarily developed in the towns and urban settlements, which were supplied by the local fisheries. In both rural and urban areas of the Valley, fishing remained strictly caste-defined in the period under review from the point of view of occupation, until East Bengal immigrants took up this

93 Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1044Misc.-5239R, Shillong 17 November 1904, ASA.
occupation beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century. When perceived as a means of supplementing home consumption and as a part of festivities of different communities, fishing was a task common to almost every rural household in colonial Asom.

**Boats and Boat-Building**

The importance of country-made boats for undertaking communication for all purposes in a land of innumerable rivers and regular floods could be hardly overemphasized, especially till the beginning of the twentieth century when the bulk of the Valley’s traffic – whether of people or commodities – were carried on by country-boats. Almost every family had a canoe or a dugout, which was used for fording or traveling on the numerous rivers, and move about during the floods. At times even an entire settlement or bazaar could be shifted to boats in times of high floods, as was observed by a medical practitioner D. A. Macleod in 1830s in Bishwanath, an important cantonment-town on the north bank of Brahmaputra in central Asom. He observed, “The Sudder Bazaar at Bishnath consists of about 140 houses, containing from 6 to 700 inhabitants... The present site of the bazaar is most wretched, cramped up on the edge of the nulla, the people are crowded together in a manner highly prejudicial to their health, and are sometimes for a fortnight together obliged to move bout from house to house in canoes when the river [Brahmaputra] rises very high.”

Alluding to the sudden transformation of roads in Asom to waterways that were fordable more easily by canoes than on foot, an additional secretary to the Bengal government wrote in an official communication in 1868,

> Immediately a road gets too much under water for foot passengers, it only becomes a good channel for boats. The small ‘dugouts’ or canoes of Assam can easily be propelled along a road covered by a few inches of water, that is to say before a footman need to cease walk on it. The only thing

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necessary is to be ready everywhere to substitute the canoe for the [mail] runner.\textsuperscript{95}

Barpeta for instance, one of the most important trading centres of the Valley, depended on boats even till the turn of the nineteenth century. As was observed, "Barpeta, then, is well supplied with roads, but so great are the floods owing to the inability of the damaged and now shallow channels to carry off the rainfall with sufficient rapidity, that it is not possible to keep them open throughout the year. \textit{Traffic is almost entirely carried on by boat, and even before the earthquake [of 1897] part of the trade of the place was borne in this way.}"\textsuperscript{96} To cater to the needs of trade, a boat-building establishment was in existence in Barpeta which was mentioned as one of the \textquote{provincial industries.}\textsuperscript{97} The logs for Barpeta boats were floated down from the Garo Hills to its south through the streams meeting the Brahmaputra, after roughly hollowing them out in the hills. Once brought to Barpeta, the usual process of Asom\textquotesingle s native country-boats and canoes was followed, and boats extending up to lengths of sixty feet and six to seven feet of breadth were thus constructed.

The Census of Assam for 1881 returned 7,126 persons engaged as boatman in the province, which was inclusive of Sylhet and Cachar.\textsuperscript{98} Only seven \textquote{boat-builders} were registered by the census, signifying that unlike in Bengal, boat-building as a separate industry or profession was not generally recognised in the Valley in the colonial period. Some of those engaged in other productive activities such as cultivation and fishing were also skilled in boat-building. Boats were the major means of transportation in the region. Road traffic in Asom was considered to be at a minimum chiefly because of the absence of all-weather

\textsuperscript{95} S. C. Bailey, Officiating Additional Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, No.5208, Fort William 31 October 1868, File No.96G, 1871-74, Goalpara Papers, ASA.
\textsuperscript{96} \textquote{Assessment Report of Bojali Group, Kamrup District}, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, June 1904, ASA.
\textsuperscript{97} ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Report on the Census of Assam, 1881}, \textquote{Occupations}, p.117.
metal roads. The soil of the entire country was clayey and the freight had to be carried by water, the rivers working as the ‘high-ways’.\footnote{E. A. Peal, \textit{The Canoes of Assam}, 1870, manuscript, India Office Library Records. The following discussion is drawn from this work. I am thankful to Bodhisattva Kar for providing a copy of the MS.}

Some of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra had such a meandering course that “a straight piece of water is unknown”.\footnote{ibid.} As for the modes of boating, towing by a line was made difficult by sharp turns and the densely forested banks, particularly that of the smaller and secondary rivers. Sailing was also not an option in such rivers since the tall and dense forests on the banks shut out the wind. Rowing too was only possible down-stream, whereas the challenge was to take freight up against the current running upwards often at five miles per hour. As such, what was termed as ‘poling’ alone remained the only effectual means. The most obvious advantage of this method was that the crew could direct their canoes against a fixed point and not against water rapidly slipping past, as was the case with rowing. “Thus out of the four means possible, i.e., traction, sailing, rowing and poling, the latter alone is possible under the ruling conditions.” The native canoes built in Asom were said to be “remarkably suited for the work they called on to perform, and for overcoming the peculiar difficulties of the navigation, in at least the secondary rivers.”\footnote{ibid.} Since cargo could be taken upstream only by poling, they far surpassed in both cheapness and speed the best boats made of any material.

\textit{The Kinds of Canoes}

E. A. Peal in his unpublished monograph titled \textit{The Canoes of Assam} identified four kinds of boats in general use in nineteenth-century Asom. They were the Hoolong, Soosia Nao, Khel Nao and Marr Nao. The first was the longest of the four that could carry a freight of 500 maunds at times. The Soosia, literally meaning a skimmer, in contrast, was a smaller boat that could carry five to six persons, and were used by the Nadiyals and other villagers. The Khel Nao
literally denoted a pleasure-boat, which was constructed in various sizes and shapes. When two or more boats were lashed along for better stability and carrying capacity, it was called a Marr Nao.

The Hooloong was named after the tree from which this type of boat was constructed. Their length varied from 50 to 80 feet, the breadth from three to six feet, and two to four feet in depth. The tings or the peaks at bow and stern, of which the one at the stern was raised, allowed the sternman a vision over the choppa or the roof. A Hooloong with 300 or 400 maunds' capacity could carry six boatmen in the crew, four of whom were placed at the roof and one on each ting. The speed upstream varied greatly from half-a-mile to two miles an hour, while coming downstream it could go up to five miles per hour. This boat was not preferred for longer journeys as it often took a longer time and several attempts to pass a curve with swift currents, or where the channel of the stream was obstructed by large trees, etc. If the "hold on the bank" was lost in such a stretch of the Brahmaputra, a whole days' journey could be reversed in an hour's time. "As a rule", the speed of journey was calculated to be "one day down is equal to four going up." The largeness of the Hooloong made it a preferred choice for carrying the considerable internal trade between eastern and western Asom, conveying oil, salt, jaggery, betel-nut, native-made pottery and most of the freight to and from the tea gardens. It also supplied the numerous godowns on the river-stations by the Brahmaputra. D. A. Macleod, a surgeon attached to the Assam Light Infantry at Bishwanath, while talking of the trade carried out in the Valley by the Marwari traders, appreciated the hooloongs when he observed in 1837,

They convey their merchandize in enormous canoes called hoolungs, capable of containing from 40 to 100 maunds. They are admirably calculated for the river, as with five men they can be pushed along by bamboo poles at the rate of 8 or 10 miles a day, with tolerable certainty, when other boats make little or no progress during the rains, on account of the rapidity of the current, there being no tracking ground, and continued easterly wind which may be said to prevail for nine months of the year.102

102 D. A. Macleod, A Sketch of the Medical Topography of Bishnath, p.11.
'Hoolong' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)

'Soosia Nao' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)
The Khel Nao varied in its carrying capacity from 10 to 100 maunds, though it was generally used only for passenger transport. They were reported to be more in use in western Assam district than elsewhere, and were manned by ten to twenty Nadiyals in the crew, who propelled it by oars called bytas. These boats were superior in construction than any other of its kind, and were said to be designed for speed alone.

The Soosia Nao, on the other hand, was the smallest of the lot, and was by far the most common, used universally for all purposes, in crossing streams, going for firewood, fishing, navigating, etc. This boat was also employed in carrying government’s mails when they were to be sent by water. When well-made and manned by a good crew of Nadiyals, the Soosia could attain a good speed of three to four miles an hour against the stream and eight to ten miles downstream. The size of these boats varied widely, so much so that no two would be found to be exactly alike. Its size varied from 20 to 35 feet long, one to two feet wide, and a foot to eighteen inches deep. They could carry from five to 30 maunds of weight.

"The smaller boats of this kind are proverbially unsteady, and it is difficult for anyone not used to them and avoid a spill. Yet the natives will stand, one on each ting, apparently defying all laws of gravity as they shoot along seemingly quite unconcerned."103 There was also another kind of boat called the Sora Nao used by the former Ahom Rajahs and the nobility, with 40 to 50 peddlers. They were the best of the Khel Naos or the pleasure boats used by the rich and the powerful, but very few of these canoes were in existence when Peal wrote his monograph in 1870.

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103 E. A. Peal, The Canoes of Assam.
'Soora Nao: Raja’s Pleasure Boat' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)

'Assamese Gossain’s Boat' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)

The Construction

The timber procured from the tree Hoolong (*Dipterocarpus Pilosa*) was primarily preferred for boat-building in Asom for both its size and durability. It grew in abundance on the hills surrounding the Valley and in the forests of the plains. The tree was very straight and tall, forming a clean shaft and dense head of foliage. The Hooloong could grow up to 80 feet in length and four to six feet in diameter, and was said to last for nearly fifteen years. Mekahie (*Dipterocarpus Mekahie*) was a still larger and more durable timber lasting about 20 years. Its growth was similar to the Hoolong, and was commonly found on the gorges of the Dihing River. Several other kinds of timber were also used, but they were considered to be inferior in quality to the two mentioned above.

The construction process involved the tasks of felling, cutting, launching and fitting respectively, along with their subsidiary works. Peal noticed that it was not always easy to find the right kind of tree, particularly in the areas in the vicinity of the rivers where it was convenient to bring the canoes out to the river after construction. As Peal observed, "The constant demand for large timber has so exhausted the supply that unless far from the beaten tracks it is difficult to meet one. Now and then fine trees will be seen, but so situated that to get the canoe out after made, would be difficult or impossible." When such a suitable tree was located, and it was decided which side the tree needed be cut and felled, a stage eight to nine feet high along the tree was made, climbing on which the tree was cut. After the tree was grounded, the bark and sapwood was removed and the bow and stern were cut, so as to leave the *tings* roughly as projecting slabs. After cleaning the surface of the tree this way and its weight lightened, the log was rolled over, ready for the woodwork. The log was hollowed out by using the axe in the beginning, and later the adze called *banghee* was employed to trim the surface and cut it out where more care was required. The floor of the boat was left thicker and flatter than the sides, while making the surface as smooth as the crude tools would allow. Thereafter,
'Felling a Simmol' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)

'Plan at the Water Line' (E. A. Peal, *The Canoes of Assam*, 1870)
The canoe is then ready for the critical operation of opening out, that is, gradually forcing the gumwals [the two sides] apart so as to make the boat of greater beam. This is always a delicate piece of work as trimming too much there is sure to cause a split and thereby ruin the canoe. Fire and water are used to assist, and by a judicious application of them, (say fire outside and water in), by mud plastered on, a rude kind of steaming is the result and as the sides open out, stretchers or peerees are driven in to keep them in situ, advantage is taken at this time to correct any irregularities of outside, and thus a crooked gumwal may be made straight and level.

All these boats were made from a single piece of timber by hollowing it out from inside, unlike the Bengal boats where the dugout was hardly in use. Since a canoe often needed fifty to sixty men to bring it to the waters, they were cut and prepared in close proximity to the rivers. Though the building process was required for all kinds of boats, the larger ones needed extra time and care in construction. This way, without using screws, nails, or complicated carpentry, boats of large magnitudes and capacity were built in Asom. A new boat cost about eight annas per maund in 1870s with the normal cost of labour. However, the expense fluctuated with the time of the year, in the rains it cost more than in the winters. The cost of carrying freight likewise varied with the distance as well as the time of the year, though it was observed that standard rates were increasingly becoming more common.

Setting on a journey, the crew of the canoes usually started at about sunrise, and most of the days' journey was covered before noon when rowing became more strenuous due to heat. The two ends of the boat or tings were occupied by two navigators. The one on the bow or the ag-ting had to keep a lookout for snags, shallows, tricky places, and other boats on the river, thereby effectively guiding the boat. The stern was controlled by the goorial, carrying a large oar-rudder. The crew en-route anchored on the banks or the numerous river-islands or chars dotting the stream. Firewood was generally available in such places. The meals prepared were usually a plain one of rice, and took about a couple of hours to cook. While describing such a setting Peal wrote poignantly, “As dusk closes in
the fires often look cheerful each with its group squatted round, cooking or singing. This latter they seem they able to do when asleep as it seems to last all night."\textsuperscript{104}

A comparison of Asom's boatmen on the Brahmaputra was made with that on the Ganges, the latter found to be more proficient in their work, while the former was termed as inefficient and under the influence of opium. This was a typical colonial stereotype universally reserved for the indigenous people of all occupations in Asom, be it the peasants or the boatmen. "On the Ganges", wrote the Director of Public Education in Bengal who travelled on the Brahmaputra in a steamer in 1857, "from there being so many pilots on that line, employed by the private companies and by Government, each one helps the other with information as to the channels, and all come to 'know the water' much better than the Assamese pilots (even when not under the influence of opium). The pilots here seem to know very little about the channels."\textsuperscript{105}

Moreover, the boats constructed in the Valley were found to be unsuitable for carrying bulky commodities such as coal, to be transported from the foothills to the Brahmaputra, the main artery of river-transport through its tributaries flowing out from the hills. This was apparent when the British government was exploring the possibilities of exploiting the mineral resources of the Dikhow River Valley in Sibsagar district during 1876-77. The party, including several railway engineers of the Northern Bengal State Railway, were entrusted the task of ascertaining "the practicability and the cost of laying down a light railway from the coal-fields of Sibsagar district to the banks of the Brahmaputra."\textsuperscript{106}

Detailed surveys were carried out for almost three months between Disangmukh on the Brahmaputra and Naginimora, at the foothills of the Naga Hills that contained the coal beds. The available information regarding the "natural features and conditions of the tract" was provided. The option of using the rivers as a medium of transport was considered and rejected.

\textsuperscript{104} Peal, \textit{The Canoes of Assam}.

\textsuperscript{105} Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Assam, Darjeeling 24 April 1857, Series I: Foreign Department, for 1857, Vol.43, ASA.

\textsuperscript{106} Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Year 1877-78, Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1878, p.18.
The Dikhu River was found to be in many respects unsuitable as a means of regular water transport. Its course is very winding, and in its upper waters to some distance below Suntuck there are frequent rapids, rendering navigation possible for ‘dug-out’ canoes. Below Nazira, however, the river is practicable for fair-sized boats, except for two or three months in the dry season.\(^{107}\)

Even the steamers as carriers were considered to be an expensive mode of transportation for the “development and utilization of the abundant mineral resources”. The rapid development of railways to reduce the dependence on water transport, either through native boats or through the steamers was advocated and attempted in the 1870s onwards. As the annual *Administration Report* for 1877-78 noted, “The question is one of the utmost interest and importance to the province, both in view to the development and utilization of the abundant mineral resources of the country and to the lowering of the present excessive cost of steamer carriage, both of goods and passengers, on the Brahmaputra, which is one of the principle obstacles to its advancement.”\(^ {108}\)

Though the provincial government was favourable to the construction of a tramway for ‘opening up’ the Naginimara coal-beds for exploration as advised by the survey party, the imperial government in Calcutta shot down the proposal as “all too expensive to be undertaken”, directing the Chief Commissioner to look for ‘more practicable’ coal-fields. Preliminary surveys for connecting the Valley with Bengal by extending the Northern Bengal State Railways were actively pursued in the 1870s. Between 1875 and 1878, both the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra were surveyed for the suitability of a railway line till Guwahati.

The timber for building boats was nothing less than a necessity for the inhabitants of the Valley in the colonial period. A government official of Lakhimpur in 1885 reported that no royalty was levied for cutting timber for the purpose of building boats during the reign of the Ahom and Matak kings, “but now there is scarcely a boat left in the [Dibrugarh] *mauza* as the people have

\(^{107}\) ibid., pp.18-19.  
\(^{108}\) ibid., p.19.
ceased to make them because of the tax."109 It was also stated that the Neog and
the Saikia (officers of the Ahom bureaucracy) of Ujanhokankhola requested for a
permission to cut poma tree to construct two boats free of royalty. The district
officer of Lakhimpur wrote in 1885 that these officials had to come to Dibrugarh
occasionally on official business and unlike in the past when the journey was
always made on boats, now had to be conducted by rail. This entailed much
expense to them, as each man brought two attendants and the railway fair was
Re.1 for each person. Further, "The gregarious and exclusive habit of the
Muttocks renders it necessary that they should go about in small companies
together when they visit the outside world and so their expenses of travelling are
increased."110 The Deputy Commissioner recommended that their request be
conceded to, with the condition that the boats thus made would be considered as
government's property and not that of the persons using them. The Chief
Commissioner sanctioned this 'concession' or 'privilege' by relaxing the rules for
the two officials.111

But it was not only the members of the old bureaucracy of the Ahom state like
the persons mentioned above who were in need of trees for making boats.
Considering the dependence of the Mishings, Deoris and other riverine
communities of the Brahmaputra Valley on country-made boats for
communication, colonial authorities of Lakhimpur district "relaxed" the rules
regarding felling and collection of timber in 1883, and allowed them to procure
unreserved trees for making boats that could be used for their private
purposes.112 Other inhabitants of the Valley, however, complained that the
importance of boats for communication is not only confined to Lakhimpur alone,
but were equally applicable to all the plains districts of Asom on the
Brahmaputra, nor was the need for trees to make boats limited to the Miris and

109 Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1655,
Dibrugarh 31 August 1885, Home, Forest B, September 1885, Nos.28/29, NAI.
110 ibid.
111 Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department to the Commissioner of Assam Valley
Districts, No.2340, 23 September 1885, Home, Forest B, September 1885, Nos.28/29, NAI.
112 Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam,
No.509, Gauhati 3 May 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.

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Deoris. Such needs were particularly felt by the inhabitants of Majuli, the largest river-island on the Brahmaputra. Therefore, the cultivators of Majuli,

all complained of the recent orders under which a royalty of Rs.2 is levied on each boat cut out of any tree on which royalty is payable when cut. Royalty at Rs.2 being now payable on unreserved trees, it was urged that this order is particularly hard on those who cut boats out of the Simul tree which abounds in the Majuli and the wood of which is almost worthless. Such boats rarely last more than 1 year or at the most 2 years and when sold it is said do not fetch a higher price than 4 or 5 rupees. A royalty of Rs.2 on a boat the value of which does not exceed Rs.5 seems excessive. On the other hand it may be said that the people need not cut their boats out of worthless trees if it does not pay them to do so as there is plenty of wood procurable in the Majuli... the royalty assessed on boats cut from Simul trees does not bear a proportion to the value of the boat much in excess of the royalty now assessed on bamboos.\textsuperscript{113}

Combined with the peculiar circumstances of Majuli where "the people are compelled to have resort to boats for a great portion of the year owing to the floods of the Brahmaputra", the royalty put its inhabitants in hardship.\textsuperscript{114} This was despite the prevailing Forest Rules which allowed villagers to collect woods for consumption and non-trade purposes free of cost, which however excluded timber used for boats. As per the government's rules notified in December 1883, all newly constructed boats were liable for collecting a levy, which would be of the same amount as the royalty payable on the tree it was made from. For instance, the revenue charged on a boat made of a Simul tree was charged Rs.2, which was also the prevailing rate of royalty on felling a Simul. The question for the colonial authorities, therefore, "simply is whether the rule charging Rs.2 on unreserved trees taken for boats in the Majuli, such being among the necessaries of life of the ryot population of that part, shall be relaxed."\textsuperscript{115} The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar recommended that boats made from unreserved trees for private use be exempted from the payment of royalty. The circumstances

\textsuperscript{113} W. C. Ward, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, No.81, Gauhati 7 March 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.

\textsuperscript{114} ibid.

\textsuperscript{115} W. C. I. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, Sibsagar 24 April 1884, Nos.86-92, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
existing in Majuli, he further noted, was common elsewhere in Assam as well, "where such boats are used they are necessities of life and nothing else." The government nonetheless agreed merely to allow the cutting of unreserved trees free of charge to construct a limited number of revenue-free boats which raiyats required for "agricultural purposes". Further, it was the government which was to determine the number of boats required for each village. Moreover, the concession was made available only to the villages of Majuli, and even among them, only to those "whose inhabitants have streams to cross between their houses and their fields." The government notification of 1885 read,

The upper portion of the Majuli, from the Auniaati to the Dakhinpat Shattras is intersected in all directions with creeks and streams, and boats are really a necessity of life during half the year. The Miri villages farther east on the banks of the Brahmaputra or Kherkatia Suti with the jungle behind them, boats are their only means of locomotion, save in the winter. The concession asked for by the ryots might be granted to the inhabitants of the Majuli.

Here again, as was the case with fishing by the inhabitants of the Valley, the collection of timber too was made a source of colonial revenue generation. The 'relaxations' allowed in certain circumstances were mere exceptions to this rule, and were to be 'privileges' bestowed by the discretion of the state. The conflict between the state's need for generating revenue and the subject's need for timber for constructing boats continued during the rest of the colonial period, even though the development of road and railway communication in the first half of the twentieth century diminished the importance of boat-communication in the long-distance routes to some extent.

116 ibid.
117 Office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1210, 19 May 1884, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
118 'Order', 'Taxation of Unreserved Trees used for Boats in the Majuli in Sibsagar', Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, 3 May 1885, Home-B, Forest Branch, March 1885, NAI.
Catching Timber on the River

Much like the other occupations connected with the rivers, there was also the common practice of collecting timber and firewood floating down the Brahmaputra and its larger tributaries from the surrounding hills, particularly during the months of monsoon when the rivers were at a spate. It was generally in the three months of July, August, and September that drift-wood was mostly available and usually collected. In the Kamrup district, the well-to-do class deputed their servants and dependents to catch drift-timber for home consumption, primarily for fuel. Petty traders, consisting chiefly of Nadiyals caught timber for sale, but the profit derived by them was found to be inconsiderable, and “inasmuch as they catch drift timber while fishing, and do not, as a rule, keep an establishment or boats for the purpose.”119 Though “these logs are seldom of much value”, “Sometimes logs of considerable size are caught in the river”.120 Nevertheless, this task involved considerable risk. Orunodoi, the first newspaper to be published in Assamese, reported an accident met by drift-timber collectors in its July 1846 edition. On the morning of July 7 of that year in Sibsagar district when there was a rapid rise in the waters of the Dikhow River, three people went on boat to catch timber, while two were pulling the boat from the bank with the help of a rope. “The rope slipped out of one of them and he fell face down on the bank, while the other was pulled down and carried away by the swift currents of the river. The Kolita [caste] man named Tuaram died by drowning.”121

The colonial State was ready to allow the catching of drift timber by the people as merely a ‘privilege’, and not as a right, though the inhabitants considered it to be a bounty enjoyed free of cost from time immemorial. However, “the privilege was actually interfered with” by the government in 1898 by introducing a permit system for the collection of drift-timber for commercial purposes, in line with the

119 P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No. 2383, Gauhati 20 September 1899, Rev.- A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.
120 ibid.
rules existing in the Surma Valley. These new regulations opened up one more avenue of extraction of revenue from the subjects and petty-traders eking out a meager livelihood by collecting timber from the Brahmaputra. A petition by Dehiram Koch and others of North Guwahati brought these grievances to the notice of the State in the year 1900. They complained that “they were subject to frequent prosecutions for non-observance of the technicalities of the law”, the forest authorities construed the permission to collect driftwood for domestic purposes as permission to collect only fuel, and as a consequence, they were prohibited from using drift timber for the purpose of repairing their boats and carts unless they shelled out the royalty payable under the prevailing Forest Rules.

The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, P. R. T. Gurdon, when asked by the Chief Commissioner as to the question of “legalizing the collection of drift-timber wood” was of the opinion that in Asom’s rivers, “The practice of collecting drift wood for home consumption has been in vogue for a very long time, and the same privilege should be extended, free of charge, to all settlement holders and their sub-tenants without restriction, and irrespective of the fact whether they catch drift timber themselves or employ servants to do the same, or whether they use it within or without the limits of their holdings.” The Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district in his reply suggested that “I would myself much prefer the annual charge of Rs.9 or Rs.10 [royalty by issuing permit]. The result of the legalization of the collection, at any rate in the big towns on the river, would be, I think, to throw the whole collection of firewood into a professional class, who at the proposed rate would be able to sale for little more than the value of their labour.”

122 P. R. T. Gurdon, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.2383, Gauhati 20 September 1899, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.
123 ‘Resolution’, Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the General Department, No.624-31R, Shillong 26 February 1900, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.
124 F. E. Jackson, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1639G, Dhubri, 4 September 1899, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.
B. C. Allen, the district officer in charge of Darrang said that in the town of Tezpur drift-timber was collected at the ghāts, "cut up, stacked, and openly sold, the Forest Department issuing monthly permits to the vendors, for which they charge Re.1.8 per mensem."\textsuperscript{126} Sixty four of such permits were issued in 1897-98 in that district, one hundred and sixteen in 1898-99 and fifty five in the four months from April to July in the year 1899. He was of the opinion that "The system seems to work well, and though no doubt a certain amount of firewood is sold which is not covered by a permit, the amount which escapes duty is probably not large, as there are a considerable number of licensed vendors who would obviously resent any open attempts made by unlicensed persons to encroach upon their business." He considered the proposal of allowing only "bona-fide agriculturists" to collect timber free of charge for their own use, very few cultivators in this district would benefit by the "concession". This was because drift-timber was collected primarily by only the Nadiyals, and since almost all of them were landless and hardly possessed any cultivable land, they would not be included within the term ‘agriculturist’, thereby remaining outside the ambit of the concession.\textsuperscript{127} Another consideration also influenced the State’s drift-wood policy, particularly in relation to the Brahmaputra. Allowed it to be collected freely, the practice kept the channel clean of snags and other obstacles in navigation. As the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang explained,

The Conservator observes that the object of the present rules was probably to benefit the poorer classes of the community, but I believe that I am right in saying that another object was the removal of snags from the river channel, and that government has hitherto abstained from levying royalty on drift timber collected in the Brahmaputra, because it was considered a matter of public importance that every encouragement should be given to persons to collect the logs that come floating down the stream. A proposal to levy royalty on drift was, I believe, made some years ago, but was negatived on these grounds.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} B. C. Allen, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No.1440R, Tezpur, 14 August 1899, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.
\textsuperscript{127} ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} ibid.
So the *Rules* for the collection of drift-timber in rivers of the Brahmaputra Valley were modified to allow the use of unmarked drift timber free to all settlement-holders and their tenants who could collect it for their domestic and agricultural and other private purposes, but not for sale or trade. Exceptions were however made to the rules for the Dayang and Dhansiri rivers in the Sibsagar district and the Bhareli River in the Darrang district, as well as other rivers which might be "closed from time to time" by government order. On the other hand, drift-timber which was collected for trade or sale now required permits from the Forest Department on payment of a monthly or annual royalty. These modifications were undertaken, the government explained, "only to clear up points which needed elucidation", and "not to deprive the people of any benefit they have hitherto enjoyed", as it was thought that it could "afford to be liberal" with regard to a duty on collected drift timber. The taxation on a necessity which was hitherto freely available and collected, however, put an additional burden on the small traders, peddlers and sellers of wood, most of whom, as noted above, were the landless Nadiyals belonging to an oppressed caste.

There was also a difference of opinion within the colonial officials that came up in 1892 on the question of whether the drift-timber collected from the Brahmaputra by brass-smiths of Borooagia village in Nowgong districts who prepared charcoal out of it for trade purposes, should be taxed or not. The Deputy Commissioner of the district was of the opinion that because the charcoal made from the driftwood was not sold by the brass-workers, it was not to be considered made for trade purposes, and hence no duty needed to be levied. Asom's Conservator of Forests, on the other hand, was convinced that "as the charcoal was employed in making the ware in which the brass workers traded, therefore it was used for trade purposes, and is excluded from the duty-free drift granted to ryots for domestic and agricultural purposes only." Moreover, the

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129 Amendment of the Drift Timber Rules in the Brahmaputra Valley, 26 February 1900, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.

130 'Resolution', Extract from the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the General Department, No.624-31R, Shillong 26 February 1900, Rev.-A, March 1900, Nos.1-12, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, ASA.

131 Officiating Conservator of Forests, Assam to Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Branch, No.2755R, 7 March 1892, Nos.287-292, May 1892, Rev.-B, NAI.
officer also believed that "a large quantity of charcoal had been consumed by the brass workers" the government was losing a considerable sum of revenue from this source because of the "lenient view" of the district officer, and called for the intervention of the Chief Commissioner.\textsuperscript{132}

The Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts too was opposed to the actions of the Deputy Commissioner, who allowed the brass-workers to collect the driftwood without charge. But the basis of his argument in favour of a tax was somewhat different from that put forward by the conservator. The Commissioner argued that, firstly, the "privilege" of collecting drift-wood was allowed only to the raiyats or the peasants, and secondly, only for their home consumption or agricultural purposes. None of these applied to the brass-workers, and hence argued for the discontinuation of the "privilege" they had been allowed so far.\textsuperscript{133} The Chief Commissioner concurred with the views expressed by the conservator, and ruled that "such timber being collected for purposes of trade is clearly liable to duty."\textsuperscript{134}

The above discussion indicates that riverine occupations that continued to survive and exist in the colonial period were sought to be commercialised by the State, though such moves invariably met with resentment and opposition from those subjects who stood to suffer from such steps. It is also clear that though in many cases the use of resources and material hitherto freely available were taxed, and those who violated the colonial regulations were termed 'illegal' and criminalised, it was impossible for the State to altogether prohibit or prevent such activities. The State also tried not to instigate widespread resentment and a sense of injustice among its subject population who were in many instances showing signs of rebellion against increasing land revenue taxation and dispossession from their customary rights. 'Relaxations' and 'concessions' were made use of by the provincial government in order to uphold the sanctity of rule

\textsuperscript{132} J. M. C. Kee, Officiating Conservator of Forests, Assam to Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Branch, No.211, Shillong 7 March 1892, Nos.287-292, Rev.-B, May 1892, NAI.
\textsuperscript{133} Officiating Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Divisional Officer, Nowgong, R.No.0/99, 8 January 1892, Nos.287-292, Rev.-B, May 1892, NAI.
\textsuperscript{134} Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, to the Officiating Conservator of Forests, Assam, No.1986R, Nos.287-292, Rev.-B, May 1892, NAI.
of law, in cases where these were under the threat of violation frequently and *en masse*. Nevertheless, in a caste-hierarchised Hindu society of the nineteenth century Brahmaputra Valley, these steps, purportedly to regulate 'illegalities' involving the riverine occupations that were made to be the domain of the most marginalised and oppressed of the social groups, adversely affected the tribal communities and the oppressed castes the most. While putting up petitions and demands for relaxation and annulment of such oppressive rules was one mode of opposition, avoiding the rules and breaking them whenever possible were also means by which such occupations were carried on. The rivers and forests of the Valley were the free gifts of Nature and sources of sustaining life for the common fish-workers, the potters, the boat-makers, the brass-workers, the drift-timber workers, the peasants, and others, even though the colonial state left no opportunity to put a price-tag on it. For the state, the rate and extent of compliance with the regulations on the resources of rivers and forests was a marker of its authority, while for its subjects the ability to break, bend or get around these oppressive laws was a marker of their freedom.