CHAPTER - III
AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN ASSAM UNDER THE BRITISH RULE

Agrarian structures bear immense importance in shaping and determining the development pattern of agriculture particularly in the less developed countries. The constituting components of the agrarian structure are farm land, farm labour, farm capital, agricultural infrastructure and social structure of the agricultural workers together with that of the rural society. In a broader sense, Sunil Sen defines, agrarian structure as “the institutional framework of agricultural production, which includes land tenure system, distribution of ownership of land between large landowners and small peasants, tenancy system, the burdens imposed on the peasants by the government and landowners”.¹

“The introduction of British administrative and economic policies not only made Assam a part of the colonial economy, but more important, it totally uprooted the existing social formations and gave birth to new socio-economic forces which were to have a lasting impact on the processes of development of Assamese society”.² But the tragedy of Assam was that the super-imposition of British rule brought a semi-tribal, semi-feudal economy within the folds of the World capitalist order.³ In this context, Karl Marx rightly opines that ‘the colonial rule in India was carried on by the East India Company, which represented the merchant adventures of England. These merchant adventures made looting and plunder a part of their system. This

²Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, New Delhi, 1990, p. 24.
work of spoliation of India's teeming millions became a main source of the primary accumulation of World capital".\(^4\) "This process had some happy and progressive consequences but by and large, the pulling of a backward economy through almost two stages of economic development had the most unfortunate consequences for the Assamese economy affecting various classes of people in the society".\(^5\) In fact, the economic policy of British Government in India may be classified into three phases, i.e. acquisition, colonisation and exploitation. The annexation of Assam belonged to the third phase. Here an attempt has been made to analyse the agrarian social structure under the British rule in order to understand the socio-economic changes in Assam. Our discussion will be concentrated on the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The five districts respectively were Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar, Kamrup and Lakhimpur because these were the districts where the presence of the Ryot Sabha was most intensely felt.

"We are not led into your country by the thirst of conquest; but are forced in our defence – to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us ..." so ran a proclamation addressed to the people of Assam by David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General, N.E. Frontier, just on the eve of the march of British Troops into Assam".\(^6\) But the entire Brahmaputra Valley, later on, popularly known as Assam proper was annexed directly by the East India Company by virtue of the treaty of Yandaboo on 24\(^{th}\) February 1826.\(^7\) The East India company divided the Ahom Kingdom into two parts consisting of Upper Assam and Lower Assam. Lower Assam was placed under jurisdiction of British administration, while Upper Assam was left to Purander Singha, an Ahom Prince, on tributary basis in 1833.\(^8\) But very soon, on the plea of his being a defaulter in October, 1838, he was deposed and his tributary kingdom was placed once more under the direct administration of the British rule.\(^9\) The treaty of Yandaboo was followed up with the process of annexation with amazing rapidly. As a result, the


\(^{5}\) Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony*, op. cit., p. 24.


\(^{7}\) *Assam Land Revenue Manual 1896*, p.lxxv.

\(^{8}\) E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1994, pp. 292-293. It is an admitted fact that five districts of Brahmaputra Valley i.e. Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur formerly constituted the kingdom of the Ahom dynasty. These five districts are generally referred to Assam proper.

\(^{9}\) E.A. Gait, *op.cit.*, p.293.
British annexed Cachar area in 1832 after the assassination of the Kachari king Raja Gobinda Chandra.\textsuperscript{10} The Khasi and Jaintia Hills were brought under the British political Agent first in 1835 and later on regular basis since 1854 onwards when the areas were placed under a Junior Assistant Commissioner.\textsuperscript{11} The Naga Hills were annexed in 1866.\textsuperscript{12} The Garo Hills areas which came under the British rule from 1765 onwards as part of North East Rangpur and later on as a part of Goalpara district, were formally created a separate district in 1869.\textsuperscript{13} The consolidation of British rule in Assam may be said to have been completed in 1874 with the placing of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Surma Valley and the adjoining Hills districts under the new Province of Assam headed by a separate Chief Commissioner.\textsuperscript{14}

The pre-colonial period of Assam was essentially a ‘semi tribal’ and ‘semi feudal’ society.\textsuperscript{15} Prior to the occupation of Assam by the British in 1826, a greater position of the Brahmaputra Valley was under the Ahom. The Ahom are the members of ‘Shan’ branch of great Tai or Thai family of south east Asia.\textsuperscript{16} It was during the Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603 A.D to 1642 A.D) under the auspicious of Mômai Tamuly Barbaruah, the villages were resettled on the basis of paik system which was the backbone of the socio-political organisation of Medieval Assam.\textsuperscript{17}

According to the Ahom system, ‘not only the land, but also subject’ was the property of the state. Every adult male between the age of 16 to 50 was liable to render personal service, free of charge, to the state either as a labourer, as a soldier, or to supply certain quality of produce in lieu there of. He was known as paik. The paiks were organised into gots or Squads.\textsuperscript{18} Originally, every got had four paiks, but during the reign of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha, the number was reduced to three. One member of each got had to serve the king in turn either as private or public servant for 1/3 (1/4 when there were four paiks in the got) of the year and the work

\textsuperscript{10}ibid., p.289.  
\textsuperscript{11}ibid., p.291.  
\textsuperscript{12}ibid., p.299.  
\textsuperscript{13}ibid., p.303.  
\textsuperscript{14}ibid., p.303.  
\textsuperscript{15}Assam Land Revenue Manual 1896, pp.xxvii-xxviii.  
\textsuperscript{17}S.L. Baruah, A Comprehensive history of Assam, New Delhi, 1985, p. 220.  
\textsuperscript{18}Hiteswar Barbaruah, Ahomor Din, Guwahati, 1981, p.123.
of the absentee *paik* had to be performed by the other members of the *got*. Sometimes two members of the *got* and in times of emergencies all three members of the *got* were employed in state services. The *paiks* were further arranged into *Khels*. To control the *paik*, various types of officers were appointed. Over every twenty an officer called *Borah* was placed, over every five *Borahs*, a *Saikia*, over ten *Saikias*, a *Hazarika* and then a *Phukan* Commanding six thousands *paiks*. The *paiks* were broadly divided into two sections – *kanri* and *chamua*. The regular peasantry was called *Kanri Paiks*, while peasantry of good or relative affluence were called *chamua paiks*. Those *paiks* working as tenants in the private estate of the nobles were called *Bohotiya* where these were allotted to the temples and *Satra* they were called *Dewalliya*.

Every *paik* in return for his service to the state was allotted two *puras* (nearly 3 acres) of *rupit* or rice land. That land was designated as *gamati* or body land. The *Paik* were also allowed to hold land for domestic purposes usually called *bari* land without limitations.

According to the Ahom system of revenue policy, the *Ga-mati* or body land was considered as the property of the state and was neither hereditary nor transferable. The *rupit* lands were duly registered and the subordinate officer had to provide each working *paik* his share of land, allotting it from the lands lapsed by death or other casualty. Besides, the state officials were ordinarily remunerated with the assignment of a number of *paiks*; they were granted rent free lands, either on a hereditary basis (*nankar*) or for the period of office (*manamti*). Above all, they often occupied free of rent, *khats* or tracts of waste land which they cultivated through their attendants, fugitive *paiks* and slaves. Apart from these, religious institutions, such as temples and *satras* were granted rent free (*Lakhiraj*) lands in the form of

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21 Hiteswar Barbaruah, *op. cit.*, p.496.
22 *ibid.*
23 *ibid.*
26 *ibid.*, p.116.
27 *ibid.,* p.29.
29 *ibid.,* p.29.
Devottar, Dhomottar and Brahmostor grants. Thus, the Ahom system of government that the revenue was mainly accrued from the personal services of the paiks.

Thus, it is evident from the above analysis that Assam particularly the Brahmaputra Valley during the larger period of Ahom rule had neither experienced abundance prosperity nor distressing starvation. True to their simple habits and self-sufficient domestic economy, the people were quite content to cultivate nearly enough for their own consumption without caring to produce a surplus with a view to sell it in the market and earn something extra. This is also testified from the writing of Shihabuddin Talish who accompanied Nawab Mir Jumla in his campaign in Assam in 1662. Talish wrote, “it was not their (Assamese) practice to buy and sell articles of food in the market-place. The inhabitants store in their houses one year’s supply of food of all kinds and are under no necessity to buy or sell any eatable”.

The British occupation of Assam for nearly 121 years since the treaty of Yandaboo of 1826 brought profound changes in the agrarian sectors. Immediately after the annexation of Assam, the British did not make any sweeping changes. It was perhaps, due to the fact that the British authority found the country’s traditional management completely foreign to them and thought it convenient to leave Assam to the native rulers. In a letter dated 23rd May, 1853 to A.J. Moffatt Mills, Judge of Sadar Court on deputation, Lt. Colonel Jenkins expressed his conception and idea of the country. According to him,

“We not only got possession of the country after a long period of devastating wars and invasions, but we found a system of management existing totally foreign to anything we had been accustomed to, and which under our Government must have proved most un-

28 ibid., pp.29-30.
30 E.A. Gait, op. cit., p.141. For the details of the Ahom revenue system, see amongst others, Assam Land Revenue Manual 1896, op. cit., Hiteswar Barbarua, op. cit.; H.K. Barpujari, Assam in the days of the Company, op. cit.; U.N. Gohain, op. cit.; N.N. Acharyya, The history of Medieval Assam, Guwahati, 1992; Manoroma Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, op. cit.; Jahnabi Gogoi(Nath), Agrarian system of Medieval Assam, New Delhi, 2002.
profitable. A change of that system was essentially required, but Mr. Scott was unable to attempt any change, for up to the date of his death the Government had not determined whether they would retain Assam or whether they would give it to up its native rulers, and it was not until 1832 that any modification of the Assamese mode of fiscal management by khels began to be made".  

Sir E.A. Gait too admitted regarding the revenue administration that it was thought inadvisable to make any radical change until the ultimate destiny of the country had been settled.

So far as the early British land revenue administration was concerned, David Scott, the Commissioner of North East Rangpur, imposed poll tax of rupees 3/- per paik in place of old liability to personal service for three or four month in the year. The responsibility of collecting revenue was also entrusted upon the old staff of khel officials. But, this arrangement was not successfull, because the paiks of different khels were so scattered that it was found to be most tedious. According to Mills, from 1826 to 1832, revenue affairs had rather retrograded than improved. This, in his opinion was due to system of collection of revenues by the corrupt and rapacious native agents. But, in contrast to Mills, Amalendu Guha holds a different views. According to him, “the high mortality from black fever, chaos in the matter of defining the nature and extent of the land rights conferred on the ryots and fiscal decision were significant factors behind the retrogression of revenue affairs”. It is therefore decided in 1832 to introduce a land assessment in the plains of the country in place of the old tax arrangement. Thus the method of collection was changed from personal to territorial basis. Each district was divided into mahals which were resulted annu-

32 E.A. Gait, op. cit., p.279.
33 E.A. Gait, op. cit., p.279.
34 Assam Land Revenue Manual 1896, p.lxxxv.
35 ibid., p.lxxxix.
36 E.A. Gait, op. cit., p.279.
ally until the year 1835. The system of realising the land tax was not uniform, but it was generally collected through the agencies of the commission agents called Chaudhuris, Mauzadors and Kakotis. In 1836-1842, the plan was started of settling for a short term of years a circle of village called a Mauza, with the Choudhuris or Mauzadar, who took upon himself all risks of loss, while, on the other hand, he enjoyed the additional rents which accrued from extended cultivation. In 1854, annual settlements had again been reverted to. According to this, the lands were divided into three main classes viz., basti or bari or homestead, rupit or low rice land and faringati or high lands. The rates assessed on these three classes differed for each district. Accordingly, the rate of assessment per bigha in the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley are shown below.

Table: 3.1

Rate of Assessment per Bigha in the five districts of Brahmaputra Valley

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Rupit</th>
<th>Other land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rs</td>
<td>as P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The above table on the rate of assessment in the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley revealed that the payment of revenue was done on cash. Therefore, it was quite different from the previous system of revenue which generally came from the personal services of the paiks. Thus, from the above discussion, it is clear that the first

38 Assam Land Revenue Manual 1896, op.cit., p.lxxix
39 ibid.
40 ibid.
and foremost problem of the peasantry of Assam was the payment of land revenue in cash. They were not accustomed to it. Secondly, under the Ahom rulers the economy was not a monetised one. Thirdly, with the establishment of the British rule, the supply of money was introduced and all economic transactions were made in cash. As a result of the land revenue policy through cash payment, the condition of the peasantry in Assam, became worst under the new monetised administration. Hence, unable to adjust themselves to the new situation, many of the paiks left the country and settled in nearby Bhutan, Cachar and other nearby areas where the taxation was of a nominal nature.42

The general character of land Settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley districts was Ryotwary land revenue system.43 The main principle of Ryotwary settlement was that it aimed at dealing directly with the actual occupant and his separate holding, without the intervention of any middleman, landlord or settlement-holder between him and the government.44 The land of each field was also separately measured, classified and assessed.45 It is an admitted fact that the Ryotwary System which ensured peasant proprietorship of cultivated land was as such, a better one than the Zamindary System. But, in Assam it is aptly observed “the government itself exercised the powers of a Zamindar, and the way the revenue demand was increased, the context in which such increases were enforced, and their consequences for the peasantry, were distinctive”.46 Later on, from 1861 to 1867, several land revenue registrations were issued which led to a series of changes in revenue administration.

In course of time, in order to encourage periodic lease, the government introduced the Settlement Rules of 1870. According to this, land possessed by the cultivators of the soil recognised a permanent, heritable and transferable right in land, subject to a revision at the end of the period.47 As a result, the system of annual settle-

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44 ibid.
45 ibid.
46 Cited by J.B. Ganguly, An Economic history of North East India(1826-1947), New Delhi, 2006, p.133.
ment was gradually transformed into decennial leases. Accordingly, the assessment was raised to a uniform rate of one rupee per bigha for basti, ten annas for rupit and eight annas for faringati.\(^{48}\) Unlike the rules of 1870, the Assam land and revenue regulations of 1886 had the force of law.\(^{49}\) As per the act of 1886, the following types of different land owning classes emerged in Assam.\(^{50}\):

(i) Proprietors, including the owners of revenue free estates, free simple, waste land grants and permanently settled estates.

(ii) Land holders, including the settlement holders of land held direct from the Government under leases for a period of exceeding ten years, or who had held for ten years continuously before the regulation came into force.

(iii) Settlements holders, other than land-holders, including persons holding land direct from the government under annual leases, or leases, the term of which is less than ten years.

This new tenure system resulted in the emergence of different classes of ryots in Assam namely, privileged ryots and occupancy ryots.\(^{51}\) By the virtue of the regulation of 1886, a ryot had the right to hold land for cultivation by himself or by the member of his family or by servants or labourers or with aid or by the partners enjoying succession interests. This occupancy rights of ryot was conditioned by the regulations of 1886 in such a way that proprietary rights over the land can never be claimed, as individuals required a period of 20 years of continuous occupation over a particular plot of land to claim occupancy rights. Similarly, a ryot can only attain the status of a privileged ryot after continuously occupying the land for not less than 20 years. Of course, this period was, later on reduced to 12 years by Assam Tenancy Act of 1935, but the insecurity of the ryot did not vanish.\(^{52}\) The sale of land by Auction

\(^{48}\) E.A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p.324.
\(^{49}\) *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886*.
\(^{50}\) *ibid*.
\(^{52}\) *ibid.*, p.28.
method on non-payment revenues also forced the *ryots* to be subjected to frequent insecurity.\textsuperscript{53}

When the reassessment of the decennial settled land came up in 1893, the government of India suggested that the system of classifying the land which were to be found in other parts of India should be introduced in Assam.\textsuperscript{54} It was, of course, admitted by the government of India that separate soil classes were unknown to the people of Assam.\textsuperscript{55} An alternative suggestion was based not on classification of soil, but on type of crop grown. The government of India found this method to be more simple and suitable for differentiating the value of various kinds of land than the determination of the soil rates. Accordingly, the government of India deputed H.Z Darrah, the Director of land records and Agriculture, to Burma to study the system of assessment there.\textsuperscript{56} In his scheme, Darrah proposed that the village should be taken as the unit of assessment and that each village should be placed in one of three classes on the basis of its relative value as measured by the following considerations.\textsuperscript{57}

(i) Proportion of settled area to waste
(ii) Proportion of fluctuating to permanent cultivation
(iii) Average sizes of the fields

On receipt of Darrah’s ‘Note on Assam and Burma’ the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, J.W. Quiton in his note in 1890, did not favour any change in the existing system, under which lands were divided into three classes namely, *basti*, *rupit* and *faringati*.\textsuperscript{58} But he wanted to raise the revenue rates. Similarly, William Ward, the successor of Quiton, also wanted to retain the above stated three folds of classification. But, he too wanted to change in assessment. Finally, with a slight modification of Darrah’s Scheme, it was decided to adopt that of recognising the demand for land as the chief factor in determining its value and therefore the rates to be assessed.

\textsuperscript{55}ibid.
\textsuperscript{56}H.Z. Darrah, *Final Report on the assessment of the Assam Valley 1893*, p.3.
\textsuperscript{57}ibid.
\textsuperscript{58}*Revenue Administration Reports of July 1895-Quiton J.W. Note.*
The Cadastral survey land conducted by the British Government between 1883 to 1892 afforded a very fair basis as to where land was most valuable. The Chief Commissioner directed that a provisional list be prepared by the Director of land records and Agriculture based on the relative demand in each village ascertained from the following four considerations. However, the final result of the decennial settlement of land in 1893 is shown in the following:

**Table: 3.2**

**Final Result of the Decennial Settlement of land in 1893**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Basti</th>
<th>Rupit</th>
<th>Faringati</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R A P</td>
<td>R A P</td>
<td>R A P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st class</td>
<td>1-6-0</td>
<td>1-0-0</td>
<td>0-12-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Class</td>
<td>1-4-0</td>
<td>0-14-0</td>
<td>0-10-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Class</td>
<td>1-2-0</td>
<td>0-12-0</td>
<td>0-9-0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is significant to note that the draft re-settlement rules didn’t contain any special provision to reassess the land under ordinary leases for cultivation of tea. But, later on, as per notification No 64604 dated 23rd December 1892, lands under tea were brought under re-assessment but incorporating a new clause in the revised rules.

There is no doubt that the agrarian system of British Government in India was designed to perpetuate the colonial interest. On one hand, the basic objective of such policy was to raise maximum revenues from its subjects, and to seek a strong local ally to help the process of colonisation on the other hand.

The introduction of new agrarian policy didn’t generate any inbuilt structural...
development either in the form of production or in the form of producing entrepreneurship. Rather it accelerated the process of stagnation and rapid pauperisation. M.M Das has outlined, “all these regulations and legislations on land tenures issued and passed by the colonial government resulted in the progressive concentrations of land in the hands of big land owners and non-agriculturists and the consequent deprivation of actual tillers of their land; the growth of parasitic intermediaries like the gain traders-cum money-lenders and stagnation in agricultural production”.  

Amalendu Guha also gives a similar view. In fact, about the general picture of rural indebtedness in pre-British India, we have found no reason to believe that the agricultural production of India at any known period of their history has been generally free from debt, although individuals or classes may have fallen into deeper embarrassments under the British rule. It increased rapidly during the last quarter of the 19th century and became one of the acutest problems in the countryside. In the rural scene of the Brahmaputra Valley, the case was same and there was a considerable burden of indebtedness. Hence, it was said that, “the cultivator in Assam is born in dept, increase his dept and dies in dept”. The study of the various administrative land revenue reports of 1856-65, 1892-93, 1910-11, 1917-18, 1925-26, and 1939-40 show the clear picture of the indebtedness of the peasantry of Assam. Accordingly, the Government collected a land revenue of Rs 1,05,958 in 1910-11, Rs 52,15,134 in 1917-18, Rs 75,90,712 in 1925-26 and Rs 90,81,709 in 1939-40.

One of the major vital causes of the rural indebtedness was the introduction of money economy as a result of the British revenue policy. Apart from it, during the late colonial period, the peasant suffered from the lack of suitable market due to non-commercialisation of agriculture. Interestingly then again, there was no market for the production of the local cultivators, but imported agricultural commodities flooded the Province under the initiative of the non-Assamese trading community, particu-

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63 M.M. Das, Peasant Agriculture in Assam: A structural Analysis, New Delhi, 1984, pp.158-159.
67 Land revenue Administration of the plain districts of Assam for the year of 1910-11, 1917-18, 1925-26 & 1939-40.
larly the Marwaris. Besides, the free movement of goods within the Province was stopped due to the discriminating policy of the government on the railway freight. 68 Hence, with the enhanced assessment of the land revenue, unrest among the peasantry persistently started growing and social tension in the rural areas, became a constant feature. Most of the official reports, very often, attempted to undermine the social tensions and tried to hide the fact of the increased land revenue assessment and the resultant unrest among the peasantry. But in the grass root level, the intensity of hardship was very acute and severe. Krishna Nath Sarmah (one of the leading freedom fighters and the general secretary of All Asom Ryot Sabha) in his diary gives a vivid picture of the miserable condition of the ryots. He writes, “with the patta of lands being granted for 10 (ten), 20 (twenty) and 30 (thirty) years of lease, the rate of land revenue went on increasing, the government’s objective to increase the rate of land revenue encouraged them to classify lands even at a time when productivity of the land was considerably declining. Even if the price of paddy declined, the rate of revenue was not reduced proportionately”. 69 With every land survey, the alien rulers used to increase the rate of land tax without caring or consideration for low productivity or constantly reducing yields. In addition to, the World Economic Depression of 1929 also seriously affected the agricultural sector to a great extent and as a result, brought in the collapse of prices of agricultural commodities which diminished the limited interest of the peasantry in the market. For instance, “before 1905, the average price, which the cultivators had received for his paddy was Rs. 1-5-0 per amount in the Assam Valley. In 1925-26 the price of paddy was Rs 2-3-0 per mound. But by 1937-38, the price of paddy and other agricultural commodities fell rapidly. The price of paddy by this time did n’t exceed Rs 1-2-0 per mound, which was half of estimate rate of 1925-26”. 70 Debeswar Sarma, one of the prominent freedom fighters of Assam, presented a picture in the council after examining more than 190 witnesses and said, “I found that, if the actual cost of cultivation is taken into calculation in consideration of the profit and loss of our actual village cultivators, the village

69 Krishna Nath Sarmah, Krishna Sarmar Diary, Guwahati, 1972, p.249.
cultivators do not gain anything".71 In this context, A.R. Desai had referred that, “the main cause of this phenomenal increase has been that the while since 1929 the incomes of the agriculturalists have been reduced by more than half, the burden of taxation on the peasantry had remained the same”.72 Consequently, indicated by S.L. Baruah, in Assam 29,600 people had to lead a life of beggar in 1937 and 2598 persons in 1934-35 had to suffer eviction for non-payment of taxes.73 It is, therefore clear that the agrarian indebtedness had reached beyond the imagination. Regarding the indebtedness of the agrarian scenario, the following table shows the extent of rural indebtedness of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in 1929-30 and 1948-49.74

Table : 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extent of rural indebtedness in the District of the Brahmaputra Valley</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District of region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A - 1929-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorhat Sub-Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - 1948-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source Calculated from P.C Goswami, *The Economic development of Assam*, New Delhi, 1988, p.68.

As the peasant could not pay so much of taxes, their arrears went or even increasing and thereby paved the way for rapid growth of indebtedness and pauperisation.

74 Calculated from P.C. Goswami, *The Economic Development of Assam*, New Delhi, 1988, p.68.
Consequently, some of the better off land holders sometimes even the Mauzaders (they can be called landlords in the true sense of the terms), the village head man and some others vested interests always took the opportunity to snatch away the ryot’s last hold of land in the name of helping him, at a lowest rate. In this context, emerging Marwari traders – Mahajan played significant role. In fact, a large number of Marwari businessmen were brought to Assam by the British as their collaborators. The Marwaris entered Assam along with the British and in the absence of any local trading class soon gained a foot-hold in transforming the economy. Sajal Nag is of the opinion that the rise of the Marwaris in Assam were from a group of immigrants scattered all over the countryside, indulging in petty business to become the virtual controller of the Assamese economy in the long run. The Marwaris were present in large numbers mainly in Upper Assam, particularly in tea garden areas while their number in Lower Assam and Barak Valley was less considerable. B.C. Allen has pointed out in 1905 that the principal men of business were the Keyas, the astute Marwari merchants whose shops were to be found in every tea garden in every headquarter towns and wherever else there was money to be made. These money lending Mahajans before the harvest advanced loans to the poor cultivators on condition that the cultivators would sell his crops to the Mahajans. Besides, the Marwaris used to keep Khata (handbook) and the signature of thumb impression of the debtors was taken a stamp in the khata. In fact, these merchants and moneylenders settled in Assam and they required lands primarily for their own habitation. Since they were basically traders, shopkeepers and moneylenders, they did not acquire land for cultivation. But soon, land resources began to be transferred from impoverished peasants to these money lenders and shopkeepers against the debts. Accordingly, “The Marwaris of the Valley possessed 13,000 acres of land in 1913-14. This acreage increased to 13,800 in 1913-15 and 14,252 in 1915-16 and in 1916-17 the acreage came down

76 B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Shillong, 1905, p.191.
78 ibid.
to 13,965". But, the report on the land revenue of 1910-11 shows that it jumped up to 16,311 in 1918-19 and 1919-20 to 16,454. Similarly, the land held by Marwaris rose from 35,958 to 36,8611 acre as in 1939-40.

Like the Marwaris, some local Mauzaders had also exploited the rural people. The severity of such exploitation is well depicted by Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla (The importance of Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla has been given in the Chapter VI) in his historic play Lavita. Lavita in her speech (dialogue) to Mauzaderni (wife of Mauzader) says, "not only the colonialists, but along with them, collaborationist Mauzaders and the village head man (or the local ghosts) are to be rooted out. She continued, because, have not you taken off our lands at Rs. 17.00 (rupees seventeen) only which was put for auction, for non-payment of revenue? Has not Mauzerder taken Bhagiram’s cow for his inability to pay revenue of Rs 4/- (rupees four)? As my father fell in dysentery, he could not pay the due revenue. Have not you put our hereditary property for last four years to auction? You and your English king could not understand anything except revenue". In the same way, during the period under study, articles published in the Assamese newspaper named Asomiya reflected the condition of the peasantry that was so unbearable suffering beyond imagination.

The large Scale of opium among the peasantry caused serious problem. Needless to say, a rich source of revenue in Assam which attracted the attention of the Government was opium cultivation. It is an admitted fact that during 1921-22 the total revenue collected from opium was 38,37,135. It is testified from a contemporary record that, "if we take the number of opium eaters to be approximately 1,00,000, then each consumer paid Rupees 38, 37,135. If we take the member of opium eaters to be approximately 1,00,000, then each consumer paid revenue of Rs. 39 per annum for opium". Hence, it is apparent that this trend degenerated the

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80 ibid.
81 Report of the land revenue Administration of the plain districts, 1910-11, p.4.
82 ibid, 1939-40, p.4.
83 S.N. Sharma and others(eds), Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla Rasamawalli, Guwahati, 1981, p.207.
84 Asomiya, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1936 & 1939.
85 Extract from Young India, 1924.
86 ibid.
Assamese peasantry both morally and economically. This situation was almost similar to the developments in the history of China, when in the first decade of the 19th century, the Chinese people violently protested against the use of opium in China and in the long run, it led to the outbreak of the first opium war of 1839-40. 87

In Assam, under the British regime, the grazing tax which was introduced in 1888 as a cattle fee at the rate 8 (eight) annas per head of cattle rose to a rupee in 1907 and shot up in 1912 to rupees 3/- per head on buffalo and annas 6 (six) on other horned-cattle. 88 This was constructed not only as a taxation, directly and indirectly on a vitally important articles of food, namely milk, but also a “repression” on the growth of cattle which form the “life and soul of agriculture” in an agricultural country like Assam. 89 In this context, Amalendu Guha has pointed out that the introduction of grazing tax in Assam became an expanding source because of a steady rise in the immigration of Nepali and other graziers along with their cattle. 90

During the period under study, a tremedous influx of population had witnessed in the Brahmaputra Valley. In fact, the British Government encouraged the migration from across the Bengal border for fulfillment of its colonial interest. In this context, According to D.D. Mali, “The colonisation scheme for opening out the remote tracts of Province encouraged people from other part of India to come to Assam. Immigrants came in substantial numbers from Mymensing and Pabna to Goalpara and Nagaon”. 91 Noteworthy that Curzon’s plan of partition of Bengal(1903-05) also played an important part in this regard. Behind the partition scheme, the British wanted to expand the Jute cultivation which subsequently led to the large migration of population from East Bengal to Assam. “The first ever Jute Mill was established by Auckland, a British National in Srirampur in 1854 and by the end of the decade another Jute Mill came up in Bengal”. 92 Consequently, by the time of the first World War(1913-

89 ibid.
90 Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op. cit., p.92.
the number of Jute Mills in Bengal stood at sixty four and in 1918-19 it increased to seventy six and in the beginning of the second War(1939-40) to one hundred ten.  

However, the Census report of 1911 shows for the first time, the immigrants from East Bengal to Assam’s waste lands and the settlers from the Bengal districts of Mymensing, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur began to flow to Goalpara district of the Char lands(lands formed by the deposit of alluvium from rivers). But, gradually after 1911 these new settlers spread beyond the Goalpara district to other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. According to the Census report of 1931, the number of settlers from East Bengal had increased almost 375,000 lac and hence the impact of the influx was clearly realized. In this context, C.S. Mullan, Superintendent, Census Operations, Assam in 1931 observed on this trend as follows:

“The lower districts of Assam Valley are becoming colonies of the Mymensing. Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant area in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million had transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the last twenty five years”.

The immigrant agricultural settlers and their descendants constitute a considerable proportion of the total population in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon and Darrang. Only Sibsagar and Lakhimpur district in the Assam Valley remained unaffected by the onslaught.

93 ibid.
95 Census of India, 1931, Vol-III, Part-I.
97 P.C. Goswami, op.cit., p.27.
98 ibid.
Thus, this large scale influx of agricultural population from outside Assam radically transformed the population pattern as well as the socio-economic structure of the Brahmaputra Valley on one hand and Assamese agrarian society on the other hand. In fact, the colonial policy of ‘peopling’, the conquered Brahmaputra Valley, had completely transformed its demographic structure. From a scantily populated Valley of vast waste lands, the Valley turned into flourishing region. Gradually, this influx of East Bengal peasantry exerted tremendous pressure on land utilization resulting in demographic imbalance. It is no doubt that the migrants brought a perceptible change in the peasant agriculture of Assam. In this context, P.C. Goswami has remarked, “one welcome result of the influx of these farm settlers is the improvement of the farming practices in the Province. The new setters developed the whole agricultural system of Assam, helped to improve the health of the countryside by clearing the jungles and marshes, and also converted the wild areas into prosperous agricultural regions. The introduction of jute, vegetables etc., as commercial crops in Assam has largely been due to the immigrants.”

But, despite of this fact, the settlement of land with the East Bengal migrants in Assam created certain problems. “In their eagerness to grasp as much land as possible, they frequently took possession of Government reserves; sometimes they settled down in waste land belonging to local people. With the diminution of the available land, friction began to arise frequently between the new settlers and the tribal and other indigenous people of the Province”. It is an admitted fact that though the immigrants’ contribution to improvement of economy which benefited the Raj the traders, speculators and entrepreneurs, the immigrant peasant were also the beneficiaries. They soon assumed the position of prosperous peasantry and also tightened their grip over the Assamese rural economy. After all, this large peasantry from outside improved their position on the land of the Brahmaputra Valley, while the indigenous not only failed in their own native land, but also transformed into a minority in their own land.

99 ibid., p.29.
100 ibid.
Thus, we have seen that the immigration of East Bengal peasantry and their settlement in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam supposed to have introduced a new agrarian economy. But in real sense, on their coming, it does not bring a situation in which there was significant change in the nature of extension of cultivation. Agricultural land use in Assam was characterised by a low percentage of cultivable land. In this context, one can agree with Manorama Sharma's scientific calculation. She argues, “Between 1910 and 1946 the percentage of cultivated area in relation to total settled area in the five districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur increased very nominally from 23.92% in 1910 to 43.91% in 1946.”

A similar case has been noticed in cropping pattern particularly in the context of rice production. From the calculation of Manorama Sharma, we may come to the point that “in 1910, 88.7% of the total cultivated area in Kamrup was under rice, in Darrang district 70% was under rice, in Nagaon rice answered for 58.98% of the area and Sibsagar and Lakhimpur had 69.50% and 60.59% respectively under rice. Whereas in 1945 the percentage share of total average under rice remained almost the same in Kamrup (89.35%) Darrang (69.55%), Sibsagar (67.38%) and Lakhimpur (65.6%)”.

Thus from the above, we can come to the point and agree with Manorama Sharma's argument. She argues that the entire period of 1910-1947, not only cropping pattern, but comprehensively the agrarian sector of Assam shows neither a very fast rate of change nor a great extent of change which indicate either increasing agrarian prosperity or accumulation of surplus leading to agrarian polarisation and sharp differentiation in the agrarian society. From that point of view, we may draw a picture of the land holding pattern in the Brahmaputra Valley districts. The following two tables give a focus on the land holding pattern of the peasantry of the

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101 Manorama Sharma, *Society and Social forces in North-East India*, op. cit., p.23.
102 *ibid.*, p.30
103 *ibid.*, p.40.
Brahmaputra Valley districts.104:

Land Holding Pattern (% of the total number of families and the total area in each size group)

Table: 3.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holding groups</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
<th>Nagaon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3-3 Acres</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Area</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 – 9.9 acres</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9 acres &amp; above</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table: 3.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No of operation holding</th>
<th>Total Acre</th>
<th>Average size of holding( acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>387,413</td>
<td>1,306,454</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>350,550</td>
<td>1,028,760</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>112,732</td>
<td>470,165</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>237,060</td>
<td>765,549</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>221,655</td>
<td>999,911</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from M.M Das, Peasant Agriculture in Assam: A Structural Analysis, New Delhi, 1984, p.164.

It is from the above two tables, it reveals that from the first decades of the twentieth century to the 1940s and till 1970-71, the land holding pattern remains almost same. The major area was occupied by holdings of the size 3.3 to 9.9 acres. It

is found that the majority of the rural peasantry of this Valley was the revenue paying peasantry. As a result, they came under the category of holding of 10 to less than 30 bighas of land. From this point of view, we may come to the point that peasantry of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam was basically the middle peasantry following the model of agrarian structure drawn up by D.N. Dhanagare.

Thus, it can be assessed that the British after occupying Assam as per the terms of Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 broke down the traditional village economy of rural sector which existed on the basis of the paik system introduced by the Ahom in the early 17th century. As a result, although the British rule inaugurated a new material foundation in the Province, yet by breaking up the traditional village economy introduced private property rights in land, the period saw the decline of the agricultural classes, gradual rise of fragmentation of land holdings. Consequently, the land became an item in the form of commodity in the market, purchased or sold or mortgaged. In addition to, under this new system, fixed money payment, assessed on land and not on the annual produce was introduced. But the material condition of the agrarian sector as a whole remained unchanged. All these eventually led to a widespread peasant risings which rocked the Assamese agrarian society.

The popular outburst which became famous as the Phulaguri Dhewa (battle of Phulaguri) in 1861, the first popular peasant movement in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in the post 1857 period. It is the fact that a rich source of revenue in Assam which attracted (as stated above) the attention of the British Government was opium cultivation. The widespread and immoderate consumption of this drug was noticed by Robinson and other writers including A.J.M.Mills who in 1853 said that \( \frac{3}{4} \) of the population are opium eaters and men, women and children alike use the drug.\(^{105}\) It was generally believed that the excessive use of opium had converted the Assamese once a hardy, industrious (and) enterprising race, into an effeminate, weak, indolent and degraded people.\(^{106}\) The increase in the cultivation of poppy, out of the juice of

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\(^{105}\) E.A. Gait, \textit{op.cit.}, p.313.

\(^{106}\) H.K. Barpujari(ed), \textit{Political history of Assam, op.cit.}, pp.88-89.
 which opium was produced, adversely affected the revenues of the government; the 
bari and chapari lands in which the crops was generally cultivated was assessed at a 
lower rate. After lengthy correspondence between the Sadar board and the local 
authorities in 1851-52, abkari opium was introduced into Assam. It was vainly hoped 
that when the ryots will have to pay dearly for the drug they will restrict its immoderate use.

Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukon also protested before 
Mills in 1853 against the opium trade of the British in Assam. Yet opium continued to 
be a major source of revenue till the early part of the 20th century. Meanwhile, plantation which suffered a set back since 1844 had started to prosper again after 1852 
and several private concerned entered the field. The tea planters who had been facing 
an acute shortage of labourers urged upon the government to increase land revenue, 
so that the local peasantry not being able to give revenue, would join plantations. To 
make them dependent entirely on government opium in 1861, cultivation of poppy 
was totally banned. So, the prohibition of poppy cultivation in that year and rumours 
of imposition of taxes on income and betel nuts and pan (betel leaf) were vehemently protested by the peasants. This led Phulaguri peasant upsurge amongst the 
tribal population of Lalung in 1861. Accordingly, about 1500 ryots marched to the 
Sadar court at Nagaon to protest against the of tax on tamul(betel nuts) and pan (betel 
leaf) cultivation. The authorities paid no heed to the sentiments of the people and promised no measures to rehabilitate their economy after abolition of the poppy cultivation or to remove their fears in other respects. The aggrieved ryots then convened 
Rajj-mel held at Phulaguri for five days from October 15, so as to enable the peasants of the remote villages to participate in the deliberations. On the first of the Mel, 
about 1000 ryots assembled; five to six hundreds of them were armed with lathis.

A police party that had come to disperse it on that day was driven out. The number of people attending the Mel increased every following day so that by 17 October, about three or four thousand peasants assembled there. The police again attempted to

107 ibid.
108 ibid., p.89.
109 ibid.
111 Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op.cit., p.7.
112 ibid., p.7.
break up the assembly and arrested some of the leaders.\footnote{113} Lt. Singer, the Lieutenant appeared himself with a police party, at which the leaders of the *ryots* headed by Jati Kalita complained about the ban on opium cultivation and *pan* taxes.\footnote{114} In return, the authority did not convey their grievances to the higher authorities. Hence, they contemplated means of carrying their grievances to the higher authorities. This had enraged Singer who ordered them to disperse and tried to seize their bamboo and *lathi*. But Singer got himself inadvertently killed in this scuffle. The police force fled away in panic. But, within a short time, with an armed force, the district magistrate reached the spot and firing took place where several peasants lost their lives. The peasant leaders like Narsingh Lalung and eight other peasant leaders were punished with long term imprisonment or transportation.\footnote{115} It is the fact that the episode of the peoples' resistance to the increasing tax is still remembered by the people of Assam as the Phulaguri Dhewa (the battle of Phulaguri) in the agrarian history of Assam. In fact, the uprising at Phulaguri was the earliest popular and mass movement in Assam, organised with the object of compelling the British Government to yield to the will of the people by the withdrawal of unpopular measure of taxation.

In spite of the growing discontent of the *ryots*, the authorities in Calcutta as well as in Assam never ceased to impose new taxes and increased the existing rates in revenue on land. In 1861, Hopkingson, the then Commissioner of Assam, sought to double the tax on land on the plea of utilising the excess revenue on works of public utility.\footnote{116} Consequently, rates of *rupit* and non-*rupit* lands increased from 25\% to 50\% in almost all the districts.\footnote{117} Hence, if Nagaon led the way in peasant movements, via the Phulaguri uprising, it was now turned to the districts of Darrang and Kamrup. The *ryots* of Patharughat in the Mangaldoi area were the first to react against the enhancement of revenues on land. Interestingly the population was largely composed of Muhammadans and happy feature of the locality was the unity between the Hindus and Muslims.\footnote{118} They met in their *mel* and protested against the new mea-
sures. Anticipating trouble, Colonel A.C. Comber, Deputy commissioner of Darrang, accompanied by the superintendent of police arrived at Patharughat, as the people of Patharughat took the initiative in resorting to no-tax campaign.\textsuperscript{119} From early 1869, mels were frequently held at Gobindapur, Hadira and Bajali in the district of Kamrup. In every place, the protests of ryots were suppressed by the government force so that the holding of Raij-mels had to be given up by them. Subsequently, the repressive measure discouraged the ryots from the holding mels, but they gathered and discussed the increasing revenue matters at Namghar (The temple of Assamese) and Mosques.

The impending enhancement of land revenue rates under the New Settlement as notified in 1892, led to widespread dissatisfaction and rocked the rural society. Under the New Settlement, the population density and the demand for land in each village were the chief considerable in determining the land values and rates to be fixed. The revised rates in the Brahmaputra Valley involved initially an enhancement of 53\% and the average; but in many villages it was at high as 70\% to 100\%.\textsuperscript{120} In December, 1893, the land revenue assessment which had remained unchanged for a quarter of century was enhanced. As a result, the movement started with the looting of the Rangia bazar (market). On 24\textsuperscript{th} December, while returning from a mel at Beiagaon, mob of about two hundreds ryots looted the Rangia bazar.\textsuperscript{121} In this context, Manorama Sharma says, “The looting of the bazar was a definite expression of their anger against the Marwari traders to whom they had go for money to pay their revenue whom they had to and pledge their crops in order to get an advance. So, in their simple minds, they considered the traders to be hand in glove, with British Government, in the enhancement of revenue”.\textsuperscript{122} Similarly, on December 30, a massive crowd consisting of three thousand people assembled at Rangia and held demonstration throughout the night. The angry mob threatened that they would destroy the police station, post office and tahsildar’s bungalow. But, the arrival of police party saved the situation. In the same way, on 10 January, 1894 a large crowd assembled at the open field near Rangia Police

\textsuperscript{119} ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op. cit., p.51.
\textsuperscript{121} Assam Secretariat Proceedings, file No, 326.
\textsuperscript{122} Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony, op. cit., p.97.
station. When they were asked to disperse, they shouted ‘we won’t pay the increase revenues’. Finding the situation critical McCabe assembled the military and the armed civil police and charged down on the crowd open fired on it and crowd ultimately dispersed. Many lost their lives and many others were arrested. In a notification on 10 January, McCabe ordered, “Whereas the assembly of mels in the district of Kamrup has resulted in riot and criminal intimidation, is hereby ordered that no mel shall assemble within the tahsils of Pati-Darrang, Rangia, Nalbari, Tamulpur, Hajo, Barma and Bajali or the Mauza of Sharukheti without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner”. So, the disturbance then quelled down and the revenue of the district was collected without difficulty.

The echo of peasant uprisings at Rangia inspired the peasantry of Lachima in the Sarukhetri Mauza of Kamrup. “On 21st January, 1894 when a Muazader accompanied with a mandal reached Kapla village near Lachima, the peasants again refused to comply with the order”. On the order of the sub-divisional officer, the police attempted to break the assembly which instead of dampening the spirits of the people, further added fuel to the fire. The police arrested seventy five persons in connection with the incident. But very soon, about three thousand people gathered and forcibly released them. Finding the situation serious, the Deputy Commissioner reached Lachima and by 25 January, 1894, 50 leaders of the mels were arrested and were forced to construct a make-shift lock up for themselves. Consequently, the same day about six thousand people appealed to the Deputy Commissioner in his camp and presented a petition demanding release of the prisoners. But instead of it, they were forced to disperse when a bayonet charge was ordered. It is an admitted fact that the most of arrested men were respectable leaders of the society - Gossains, Doloi and Village elders.

The mels during the peasant unrests in the 19th century in the Brahmaputra Val-

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123 Assam Secretariat Proceedings file No, 252.
124 ibid., file No, 257.
ley played a historical role in making the rural sector conscious of the utter helplessness in which they lived under the alien rulers. The impending enhancement of land revenue rates under the New Settlement as examined led to a widespread dissatisfaction in the rural society. That was why, peasantry in Kamrup and Central Assam reacted through their Raij-mels, discussed in their mels the increasing economic burden on them or a no-rent campaign. In this context, Jawaharlal Nehru’s view is that, “the village communities are little republics having nearly everything they want within themselves; and almost independent of foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing lasts. This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself- is in a high degree conducive to their happiness and to their enjoyment of great portion freedom and independence”, 127 seems to present the rural scenario of Assam in a very clear light. The word Raij in Assamese means, “people in general or in the context of a particular locality. It is derived from the word Rajya (Kingdom) which meant an administrative or fiscal unit in some parts of medieval Assam. An Assamese proverb says: ‘the people are (your) sovereign and the clan, (your) Ganga (Raijei Raja, Jnatiyei Ganga). Hence, Raij-mel was much more than what we understand elsewhere by a village Panchayat”. 128 The Survey of agrarian uprisings as stated revealed that, “the Raij mels asked the people not to pay the enhanced tax, not to buy defaulters’ auctioned properties and to punish the black sheep by ex-communication and social boycott. In some places, the mels hung up their messages on the road side trees. In the Barama Tahsil, the Mel appointed their own dak harkaras (notice board) to carry orders from one village to another, and even maintained a core of lathi-armed volunteers to resist attachment of properties”. 129

Needless to say, “the mels were not mere organisations of the Assamese peasantry for building up a resistance to revenue enhancements or other economic injustices of the British rule, but were an intrinsic part of the rural life of Assam”. 130 It is true that, “the tribal clans were no longer in their original form in Assam Valley, but it

128 Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op.cit., p.53, also referred by Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, op.cit., p.95.
130 Manorama Sharma, Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony, op.cit., p.95.
must also be remembered that the majority of the ryots belonged to the various indigenous Assamese tribes like the Bodo-Kachais, Chutias, Morans, Mataks and such other plains tribes and Ahoms. Therefore, the feelings of clan unity were still very strong amongst the peasants and this sentiment of unity was the source of strength of the Rai Melas. In fact, "it was this clan unity which gave the peasants the courage to stand up against the British might and go to the extent of a beginning a no-rent campaign. Every peasant knew that in the fight his fellow peasants would not betray him and that they would all stand together as one man, to the last". The Raij Mel was sentiment of unity and source of strength in the peasant fight against the British rule. Regarding the leadership of the Raij Mel Amalendu Guha is of the opinion that, "the widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating landowners, made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society. The non-cultivating land owners - Brahmins, Mahantas, Dolois, the traditional rural elite-apparently took the initiative and a leading role. But it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural poor, including the artisans, who actually lent it a militant character. One of the militant artisans, Pusparam kanhar, is still remembered, inter alia by the bell-metal workers of Sarukheti mauza to have undergone a term of imprisonment". The striking feature of the agrarian uprisings in Assam, as Manorama Sharma has rightly pointed out that, "while other parts of our country witnessed mass-struggles particularly against the grass-root dominant classes like money-lenders, Zaminders. In Assam peasant unrest was peasant vs state".

One of the distinguishing feature of the agrarian unrest was that it was throughout marked by a rare combination of unity among the Hindus and Muslims. The scores of petitions, which were sent by the Raij mels, contained the signatures of both the Hindus and the Muslims. For instance, it contained the names of Muslims leaders like Babu Muharam, Md. Laghan Gaonburha, Alishek, Abdul Ali, Alisha Hajji and many oth-

131 ibid., p.95.
133 Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op. cit., p.54.
ers. Whereas, the others Hindu leaders were Kon Gossain of Rangia, Babu Kaibatra of Phulaguri, Narasingh Lalung, Pit Singh konwar, Puspa Kohar and others. As a matter of fact, the unrest was as much the hard work of the Muslims as the Hindus. In fact, the rural sector of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam participated in the agrarian revolts irrespective of their caste, community and creed. Neither caste distinctions nor communal differences obstructed the march of the events. The exploited masses of the peasantry fought unitedly against the exploiters.

Of course, the period between 1830-1900 witnessed various phases of peasant outburst throughout India. A declared aim of the peasants was to drive out the British even through armed struggle. The Wahabi and Faraizi movement (1830-1870) in Bengal, had thus a target to fight against the local Zaminders and indigo planters who were supposed to be agents of the British rulers. The Santhal uprising of 1855-56 was too, a part of tribal and agrarian unrest. The Mohplah revolt of Malabar in 1871-96 and Munda uprising led by Birsha Bhagawan of 1895-1900 had the same programmes of action. It is a matter of fact that these spontaneous peasant uprisings in different parts of India originated to protest the exploitative economic policy introduced by the British Government.

Thus, we have seen that issues related to the peasantry became some of the most persistent questions raised in the entire history of the British rule Assam. But, towards the later part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the nature of the peasant movement had a new dimension in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the next chapter, we shall see the organisations of peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley in which the Ryot Sabha emerged.

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137 The information on the Peasant Uprisings has been collected from Narahari Kabiraj, A peasant Uprising in Bengal 1783, New Delhi; A.R. Desai(ed), Peasant Struggles in India, Bombay, 1979; D.N. Dhanagare, Peasant Movements in India 1920-50, New Delhi, 1983.