CHAPTER I

LAND SYSTEMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF PEASANTRY

In peasant economy, land is looked upon not only as a physical factor of production, but principally as a societal factor being an inseparable part of the peasant community living and working on it, to whom its use is a way of life. The functionality of land is determined by the particular trait of a group of people working under the constraints imposed by the socio-legal-institutional complex. But as the general economy develops, economic consideration of land as a marketable capital input associated with the problem of demand and supply, becomes prominent. Under the stress and strain of economic principle, the actual users of land very often do not own or cannot acquire land. So a land system to regulate the economic use of land for the prosperity of the society is necessary.

It is not incorrect to say that the socio-economic structure of peasantry in Assam is basically built on the land tenure system. The structure of the agricultural society in Assam as a whole approximates to a pyramid as 57.04 per cent of the total operational holdings belong to the category of sub-marginal and marginal holdings (under 1 hectare); 33.38 per cent
to small holdings (1.00 to 3.00 hectares); 4.41 per cent to moderately small-sized holdings (3.01 to 4.00 hectares); 2.21 per cent to medium-sized holdings (4.01 to 5.00 hectares); 2.56 per cent to moderately large-sized holdings (5.01 to 10.00 hectares); and only 0.40 per cent to large-sized holdings (above 10.00 hectares)\(^1\). In the present agrarian conditions of Assam, 4-hectare size is taken as the marginal level below which a peasant family lives in a sub-marginal or subsistence condition\(^2\).

A land holding of over 4-hectare size, considered as an economic holding, constitutes only 5 per cent of the total operational land holdings of the state. The remaining 95 per cent belong to a category of peasants which has failed to fully share the benefits of package programmes and technification.

10. 1 LAND TENURE SYSTEMS

Before the advent of the British in Assam in 1826, the Brahmaputra valley except Goalpara was under the rule of the Ahom kings (who, originally belonged to the Tai clan of Burma, came to Assam in 1228 A.D. for the first time and founded their kingdom here). The present land system did not exist during their reign. They introduced a system known as 'Khal' according to which the

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\(^1\) World Agricultural Census, 1970-71, Assam, p. 26
whole population was divided into a number of Khels, each comprising 1,000 to 5,000 adult persons. Each Khel was divided into 'Gots', each 'Got' consisting of four persons called 'Paiks' or 'Raiyats'. One 'Paik' of each 'Got' had to render service to the king or to the officers, to whom he was attached for three months in the year, while the other three 'Paiks' also had to do so in their turns. Each 'Paik' was granted two 'Puras' (1.21 hectares) of rice land free of rent as a reward for his services. 'Paiks' were also given land for homesteads for which they had to pay a poll tax (house or hearth tax) of about one rupee per annum.\(^3\)

The Ahom kings patronised the nobles, priests and officers of the state by gifts of land, free of rent. Some of the kings made free grants to temples or other religious institutions. In such gifts and grants, the kings alienated the proprietary rights in favour of the grantees. These lands were cultivated by the 'Paiks' attached to them.

Before the British occupied the Goalpara district, it was under the Mughal rule. The Mughal Emperors left the administration with the Chieftains who paid a nominal tribute to them. The British rulers treated the lands under occupation of the Chieftains, for all practical purposes, as permanently settled to them. The Chieftains were subsequently titled as 'Zamindars', the proprietors as defined in the Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886.

\(^3\) Goswami, P.C., op.cit., pp. 280-81.
During the pre-British period all rights on land in Cachar district were vested with the kings, but the occupants enjoyed the heritable and transferable rights on their lands. Apart from the indigenous people, the Bengali settlers were allowed to hold land under the 'Mirasdari' system, according to which lands were held jointly by all the members of a 'Khel' for discharging certain customary services including the supply of labour for the king's work and of food and other necessaries during his journeys and also for payment of revenue to the kings jointly. The Karimganj subdivision of this district was under the Mughal Emperors prior to the British acquisition. Here also the land system was similar to that in Goalpara district.

In the two hills districts of the present Assam, there was no private ownership of land except in the plain areas of K.A. All the lands of a village were collectively owned by the tribal community of that village.

Some of the features of the existing land tenure in Assam are legacies of the pre-British and British period. The land tenure system was not uniform all over the state. For this purpose, the state could be divided into four distinct tracts with different land tenure systems: (1) Independent single tenure which is described as the Baiyatwari system in the Temporarily Settled Districts of Assam. (2) Landlord tenure which is called Zamindari system in the Permanently Settled Area of Goalpara district.

4 World Agricultural Census, loc. cit.
(5) Land/tenure in the Permanently Settled Area of Cachar district; and (4) Land without any legal ownership in the two hills districts.

After the annexation of the province by the British in 1826, the British administration gradually introduced the present land settlement and land revenue systems into the Assam plains. The Haliyatwarl system was preferred to the Zamindari as the authorities had become aware of the defects of the latter through their experiences in other parts of India.

At the beginning of the British rule in Assam, Goalpara and Sylhet districts formed part of the Bengal Presidency. When the permanent settlement was introduced in Bengal, these two districts also came under that system. The permanent settlement, therefore, became prevalent in Goalpara district and the Karimganj subdivision (which was transferred from Sylhet to Cachar district during the partition of Indian Subcontinent into Indian Union and Pakistan).

**Land Tenure System in the Plains Districts**

Land tenure is the body of rules which govern the ownership of land and revenue thereof. It covers the economic, legal, political and social customs of a society. Thus the land tenure system involves the whole gamut of relationship between man and land.
From the agricultural point of view, the system of land tenure falls broadly into two categories, viz. occupying ownership and tenancy. Occupying ownership is the system of landholding where the peasant or the occupier himself is the sole owner of the land he cultivates. Tenancy differs from occupying ownership, because there is both a legal and an economic separation of land-ownership from the land operation. Tenancy system concerns with the legal contract by which the owner of the land lets it out for use by another person. There are many forms of tenancy system depending upon the form of rent payment and the degree of control exercised by the landlord and owner of the land. Rent is paid in money, in kind or in service. Most of the agricultural land in Assam falls under one or the other system of land tenure.

Depending upon the rights and privileges enjoyed by the various types of land holders, the system of land tenure in the plains of Assam as existing at the eve of Independence, could be classified into two broad heads, viz. Zamindari and Raiyatwari. Under the Zamindari system, settlement of land was held permanently by the holders and the land revenue was fixed in perpetuity. The La-Khiraj Estates, Fee-Simple Estates, and Misf-Khiraj land may also be regarded as lands coming under this system of tenure. Under the Raiyatwari system, land is held in simple independent holdings on periodic basis where land holders are directly

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Fee Simple estates were originally revenue free in order to encourage tea plantation, but in 1948 such lands were made assessable under the Assam Assessment of Revenue Free Waste Land Grant Act, 1948.
responsible to the state for payment of revenue.

Under the Zamindari system, the holders of the land were
the intermediaries between the state and the actual cultivators
for collection of land revenue. Under the Raiyatwari system, the
land holders were at liberty to sub-let their land under their
terms and conditions and enjoyed the permanent right of tenancy
so long as they paid the land revenue. As such, elements of the
Zamindari system did appear in this system also and tenancy
cultivation has also been common in the Raiyatwari system.

The British administration in Assam accepted the theory
of absolute state ownership of land and made an arrangement in
1832 to introduce a land assessment system in the plains. Accor ding
to this system land was settled annually and the tax collected
through the agency of commission agents called 'Choudhury', 'Mausa
dar', and 'Kakati'. The lands were divided into four main classes,
 viz. (1) 'Basti'(homestead), (2) 'Rupit'(land on which transplanted
paddy was grown), (3) 'Bao Tali' (low-lying land growing spring
rice and 'Bao' rice), (4) 'Faringati' (high land). The rates
assessed on these four classes of land were different and differed
from district to district. The Settlement Rules of 1870 were the
first public declaration on the part of the Government regarding
the rights on land possessed by the cultivators. These rules
recognized a permanent, heritable and transferable right on land
attached to all persons who took periodic leases from the
Government; but the rules conferred no such rights in the case of
those who took out only annual leases for shifting or fluctuating
cultivation.

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 is the
general revenue law of Assam and it is still in force. This
Regulation granted legal sanction to the existing settlement
rules issued in 1870. All owners of land were divided into three
classes, viz. (1) Proprietors including the owners of revenue
free estates, fee-simple estates and permanently settled estates;
(2) Land-holders including the settlement holders of land held
directly from the Government under leases for a period exceeding
ten years or who had held land for ten years continuously before
the regulation came into force, and (3) Settlement holders other
than land holders including persons holding land directly from the
Government under annual leases, the terms of which is less than
ten years. Periodic lease is ordinarily issued when the land has
been taken up for dwelling houses or for permanent cultivation.
Such lease is valid from one Land Settlement Operation to the
next one. On the other hand, an annual lease is granted for a
year only, and it confers no right of inheritance, transfer and
sub-letting. Later on, the rights and obligations of the tenants
were governed by three Tenancy Acts, viz. the Goalpara Tenancy Act,
1929, applicable in the permanently settled areas of Goalpara dis-
trict; the Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936, applicable in the present

\[\text{World Agricultural Census, op.cit., p. 28.}\]
administrative subdivision of Karimganj; and the Assam (Temporarily Settled Districts) Tenancy Act, 1935, applicable throughout the temporarily settled areas of 8 plain districts.

All these three Acts were amended in 1943. The Goalpara Tenancy Amendment Act improved the position of the Under Raiyats and fixed the maximum rent payable by them. The Assam Tenancy Act was amended further in 1953 giving the tenants substantial rights.

The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951, was enacted to completely abolish the Zamindari System in permanently settled portions of the state and to bring the tenants directly under the Government. Upto November, 1976, all the proprietary rights and the rights of the tenure holders excepting a few minor tenures, have been acquired covering an area of 6.77 lakh hectares. On account of the abolition of these feudal interests in the state, the system of land holdings in the erstwhile permanently settled areas is beginning to approximate the character of the system in the rest of the state. The state has now come directly in contact with the persons holding the land.

By another Act entitled 'The Assam State Acquisition of Lands belonging to Religious and Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959', an area of 0.44 lakh hectares belonging to 164 institutions have been acquired so far and the tenants have come directly under the Government. The lands are settled with the erstwhile tenants under these institutions with the status of a
land holder as in the temporarily settled areas.7

Land Tenure System in the Hill Areas

The two hills districts of Assam, being inhabited by tribals, have been all along exempted from the application of the various rules and regulations, pertaining to the Land Revenue Administration, except the portions of K.A. (formerly known as Mikir Hills) which were transferred from the districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar at the time of its formation in 1951.

The K.A. District Council enacted the Mikir Hills Land Revenue Act, 1953, adopting the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886, and this Act was made effective from 1953 only in the transferred areas. Thus the system of land settlement in these areas, at present, is more or less similar to that in other districts of the state. But the other areas of these two hills districts have neither been cadastrally surveyed, nor a system of land revenue assessment introduced. Following the tribal tradition, all lands belong to the District Council and these are distributed amongst the individual holders through the village Headman for the purpose of cultivation. The holders have to pay only a house tax at flat rate irrespective of the size of

7 Chief Minister's Secretariat, Janata Bhawan, Guwahati, 'Last One First', Vol. I, No. 15, Special Issue, November, 19, 1976.
the holding and land operation. The resident families in a village possess land according to the capability of cultivation but without right of permanent, inheritable and transferable possession. So far as the cultivated land is concerned, normally after completion of a jhuming cycle, the land possessed by the families automatically becomes 'Khas' land (land under nobody's possession), and the power of subsequent disposal is vested with the village Headman.

**Raiyatwari System and its Impact on Structural Changes in Peasantry**

From the foregoing discussion, it is seen that in most of the areas in Assam, Raiyatwari system of land tenure has been prevailing since quite sometime past. The main advantages of this system are that (i) there is no sub-infeudation and the cultivator is in direct relation with the Government, (ii) there are no parasitic intermediaries, (iii) the actual tillers of the soil cannot be ejected easily and, therefore, they feel secure in their own land so long as they pay the land revenue to the Government. Therefore, there seems to be a special and powerful incentive to preserve and develop an asset which is under the complete control of the occupier and which may be devoted to the welfare of his family and heirs. But certain defects of this system are observed, such as, (i) the land in these areas has been passing
very often into the hands of non-agriculturists and rich agricul-
turists, the number of landless labourers increasing, and the
size of holdings decreasing; (ii) it is defective in the method
of assessment of land revenue which leaves too much to the
Settlement Officer, 'Kamano' (a junior Revenue Officer) and
'Mandal' (Surveyor), whose estimates are based on mere guess
work; (iii) the individual assessment has destroyed the collect-
and
ive basis of village life; (iv) the money lenders become very
prominent in the Rabiwtari areas with their vested financial
support to the small land holders. As a result, a new class of
landlord begins to rise in these areas dispossessing the actual
tillers of the soil of their proprietorship.

The tenant who cultivates land on lease which is
generally annual, is not sure how long the land would remain in
his possession as the landlord has the power to resume that land
after the end of the year. Thus the tenant has no permanent inter-
est in land. In many cases, land is leased out on the share-
cropping basis. If the tenant saves improved seeds or puts in
good manure or extra labour to improve the land, half of the
increased production so obtained at his cost goes to the landlord.
The tenant does not get a proper return on his labour and enter-
prise. The absentee landlord cares only for his annual rent and
takes no interest in the improvement of his land or the intro-
duction of improved methods of cultivation.

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Both the legal forms of land ownership introduced by the British — Zamindari and Raiyatwari — are found to be defective for agricultural development and removal of socio-economic injustice. Marx correctly characterised the Zamindari system as a caricature of English land-lordism and the Raiyatwari system as a caricature of French peasant-proprietorship. After Independence, the national policy was adopted to abolish the Zamindari system but to retain the Raiyatwari system. The ideology of the Indian Democratic Government is to create a class of small peasant proprietors in the field of agriculture which is possible only through the Raiyatwari system of land tenure. In theory, the Raiyatwari system admits only two interests of land — the Government and the owner-cultivators — and only one payment, namely, the revenue. But in practice, it is seen that it has in itself a built-in-device which is to make it, with the passage of time, no different from the three-tiered Zamindari system in all its essentials. Ownership implies the freedom to sell, mortgage, lease or transfer of property. As the vicissitudes of under-developed agriculture together with antiproducive peasant mode of production drove the peasantry into debt, a tendency arose even in Raiyatwari areas among owner-cultivators to alienate and sell their lands. It should also be noted that land has become a good asset to hold as a source of rental incomes and, therefore,

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many buyers of land have emerged. Thus increasingly larger areas have been passing under open tenancy, while an unknown, though substantial proportion of area has been increasingly worked under share-cropping, in essence no different from tenancy.

In rural Assam—the absentee landowners, the small peasants (owner—cultivators and the tenants), and the agricultural labourers. As such the major mechanism for increasing agricultural productivity, i.e., investment becomes weak; for while the Government remains passive, the absentee owners, to whom the surplus accrue, typically prefer consumption to investment and fritter these surpluses away into other channels. The tenant-cultivators do not have adequate surpluses and hence cannot invest.

Insecurity of tenure, fear of eviction and uncertainty which accompany tenant-cultivation, become added reasons for the cultivators to live from hand to mouth, exploit the land unduly and avoid permanent improvement through investment in land. Since technification is a function of capital investment, the near absence of technification in Assam's agriculture, is to be accounted for, among other things, sluggishness of investment which, in turn, is explained by the exigencies of the tenurial system. In terms of productivity per hectare, the position of Assam lies very close to the bottom of the productivity ladder among the

Khuaro, A.M., 1975, Economics of Land Reform and Farm Size in India, Macmillan India, pp. 4-5.
In spite of the Government's various efforts through legislation and administrative power to create a single class of self-operating peasants in the agricultural sector by abolishing land lordism on the one hand, and, the tenancy and subtenancy on the other hand, a three-tier structure characterises the land tenure organisation in the rural areas of the state comprising owner-cultivators, tenant-cultivators (with varying degrees of security, but often with none) and owner-cum-tenant cultivators. On the basis of the tenure status, the World Agricultural Census, 1970-71, Assam, classified the total number of operational holdings in Assam into three groups which had direct relationship with the three-tier structure stated above, viz. (1) owned and self-operated, (2) wholly rented, and (3) partly owned and partly rented.

Table 10.1 gives the percentages of owned land and rented land in different districts (rented land includes Government and private land occupied without settlement or contract). The percentage of owned land in the hills districts has been shown to be the highest. This is because of the fact that community land occupied for shifting cultivation in the hills districts was treated as owned land. There is no structural problem of land tenure in the two hills districts. An analysis of the table 10.1 shows that the districts with lesser pressure of population have a higher
Table 10.1

PROPORTION OF OWNED AND RENTED LAND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total No. of Holding</th>
<th>Total Area Operated ('000 ha.)</th>
<th>Percentage of Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2,89,535</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>88.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3,87,413</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>84.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3,50,550</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>73.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>2,37,060</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>91.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>2,21,655</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>92.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>1,12,732</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>65.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>1,40,088</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>80.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashar</td>
<td>1,81,435</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>87.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.A.</td>
<td>35,266</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>92.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.C.Hills</td>
<td>8,633</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>99.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Assam</td>
<td>19,64,376</td>
<td>2,883</td>
<td>84.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Proportions of tenant cultivators with rented land. This apparent paradox is due to the fact that in those districts, some of the Government lands occupied without settlement have been shown as rented land.

As much as 75.90 per cent of the total operational holdings in Assam are entirely on owned land, 15.57 per cent rented land, and 8.53 per cent partly owned and partly rented land. These cover 71.39, 10.68 and 17.93 per cent respectively.
of the total operational holdings. It may be pointed out here that with as high as 71 per cent of the cultivated area being owned, there should be no reason why the owner-cultivators should be lacking incentive to increase production in respect of this land as any benefit from improved farming on such land must accrue to them. But in reality it is found that the productivity per unit area in major parts of the state is very low compared to other states of India, and, the method of cultivation is still traditional.

The proportions of holdings entirely owned are higher in the lower size classes and maintain a decreasing trend with the increase in the holding sizes, with the exception of the highest size class which belongs mostly to tea plantation. The same trend is observed in respect of the proportion of area. This indicates that the number of small-sized owner-operated holdings is greater than that of small-sized rented and partly owned and partly rented holdings, whereas the number of medium and big-sized owner-operated holdings is smaller than that of medium or big-sized rented, and partly owned and partly rented holdings. It may be, therefore, inferred that Assam is a land of small peasants, most of them having small, uneconomic holdings, and lack the capacity to extend the sizes of their operational holdings by taking other's lands on lease or rent. There is, of course, spatial variation of this situation.
The proportion of holding having entirely owned land is lowest in the district of Lakhimpur and is only 60.73 per cent, covering an area of 50.95 per cent of the total operated land (Fig. 10.2). Among the plains districts, the proportion of owned and self-operated holdings was highest in the district of Nowgong followed by Sibsagar. There was practically no rented land in N.C.Hills, while the position of K.A. was more or less the same as that of Nowgong and Sibsagar. So far as the holdings having only rented land are concerned, it was Darrang where the number of such holdings was the highest. But the percentage of area covered was highest in Lakhimpur followed by Darrang. As regards the mixed type of holdings, Goalpara and Lakhimpur had higher percentages.

In the case of mixed holdings, the overall percentage of owned land was 72.40 as against 27.60 per cent of rented land. The proportion of rented land was lowest in Dibrugarh, whereas Lakhimpur occupied the highest position with more than 40 per cent of the operated area of such holdings as rented land.

Extent of Rented Land and Terms of Lease

The land which is not owned by its tiller can be divided into two categories, viz. land of private owners and Government land occupied without settlement. The former accounted for 5.47 per cent and the latter 10.16 per cent of the total operated land. Cachar got the highest proportion of land (11.54 per cent) rented
from private owners, followed by Darrang (8.24 per cent) and Kamrup (8.05 per cent). The proportion of rented land was insignificant in the other districts except Sibsagar (4.68 per cent). The area of the Government land occupied without settlement was highest in Darrang, but in terms of proportion to the total operated land, Lakhimpur scored the highest value (32.94 per cent) followed by Dibrugarh (18.39 per cent) and Darrang (18.34 per cent). Among the plains districts, it was Sibsagar where the extent of Government land occupied was found to be minimum (only 2.78 per cent).

The mode of payment of rent, may be classified into four categories, viz. (1) a fixed amount of money, (2) a fixed quantity of produce, (3) a share of crop, and (4) other terms including unauthorised occupation. The spatial variation in the rented area under different terms of rent is given in table 10.2.

The table reveals that the cash payment term was the predominant type of renting land in Assam which accounted for 40 per cent of the total rented land. The fixed produce payment in kind and share cropping, each accounted for about 16 per cent. The system of fixed cash payment was relatively more important in the districts with relatively less pressure of population except Cachar. On the other hand, fixed produce payment was significant in Kamrup and Goalpara where politico-economic consciousness had spread to rural areas since quite sometime back. The proportion of rented land taken on share cropping system was relatively high.
### Table 10.2

**SPATIAL VARIATION IN RENTED AREA UNDER DIFFERENT TERMS OF RENT**

(Areas in hectares, bracketed figures represent percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Fixed Money</th>
<th>Fixed Produce</th>
<th>Share of Crop</th>
<th>Other terms including Occupation of others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>1,386 (8.90)</td>
<td>4,245 (27.26)</td>
<td>6,445 (41.38)</td>
<td>3,498 (22.46)</td>
<td>15,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>12,080 (28.38)</td>
<td>13,390 (31.45)</td>
<td>8,550 (19.62)</td>
<td>8,750 (20.55)</td>
<td>42,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>16,223 (47.29)</td>
<td>710 (2.07)</td>
<td>797 (2.32)</td>
<td>16,877 (48.32)</td>
<td>34,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mangal</td>
<td>499 (9.09)</td>
<td>1,062 (19.34)</td>
<td>1,770 (32.24)</td>
<td>2,159 (39.33)</td>
<td>5,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>9,785 (51.64)</td>
<td>2,256 (11.91)</td>
<td>2,492 (13.15)</td>
<td>4,416 (23.30)</td>
<td>18,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>1,407 (63.12)</td>
<td>287 (12.88)</td>
<td>12 (0.54)</td>
<td>523 (23.46)</td>
<td>2,229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>1,449 (37.25)</td>
<td>160 (4.11)</td>
<td>210 (5.40)</td>
<td>2,071 (53.24)</td>
<td>3,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>18,465 (60.00)</td>
<td>2,166 (7.04)</td>
<td>5,171 (16.80)</td>
<td>4,974 (16.16)</td>
<td>30,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.C. Hills</td>
<td>1,937 (51.35)</td>
<td>513 (13.60)</td>
<td>999 (26.48)</td>
<td>323 (8.57)</td>
<td>3,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>63,257 (40.00)</strong></td>
<td><strong>24,790 (15.73)</strong></td>
<td><strong>26,246 (16.66)</strong></td>
<td><strong>43,291 (27.47)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,57,584</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in Nowgong and Goalpara both having large proportions of immigrant population. The proportion of rented land taken on other terms including forcible occupation of both Government and private land was relatively high in Dibrugarh, Darrang and Nowgong, the former two districts having large areas of fallow lands around the tea gardens, and the last one having large areas of low-lying vacant land of the Government.

10.2 SIZE OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING

The agricultural landscape of Assam is divided into innumerable operational holdings consisting of a mosaic of fields of different shapes and sizes surrounding the settlement.

The size of a standard operational holding is fixed by socio-economic conditions in accordance with the type of farming practised. In reality, it is found that in different countries, the standard size varies enormously in accordance with the pressure of cultivators on the cultivated area and the law of inheritance. In Assam, a definite standard size of farm cannot be maintained, because of the increasing pressure of agricultural population on arable land and the working of the law of inheritance. These two factors are responsible for the splitting of large-sized holdings into small, often widely scattered pieces of land which fail to conform to any reasonable economic standard.

Singh, J., op.cit. p. 171,
Subdivision and fragmentation of land occur as each generation enters into its patrimony.

In Assam, the average size of an operational holding is only 1.47 hectares which is much less than the all-India average of 2.71 hectares. The number of operational holdings and the areas covered by them include the large-sized operational holdings of about 752 tea gardens of Assam also. Therefore, the average size of operational holdings in the peasant sector of agriculture would be still smaller than 1.47 hectares. Table 10.3 shows the distribution of operational holdings in Assam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of operational holding</th>
<th>Total area operated (in hect.)</th>
<th>Average size of holdings (in hect.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>289,535</td>
<td>416,018</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>387,413</td>
<td>526,709</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>350,550</td>
<td>416,329</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>112,732</td>
<td>190,271</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>237,060</td>
<td>309,810</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>221,655</td>
<td>404,654</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>140,088</td>
<td>272,928</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>181,435</td>
<td>266,678</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.A.</td>
<td>35,266</td>
<td>63,664</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.-O Hills</td>
<td>8,633</td>
<td>13,507</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>12,64,376</td>
<td>28,82,573</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The higher average size of holding in Dibrugarh and Sibsagar was mainly due to the existence of a large number of big-sized holdings of the tea gardens. In the districts of Cachar and Darrang, where there are also a large number of tea gardens, the average size of holding is brought down by the existence of innumerable tiny-sized holdings. Table 10.3 presents a dismal picture of average size of holding everywhere within the state. The alarmingly small size of holding accounts for the general poverty of the peasants. The corollary to the problem of small size of holding is the concentration of agricultural land in the hands of a minority of landowners. That there exist wide disparities in the distribution of the operational areas under different size-classes of holdings in Assam is shown in table 10.4.

Table 10.4

CATEGORY OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING IN ASSAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sizes in hectares</th>
<th>% of total operational holding</th>
<th>% of total operational area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 1</td>
<td>57.04</td>
<td>17.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2</td>
<td>23.75</td>
<td>22.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>15.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>10.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 5</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>6.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 10</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>15.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All 100.00 100.00

(Source - World Agricultural Census, ibid, pp. 44-45)
For Assam as a whole, 80.79 per cent of the bottom holdings operating up to 2 hectares each contains only 40.62 per cent of the total cultivated area. At the other extreme, an insignificant 0.40 per cent of the holdings (tilling above 10 hectares) uses 15.06 per cent of the total operated area. The Lorenz Curve in Fig. 10.3 brings out the disparities in the land distribution in Assam. The land concentration ratio turns out to be 0.53, indicating a very high degree of concentration of operational holdings.

In 1948-49, the concentration ratio in Assam was found to be only 0.37. Because of the Raiyatwari system of tenancy prevailing in most parts of the Assam plains and very little competition for land in the last century, concentration of land in a few hands did not develop in Assam. The increase of the concentration ratio from 0.37 in 1948-49 to 0.53 in 1970-71,

The concentration ratio is derived with the help of the formula used by Iyenger, R. in his study on 'On a Problem of Estimating Increase in Consumer Demand', Sankhya, Vol. 22, (B), 1960. The formula is expressed as

Concentration ratio,

\[ Z = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{m} (P_{i} - P_{i-1}) (q_{i} + q_{i-1}) \]

where \( P_{i} \) is the proportion of land holding of size not more than \( i' \) (upper limit of the size class) and \( q_{i} \) is the proportion of area of land holding not more than \( i' \) \( (i = 1, 2, \ldots, n) \). The concentration ratio is obtained by processing the data with the help of CRIT Computer Centre, Guwahati University.

Goswami, P.C., op.cit., pp. 50-51.
indicates gradual concentration of lands in the hands of a few landowning families contrary to all kinds of measure taken by the Government for land distribution among the landless and small peasants. After the abolition of Zamindari system in Goalpara and Cachar and other permanent settlements in other districts, implementation of the Land Ceiling Act and various other Land Reform Acts, the increase in the concentration of land is paradoxical. It is interesting to find that most of the land (about 45 per cent) is concentrated within the range of the size-classes from 2 to 10 hectares, i.e. distinctly below the ceiling level fixed by the Land Ceiling Act as amended in 1972 which was 10 hectares against 20 hectares in 1956. There is a negligible percentage of operational holding (only 0.40) above the size of 10 hectares. Another reason for high concentration is that, as a result of tenancy reform measures, most of the landlords have brought their lands (which were formerly under the occupation of their tenants) into their direct control and have started self-operation of cultivation with the help of hired labourers.

The high concentration ratio of Assam should not, therefore, be compared with the relatively lower concentration ratio of the state like Haryana, where the higher percentage of operational area is concentrated in the hands of a few cultivating households possessing higher sizes of land holdings (Table 10.5).

Thus for Haryana, the bottom 27.6 per cent households operating up to 2 hectare size till only 7.6 per cent of the total
Table 10.5
CATEGORY OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING IN HARYANA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sizes in hectares</th>
<th>% of total cultivating households</th>
<th>% of total cultivated area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - 4</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - 8</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 12</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 12</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source - Bhalla, G.S., 1972).

area, while in Assam, 80.79 per cent operational holdings operating until 2 hectare size till 40.62 per cent of the total area.

It is, therefore, found that the concentration ratios compared between two regions might be often misleading, if the actual distribution of land holdings and respective areas in different size classes are not analysed. Even in Haryana, an agriculturally advanced state of India, it is stated by Bhalla that 56.6 per cent of the cultivating households possessing up to 4-hectare size of holding, live either in actual bankruptcy or on the verge of it.\(^{15}\) So the condition of 98.82 per cent of the cultivating households having less than 4-hectare size of land

\(^{15}\) Bhalla, G.S., 1972, *Changing Agrarian Structure in India*, Meerut Prakashan, Meerut, p. 27.

He obtained the Gini’s Concentration Ratio of land holding to be 0.40 for Haryana.
holding in an agriculturally most backward state of Assam may be abysmally dismal and can only be imagined. The concentration of operational lands in Assam varies from district to district. Table 10.6 shows the distribution of concentration ratio of different districts in Assam derived with the help of BCL Computer Centre, Gauhati University, using the Iyengar’s Method. The spatial pattern is revealed in Fig. 10.4.

Table 10.6

DISTRICTWISE VARIATION OF CONCENTRATION OF LAND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Concentration Ratio</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Concentration Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>K.A.</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhsagar</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>N.C.Hills</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis in the light of the table 10.6 shows that concentration ratio is higher in those districts in the plains where the average size of holding is also higher (see also Table 10.3).

For administrative purposes in Assam, land holdings are classified as follows: (1) sub-marginal holdings, the size of each of them being less than 0.5 hectare (the peasants possessing such a tiny plot of land are classed along with the landless
peasants); (ii) Marginal holdings, the size of each being between 0.5 and 1 hectare; (iii) Small holdings, the size of each being between 1 and 2 hectares; (iv) Medium and big holdings, the size of each being 2 hectares or more. According to this classification, 33.19 per cent of the total holdings in Assam is sub-marginal covering only 5.88 per cent of the total operational area. Cachar has the highest proportion of such holdings. Among the plains districts, Lakhimpur records the lowest percentage of sub-marginal holdings. Such holdings are comparatively small in number in the two hills districts.

Marginal holdings constitute 23.85 per cent of the total holdings of the state. The proportion of this type of holdings ranges from 22.09 per cent in N.C. Hills to 25.21 per cent in Darrang. As regards small holdings, Lakhimpur has the highest percentage of 28.13 and Cachar records the lowest among the plains districts. The two hills districts have got a large proportion of holdings in this size-class.

The above classification of land holdings is a gross under-estimation of the most important consideration of economic viability or non-viability of farm size. Khusro has fixed 2-hectare size as the floor level from the economic point of view. Such a small-sized holding suffers from the problems of size-disability, tenurial uncertainty and exploitation as it cannot

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16 World Agricultural Census, op.cit., p. 46.
17 Khusro, A.M., op.cit., p. 73.
give the peasants opportunities for full utilisation of the available human and animal labour.

Bhalla has classified the cultivating households in Haryana into the following five categories according to the size of their net operational holdings: (i) Sub-marginal peasant households, each having a holding size of less than 2 hectares; (ii) Marginal or small peasant households, each having a holding size between 2 and 4 hectares; (iii) Intermediate peasant households with holding size between 4 and 8 hectares; (iv) Big peasant households with holding size between 8 and 12 hectares; and (v) Very big peasant households with holding size of more than 12 hectares.\[18\]

By the standard of the holding size fixed by Bhalla for classification of peasant households in Haryana, 80.82 per cent of the total operational holdings in Assam are sub-marginal, 14.04 per cent marginal, 4.79 per cent medium and only 0.35 per cent big. It may be mentioned here that about 16 per cent of the total rural households in Assam are landless.\[19\] It is, therefore, found that as large as 81 per cent of the total operational holdings having 43 per cent of the total operational area lie below the floor level of economic holding. The very small peasants belonging to this category have to live in abject poverty and

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\[18\] Bhalla, O.S., op. cit., p. 18.

\[19\] Report of the Assam Agricultural Commission, op. cit., p. 27.
perpetual debt. On the other hand, about 60 per cent of the total area of operational holdings are concentrated in only 20 per cent of the total holdings. The marginal and sub-marginal peasants combined together possess 95 per cent of the total operational holdings covering 71 per cent of the total operational area.

That the agricultural land in Assam is highly concentrated in the hands of a minority of land owners and distributed in microscopic sizes of operational holdings, and also that there is a significant number of landless rural households, have been confirmed officially by a micro-level study on rural development and strategy for action with regard to four 'Gaon Panchayats' (a number of villages under a Village Council) of the state — Nischintapur (Cachar district), Borpujia (Nowgong), Pub Tamulpur (Kamrup), and Panidihing (Sibsagar)20. The Nischintapur report reveals that 14 per cent of the households own 56 per cent of the cultivable land, while 36 per cent own no land. The per capita availability of cultivated land is 0.08 hectare. The sub-marginal peasants with land holding size of less than 1 hectare represent 50 per cent of the total families. Over 80 per cent of the population is below the poverty line with per capita monthly consumption expenditure below rupees 40 only.

The report on Borpujia also indicated a serious imbalance in the size and ownership structure of land holding. Sixty seven

per cent of the cultivated land is held by only 29 per cent of the households, while 14.5 per cent of the households are landless. The per capita availability of operational land is only 0.12 hectares. Eighty three per cent of the total population of the area lie below the poverty line.

Problems relating to Panidihing and Pub Temulpur Panchayat areas are also not much different from those of the above mentioned areas. These four sample reports are quite representative of the rural areas of the whole state. It is, therefore, proved that Assam is a land of small peasants per excellence. Any kind of agricultural problems in Assam is thus the problems of these small peasants with their 'toy' farms. Green Revolution through technological break-through in peasant agriculture of Assam cannot be expected to be ushered in by such small peasantry. So the technocratic strategy advocated by Rao is not capable of solving the agricultural problem in Assam without removing the prevailing size-tenurial structure of the peasantry21.


According to Rao, 'the biggest prospects for increasing output and generating employment in the next two to three decades (with wider application of known technology such as HYV seeds and fertilizers) and for improving the distribution of income — horizontally as well as vertically — lies in public investment in irrigation and the exploitation of ground water'.
10.5 FRAGMENTATION OF LAND HOLDING

The problem of small-sized uneconomic holdings is further complicated by the practice of fragmentation of holdings. It is a product of unfavourable man-land ratio, the laws of inheritance and succession, attitude of the people born out of a traditional peasant society, and the unrestricted transfer of land. If a father of four sons dies, leaving four isolated plots each of which is of one hectare size, they do not partake one plot per head, but one-fourth of each plot so that a plot is divided equally into four fragments leading to the creation of 16 separated plots in total, each of which is of 0.25 hectare size. This happens specially when lands are of different qualities and situated in different localities. If one or two of the brothers are employed in some non-agricultural occupations, even then they get their shares of paternal land. Generally, such non-cultivating brothers do not forego their shares. From generation to generation, such a process of irrational fragmentation of holdings has been going on. Consequently, operational holdings of a peasant do not consist of a single compact block of land, but a number of small parcels scattered over different parts of the village, often of a very irregular shape. Some of them may lie outside the village of the peasant.
In Assam, the average holding contains 3.3 to 4.5 plots. Table 10.7 gives the extent of fragmentation in five districts for which only, data are available.

Table 10.7

EXTENT OF FRAGMENTATION OF HOLDING, 1948-49.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Percentage of holding with 4 or more fragments</th>
<th>Percentage of fragmentation with size Less than 0.25 hect.</th>
<th>Less than 0.65 hect.</th>
<th>Less than 1.33 hect.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>90.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>92.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur &amp; Dibrugarh</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikir Hills</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source - Goswami, P.C., op. cit., p. 51)

The table 10.7 shows a serious problem of fragmentation in four plains districts. The problem is likely to be more acute in the remaining three plains districts, because of higher density of population in those districts.

The intensity of fragmentation per farm and per hectare in the Nowgong district is presented in table 10.8. Such data are not available for other districts.
### Table 10.8

**NUMBER OF FRAGMENTS OF LAND HOLDING**

**BY FARM SIZE-GROUPS, 1968-69**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size-Groups (in hectares)</th>
<th>No. of Fragments</th>
<th>Per Farm</th>
<th>Per Hectare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.01 - 1.82</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.83 - 2.43</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.44 - 3.24</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.25 - 4.45</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 4.45</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: F.M.S., Newgong district, Assam, p. 50)

The fact that the per hectare fragmentation is higher in small size-group and lower in larger size-group puts the small peasants in a more disadvantageous position, compared to big peasants.

Small size of fragmentary holdings is the primary cause for setting traditionalism in peasant farming, misallocation of human resources, low marginal productivity of labour and other inputs, an early operation of the law of diminishing return, small output, small savings and subsistence-oriented character of farm organisation.

From the foregoing analysis of the size-tenure structure of operational holdings, it becomes clear that the present agrarian structure based on landownership and operation system in Assam is not conducive to agricultural innovation for maximum and sustained growth.