CHAPTER – II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

NAME, ORIGIN AND AREA OF KAMRUP:

Assam was known by different names at different times and her geographical limits also varied from time to time. A continuous process of integration and disintegration prevailed in the region as a whole. Proagjyotishpura and Kamarupa were the geographical names given to the kingdom which subsequently came to be known as Assam.

There are various views regarding the name of the kingdom. Mythologically, the name Kamarupa is associated with Kamadeva, the God of love. He was destroyed by the fiery glance of Lord Siva. His wife Sati breathed Her last in grief as Her husband Lord Siva was not invited to the Yajna, referred to as Dakshya yajna in the relevant texts. The untimely death of the Sati made Siva grief-stricken and He wondered about the world with his wife Sati's corpse on head. This brought uncertainty to the existence of the world. And then Lord Bishnu with His chakra (Discus) mutilated the body of the Sati and it fell on the earth in fifty one different places. The ground where such piece of her body fell subsequently
became a sacred one. Lord Sīva on the other hand began penance which alarmed the other Gods. Being terrified, they sent Kamadeva to break the penance of Sīva. Kamadeva did his job successfully, but the wrath of Sīva burnt Him. Eventually Kamadeva regained His rupa or original form. The place where Kamdeva regained his rupa came to be known as Kamarupa.¹

Yuan chwang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited the kingdom of Pragjyotishpura in 643 A.D. mentions the name of Kamarupa as ka-mo-lu-po. The Allahabad Pillar Prasasti mentions Kamarupa as a frontier kingdom of India.² Dr. B. K. Kakati, on the basis of linguistic analysis, points out that Kamarupa is a non Aryan word. The chaotali word kamru or kambru stands for Goddess of cremation ground. This word also means corpse. Dr. Kakati refers that as Kamadeva regained his life from corpse, so the place, which had certain belief of regaining life out of corpse, came to be known as Kamrut. Subsequently this word was aryansed as Kamarupa,³

Taking all these together, we may come to the conclusion that Pragjyotishpura assumed a new geographical expression i.e., Kamarupa which was an aryansed form in a territory mostly populated by the non-Aryans.

¹ Gait, E A , A History of Assam, Gauhati, 1997, (7th print) P 11
² Barua, K. L., Early History of Kamarupa, Gauhati, 1963 P 7
The later Puranas and the Tantras prove that Kamarupa comprised lands, which included on the east the eastern limits of modern Assam and in the west extended to the Karatoya and at times beyond the river.\footnote{Choudhary, P. C., The History of the Civilization of the people of Assam, to the twelfth. Century A. D., Gauhati, 1966, P.44} It has been pointed out that Pragjyotisha or ancient Kamarupa was a much more larger kingdom than most of the other kingdoms mentioned in the Mahabharata.\footnote{Banja, K L., Op C it, P. 7} The Account of Huen Tsang and Yogini Tantra suggest to believe that even at a later period the kingdom of Kamarupa included not only the whole of Assam valley but also parts of northern and eastern Bengal, part of Bhutan, the Khasi and Garo Hills and the northern portion of the district of Sylhet. Therefore, it appears that the kingdom of Kamarupa was larger than most of the kingdoms mentioned in the Epics and it remained so for centuries with varying fortunes.

Like territorial limits, the administration of Kamarupa had changed hands from time to time. In the middle age the three ruling clans of Kamarupa were Koch, Kachari and Ahom. The Koches ruled over Kamarupa-Kamata which was subsequently split up. As a matter of fact, the Kamarupa kings had to bow down to Koches under whom Kamarupa had assumed a new geographical entity viz., Koch-Hajo. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Kamarupa was conquered by the Mughals.\footnote{Choudhary, P. C., The History of the Civilization of the people of Assam, to the twelfth. Century A. D., Gauhati, 1966, P.44}
Mughals called it Kamrup or Kambru or Kamrut. Their occupation of Kamrup was shortlived. The Ahoms, the eastern neighbour of the Koches came forward to take possession of Kamrup which was resulted in the Ahom Mughal rivalry. In the long-drawn out struggle (1615-1682) the Mughals were defeated and Kamrup passed under the rule of the Ahoms. But in 1826 Assam entered into a new phase of her political life and British rule was setup in this region. For administrative convenience the foreign rulers split up Assam into different districts. Kamrup was one of the districts of the Brahmaputra valley.

Thus the name Kamarupa which denotes a kingdom in the past, was confined to a district under the British rule.

The then district Kamrup was bounded on the north by Bhutan, on the east by the districts of Darrang and Nowgong, on the south by Khasi Hills and on the west by Goalpara. It lies between 25°43' and 26°53' N and 90°39' and 92°11' E and covers an area of 3858 sq. miles. The area is found to have been differed slightly at different settlements. Such difference took place due to recalculation of the area covered by the Brahmaputra and its unsurveyed churs. The total area of this district as

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6 Ibid, P. 8
stated by A. Bogle, the collector of Kamrup, was 2520800 sq. miles in 1834. Mr. Bogle himself however confessed that accuracy of this statistical information could not be relied upon. A small area about 23 sq. miles was transferred from Barpeta subdivision to Goalpara district. Therefore, in the Resettlement Report of 1905, the total area of Kamrup including the area covered by the Brahmaputra was shown 3662.92 sq. miles. As stated by W. W. Hunter, Kamrup District contained an area of 3631 sq. miles.

It may therefore be summed up that during the British rule the areas of Kamrup varied from time to time.

**POLITICAL HISTORY:**

The political history of Kamrup was replete with rise and fall of a number of ruling dynasties. From the Varman kings to the Palas, Kamarupa became the most powerful kingdom in the north east of India. The prevalence of the non-Aryan kingdoms in north east of Kamarupa is a historical fact. The tract between the west of the Kacharis on the South Bank of the Brahmaputra and the Chutiyas on the North Bank was

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8 Bogle, A., Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835, File No-298 BG, State Archives, Dispur P. 65
10 Hunter, W.W., A statistical Account of Assam, Landon, 1879, vol-I, P.1
dominated by a number of petty chiefs called *Bhuyans*.\(^{11}\) The chiefs are well-remembered in Assam legend as the *Baro Bhuyans*. Durlabh Narayan, one of these twelve chiefs ruled over Kamata at the end of thirteenth century.\(^{12}\) The last representative of the Kamata kingdom, Nilambar who ruled over the territory between Barnadi and Karatowa, was overthrown by Hussain Shah, the ruler of Gauda, in 1498. Hussain Shah occupied the territory as far as Barnadi and left his son at Hajo as Governor of the conquered territory.\(^{13}\) Some years later, in his bid for annexing the Ahom kingdom Hussain Shah was annihilated by the Ahoms.

The period between the departure of the Mahammadans and the rise of the Koch power, witnessed the rule of a number of petty independent chiefs who ruled between the Sonkosh and Barnadi rivers. Those petty local chiefs were no other than the feudal landlords or Bhuyans referred to. They were in no way connected with the Baro-Bhuyans.\(^{14}\)

The Koch Kingdom, founded by Biswa Singha reached the zenith of power during the reign of Nar Narayan. Internal feuds however, compelled Nar Narayan to bifurcate his kingdom. Raghu Dev, son of Nar Narayan's brother Chilarai, was made the vassal king of eastern portion of the Koch

\(^{11}\) Gait, E. A., *op. cit*, P. 36

\(^{12}\) *Ibid*, P. 37

\(^{13}\) *Ibid*, P. 42.

\(^{14}\) *Ibid*, P. 36
kingdom stretching from the river Sonkosh to the west of Barnadi. But, internal dissension hastened the decline of the Koch power. In the second decade of the nineteenth century quarrel took place between Raghu Dev’s son Parikhit Narayan and king Lakshmi Narayan, the son of Nara-Narayan. Lakshmi Narayan begged intervention of the Mughals. The Mughals conceded to it. The combined forces of Mughals and Lakshmi Singha defeated Parikshit Narayan and his dominion as far as Barnadi was annexed to the Delhi empire. The Mughal general Mukarram Khan’s brother was left in command of the conquered region. In 1616, Mukarrram Khan himself was appointed governor who stationed at Hajo. After the occupation of Kamrup, the Mughals sought to extend its eastern limit which led to a series of conflict between the Mughals and the Ahoms. Swargadeo Pratap Singha, the Ahom king who incessantly fought against the Mughals had to make peace in 1639. As a result of this peace, Barnadi on the North Bank and Asurar Ali on the South Bank of the Brahmaputra were fixed as the boundary between the two powers i.e. the Ahoms and the Mughals. The territory west of this boundary line remained under Mughal possession for the next twenty years. In 1658, taking advantage of confusion in Delhi due to sickness of Emperor Shah Jahan, the Raja of Koch Bihar Pran Narayan attacked the Mughal army and defeated Mir

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15 Ibid, P 62
16 Ibid, P.P 111-112
Lutfulla shivaji, the Mughal faujdar of Gauhati. Ahom king Jayadvaj Singha also took advantage of the situation and with a strong army advanced towards Gauhati. Mir Lutfulla fled to Dacca. The Ahom king then marched against the Koches and defeated them twice and compelled to retreat to the Sonkosh river. Thus the Ahoms regained Kamrup and became the master of the whole of the Brahmaputra valley.

The whole episode irritated Auragzeb, the new emperor of Delhi. He despatched an army under Mir Jumla against the Ahom king. Mir Jumla easily occupied Koch Bihar first and then proceeded to Gauhati on 4\textsuperscript{th} February 1662. Furthermore the advancing Mughal army occupied Garhgaon on March 17,1662.\textsuperscript{17} Thus the Mughal occupation of Kamrup continued till 1667 when a part of it, however, was recaptured by the Ahoms. In the battle of \textit{Saraighat} the Mughals were defeated and retreated to the Manas river.\textsuperscript{18} But, taking advantage of the internal strife in the Ahom monarchy, the Mughals once again succeeded in consolidating their hold over Kamrup in 1679. Subsequently, Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha successfully vanquished the Mughals at the war of Itakhuli in 1682 and thus, finally Kamrup was wrested from the administrative authority of the Mughals. The Ahom king appointed Barphukan to look after the

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid,P.P. 126-127; Bhuyan, S.K., Kamrupar Buranj (compiled & edited), Gauhati, 1987, PP. 65-66
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, P.93
administration of Kamrup. It is to note that the Ahoms who guided the destiny of Assam for a little less than six hundred years could establish their firm and continuous control over Kamrup only from 1682. That too did not run smoothly; for, in the last quarter of eighteenth century the Ahom kingdom witnessed serious set back. From 1769 onwards, the kingdom was badly disturbed by internal dissension. The Moamoria rebellion, the Burmese invasions as well as mutual jealousy and conspiracy of nobles paused as chain of events which led the country to the state of anarchy, consequent of which the Ahom ruler had to seek intervention of the British Authority in India.

It should be mentioned that the British intervened in the affairs of the Ahom Kingdom during the reign of Gaurinath Singha (1780-1794). It paved the way for the British annexation of the Ahom kingdom (Assam) into British territory.

It is to note that after annexation in 1826, Assam became a division of Bengal Government under a commissioner. David Scott was the first Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General of India in the North East Frontier. On the death of David Scott in 1831, T.C. Robertson

19 Bhuyan, S. K., Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1886, Gauhati, 1949, P.6
20 Baruah, Gopal Ch., Ahom Buranjii (translated & edited), Calcutta, 1930, p. 353
became the Commissioner. After him, in January 1834 captain F. Jenkins assumed the office of Commissioner. In 1861, Colonel Henry Hopkinson succeeded Jenkins and continued his office till the formation of Assam into a chief commissionership in 1874. The Governor General under proclamation No. 379 of the 6th, January, 1874, with the sanction of the secretary of state for India brought under his authority the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Siva Sagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Cachar and Goalpara.

LAND REVENUE HISTORY DURING PRE-BRITISH TIME:

Be that as it may, the land system of Kamrup under the British rule showed a peculiar picture as much as it did not agree with the broad based classification of land as rayotary. Different interests were involved in the land.

In an agrarian society land becomes primary concern of the people. Ownership of land assumed the position of prime importance. In ancient Kamarupa land ownership and landmanagement did not pause as a problem due mainly to the thin population and availability of fertile lands. Under kingship, the king was the owner of land. But people could take

**21** The Gazette of India, Calcutta (H.D) Part-1, Feb, 1874.
possession of khas land by clearing off the jungles. In the long run, it gave birth to the system of transfer of ownership of land which inaugurated feudalistic pattern of landsystem in Kamrup. On the basis of land grants made by the ancient Kamarupa kings in favour of Brahmins and religious institution, it can be assumed that the royal donee became the sole proprietor of land. The oldest of such grants was found to have been issued by Dharmapala and Vanamala who reigned between 1100 A.D. and 1200 A.D. Some other religious endowments like Madhav, Gopeswar and Buddha Janardan are traced back to still older dates.

Normally the kings not only granted land to the donees, but also donated at least a number of peasants for the service of the grantees. The donees got land and labourers as royal gift. It can be assumed that the peasants of the particular plot of land granted to the donee were the rayots of the crown subject to their services to the donee. They might have possessed some sort of rights on lands they occupied. At the time of alienation of the plot of land the case was made public by beating a dhol (drum).

Be that as it may, the peasants of the particular plot of land were attached to the donee. From the time of attachment with the donee, the

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22 Barua, F.C., La and Nilsfíhiraj Survey in Kamrup fli No. 62 R, Assam Secretariat, (G.D.) 1883. Sate Archives, Dispur, P.31
peasants had to sacrifice their rights. Therefore, the whole practice was transfer of the royal rights over a portion of land as well as subject to the donee.23

Thus in ancient Kamrup, it is found that the king was the chief authority over land. He occasionally granted land to the religious institutions or persons who acquired the status of landlordship under the royal authority. Therefore, it is found that the British considered them as landed aristocrats who were served by the tenants in different ways.

It is found that, under the Kamata Kings of Kamarupa, some Bhuyans or landlords flourished in the region referred to. A group of some villages called Chakala remained under the authority of the Bhuyans. The system was known as Chakalabandi.24 During the period between the departure of Gauda ruler Hussain Shah's army and the rise of the Koch power under Biswa Singha, the Bhuyans became prominent as chiefs in the areas between Barnadi and Sonkosh rivers. Biswa Singha subdued a large number of such Bhuyan chiefs.25 Besides these, there was a considerable number of petty zamindars' in Koch kingdom. Dr. Guha

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24 Neog, Maheswar, Prachchyya Sasanavali, Gauhali, 1974, P. 110.
25 Gad, E.A., op cit., P. 45
identifies them as primary zamindars. It is to point out that these landlords wielded political authority over their landed estates and treated the people who lived in such areas as their subjects. To speak otherwise, the landlords of Kamrupa continued their lordship over the estates under Koch rule.

Therefore, it appears that the koch kings of Kamarup did not make any shift from the traditional land policy. They showed due honour to the existing land grant system of the former Rajas and land was still granted as before. Besides this, a small number of paiks, particularly temple paiks remained as before.

As referred to, in the first half of the seventeenth century, Kamarupa was conquered and held by the Mughals for a period of time. Establishment of Mughal rule in Kamrup brought numerous changes in land revenue administration. For administrative convenience, the Mughals divided the conquered territory into Subas which were again subdivided into Sarkars, viz; Kamrup, Dhekeri, Dakshinkul and Bangalbhum. Each Sarkar was divided into Paragana or mahal. As has been stated earlier Emperor Jahangir sent an amin named Ibrahim karori to make bondobast

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26 Guha, A., Zamindar Kalin Goalpara Zilar Artha Samajik Awastha, Edi Artishik Dnatipat, Dhubri, 1984, pp. 8-10
27 Ibid, P 9
28 Neog, Maheswar, op. cit., P. 110
in Kamrup. Sheikh Ibrahim Karori brought about Paragana bandi in place of Chakalabandi. Thus the Mughals introduced the method of collection of revenue through the intermediaries. The intermediaries came to be known as Choudhary. Practically, the Choudharies exercised tremendous authority within their respective mahals. Of course, this the Mughals continued the system of landgrants to religious institutions and persons of importance in different fields.

In the Mughal rule, three types of landlords were there in Kamrup. Firstly those chiefs who accepted the Mughal vassalage enjoyed their vast estates and assumed the status of landlords. Secondly, there was a remarkable quantity of lands which were occupied by certain individuals or institutions as debottar, dharmottar, brahmottar, nankar and pirpal. Such estates were enjoyed by individuals in the name of religious institutions or service to the state. In fact Mughal administration acknowledged the original zamindars' and allowed them to continue as such. For without the active support of this class of privileged section it was impossible for the Mughals to collect revenue. Virtually those landlords were none but the influential zamindars of the area. Thirdly, the Mughals appointed some

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29(a) Bhuyan, S.K., (edited) Kamrupar Buranjji, Guwahati, (3rd. edition), 1987, P. 31
29(b) Barman, S., op.cit., p. 177
30 Barua, F.C., op. cit., P. 31
31 Habib, Iftir, the Agrarian system of Mughal India 1556-1707, Lucknow, New Delhi, 1983, PP 290-293
local influential individuals to collect revenue from the Paraganas. In case of such appointments the Mughals gave preference to the local Zamindars.\textsuperscript{32(a)} Those collectors of rent were known as zamindar. Similar collectors of land rent were found elsewhere in India and were known as Desai in Gujrat, Deshmukh in most part of south India\textsuperscript{32(b)} Choudhary was invariably a zamindar and usually his position was hereditary. But he could be easily deprived of his office by issuing an imperial order. Be that as it may, the Choudhary was chiefly concerned with the collection of revenue. Apart from this, he had also certain subsidiary duties. The Choudhary was used as a counter check to the Qanungo\textsuperscript{33}. As a result, under the Mughals the Choudharis became more powerful. The Qanungo was the permanent repository of information concerning the revenue receipts, area of statistics, local revenue rates, and customs of the Paragana.\textsuperscript{34} In the Paragana the Qannugo was another influential and powerful officer. It is to note that after the occupation of Kamrup, the Mughals abolished the existing paik system and introduced the system of collection of revenue from the rayots. Thus Kabindra Patra, was appointed the Nayeb Qanungo of Rangamati. Subsequently, his son Kabi Sekhar assumed the responsibility of Nayeb Qanungo to the four Sarkars referred to. Revenue

\textsuperscript{32(a)} Guha, A., op cit., P 5
\textsuperscript{32(b)} Habib, op cit.,
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, PP. 287-289
was collected from the *rayots* on the basis of papers prepared by the *Qanungo*.\(^{35}\)

Outwardly, though it seems that the Mughals introduced a system of direct contact with the *rayots* in land revenue matters, actually it was not so. Because the Mughal administration did not disfavour the landed aristocrats as well as their large estates where a large number of *Paiks* served them as serfs.

As referred to earlier, the Mughal occupation of Koch Hajo region led to the long drawn out struggle between the Ahoms and the Mughals and the latter was finally defeated and Kamrup passed under the rule of the Ahoms.

It was a fixed maxim of the Assamese Government that the subject and soil were alike the property of the state. The cultivators or serfs were denominated as *paiks* and they were at all times liable to be called on to give their labour to the state.\(^{36}\) The very basis of land revenue administration of the Ahoms was the *Paik* system. It is however notable that Kamrup experienced little impact of this system. It was due to the prevalence of the deeprooted Mughal system of land revenue

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\(^{36}\) Bogles, A., *op cit*, 1835, P. 103
administration. Of course, a good number of Paiks Khown as private Paiks were concentrated in the lakhiraj as well as nisfkhiraj mahals.37

The population of Kamrup during Ahom rule was divided into broad divisions, viz. (i) the privileged aristocracy which included the secular and spiritual aristocrats, (ii) Peasantry and (ii) the servile population.38 Aristocracy did not render any physical service. The secular aristocracy comprised of Rajas, chieftains and bureaucracy. They had their hereditary estates which were regularly served by paiks. Bureaucracy was remunerated by kinds viz. rent free land known as nankar and manmati. Nankar was hereditary but manamati was not. Thus in lieu of cash salaries the state officers won land with attendants39, likehows as they were called.

The Ahom kings made numerous land grants to be held revenue free or lakhiraj for religious or charitable purposes. The holders of such estates enjoyed special status and were considered as spiritual aristocrats. Besides the estates or mahals, they got the benefit of the services of the paiks. Lakhiraj grants were of different kinds, viz., the debottar, dharmotter

37 Ibid, P 67
38 Guha, A, op cit, P 39
39 Bhuyan, S K, Anglo Assamese Relations, (1771-1826) op cit, P 155
and brahmottar. Thus under the Ahom rule, aristocracy both secular and spiritual enjoyed considerable royal favour.\textsuperscript{40}

An overwhelming majority of the population, belonged to the peasantry designated as \textit{paiks}. In fact, as has been referred to, \textit{Paiks} were the common subjects who were required to render physical service to the state or to pay tax in lieu of such service. In Kamrup, a good number of \textit{paiks} served in the households of the secular aristocrats as per norms of the system. The \textit{paiks} who worked for \textit{lakhiraj} holdings were transferred from the register of the state militia to the jurisdiction of the respective grantees. They served in the temples or \textit{satras} or the households of the Brahmin. The peasantry, naturally, did not enjoy the privileges which were granted to the aristocrats. It was estimated that slaves, serfs and bondsmen constituted 5.9 per cent of the total population\textsuperscript{41}.

It may be noted that Mughal system of land revenue was allowed to continue in the district of Kamrup with an admixture of the Ahom system. The Ahoms retained in Kamrup something of the Mughal type of administration and that of the Ahom system of feudal aristocracy\textsuperscript{42}. The system of \textit{ga-dhan}, \textit{ga-mati}, \textit{ga-khatani} were also fully applied for the

\textsuperscript{40} Guha, A op cit., PP. 239-244
\textsuperscript{41} Guha, A, "Medieval Economy of Assam", The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol I
\textsuperscript{42} Naq, Maheswar, op cit., P. 132.
region. On the other hand Choudharis and other grantholders were also equally allowed to hold their respective positions. Large estates known as *khats* or *bilats* were granted to the ministers or bureaucrats who were called Baruas, Barbaruas, Barphukans etc. Such *khats* or *bilats* were cultivated by *paiks* known as *bilatiya paiks*. But in case of *debottar*, *Drahmottar* and *dharmottar* lands, the *paiks* who cultivated such lands were considered as slaves or *bandha*. Gait mentions that David scott released some 12,000 slaves from Kamrup alone.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus, it is found that during Ahom rule, there were differences of the rights to land. These may be grouped into two classes, viz, upper and lower. Estates were granted to the upper class consisting of nobles, officials, priests and Brahmins with heritable and transferable rights; but no transferable and heritable rights were given to the lands granted to the lower class, consisting of the common *paiks*.\textsuperscript{44}

There is no doubt that in the Ahom regime also, an overwhelming majority of the population of Kamrup belonged to the landholding peasantry designated as *Paiks*. A good number of the paiks had to work under the supervision and control of the secular and spiritual aristocrats. The number of peasants who had to depend upon the Choudharis and

\textsuperscript{43} Gait, E. A., op. cit., P. 242.

\textsuperscript{44} ibid, P 240
other landed aristocrats was also not negligible. Therefore, it may be assumed that during the Ahom rule, the vast peasantry had to live in a dependent atmosphere. They were first to depend upon the king, the proprietor of both subjects and soil, and then upon their immediate land lords, viz., secular or spiritual aristocrats, Choudharis etc. The method of indicating their economic differentiation was the basis of the number of ploughs operated and not the amount of land held. The households were grouped into four categories in 1830.\textsuperscript{45} Those were-

(i) Uttam (Superior) i.e., those with 3 or more ploughs each.
(ii) Madhyam (middling) i.e., those with two ploughs each.
(iii) Samanya (common) i.e., those with one plough each.
(iv) Prakrit (inferior) i.e., ploughless or those worked with borrowed plough or bondsmen.

It appears that Kamrup had the experience of the frequent change of her political master. That is the reason as to why the land system of Kamrup remained to be so peculiar. Under different administrative authorities, Kamrup showed somewhat peculiarity in her land system and maintained a good difference with other districts of the Brahmaputra valley as well as the erstwhile goaplara district.

\textsuperscript{45} Guha, A., Medieval & Early Colonial Assam, Society Polity Economy, op. cit., P. 240
When the country passed under the British rule, Kamrup together with other districts of Assam, came under a new type of revenue arrangement. It is dealt with in the next chapter.

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