CHAPTER- V

LANDLORD TENANT RELATIONS

PRESSURE OF LANDLORDISM ON THE TENANCY

As to the landlord tenant relations, it is said that landholding pattern of Kamrup was much more landlord oriented than any other rayotary districts of Assam. In the pre-British era classification of people in the state ignored complexities and besides aristocracy there remained the numerous peasantry and the servile population. But the British period witnessed numerous changes in the class structure. As has been referred to, main elements of the landholder class were the aristocracy both religious and bureaucratic. The number of such new landed aristocracy in the five rayotary districts of Assam ranged between 2000 and 3000, over the last quarter of nineteenth century.¹ Most of these aristocrats lived in Kamrup alone. It is to note that the landlords in most cases did not cultivate land personally. Hence they used to sublet their land. In Kamrup subletting was very common in all the three sectors of land i.e., lakhiraj.

¹ Guha, A. Medieval And Early Colonial Assam, Society Polity Economy, Calcutta, 1991, P 240
nisfkhiraj and lakhiraj. Outwardly it seems that as like Goalpara or sylhet, there should be no Zamindars in a rayotary district. But the accumulation of huge land in a group of persons as well as the provision of subletting created a Zamindary like atmosphere in Kamrup also. Government made settlements with the lakhirajdars, nisfkhirajdars and khirajdars. Most of them, in their turn, made settlements with actual cultivators who came to be known as under tenants. Therefore, the landlord-tenants relationship forms an interesting aspect of agrarian relations in the district.

Landholders of the district had their big or small holdings. Hunter suggests that, in Kamrup, a farm of above a hundred bighas should be considered as a very large estate; anything below twenty bighas or seven acres as a small one.\(^2\) Since almost all the big landholders used to sublet their lands to the tenants and did not contribute any physical labour, to cultivation may be termed as big landlords. On the other hand those who possessed ten to twenty acres of land can be considered as petty landlords.\(^3\) The lakhirajdars, nispikhirajdars, Chamudars, khatdars, and other landed aristocrats like mauzadars enjoyed the status of big landlords. While the first two were holders of privileged tenure, the rests were full rate paying rayots. On the other hand, the petty landlords who

\(^{2}\) Ibid, P. 243
\(^{5}\) Guha, A., op.cit, p.234
were numerous and accounted for almost all the temporarily settled estates also retained tenantry like the big landlords in greater or lesser degree⁴. As a result, in Kamrup district the number of tenants was immense. In 1895-96, in Assam proper there were altogether 139 lakhiraj estates with a total land of 83,756 acres. About forty percent of this revenue free acreage was concentrated in Kamrup alone. Likewise in 1887-88 there were 2035 half-rate paying estates with 19,90,42 acres in Assam proper. About eighty five percent of this half revenue paying acreage was concentrated in Kamrup alone.⁵ In 1900-01, total settled area in Kamrup was covered by 591,706 acres of land. Twenty five percent of this acreage was nisfkhiraj and six percent Lakhiraj. Thus almost one third of the settled land of Kamrup was occupied by these landholders who were holding huge acres of land, the minimal being not less than 33 acres of land per estate.⁶ Obviously, the lakhirajdars and nisfkhirajars as well as some khirajdars used to sublet their land to the tenants of various types. About 18 percent of the area were leased out during the period between 1883 and 1893.⁷ At the end of the century that rose to 25 percent.⁸ As a result the increase of number of tenants in Kamrup was a common

⁴ Ibid, P. 244  
⁵ Assam Administrative Report, 1889-90, State Archives, Dispur, P. 102  
phenomenon. In 1891, the number of tenants in Kamrup was 77,683. This number rose to about one lakh in 1901.9

It appears that in the British regime the incidence of tenancy was tremendously increased. As a result, the socio-economic relations between the landlords and their tenants got a fresh turn. During the early years of the administration of the British, the landlords were mostly considered by the tenants as saviours, patrons, lords etc. They, being backward socially and financially, never dared to consider them less than that. On the otherhand, the landlords had their good financial health as well as social background. Such background of the landlords helped them in acquiring the status of patrons, lords etc. Already a feudalistic trend was there. Most of the tenants came under the so-called protection of umbrella of the landlords. While some came with their origin of slavery, some had entered into the Zaminders umbrella of protection being landless peasants. Furthermore, the anarchy and troubles of the last days of Ahom rule had created an environment of insecurity. Under this circumstance, the poor peasants had sought their savours. Therefore it can be safely pointed out that after the entrance of the British, there appeared an era of submission to the superiors in the district. This submission was firstly to the British as a

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8 Gait, E A, Moral and Material Progress of Assam During ten years ending 1891, Shillong, Oct, 1892, State Archives, Dispur, P 12

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whole and then to the landlords. The people of lower strata, normally submitted to the landlords. That is the reason why a poor tenant used to say ‘Aponar Golam’, (your servant) in identifying himself before a landlord. He even used to take advice from his landlord with regard to his domestic affairs. On every festive occasion, the rayot was accustomed in offering a ‘sarai’ and a ‘gamocha’ to the landlord. These are all token in honour or in otherwards submission.\textsuperscript{10} It is worth noting that such attitude of the rayots towards the landlords was the outcome of the landlordism itself. Even when there was a change of government they remained faithfull to the landlords. Being apprehensive of the position under the new government (British), they preferred to attach themselves with a ‘Jana Suna manuh’ i.e., learned man. And the rayots considered the landlords as ‘Janasuna manuh’.\textsuperscript{10(a)} 

However, situation did not remain the same. As time passed, the zamindars were being looked at as oppressive one. The rayots who had to surrender larger share of production in favour of the landlords had also to offer physical service for their satisfaction. Even, they had to act as Palki bearers of their landlords. Besides this, the rayots had to keep their landlords satisfied by any other means as circumstances demanded of

\textsuperscript{10} Interview with Arjun Gossain, Dinha, Kamrup.
\textsuperscript{10(a)} Ibid.
Such type of oppression became more expansive day by day. As a result, with the passage of time, a change was bound to come. And agitation crept into the minds of the rayots slowly. In order to have an understanding of the nature of conflict between the landlords and tenants some cases may be referred to.

The first incident was the case of killing of a zamindar, namely Durga Choudhary at the village Dinha, situated about 20 kilometers away in the South-West of Rangia. In about 1925, Durga Choudhary inherited a khiraj estate of 420 bihas 1 khattha and 19 lecha from his father Abhoy Choudhary. The inhabitants of the area regarded him as lord and tried their level best to keep him happy. Most of his rayots were very poor and belonged to lower caste. They considered the landlord as their protector and tried their best to pay the rent regularly. But the landlord was inconsiderate and unsympathetic to the rayots. He frequently visited the area riding on elephant for the collection of rents in kinds in an autocratic manner. It was alleged that he even turned his evil eyes towards the young ladies of the localities. He frequently used to tell the rayots that he was their lord and so every good item of their products be offered to him first. Such treatment of the landlord irritated the rayots and when their annoyance knew no bounds, one evening some rayots killed him.
ruthlessly. Subsequently the court sentenced lifelong imprisonment to Lakshmi Gossain, the Satradhikar of Dinha Satra. He was accused as chief conspirator. His assistants namely Ojan and Mitha Das were also sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment¹¹.

The second incident was the case of a Satradhikar of Katara Shymrai satra, in Khata mauza under Nalbari District. Bhagawan Gossain inherited the Gossainship of the satra from his ancestor. The rayots of the Satra acknowledged him as their spiritual guru as well as their protector. The Satra owned a vast area as nisfkhiraj and khiraj tenures. The rayots cultivated the lands and offered different types of rent to the landlord. There was a big measurement balance or taraju infront of the house of the landlord. In case of payment in kind, the tenants measured their wet grains in the balance and submitted to the landlord his due share. Besides this, the rayots had to serve the landlords family physically. On the occasions of different celebrations related to the satra they had to pay subscription and physical labour as well. It is to note that most of the rayots were the lower caste people and very poor. The Gossain on the otherhand led a prosperous life. In about 1955 strain relations took place between some rayots and the Gossain as regards rent of land. By this time the rayots of Kamrup were found to have been influenced by the Communist

¹¹ Ibid
propaganda over land rights of the peasantry. In all probability, the rayots were dissatisfied with the satradhikar for his stern attitude. Consequently one day, he was invited to a meeting where he was ruthlessly killed by some rayots. The court punished the guilty rayots.¹²

The above mentioned instances give a plain picture of the landlord tenant relationship at least towards the end of British rule. In fact, the real position of the landlords in Kamrup was not less than feudal lords. The British administration inspired with its imperialistic design sought to root its strength on the soil by creating middlemen between the government and the peasants. That is why, like the Zamindars in the permanently settled tract, the landholders were retained the rayotary position of state. Thus the emergence of tenantry with subletting became a common feature. The tenants in general and undertenants in particular had no permanent, heritable and transferable rights on land. They were treated as tenants-at-will. As has been referred to in the preceding chapter, they had to pay rents to their landlords in different forms. Though government rate was widely applied, the tenants had to pay additional rent besides their usual physical services. Furthermore, there was the process of short measurement of land. In matters of collection of arrear rent, ruthlessness on the part of the landlords was not unheard. It is to note that with passage

¹² Interview with Hare Gossain, the brother of the Slain Gossain, Katara, Nalbari District.
of time, the lakhirajdars, larger nisfkhirajdars, chamuadars, khatdars and mauzadarś had shifted to middle class professions for their decent livelihood. But they continued to hold big landholdings. Many examples may be cited here. Madhav Chandra Bardaloi (1847-1907), a high ranking government servant who was reportedly drawing a salary of Rs. 800 per month towards the end of nineteenth century had his khats or estates.\(^\text{13}\) In 1882, Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin held altogether 476 acres of land in several compact blocks. Of those, 301 acres were held in khiraj terms and 175 acres in lakhiraj terms. These were mostly tenant cultivated estates.\(^\text{14}\)

Be that as it may, landlord-tenant relationship in all the groups of the district was almost same. It may be reviewed groupwise with special reference to certain instances.

(1) Barbhag Group:

In Barbhag Group, landlords domination was widely prevalent in all the sectors of land. The number of landholders who cultivated the land by themselves or by their agencies was large in Upar Barbhag, Pakowa, Dharampur and Paschim Banbhag mauzaes.\(^\text{15}\) But in the mauzas like Pub-Banbhag,
Paschim Barigog, Bahjani and Batahghila the extent of subletting was much higher.\textsuperscript{16} The reason behind this was that in those mauzas land was owned by big landlords. Elsewhere in the group land was fairly divided amongst the actual cultivators.

It should be mentioned that landlords made personal settlement with the rayots. Such settlement was nothing but the result of heavy bargain. The landlords convinced the tenants that the terms of settlement should not be disclosed to the government officer.\textsuperscript{17} The term and conditions in subletting was not uniform in the group. If the landlords had owned huge but unproductive lands, or they were absentees from the estates, they generally kept themselves satisfied with moderate rates of rent. But if the landlords owned small area of land or lived in the same locality or had very productive land, then they endeavoured to get as much as possible.

For instance, in Ratanpur village of Nam-Barbhag mauza, the big land holders like the Parbatiya Gossains sublet land entirely on cash rent varying from Re. 1 to Re. 1-8 per bigha. On the otherhand, the local landlords sublet their land on adhi terms. It was seen that better land

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid
always attracted *adhi* tenants and inferior land was usually given out on terms which often included liability to service in addition to cash rent. The cash rent did differ far from the government rate: Some landlords added to their profit by charging higher local rate or sometimes by charging an *anna* or two for each revenue receipt granted.\(^{18}\) It is revealed in our investigation that in case of *khiraj* land let out on cash rent, the land lords made profit varying from 25 to 50 percent. On the other hand, their profits on land let out on *adhi* terms was more than that. In case of some *nisfkhiraj* and *lakhiraj* areas of land owned by temples or other religious institutions and persons attached to such institutions, many tenants hold lands by rendaring specific service. But such services had been commuted to full government revenue by the authorities managing the temples or the institution.

The *dalais* or *satradhikars* of the group had sole power in managing the religious institutions. In fact, there had been no one to make the managers accountable. As a result, there was gross mismanagement in most of the estates. *Paiks* and *bhakats* found personal service irksome and were looking to commute it into cash payment. Misappropriation of the cash and kind collected from the *lakhiraj* and *nisfkhiraj* land was very common. Most of the *dalais* or *satradhikars* had gone to the extent of

\(^{18}\) Ibid, P 28
getting land in surplus to the original *faisalas* as their personal land which were rented on full rates.

As regards the grants made to individuals, the grantees were the sole owners and were not content with the realization of mere government revenue from their tenants. The biggest of them were the Parbatia Gossains, the religious preceptors of the Ahoms Kings. In addition to the full revenue, they made illegal exactions, such as, *salami, pekhosa, puja or sevakara*, grazing fees, cost of receipt etc. The local landlords also followed them in levying different cesses.

It is easy to understand that the landlords were on the whole fairly well-off. The *lakhirajdars* received rents as well as physical service from the tenants. Government received little in the form of local tax. The *nisfkhirajdars* levied rents sometimes at government *khiraj* rate and sometimes more than that, besides different types of physical services referred to. But they paid up to the government only half of the *khiraj* rate. Likewise, the landlords of *khiraj* sector like *chamuadars*, *khatdars*, *mauzadars* etc. had enjoyed many privileges. Though they paid full *khiraj* rate to the government, they collected many folds from their tenants. Besides this, they also exacted physical service from their tenants.
The landlords, therefore, acted as protector or probhu to their tenants. The question appears as to how did the rayots tolerate the so-called feudalistic behaviour of the landlords? One important point to note is that, as referred to, the excessive indolence of the most of Assamese common people led them to become rayots and thus lived under the protection of the landlords.\textsuperscript{19} Besides this, most of them considered landlords as their own men in comparison to the government officers. Therefore it is found that most of the rayots bowed down before the landlords. It is true that as time passed off, the landlord tenant relationship lost such smooth character. However, until the fourth decade of the twentieth century the rayots were not properly organized to oppose the so-called zamindars.

It is noted that there were large number of landlords with different titles in the group. Let us take note of the landlord tenents relations in respect of the khiraj estates under the Bujar Baruah of Chandkuchi and that of Nisf-khiraj estate of Katara Shyamrai Satra under the Gossain.

\textbf{(i) Khiraj Estates of the Bujar Baruas of Chandkuchi:}

It is heard that the Ahom prince Godapani during his fugitive period appeared at Chandkuchi near Nalbari district head quarter and stayed

\textsuperscript{19} Darrah, H. Z., Note on the condition of the people of Assam, State Archives, Dispur, P. 6
there for about some months. (Bhuyan, S.K., Atan Burah Gohain And His Times, Second Edition, 1997, page no. 226). The family giving him shelter in Chandkuchi is said to have granted a large area of land measuring “Dholar Kob” by him after he became the Ahom King as Gadadhar Singha. And thus the family became local zamindar of the area. With the passage of time the extent of their occupied areas crossed almost thousand puras, Viz.,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AREA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tihu, Nathkuchi</td>
<td>300 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athiabari, Jowaddi</td>
<td>200 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahjani, Cherabari</td>
<td>80 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khorakhuchi, Balitara</td>
<td>180 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batabari</td>
<td>120 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalbari Town</td>
<td>18 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandkhuchi</td>
<td>300 puras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaha</td>
<td>20 puras</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It appears that the land donated to the Bujar Baruas did not form a compact block. The question arises as to how a land of one dhol could be scattered in such distant areas? The answer is that in those days a
landlord who claimed royal lineage or favour could occupy any land on any pretext. The Bujar Baruas of Chandkuchi probably did so.

All the lands owned by the Bujar Baruas were *khiraj* and they paid full taxes to the government through different agents because their land was scattered in different *mauzas*. On their part, they collected rents from the tenants through the *thakurias*. For instance, in order to collect the rent from the tenants of Tihu Nathkuchi *khāt*, the landlord appointed a *Thakuna* from the same locality. The Thakuria collected it from the tenants and deposited in the house of the landlord. Be that as it may, the landlord paid occasional visit to the *khāt*. There was a permanent *baha* or hut of the landlord who used to stay in it during his visit to the *khāt*. The *rayots* on hearing the news of landlords arrival gathered round the *baha* and offered various types of *manani* or gift in honour of the landlord. They had also to pay the *baha* expenditure of the landlords. Thus, the landlords collected huge amount of materials either in case or kind during his visit to a *khāt*.

Under the circumstances, the economic condition of the *rayots* was bound to be less than good. In some cases, *adhi* system was in vogue. Cash rent was also in force. If a tenant failed to pay his rent, the *Thakuna* used different skills to collect it. There was a system called *crok* i.e., a
process to collect arrear rent by taking away valuables from the tenant. The *Thakurias* sometimes used this skill and snatched away cow, goat, plough etc. from the *rayots* who failed to pay rent in time.

The *Bujar Baruas* of Chandkuchi enjoyed the privilege as such throughout the British period. Their relations with the *rayots* was that of a king and his subjects. It is true that there was no organized disobedience on the part of the *rayots* against these landlords. However, if any *rayot* showed sign of disrespect, the landlord got such information through his agent i.e., the *Thakuria* and took measure against such *rayots*. In such case, generally the guilty *rayots* were subjected to manannual labour at the house of the landlords at least for some days.\(^{20}\)

(ii) **Nisfhiraj Estate of Shyamrai Satra, Katara:**

The *Shyamrai Satra* of Katara in Khata *mauza* of Barbhag group was set up by Damodar Dev's disciple Narayan Dev in 1702 *saka*. Ahom Swargadeo Lakshmi Singha made two landgrants to the *Shyamrai Satra* of Katara. The copper plates relating to the land grants are still preserved. The land grants comprised of a vast area called the land of two *dhols* which contained a large number of villages like Ajara, Thalkuchi, Balitara,

\(^{20}\) Interview with U. Bujar Baruah, Chandkuchi, Nalbari District.
Rangafali, Naherbari, Namati, Katara Kshudra Bistupura, Ghahkuchi, Nilpur etc. It appears that the satras had 2304 bighas, 1 katha and 9 lecha.

The Ahom king authorised the satradhikar to look after the people of the area. The people who used to live in the area long before the issue of the grant became the rayot of the satra. The rayots had to pay different rents to the satradhikar both in cash and kind. They had to take part in different functions of the satra. For the collection of rent the Gossain appointed Thakuria and MaharL. Besides the usual land rent, the rayots had also to pay a salami on the auspicious occasion like sabha which was annually celebrated on shradha ceremony of Narayan Dev and his wife.

Initially no specific case was there regarding the atrocities of the Thakuria, and Mahar in collecting revenue. However from the second quarter of twentieth century difficulties arose in the collection of rent from the rayots. Even the satradhikar had to go to the court for the settlement of disputes. As has been referred to, in the fifth decade of twentieth century the revolutionary propaganda of the Communists attracted the rayots of Shyamrai satra also. As a result, the satradhikar Gossain had to face problem in collecting revenue from the rayots. Therefore, to avoid such trouble, sometimes the Gossain used to mortgage land upon the
Even after independence this practice was going on. He had mortgaged a portion of land in Balitara village and subsequently sold it to the *rayots*. But in the process of selling, the *satradhikar* came into bad terms with some villagers of Balitara. Consequently, they intrigued against the stradhikar. One day Bhagawan Gossain was invited to attend a meeting organised by the *rayots*. The meeting started very calmly. But as it was previously planned to murder the satradhikar, one Chandra Haloi, a *rayot* of the village, accomplished the murder by cutting the Gossain into two pieces (in February, 1958.)

(2) South Bank Group:

This group, comprising 19 *mauzas*, bore the brunt of dominance of landlordism in all the land tenures. Several local *Rajas* formerly ruled in different parts of this group. Some of them were *Khasi* and *Garo* chiefs. The British reduced them to mere *zamindar* in the form of *mauzadars*. However later on some of them were replaced by local men. The *Zamindars* of Rani, Luki, Beltola, *Panbari*, *Barduar* enjoyed special status in their respective areas.

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21 Interview with Hare Gossai, Katara, Nalbari District.
22 Barnes, H. C. Assessment Report, South Bank Group, 1905, State Archives, Dispur, PP. 1-2
As referred to, in 1905-06 the total *khiraj* area of the group was 1026.77 acres or 3106 bighas.\(^{23}\) on the other hand there were 271 *nisfkhiraj*, 20 *lakhiraj* and 9 special estates.\(^{24}\) Of this, direct impact of landlordism was fallen on 19.6 percent of land as a whole. The incidence of percentage differed from mauza to mauza, viz, Beltola 27.3 percent, Panbari 35.9 percent, Ramsa 30.8 percent, Rani 19.5 percent and Chhayani 24.4 percent.\(^{25}\)

The prices for produces of land were generally higher in the South Bank Group than that in the North Bank Groups. So was the case of rent in the Panbari mauza. For example, land was sublet at first class *sarkari* rate though the land was classified as third class one. Besides this, the tenants had to assist the landlords in reaping out the paddy grown in their personal plots of agriculture. In Beltola and Ramsa the rates varied from Re. 1-1 to Re. 1-8 per *bigha\(^{1}\)* and the tenants had to render physical service to the landlords. In Rani, rates ran as high as Rs. 2 per *bilhga*. But the measuring rod used was usually proper one, i.e. eight hats.\(^{26}\)

\(^{23}\) Ibid, P 2
\(^{24}\) Ibid, P 11
\(^{25}\) Ibid, P 5
\(^{26}\) Ibid
So far as rent of the land was concerned, adhi system was adopted for rupit and good Baotoli land. But in case of inferior land, chukani system was applied. The chukti adhi rate for rupit land varied according to the quality of land from 15 to 25 puras of paddy per pura of land. In case land was let out on cash rent, the landlords made a profit of hundred percent. On the other hand, in case of lesser profit, some other conditions were laid down such as, physical service to the landlord, taking a part of the land on adhi etc. It seems that the weaker the economic position of the tenant the more extortionate the landlords were to be. For instance, at Namati, the landlords realized Rs. 8 per pura and required 8 days physical service from the tenants. The terms were more extortionate in Beltola where most of the tenants were men of backward tribes. In this mouza, chukti adhi was widely prevalent and as a rule only inferior paddy land and bastis were let out on chukti terms. For instance, in Fatashil area where land was of inferior quality, a landlord sublet a part of his land at Rs. 6 - 6 a pura and another part at Rs. 14 puras of paddy per pura of lands. He measured land with a seven hat tar. Moreover, the tenants had to supply wood as fuel for him for one or more days and to reap his paddy for a day.

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27 See Appendix - III.
As a matter of fact the tenant landlord relationship in the South Bank Group tilted in favour of the later and in spite of the continuous suppression and oppression the tenants could do nothing against their lords. But situation was being changed in the wake of the independence movement of the country. Whatever might have been his intention, Gandhi's eleventh point charter of demands revised in 1933 had its impact on the minds of the peasants. Both non-political local organisation, politically influenced organisation such as Rayot Sabhas came into being. As has been referred to by Dr. Guha, in 1932-33 "the unorganised tenants cultivators of Kamrup peacefully agitated for the grant of occupancy rights through suitable legislation".\textsuperscript{28(a)}

In the forties of the last century, coming under the direct influence of the Communists, the rayots of Belotala, Panbari, Rani, Chaygaon, Boko etc. (in South Kamrup) came forward to reduce the share of paddy of the landlords. In fact, the oppressed tenantry started realizing that the landlords enjoyed their lives at their cost, while they were deprived of their minimum needs. Hence they also came forward with the demand of land for the landless peasants.

\textsuperscript{28(a)} Guha, A., Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle And Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, (Reprint) New Delhi, 1988, P.P., 181-182
Thus in the South Bank region the rayots started revolt to reduce the landlords share of the grains. They could raise such demands with the full cooperation and encouragement of the communists leaders like Gobinda Kalita, Balo Basumatary, Banti Mahajan, Bhadra choudhary, Kula Basumatary and Dambarudhar etc.29

From the foregoing paragraphs it comes to light that landlord tenants relationship in a rayotary district like Kamrup, to a large extent, was that of a proprietor and a servant. For quite sometime under British rule, this relationship continued without any hindrance. Because the alien government carefully sought to maintain a pro-landlord policy. Consequently the condition of the ordinary rayots went from bad to worse. The paucity of clothes and jewellery among the women of the tenants was an indication of their inferior living. But the better class of resident landholders lived in a style superior to that of the ordinary rayots.30 It is important to note that the landholders derived most of their income from grain or cash rent and from the profits of the fields which they cultivated through the rayots.31 In the chapori areas, the conditions of the rayots was more pitiable. Because, the physical conditions in which the rayots of the chapori areas were, on the whole not as conducive to comfort as in the

29 Deka, Tarun Sen, Mukti Sangram^Xdharate Jibankatha, Gauhati, 1993, PP- 125-126  
30 Barnes, H C., Assessment Report, Bajali Group, 1905, State Archives, Dispur, P 9  
31 Ibid.
rupit mahal. Residents in these areas were forced to adopt an amphibious mode of life, living in water during the rain and on land during the dry weather.\textsuperscript{32} The landlords on the other hand used to add to their income by keeping buffaloes and dealing in diary produce.\textsuperscript{33} Thus it is found that in the so-called rayotary system by which the colonial government sought to extract maximum surplus of agricultural production in the form of land revenue, the rayots were groaning under the revenue maximisation policy of the ruler. On the other hand, the landlords fully took the advantage of the situation and started indulging in many semifeudal forms of exploitation such as share-cropping, rent renting, ejections, forced labour, salami and gifts etc.

PEASNAT UPRISINGS IN CONCRETE FORM:

The Peasant uprisings which took place in Assam at different times since the Ahom rule, were essentially originated in a political conflict between the feudal element and the different segments of exploited peasantry. It is true that from the time of Moamoria uprising to the rajmel movement of the nineteenth century, the contending classes might not have been collectively self-conscious. However, during the first quarter of the twentieth century, collective awareness of the peasant community

\textsuperscript{32} Desai, S. P, Reassessment Report of Barpeta chaporoi Group, 1927, State Archives, Dispur, P 15
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid
became a reality. It was during the fourth decade of the century that peasant annoyance reached a specific turn under the leadership of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India.

PEOPLE'S GRIEVENCES

The Moamoria or Matak trouble which was outwardly described as a religious conflict, was in fact, a political tussle between the feudal ruling class and the different segments of the exploited peasantry. It appears that in the Ahom kingdom, there emerged three status groups, viz.,

(i) The feudal lords i.e., the nobility, both temporal and spiritual, who did not pay any tax for their estates and enjoyed the physical service of serfs, tenants and slaves;

(ii) The free peasantry and peasant-cum-artisans subjugated only to the state;

(iii) The servile population subjugated not to the state but personally to the king and other feudal lords.

Moamoria influence was minimal in Kamrup. In the district neither any local monastery nor the bulk of the peasantry were involved in the uprising. The initiative in carrying on the revolt against the Ahom authority

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34 Guha, A., Op cif, P 98
35 Ibid, P 110
passed to the feudal elements who got some popular support in the
district. The revolts of Haradatta Choudhary, a powerful zamindar of North
Kamrup and the Darrang Raja Krishna Narayan were backed by local
peoples support. It is worthmentioning that the local people of Kamrup who
were once subjects of the Koch kingdom were psychologically more
attached to the local zamindars like Haradatta Choudhary. The Ahom
administration did not trust the people of Kamrup and there was
precautionary restrictions on the entry of Kamrupias in the towns of
Gauhati and Rangpur.36

The moamoria uprising pulled a new series of events which proved
to be a curse for the Ahom rule. The Burmese occupation and finally the
British annexation were the outcome of these events. British appearance
in the state was accepted by its people as a great boon. They
acknowledged the British supremacy and welcomed them. The alien
administration, finding no remarkable source of income in the initial years,
preferred to collect the land revenue in a more profitable way. The policy
was continued with the same spirit even after the consolidation of the
British Power. Infact it started enhancing land revenue in one pretext or
other, referred to earlier. It is to note that the people of Assam had been
suffered from frustration and insecurities since the Moamoria insurrection

34 Ibid, P. 119
The Burmese aggression was the last blow on the distress of the people.
The structure of the society was completely overhauled. Under such
circumstances the people of Assam including Kamrup welcomed the
British and never questioned against their rule. Meanwhile, the compulsory
military service in the form of \textit{paik} system under Ahom rule irritated the
subjects. A remarkable size of Ahom subjects used to become \textit{bhakats} of
temples or \textit{satras} and thus tried to avert compulsory military service. In
1824 total cultivable land of Kamrup was 294,027 \textit{bighas}. About half of this
land was alienated for religious and other purposes. Of the 16,512
registered \textit{paiks} of Kamrup, only one fourth were there in the direct
service of the state and the rest were being employed in the services of the
temples, other land grantees and officials.\footnote{Bhuyan, S K, Anglo-Assamese Relation; 1771-1826, Gauhati, 1974, P 531; Guha A., Op cit., P 133} In comparison with the paiks
under state service, the peasants of such temple or \textit{satra} as well as the
paiks working under different lords used to live in content.

It is to be mentioned that the abolition of slavery in 1843 was one of
the good measures taken by the British Government. It almost crippled the
Ahom aristocracy. This stand of the British \textit{raj} severely affected the
Brahmins, Mahantas and other landlords who had their innumerable slaves
for cultivation of \textit{debottar, dharmottar} and \textit{brahmotter} land. The Brahmin
slaveholders of Kamrup district even held protest demonstration and submitted to the authorities thousands of petitions seeking permission to retain their slaves.38 But inspite of the abolition of slavery, bulk of the freed slaves appeared to have been poor tenants due to the absence of rehabilitation programme.

The government's view towards the peasants was that the "Assamese cultivators were very well off." There was little actual poverty in the province and opium consumption increased their indolent habits.39 But whatever may be the concept of the British rulers, in fact the peasants did not remain contented under the British although. It is true that the peasants welcomed a settled condition of life brought in by the British rule. But, on the other hand, most of the cultivators who were dependant on the landlords for cultivable land, had continuous transaction with the moneylenders. Because in most cases they had to pay rent in cash. But mustard was the only important cash crop. As a result, they were always in moneytary crisis which led them to continue transaction with the money lenders, who squeezed the cream of the peasantry. In the district, according to the Census Report of 1891, there was 1,211 registered

39 Saikia, Rajen, Social and Economic History of Assam, Delhi, 2000, P 104
moneylenders who used to lend money.\textsuperscript{40} Besides these, most of the cultivators in the times of crisis went to their landlords for monetary help in return of which they had to pay heavily.

**The Raijmel:s**

Under such a circumstance, any proposal of the government for enhancement of land revenue naturally irritated the people. The Assamese peasants however did not raise any protest against the hike of land revenue till 1861. The first severe protest came from the peasants of phulguri, Nowgong, in 1861 when the rates of revenue were made double\textsuperscript{41}. The riots of Patharughat also reacted to it and organised Raijmel against enhancement of the revenue. Likewise the peasants of Gobinda pur, Hadira and Bajali were found to have been aggrieved over the enhancement of the land revenue.\textsuperscript{42} In case of all these grievances of the peasants, the alien government took a very stern attitude and followed repressive measure. So was the case of Hajo Raijmel. The Hajo Raijmel proved the fact that the government repression failed to subdue the peasants' voice. In 1870 the government decided for settlement of all kinds of land and to impose rents accordingly. As a result, in May 1890,

\textsuperscript{40} Quoted from Guha, A op. cit., P 48
\textsuperscript{41} Letter No 760, from G. Godrey, Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts to Chief Commissioner, Dated, Gauhati, the 27\textsuperscript{th} March, 1894 (Home Proceedings, No 320, Assam Secretariat), also quoted by Barman, S, "The mels System in Assam, A Socio-Cultural Study (A Research Project, Unpublished), P 78
\textsuperscript{42} Barman, S, Ibid, P 79
Raijmels were held in different Tehsil areas of Hajo. The Raijmels decided not to pay rent of land. Government remained indifferent to it. Going ahead of this policy, in 1892, the government revised the rates of revenue. Initially the revised rate involved an enhancement of 53 percent on the average, but in many villages of Kamrup it was as high as 70 to 100 percent. On the face of public opposition, the Chief Commissioner passed orders to reduce the increased rate in effect to an average 37 percent. The rayots on the other hand demanded a postponement of the collection of rent even at the reduced rate until the final orders of the government of India. But the Chief Commissioner disallowed such postponment.

Raijmel movement assumed the final phase during 1893. In this series Raijmels were held in the tehsils of Pati Darrang, Nalbari, Barama, Bajali and also in the mauzas of upper Barbhag and Barkhetry. On 24th December, 1893, a Raijmel was held at Balagaon, a village closed to Rangia. It appears that the mel dealt with the incidence of the enhanced land revenue and decided for its non-payment. It is found that the dissatisfaction of the raij took a violent turn and taking advantage of the

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43 Ibid p. 81
situation the Government followed repressive measures and prohibited the sitting of Raijmel.

As has been pointed out by McCabe, the Raijmels were held again at Nalbari and Uppar Barbhag mauza in 1894. It is found that a Raijmel was held at Rajkadamtal of Sandha Paikarkuchi near Nalbari and it decided to proceed to Rangia for raising protest against the revenue hike. In the Raijmel of Rajkadamtal, leading role was played by Rupkanta Dalai, a resident of Guakuchi village.

Like Rajkadamtal, Raijmels were held at Bajali after imposition of prohibition, referred to. The Raijmels of Bajali areas issued injunction to resist the raij against the payment of enhanced revenue. In Barama Tehsils also Raijmels were held in the same spirit.

It is to be noted that the rayots expressed their disappointment and discussed the issue in the Raij mels. These mels were governed by the leading dalais or Gossains and by the principal landholders of the district. McCabe, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup even compared

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46 R B McCabe, Op Cit,
47 Barman S, Op Cit, P. 88
48 Ibid P. 88
49 Letter from R B Mccabe, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup to the commissioner of Assam valley districts, Assam Secretarial Proceedings, No. 252, Dispur, State Archives, Dispur
Raijmel to the Nihilist movement of Tsarist Russia.50 Whatever might have been the view of the alien government on the mel's it is sure that the Raijmels were basically guided by the men of honour of the locality, i.e., the landed aristocracy. Hence question arises as to what was the interests of the landholders in inducing the tenants to start revolt against the government. The answer is not far to seek.

In fact, along with the peasantry the non-cultivating rural gentry, i.e., the landholders were angered by the hike of land revenue rate. Their anger was not because of the frustration of the peasants due to the hike of revenue, but because of their self interests. Most of the landholders had under tenants. They feared that it would be impossible to realise the increased revenue from them and as a result their profit as middlemen would be cut down. Such fear made the landlords anxious and they opted for instigating the peasants against the government decision. They commanded the peasants to oppose the government stand, but they did not show their own faces. Their role in this uprising was diabolical. When the government took the path of repression, these so-called leaders betrayed the peasants and disappeared.51 One instance is sufficient in this respect. Jogeswar Gossain, was the Gossain of Byashkuchi satra. His

50 Ibid
51 Guha, A , Op cit , P. 54
brother Maju Gossain alias Ananta Gossain was an active leader in the area during the uprising. Having implicated him as the leader of the movement, the subdivisional officer of Barpeta, Madhav Chandra Bardaloi ordered him to pull plough in the field. Such activity was against the well-settled norms of the high-caste Hindus. Then Jogeswar Gossain went to Barpeta and convinced the Sub-Divisional Officer to keep his brother refrain from the revolt and thereby cancelled the orders.52

The condition of the rayots was like that of a scapegoat. On the one side they had to face the tehsildar who said “if you do not pay tax, your property will be attached.”53 On the other side there was the raij i.e., embodiment of the orders of the mel which stated “if you do pay, you are cursed and excommunicated”.54 The rayots followed the command of their leaders due to the fear of ostracism with the concept that ‘it was the raijar hukum’.55

Basically, the uprising of 1893 was not spontaneous; it was inspired, as stated earlier. Inspiration came from the non cultivating landowners. Nodoubt, everybody was hard pressed due to the increase of land

52 Rajimel Souvenir, Centenary Celebration, Sarthebari 1994.
54 Ibid
55 Ibid.
revenue. Peasants' condition was more pitiable. They produced only rice which was not a cash crop. On the otherhand, major share of their produced went to the bharals of the zamindars in the forms of revenue cesses etc. Under such circumstances when they found green signal from their so-called protectors. i.e., the landlords, they rose in revolt without knowing any specific discipline of . At the same time, it was not uncommon that some landlords, though few in number and their close followers, took government side and urged the rayots to pay the land revenue as imposed by the government. Such landlords had to face public wrath. One instance may be cited here. The mauzadar of Sarthebari Das Ram choudhary tried to convince the rayots to pay the revised land revenue. But Sarthebari was one of the most important sites of the revolt. Like Pati Darrang, Rangia, Nalbari, Barama and Barbhag, Raijmels were held in khetri paragana also. Raijmels unanimously adopted the following decisions –

(1) not to follow the government decision of revenue hike, and
(2) anybody who would defy the decision of the Raijmel would be punished and excommunicated.

56 Raijmel Souvenir, centenary celebration, Sarthebari, 1994
Government on the other hand took a very stern attitude towards such decisions of the *mels*. McCabe, the Deputy commissioner issued a notice on 10th January, 1894. "Whereas the assembly or *mels* in the district of Kamrup has resulted in riot and criminal intimidation, it is hereby ordered that no *mel* shall assemble within the *Tehsils* of Pati Darrang Rangia, Nalbari, Tamulpur, Hajo, Barama and Bajali or in the *mauzas* of Sarukhetri without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner. Any persons joining such assembly after the issue of the notice will be punished according to law." ⁵⁷

The agitated peasants of Sarthebari, Rangia, PatiDarrang and other places did not care such government order and held *mels*. As a result, these places became the chief sites of uprising.

It is important to note that *Raijmel* was held at Panagaon near Sarthebari. Thousands of people assembled in the *mel*. A large number of *rayots* came from Nalbari, Rangia, Bajali, Dharmapur and Barbhag. Madhav Chandra Bardaloi, the Sub-Divisional Officer of Barpeta appeared in the *mel* and tried to convince the *raij* about the legality and justness of the government decision. But the *raij* were not happy at his efforts and defied

⁵⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home-A, Sept., 1894 Rangia, Lachima, Patharughat riots, No, 257, State Archives, Dispur
him. Then the officer, on the force of his official position misbehaved the assembled raij. Such ill-treatment of an indigenous officer irritated the people who physically attacked him. At last the officer bowed down before the raij by paying fine and left the place.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Raijmels were also held at Rangia and PatiDarrang. The revolted raij assembled in mels and adopted anti government stand. In Pati Darrang also some landlords openly supported the government while some others induced the people to rise against the government decision. Bejoy Choudhary, a landholder of Pati Darrang paid his revenue to the Pati Darrang Tehsilder on 22\textsuperscript{nd} December, 1893. The Gaonbura named Manu was commanded by the raij to bring the Choudary before the \textit{Raijmel}. Subsequently Bejoy Choudhary had to bow down before the raij and compelled to pay a fine of Rs. 25.\textsuperscript{59}}

The government by following the policy of repression was able to subdue the revolt. Most of the rayots were kept in jail. The landlords who primarily excited the peasants were now able to keep themselves away from the rising and pretended to be the law abiding bulk. The arrested peasants had to suffer imprisonment.

\textsuperscript{58} Raijmel souvenir, op. cit. p 24

\textsuperscript{59} ibid
Altogether 145 peasants had to suffer imprisonment in the Sarthebari area alone. Likewise, in Rangia, Pati Darrang and other places many people had been imprisoned. Thus the Raijmel movement became leaderless and ultimately fizzled out. The roar of the movement turned to be quiet bubble. The question appears as to why the elites of the province failed to understand the spirit of the Raijmel held at Lachima, Byaskuchi, Rangia and Pati Darrang. The peasantry had genuine grievances but they could do very little towards their redressal. In fact, there was a lack of common cause among the rebels. It is very clear that there were three contending parties in the uprising, instead of two. Besides the government and the rayots, there were the landlords who spoke through the mouths of the rayots. The class interests of the landlords was different from that of the rayots. This rural gentry brought out the rayots to stand against the government. The rayots came out to the street without any consideration for its results. Therefore, failure of the revolt was not surprising.

However it cannot be concluded that the Raijmel movement was entirely a futile exercise. The government of India subsequently reduced the overall initial increase of land revenue to a 32.7 percent of the previous demand at the old rates under the pressure of the revolt. No doubt, that
was a partial victory of the raij. The echo of the Raijmel movement was heard in the Imperial Legislative Council itself through the spirited voice of Dr. Rashbihari Ghosh.60

PEASANT UNREST UNDER COMMUNIST BANNER:

After 1894, there was no outburst of the peasants in the Brahmaputra valley till the non-cooperation movement. Infact, in a period of forty years after the uprising of 1894, the peasantry ceased to be unipartite body. But they were not reconciled to the British rule. The fact is that the peasant community mingled itself in the freedom struggle under the flag of the Indian National Congress.

The freedom struggle assumed a new turn under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The policy and principles of the Indian National Congress, to a large extent tried to attract the peasant community by adopting different proposals in favour of the peasantry. In 1937 the Indian National Congress drew up detailed agrarian programme which included measures like reduction of revenue, assessment of agricultural income, abolition of feudal practices and forced labour, fixing of tenure with

60 Guha, A., planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle And Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947, New Delhi, 1988 (Reprint), P. 54.
heritable rights, removal of rural debt etc. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was influenced by this programme. Moreover, this was the period during which a number of local peasant organizations were being started in the Brahmaputra and Surama valleys and Goalpara. Their main demands were on the reduction and remission of land revenue, distribution of agricultural loan, abolition of cart tax etc. Rayot Sabhas, Halowa Sangha etc. were organized in the Brahmaputra valley. In Kamrup District some Rayot Sabhas were organised on mauza basis. They became the part and parcel of the All Assam Rayot Sabha. It is important to note that the Rayot Sabhas included the congress men also.

There is no denying the fact that the National Congress Party had increasingly become the party of the landlords' interest. Therefore inspite of its socialist tune, in actuality it rarely went against the interests of its own class. It is due to this reason that the organization had failed to carry out resolution on land reform. Its members in the Brahmaputra valley had come down to 2,620 only in 1935-36. This downward organizational position of the Congress Party led Nehru to advise his followers that "the basis of your organization will inevitably be the peasantry and therefore

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61 Bargohain, R., Politics of Land Reform in Assam, p.9, New Delhi, 1982, P-9
63 Ibid, p 254
you should keep the agrarian reforms ever before you and discuss this with the peasantry⁶⁴.

But the presence of ever increasing landlords in the party compelled the Congress not to neglect their interests. Such vested interest in the Congress did serious harm to the party. It paved the way for rising Communist ideology for the safeguard of the peasants. Even within the Congress Party, a socialist group emerged out.

In the permanently settled areas i.e., Goalpara and Sylhet districts, landlord tenant conflict dominated the peasant agitations. But the Brahmaputra valley including Kamrup experienced the conflict between the state and the peasantry. There were cry for fifty percent reduction in land revenue. The Congress as well as the Rayot Sabha were clamouring with such demand. Some disillusioned Congress men of the Brahmaputra valley came to the fold of under ground Communist League. The peasant and labour party i.e., the Krishak Banua Panchayat was formed at a meeting of delegates from several districts, held at Gauhati on may 2,1940. Kedar Nath Goswami presided over this meeting⁶⁵. Another group of youths who formed the Gauhati Byayam Sangha in 1935, joined the Communist

⁶⁴ Ibid
⁶⁵ Ibid, p.249
League. On December 6, 1939 the All Assam Progressive Youth Association was formed. A `Radical Institute' well known as a study center had come into existence and it served as the chief study center of the members of the progressive Association and the Communist League.

Thus a left organizational framework had already developed in the Brahmaputra valley and it took a leading role in safeguarding the interests of the peasant community. But it is to note that before the appearance of a radical uprising of the peasant community under Communist banner, there was some sort of peaceful and unorganized peasant struggle in the Kamrup district.

In 1932-33, the unorganized tenants of Kamrup agitated for the grant of occupancy right through suitable legislation. It is to note that except in the district of Goalpara, there was no legislation for tenant landlord relationship in the state. The rayots of the district had a long-standing demand of occupancy right. For want of this right, they often failed to secure any agricultural credit in times of need. On the other hand, as referred to, they were subjected to different arbitrary cesses as well as physical labours by their landlords.

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It is to note that Kamrup had experienced the tremendous pressure of the oppressed peasants who suffered from ignorance and economic insufficiency. Out of 1,89,000 acres of nisfkhiraj land in the province during 1932-33, about 1,35,000 acres were concentrated in this district. Furthermore, in the khiraj area, altogether 18 percent land was sublet. On the other hand, till then no peasant organization was formed in the true sense of the term. As expected, the branches of the Rayat Sabhas or the Congress Committee could have include agenda on the problem of the peasants. Infact the members of the said organizations were apathetic to it.

A petition, signed by some 2000 tenants of Kamrup was addressed to the Governor-General-in-Council for legislative redress of their grievances. Public meetings were held in support of their demands. The landlords even did not oppose the movement. Because, the tenants were agreeable to certain provisions on the same line as prescribed in the Goalpara Tenancy, Act 1929. At last, in response to the agitation, the Council recommended tenancy legislation for all temporarily settled areas on March, 21, 1933. In the state legislature the need for tenancy legislation in the temporarily settled areas was voiced through the motion raised by R.K. Choudhary. Accordingly the government introduced the

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67 Guha, A., op. cit., P. 182
68 Ibid, p.183
Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act in 1934. It seriously provoked the landlords who opposed the Act tooth and nail. But in spite of their opposition as well as that of the Select Committee which was dominated mostly by the landlords, the Reformed Council voted 39 to 1 to adopt the official motion for its recommittal. And ultimately on June 7, 1935 the Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act was passed. It came into force in 1937 and provided for all such tenants rights in substance as were there in the Sylhet and Goalpara Tenancy Acts.69

In fact bulk of the peasantry who had no surplus to sell and who had been suffering from incessant oppressive treatment of the aristocracy, both spiritual and political, failed to organize themselves effectively for agitation from a single platform. However, towards the late forties socialist and communist thought influenced the young and student intelligentsia in the valley. They started believing that the demand for national freedom had to be concretely linked with workers and peasants interests. The Congress Socialist Party, formed in 1834 and the formation of the Communist League in the same year by Saumendra Nath Tagore of Bengal were not insignificant events for the socio-political structure of the Brahmaputra valley.

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69 Ibid, p 203
The surprising fact is that long before the peasant revolts like Tebhaga which rocked almost 19 districts of Bengal in 1946\textsuperscript{70}, Kamrup experienced peasant struggle under the guidance of red flag. The Communist League, referred to, was renamed as Revolutionary Communist party since 1942. This party was also known as Radical party. This name was imposed due to the fact that the members of the earlier Communist League were closely attached to the 'Radical Institute' situated in Guwahati. Amongst the most active workers of the Radical group in Gauhati, the names of Haren Kalita, Deben Sarma, Upen Sarma, Gokul Medhi, Hari Das Deka, Bhupen Mahanta, Biren Senapati, Satya Chaudhary, Mathura Deka, Khagen Goswami, Tara Mazumdar and Gobinda Kalita were notable. Such workers organized a movement in 1942, which though, was not a peasant revolt in the true sense of term, opened the eyes of the oppressed peasantary. The ‘Do Sutimukhar’ movement,\textsuperscript{71} as it was called, was a lesson to the people of the area that united mass could do anything. In Upar-Barbhag mauza, the confluence of Baralia and Pagaldia rivers was known as ‘Do sutimukh’. There was a bamboo bridge over the Baralia river in Do-Sutimukh. It was about two kilometers away from the Bijulighat under the then Nalbari circle. One Arun Medhi took the ghat in lease from the local Board authority. Arun Medhi

\textsuperscript{70} Omar, Badamddin, Shirosthayee Bandobasto, Bangladesher Khrishak, 3\textsuperscript{rd} print, May 1983, p 71
\textsuperscript{71} Deka, Tarun Sen, Op. cit., p.45
proposed to dismantle the bamboo bridge over the Baralia river and thereby compel the peasants to use the boat in crossing the river for which they would have to pay. This created furor among the peasants. Under such a circumstance, the Revolutionary Communist leadership of Guwahati appointed Gobinda Kalita, Tarun Sen Deka and Lokhath Barua to help the peasants against the ill-designed attempt of the leasee. These three communist workers went to Bijulighat, a place about 10 kilometers away from Nalbari town and stayed there for three months for organizing resistance to breaking of the bridge. They even met Umesh Chandra Choudhary, the chairman of Guwahati Local Board to get assurance of the continuance of the bridge, but in vain. At last they made up their minds for agitation and organized the peasants of the area, particularly of the villages like Kamarkuchi, Arangmau, Ramdia, Nakheti, Ratkuchi, Porakuchi, Dingdingi and Ulabari. The agitated peasants came out to the street and protested against the decision of the Local Board which permitted Arun Medhi to break up the bridge. Arun Medhi on the otherhand, with the assistance of police party went to 'Do sutimukh' to damage the bridge. But the agitators appeared in the spot shouting slogan and terror stricken Arun Medhi along with the police personals. The peasants achieved grand success in this small but significant event. Government arrested some people involved in it. At last, one Puran Das
was made guilty and sentenced to imprisonment. On the other hand, the Local Board Authority ordered Arun Medhi to keep the bridge intact.72

This incident of ‘Dosutimukh’ opened the eyes of the poor and oppressed peasantry and organizational activities of the Revolutionary Communist Party increased considerably.

As referred to, peculiar land system in Kamrup created a huge number of dependent *rayots* whose conditions were very pitiable. Now the Communists propagandists being enthusias, came out for their redressal. The Communists organized the peasants of Kamrup and formed *Krishak Panchayat*. The main demands of the *Krishak Panchayat* were

(i) Fix eight *pura* paddy per year for one *pura faringati* land.

(ii) Fix twelve *pura* paddy per year for one *pura bardhantoli* land.

(iii) Stop every kind of feudal oppression.

(iv) Allot lands to the landless peasants.

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72 Ibid, P.46
The *Krishak Panchayat* was capable of alerting the rayots who were accustomed in bearing longstanding feudalistic torture. Gobinda Kalita led this movement at Beltola and in different places in south Kamrup. In south Kamrup, due to erosion of the Brahmaputra, condition of the peasants went from bad to worse. Every year numberless peasants became landless. The *Krishak Panchayat* of south Kamrup region organized a huge rally in 1941 demanding allotment of land to the erosion hit landless peasants. It is to be noted that it was the first peasant rally in Assam.\(^7\)

After this demonstration, the communists started campaigning to enhance the consciousness of the oppressed peasantry. In the region, under the leadership of Gobinda Kalita, Bhadra Choudhary and Banti Mahajan, every village was jerked and highly inspired.\(^4\) The propagandists excited the rayots against their ruthless landlords. They demanded reform in *adhi* system and proposed to reduce the landlords' share. In 1946, the conference of the Nikhil Assam *Krishak Panchayat* was held at Bhanguripara, South Kamrup. Subsequently another conference was held at Bangara, South Kamrup.\(^5\)

These conferences educated the mass people in South Goalpara, i.e., Dhupdhara, Palashbari to Beltola and Panbari mauzas. Now they got

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\(^{7}\) *Ibid*, P 50

\(^{4}\) *Interview with Gobinda Kalita*, Guahati

\(^{5}\) *Deka, Tarun Sen*, Op. Cit., P. 50
their eyes opened and prepared to gather courage to defy illegal claims of their landlords.

On the other hand, the landlords were not sitting idle. They formed *Pattadar Sangha* and with the help of the government machinery taken coercive action against the peasants. Arrests, lathicharge etc. were very common weapons of the police to stop the activities of the *Krishak Panchayat* leaders. It is to note here that in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, people of Assam like other states of India were very much busy in struggling to oust the British from Indian soil. In this struggle the people were basically guided by the Indian National Congress. As referred to, the Congress party was the conglomeration of different classes of the society i.e., the planters, landlords, spiritual and landed aristocrats, traders, peasants and workers. Virtually in such a huge organization, leading role was played by the men of upper strata. The peasants and workers, though their number was immense had just to carry out the proceedings of the party. For instance, when a big rally was arranged at Guahati after the arrest of some leaders of freedom movement, in 1942, the *rayots* of Beltola were asked by their landlords to participate in it. The *rayots* followed the command.76

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76 Interview with Gobinda Kalita, Guahati
It appears that the peasants were becoming mere tools at the hands of the Congress leadership. Under such circumstances, when organization like *Krishak Panchayat* tried to do away with their misery, they quickly sided with such organization. But the militant approach to crush the oppression of *zamindars* who crowded the Congress party was severely obstructed by both the government and the Congress itself. In spite of such opposition, peasant uprising continued under the revolutionary Communists and their enterprise did not end in vain. In fact it was due to such pressure that the Adhiaar Protection Act, 1948 and the Ceeling Act, 1956 were passed.

The popular belief of the Revolutionary Communist party was that the Congress would not be able to arrange the war against British. Because, the British interests and that of the Indian bourgeoisie were identical. The Congress party normally reflected the wills and ambitions of this bourgeoisie class. There was a socialist group within the Congress, but their limitation was clearly visible. However, inspite of such pro-bourgeoisie interests, popularity of Gandhi and Nehru made Congress Party a strong platform of the freedom movement which entangled almost all the classes of the society. On the other hand local influence of the landed aristocracy inspired the peasants to jump into the freedom struggle
under the Congress banner. And that was the fact as to why the Communists found difficulties in their efforts to gather the oppressed peasantry against the landlords. But in spite of such difficulties the enthusiasts and young communists went ahead of their programme.

In the North Kamrup, peasant agitation assumed ferocious form. During 1943–44, some parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa came under severe food crisis. Its impact was far-reaching. Some opportunist businessmen, particularly in North Kamrup and Goalpara, purchased paddy in the market of Kamrup at the rate of four to six rupees per *mounds* (i.e., forty kilogram) and carried it on boats through river roots to such places where it was sold at the rate of 18 to 20 rupees per *mounds*. Some landlords of Kamrup also joined in this profitable business. The Radicalists determined to stop this business and engaged volunteers to search the businessmen who were purchasing paddy from different markets of Kamrup. In doing so, the overenthusiast Communist volunteers not only searched the paddy purchasers but also entered into the *bharals* of some landlords and by force distributed their surplus paddy among the poor and needy *rayats* at the rate of rupees five to six per *mounds*. They paid it over
to the landlords. This measure of the Radicalists excited the peasants who started looking at the militant leaders with supports.

Practically from 1945 to 1947 the labour and peasants throughout the whole country rose to militant consciousness; the freedom struggle was also turning to the decisive end. During the period, the collective awareness of the peasant community became a reality. The Tebhaga movement spread over more than one dozen districts of Bengal. At Basti and Ballia in Uttar Pradesh the atrocities of the zamindars on the rayots crossed limit and it resulted in ferocious peasant revolt. In Panjab, centering Layalpur district, peasant movement got widespread. In Hyderabad, the Telengana peasant movement which continued till 1951, jerked the entire peasant community of the country. The impact of all these peasant uprisings was far reaching in Assam. The pro-peasant communist leaders of Kamrup encouraged the peasants of Beltola, Rani, Chaygaon, Boko and Palashbari to claim for reduction of the quantity of paddy which they were paying to their landlords as adhi. Soon after the completion of the conferences held at Bhanguripara and Bangara, referred to, the uproar assumed a serious turn in the district. The 'eight pura twelve pura' paddy movement, was widespread in the whole district. This movement unnerved the landlords who formed the Pattadar Sangha. The first conference of the

77 Ibid.
Pattadar Sangha was held at Rayabari village, South Rani. But, on that very day of the conference, a huge number of rayots under the leadership of Krishak Panchayat came forward and put resistance to the Sangha. The members of the Pattadar Sangha failed to resist the rayots and hence insisted on the Congress government of the state to create a reign of terror. But such effort failed, because, the rayots were led by Communist leaders like Habiram Deka, Gobinda Kalita and others.78

In the Beltola mauza, Kamini Sarma, a young and enthusiast worker of Krishak Panchayat worked hard to unite the peasants of the area. He, along with some other workers of Krishak Panchayat pulled towards the Panchayat, the peasants of the villages like Birkuchi, Bonda, Tetelia, Kerakuchi, Kalitakuchi, Amcheng, Jorabat, Satgaon, Kahilipara, Barbari, Chaokuchi, Latuma, Kuptipara, Dhalmama, Pamhi, Moina Khorang, Garhchuk, Katobazar, Ahomgaon, Garogaon, Dhirenpara, Manpara, Datalpara etc. and enhanced the strength of the krishak Panchayat. In these villages, it was Krishak Panchayat which determined the rate of the amount of paddy payable to the landlords for adhi. The oppressed peasants enthusiastically followed the footsteps of the Communists who were vigilant in the district.79

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78 Ibid.
79 Interview with Kamini Sarma, Rangia, Kamrup.
In the North Kamrup villages, this movement did not lag behind in the Batahghila mauza of Nalbari Division, the rayots were impressed by the Communists and stood against the extortion of the landlords. As referred to, the Gossain of Katara Shyamrai Satra was even killed by rayots. The rayots of this area coming under the influence of the Krishak Sabha dared to reduce the landlords share of adhi. It is to mention here that as a common practice, there was a big measuring balance or tarju infront of every landlords house. After the harvesting of paddy, the rayots had to come to the landlords house with the paddy for measurement in the tarju. Now the agitated rayots did not care to measure the paddy in the tarju.  

In North Kamrup another sangathan known as Krishak Banua Sangha became popular among the oppressed sections of the people. The chief agenda of this organization was to encroach land form government reserves and distribute it among the landless peasants. The workers of the sangha forcefully occupied the areas of Tulsibari reserve near Rangia and some reserves near Bhawanipur. Their effort at Tulsibari ended in vain due to the determination of the government to resist it. The members of the Sangha constructed huts in the occupied areas of the reserve. But the police set fire to the huts and pushed back the occupaints.

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80 Ibid.
of the area under the control of the members of the Sangha. They were successful in encroaching the reserve land of Tapa, Bamunbari and Phularguri. Tapa, possessed about 600 bighas of land. The revolutionaries brought a large number of landless peasants particularly from Era Bamundi, Barpeta and settled them in the reserve land. Most of them were lower caste people, particularly nomosudra (fishermen). Each newly settled peasant was given a bigha of land. But subsequently, the local people opposed the new settlers who had to leave the place. The local people occupied the reserve areas and started growing paddy, mustered sugarcane etc. Even today, these reserve areas are being cultivated by the local people and thus they are contributing to the state economy.

Another reserve namely Matikhowa and Theka possessed twenty two thousand bighas of land. A Large number of landless peasants mostly of the lower classes were settled in the reserve areas with six bighas of land each. Subsequently Mahendra Mohan Choudhary, as revenue minister awarded Ekchania Patta to each of encrochers. But with the passage of time the original settlers of the reserves sold off their land to

\[81\] Ibid.

82 Interview with Puharam Nath, Bamunbari, Tapa, Barpeta District.
some other people most of whom were immigrant Muslims. At present these reserves are cultivated by these people.\textsuperscript{83}

Besides the government reserves, in some places they grabbed land from landlords. For instance, some workers of the \textit{Krishak Banua Sangha} forcefully occupied a vast area in sonpur under Nalbari Town; the lands were owned by Choudhary family of elengidal.\textsuperscript{84} This land encroachment movement got widespread popularity amongst the landless people who now became part and parcel of the \textit{Krishak Banua Sangha}. The movement of North Kamrup was led by Gobinda Sil, Hari Mohan Das, Rati Swangiary, Harum Ali, Ganesh Majumdar and Lohit Das. Thousands of landless peasants came on foot from the foothill of Bhutan and marched to Shillong through Gauhati. They assembled at Barpeta, Nalbari, and Gauhati and then proceeded to Shillong. The agitators handed over a memorandum to the government of Assam demanding to allot land from the government reserves to the landless peasants. This incident enhanced the enthusiasm of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{85}

The communist activities enabled the peasants to gather courage to question their landlords against oppression. As a matter of fact the

\textsuperscript{83} Interview with Mahendra Das, Tapa, Barpeta District
\textsuperscript{84} Interview with Adya Choudhary, a senior member of the mauzadar family, Elengidal, Nalbari District
\textsuperscript{85} Guha, A., Op. cit., P. 313; interview with Kamini Sarma, Ranga, Kamrup
incidents of Dinha and Katara referred to, were emboldened by this spirit of militant reaction. Now the *raytots* could dare not to offer 'sarai' i.e. a token of honour, to the landlords on different occasions and ask them to stop illegal cesses. The peasants were excited by the communists to start a movement well known as 'Nangal jar mati tar'. This movement compelled many of the landlords of almost all the *mauzas* under Nalbari and Barpeta Divisions to sacrifice their share of crops.\(^{86}\) The *rayots* under leadership of the *Krishak Banua Sangha* forced the landlords to minimize their share of crop. Furthermore, some landless peasants encroached land from the surplus land of the zamindars, referred to.

The landlords with the assistance of the Congres government tried to stop such activities of the Communists. The government banned Revolutionary Communist party and thus tried to satisfy the landlords. Meanwhile Acharyye Binova Bhave started his famous Bhudan Movement. The chief aim of this movement was to allot land to the landless peasants from the supply lands of *zamindars* through peaceful means. Binovaji traveled throughout India and instituted *gramdani* committee to collect land from the *zamindars* and distribute amongst the landless peasants. Binovaji even came to Nalbari and delivered a lecture on *bhudan*, It is important to note that the *zamindars* of Kamrup suppoted the *Bhudan*
movement and preferred to leave proprietorship of certain portion of their land. Two reasons guided them to support the *bhudan* movement-

(i) The *Nangal jar mati tar* movement frightened the landlords. They eagerly expected to minimize the influence of the Communists. By allotting land under the banner of *bhudan yagnya* they sought to minimize the communist activities.

(ii) The *Zamindar* found an opportunity to allot their poor and non-productive land.

The government of Assam also offered helping hands to this movement and passed the *gramdan* Act of 1961 and Bhudan Act of 1965.

No doubt, the *bhudan* scheme quelled the anger and frustration of some landless peasants. But to a large extent it weakened the peasant movement. While the 'Nangal jar mati tar' movement enhanced enthusiasm of the peasant community, the *bhudan* movement itself appeared like an air cooler.

Thus landlordism paved the way for peasant uprisings in the district.
and their oppressive behaviour towards the rayots seemed to be enhancing. In North Kamrup, Zamindars frequently used to cancel the allotment of land to the rayots in the pretext of getting slight difference in adhi income. And allotted the particular plot of land to an another rayot. This practice made the former rayot landless. Such arbitrary treatment of the Zamindars helped the Communists to be popular in the area. The Revolutionary Communist party workers like Tarun Sen Deka, Rati Swargiary, Nabin Medhi, Loknath Barua etc. successfully enlightened the rayots of North Kamrup and induced them to reduce the share of adhi. Thus coming under the influence of these workers some rayots even stopped paying the share of adhi to the landlords. Some started paying their share less than the prescribed measure. The landlords put united pressure on the Congress government to punish the revolutionary leaders. Accordingly, the government followed the tactics of arrests, beating etc. to create an atmosphere of terror.

In fact, bulk of the peasantry who had no surplus produce to sell and had been suffering from incessant oppression of the landed aristocracy, failed to organise themselves for a struggle. It is true that towards the end of the fourth decade of twentieth century communist ideology gripped the

87 Ibid.
88 Deka, Tarun Sen, Op cit, P. 168
young men. They believed that the demand for national independence had to be concretely linked with peasants and workers. It was under such a background that the Congress Socialist party as well as the Communist League were formed. Besides these, there sprang up Krishak Banua Sangh, Krishak Sabha, Khet Majdoor Sangha etc. Such organizations took initiative to redress the grievances of the peasants.

Peasant struggle in the district however, failed to achieve complete success. It was due to the fact that the collective awareness of the oppressed peasantry was not common everywhere. Secondly, the congress party uttering the popular names of Gandhi, Nehru and others compelled the bulk of the peasant community to side with it, in lieu of the communist programmes. Thirdly, the government started some half-hearted measures to satisfy the peasants. All these stood in the way of a strong peasant movement in Kamrup as well as Assam and that resulted in the continuity of troubles of the peasant community. One however cannot argue that the peasant struggle did yield nothing. Infact, it was the pressure of these peasant struggle which compelled the independent governments to pass various Acts. Credit goes to the communist organizations which paved the way for passing different pro-peasant legislations.

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