CHAPTER - V

AGRA RIAN REFORM IN ASSAM : MYTH AND REALITY

With imposition of the Ryotwari system, as we have already discussed in Chapter-III, the colonial rule in Assam had paved the way for emergence of a class of landed aristocracy which was loyal to the colonial interests though they themselves were not very rich. Being privileged under the colonial rule, this small section of the society has the access to modern education and ideas, and consequently assumed the characteristics of an enlightened middle class. During the course of freedom movement it provided political leadership to the Asamiya society under the banner of the Indian National Congress. And, with independence, the same section of the people had come to the power in Assam. As a junior partner of the Indian capitalist class, its first political task has been to legitimatize class rule in Assam, and agrarian reform has become a major item of its political agenda.

The ruling class in Assam has been successful to create a myth of agrarian reform by enacting several legislations related particularly to the set of production relations in the agrarian sector. These legislations are now glamourized by many as the most radical legislations in the country as a whole. Our primary endeavour in this chapter is to analyse the nature and impacts of the reform legislations enacted by the Government of Assam. Wherever
AGENDA FOR LAND REFORM:

The primary objectives of land reform legislations enacted by the Congress Government in Assam are decisively commensurable with the objectives of the national planning, and obviously, compatible with the growing capitalist interests in agriculture. With an apparent concern for eradication of class exploitation and maximization of production efficiency, the Congress Party which has been ruling over Assam almost continuously (except for the brief period of Janata and A.G.P. rule) since independence, has enacted a good number of land reform legislations. The salient features of all the major legislations are embodied mainly in the programmes for:

(a) abolition of intermediaries;
(b) ceiling on landholding;
(c) consolidation of holdings; and
(d) tenancy reform;

Let us first briefly point out the officially stated objectives of the legislations concerning with each of the programmes and their achievements.

Abolition of Intermediaries:

With a view to acquire the rights of the Proprietors (Zamidars) and intermediary tenure holders (Jotedars and Mirasbdars) in permanently settled areas of Goalpara and
Cachar districts, the Government of Assam enacted the Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951 and it was brought into force from 15 June 1954. In the permanently settled estates of Goalpara district, the implementation of the Act started in 1954. All the six Zamindaries namely Bijni, Gauripur, Parbatjoar, Mechpara, Chapar and Karaihar were acquired in 1954-57, and the rights of other intermediaries were acquired during 1954-72. However, in Cachar, implementation of this Act started a little later, because there were no reliable records of the estates of thousands of small Zamidars called Mirashdars.

According to an official report, by now rights of all proprietors in respect of 3628 estates and those of tenure holders in respect of 4533 tenures covering an area of 16.74 lakh acres have been acquired in the permanently settled areas of the erstwhile Cachar and Goalpara districts. Consequently a large number of tenants have been brought directly under the state government; their rights being that of the land holder.

The Assam State Acquisition of Lands belonging to Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959, was another significant step to do away with intermediary interests held by the Satra, Matha, Public Temple etc. This Act has been brought into force in all the plain districts of Assam with effect from 18 March, 1963. Till now, as an official report reveals, total 3,30,157
bighas (1,09,143 acres) of land belonging to 164 institutions have been acquired. The total area to be acquired from about 200 such institutions is estimated at 3,71,197 bighas (1,22,710 acres). Besides, so far out of the total acquired area, an area of 39,289 bighas (12,988 acres) has been settled.

Ceiling on Land Holding :

The Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holding Act, 1956 was brought into force with effect from 15 February, 1958 in all plain districts of Assam. The level of rural ceiling was 150 bighas to start with. However, this Act was amended and ceiling was brought down to 75 bighas in 1972 and finally to 50 bighas plus 4 bighas for orchard in 1976. According to an official source, the massive acquisition of land under the Land Ceiling Laws from individuals as well as from tea gardens has taken place, and an area of 6,10,369 acres have declared as surplus. The total area acquired from the tea gardens is 4,16591 acres, while 1,93,777 acres has been acquired from the individuals.

The total acquired land, however, was not available for distribution due to a variety of reasons as shown in Table - 5.1.
### TABLE - 5.1

**CEILING SURPLUS LAND NOT AVAILABLE FOR DISTRIBUTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL. NO.</th>
<th>REASON</th>
<th>AREA (In Acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Area under litigation</td>
<td>38,461.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Unfit for distribution</td>
<td>13,105.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Reserved for public purpose</td>
<td>17,250.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Under encroachment</td>
<td>10,275.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>Area not available</td>
<td>4,006.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>83,098.98</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual report: 1992-93, Revenue, Registration and Relief Departments, Government of Assam.

### Table - 5.2

**DISTRIBUTION OF CEILING SURPLUS LAND IN ASSAM**

(Till 31 March, 1993)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of beneficiaries</th>
<th>Area (Acre)</th>
<th>Number of beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>39,168.96</td>
<td>38,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>52,463.53</td>
<td>36,652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3,66,408.17</td>
<td>3,41,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>20,493.93</td>
<td>573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,78,534.59</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,17,662</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Till 31 March, 1993, an area of 4,78,534.59 acres of the ceiling surplus land has been distributed, and the breakup of land allotted to the beneficiaries is shown in Table - 5.2. It can be said on the basis of Table - 5.2 that distribution of ceiling surplus land in Assam has almost come to an end, because more than 90 percent of the ceiling surplus land has already been distributed to more than 4.17 lakhs families and 573 institutions.

Consolidation of Holdings:

Needless to say, fragmentation of operational holdings is one of the major constraints in modernization of the agricultural sector. In the specific context of Assam, relatively a high growth rate of the rural population causing excessive pressure on the agricultural sector is definitely a factor responsible for rapid fragmentation of operational holdings. In order to prevent further fragmentation and to make a situation conducive for mechanized farming by consolidating the small holdings, the Government of Assam enacted the Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960 which came into force in all the plain districts of Assam. The Act was amended in 1966 so that consolidation could be made compulsory. In 1966, the Government of Assam launched a scheme for consolidation of 50,000 bighas in Palashbari, Koliabar and Golaghat. But in the course of implementation, the government had to face several difficulties including lack of enthusiasm and
participation of the people. It was felt that the consolidation would be fruitful only after conferring the ownership rights to the actual cultivators. Hence, it has been decided that implementation of the programme for consolidation of holdings would be kept in abeyance till irrigation facilities develop and ownership rights are conferred to cultivators.

Tenancy Reform:

The tenancy reform programme launched by the Government of Assam includes primarily three sets of measure: (i) regulation of rent; (ii) security of tenure; (iii) ownership rights for tenants.

Being inspired by the famous 'Tebhaga' movement of Bengal, the left parties in Assam, particularly the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), and the Communist Party of India (CPI), had also sought to mobilize the peasants against the prevailing Adhi (share-cropping) system in the state immediately after independence. In response to that, the Government of Assam enacted the Assam Adhiaar Protection and Regulation Act, 1948. This Act prescribed that only one fourth of principal crop should be given as crop rent by the Adhiaar (share-cropper) to the landlord.

However, the Act has become ineffective because of failure of the government to take strong steps against the landlords who violated its provisions. The tenants generally
avoided any confrontation with the landlords as they were afraid of being ejected forcefully from the land if they demanded statutory rent. In some isolated pockets, of course, the tenants insisted on implementation of the Act. But, this led to a situation where the landlords with the help of police seized the entire crop from the possession of the tenants followed by their eviction.

After almost 23 years from enactment of the previous Act, the Government of Assam enacted a new legislation - The Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971. This Act was originally applicable to the temporarily settled areas of Assam, but now it has been made applicable to the earstwhile permanently settled areas of Goalpara and Cachar districts too. This Act seeks to reduce drastically the rent payable by a tenant, and to make his ejectment from the land he cultivates far more difficult than ever before. It has also specified the provisions to the tenant to become an owner himself. This Act defines the term 'Tenant' as:

"Tenant means a person who cultivates or holds the land of another person and is, or but for a specified contract (expressed or implied) would be liable to pay rent for that land to that person, and includes a person who, under the system generally known as 'Adhi' (whether Guchi-Adhi or Guti-Adhi), 'Barga', 'Chukti', 'Bhog' or 'Chukani', cultivates the land of another person on condition of delivering a share or quantity of the produce of such land to the person." An 'Adhiaar' has been given the status of a tenant in this Act, and the protection given to a tenant will be available to him also. Thus this Act has replaced the previous "Adhiaar Protection Act."
The new Act classifies the tenants into two broad categories - (i) the occupancy tenants; and (ii) the non-occupancy tenants. To get the status of an occupancy tenant, the person must have held the land from his landlord continuously for three years. An occupancy tenant has been provided with permanent, heritable and transferable right of use and occupation over the land. The non-occupancy tenant, however, means a person who has held his land from the landlord for a period of less than three years. The non-occupancy tenant has also been provided with heritable right of use and occupancy of his holding till he is lawfully ejected therefrom, but he does not enjoy the transferable rights.

Further, the Act has also specified that no tenant is liable to pay rent more than three times of the land revenue payable for the land or one-fifth of the principal crop grown during the agricultural year. No tenant (whether he is an occupancy tenant or not) can be ejected except in execution of an ejectment decree passed by a competent Civil Court. If he is ejected otherwise, he may within 90 days apply to the Revenue Officer for restoration of his possession.

Another significant aspect of this Act has been an introduction of certain provisions for a tenant to become the owner of the land he tills. In the first provision, the Act empowers the state government to take initiative and to
provide ownership right to an occupancy tenant. In the second provision, the tenant may approach the Deputy Commissioner of his district for ownership right over the land he cultivates. In the sphere of tenancy reforms in Assam, this particular Act is highly significant for the provisions it has made to provide all types of security to a tenant.

IMPACTS OF LAND REFORMS:

Thus, the Government of Assam has tried to make us believe that the Zamidari system and other such intermediary interests on land are almost completely abolished, and a large number of the landless families have also been provided with cultivable land. In other words, cultivated land has been vested only with the tillers and the rights of the share-croppers are now well protected. All such necessary steps to ensure agricultural growth with social justice are being taken, and the state government has been successful to carry forward its land reform programmes almost to the verge of completion.

Logically, the overall impacts of the first two sets of land reform programme, that is, abolition of Zamidari and other such intermediaries, and imposition of ceiling on land holdings should be reflected by the changing pattern of operational holdings. Let us at first try to understand this aspects before we go to address the larger question of tenancy reforms.
Changing Pattern of Operational Holdings:

In order to grasp objectively the overall impacts of land reform programmes in Assam, it is an imperative to look at the pattern of change in distribution of operational holdings. Table - 5.3 depicts the pattern of change during the period between 1970-71 and 1985-86. It is apparent from the table that the number of marginal and small operational holdings have considerably increased during the period under consideration. The number of marginal operational holdings has increased significantly from 11.20 lakhs in 1970-71 to 14.50 lakhs in 1985-86, thus accounting a growth of more than 29 percent in 15 years. In other words, on an average, about 22 thousand marginal holdings are emerging every year. As a result, the average size of marginal holdings has declined from .45 hectre in 1970-71 to .41 hectre in 1985-86. Similarly, the number of small holdings has also increased from 4.67 lakhs in 1970-71 to 5.46 lakhs in 1985-86, which amounts a growth of more than 17 percent in 15 years. The average size of small holdings has, therefore, declined from 1.42 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.40 hectares in 1985-86.

Needless to say that table-5.3 indicates a growing proclivity towards marginalization of the operational holdings in Assam. Atleast two factors are immediately responsible for this. The first factor obviously is the growth of population and its increasing pressure on land,
Table 5.3
DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONAL HOLDINGS IN ASSAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Area (Hect.)</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Very Small</td>
<td>11,28,485</td>
<td>5.89.297</td>
<td>13,63,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(below 1 hect.)</td>
<td>57.04</td>
<td>17.67</td>
<td>59.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Small</td>
<td>4,86,691</td>
<td>6.51.328</td>
<td>5,22,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.0 - 2.0 hect.)</td>
<td>23.76</td>
<td>22.95</td>
<td>22.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.0 - 4.0 hect.)</td>
<td>14.04</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>13.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Medium</td>
<td>93,924</td>
<td>5.40.345</td>
<td>92,819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4.0 - 10.0 hect.)</td>
<td>04.78</td>
<td>18.05</td>
<td>04.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Large</td>
<td>7,576</td>
<td>4.35.195</td>
<td>5,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10.0 &amp; Above)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>15.06</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19,64,576</td>
<td>28.87.577</td>
<td>22,87,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. : Figures in bracket indicate percentage

Source: Agriculture Census of the respective years.

Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Government of Assam.
DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING
ASSAM (NO. IN %)

1970-71

1980-81

1990-91

DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING
ASSAM (AREA IN %)

1970-71

1980-81

1990-91
because the secondary and the tertiary sectors of economy of the state have failed to register any significant development till now. Presumably, the second factor is distribution of ceiling surplus land particularly among the landless families. As Table-5.3 shows, the number of medium holdings and the area occupied by such holdings have declined by 2 percent and almost by 10 percent respectively from 1970-71 to 1980-81.

This indicates that rigorous enforcement of land ceiling during mid 1970s could shed away some amount of land from the upper echelon of the medium land holders. And, distribution of this ceiling surplus during the subsequent period has resulted in increase of a considerable number of the marginal holdings. Nevertheless, on the contrary to the objectives of the land reform programmes, as the Table shows, the total area under the large holdings has constantly increased during the period between 1970-71 and 1985-86. As a result, only 24 percent of the total holdings have a command over more than 14 percent of the total operational area in Assam. Thus, it can be safely said that despite the several land reform programmes initiated by the post-colonial state, the agrarian structure is marked by a highly uneven pattern of land resource distribution.

Implementation of the Assam State Acquisition of Zamindari Act has decidedly changed the mode of surplus extraction by the landlords, but it could not significantly influence the pattern of operational holdings. The Act
empowered the state government to acquire by notification all rights and interests of the proprietor of the estates and the tenure holders. However, the proprietors and the tenure-holders were allowed to retain possession of private land upto 400 bighas (or 53 hectares) and 150 bighas (or 21 hectares) respectively. The maximum limit could also be relaxed in case of large scale farming on co-operative basis, or where power-driven mechanical appliances were used. Consequently, the Zamidars and other intermediaries could retain land under fake co-operatives or under the pretext of mechanical or personal cultivation. Therefore, like in case of many other states, implementation of this Act resulted in a large scale eviction of the tenants on one hand, and engagement of hired labour by the landlords on the other. Further, whatever amount of land could be acquired by the state government, had gone to those people who were either temporary occupants or were share-cropping with their landlords.

Tenancy Reforms:

Most of the evaluation as well as diagnostic studies on land reform programmes in Assam have presumed that Assam never had any problem related to tenant-landlord relationship, except in the Zamidari areas. The major question, however, was to protect the rights of the share-croppers, who were not initially considered as tenants. It has also been widely perceived that with the help of a radical legislation like the Assam (Temporarily
Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971, the Government has been successful to solve the problem of the share-croppers also.

Being guided by such assumptions, most of the recent studies on land reforms in Assam have overlooked the real issues involved with the practice of share-cropping in Assam. To understand this aspect more objectively, we have conducted a few case studies of certain selected households in the course of our field study covering four villages of the district Kamrup, namely Bamungaon, Deulguri, Sil Bharai and Tupamari. A couple of them are summarized below.

Case Study - I

Mikir Boro is a resident of village Deulguri. He cannot say exactly how old he is, but believes that he has already crossed seventy. Yet, his main occupation, as he has reported, is cultivation. He has a family of eight members being constituted of his old wife, three sons, one daughter-in-law, and two grand children. His two adult sons are educated and now they are in permanent service. Therefore, the main source of income for his family is the regular earning of his two sons. The respondent does not know exactly how much they earn per month, but he thinks, the total amount is not less than Rs. 6000.00 per month.

The respondent owns a holding of total 25 bighas (3.35 hectares). Out of the total land he owns, he has kept only 12 bighas for cultivation on his own, and the remaining part has been leased out. He cultivates his 12 bighas with
the help of a servant, and he also hires in labour whenever he feels necessary. The respondent has leased out 6 bighas of his land on Adhi, and another 7 bighas on Chukani. He gives two reasons for leasing out of his land. First, since his two adult sons are in service, hardly they get time for cultivation and therefore, it is difficult for him alone to cultivate the entire holding depending on the servant and on the hired labour. Secondly, the 7 bighas, which has been leased out on Chukani is only suitable for Bodo Paddy.

For the first 6 bighas of his leased out land, the respondent gets on an average 8 quintals (half of the total production) of Sali paddy per year, and for the remaining 7 bighas he gets 8.4 quintals of Bodo paddy which is almost equal to half of the total production of the crop per year.

Case Study - II

Md. Nazimuddin is a resident of village Tupamari. He has a very small family comprised of only his wife and son. His 22 years old son has recently got married, and so increased one more member in his family. The respondent has primary education and his son is a student of class XII.

The 45 years old respondent was a farmer till 1980 with his holding of 20 bighas (2.68 hectares). However, he found that agriculture is a difficult and less profitable occupation. Therefore, he had leased out his entire cultivated land on Adhi in 1980, and started a grocery shop
at the nearby urban centre called Nagarbera. Now he gets half of the total production of his land per year, for which he has nothing to pay. In addition to that he earns about Rs. 1500.00 per month from his grocery shop.

Case Study - III:

Dwipen Boro of village Deulguri has a small family of five members consisted of his wife, one adult son who is in a permanent service, one minor son and one minor daughter. His primary occupation is cultivation.

The respondent owns a holding of 5 bighas (0.67 hectares). He has taken 5 bighas of cultivated land on Bandhaki from a fellow villager in 1992 for a loan of Rs. 8,000.00. Similarly in 1992, he has mortgaged in 5 bighas more for Rs. 3,500.00. The condition for this 5 bighas is that the mortgagor or the actual owner will have to re-pay the entire amount in seven equal annual installments and only after that he will get back his mortgaged land. It implies that the respondent can possess this 5 bighas atleast for 7 years, and therefore, at present he should have a total operational area of 15 bighas. But, the respondent has leased out 5 bighas on Adhi from this 15 bighas, and therefore, he has an operational holding of total 10 bighas at present.

Case Study - IV:

About 50 years old Sarbaram Das is a resident of village Bamun Gaon. He is an illiterate. He has a small
family comprised of his wife, one 15 years old illiterate daughter and two sons. One of them is in class VI and other one is in the primary school of the village. The respondent had 4 bighas (.54 hectares) of cultivated land to start his life as a marginal farmer. But in 1981, he had to mortgage 2 bighas for only Rs. 1,600.00 to meet a sudden financial crisis (the respondent has refused to disclose the cause of it). Even after that, he used to support his family as a cultivator by leasing in some more land on Adh1, because he had a pair of plough bullocks to support him. Unfortunately, the poor farmer had lost one of his plough bullocks in 1984. It was impossible for him to buy another plough bullock immediately, and therefore, he had leased out remaining 2 bighas of his own land on Adh1. Our respondent is owner of 4 bighas of cultivated land, but, he has been earning his livelihood as a landless agricultural labourer since 1984. He could not send his daughter to a school, and now she is a maid servant. Even after 13 years, the respondent could not get back his 2 bighas which is on mortgage only for Rs. 1,600.00.

Case Study – V :

Md. Bajuruddin is a marginal farmer and belongs to the village Tupamari. At present he has an average size of family of 6 members - his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and two grand children. He had total 4.5 bighas (.60 hectares) of cultivated land of his own. To supplement his income, he had
also leased in total 5 bighas of land on Adhi in 1980, which is still in his possession.

To arrange his daughter's marriage in 1989, the respondent had mortgaged 2 bighas of his own cultivated land for Rs. 2000.00. Therefore, at present he has total 7.5 bighas of operational land. But, half of the total production of the 5 bighas of land which he had leased in goes back to the actual owner. Practically, the respondent gets production of only 5 bighas, nevertheless, he cultivates 7.5 bighas. Since he can not produce enough to support his family for the whole year, his son has to work as a wage labourer atleast for 3 months in the year.

These case studies have clearly established the fact that tenancy reform legislations enacted by the government have utterly failed to do away with the semi-feudal practices from the agrarian structure of Assam. Alienation of cultivated land from the poor peasants through the practice of Bandhaki i.e. mortgage, and different forms of tenancy have still significant impacts on the system of production. It can be safely said on the basis of the case studies that a large section of the peasants of all the four major communities of Assam are exploited by the rich peasants through the existing semi-feudal practices such as Adhi, Bandhaki and Iheka etc. Before we proceed further, let us try to briefly analyse the forms of such semi-feudal practices.
PERPETUATION OF SEMI-FEUDAL PRACTICES:

(a) Bandhaki:

Infact this semi-feudal practice implies mortgage of cultivated land which normally involves three different forms of informal/verbal but very rigid agreement. In the first form, the mortgagor is free to repay the entire loan (for which his land is on mortgage) at a time whenever he finds it feasible (but not before at least one harvest), and can resume his ownership over the mortgaged land thereafter. The second form of agreement is time bound, i.e. the mortgagor is liable to repay his entire amount of loan at a time within a stipulated period (normally 3 to 5 years) for resumption of his ownership over the mortgaged land. And, in the third form of agreement, the mortgagor is liable to repay his loan in fixed annual installment, and only on full repayment he can resume his ownership over the mortgaged land. In all these three forms of agreement, the mortgagee enjoys heritable right over the mortgaged land, and becomes its actual owner if the mortgagor fails to repay the loan either in installment or at a time. Further, generally a loan of Rs. 2000.00 requires a mortgage of one bigha of cultivated land.

Needless to say, the mortgagors are obviously small or marginal farmer and the mortgagee belongs to the category of rich farmer. Being distressed by extreme poverty, the former category under any compelling circumstances prefer Bandhaki rather than selling off their land with the hope
that they will somehow get back the mortgaged land. On the contrary, the mortgagee tries to take benefit of the situation. Realistically he assumes that ultimately he will be the owner of the mortgaged land. And, in practice, the mortgagee quite often becomes the actual owner. This results in alienation of cultivated land, and degradation of the position of the marginal and small farmers to landless labourers. This practice could have been at least restricted, if not completely eradicated, by making adequate provision of for short-term loan to help the marginal and small farmers at the time of emergency.

(b) Adhi And Chukani:

It is clear from the case studies that at least two forms of tenancy viz. Adhi and Chukani (also called ileka) have their significant influences on the agrarian structure of Assam. We have found in our household survey that in the first form of tenancy, the tenant has to pay half of the total production of the main crop to the actual owner of the land as land rent. In the second system, i.e. Chukani, a fixed amount of the total production has to be paid by the tenant as land rent. The "fixed amount" nevertheless, is quite often equal to half of the total production of the main crop. The terms and conditions involved in both the systems of share-cropping are always laid down by the owner of the land in the form of a verbal agreement. In most cases, the landowners are free from the responsibilities of production or any investment of capital required for seeds,
fertilizers etc. Since most of the terms and conditions involved with both the systems are more or less same, we shall consider them as only one form of share-cropping. Further, it must also be mentioned that we could not find even a single share-cropper or tenant who had ever tried to exercise the rights given to him by the "radical" legislation. It is not entirely due to ignorance though it is an important factor, but mainly because of the fear of ejectment by the land owner.

CONSEQUENCE OF LAND MORTGAGE AND SHARE-CROPPING:

Our survey of total 205 households of 4 villages, namely Bamun Gaon (67), Deulguri (48), Sil Bharal (27) and Tupamari (63) reveals that a large number of the households are involved with some or other form of leasing in/out of cultivated land, and it is explicit in Table - 5.4. The Table also indicates that share-cropping is more prevalent among the caste Hindu Asamiya (village Bamun Gaon) and the Plain Tribal (village Deulguri) farmers than the farmers belonged to the Na-Asamiya Muslim Community (village Tupamari) and the Scheduled Castes (village Sil Bharal). On the other hand, as the Table indicates, the farmers belonged to the Na-Asamiya Muslim Community and the Scheduled Castes are more prone to land alienation than the other two communities.
The overall impacts of the existing system of share-cropping and Bandhaki can be analysed with the help of Table - 5.5 and Table - 5.6. These two Tables have definitely witnessed a very highly uneven pattern of distribution of cultivated land in the surveyed villages. Nevertheless, for our immediate concern, the striking feature of the Tables is the difference between the column 'A' and the column 'B' for each category of households. The major causes and the consequences are to be analysed for a better understanding of the impacts of tenancy reforms in Assam.

It can be seen in Table - 5.5 that about 46, 33, 48 and 35 percent of the households in Bamun Gaon, Deulguri, Sil Bharal and Tupamari respectively belong to the category of...
marginal holders in terms of their ownership holdings. As this group of households are generally vulnerable to poverty, we have found that a large number of these households have leased out their cultivated land mainly on Bandhaki. Our survey reveals that 13, 38, 15 and 36 percent of such households in Bamun Gaon, Deulguri, Sil Bharal and Tupamari respectively have leased out their entire cultivated land. Combining all the four villages together, we have found that more than 24 percent of such households have leased out their entire cultivated land. This has resulted in substantial increase of the landless households which can be seen in Table - 5.6.

We have also found that more than 15 percent (constituting about 5 percent of the total households) of the households which belonged to the category of small and semi-medium holders in terms of ownership holdings had leased out their entire cultivated land, and now reported to be landless in terms of operational holdings. This section of the households, however, had leased out land mostly on the basis of share-cropping.

Now let us look at some of the impacts of the practice of leasing in of cultivated land. Combining all the four villages together, we have found that more than 11 percent of the households which belonged to the category of landless in terms of ownership holding had leased in cultivated land. In terms of operational holding, about
### Table 5.5

**VILLAGES WISE DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS ACCORDING TO SIZE OF HOLDING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Holdings</th>
<th>Bamun Gaon</th>
<th>Deolguri</th>
<th>Sil Bharal</th>
<th>Lupamari</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A *</td>
<td>B #</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>26.87</td>
<td>22.92</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal (Below 1 hect)</td>
<td>46.26</td>
<td>29.85</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (1.0-2.0 hect)</td>
<td>26.87</td>
<td>25.37</td>
<td>35.42</td>
<td>35.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Medium (2.0-4.0 hect)</td>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium &amp; Large (4.0 and above)</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| total                  | 100        | 100      | 100        | 100      | 100       | 100      | 100       | 100       |

**Note:**

A * : in terms of ownership holding  
B # : in terms of operational holding

### Table 5.6

**DISTRIBUTION OF HOLDERS ACCORDING TO SIZE OF HOLDING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Holding</th>
<th>Households With</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ownership Holding</td>
<td>Operational Holding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>26.34</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>40.00</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21.95</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Medium</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium &amp; Large</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| total           | 205 | 100  | 205 | 100  |
VILLAGEWISE DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS
ACCORDING TO SIZES OF OWNERSHIP HOLDING

VILLAGEWISE DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS
ACCORDING TO SIZES OF OPERATIONAL HOLDING
9 and 2 percent of them reported to be marginal and small holders respectively. The so-called marginal and small farmers are, however, purely tenants or sharecroppers, and, as we have already indicated, they do not get more than half of the crop they produce every year. We have also found that about 28, 17 and 15 percent of the marginal, small and semi-medium farmers respectively have also leased in land by some or other way. Many of them, particularly the semi-medium farmers have leased in on Bandhakir. Because of the additional holdings which have been leased in, this section of households have now reported to have relatively bigger size of operational holdings. Without going further into the complexities involved with the practices of leasing in/out of cultivated land, now let us try to summarize our findings based on intensive field work.

First of all, we have found that slightly more than 38 percent of the households covered by our survey have reported to be landless in terms of their operational holdings. But approximately 13 percent of them, constituting about 5 percent of the total surveyed households is constituted of those households which have leased out their entire ownership holding on Adhi. Further, in terms of occupation, approximately 45 percent of the landless households are depending upon wage earning. It indicates that about 17 percent of the total households covered by our survey are headed by wage earners mainly as agricultural labourer.
Secondly, we have noted that more than 11 percent of the households, constituting about 3 percent of the total surveyed households which belong to the category of landless in terms of ownership, have leased in cultivated land. This 3 percent of the total surveyed households have to depend fully on share-cropping. It implies that at least 3 percent of the farmers in the 4 villages together are purely tenants or share-croppers.

Thirdly, as we have noted, a significantly high percentage of the households which belonged to the category of marginal and small holders in terms of ownership holding had also leased in land to increase the size of operational holdings. We have found that more than 34 percent of the households are reported to be small and semi-medium holders in terms of their operational holdings. These households are in fact marginal holders in terms of their ownership holdings. Such households together constituted more than 11 percent of the total households covered by our survey. Almost all such households have leased in land for share-cropping and they have to depend on share-cropping to a considerable extent.

Further, a large number of the households which belonged to the category of marginal and small holders both in terms of ownership as well as operational holdings, have also leased in land for share-cropping to attain the subsistence level of production. We have found that 18
percent of the total surveyed households are such households. Therefore, we can say that about 29 percent of the total households are depending upon leased in land to a considerable extent in addition to their own land. In other words, we can say that 29 percent of the total households surveyed are headed by partial share-croppers.

Fourthly, we have found that almost 30 percent of the total households do not depend upon share-cropping. Nevertheless, it must be noted that about one third of them have been benefited by the practice of Bandhaki. Yet, we can say that about 30 percent of the total households are headed by self-cultivators with different sizes of operational holdings, or belonging to different categories of farmers.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the total operational area, in the four villages covered by our survey is 1,347 bighas (180.32 hectares). The pattern of its distribution among the farmers has been shown in Table - 5.1. It is clear from the Table that more than 28 percent of the total operational area has been constituted by the leased in land. Out of the total leased in land, about 7.38 percent which constitutes more than 2 percent of the total operational area, has been leased in by the purely share-croppers. From the remaining part, almost 23 percent has been cultivated by the partial share-croppers along with their own land which amounts to 32 percent of the total operational area. Remaining 40 percent of the total
operational area is cultivated by the self cultivators who do not depend upon share-cropping. Nevertheless, it includes the area leased in on Bandhaki which amounts to about 3 percent of the total operational area of the villages covered by our survey.

Table -5.7

DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONAL AREA IN THE SURVEYED VILLAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Households/Farmer</th>
<th>As % of the total surveyed households</th>
<th>As % of the total operational area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purely Share_Croppers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Share_Croppers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32+23*#55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self_Cultivators</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40 +3#43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Corrected to the nearest whole number)

Note: * Area leased in for Share-cropping
# Area leased in on Bandhaki.

Hence, it can be safely said that approximately one third of the farmers in Assam have to depend on share-cropping or the semi-feudal system of Adh1. However, this section of the farmers has hardly been benefited by the legal provisions regarding security of tenancy. It seems there exists no tenancy security at the empirical level.
Moreover, on the basis of our findings, we can estimate that no less than one fourth of the total operational area in the state is under share-cropping, or leased out by the actual owners on Adhi. In most cases, the actual owners are relatively big landholders and have an additional source of income. They are more concerned with getting their share of production in time than productivity. The share-croppers who are generally small and marginal farmers, however, cannot bear the risk of investment in modern agricultural inputs to raise productivity in the absence of irrigation facility.

Additionally, it must also be emphasised that productivity of approximately 60 percent of cultivated land in Assam being operated by the tenants and petty farmers cum share-croppers is directly related to the institutional reforms. Therefore, tenancy reform in Assam is also a prerequisite for a desired level of agricultural growth and productivity to be achieved through technological reforms. However, the ruling class in Assam is not willing to carry forward even the existing tenancy reform programmes to their logical end. Because enforcement of the tenancy laws would be counter-productive for the ruling class itself. Needless to repeat that the ruling class in Assam essentially represents the interest of the big landlords—the section which is benefited by the existing semi-feudal practices such as Adhi, Bandhaki etc.
FEUDAL LEGISLATORS AND FRAUDULENT REFORMS:

It has commonly been perceived that the petty bureaucrats are largely responsible for failure of various land reform programmes initiated by the government after independence. Assam has so far been ruled by two major political parties i.e. the Congress, later on the Congress (I); and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). We can perhaps afford to ignore the 20 months of Janata rule in 1978-79 as a purely temporary phenomenon. It is the ruling Congress which has made much of the egalitarian claims of land reforms. The AGP which was in power for almost 5 years from 1985 to 90, also emphasised much on implementation of land reforms. But, in practice, the AGP government has totally ignored the issue of land reforms.

In an overwhelmingly agrarian society like Assam, large holding of cultivated land is still a pre-requisite for acquiring political power. This fact has been established in a very recent study conducted at the University of Gauhati which studied the social background of the MLAs. It is explicit from Table-5.8 that 90 percent of the MLAs whose land resource position is known to us were related to agriculture. More than half of the total MLAs have cultivated land much above the average size of holding in Assam. More importantly, almost 28 percent of the total MLAs have land more than the ceiling fixed by the Government.
of Assam, and about 10 percent of the total MLAs are big landlords, with more than 80 bighas of cultivated land. The table also reveals that the MLAs with substantial landholdings are belonged to the two ruling parties i.e. the Congress (I) and the A.G.P. About one third of the total Congress (I) MLAs have land more than the ceiling fixed by the Congress Government itself. Again approximately one fourth of the total A.G.P. MLAs had land beyond the ceiling and 8 percent of them were big landlords, with more than 80 bighas of cultivated land.

Further, it has also been found that total 9 percent of the Congress (I) and 10 percent of the ruling A.G.P. MLAs who have land upto 20 bighas, have leased out their entire cultivated land on Adhi. Moreover, 23 and 19 percent of the Congress (I) and MLAs respectively, who have land above 20 bighas also have leased out their entire cultivated land on Adhi. These MLAs can be safely characterised as absentee landlords. We have found that approximately 22 percent of the total MLAs of the 8th Legislative Assembly of Assam are traditionally absentee landlords with substantial cultivated land under their possessions.

The fact cited here clearly indicates the nexus between political domination and absentee landlordism. This paradoxically demonstrated the contradictory and biased nature of the land reforms in Assam. In this context,
TABLE 5.8
PATTERN OF LANDHOLDING OF THE MLAs IN THE 8th. ASSEMBLY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of holdings</th>
<th>ASP</th>
<th>CONG</th>
<th>ONGO</th>
<th>CDNG(S)</th>
<th>CPI(M)</th>
<th>UHF</th>
<th>PTCA</th>
<th>UTNLFSUCI</th>
<th>IND.</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81 to 100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 150</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151 &amp; above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = Total Number
It is worth noticing that in absence of any other opportunity of investment in Assam, the well-to-do households invest in land and landed property. Even the urban middle class constituted of the white collar job holders, and other professionals finds it more profitable to invest in cultivated land, notwithstanding this section is hardly interested in agriculture. This section of landlords leases out the cultivated land on Adhi and often assumes the character of absentee landlords. Needless to say, it has severe economic repercussions. It restricts productivity and agricultural growth on one hand, and results in concentration of cultivated land in the hands of few non-cultivators on the other.

SUMMING UP:

We have seen that the ruling class in Assam has been successful to do away with the feudal relations in the permanently settled areas of Assam to certain extent. Indeed, the Zamidars or other such intermediaries have assumed the role of big landlords who instead of tenants, now depend upon hired labour. The steps taken by the government to impose ceiling on land holdings have had, however, marginal impacts on their holdings.

However, in remaining part of the Brahmaputra Valley, as we have discussed earlier, feudalism as a mode of production could not complete its course. The major enigma
of the agrarian structure is definitely the semi-feudal practice of share-cropping in addition to concentration of operational holdings. Nevertheless, the Government of Assam has taken almost two and a half decades after independence to enact a legislation in favour of the share-croppers. This testifies the indifferent attitude of the power structure to the basic issues of the masses. Many legal provisions have been made to protect the share-croppers. But in practice, the share-croppers are still equally deprived as before.

In the light of our findings, it can be said that the reform measures followed by the ruling class in Assam are also heavily biased towards the landlords like in case of many other states. A host of the semi-feudal practices even now have substantial influence upon the agrarian structure of Assam, but the ruling class has hardly shown any interests to eradicate them.

We have pointed out that the existing semi-feudal practices are largely responsible for the poor performance of the agrarian sector in Assam. Therefore, we have argued that the institutional reform programmes must be carried forward to their stated objectives or atleast near to that, before we think about the technological reforms in Assam. In other words, the institutional reforms must precede the technological reforms for a desired level of agricultural growth as well as economic development of the vast majority of the peasants.
However, the ruling class in Assam can not carry forward the institutional reforms to their logical end mainly for two reasons. First, implementation of land reform programmes will be counter-productive for a large number of the power elites, because as we have seen, most of them are absentee landlords. Second, enforcement of the land reform legislations may antagonise the rural rich - the section which is directly benefited by the existing semi-feudal practices. As a result, the agrarian question in Assam has not yet been resolved. But, the ruling class is creating a myth for its own political interests.

Finally it can be said that being a junior partner of the Indian bourgeoisie and landlords, the ruling class in Assam also made certain efforts to create a situation conducive to development of capitalist relations in agriculture. The issue of land reform has occupied a predominant position in its political agenda primarily for two reasons. First of all, the ruling class in Assam had to legitimatize its domination, and secondly, it has to fulfill the growing aspirations of the capitalist class.