In this study, we have made an attempt to understand the agrarian reforms in Assam specially during the post-colonial period. It is impossible to comprehend the post-colonial situation in isolation from the colonial and pre-colonial period, therefore, we have tried to link all these three phases in their socio-economic and historical contexts. The post-colonial society inherited the colonial agrarian structure with all its unevenness, stagnancy and exploitation. However, because of the mass expectation generated by newly attained freedom from colonial bondage, the post-colonial state had to place a new agenda to resolve the agrarian question in India within the democratic framework. Both physically and culturally, India is not a homogeneous country, therefore within the federal structure, each state had to initiate new agrarian reform programmes specific to the regional society. Assam too had its autonomous agrarian reform programmes, however, one must not forget that the giant Congress Party broadly provided the common policy framework to the country as a whole. Here, a student of social science can not ignore the ideological thrust and class location of the agrarian reform programmes with the emerging empirical reality. To comprehend the process and impacts of agrarian reforms in post-colonial Assam, we have made a brief inquiry into the pre-colonial as well as colonial phase of this regional society.
The pre-colonial social formation of Assam was marked by the persisting influences of the natural or tribal economy and a process of growth and consolidation of feudalism under the aegis of the Ahom state. The natural or tribal economy predominated the production system until the end of the sixteenth century. The Ahom state sought to encourage the growth of feudalism in Assam since the beginning of the seventeenth century mainly through expansion of paddy cultivation. The process of expansion and consolidation of feudalism had gradually divided the society into a number of distinct economic classes. The paik cum militia system which was devised by the Ahom state, had been the edifice of growing feudalism in Assam.

In order to expand the sphere of wet paddy cultivation and to expedite the process of surplus generation, the Ahom state made several rent free grants of cultivable waste land along with the paiks, serfs and the slaves in favour of the upper strata of the ruling hierarchy. As a result, we find the emergence of a numerically smaller section of the feudal landlords which also include the spiritual leaders, ret, as we have observed before, a very low level of technological development and primitive implements used in agriculture, relative absence of a monetized economy, scarcity of labour, and existence of the paik system etc. were some of the major factors responsible for a narrow socio-economic base for the emerging feudal mode of production in Assam.
We have also observed that the neo-vaishnavite movement had positively contributed to the consolidation of feudalism in Assam by accelerating the process of detribalisation and sanskritization. However, the conformist attitude of a section of the leadership of the neo-vaishnavite movement had finally resulted in a split within the movement mainly on ideological ground. The non-conformist section which emerged after the split sought to enlarge its sphere of influence mainly by mobilizing the socially and economically oppressed section of the society. This section of the society attempted to resolve its contradiction with the feudal state through violent means under the leadership of the neo-vaishnavites. This led to a prolonged civil war and the subsequent Burmese invasions. As a result, the process of feudal consolidation initiated by the Ahom state in the early seventeenth century had come to an end by the end of the eighteenth century before it reached a matured stage of development. And, in a situation of extreme political chaos and disorder and atrocities let loose by the Burmese invasions, the British colonialist appeared before the masses in the guise of their saviour.

British colonialism in other parts of India attempted a significant transformation of the relations of production in the agrarian sector to create a situation conducive to colonial plunder. Primarily to expropriate maximum land revenue, the colonial state brought into being a small section of socially and economically powerful and oppressive
class of landlords in between the state and the peasants. The relationship between this oppressive intermediary class and their tenants, and semi-feudal bondage of several types, however, condemned the agrarian society to a stagnation. Growing insecurity of tenancy caused by evictions, rackrenting and increasing burden over the small peasants etc. were some of the basic problems created by the colonial state with the help of their agents, i.e. the feudal landlords, and the intermediaries.

The overall impacts of British colonialism on the agrarian sector of Assam are not qualitatively different from the rest of India. It must be noted that Assam was annexed by British colonialism when the industrial capitalist interest was on the verge of its final ascendancy over the merchantile interest in England. Nevertheless, the primary concern of the colonial state had been the maximization of land revenue. The colonial strategy of plunder required a drastic change in the agrarian sector of Assam. The most significant and abrupt steps taken by the colonial state were to monetize the revenue system and introduction of the concept of private ownership over land. Land was transformed into a saleable and purchaseable commodity. The old revenue system was substituted by a qualitatively different land revenue system. As a result, the colonial state had totally ruined the Ahom aristocracy, but compromised with the section of spiritual leaders cum landed
aristocracy. The colonial state finally introduced the Kyotwari system over the semi-feudal agrarian structure of Assam proper.

In order to systematize the collection of rents, the colonial state had worked out a detailed administrative arrangement and encouraged the emergence of a class of revenue collectors cum landed aristocracy, particularly from the upper caste Asamiya Hindu and well to do Muslim families. Being patronaged by the colonial state, this newly emerged class became an important category both socially and economically. With all sorts of semi-feudal practices like bondage, usury etc. this class dominated the overwhelmingly agrarian society of Assam. In the emerging class structure, they stood between the rulers and the ruled.

However, after exploring the possibilities of tea plantations in Assam, the colonial state boosted up the tea sector at the cost of general agriculture. By frequently enhancing the land revenue, the colonial state attempted to squeeze the peasants in order to flush them out to the labour market so as to enable the new planters to use the service of the ejected peasants in the growing plantations. Yet, the colonial state had failed to push the indigenous population to the tea sector as wage labourer. Thus, to meet the growing need of wage labourer at the tea sector, the colonial state encouraged the massive inflow of labourers to Assam from different parts of British India. Further, to
maximize land revenue, the colonial state also encouraged heavy migration of landless peasants particularly from East Bengal to occupy the cultivable waste land of Assam. The large scale migration of people from different parts of the country during the colonial era had not only changed the population pattern of Assam, but it also had severe impacts on the stagnant agricultural sector. With no visible improvement in terms of productivity, the agricultural sector failed to generate enough food required for the fast growing population. Consequently, Assam had to depend increasingly on Bengal for food. Colonialism in Assam resulted in pauperization of the peasantry at a large scale, though it could not proletarise them.

One of the most significant impacts of British colonialism in India as a whole, had been a sharp division of the agrarian society into two antagonistic camps, i.e. the feudal landlords and the oppressed peasantry which included both tenants and the small farmers. Under the colonial system, therefore, we find a contradiction between the oppressed peasantry and the colonial state on one hand, and between the farmer and feudal landlords on the other. Obviously, the feudal landlords maintained a non-antagonistic relation with the colonial state. With growing political consciousness, the oppressed peasantry sought to resolve the contradiction with feudalism and colonialism through violent means. It had manifested itself in a number of peasant uprisings which took place towards the end of the
nineteenth century and in the first two decades of the present century in different parts of British India including Assam. At such a crucial juncture, the Indian National Congress which represented the aspirations of the Indian national bourgeoisie tried to mobilize the peasantry to fight against British colonialism by launching peasant movement in different parts of India under the leadership of Gandhi. These peasant movements had clearly established the fact that the INC had compromised with the powerful landlords in order to fight against colonialism and to capture power after independence. In fact, the INC had camouflaged the basic contradiction between the oppressed peasantry and the feudal landlords by the ideology of nationalism. As a result, the post-colonial Indian state under the leadership of the Congress assumed a role for itself of a mediator of the interests of at least two competing classes, i.e. the Indian capitalist class and the big landlords.

In the specific context, of Assam we have pointed out that the landed aristocratic class which was privileged under the colonial rule, later on provided political leadership to the Assamese masses during the courses of the freedom movement. Perhaps, this explains the reasons for the absence of any well-organized radical peasant struggle in Assam during the period of freedom movement. Of course, the oppressed peasantry in certain pockets violently fought against the landlords as well as the colonial state. This
undoubtedly indicates a growing consciousness of the peasantry against landlordism and colonialism. However, the leadership of the freedom movement in Assam could successfully camouflage the contradiction between the peasantry and the feudal landlords under the facade of the ideology of Indian nationalism. The leadership of the freedom movement in Assam, i.e. the landed aristocratic class captured power after independence. The ruling class in Assam started to function as a junior partner of the Indian ruling class.

The immediate task before the post-colonial state in India under the new democratic set up was not only to logically base its class rule but also to promote agricultural growth required for rapid industrialization. This has necessitated a set of reforms in the agrarian structure with effective intervention of the state. Thus, in the agenda of post-colonial reconstruction, the Indian state devised its strategy for institutional reforms which included land reforms, establishment of agricultural cooperatives, community development programmes etc. with their stated egalitarian objectives as a part of the new ruling class ideology. Such institutional reforms were followed by technological reforms. One of the major effects of such reforms, has been the multiplication of economic classes within the peasantry. Needless to say that the rich peasants have been the major beneficiaries of the agrarian reform programmes. As a result, we find, the emergence of the rich
peasantry as a distinct class for itself capable of furthering its own class interests with increasing political influence. However, the state has been successful only partially in stimulating agricultural growth, which was a major objective of institutional reforms. Therefore, an attack on the technological front has been proved to be a compelling necessity, and the post-colonial state has devised its so-called Green Revolution strategy. The state has undertaken to supply modern inputs and credit in order to secure agricultural growth.

With substantial empirical data collected through the intensive field work, we have attempted to analyse the major changes in the agrarian structure of Assam. We have argued that the ruling class in Assam has been successful in eliminating some elements of feudalism in the permanently settled areas of Assam i.e. the earstill undivided districts of Goalpara and Cachar. However, in the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley, where feudalism as a mode of production could not complete its course, the major enigma of the agrarian structure has been the semi-feudal practices in addition to concentration of land. And, as we have found, the government of Assam has utterly failed to bring about any significant change through its institutional reform programmes. We have empirically proved that the post-colonial power structure in Assam is influenced by the absentee landlords. Our brief analysis on agrarian class differentiation has established the fact that the ruling
class in Assam has attempted to superimpose capitalist relations of production without mitigating the semi-feudal practices. The lethargic emergence of capitalist relations in the agrarian structure of Assam is an empirical reality, and it is relatively a recent phenomenon. Yet, only a small fragment of the landlord class represents the capitalist tendency, while others are still feudal. As a result, almost one third of the peasantry with a considerably low per capita ownership holding, is exploited by the feudal elements. And obviously, this exploited section has to struggle hard to ensure livelihood. A large portion, i.e. almost one fifth of the rural population have to earn their livelihood by selling their labour, and this section is totally deprived of any access to land resource except their small homestead.

Because of failure of the government in carrying forward the land reform programmes to their logical end, the overall agrarian scenario of Assam represents a situation of unusual backwardness. Production of food grains is traditional with Asamiya farmers, and the state could produce enough to feed its entire population a century back as cultivated land was in abundance. But, significantly a high growth rate of population caused by a high birth rate as well as migration/immigration has distressed the agricultural sector of Assam. The area under total food grains per cultivator in Assam is the lowest in comparison with all the agriculturally important states in India.
Besides, the pattern of distribution of cultivated land witnessed a significantly high level of concentration. Investment on productivity-rising inputs has been confined only to the landlord capitalists and the proto-bourgeois rich farmers. As a result, the overwhelming majority of the peasantry is deprived of the benefits of modern agricultural inputs, and we find that, of the total area under food grains, Assam has a abysmally low percentage of irrigated area. More prominently, the state is the lowest consumer of fertilizers, and consequently we find the lowest yield ratio of food grains in Assam in comparison to all other agriculturally important states of India.

With the emergence of the tiny section of the landlord capitalist and proto-bourgeois rich farmers, the agricultural growth rate in Assam has been showing a slight improvement since 1968-69. Similarly production of non-food grains is also revealing a positive trend. Yet, the agricultural growth rate in Assam is far below the national average as well as even some of the agriculturally backward states. This is mainly because of a significantly low growth rate of productivity. Needless to say that in a state like Assam where per capita land resource position of vast majority of the peasantry is significantly low, the factor of productivity is extremely important for a better performance of the agricultural sector. But, as we have noted, it is constrained by the semi-feudal practices involved in the production system.
Further, Assam is also one of the most industrially backward states in the country. Due to several historical factors, Assam could hardly develop an Assamiya big bourgeois to establish manufacturing industries in Assam notwithstanding the state is quite rich in terms of raw materials. Besides, other sectors of the state economy have registered only a marginal growth during the post-colonial period. The trade sector has been traditionally monopolised by the Marowaries. Under such circumstances, the relatively higher growth of population has resulted in an increasing pressure on the already over-burdened agricultural sector. The natural consequences are, marginalization of the landholding, increasing landlessness, and obviously growing incidence of rural poverty.

Nevertheless, the exploiting classes of the peasantry have been benefited in the process. The disproportionate growth of the section of agricultural labourer to the capitalist elements has naturally helped the latter. The landlord capitalists and the proto-bourgeois rich peasants have got an exclusive control over the labour market and to keep the wages low. Moreover, since the labour market does not ensure livelihood, the landless households also most often prefer tenancy. This provides more bargaining power to the feudal landlords and the proto-feudal rich farmers. In addition to that, the poor farmers and the agricultural labourers who cannot ensure their livelihood, have to approach the money lender in absence of any other
alternatives. Thus, it can be safely concluded that the prevailing semi-feudal practices are largely responsible for agricultural backwardness and growing incidence of rural poverty in Assam. The unusual economic backwardness of Assam primarily caused by failure of the government to carry forward the agrarian reform programmes to their logical end has created a situation prone to large scale violence and disruption of the social order. And, this has been well manifested by the political developments in the state specially since the beginning of the Assam movement.

The Assam movement which began in 1979, and immediately assumed a mass character, has been interpreted by different scholars from different points of view. For some, it was essentially an outcome of economic underdevelopment and cudgel of chauvinism. In sharp contrast to that, some scholars have characterised it as a legitimate and peaceful movement of the Asamese people. Considering Assam as a colonial hinterland of India, some scholars have argued that Assam movement represented the desire for self-determination of an oppressed and backward nationality of India. Yet, we have a couple of studies which have comprehended the Assam movement in its totality. Guha shows that the Assam movement is national in form and not free from chauvinistic and undemocratic tendencies. Hussain provides a scientific analysis of the Assam movement covering different aspects. He has historically analysed the process of development of Asamiya nationality and identified
the basic weaknesses which are to a large extent responsible for the chauvinistic character of the movement. He has also clearly established the linkage between economic backwardness of Assam and outbreak of the mass movement.

On the basis of the available scientific analysis and close observation of the political process, the Assam movement can be conceived as the prelude to the phenomena of regionalism, and subsequently the growth of separatist and secessionist tendencies in Assam. Though it was apparently led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the movement was designed by a section of Assamia elite, which included broadly the Assamia landed aristocracy, a few tea planters, a small group of merchant, white collar employees including a number of civil servants and professionals. We have noted that this section of people had emerged in Assam in the second half of the colonial rule. Since its emergence, this section has been in a constant conflict with its migrant counterpart in sharing the peripheral economy. The contradiction between the two has sharpened after independence while the former monopolised over the political and administrative apparatus of the state, the latter controlled the industries and trade however limited it might be. The basic aspiration of the Assamiya elite being expansion of its control from the political sphere to the regional economy, the first political task before this section has obviously been to make an effort for much greater political autonomy for higher bargaining power with
the Centre. For this, the section of Asamiya elite, wanted to forge an ideology of regionalism to encourage the movement. The basic elements of the ideology of Asamiya regionalism are: a) safeguard of Asamiya national identity in the wake of a heavy influx of the outsiders; and b) economic prosperity of the ethnic Asamiyas.

By propagating such an ideology of Asamiya regionalism, the real leadership of the movement directed the growing discontent of the Asamiya people against the Bohiragatas (outsiders). It goes without saying that the objective basis of the discontent of the Asamiya people at large, is their economic backwardness, and more specifically, a hunger for land. As a result, from the very beginning, the Assam movement took a violent character of aggressive nativism. This has led to a situation of politically motivated violence against the clearly demarcated linguistic and religious communities. It was projected by the leadership of the movement that the Bohiragatas are the real threat to the Asamiya nationality as well as the major obstacle to the economic development of the Asamiyas. It was convincing for the Asamiya people, because, a substantial portion of the cultivated land in Assam is under possession of non-Asamiya (in fact Na-Asamiya) farmers. Arson and killings of a large number of Bohiragatas went on side by side of a constant campaign against the centralist parties (excluding the BJP) including the left parties, and murder and assault of the selected
political workers particularly of the Left parties. Along with that, an attack was also launched against the prominent democratic minded intellectuals who wanted to address the problems of Assam with a broad perspective. Further, the hegemony of Pan-Indian nationalism was substantially diluted when the prominent leaders of the movement made effort to raise the sentiment of the Assamiya nationality against the Centre focusing Assam as a colony of the latter. This argument carried forward later by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

In an atmosphere of extreme violence, the regional elite prepared the political ground for launching a regional political party. Finally, the prolonged movement reached a dramatic end through a compromise with the central government in 1985. The so-called Assam accord was signed by the leadership of the movement, and consequently the newly formed AGP had come to power. The ideology of regionalism imbued with the elements of aggressive nativism undoubtedly constitute a major part of the myopic political strategy of a section of the Assamiya elite. The dangerous repercussions of the political process, however, have been dismemberment of the social fabric in Assam, and hence, the resistance it imposed over the process of natural assimilation of various national or ethno-linguistic identities of the region. Therefore, the political developments in Assam after 1985 must also be explained, largely as a product of the period of the Assam movement from 1979 to 1985.
The regional political party came to power with a commitment to bring about a pattern of economic development desired by the Asamiya masses. However, while in power, it even failed to initiate anything which deserve mention. Being disillusioned by the centralist ruling parties, the common Asamiya people reposed faith in the leadership of the AGP which appeared in a situation of extreme economic backwardness as saviour of the Asamiya nationality. Nevertheless, like the previous ruling cliques, the AGP also totally overlooked the primary economic interests of the masses. In absence of any radical agrarian reforms, the economic condition of the common people in the state deteriorated further.

Within a very short span of time, the political design of the regional elite failed, when the AGP could not sustained the support base primarily because of its role in office. Consequently, the renewed disillusionment of the Asamiya masses longed for an expression. The effort of the Asamiya elite to consolidate the Asamiya nationality creating a sentiment against Pan-Indian nationalism provided a space for emergence of a small secessionist force before the AGP came to power. This was embodied in the ULFA. Alongwith the renewed disillusionment of the people, this secessionist force developed with extra-territorial patronage during the last couple of years of the 1980s. Its influence and political base in the state expanded easily in absence of an effective intervention of any Centralist or
left Parties. At such a crucial juncture, while the growing secessionist force already started commanding substantial political legitimacy among the Asamiya masses, the AIP has compromised with the former for its own political existence. As a result, though it was not desired by the Asamiya elite, its own political design in the state has created a secessionist force. Therefore, in the specific context of Assam, secessionism is a logical offshoot of regionalism.

Finally, it can be said that, owing to the alliance entered into by the bourgeoisie with feudal and semi-feudal interests, the post-colonial state has failed to carry further a radical redistributive land reforms. Consequently, post-colonial Assam has become one of the most economically backward regions of India. And, the extreme economic backwardness of the state has provided a fertile subsoil for the emergence of divisive and secessionist movements. Thus, most of the socio-economic as well as political problems faced by the country in general, and Assam in particular, can be resolved through implementation of the institutional reform programmes in favour of the people at large followed by adequate technological and financial support to the poor peasants.

However, in ultimate analysis the agrarian question is inseparably linked with the larger political question. Historically speaking, the nexus between the state and the vested landed interest has remained unaltered in any
significant manner during the post-colonial period notwithstanding the initiation of quite a few land reform programmes. Until and unless the nature of the post-colonial state in India changes drastically in face of pressure from the bottom as a result of further sharpening of the existing contradictions, it would be naive to expect any radical resolution of the agrarian question. It seems at the present stage of political development, the agrarian question has became dormant in the wake of globalization of Indian economy. However, this dormancy carries the potential of a massive outbreak in the future if not now!