CHAPTER II

AGRARIAN STRUCTURE OF ASSAM:
PRE-COLONIAL PHASE

An attempt has been made in this chapter to present a
general picture of the pre-colonial society in Assam and its
polity. This would provide us the backdrop for an objective
understanding of some of the fundamental issues related to
the present agrarian structure and its intricate
relationship with polity or the power structure. A detailed
historical inquiry of a number of issues confronted by us in
our present endeavour, no doubt, would have helped us, but
such a project requires a long term collective effort with a
multi-disciplinary approach. In addition to our limitations,
sarcity of data and officially stipulated time for a
research programme are the two major constraints for which
we have restricted ourselves only to certain aspects
of pre_colonial Assam.

By way of preliminary remarks, we may point out that
the six centuries of Ahom rule over the Brahmaputra Valley
distinctly shows a process of transition from tribalism to
feudalism. However, this transition remained incomplete. The
complex social formation prior to the colonial
intervention was marked broadly, by some elements of tribal
or communal economy, a deep rooted institution of slavery
with more than marginal influence on agriculture, and
Increasing influence of feudalism. This complex social formation, which shaped the agrarian structure of pre-colonial Assam, has been discussed in this chapter.

Population:

Assam was ruled by the Ahoms for six consecutive centuries prior to the advent of the British. A small section of the Northern Tai or Shan tribe of Upper Burma entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the early thirteenth century and came to be known as the Ahoms. This small section had established their rule in the early thirteenth century and, with their growing influence, they had established a strong state by the end of the seventeenth century covering by and large the entire Brahmaputra Valley.

Though the Ahom kings had a rich tradition of documentation, we are hardly acquainted with any literary source that could provide us an exact or even near exact demographic picture of Assam at any point of time during the six consecutive centuries of their rule. The total population of Assam before the Civil War (1769-1806) was estimated by Gunabhiram Barua to be about two million and a half. The prolonged Civil War and the subsequent series of Burmese invasions (1817-24), however, had definitely reduced it substantially, and the total population of Assam at the time of British annexation was not more than one million.
The first systematic census of Assam under colonial rule was commenced in 1872, but this available source of information is also incomplete in many senses and not fully reliable for its limitations. Yet, this provides us some meaningful insights to draw a rough demographic sketch of Assam in the 1870s. Perhaps, this would broadly represent the population scenario of pre-colonial Assam, because, the traditional pattern of population distribution was not yet effected by large scale migration, and secondly it could also be expected that the loss of population during the period of Civil War and Burmese invasions had been recovered to a large extent by natural growth during the first four decades of colonial rule. Therefore, we shall try to make some quantitative assessments about the pre-colonial situation on the basis of this available source.

It is explicit in Table - 2.1 that except for the districts of Kamrup & Sibsagar, the remaining part of Assam had remarkably a low density of population. Of course, it was much higher in Kamrup and Sibsagar than the other three districts, nevertheless, the average for Assam as a whole clearly indicates a situation of an abundance of land to its population. Secondly, in the context of a wholly agrarian society like Assam, the small size of the family as indicated by the same Table is also a factor of great economic importance. Almost uniformly small size of family in all the five districts indicates that nuclear family
Table - 2.1

DISTRICT WISE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSES IN ASSAM PROPER IN 1872

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL:</th>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>AREA IN SQ. MILES</th>
<th>POPULATION IN SQ. HOUSES</th>
<th>NO. OF HOUSES</th>
<th>PERSON PER SQ. MILE</th>
<th>HOUSES PER SQ. MILE</th>
<th>PERSON PER HOUSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>KAMRUP</td>
<td>3,631</td>
<td>5,61,681</td>
<td>1,03,908</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>DARRANG</td>
<td>3,418</td>
<td>2,36,009</td>
<td>43,558</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>NOWGONG</td>
<td>3,415</td>
<td>2,56,390</td>
<td>44,050</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>SIBSAGAR</td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>2,96,609</td>
<td>55,604</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>LAKHIMPUR</td>
<td>3,192</td>
<td>1,21,267</td>
<td>26,398</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL/AVRGE</td>
<td>16,511</td>
<td>14,71,956</td>
<td>2,73,518</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

system had been a tradition in the Brahmaputra Valley. In this context, it must also be noted that, nearly the entire population of pre-colonial Assam was essentially rural population for a conspicuous absence of an urban sector.

Table - 2.2 shows the pattern of caste and tribe wise distribution of population in the five districts of Assam proper. The major castes and tribes enlisted in the Table together constituted more than three fourth of the total population of Assam, the pattern of their distribution in various districts, however, had been distinctly uneven. Less than 5 percent of the total population of Assam was constituted by person of recent immigrant/migrant origin or immigrants/migrants themselves. The rest were indigenous and slightly more than 8 percent of them were Muslims.

It appears from Table - 2.2 that almost half of the total population of the Brahmaputra Valley were Hindus. The Kalitas were more prominent among the Hindus, and almost half of them were concentrated in Kamrup alone. This Hindu caste enjoyed a high position in the caste hierarchy ranked next to the Brahmans, Ganaks & the Kayasthas and this caste alone had a share of almost 12 percent of the total population of Assam. This was primarily an agricultural caste, though it had certain functional sub-divisions within itself.

The Koch was numerically the largest caste which constituted almost 13 percent of the total population of
Assam. Like the Kalitas, the Koch were also concentrated mainly in Kamrup, and their numerical strength gradually declines as we move towards the districts of Upper Assam. It is obvious because, Koch was originally a tribe of North Bengal and Lower Assam. They got a Hindu caste status by the sixteenth century. This caste status was, however, open in the later period to accommodate all new converts to Hinduism from various tribes. Guha observed that to become a Koch meant more than religious conversion. It meant the adoption of plough in place of hoe, of the mud plinth dwelling in place of the pile-house dwelling, and of cremation of the dead instead of burial. He further noted that a tribal could progressively realize the caste status of Koch through stages, and the process of the promotion of Bodo-kachari, Lalung, Mikir (Karbi) and other such plain tribes up the ladder of sanskritisation had been continuous.

Being the ruling clan, the Ahoms had tremendous political as well as economic significance. They migrated to Upper Assam in the thirteenth century and gradually absorbed some of the aboriginal tribes like the Chutiya, the Moran and the Borahi into their fold and expanded their numerical strength upto almost 10 percent of the total population of Assam in 1872. Apart from ruling, the Ahoms had significantly contributed to the agricultural sector with their relatively superior technology and this aspect will be discussed in some other context, later. After retaining a separate enthrno-linguistic as well as religious identity for
### Table 2.2

**Caste/Tribe wise Distribution of Population in Assam in 1872**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Caste/Tribe</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
<th>Sibsagar</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
<th>Total of the caste/Tribe Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As % of the total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Garo</td>
<td>4,849</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>76,994</td>
<td>62,214</td>
<td>8,828</td>
<td>15,320</td>
<td>14,959</td>
<td>117,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Laiung</td>
<td>1,958</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32,813</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>35,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>20,488</td>
<td>10,302</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sarania</td>
<td>11,812</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>2,782</td>
<td>14,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nat</td>
<td>1,735</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>1,481</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>4,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chutiya</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>2,532</td>
<td>7,361</td>
<td>31,342</td>
<td>9,453</td>
<td>51,482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>69,277</td>
<td>46,788</td>
<td>41,851</td>
<td>23,965</td>
<td>3,747</td>
<td>164,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mikir</td>
<td>11,447</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>34,583</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>46,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mili</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>2,048</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>6,862</td>
<td>4,886</td>
<td>14,128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Anos</td>
<td>1,268</td>
<td>3,490</td>
<td>4,995</td>
<td>94,304</td>
<td>43,942</td>
<td>147,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Brahman</td>
<td>31,355</td>
<td>5,783</td>
<td>6,975</td>
<td>12,821</td>
<td>1,142</td>
<td>57,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>106,952</td>
<td>16,998</td>
<td>20,972</td>
<td>26,973</td>
<td>3,406</td>
<td>117,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>5,841</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>1,720</td>
<td>2,117</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>10,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jugi &amp; Katani</td>
<td>13,707</td>
<td>10,895</td>
<td>16,392</td>
<td>4,394</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>52,385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kaibarta</td>
<td>48,943</td>
<td>3,468</td>
<td>13,737</td>
<td>2,159</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>61,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dom &amp; Naidal</td>
<td>10,276</td>
<td>8,269</td>
<td>19,999</td>
<td>16,337</td>
<td>8,647</td>
<td>67,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>14,06,938</td>
<td>1,181,885</td>
<td>1,10,434</td>
<td>12,38,765</td>
<td>76,194</td>
<td>111,35,720</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hunter, op.cit.
almost three centuries, the Ahoms adopted Hinduism and Asamiya language in the later half of their reign. It must also be mentioned that, though the Ahoms ruled over Assam for six consecutive centuries, they were neither given the status of the upper caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy, nor they constituted a higher percentage of the total population than what we have estimated before at any point of time. As upper Assam was the heart of Ahom Kingdom, almost 94 percent of the Ahoms were concentrated in the districts of Sibasagar and Lakhimpur. Their relative absence in the other districts must have had some repercussions on the overall socio-economic processes of pre-colonial Assam.

Among other numerically significant castes, the Kaivartas, the Chutiyas, the Dom or Nadiyals had significant contributions to the agricultural sector. Although these castes were divided into various functional groups, majority of them had to depend primarily on agriculture. In addition to all these Hindu castes, as it is explicit in Table-2.2, a sizable portion of the population was constituted by the aboriginal tribes, such as Kachari, Rabha, Garo, Lalung (Tiwa), Miri (Mishing) and Mikir (Karbi) etc. scattered unevenly in the five districts of Assam proper. It must be mentioned that most of the plain tribes were learning the use of plough in agriculture from their neighbouring settled population in course of the centuries.

Besides these Hindu castes and aboriginal tribes, we find a significant size of Muslim population in pre-colonial
Assam who had an equal contribution with the Hindus in shaping the economy and society. Both the religious communities created some artisans and occupational groups like, Kamar, Kumbhar, Hira, Sonar, Dhunias, Dhubis, Kasais, tailors and carpenters etc. who had a low social status. In addition to the Hindus and the Muslims, there were also small groups of Sikhs and Buddhists. These groups were not very significant in terms of their numerical strength, but they added to the variety of the demographic composition of Assam.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the population configuration of pre-colonial Assam does not indicate the existence of any indigenous trading community or caste of economic and commercial significance.

**CROPPING PATTERN, CULTIVATED AREA AND PRODUCTION OF THE MAJOR CROPS:**

The Brahmaputra Valley is an alluvial plain and the total geographical area it covers is almost 22,000 square miles. Certain specific conditions, laid by nature and other geographical factors permitted only few crops to grow in this valley. Nevertheless, being relatively isolated from the rest of India, the cropping pattern and its related agricultural practices in pre-colonial Assam were influenced heavily at least by two major factors: (a) the traditions and customary practices associated with different segments of its population; and (b) the local demand for consumption, because a large sector of market including external trade
was absent. In the context of the complex population configuration which we have already outlined, the first factor makes it extremely difficult to make any quantitative assessment about the pre-colonial agricultural situation in the absence of required data. Yet, here an attempt would be made to focus upon the major dimensions of the agricultural sector which emerged by the end of the Ahom rule.

Table-2.3 and 2.4 would provide us some meaningful insights to make some reasonable assessments about the area and production of the major crops in Assam before the Civil War. Of course, there is a time gap of almost one century between the period under consideration and the period for which information are available. Yet, we can make use of these two Tables for our analytical purpose because, it would not be entirely unrealistic to assume that the changes, if any, which took place within that period were largely insignificant. The objective basis for our assumption is that, first of all, the agricultural practices over the period had also been traditional as before. And secondly, the initial phase of colonialism refused to uplift the agricultural sector with any technological inputs, but the first five decades of colonial rule helped in reclamation of land under different crops which was fallowed due to the prolonged Civil War.

Rice being the staple food of the people, paddy cultivation got an overwhelming importance in Assam as it commanded more than 75 percent of the total cultivated area,
as demonstrated in Table-2.3 followed by oilseeds (mainly mustard) which commanded almost 12 percent of the total cultivated area. It must be stated clearly that, although oilseeds and some other agricultural crops, such as cotton, were exported to Bengal during the pre_colonial era, it is evident from Table-2.3 that these crops occupied only an insignificant portion of the land under cultivation. The other agricultural based production in pre_colonial Assam was some amount of silk beyond the level of its self-consumption and this was a major item of export to Bengal to meet the local demand of salt form Bengal. Rest of the miscellaneous crops were produced only for self-consumption and they together occupied slightly more than one tenth of the total area under cultivation. Except for the district of Nowgong, the pattern of division of land among the major crops had been almost same. Our major concern, however, is paddy because paddy culture had been the basis of pre_colonial Assamese society and its economy.

Although paddy occupied a predominant position in the pre_colonial agricultural scenario, a large chunk of its production was influenced heavily by the prevailing practices of shifting cultivation. There are evidences to show that shifting cultivation dominated particularly the western and central parts of the Brahmaputra Valley and it was taken up on a large scale in Lakhimpur. The variety of paddy which was suitable for shifting cultivation on undulating and sloping lands in submontane
and reverine tracts is locally called Ahu. This variety of paddy is traditionally sown broadcast, and it takes a short duration to mature. The piece of land occupied by Ahu, therefore, sometimes allowed a second crop (pulses and oilseeds) to grow after it was harvested. But after two or three crops, the Ahu field used to become totally exhausted and had to be fallowed for many years.

The second variety of paddy locally called Sali, is more important for us than Ahu, because Sali involved permanent cultivation. Sali is traditionally transplanted in July-August and harvested in November-December. Obviously, Sali demanded wet lands to grow and involved ploughing the land. Since it takes a longer duration to mature, Sali paddy hardly allowed a second crop to grow on the piece of land it occupied. In terms of yield per unit of cultivated land, it was obviously much higher in case of Sali than Ahu, because the level of natural fertility of the wet Sali fields was constantly enriched by yearly floods, and the process of transplantation involved much more human labour inputs and care than Ahu which was sown broadcast. The yield of Ahu used to gradually go down every year.

In addition to Ahu and Sali, the another variety of paddy, locally called Hoo, was also cultivated to an extent. This variety of paddy is even now cultivated in the natural marshes and generally it does not require ploughing before sowing. This variety of paddy takes much longer duration than Ahu and Sali and yields lesser than them.
Table-2.3

AREA UNDER THE MAJOR CROPS IN EARLY 1870s (Area in Acre)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>Paddy</th>
<th>Oilseeds</th>
<th>Sugarcane</th>
<th>Cotton</th>
<th>Other Crops</th>
<th>Total Cultivated Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karonup</td>
<td>3,43,461 (76.62)</td>
<td>55,335 (12.34)</td>
<td>3,391 (0.76)</td>
<td>12,751 (0.53)</td>
<td>43,715 (9.75)</td>
<td>4,48,273 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barpang</td>
<td>1,82,172 (95.31)</td>
<td>3,644 (1.92)</td>
<td>1,126 (0.59)</td>
<td>850 (0.44)</td>
<td>3,835 (1.74)</td>
<td>1,91,127 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>1,16,876 (49.24)</td>
<td>73,700 (31.04)</td>
<td>1,600 (0.67)</td>
<td>5,074 (2.14)</td>
<td>40,150 (16.91)</td>
<td>2,37,400 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sivasagar</td>
<td>2,10,140 (81.77)</td>
<td>6,948 (2.71)</td>
<td>4,218 (1.64)</td>
<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>35,668 (13.88)</td>
<td>2,56,974 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>46,730 (74.73)</td>
<td>3,000 (4.80)</td>
<td>2,927 (4.68)</td>
<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>9,675 (15.79)</td>
<td>62,532 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,99,399 (75.18)</td>
<td>11,42,627 (11.92)</td>
<td>13,262 (1.11)</td>
<td>8,275 (0.69)</td>
<td>1,32,743 (11.10)</td>
<td>11,96,306 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This excludes area under Tea.

Source: W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*

( Figures in brackets indicate percentage share of the crop to total cultivated area. )
The first and the third variety of paddy, that is Ahu and Bag, which were traditionally sown broadcast were suitable for shifting cultivation. Guha observed that in the beginning of the Ahom rule, the tribal population of the valley were associated mainly with the Ahu crop or shifting cultivation, and wet rice culture was traditional with the Ahoms. Alongwith the growing influence of the Ahoms, accompanied by the process of detribalization and sanskritization, shifting cultivation in Assam gradually went on shrinking. Nevertheless, it had been a practice of various plain tribes even in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it can be said that shifting cultivation co_existed with wet permanent cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley throughout the period under consideration. Further, it should also be noted that the prevailing cropping practices reduced cropping intensity to the level of a monocrop culture.

A cross sectional picture of the early 1870s has been drawn in Table - 2.4 which shows the estimated area under the three varieties of paddy and estimated quantity of their production in the five districts of Assam proper. Now, a comparative analysis of this Table with the population configuration drawn in Table - 2.1 and 2.2 would help us to comment on the agricultural scenario of Assam while it was at the height of its prosperity before the Civil War.
Table - 2.4

When and Production of Different Varieties of Paddy in Early 1870s.
(Area in thousand acres and production in thousand quintals)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Cultivated Area</th>
<th>Estimated Area under each variety of paddy</th>
<th>Estimated Production of each variety of Paddy</th>
<th>Total Production of Paddy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sali</td>
<td>Ahu</td>
<td>Bao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paddy Area</td>
<td>Paddy Area</td>
<td>Paddy Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazaribag</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrang</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawabganj</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsaagar</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>699</strong></td>
<td><strong>594</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>191</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimated yield: Sali paddy = 9 Qt/Acre; Ahu and Bao paddy = 7 Qt/Acre

Sources: Total area under paddy has been taken from R.W. Hunter, pp. 315-16 and percentage of area under each variety of paddy has been taken from Sunil Appah et al. Early Colonial Issues - Ethnicity, Politics, Economy, pp. 1-7. (Table - 7.1)
The most prominent aspect in Table - 2.4 is the district wise variation of cultivated land under Sali paddy. The percentage of area under Sali to the total cultivated land under paddy is the highest in the district of Sibsagar (72%) followed by Lakhimpur (63%) and it is the lowest in the district of Kamrup and Nowgong (50%). Beyond any doubt, this variation is particularly due to the sociological factor of production, which to a large extent could overcome the topographical barricades in the districts of Upper Assam. The two districts of Upper Assam, that is Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, as we have seen in Table - 2.4, were predominated by the Ahoms and with their relatively superior agricultural practices of wet paddy cultivation could bring about a much larger area under settled Sali cultivation. The case of Darrang district with almost 77 percent of the land under Sali paddy reveals a proximity to the situation in Lakhimpur despite a large tribal population in the district. This was perhaps due to greater degree of detribalization in Darrang than Kamrup and Nowgong districts, where shifting cultivation was equally popular with settled cultivation.

A comparison of the total number of family as shown in Table-2.1 and the total cultivated land under paddy as shown in Table - 2.4 would reveal that every family had command over slightly more than 3 acres of paddy land. This apparent ratio, however, may be misleading. For a better understanding of the distributional pattern of land, it must
be kept in mind that the Paik system had been the basis of the agrarian structure of pre-colonial Assam which involved a peculiar pattern of distribution. We shall deal with this system thoroughly in some other context later. But, it must be noted at this juncture that the essence of distributional aspect of the Paik system, was, an equal allotment of two puras or 2.66 acres of wet paddy land by the state to its adult male population who were not slaves.

Hunter shows that 52 percent of the total population in Assam was constituted by the males, and thus the total number of male population could be estimated as almost 7.55 lakhs. It could be further estimated that one third of the total male population was constituted by the adult persons, and this amounts to be 2.55 lakhs. Now, leaving apart the slaves and other such unfree people, the total number of the Paiks could be estimated as roughly 2.30 lakhs. This rough estimation suggests that every Paik in Assam, on an average had command over 2.63 acres of land under Salī paddy. This ratio is in conformity with the customary pattern of distribution of wet paddy land which does not provide any scope of concentration of such lands in the hands of few. The distribution of dry land and marshes occupied by Abū and Bāo paddy respectively, nevertheless, was traditionally uneven, because the state never restricted the people to reclaim such lands on their own individual initiative. This might have resulted in concentration of such lands in the hands of few. Yet, it is revealed by our estimation that
every Paik on an average had a share of almost four acres of paddy land including his 2.66 acres of wet paddy land allotted by the state. This ratio, however, does not indicate a very high degree of concentration of the land under any or bag paddy in the hands of few.

From the level of production as shown in Table - 2.4 it could be estimated that the per capita production of paddy for Assam as a whole was roughly 5 quintals. This was the same for the district of Kamrup, and highest in Barpeta and Sibasagar, i.e 6.6 quintals and 6.3 quintals respectively. The lowest per capita production was, however, registered by Lakhimpur, i.e 3.7 quintals. Now, keeping in mind the food habit, popularity of rice beer among the aboriginal tribes, and other cultural patterns and rituals, it can be broadly estimated that requirement of paddy per person was about 3 quintals in a year. Thus it can be safely said that every district was self-sufficient in terms of paddy and roughly about two third of the paddy produced in a year was for self-consumption. The remaining one-third was exchanged with the neighbouring hill tribes for various forest products.

TECHNOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTS OF PRODUCTION:

The overall level of technological development in pre-colonial Assam was much behind the rest of India. Perhaps, abundance of land with rich natural fertility, a
Large size of the plain-tribal population often multiplied by migration of many other tribes from the neighbouring hills, the prevailing ethos of production mainly to attain self-sufficiency and its relative isolation from the rest of India were the primary factors responsible for technological stagnation. The consequence of technological backwardness had been the practice of hoe cultivation in the larger part of the Brahmaputra Valley which prevented expansion of plough cultivation for a considerably long period of time. With an exception of the well-settled Kachari villages in Upper Assam, Guha noted that in the early years of British administration, most of the aboriginal tribal communities were either associated with hoe cultivation, or were passing through a transition from hoe to plough.

It has already been noted that the majority of the tribes were involved in some or other form of shifting cultivation, and hoes perhaps had been effective enough for that purpose. But, the wet paddy culture which was popularized by the Ahoms in Upper Assam definitely demanded not only the use of plough, but also extensive measures to prevent the cropped area from inundations and to retain rain and flood water necessary for Sali. Robinson noted that most of the rivers in Upper Assam were guarded by embankments to prevent the plains from inundations, and the embankments served a dual purpose of bunds as well as roads. He observed, "the river embankments were crossed by high raised pathways which were again joined by smaller bunds"
graduating down; and connecting villages and fields at one-
formed most commodious means of communication, and afforded
opportunities for retaining or keeping out the inundations".
Moreover, the areas of permanent settlement, particularly in
Upper Assam, also involved various other land development
activities such as reclamation of the cultivable waste land,
leveling up the surface etc. necessary for paddy culture.
Such activities were taken up at a large scale in the river-
dominated Upper Assam, which involved collective effort on
the peasant community organised by the state through the
institution of Failk.

Lower Assam, however, in contrast to Upper Assam, had
never such extensive community investment in the form of
embankments and dykes to convert much of the Ahu and Ha
lands into paddy fields. Consequently, wet paddy culture in
Lower Assam was limited to the extent of the flat terrain.
It must also be mentioned in this context that excepting a
section of the Kachari tribe inhabited in some pockets of
the Brahmaputra Valley, irrigation was not a practice in
rest of the valley. The means, nevertheless, were as
abundant and convenient as in most of the other parts of
India. Similarly, use of manure also was not in practice for
better yield of any variety of paddy cultivated in the
Brahmaputra Valley.

Further, the implements used in paddy culture were
extremely crude and primitive in their form. Though the use
of plough had been an increasing trend, the instrument was so simple that plough shares were made out of roots of arecanut trees or bamboo and the use of iron shave was limited. The use of iron, bricks and wheelcarts was also extremely limited though they were known from ancient times. The land development activities involving the construction of a large number of embankments, dykes etc. were no doubt extremely necessary for expansion of Sali, but these activities were carried on with very simple implements like spade. These activities therefore involved a large portion of the existing limited labour power continuously. To be precise, primarily the factor of agricultural technology coupled with scarcity of population allowed only one major crop to grow annually, and hence generated a very limited amount of agricultural surplus. Nevertheless, with a relatively better technology of production, Upper Assam could produce more surplus than Lower Assam. And this obviously helped the Ahoms in expanding their influence all over the Brahmaputra Valley.

OWNERSHIP OF LAND:

During the last two centuries of Ahom rule, Assam witnessed a unique pattern of ownership of land and revenue administration where hereditary private property right was given to the Bari and Basti lands (gardens and homestead) only. The land under wet paddy called rupit mati was not considered as heritable private property unless backed by a
royal grant. The farming community, nevertheless had a free access to the unoccupied dry lands for fire wood, building materials, grazing and even temporary cultivation.

Excepting the areas under royal farms or Lakhinaj (revenue free) grants made in favour of the Brahmans, religious institutions and some members of the nobility for their distinguished service, the wet rice fields were distributed equally among the Paiks, i.e. the adult male population who were not slaves. A Paik was allotted, as we have already noted, two puras or 2.66 acres of rupit mati as his ga-mati (land attached to a person) for which he was obliged to render initially three months and later four months of his service to the state. The fixed quota of two puras, however could be supplemented by any amount of tax-free inferior land. Further, this could also be supplemented by an additional share of ubar mati, i.e. the land which was surplus after meeting the demands of all local Paikes. This additional share of ubar mati was initially revenue free, but a marginal amount of revenue was imposed on it in the later period. The share of ubar mati, or even the ga-mati of a Paik could, however, be taken back by the state.

It must also be mentioned that the distributional aspect of wet land was essentially imbued with communal ownership. In a situation of a remarkably low density of population and hence abundance of land to the people, the low-lying open fields were reclaimed collectively. Further, the reclaimed fields were also to be protected against
floods through continuous collective efforts. Therefore, they were considered as communal property, and a Paik held his ga-mati with mere usufruct right. After his death, or at his old age his wet paddy land always went back to the community.

The pattern of ownership coupled with the technological factor arrested the capacity of a Paik to command over a much bigger size of land than what was customarily allotted to him. Consequently, the Ahom rule could not encourage a significant level of accumulation of wet land by any free peasant, although they had an access to the vast areas of cultivable waste land. A few royal families, and the clerics, nevertheless, were benefited by the royal grants made in favour of them.

TRADE

The overwhelming importance on paddy culture for self-sufficiency and consequently, the low level of economic diversification of the people could hardly encourage expansion of trade in pre-colonial Assam. It is evident from the fact that its indigenous caste structure does not indicate the existence of any trading community or caste of economic significance. At least two factors can be pointed out immediately which had restricted the growth of a trade sector in pre-colonial Assam. First, its physical isolation from the rest of India made external trade extremely
difficult, and secondly as we have already noted, its agricultural sector had failed to generate enough surplus to inspire the people to search for a market. In addition to these two factors, another important factor had been an unfavourable and largely isolationist attitude of the Ahom rulers to promote trade. Guha observed that River_borne trade in Assam could never be as important as that along the Ganges, because of difficult navigation on the Brahmaputra. Trade was limited by the carrying capacity of canoes on rivers and of pack animals (limitedly used) and human carriers on land.

The attitude of the Ahom rulers towards foreign trade is reflected well in the observation made by Shihabuddin in the mid-seventeenth century. He noted that the kings neither allowed foreigners to enter their land, nor permitted any of their own subjects to go out of it. "Formerly once a year" noted Shihabuddin, "by order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Gauhati; they gave gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard and silk cloth in exchange for salt, saltpeter, sulphur and certain other products of India which the people of Gauhati used to take thither."

We may get a fair idea of the river_borne external trade of Assam with Bengal from the figures of 1808-1809 quoted by S.K. Bhuyan. The major export items of Assam to Bengal were Raw Cotton (Rs. 35,000), Stick Lac (Rs. 35,000), Mustard Seed (Rs. 20,000), Muga Cloth (Rs. 17,500), Muga
Silk (Rs. 11,350), Ivory (Rs. 6,000), Slaves (Rs. 2,000), Bell metal vessels (Rs. 1,500) etc. The total value of all the export items was only Rs. 1,30,900. On the other hand, the import of salt from Bengal alone amounted to Rs. 1,92,500. The remaining part of the import from Bengal was constituted by various luxury items, and the total value of all the import items was Rs. 2,28,300.

It is evident that the distinctly unfavourable balance of trade was, mainly due to demand of Bengal salt, and to match the value, Assam never had enough of its own agricultural surplus to export. The oilseeds could be exported because of low consumption of vegetable oil in Assam which was a part of the food habit of the tribal population. It is worth noticing that raw cotton and some of the forest products exported to Bengal were procured through barter with the neighbouring hill tribes for paddy, dry fish and silk. Further, it needs to be emphasised that the geographical isolation of Assam from the rest of India and its sizeable section of the tribal population integrated the precolonial economy of Assam more with the hills than the rest of India. The form of exchange was however, barter. Guha observed that this symbiotic relationships was maintained through a chain of foot hill marts and fairs where both sides met, and this trade between the hills and the plains appears to have been no less important than what was between precolonial Assam and the rest of India.
TRANSITION FROM TRIBALISM TO FEUDALISM:

In the light of our discussion it can be safely said that the agricultural sector had been the whole edifice of pre-colonial Assam. This sector, however, had never been significantly influenced by a very high level of productive technology, and remained exclusively dependent on nature. As a result, with gradual expansion of wet paddy culture, the labour intensive agricultural practices absorbed the entire work force. With a pattern of communal ownership, the wet paddy fields were distributed equally among the peasants. The primary sector of production with such unique features did not provide the required scope for accumulation of wealth in the hands of few farmers. The pre-colonial economy as a whole could encourage only a very rudimentary level of specialization involving marginal division of labour, and consequently, it could neither develop a trade sector of much economic significance, nor an urban sector which deserves attention. These broad characteristic features indicate the persisting influence of tribalism. However, a close observation of the last two centuries of Ahom rule also indicate a slow process of transition of the Assamese society towards feudalism.

The seventeenth century had been a landmark in the history of feudalism in Assam. A gradual expansion of ploough and wet paddy cultivation in Upper Assam resulted in generation of agricultural surplus to an extent. This had
been accompanied by rapid development of war technology with
the introduction of locally manufactured gun-powder, matchlocks and cannon. The amount of surplus production and the concomitant development of war technology provided material strength to the Ahom kings for expansion of their political as well as economic influence over the neighbouring kingdoms.

Another worthmentioning development in the arena of pre_colonial economy had been a much wider circulation of local coins since the mid_seventeenth century than ever before. This indicates the development of a market sector, not-withstanding its pace of growth was rather slow and scope was limited. In 1662, there was only a narrow nave road in the Ahom capital, and the traders were only betel_leaf sellers. Buying and selling of the articles of food in the market was not the common practice. However, in the first half of the eighteenth century we find a price list of different food staff being quoted in a copper plate deed of grant. This indicates a gradual expansion of the market limited circulation of Ahom coins in the last part of the seventeenth century.

In this context, a brief discussion on the class structure which emerged towards the last part of Ahom rule may help us to understand the process of feudal consolidation in Assam. On the criterion of labour appropriation, Hussain broadly devided the pre_colonial
Assemese society into two distinctly antagonistic classes: i.e. the ruling class and the toiling class. Hussain further observed that the ruling class of pre-colonial Assam was mainly composed of three hierarchically distinct aristocracies: (a) the higher aristocracy, comprising the king, the royal families, ministers and the high officials; (b) the middle aristocracy, mainly composed of the priestly classes or the spiritual heads including the Vaishnavite and the landed vassals etc.; (c) the lower aristocracy, primarily composed of the officers of lower rank, the Apaikan Chamuas or the privileged peasants who were not required to render their physical labour to the state, and the merchants. The class structure of pre-colonial Assam has been shown in Appendix - 6.

The top two segments of the class hierarchy were substantially rich. These two tiny segments, being favoured by royal grants held their hereditary landed estates or Khats of large size and bulk of the Paiks and slaves allotted to them in lieu of salary. The bottom of the ruling hierarchy was occupied by the Apaikan Chamuas who owned small means of production. They were, however, free from obligatory manual service to the state. In terms of power and privileges, this section was far behind the other two sections of the ruling class. The ruling class of pre-colonial Assam as a whole was, however, numerically quite weak, because all the three segments of this class together
constituted some one percent of the total population.

The vast majority of the society either was Paik or slave. They constituted the toiling class. The class of Paik was further divided into two categories of manual workers; (a) Kanri Paiks, who were liable to obligatory non-service of any kind to the state; and (b) Chamua Paiks, who were permitted to contribute periodically share of their specialised products or their skilled service. Both the categories of Paik were organised in Khel, and many of the Chamua Khels, such as those of goldsmiths, goldwashers, oil_pressers etc. were more or less like guilds. However the vast majority of the peasantry were Kanri Paiks. To be precise, the Paik as a social category, which numerically predominated the pre_colonial society, was composed of the manual workforce of the adult males drawn from the non_ruling class and non_slaves. It must also be noted in this context that about one-fourth to one-third of the mobilized Paiks were assigned as Likchou to the officers in lieu of their salary, and they had to work in the private khats and households of the officers. Further, there were also a large number of Paiks who were permanently withdrawn from their Khels and attached to the Satras (Vashnavite monasteries), and temples for providing specific service. They were called Bhakats when attached to a Satra, and Dewalia Paik when attached to a temple. These two sections of Paik had no obligations of any kind towards the state.
We find the Bahatia (serfs) and the Bandi-Beti (male and female household slaves) at the bottom of the class hierarchy. The household slaves could be bought and sold, and we have already noted that they were even exploited in denial. The institution of slavery was deep rooted in pre-colonial Assam, as the ruling class to a large extent had to depend upon the slaves to cultivate their Khats and also for their households works. Mainly the prisoners of war, condemned criminals and persons born of slaves constituted a major section of this class. However, quite often, the Kanri Fords used to sell themselves to a rich man to get rid of the risk he had bear at the time of war. Further, slavery was also caused by debt, because a Bandha (the person who mortgaged himself for an indefinite period) in course of time could be converted to a slave. Guha estimated that the sections of slaves, serfs and bondsmen constituted approximately ten percent of the total population of Assam in mid eighteenth century.

A close observation would reveal that the state apparatus as well as the modus operandi of the class hierarchy had been marked by certain degree of centralization of authority. The class hierarchy which took a concrete shape in the seventeenth century helped in extraction of the surplus by the feudal state because, being representative of the state, the king had gradually established ownerships of the entire wet paddy and waste lands and enjoyed the monopoly over the
distribution of land and mobilization of surplus. Further, a class of feudal landed aristocracy had also been established by the state by providing the tax free grants of estate land on which the Raiks, serfs and slaves were to cultivate them. The Brahman abbots and the priests who were favoured by the royal grants constituted a class of spiritual leaders cum land lords and they exacted labour rent in general, or a rent in cash or kind in lieu of it from their tenants. Furthermore, several hereditary vassal chiefs were allowed to enjoy autonomy in their respective territories and had the obligation to supply a fixed contingent of soldiers to the Ahom King. All such factors indicate a process of transition and gradual consolidation of feudalism in Assam under the Ahom rule. Nevertheless, certain elements of tribalism as we have already indicated, continued their influence over the pre-colonial Assamese society and its economy.

FEUDAL CRISIS AND POLITICAL CHAOS:

The process of feudal consolidation in Assam inherited certain structural weaknesses which manifested themselves in the form of increasing political contradiction between the ruling class and the peasantry. Neither the ruling class, nor the peasantry was, however, a class for itself, yet the Civil War which broke out in 1767 and continued till 1806 could be conceived as an outcome of the unresolved contradiction between these two antagonistic
classes. The prolonged Civil War ended indecisively but ruined the political structure of feudalism and its economy. A close scrutiny of the major socio-political as well as economic process during the period under consideration would reveal a couple of mutually interdependent factors which pushed the people to this or that side of the divide.

The Civil War involving a series of popular peasant revolts which shook the foundation of Ahom kingdom has been often described as Moamoria rebellion, because the followers of a neo-vaishnavite monastery called Moamara Satra provided the leadership to this armed struggle. It is therefore imperative to discuss briefly the impact of neo-vaishnavism on pre-colonial Assam for a better understanding of the nature and causes of the Civil War.

The neo-vaishnavite movement had secured a strong footing towards the last part of the fifteenth century under the leadership of Sankardeva. This monotheistic cult of Pan-Indian Bhakti Movement through the proselytizing function of its extensive network of Satras became increasingly popular among the different sections of the common people. The theological essence of neo-vaishnavism, is that any one irrespective of birth, caste or social status could attain salvation by becoming loyal to one deity. This appealed particularly the tribal and other such relatively backward communities. Obviously, it accelerated the ongoing process of detribalization and sanskritization.
The Ahom kings either remained indifferent to or ignored the increasing popularity of neo-vaishnavism in its initial phase. Neo-vaishnavism, however, became a powerful ideological instrument of feudalism in the subsequent period, while it received royal patronage in the mid-seventeenth century. For its outstanding contribution in consolidation of feudalism by accelerating the process of detribalization and Sanskritization, neo-vaishnavism received a special attention of the Ahom kings particularly during the second half of the seventeenth century, and extended its sphere of influence substantially.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, being a religious ideology of feudalism, neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam refused to challenge the conservative elements of Shaktaism including the Vedic rituals, existing caste hierarchy and even idol worship. Neo-vaishnavite movement rather compromised with the later for further enhancement of its acceptance. Inspite of such limitations and compromises with the conservative elements of Hinduism, the religious ideology of the ruling class had been successful in bringing the people to its fold, and consequently it antagonised the section of traditional Hindu priests. In addition to that, the conformist attitude of neo-vaishnavism had given birth to a section of extremists within the movement itself who wanted to lead the movement to its original ideological end.
The ideological differences which emerged within the neo-vaishnavite movement finally resulted in its fragmentation towards the end of seventeenth century. The movement had been divided into four competing orders or Sambhatis: (a) Brahma, which accepted supremacy of the brahmans and allowed them to continue with their vedic rites and idol worship; (b) Purusha, (c) Nika, and (d) Kala. These four orders can be divided into two broad ideological camps, that is the conformist led by the Brahma Sambhati, and the non-conformist under the leadership of Kala Sambhati. The later for its liberal attitude could gain more popularity among the oppressed sections of the Hindu caste hierarchy and the Hinduised tribal population.

Further, it must also be mentioned that, detribalization as a social process had helped in consolidation of feudalism by alienating the tribal elements from the socio-economic practices of Assam. However, unlimited caste mobility, or broadly speaking, an equal social position of all classes or castes as advocated by the non-conformist camp of neo-vaishnavite movement was not acceptable to the feudal ruling class for its potential threat to the feudal structure itself. The growing influence of the non-conformist ideology therefore compelled the feudal ruling class to take oppressive measures against the religious movement as a whole towards the end of seventeenth century. This had driven the non-conformist section underground, but could not close the chapter.
The ongoing religious conflicts forced the feudal state to revise its religious policy, and the ruling class finally had arrived at an alliance between the king, traditional priests of the Shakti cult, and the Brahminical or conformist camp of neo-vaishnavism in a situation when the reformist movement experienced a sharp erosion of its early idealism. Such a politically motivated alliance, however, could not completely isolate the non-conformist camp of neo-vaishnavism from the people. It is evident from the fact that the Moamara Satra still continued with its non-conformist ideology and provided leadership in the Civil War.

The unresolved ideological conflicts of seventeenth century had substantially reduced the feudal hegemony, and caused an acute crisis before the state. This had been further aggravated by a concomitant process of evasion of Paik services to the state, both because of religious and economic factors. It is evident from the fact that just before the Civil War, the feudal state could command the Paik or militia service of only about 80,000 adult males of its total population of nearly 2.5 million. Beyond any doubt, this indicates a significant erosion of martial strength of the feudal state.

We have already noted a growing tendency among the Paiks to avoid obligatory services to the state as militia, and many of them even preferred to be slaves. The growing
number of the neo-vaishnavite monasteries had provided an outlet to the adult males to become bhakats, and hence to get exempted from the obligatory service as militia by the feudal state. The satras, with the substantially lower free royal grants of cultivable waste land and the increasing workforce, emerged as strong feudal estates on one hand, and very significantly the feudal state experienced a gradual decline of its militia on the other.

Another important factor responsible for feudal crisis in pre-colonial Assam was inroads of money into its economy. For smooth functioning of the Ahom system of administration, it was essential for the state to maintain the status quo of the Paik or militia system. But, gradual introduction of money encouraged an upward class mobility and diversification of economic activities to an extent. First of all, with introduction of money into its economy the feudal state initially allowed the Paiks of high castes to render their obligations to the state in the form of money tax. Being so privileged, such Paiks could designate themselves as Aapalkan Chamua which meant an upward class mobility. Secondly, with expansion of trade and growth of a market sector however limited its scope might be, a section of Assamese traders emerged within the peasantry. Obviously they could gain some amount of cash. Naturally, they wanted to substitute their corvee obligations by money tax and enter into the superior status. Similar was the situation
with the artisan class particularly in Lower Assam, because this section was also benefited by the growing trade with Mughal India in eighteenth century.

Since its militia had already faced an acute crisis of man power, the feudal state was reluctant to extend this privilege any more. Further, for an immediate solution of the crisis of man power, the size of each got was reduced from 4 to 3 Paiks which meant an increase of the period of obligatory service of Paiks from 3 months to 4 months. The direct consequence had been an increased workload on the peasantry of the lower castes and Hinduized tribals.

All these factors together added a new dimension to the crisis already faced by the feudal ruling class in the first half of eighteenth century and widened the gap between the ruling feudal state and its subjects. A resolution of the increasing contradiction had been sought by the oppressed peasantry in the prolonged Civil War under the leadership of the non-conformist camp of neo-vaishnavite movement, or to be more specific, the Mgamorias. Due to its internal contradiction, the feudal state had failed to resolve the conflict and paved the way for external intervention and finally to the British Colonialist annexed Assam in 1826.
SUMMING UP:

The pre-colonial social formation of Assam witnessed the persisting influence of tribalism, a deep rooted institution of slavery and a process of growth and consolidation of feudalism which remained incomplete. The elements of tribalism dominated the production system of Assam until the end of the sixteenth century. The Ahom state, however, encouraged the growth and consolidation of feudalism particularly since the seventeenth century. The process of transition from tribalism to feudalism had inevitably been accompanied by the growth of slavery.

Cultivation of wet paddy, which was traditional with the Ahoms, had been expanded by the Ahom state initially in Upper Assam. Expansion of wet paddy cultivation and the surplus generated by it had been instrumental in territorial expansion of the Ahom state and its political consolidation over the entire Brahmaputra Valley during the subsequent period. The given geographical situation, particularly the topography of the Brahmaputra Valley, however, necessitated a heavy community investment for growth of wet paddy culture. Reclamation of cultivated land and construction of embankments were the two major tasks which could not be taken up without involving a large number of people. But, we have seen that the Brahmaputra Valley was sparsely populated, and the economy was not yet monetized. In addition to the huge labour force required for wet paddy
cultivation, the state had also to maintain a strong armed force for its territorial expansion as well as self defence. Under such compelling circumstances, the Ahom state had to device the Paik cum militia system.

The expansion of wet paddy cultivation resulted in the erosion of the prevailing practice of shifting cultivation. Further, to promote wet paddy cultivation, the Ahom state had also made several grants of cultivable waste land along with the Paiks, serfs and slaves in favour of the upper strata of the ruling hierarchy. All such conscious steps taken by the state paved the way for emergence of feudalism in Assam. The society had distinctly been divided into two broad classes, i.e. the exploiting ruling class, and the exploited toiling peasants and the slaves. Initially the war prisoners were treated as slaves, but the numerical strength of this section had substantially increased, because many free peasants were also converted to slaves.

The low level of technological development, primitive implements used in agriculture, scarcity of human labour and the existing Paik system are some of the major factors which restricted the capacity of free peasants to concentrate cultivated land, notwithstanding they had a free access to the vast area of cultivable waste land. The same factors are also responsible for the limited growth of agricultural surplus and a narrow economic base of emerging feudalism. Production was mainly for self consumption. A trading
community and a market sector could not develop significantly because the economy was not monetized.

The neo-vaishnavite movement played a decisive role in the process of transition from tribalism to feudalism. The Ahom state was initially indifferent towards neo-vaishnavism. But, its growing popularity had drawn attention of the state, and with royal patronage, the neo-vaishnavism had become an ideology of growing feudalism in Assam. At that juncture, the neo-vaishnavite movement had sought to bridge the gap between the state and the society at large. For enhancement of popularity and to serve the interests of growing feudalism, a section of neo-vaishnavite leadership had even compromised with the conservative elements of Hinduism. This conformist attitude resulted in an ideological split within the movement. This had finally culminated in the emergence of a non-conformist camp towards the end of the seventeenth century. The non-conformist camp had been successful to bring the socially as well as economically oppressed sections of the peasantry to its fold.

The increasing contradiction between the feudal state and the oppressed section of the peasantry was sought to be resolved by the non-conformist camp of the neo-vaishnavite movement through violent means. This had finally culminated in the Civil War. It was of course not a struggle waged by the oppressed peasantry as a class for itself against
feudalism. Yet, it had undoubtedly ruined the economic base of the nobility. This was followed by the series of Burmese invasions. The political chaos caused by growing contradiction between the emerging feudalism and the oppressed peasantry on one hand, and the contradiction within the ruling class over the issue of appropriation of surplus on the other, had finally paved the way for colonial intervention. Historically, this is a very significant event, because, colonialism was imposed on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society. This paved the way for a complex process of social change including qualitative change in the agrarian sector.
Notes and References

1. Here Assam means Assam proper, i.e. the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley under the colonial rule. These five districts are, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur. The district of Goalpara has been excluded as it was not a part of the Ahom Kingdom of Assam. See for details, S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations: 1771 - 1826; DHAS, Guwahati, 1949, P.1.

2. Ibid


5. The limitations are well reported in the third census of Assam in 1901. See for details, Report On the Census of Assam, 1901, Vol.1.

6. We may accept the ratio between population and number of houses as shown in Table - 2.1 as a proxy indicator of family size.


8. Ibid, they were European, Bhutia, Nepali immigrants and other Indian migrants.

9. Ibid.

10. See for details, Guha, op.cit., PP. 18-19

11. Ibid. P.19

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.


16. See, Guha, op.cit. P.8

17. For details about the geographical factor, see, Ibid., op.cit. PP. 8-15

18. This will be discussed in details in some other context.

19. See for details, Guha, op. cit. PP. 63-66

20. See for details, Ibid, PP. 65-78

21. Ibid. P.69

22. W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, Sanskaran Prakasan Delhi, Reprint 1975, Delhi PP. 317-318.

23. To quote Shihabuddin, "In this country they make the surface of fields and gardens so level that the eye can not find the least elevation in it up to the extreme horizon." See, Gait, History of Assam, Reprint, Third revised edition, United Commercial Press Ltd. Calcutta, 1967, P. 145.


27. Guha, op.cit.

30. See, Bait, op. cit., P. 147.


33. For instance, Kamrup was incorporated to Ahom Kingdom by 1684.

34. See, Bait, op. cit., P. 155

35. See for details, ibid., Pp. 222-223

36. See for details, Hussain, op. cit., P. 30

37. Ibid., Pp. 30-33

38. For example, in mid-eighteenth century the marriage dowry of a Barphukan's daughter comprised two elephants, ten horses, five hundred buffaloes, one thousand cows, one hundred slaves, three hundred wardrobes, eighteen pieces of gold utensils, eighteen pieces of silver utensils, one gold saddle and several sets of gold and silver jewellery. See, Guha, op. cit., Pp. 51-52; 54-55.

39. Ibid., P. 57.

40. Ibid., P. 53

41. For detailed account of the institution of slavery in Assam, See Robinsons, op. cit., and Guha, op. cit.

42. Guha, op. cit., P. 53
43. For detailed account of the system of administration, see Gait, op.cit., and Bhuyan, op.cit.

44. Guha, op.cit., P. 108

45. See for details about the rebellion, Bhuyan, op.cit.; Neog, Sankardeva And His Time : Early History of Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1965; and, Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Moyamoriya Vaishnavas, Centre For Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1982; and Gait, op.cit.

46. It is evident from the religious policy adopted by Pratap Singha (1603-1641). He ignored the increasing popularity of neo-vaishnavism and preferred to patronized the Brahmins and Temples.

47. From Jayadhvaj Singha (1649-63) to Ratnadhvaj Singha (1679-81), the Ahom Kings with few exceptions, showed due respect and courtsey to the Vaishnava Gosains, and accepted initiation. Neo-vaishnavism received official recognition and the kings made grants and endowments for maintenance of the monasteries. During that period of time, most of the important Satras of Eastern Assam including Auniati, Koliabar and Majuli were set up under the royal patronage. See, Gait, op.cit., pp. 287-290.


49. See for details, Guha, op.cit.

50. See, Bhuyan, op.cit., 1949.