CHAPTER - III
AGRARIAN REFORMS : THE COLONIAL PHASE

Modern colonialism is a very significant historical phenomenon associated with the development and the expansion of West European capitalism which began at the commercial revolution of the sixteenth century. The objectives were essentially economic, but their realization necessitated direct political subjugation of a pre-capitalist society by the imperialist power. The major emphasis of the latter was on search for raw materials and markets. Given the economic preeminence and naval superiority of the Britain vis-a-vis the other Western imperialist countries, it could continue its economic control in the colonies till mid 19th century without complete political subjugation of the latter. However, rising strength of other imperialist countries and concomitant growth of intra-imperialist contradiction had made complete political subjugation essential as a preemptive strategy vis-a-vis rival imperialist powers. Therefore, world capitalist economic system since late 19th century inevitably developed with complete political subjugation of the pre-capitalist societies by the imperialist powers.

The institution of state in the colonial society can be perceived basically as an instrument of economic reconstruction of the colonial system conducive for
Imperialist exploitation. Being an integral component of the imperialist super structure, the state in a colonial system has to justify imperialist exploitation and economic subjugation. Therefore, it has also an ideological role to play. Nevertheless, in a sharp contrast to the hegemonic role of state in a modern society, the colonial state is often marked by naked repression and extreme coercion as well as complete political dependence on the imperialist state. All the important decisions are made by the latter, and implemented through the colonial state and its agents in the subjugated society.

British colonialism in India synchronizing with the process of capitalist development in England went through three distinct phases. Obviously, we find corresponding changes in the nature and content of agrarian policy as necessitated by each phase of colonialism. Broadly, the first phase of colonialism in India extends from the beginning of the seventeenth century upto the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This phase was marked by the rule of British merchant capital, and mode of surplus appropriation was primarily plunder in one form or the other. The basic nature of agrarian policy at this stage was aimed solely at extraction of maximum land revenue.

The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of mercantile capitalism into industrial capitalism in Britain, and the transformation had a
resultant impact on British policy in India. During this phase, the British industrial capitalist interests attempted to convert India to a source of raw materials for British industries and a market of manufactured goods produced in Britain. This phase, nevertheless, was marked by conflict between the merchant capitalist interests and the growing industrial capitalist interests. The former wanted to retain their profits through the East India Company in power, while the latter wanted to maximise profits by an expansion of the free market through free trade. The conflicts between these two classes were partially resolved in the mid-1830s when the commercial aspirations of the company were initially banned, and finally in 1858 the company was dissolved. The colonial state started its direct rule in India.

Consequently, the third phase of British colonialism in India began after the first struggle for independence in 1857. The colonial agrarian policy had also undergone a substantial change. The third phase was marked by a shift from surplus extraction by direct methods to surplus extraction by the relatively covert methods. Colonial exploitation through land revenue came to be increasingly supplemented by exploitation of India’s raw materials and market. Because of complex regional and sub-regional variations in a country of continental dimensions, a detailed analysis of the nature and impact of colonialism on
the agrarian structure and economy of India would be beyond the scope of our present study. An attempt, however, will be made in this chapter to discuss the policy of agrarian reforms in a distinct regional society, i.e., in the specific context of Assam. Further, in certain cases, the implications of the reforms have also been pointed out.

ANNEXATION OF ASSAM:

Assam was annexed by British colonialism when the industrial capitalist class was on the threshold of its final ascendency over the mercantile interests. British colonialism remained indifferent towards Assam until the Burmese invasion (1817-24). This was mainly because of the facts that the sparsely populated Ahom territory did not have enough economic worth or surplus revenue-yielding potentiality. The policy of indifference, however, came to an end with the Burmese invasion of Assam. And finally, the Burmese invaders were forced to surrender before the British in 1826. The colonialist initially decided to establish their direct control over lower Assam, i.e., Kamrup and a part of Darrang, because lower Assam used to yield an attractive revenue of more than three lakhs at that time. The districts of Upper Assam of which the total revenue reached until 1828 an amount of only one lakh rupees were restored to a section of the Ahom royalty. While the colonial industrial capitalist interests explored the natural potential of Upper Assam particularly in terms of
tea production, the colonial rule changed its attitude, and Upper Assam was finally brought under direct colonial rule in 1836.

Immediately after the incorporation of Assam, the colonial strategy of plunder demanded a set of major changes in the hitherto revenue administration. The primary objective of colonial rule at that juncture being establishment of a system conducive for plunder through land revenue, sought to abolish the Ahom system of revenue administration. The colonial system of land revenue substituted the century old practice of labour rent through Paik services, with cash rent and made land not only inheritable private property, but also a salable and purchasable commodity. Such an abrupt step towards monetization obviously had some severe implications on the barter oriented and money short economy of Assam. This had at least immediately ensured an outflow of the surplus revenue in its money form extracted from the peasants. Without going into further details we can characterise the first one decade of colonialism as a period of colonial consolidation in Assam.

Jenkins's Model of Colonization:

The Charter of 1833, which witnessed the final ascendancy of industrial capitalist interests over mercantile interests in Britain, had determined the
colonization agenda for Assam in the subsequent period. This charter had required the East India Company to facilitate the importation of British private capital into India and to promote an Indian market for British manufactures. Further, this charter had for the first time allowed Europeans to hold land in India either on long term lease or with freehold rights, hence it paved the way for direct intervention of colonial capital. At this juncture, a specific model of colonization of Assam proposed by Jenkins (in charge of the North East Frontier during 1834-66) was promptly considered by the colonial state.

In this model of colonization, Jenkins encouraged the process of monetization of the revenue system and move towards creation of absolute property rights on land. To gear up the process, Jenkins pointed out the necessity of undertaking some public works as an immediate measure to ensure a flow of cash into the money short economy of Assam. The essence of Jenkins model, nevertheless, was to attract a section of European planters with their capital to Assam’s waste lands which were deemed suitable for the production of indigo, sugarcane and other such cash crops. He believed that if the ordinary cultivation were heavily taxed, the ryots would leave their farms and work for the cash crop-oriented European capitalist farmers as tenant cultivators.
In the context of a discriminatory land revenue policy, biased in favour of the colonial capital -- Jenkins argued that the difference between what used to be paid by the ryots towards land revenue and the lower average to be paid by the colonialist would first appear to be a loss to the state. But, the large quantities of wastelands brought under tillage and other improvements would soon cover the loss.

The colonization model of Jenkins which essentially shows the possibilities of exploitation of Assam's natural resources and labour with foreign enterprise, capital and skills had been successful to convince the colonial rulers. And, the growing prospect of tea culture in Assam with successful production of Assam tea in 1837 made the proposed model all the more acceptable.

GROWTH OF THE TEA SECTOR:

The colonization model of Jenkins had failed to attract British capital and skill for export-oriented production of indigo and sugarcane in Assam. British private capital, however, responded enthusiastically to the beckoning prospect of tea plantations. Discovery of indigenous tea and its experimental production had proved that the tea produced in Assam was as good as that of China. Consequently, the Assam Tea Company had come into being in 1838 for production of Assam tea, and the local authorities were directed by the Governor-General in Council to allow
Assam Company or any other concern to commence operations and occupy such lands as might be required under Wasteland Grants Rules, 1838.

It must be noted that the Wasteland Grants rules of 1838 and their revision in 1854 were consciously framed with a colonial bias. Under these rules, no grant for agricultural purpose could be made of an extent less than one hundred acres. Further, the applicant must possess capital and agricultural stock or implements to the extent of rupees three per acre. Under such conditions, obviously only the European capitalist could occupy such grants, as the indigenous entrepreneurs could hardly furnish the requisite qualification.

The newly explored sector of tea dominated the entire developments in Assam during the subsequent two decades, and it was firmly established as a new crop of capitalist farming by 1870s. This had for the first time integrated Assam with the colonial world economy. The rapid development of this sector is evident from the fact that the total acreage under tea plants, mature and immature, increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to about 8,000 acres by 1859, and the output from 29,267 lbs. to more than 1.2 million lbs. Further, by 1871, more than three lakh acres of Wastelands had been settled with plantations in Assam proper which had increased to 6.4 lakh acres by 1901.
It must, however, be noted that the planters had enclosed by 1901 some one fourth of the total settlement area or 5 percent of the total area of Assam proper under their exclusive property rights. But the acreage under active cultivation of tea had always been significantly low in comparison to the total enclosed area. Acreage under tea formed only 8 to 10 percent of the occupied tea area in the early 1870s and some 29 percent even in the late 1947.

**REFORMS IN THE REVENUE SYSTEM:**

The colonial rule in Assam reformed the revenue system with primarily three objectives. The first one was obviously to augment the public revenue resources, and second was to create a labour market to meet the growing demands of labourers in the tea sector, and third, to create an intermediary class to stand as a buffer between the ruled and the rulers. As we have already indicated, it was assumed that a heavy tax burden upon the peasantry would not only raise the public revenue, but also would force a large section of them to join the tea sector as wage labourer. The logical end of the reforms would, therefore, mean both pauperization as well as proletarianization of the peasantry.

With the above objectives and assumptions in mind, the colonial rulers increased land revenue rates several times during the period between 1826 to 1853. (see Appendix 7) Dhekiyal Phukan noted that assessment of some of the
rupi.t lands was found to be nearly equal in value to one-
14
half of their gross produce. Guha noted that the total land
revenue demand more than quadrupled between 1865-66 and
1993-94, rising from about Rs. 1 million to more than Rs. 4 mil-
while the growth of cultivated acreage under all crops ex-
than tea remained as low as little over 7 percent with no
visible increase in productivity.

For convenience of rent collection, the colonial rule
worked out a detailed administrative arrangement. In the new
set-up, each district was divided into several fiscal
divisions called Paraganahs and Maazas. Rent was collected
from the ryots of each such division by an intermediary
class officially called Chaudhury, Patgiri, Maazadar or
Baishya. In general, ryots lands were measured annually or
from time to time and the public assessment was fixed
uniformly for a term extending from one to five years. The
officer-in-charge of the fiscal division had also the same
tenure. He was allowed a commission as his remuneration and
permitted to appropriate any increase in the assessment
arising out of extended cultivation. However, he was held
responsible also for decrease. Not being salaried, the
officer-in-charge was more a revenue farmer or contractor
than a public servant. Nevertheless, the revenue collectors
as collaborators of colonialism and mediators between the
colonial state and the peasants became an important social
category. They were appointed mainly from the rich upper
caste Hindus and Muslims. Getting a mauzadarship was an
important recognition of social status and power as well as loyalty to the colonial state.

The system of short lease continued in practice till 1851, though it was replaced by decennial settlement in Settlement Rules of 1870. The need for decennial settlement was felt because the system of short lease caused instability of interest in land and oppression of the ryots by their revenue officers. Further, the risk of collection was great, but the commission allowed to the revenue officers was meagre.

The colonial administration, nevertheless, found assessments on a long-term basis feasible only in case of the permanently cultivated rupit, bari and basti lands. Assessments of the land under shifting cultivation, however, was practicable only on a year-to-year basis, because the ryots were in the habit of relinquishing every year a good part of such lands in their possession. Consequently, despite of a large scale conversion of annual leases into decennial ones after 1833, the system of annual settlements did not become entirely obsolete.

Another significant development in colonial land revenue policy had been the promulgation of Land and Revenue Regulations of 1896. Under these regulations, the tenural rights of the common land holder were defined clearly in legal terms. All the Holders of decennial leases, and those
who were found paying land revenue rates directly to the
government for the previous ten years were recognised as
ryots enjoying permanent, heritable and transferable right of
use and occupancy on their lands. This, thus, had provided
a complete legal basis to the Ryotwari system of land
revenue administration which had gradually taken shape in
the preceding decades of colonial rule. A ryot's land now
could be put on auction sale anywhere in Assam proper by the
government if the amount of moveable property was found
inadequate for recovering the arrears of land revenue from
him. Additionally, the colonial revenue administration was
also marked by several other measures which were introduced
specifically in favour of the tea-planters. Particularly,
the Wastelands Settlement Rules of 1854; the Fee Simple
Rules of 1862; and the 'Thirty Years' Lease Rules of 1876
were some of the prominent steps in this regard.

The set of reform measures which we have pointed out
severely affected the Ahom landed aristocracy. With the
official abolition of slavery and monetization of the
revenue system, the privileged feudal aristocracy received a
major set-back. In absence of the slaves, serfs and other
such feudal privileges, their estates became unproductive,
and many of them even failed to pay their land revenue. This
aspect will be discussed later in some other context. We can
say here safely that the economic position of the Ahom
aristocracy was reduced to the level of the common men.
The modus operandi of this revenue system, nevertheless, paved the way for the land revenue officials to emerge as big landlords. For instance, if a ryot had been unable to pay the current revenue installment, it was the duty of a Mauzadar to put a bakijat or statement showing the arrears, and the district collector was to issue the attachment order. If the arrear amount was not paid within 15 days, the attached properties were sold. The Mauzadar, instead of instituting a bakijat case used to convert the arrear revenue into a loan by making the cultivator execute a bond and in due course acquired the land.

Without going into further details, it can be said that the new land revenue system had resulted in emergence of a section of loyal, but not very rich rural elite. This newly emerged section of rural elite constituted of the revenue officials, being boosted by colonialism, provided the rural leadership and worked to fulfill the interests of their masters. In the process they too received crumbs from the colonial rulers.

Apart from land, the colonialist found another major source of public revenue in the form of opium excise. It needs to be mentioned that during the last part of whom rule, consumption of opium became increasingly popular particularly among a section of the ruling aristocracies. Yet, local production of poppy was limited. The colonial
rule in its early years encouraged local production of poppy as a major cash crop. Consequently, a large number of people in Assam got addicted to opium.

The colonial rule, for its own interest, finally banned cultivation of poppy in Assam with effect from May 1860, and the government itself became the sole source of opium supply from outside to meet the local demand. In 1864-65, the total amount of Bengal opium sold in Assam amounted to 1939 mounds. The revenue derived from the opium excise was Rs. 11,86,413. Significantly this was much higher than the amount of total land revenue of the province, which was Rs. 10,61,009.

In order to maximise the excise revenue, the colonial state had raised the price of opium, and controlled its supply. The price of opium was increased from Rs. 14 per seer in 1860 to Rs. 20 in 1862, and further Rs. 23 by 1872. This was subsequently pushed upward to Rs. 37 per seer by 1890-91, and then to Rs. 50 in 1918-19, and to Rs. 57 in 1920-21. The increasing price, however, did not reduce its consumption, which increased from 1228 mounds in 1897-98 and 1901-02 to 17148 mounds in 1919-20. Thus, the excise policy of colonial rule significantly opiated and pauperised the people at large. This has exposed the real character of the colonial state.

FORMS OF TENANCY AND THE BIG LANDHOLDERS:

It has already been pointed out that the upper echelon of the pre-colonial ruling aristocracy had been
benefited by the royal grants of cultivable land and the permanently assigned section of the population to render their services to the land grantees instead of the state. This testifies the existence of a particular form of tenancy which involved payment of rent by the tenants to their landlords in the form of labour service or in kind. We have also noted that the section of big landholders emerged during the pre-colonial era was numerically feeble, but socially dominant.

However, the colonial monetized revenue system coupled with abolition of slaves had severely affected the Ahom aristocracy. In many cases, their large holdings were either confiscated by the colonial state or allowed to be sold off for land revenue. In the process, this section of landholders was almost completely done away with by the colonial state. However, the position of the religious aristocracy, headed by the Brahman priests and the Gossain-Mahanta clerics of Vaishnavism, nevertheless, did not decline because of a continuity of state patronage even during the colonial era. Their ownership over large tracts of land continued, and because of their spiritual leadership, they could also continue with some of their feudal privileges like the appropriation of labour of their followers.

In this context, Gohain observed that by offering special feudal privileges to the Gossain-Mahantas, the
colonial rulers tried to obtain loyalty from the masses through the powerful satras. He noted that in Sibsagar district alone, the Gossains of Auniati Satra, Dakhimpat Satra and Kamalabani Satra owned respectively 21,000, 11,000 and 5,900 acres of revenue free land in addition to large tracts of land on concessional land revenue.

Further, Guha noted that the total number of surviving landlord estates ranged between 2000 to 3000 over the last quarter of the 19th century. Out of the 17,03,062 acres settled for cultivation by 1880, as much as 318,540 acres or 18 percent were reportedly found settled with big landholders styled as Lakhirajdars, Nisfkhirajdars, Khuddars and Chamuadars. While the first two were holders of privileged tenants, the last two were full rate paying substantial ryots. Though a part of their holding was cultivated by family members and bondsmen, the remaining part was cultivated by their tenants.

The big landlords who could survive at the mercy of colonial rule had quickly shifted their loyalty to colonialism. In addition to their landed property, they sought to avail every opportunity given by the colonial state. Later on, the Mauzadar and other government officials were rose mostly from these families. Being patronized by the colonial administration, the section of existing landlords showed a tendency to accumulate more land. Their relatively easier access to money helped them to maintain a
form of tenancy where land could be leased out to the tenants on cash rent. Further, gradual expansion of the administrative towns and job facilities attached this section to the urban vicinity. This is significant both historically and socially, because the colonialism produced a new class of absentee landlord hitherto absent in the pre-colonial social formation. Needless to say, the nascent Asamiya middle class had its linkage with the rural society as absentee landlords. Alongwith that, the newly emerged rural elites constituted primarily of the Mauzadar and other revenue collectors also found tenancy convenient for getting their newly acquired lands cultivated. As a result, the form of tenancy based on cash rent had shown an increasing trend.

The cadastral survey operations, 1880-93, ascertained that about 18 percent of the settled area was leased out in the then Kamrup, whereas in no other district it was more than 6 percent. At the end of the century, the proportion of leased out to total settled area, was officially estimated at about 25 percent for Kamrup, 9 percent for Darrang, and 7 percent for Sibsagar, although it remained still below 6 percent in two other districts of Assam proper. Further, it must also be noted that a remarkably higher percentage of the total leased out area in every individual district was based on cash rent arrangement, and only a small portion of it accounted for Adhi or share-cropping system. Needless to say that the form of tenancy discussed earlier was evolved by the big
landholders to accumulate money by leasing out their Lakhiraj and Nisfkhiraj lands.

SMALL LANDHOLDERS:

The colonial agrarian policy, by imposing right over land, converted the vast majority of the population to a broad class of small landholders. It was not definitely an economic class in itself, as it could be further stratified into various strata such as rich, middle and poor peasants, on the basis of their position in the production process. In terms of holding, the small landholders held major portion of his land on long term lease, but a certain portion on annual lease. It is, therefore, difficult to estimate the average size of holding held by the small landholder on the basis of the number of temporarily settled estates. However, it can be assumed that, though land was abundant, scarcity of money had restricted the land acquiring capacity of a common peasant.

As per information provided by Hunter, it can be said that a holding of 15 bighas in Kamrup and Darrang, 12 to 15 Bighas in Nowgong, and 12 Bighas in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts would mean a small as well as an average size of holding. Guha estimated the same at five-and-a-half acres. Without going into the further details, it can, however, be said that the agricultural sector of colonial Assam was overwhelmingly dominated by the landholders whose primary
concern was to ensure a subsistence level of production mostly engaging family labour.

BONDSMEN AND AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS:

In the pre-colonial society of Assam, as we have already estimated, about 10 percent of total population were constituted of the slaves, serfs, bondsmen and such categories of unfree labour. The colonial state considered them all as slaves, because it was difficult to distinguish each category from the rest. With formal abolition of slavery in 1843, this broad category of labourer became legally free, but they continued to depend upon their masters as before for a long time. Obviously, monetization of the economy compelled many of them to borrow cash on the mortgage of their own labour power as bondsmen. Beyond any doubt, the colonial policy of increasing land revenue and opium excise degraded many small peasants to the position of bondsmen, or at least near to it. Notwithstanding the transformation of pre-colonial society into a colonial one and abolition of slavery, the plight of the bondsmen remained largely the same. The borrower as the bonded under the system, tilled owner’s land besides working as a general servant. And for that he used to get a monthly deduction from the principal he had borrowed. The common practice in the late 1880s was that if the borrower was fed but not clothed by his master, he would to work for 20 months towards settling an advance of Rs. 20. In this case, a
month's wage was deemed equivalent to the food, interest and a rupee in cash. If the principal happened to be more, his monthly wages used to be much lesser, as because the interest on the debt was proportionately higher.

Needless to say that in the prevailing conditions, only a privileged members of the society could afford the advantage of the system of bondsmen. Further, easy availability of land and the practice of Marakiya system of labour had also perhaps restricted the growth of bondsmen and agricultural labourers to certain extent. Under the Marakiya system of labour, the service of one's plough bullocks was to be lent-out to a peasant during the ploughing season. The borrower ploughed the lander's land for two days and his own land for one day, and in that proportion for the whole season. During remaining part of the year, a Marakiya had free time for his own business or work for others.

Without going into further details, it can be said that paucity of capital rather than of land had been the major factor responsible for impoverishment of the peasants and the existing forms of exploitation. However, the number of unfree and free agricultural labourers together was not very high. In the Census of 1891, those occupationally classed as farm servants and field labours along with their dependents numbered only 4,498, and 632 persons respectively. Total 78 percent of the farm servants and 58
percent of the field labours were, however, found in the
district of Kamrup alone. Presumably, the first category
included the bondsmen, while the second category implied the
true agricultural labours. Thus, one can assume safely that
the colonial reforms could not push a large number of
peasants to the agricultural labour market as wage earners,
nevertheless, it sustained the practice of bondage to a
certain extent.

MIGRATION : ITS CAUSES AND IMPACTS

The apparent scarcity of local labour to meet the
growing need of the tea sector, and abundance of cultivable
waste land provided the scope for a large scale migration of
wage labourers and landless peasants from different parts of
British India to Assam particularly since 1870s. The growing
tea sector in its initial phase tried to meet the demand of
labour by recruiting some local people belonging to the
Bodo-Kachari tribe. This section of local labourers,
however, left the tea sector and settled as independent
farmers after earning some amount of cash required for land
revenue. Thus, to meet the growing need of the tea sector,
the colonial state encouraged migration of labourers to
Assam, particularly from the Jharkhand region. (see Appendix
- 8). And, until the beginning of a still bigger inflow of
the landless peasants from earstwhile East Bengal in the
first decade of the present century, the tea garden labours
had influenced the demographic structure of Assam.
Table - 3.1 and 3.2 show the increasing strength of the migrants mainly the tea garden labours, in terms of absolute number, and consequently, the increasing density of population per sq. mile specifically during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. These two tables reflect a peculiar pattern of population growth and corresponding changes in the demographic composition in the five districts of Assam proper separately. The total population of Assam proper during 1880s and 1890s had increased by almost 1.7 percent and 2.6 percent respectively. The remarkable growth in 1880s had been more due to natural growth of the indigenous population than migration. But, the situation in the 1890s revealed a reverse process. The indigenous population in that decade heavily declined due to very high mortality rate caused by Kalazar (Black Fever). Therefore, the apparent increase in total population was only because of the migrants. The phenomenon of migration being caused by the tea sector alone in the last quarter of the 19th century affected particularly the tea producing districts. It had not only changed the ethnic composition in those districts, but also steadily raised the density of population as we have seen in case of Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts in Table - 3.2.
Table - 3.1

GROWTH OF POPULATION IN ASSAM (in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guwahati</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports of the respective years.

* Figure not available separately.
The second category of migrants, i.e., the oppressed peasants from East Bengal started coming to Assam in the first decade of the present century. Initially they settled down in the thinly populated Goalpara district — which had some cultural similarities with East Bengal — and then spread from there to Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang. As Bhuá has observed:

"... Landless immigrants from over-populated East Bengal — of them some 85 percent were Muslims found land in Assam's water-logged, jungle-infested riverine belt. Used to an amphibious mode of living and industrious, these immigrants came by rail, steamers and boats up to the Brahmaputra to reclaim these malarial areas. All that they wanted was land, from their riverine base, they further pressed themselves forward in all directions in search of more living space in the areas held by the autochthones..." 34

The constant inflow of the tea garden laboures now coupled with the peasants from East Bengal resulted in a significant increase of population in the first quarter of the present century. Table - 3.2 explicitly shows the increasing pressure of population in every district of Assam particularly during the period between 1901 to 1921.

Table - 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>184</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: lbid
Further, colonial rule in Assam also encouraged an inflow of thousands of people belonging to various occupational groups and nationalities from different parts of India and abroad. They were mainly the Marwari traders, middle class Hindu Bengalis, etc. The total number of migrants, however, had been insignificant in comparison to the migrant tea garden labourers and landless peasants. The phenomenon of large scale migration during the colonial era had several impacts on Assam. Needless to say that the ethnic composition had been changed significantly by the newly settled national/ethnic groups. This had influenced not only the socio-cultural patterns, but also to a large extent the economy, and consequently the class structure of the peasantry.

The agricultural sector, however, had failed to register any remarkable positive change. During the period between 1865-66 and 1897-98, for instance, the growth of cultivated acreage under all crops other than tea remained as low as a little over 7 percent with no visible increase in productivity. The cropping pattern also, as Table 3.3 indicates, hardly witnessed any favourable change. The percentage share of tea area had gradually gone up, while the same for rice had declined from 73.47 percent in 1882-83 to 65.77 percent in 1900-01. The agricultural sector as a whole witnessed a situation of stagnation, both in terms of productivity as well as expansion.
Table 3.3

PERCENTAGE AREA UNDER DIFFERENT CROPS TO TOTAL CROPPED AREA IN ASSAM: 1882-83 TO 1900-01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Other Foodgrains</th>
<th>Sugarcane</th>
<th>Fibre</th>
<th>Oilseeds</th>
<th>Tea</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>73.47</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>8.77</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-86</td>
<td>67.86</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>9.45</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>11.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-86</td>
<td>67.85</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>12.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-96</td>
<td>65.56</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>9.12</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>12.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-01</td>
<td>65.77</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>11.39</td>
<td>11.65</td>
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</table>

Source: Guha, op cit.

The stagnant agricultural sector, had failed to support the increasing population pressure on it. Consequently, Assam had to increasingly depend upon Bengal for food crops. This indicates that migration had proved to be advantageous for the colonialist alone.

I. SUMMING UP:

The British colonial state very significantly changed the agrarian structure of Assam. The colonialism was superimposed on the semi-tribal and semi-feudal agrarian structure. The land became salable and purchaseable and inheritable commodity. We have seen in the light of our discussion that colonialism in Assam boosted up the tea sector at the cost of general agriculture. With
intensification of the land rent in cash, colonialism ruined
the Ahom feudal aristocracy on one hand, and had attempted
to squeeze the peasant in order to flush them out to the
labour market on the other. The European planters were,
however, given necessary support to occupy as much land as
they desired. Along with that, the colonial state compromised
with the hitherto priestly aristocracy to create a support
base. And, very significantly as an inseparable part of
colonial policy, a class of intermediary emerged in Assam as
elsewhere in India. Both the priestly aristocracy and the
new intermediary class together constituted the buffer
between the rulers and the ruled. Hence, the colonial
perspective of agrarian reforms was loaded with political
consideration in addition to its economic interests.

Broadly, the pre-colonial agrarian class structure
was done away with, and the new class structure that emerged
was constituted by the landlords, self-employed peasant
proprietors and the tenants. These three classes were
identifiable on the basis of the production relations. The
class of agricultural labourer was yet to be emerged
significantly, but was in the process of its formation.

It appears from the Census of 1891, that together
with their dependents, the landlords constituted less than
one percent, the peasant about 90 percent, the tenant about
7 percent, and the farm servants and field labourers
together about 0.3 percent of the total agricultural
The class of agricultural labourer was, however, further strengthened numerically by the large-scale migration of the landless peasants from East Bengal and the ex-tea garden labourers settled for cultivation during the subsequent period. Finally, we can conclude that so far as the indigenous population is concerned, the colonial reforms pauperised the peasants at large scale, but could not proletarize them significantly. Needless to recapitulate, whatever reforms or changes took place, they were very consciously aimed at protecting the British colonial interest in Assam.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid.


5. The revenue collection in local currency was annually remitted to Calcutta for recoupage. But as Guha noted, there was practically no flow-back as the remittance represented a surplus of revenue over local disbursements. See for details, Guha, 1991, op.cit., p. 143.

6. For a detailed account of this model, see amongst others, Guha, 1991, op.cit.


9. Ibid, p. 154

10. Ibid, p. 159.

11. Ibid, pp. 188-189

13. See for a detail account, Mills, *op. cit.*

14. "Observation on the Administration of the province of Assam" by Uhekiyal Phukan in Mills, *op. cit.*


18. See note 14; Mills reported that "There is no question that the risks of collection are great, and the commission allowed to cover them is small; the consequence is, that the Mauzahadar is driven to exact the uttermost farthing from the resident ryots if he can not meet his losses by assessing newly reclaimed lands. His lease is of short duration; his tenure or office is insecure, and he is not therefore interested in keeping up cultivation to the utmost." Mills, *op. cit.* p. 8.


22. For instance, two estates - one headed by a Brahman Preceptor and another by a temple accounted between them for no less than a thousand tenants in 1883. See, Guha, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 254, and also M. Hussain, *op. cit.* for a detailed discussion on this expect.


26. In our previous discussion we have pointed out that almost 90 percent of the total population of pre-colonial Assam was constituted of the Baks.

27. Usually, the *bati* and *rupit* lands were held on decennial lease, and the dry lands on annual lease, as such lands were used for shifting cultivation. Therefore, a landholder had more than one estate in his possession.


31. *ibid*.

32. See the *Report on the Census of Assam, 1901*.

33. For details about this see, M. Hussain, *op.cit.* pp. 190 - 211.


35. Import of Rice from Bengal to Assam (in mounds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1885 - 86</td>
<td>4,60,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889 - 90</td>
<td>2,57,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892 - 93</td>
<td>4,13,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894 - 95</td>
<td>5,81,834</td>
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