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The Agrarian Economy of Assam in the 19th Century

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Abstract:

The 19th century completely transformed Assam from a semi-feudal Ahom kingdom into a colonial frontier dominated by peasant smallholders, European tea plantations, and (toward the end of the century) immigrant East Bengali cultivators. The annexation of Assam in 1826 (Treaty of Yandabo) marked the end of the Ahom kingdom's seven-century-old agrarian order and the beginning of one of British India's most distinctive colonial agrarian experiments. Unlike Bengal's permanent zamindari settlement or the ryotwari systems of Madras and Bombay, Assam evolved into a lightly taxed small-peasant frontier co-existing with a highly privileged European plantation enclave. By 1900, the province had become a unique hybrid: a ryotwari peasant economy, a tea-garden empire, and (in its final decade) a zone of rapid East Bengali Muslim peasant colonization. This article examines the collapse of the pre-colonial order, the introduction of low-revenue policies and waste-land grants, the rise of tea and jute as cash crops, and the demographic shifts driven by East Bengali migration. Drawing on archival reports and seminal historical studies, it argues that Assam's agrarian regime was uniquely engineered to attract capital and labour, resulting in a small-peasant dominant structure with minimal landlordism—a configuration unparalleled elsewhere in British India.

Keywords: transformed, immigrant, permanent, zamindari, demographic shifts etc.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The Treaty of Yandabo (1826) ended Burmese occupation and transferred Assam to British control, marking the onset of colonial agrarian reconfiguration. The Ahom kingdom (1228–1826) had operated a centralized system where land was state property, and adult males provided labour service (*paikan*) rather than cash taxes. Private ownership was absent, and there was no entrenched landlord class. British administrators initially sought to monetize revenue but soon adapted policies to exploit Assam's vast "waste" lands (jungle and fallow areas comprising over 70% of the province). By 1900, this evolved into a dual economy: a subsistence-oriented indigenous peasantry and a commercial plantation enclave, later augmented by immigrant cash-crop cultivators. This transformation not only boosted provincial output but also sowed seeds for future land and identity conflicts (Guha, 1978; Saikia, 2014).

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This article examines the collapse of the pre-colonial order, the introduction of low-revenue policies and waste-land grants, the rise of tea and jute as cash crops, and the demographic shifts driven by East Bengali migration.

III. METHODOLOGY:

The study is based on descriptive in nature and based on secondary sources. This study adopts a **descriptive research design** to analyses the collapse of the pre-colonial order, the introduction of low-revenue policies and waste-land grants, the rise of tea and jute as cash crops, and the demographic shifts driven by East Bengali migration. Both **primary and secondary data sources** have been utilized to achieve the research objectives.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSES:

Post-annexation, the British retained Ahom revenue collectors and imposed cash assessments at rates far exceeding pre-colonial burdens. To facilitate payment, opium cultivation was aggressively promoted as a high-value crop. By the 1840s, Assam produced significant opium, much of it consumed locally, leading to widespread addiction and a decline in food crops. Rice cultivation contracted by an estimated 20–30%, triggering depopulation, village desertions, and subsistence crises, including near-famines in 1837–38 and 1854 (Mills, 1854).

The seminal *Report on the Province of Assam* by A.J. Moffatt Mills (1854) critiqued these policies, highlighting excessive taxation (up to 50% of produce in some areas) and opium's socio-economic devastation. It recommended revenue reductions, opium restrictions, and incentives for land reclamation. These suggestions formed the blueprint for subsequent reforms, shifting Assam from extraction to expansionist development.

From Ahom Paikan System to Colonial Ryotwari (1826–1860s)

Under the Ahoms, land theoretically belonged to the king. Adult males rendered labour service (paikan) or paid cash equivalents. There was no private property in land and virtually no landlord class. After 1826 the British initially retained Ahom revenue officials and attempted to collect cash revenue at very high rates. The result was widespread distress, flight of cultivators, and a catastrophic expansion of opium cultivation (encouraged as a cash crop). Rice acreage shrank; recurrent food shortages culminated in the near-famine of 1854.

A.J. Moffatt Mills's *Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) exposed the failure of early policy and recommended drastic reduction of revenue demand and abolition of state-sponsored opium. From the late 1850s the government accepted these recommendations, ushering in the decisive phase of agrarian restructuring.

From the 1860s, Assam implemented a ryotwari settlement whereby individual cultivators (*ryots*) held land directly from the state with heritable and transferable rights. Key innovations included:

Low revenue demand: Rates were fixed at 25–35% of those in Bengal, with periodic reassessments favoring leniency to encourage settlement (Assam Land Revenue Settlement Reports, 1893–1919).

Waste-Land Rules (promulgated in 1838, revised 1854, 1876, and 1898): These allowed grants of uncultivated land on 99-year leases or fee-simple ownership at nominal rents. Europeans received preferential terms, often requiring clearance of only one-fourth of the grant.

This framework fostered rapid agrarian expansion:

- Cultivated area in the Brahmaputra Valley doubled between 1850 and 1900.
- Indigenous communities (Assamese, Kacharis, and tribes) became smallholders averaging 5–15 acres, paying fixed cash revenue.
- Critically, intermediary landlords were marginalized; by 1901, over 80% of cultivated land was under direct peasant tenure, contrasting sharply with zamindari-dominated Bengal (Guha, 1978).

The Plantation Enclave: Tea and European Capital

The waste-land policies primarily benefited European investors in tea. Discovered growing wild in Assam in the 1820s, tea cultivation exploded: from experimental gardens in 1839 to over 300 estates covering 400,000 acres by 1900. Plantations operated as self-contained enclaves, importing indentured labour from tribal regions of Chota Nagpur and Bihar (over 1 million workers by 1901). They contributed minimally to local agrarian linkages, focusing on export while enjoying revenue exemptions or reductions. This "planter raj" exemplified colonial favoritism toward capital, displacing potential peasant settlement in prime piedmont zones (Sharma, 2011).

Emergence of Commercial Agriculture and Immigration (1870s–1900)

Subsistence rice dominated indigenous farming until the late century. The introduction of jute in the 1870s marked a shift. Suited to flood-prone lowlands, jute thrived under intensive methods practiced by East Bengali Muslim peasants facing land scarcity in Mymensingh and Rangpur districts.

Official "colonization schemes" encouraged migration: immigrants received short-term leases on "waste" lands at low rates. Migration surged post-1890, with over 300,000 arrivals by 1911. These settlers transformed Goalpara, Kamrup, and Nowgong into high-yield zones; Assam became India's second-largest jute producer by 1912. Unlike indigenous ryots, immigrants introduced plough-based wet-rice systems and sharecropping, laying foundations for a nascent rich-peasant class in lower Assam (Saikia, 2008).

The Agrarian Structure in 1900: A Unique Colonial Hybrid

By century's end, Assam's agrarian economy comprised:

- **Small-peasant core**: Indigenous ryots on lightly taxed holdings, focused on rice.
- **Plantation sector**: European tea estates on privileged grants.
- **Immigrant frontier**: East Bengali cultivators driving jute and rice commercialization.

Regional variations were pronounced: Upper Assam emphasized tea and traditional peasantry; Lower Assam featured immigrant-driven growth. Absentee landlordism was negligible, revenue burdens light (averaging 10–15% of produce), and reclamation incentives successful. Yet, this openness exacerbated ethnic tensions and resource competition (Baruah, 1999).

❖ **Consequences:**

- Rapid expansion of European-owned tea plantations: from 1 garden in 1840 to over 300 by 1900, occupying the best piedmont "wastes".
- Indigenous Assamese, Kachari, and tribal communities cleared jungle elsewhere and became small ryots holding 5–20 acres directly from the state.
- By 1901 over 80 % of cultivated area in the Brahmaputra Valley was under peasant proprietorship – one of the highest proportions in British India.

Assam thus acquired a predominantly small-peasant structure with almost no indigenous landlordism or rich-peasant (jotedar) dominance.

Dual Economy: Tea Plantations and Peasant Agriculture

Tea remained an enclave. Plantations imported labour from Chota Nagpur, Santhal Parganas, and central India; they had minimal linkages with the local peasant economy except for competition over land. The indigenous peasantry continued to grow wet rice (sali, ahu, bao) with traditional ploughs and very little commercialization until the last quarter of the century.

The Jute Revolution and East Bengali Immigration (1870s–1900)

From the 1870s a new cash crop, jute, began to spread in the low-lying areas of Goalpara, Kamrup, and Nowgong. Demand exploded after 1890. The crop was ideally suited to the labour-intensive methods of land-hungry Muslim peasants from Mymensingh, Pabna, and Rangpur in East Bengal. Under official "colonization schemes" and waste-land rules, tens of thousands migrated annually. By 1911–12 Assam had become British India's second-largest jute producer. The immigrants brought superior wet-rice and jute techniques, dramatically raising yields on newly cleared lands.

Agrarian Structure of Assam by 1900

- Dominant form: small ryotwari peasants (Assamese, tribal, and some early immigrants) paying light, fixed revenue directly to the state.
- Large European tea estates on privileged revenue-free or low-revenue grants.
- Emerging belt of immigrant East Bengali cultivators (mostly Muslim) concentrating in riverine and reserve-forest areas.
- Negligible intermediary landlordism (except in parts of Goalpara and Cachar).
- Sharp regional variation: Upper Assam – tea gardens + indigenous peasants; Lower Assam – immigrant jute + rice zones.

V. Conclusion

Nineteenth-century Assam was deliberately engineered as a low-revenue, open frontier. The combination of minimal land tax, generous waste-land grants to European capital, and (from the 1890s) state-sponsored immigration produced a colonial agrarian economy without parallel in South Asia: a small-peasant society alongside a plantation enclave, overlaid in its closing decade by a dynamic immigrant peasant frontier. These structures laid the foundations for twentieth-century conflicts over land, identity, and citizenship that continue to shape Assam to the present day.

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