

# Agrarian Transformation In Undivided Goalpara District Of Assam From 1765 To 1947

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to elucidate the agrarian transformation during the period from 1765 to 1947 in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. This paper is not only limited to the agrarian transformation of this region but also the demographic change. The British occupied Assam after the treaty of Yaddaboo in, 1826 and after their occupation, they had brought a policy of wasteland grants for more food production. They wanted to bring uninhabited land under cultivation for more revenue collection and to mitigate the food crisis. This policy along with other reasons encouraged the immigration of peasants from East Bengal. The East Bengal peasants settled in the riverine areas called 'Char' lands (river islands and banks formed by silt deposit) of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries in four districts of Assam viz; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgaon. Their presence was felt more in the undivided Goalpara district. The immigrants with their hard labor cleared a huge uninhabited wasteland and brought it under cultivation. They turned Assam from importer to exporter in agricultural production.

**Key Words:** Colonial Period, undivided Goalpara, Agrarian transformation

## **Introduction**

The undivided Goalpara is situated in the western boundary of Assam bordering West Bengal, Bhutan and erstwhile East Bengal. The undivided Goalpara district is comprised of presently created five districts viz; Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, and South Salmara-Mankachar District. The arrival of the Britishers and their land policy brought the farmers from then East Bengal towards the undivided Goalpara region. They brought vast track of virgin land under cultivation and brought a drastic change in agricultural production. The transformation of agricultural patterns and production in this area had a significant impact not only on the economy

but also on the socio-cultural field. The period is taken from 1765 to 1947 because the undivided Goalpara district came under British rule in 1765, much before the Yandaboo treaty of 1826.

## **Objectives of the Study-**

1. To gain insight into the immigration of the cultivators to the Goalpara district
2. To study the how the immigrant cultivators transformed the agricultural production.

## **Methodology**

The research follows an analytical method of investigation within the framework of historical methodology. Both primary and secondary sources are used in the research work. Primary

sources include relevant materials from the Archives, Government Proceedings, Census Reports, Gazetteers, Statistical Handbook, Journals, etc. Secondary sources include books, articles in magazines, newspapers, etc. related to the study. E-resources such as e-books were also consulted for the study.

### **Geographical and Historical setting of Undivided Goalpara District**

The undivided Goalpara district is situated in the westernmost fraction of Assam on both sides of the mighty river Brahmaputra. The area of Goalpara extends from latitude 25° 28' N to 26° 54' N and 89° 42' E to 91° 50' E longitude. The erstwhile Goalpara district touches the boundary of Bhutan in the north, Kamrup district in the east, Garo Hills in the south, and the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar of Bengal in the west. (Allen, 1905) The mighty Brahmaputra occupies the principal position in the river system of undivided Goalpara. This river flows throughout the boundary of the region with several tributaries and a sandy tract locally called Char is an important feature. The Manas is another prominent river that joins the Brahmaputra in the Goalpara district. The Gadadhar river is another important river that rises in the Bhutan Hills and flows in the western portion of the region. Other notable rivers in this region are the Sankosh River, Champabati, Saralbhanga, etc.

The Undivided Goalpara district is one of the oldest administrative units of Assam. This region had undergone numerous political regimes and seen socio-cultural changes in the ancient and medieval periods. This region remained under the Mughal rule till 1765 headquartered at Rangamati. They had established an elaborate form of administration and incorporated it with the Dacca administration but after the Treaty of Allahabad in 1765, this part permanently came under the jurisdiction of the Britishers.

During the period from 1765 to 1822 the three old police circles namely; Dhubri, Goalpara, and

Kokrajhar were made part of the Rangpur district of Bengal. Under the Regulation X Act of 1822, the three thanas viz; Karaibari, Goalpara, and Dhubri were separated from the Rangpur district and attached with Garo Hills to form a separate district. This district was put under a newly created Principal Assistant commissioner. At the time of the Yandaboo treaty of 1826, undivided Goalpara was a part of the Rangpur district of Bengal. However, after the treaty of Yandaboo, 1826 to 1866, the Goalpara district remained a part of Assam. In 1874 the British government had reorganized the administration of the Assam region. Under this reorganization act Assam division was separated from Bengal and raised to the status of a province under the control of a Chief Commissioner. The region of three thanas (police stations) of Rangpur; Dhubri, Goalpara, and Karaibari along with Garo Hills were transferred from Cooch Bihar to Assam as Goalpara district. In 1983 two new districts were created from the undivided Goalpara district namely Dhubri and Kokrajhar and 1989 Bongaigaon district was formed from the parts of Kokrajhar and Goalpara.

### **British Wasteland policy and immigration in Undivided Goalpara District**

The Burmese brutal incursion had devastated the entire region which led to the arrival of the British in Assam. After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, they took the administration of the whole Assam province. The devastation and depopulation during the time of long drawn civil wars and Burmese invasion left the tract of wasteland throughout the province. (Barpujari(ed), 1993) The Britishers were fully convinced that unless these vast wastelands were brought under tillage the revenue collection could not be improved and broad plans were prepared to grant wasteland under condition. At that time primitive agriculture was done and one crop was cultivated throughout the year in Assam. David scoot though brought a plan in 1827 on wasteland grants but Jenkins in 1838 brought a complete

plan on wastelands. He commented 'the annual produce was for immediate need, hardly any surplus for the sale or provision for the sale or provision for the rainy season. Consequently in the event of failure of crops due to drought and inundation conditions bordering on famine were of frequent occurrence'. (Barpujari, 1980) In 1858 the Governor of Bengal had approved the wastelands grant in Assam. According to this, the land grant can be given to Europeans, Assamese, Bengalese, and others without any distinction and the grantee can cultivate any food. (Barpujari, 1980) In 1872 Col. Hopkins then an agent of Governor-General had written to the Governor of Bengal that "what is wanted in Assam is draft of immigration from the overcrowded, famine-stricken districts of Bengal who might receive a plot of wasteland to break upon the most liberal terms." (B J Das, 1985) The British waste land grant policy had encouraged immigration, which can be categorized into three types i.e., the immigration of the tea garden laborers towards upper Assam, immigration of the agricultural laborers from East Bengal towards western Assam, and the immigration of the Nepalese. It was however not only the wasteland grant policy but other reasons were also associated with the large-scale immigration from East Bengal mostly in the undivided Goalpara district than other parts of Assam.

The Zamindars of East Bengal tortured and exploited the peasants for higher tax and driven out them from their land. The landless peasants compelled to leave their place and moved to the abandoning vacant land for livelihood. (Khan, 1997) The policy of 'Grow more Food' in 1886, encouraged immigration from Maymansingh, Pabna, Noakhaili, Sirajganj, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Rajshahi district of East Bengal. They were skilled, hard labor and habitual in living with flood and calamities. (Hussain, 1980) The introduction of Bengali as a medium of instruction, the devastating earthquake of 1882 in

East Bengal was also associated with the immigration from East Bengal.

The pace of immigration was very slow till the end of the 19th century in Goalpara from East Bengal. Immigration increased in the last part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the 20th century. Guha pointed that "the land-hungry immigrant's peasants from East Bengal of whom an estimated 85 percent were Muslims started settling down in thousands from about 1905 on the unoccupied riverine track". (Guha, 1980) The Census Report of 1911 has clearly shown the large-scale immigration from densely populated districts of East Bengal to the char areas of Goalpara and Assam proper. By the year 1911 around 1, 18,000 immigrants had settled in Goalpara which constituted 20 percent of the district population. (Das & Saikia, 2011) The influx of immigrants from East Bengal increased manifold and by the year 1921 altogether 141 thousand immigrants had settled in Goalpara and 117 thousand in Assam proper. (Chakrabarty, 2012) The Zamindars of Goalpara had encouraged the peasants of East Bengal to settle and cultivate jute in the chars. These cultivators were mainly tenants. They emigrated from the densely populated areas of East Bengal and settled here which gave them a minimum level of security of livelihoods. (Das & Saikia, 2011) The cultivators were offered terms for bringing these chars under cultivation. They were provided remission of rent in the initial years locally called pali and the patta was allotted was known as pali patta. (Chakrabarty, 2012)

### **Agrarian Transformation**

The scenario of food production was in a very bad shape in Assam till the last quarter of the 19th century. The British administration was unable to cope with the demand. The influx of tea garden laborers and the aloofness of the indigenous people from agriculture made the food chain more critical. In the eighties and early nineties of the 19th century, the British government had to import food grains mainly from Bengal and

Burma. In those period estimated 5 lakh mounds of rice was imported from Bengal every year. (Hussain H. , 2010) By the year 1853, only 6.3 percent of the total area in Assam was under cultivation and the percentage of the uncultivated area was more in Kamrup and Goalpara district. (Hussain H. , 2010)

The immigrants gradually settled in the char chaporis of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries of the Goalpara district. They had opened up a vast tract of dense jungle and unused land into a cultivable track. They had expertise in cultivation and used to cultivate five crops where the indigenous people cultivate only two crops in a year. Mr. Higgins wrote “They do better cultivation than local people as such they are certainly beneficial to the country”. (Barpujari(ed), 1993)To increase productivity they maintained the same distance between the

plants and the new technique of Bidha was introduced in the Brahmaputra valley. This technique is still is in use. (Hussain I. , 2001)

The East Bengal immigrants initially produced rice and jute in Goalpara and other parts of Assam. It was “since 1880, the production of jute was growing in importance...it was produced on a commercial scale for export in the district of Goalpara and Sylhet which adjoin the jute growing areas of Bengal”. (Barpujari(ed), 1993)Assam by the time of the Second World War became the third-largest producer of jute in India. However, important feature jute was cultivated in 25,850 acres of land out of which 25,000 acres were in Goalpara district by the year 1901. (Chakrabarty, 2012) The production of jute can be estimated from the figures of export from Assam- (Chakrabarty, 2012)

Year	Brahmaputra Valley
1880-81	59,249
1889-90	225,742
1893-94	324,911
1896-97	348,332

Along with rice and jute, the immigrants introduced other food grains like; pulses, potato, onion, garlic, chili, etc. They had introduced double-cropping at the same time tichi & dhanial, tichi & machur mah, wheat & machur mah, guji til, mestapat, kalijira, etc. (Hussain I. , 2001) According to the report of 1853 out of the total area of 34,345 sq. mile in Assam only 2,242 sq. miles which was 6.5 percent only under cultivation. By the year 1901-02 the land under cultivation increased to 2.43 million acres and 5 million acres in 1941-42. This increment was more prominent in the plains areas, where the net sown area increased from 2.40 million acres (15.4 percent of the total area) in 1901-02 to 14.10

million acres (25.2 percent) by the year 1941-42. (Baruah, 2005) In the Brahmaputra valley, 5, 42, 00 acres of wasteland was brought under cultivation in the year from 1921 to 1931, and additional 84,000 acres from 1931 to 1941. (Hussain I. , 2001)The East Bengal immigrants brought a sea change in the production of jute and tobacco as the area under its cultivation was only 5 thousands and 2 thousand respectively in 1901 to1902 but it was increased to 286 thousand and 14 thousand respectively in 1939-40. (Baruah, 2005) The increased level of different crops in Brahmaputra valley can be understood from the chart (in thousand acres) — (Chakrabarty, 2012)

Crops	1911-12	1947-48
Rice	2573	4004

Cerals & Pulses	109	255
Jute	58	210
Rape & Mustard	238	310
Sugarcane	30	60
Oilseeds	7	39
Cotton	34	35

The productivity of crops was much higher in the East Bengal immigrant prone district i.e; Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, and Darrang in comparison to the other district where their involvement was minimum as referred to in the Statistical Abstract of Assam, 1951. It was during the years 1924-25 to 1947-48 the production per acre of autumn paddy increased to 11.27 percent in these four districts as compared to 5.3 percent in other provinces as a whole. In the case of winter paddy, it was 12.5 percent and 5.20 percent. For sugar cane, it was 19.95 percent and 7.7 percent and for jute 18.85 percent and 8.80 percent respectively. (Chakrabarty, 2012)

### **Conclusion**

The arrival of the British in Assam and their policy of agrarian expansion along with revenue collection had brought a major socio-economic change in undivided Goalpara and Assam. The

immigrants had settled here and formed a diverse society and their decedents are mostly involved with agrarian activities. In this way, the agriculture sector of undivided Goalpara had witnessed a remarkable transformation during the colonial period.

### **Notes-**

1. Patta: A Patta is a legal document issued by the Government in the name of the actual owner of a particular plot of land.
2. Dhania: coriander
3. Tisi: Flex seed.
4. Bidha: technique to plant the rice plant at nursery level.

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