

Colonialism, Production and Development: A Study of Agriculture in Cachar During the Colonial Period

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Abstract: *The invention of agriculture in human history is a significant achievement. In the Neolithic era, human beings began to mould nature to their needs, and agriculture emerged in multiple places around the planet. Cachar is the largest and most important district in southern Assam. There were references in Ain-i-Akbari to the sending of children as eunuchs by peasants from Sylhet and Cachar to the Mughal court of Jahangir. Although there are not many sources of information on agriculture, regular recording of agricultural data began after the British annexation of the Cachar district in 1832. Agriculture was the main source of income for the population of Cachar throughout the colonial era. The primary crop in the Cachar Plains and all of Assam was rice. Other significant grains include kalai, a type of pulse, and other legumes including mustard, sarissa; linseed, or tisi. The introduction of tea cultivation and expansion of tea gardens led to the growth of a commercial crop in south Assam during the colonial period. In 1856, the first tea garden was opened in Mauza Barsangan.*

Keywords: Cachar, Colonial Period, Rice, Tea, Mustard, Cultivation, Production, Labourers

Humans invented agriculture during the Neolithic age, and since the time of the earliest cultivation, there has been a great development in the production process and the tools and technologies associated with agriculture. Though there have been various other occupations, agriculture has been the focal point of the economy until recent times. Agriculture has a huge impact on society and culture, and a large number of people base their livelihoods on agriculture. Agriculture can be characterised historically as the social organisation of physical forces for the production of organic materials for human consumption. Farming has altered the landscape more than any other occupation in human history. It has historically been the main force behind ecological change. State authority and agrarian social forces, as well as rulers and farmers, have historically interacted and shaped one another. Cachar is the largest and most important district in southern

Assam. The district is bounded by Manipur in the east, Meghalaya and Dima Hasao (previously North Cachar Hills) in the north, Bangladesh in the west, and Mizoram (previously Lushai Hills) in the south. Like other parts of India, the economy of Cachar was also agriculture-based. Although there are not many sources of information on agriculture, regular recording of agricultural data began following the British conquest of the Cachar district in 1832. This region produced varieties of rice, mustard, linseed, lentils, jute, sugarcane, rhea, and other essential food crops. During the middle of the 19th century, tea gardens were established all over Assam and Cachar, which gave a huge number of employment opportunities as tea garden labourers, yet the people of South Assam remained largely agriculturalists rather than being engaged as tea garden labourers. To work in the gardens, the colonial planters had to recruit a sizeable labour force from outside. Apart from reaping the benefits of the flourishing agriculture of Cachar, the colonial administration also exploited various other commercial products like rubber, timber, and cotton and gained a good amount of revenue from the cultivation of poppy in Cachar. In the colonial period, even though some industries like weaving, silk industry, pottery, bell-metal industry, etc. provided large employment to people, agriculture remained the dominant form of work throughout the colonial period. This paper aims to examine the growth and impact of colonialism on the agriculture sector of Cachar.

Agriculture in Cachar during the pre-colonial period:

Agriculture has been the backbone of the economy of the Cachar district since ancient times. In Cachar, agriculture was backward during the times of the Mughals; agricultural production was probably just self-sufficient to sustain its population. In the administration of Bengal Suba, Sylhet was a Sarkar, which yielded good revenue. There were references in Ain-I-Akbari to the sending of children as eunuchs by peasants from Sylhet and Cachar to the Mughal court of Jahangir.¹ Elephant hides and ivory goods were transported through the forests from this area to Delhi and then to Agra. From other sources, there were references to the export of rice from Sylhet through Chittagong. Karimganj had been a trade market before the coming of the English.² During the reign of Raja Surdapanarayan, son of Tamradhvaj-Narayan, who succeeded in 1708, he reconstructed his kingdom and also his capital, Khaspur. During his reign, attempts were made to attract the Bengali population from neighbouring Bengal for an increase in agriculture, as the land in this region was fertile but there was a sparse population.³ In his reign, there was a trade centre, namely, Rungrang, in which trade was conducted between Cachar, Manipur, Lushai Hills, and Tripura in various items such as paddy, cotton, cloth, brass, bell metal, vegetables, etc.⁴ During the reign of the later Rajas of Cachar, namely Lakhmi Chandra and Raja Harish Chandra Narayan, who granted lands to the Bengalee immigrants on nominal gross revenue. During the reign of Raja Krishna Chandra (1780–1833), the land of this region was fertile, agriculture

was good, and it was flourishing. There was no famine.⁵ During the reign of the last Raja Govinda Chandra, due to internal troubles and external invasions, the population in this region further declined, leading to a decline in agriculture.⁶ The Parganas of Khaspur and Oodabund (Udharband) in Cachar were the best-cultivated parts because of the superior soil quality and other local advantages (Khaspur being the capital of the Kachari kingdom). During the Burmese war, these two places suffered a lot, and after the war, Khaspur was entirely abandoned by the people, and the area under cultivation in Udharband was only about one-half of its former amount of cultivation, as stated in Lieutenant Fisher's Report on the Revenue System in Cachar, dated July 29th, 1831, to David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier.⁷ The conditions in the Pargana of Udharband were favourable for artificial irrigation, due to which, during the time of the Rajas, artificial irrigation was used to raise various crops in the dry season.⁸ In the pre-British era, both in Cachar and Karimganj, the per-head area for cultivation was greater, and the people in south Assam rarely attempted to produce more to become more wealthy. Natural calamities were infrequent; therefore, peasants generally had good harvests. Each family grew sufficient to supply all its modest wants, and the small quantity of surplus mostly went into the neighbouring areas, especially the hills, as the age-old jhum cultivation had very low productivity.

Agriculture in Cachar during the Colonial period:

During the colonial period, agriculture was also the main occupation of the people of Cachar. When the British annexed the kingdom, they found the revenue generated by this region was not enough to bear the cost of administration. Therefore, the British further encouraged immigration from Bengal to increase the area under cultivation.

When the British took over the administration of Cachar, they wanted to increase the area under cultivation, as the revenue generated in Cachar was very little to bear the cost of administration. The soil of Cachar was very fertile and productive. The average production of a bigha in Cachar was higher than that of neighbouring Sylhet. In Sylhet, there were 5 maunds of paddy grown per bigha, but in Cachar, it was 7 maunds.⁹ The immigration of the people from eastern Bengal to south Assam, and also the coming of coolies in the tea gardens, caused the need for food grain and the subsequent clearing of the forests and also cultivating fresh lands, which led to an increase in the area of cultivation and increased the revenue of the district. To increase land revenue, the British also allowed a huge number of people to reside on uncultivable land for small pattahs. During the late 19th century, a lady missionary named M.J. Wright, who stayed in Cachar for three years, left an account of it. She praised the remarkable fertility and productivity of the soil and said the inhabitants could grow anything on it. The author also said that in Cachar, the natives produce three rice crops in a year.¹⁰

Initially, in Cachar district, the tenants used to enjoy advantageous positions and the economic condition of the people was good. The soil of the district was highly fertile. The peasants here had either Khas lands or land held in subtenancy. In the rural areas, we hardly find any agricultural labourers who were unemployed, and who would agree to work as a labourer. This fact supports the fact that in Cachar, the socio-economic condition of the common people was relatively good.¹¹ Though the land of Cachar district was found to be fertile and productive by nature, it was always self-sufficient in rice production. Cachar used to export rice to neighbouring regions; in some cases, the district had to import rice from those regions. In one case, it is evident from the report sent by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar to the higher authorities on May 30, 1888, that the district had to import both paddy and rice because floods had destroyed all the crops in the previous years.¹²

Rice - Rice formed the staple crop of Cachar Plains, as well as throughout Assam. In Cachar, 66% of the entire cultivated land was made up of rice in 1903-04, tea covered 19 percent, oil seeds covered 5 percent, and other food grains, comprising pulses, accounted up 1% of the total cultivated area, while sugarcane constituted 2%. Wheat, barley, gramme, and maize were cultivated, but in small patches and generally by foreigners.¹³ There were primarily three types of rice in Cachar: Sail which was winter rice, Aman, which was long-stemmed rice that was typically planted in swampy areas, and Aus, which was summer rice. About 70% of the rice grown on the plains was Sail, 8% was cultivated using Aman, and 22% was cultivated using Aus.¹⁴

Agricultural products and Cash crops

Some other important grains were also grown, like mustard, or sarisha; linseed, or tisi; and a sort of pulse called kalai. In Cachar, apart from agricultural products, the colonial authorities also promoted cash crops such as tea, coffee etc.

Mustard - Mustard was grown either on chara lands or in clearings in the jungle.¹⁵ In the region of Cachar, mustard was raised using three distinct methods referred to as 1) dhupi, 2) hainna, and 3) haoria. Usually, dhupi was sown on high terrain close to the homesteads. In the chur lands, hainna mustard was sown using the same method as dhupi, but without the need for manure. As their name suggests, the haoria mustard was raised in haors.¹⁶ In the Cachar district, the parganas of Sonapur, Banraj, Rupairbali, and Barakpur that lie on either side of the Barak River as well as the Hailakandi valley grew the majority of the mustard.¹⁷

Jute & Hemp - Small amounts of jute and hemp were cultivated for local consumption. Hemp was grown sporadically along riverbanks. There were two types of it: 1) the sail (sowed in November and cut in March) and 1) the aus (sowed in April and cut in August).¹⁸ Jute was cultivated in small

sections as a garden crop. The plants were chopped down in August and September, stripped of their leaves, bundled into bundles, and left to decay in pools of water for seven to twelve days. When they were ready, they were taken out of the water and the outer material was carefully peeled off the stem. In 1903-04, the Cachar Plains comprised only 86 acres planted with jute.¹⁹

Rhea - Small areas of rhea (*Boehmeria nivea*) were planted in the gardens of the fishing settlements, which were highly fertilised. Once the plants were ready, a small number of stems were picked up, broken in the middle, and thrashed back and forth in water until the inner part fell out and just the fibre remained. The yarn that was obtained was extraordinarily resilient and strong, but the difficulties of decortication had hampered the growth of rhea on a commercial scale.²⁰

Sugarcane - In Cachar, sugarcane was cultivated to a limited extent. The varieties of sugarcane recognized in Cachar were Dholakhagri, Lal khagri, and Bombay. In 1903-04, the Plains had a total of 5,200 acres planted with sugarcane. Vernerpur, Udharbond, Chatla Haor, Lakhipur, Sonapur, and Banrajwere the most popular parganas for cultivation.²¹

Poppy - The cultivation of poppy was very popular in Cachar, and it was never prohibited. The landholders grew it in any part of their taluk at their pleasure and without the permission of the Superintendent, but paid revenue of Rs. 48 per kulbah in addition to the common rate of land tax. There was a large-scale consumption of this drug in Cachar, but a great part of the production was smuggled into Sylhet.²²

Tea: One of the important commercial crops that emerged during the colonial period was the introduction of tea cultivation and the growth of tea gardens in Cachar and then in all parts of south Assam. In 1855, tea was discovered in Cachar, and Cachar's first tea garden, Mauza Barsangan, was founded in 1856.²³ The gardens were initially established on the flat tops of the low spurs that extend from the Barail to the Barak. Because the region here was not very extensive, the planters relocated to the low tillas, which were low as well, round-topped hills for tea cultivation. In 1875, a new experiment was tried in Cachar: planting tea in the low marshland after draining thoroughly, which yielded a good return. In some cases, the tea gardens that were made on the Bils lands were killed due to water logging. The quality of the tea was not so good compared to the tea produced on other soils.

After establishing the first tea garden in Cachar, there was a steady growth of tea gardens until a good prospect evolved by establishing a tea garden and becoming suddenly immensely rich by selling the tea garden. From 1866 to 1869, there was a period of depression in the tea industry. After 1869, the situation improved in the tea industry, and it was found that the tea gardens under careful management were making a good profit. In

1869, the entire land used for the tea plantation in the Cachar district was 24,151 acres of land, producing 42,34,794 pounds of tea.²⁴ In 1882, there was an increase in the area under cultivation; it was 48,878 acres, which yielded 12,721,000 lbs of manufactured tea. In 1898, the area under cultivation of tea had risen to 62,179 acres, and the output was 20,898,000 lbs. In 1901, the output of tea production reached 81,088,000 lbs.²⁵

There was little labour available in Cachar to work in the tea gardens. Therefore, a large number of labourers had to be brought in from outside Assam. In 1890, the total number of labourers (also known as coolies in Cachar as well as in Assam) imported from outside was 51,894; in 1900, it reached 75,412. Still, there was a shortage of labourers in the gardens. The labour class Coolies were multilingual and heterogeneous in composition and were the new working class. The exploitation of the coolies in tea gardens led to various protest movements against the planters in particular and the colonial government in general. In 1885, Cachar topped tea production. In 1895, there were 139 tea gardens; in 1915, there were 159 tea gardens; and in 1928, the number increased to 176 tea gardens. Originally, black tea was produced in Cachar, but in 1903, on-demand from America, one million pounds of green tea were exported to North America.²⁶ The development of tea cultivation in Cachar led to a major change in the agricultural cropping pattern, made tea a major crop in this region, and contributed to the growth of the economy in this district.

Coffee: During the colonial period, in the last decade of the 19th century, coffee was grown only in three districts of Assam, namely Nowgong (Nagaon), Sylhet, and Cachar.²⁷ In reply to a letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated 19th May 1898, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar stated that coffee was grown in the Manipur tea estate of Hailakandi in Cachar district, but only a small area was cultivated in 1896. The total area under coffee was only 7 acres; it increased to 22 acres in 1897.²⁸

Cotton – In Cachar district, most of the cotton comes from North Cachar Hills and it is grown by the tribes of North Cachar Hills. Cotton of good quality was brought to the markets in the Cachar plains, which were bought by the merchants and people from Bengal.²⁹

The following table will show the increase in the area under cultivation in the Cachar district under British rule.³⁰

Year	Areas under cultivation in Cachar district
1830	29,000 acres
1841- 42	70,000 acres
1868	1,47,917 acres
1875 - 76	2,57,285 acres

The following table shows the crop statistics in Cachar district from 1900 – 1904.³¹

Particulars	1900-01	1901-02	1902-03	1903-04
Total District	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres
Total cropped area	2,88,783	3,20,190	3,30,208	3,17,172
Rice	1,67,877	2,06,230	2,13,727	2,08,690
Mustard	7,725	10,078	11,242	11,748
Sugarcane	2,864	4,972	5,240	5,229
Pulses	6,000	5,861	5,540	4,297
All other crops	1,04,317	93,049	94,459	87,208

The following table gives crop statistics in Cachar from 1904-05 to 1912-13.³²

Particulars	1904-05	1905-06	1906-07	1907-08	1908-09	1909-10	1910-11	1911-12	1912-13
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Total District	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres
Total area cropped	2,89,296	2,93,818	2,99,700	3,11,130	3,22,227	3,12,852	3,13,973	3,36,071	3,36,759
Rice	1,82,905	1,87,740	1,91,988	2,04,022	2,13,361	2,02,419	2,04,526	2,07,940	2,07,442
Mustard	11,849	10,576	11,141	9,641	11,018	11,202	10,395	9,629	9,965
Sugarcane	5,250	5,788	7,592	7,435	7,422	6,844	7,421	8,213	8,511
Pulse	4,195	3,690	3,583	4,187	4,088	4,471	3,962	2,985	3,215
All Other crops	85,097	86,024	85,396	85,845	86,338	87,916	87,669	1,07,304	1,07,626

Deforestation for cultivation

The office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in a letter dated January 16, 1896, to the Government of India, requested the disforestation of 20,451 acres of forest reserves in Vernerpur Pargana in the south of district Cachar district for cultivation. On the land Revenue Administration in Assam during the year 1892-93, reference was made to the question of whether some portions of the forest reserves in the Cachar district could not be utilized more profitably for cultivation.³³ The question of disforestation certain areas in this district, which were of no special value from a forest point of view but were suitable for cultivation, had for a long time been under the consideration of this Administration, to meet the large and annually increasing demand for land in the district arising from the growth of population owing to immigration and other causes. The continuously increasing population needed land for settlement and cultivation. The

Government of India sanctioned the request of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in a letter dated February 12, 1896, for the disforestation of forests for cultivation.³⁴

The Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, in letter No. 1475 dated June 25, 1897, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, requested the disforestation of 7,641 acres in the Inner line reserve forests south of Cachar for extension of cultivation. The total area of the Cachar district was 1,420,800 acres, and of these 454,292 acres, or nearly one-third, were included in forest reserves. The Chief Commissioner informed the Government of India about this and forwarded the matter to the military department and forest conservators for their opinion.³⁵

Nursery Garden & Cattle Breeding Centre

The British government took several measures to develop agriculture in the Cachar district. Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, O.G.R. McWilliam, through his letter dated November 23, 1872, to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, requested him to permit him to establish a Nursery Garden in Silchar, Cachar. Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, in his report, said that in Cachar, he was frequently asked by the natives to provide them with good-quality vegetables and plant seeds. The Government of Bengal, in its report on February 21, 1873, sanctioned the establishment of a nursery garden in Cachar and the appointment of two gardeners for the same purpose of improving agriculture.³⁶

The colonial administration established various grazing farms for cattle for the development of agriculture. One new breeding centre at Dullabcherra in Cachar district was opened in 1936. A report was sent by the Director of Agriculture, Assam, to the Secretary to the Govt. of Assam, and in reply to that, the Secretary informed the Director of Agriculture about the approval and selection of the Government of Dullabcherra as the breeding centre in the district of Cachar.³⁷ In 1937, a second cattle breeding centre was opened at Lakhipur in the Cachar district because the place was found to be suitable for this purpose as the people of the locality take considerable interest in cattle breeding and the improvement of cattle.³⁸

The economy of Cachar was mainly agriculture-centric. The main crop produced in the plains was rice. Apart from rice, other crops produced in Cachar were jute, mustard, sugarcane, poppies, hemp etc. The British encouraged the immigration of people from eastern Bengal, to generate more revenue to cope with the cost of running the administration. As the immigration increased in the plains area of south Assam, it witnessed a great extension in the area under rice cultivation. Large areas of forest areas were cleared for cultivation. The people of Cachar produced commercial crops as well, for example, cotton, jute, sugarcane, etc. The excess production of rice and other items, which were produced by the people of this district, found its way to Bengal. Agriculture developed during the colonial period, and it helped to generate more revenue for the colonial

government in Cachar. On the other hand, the British government derived more revenue by exploiting the surplus production of the peasants.

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