

**AGRARIAN UNREST IN ASSAM AND
THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA:
KAMRUP, 1945-52**

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that dissertation entitled "**AGRARIAN UNREST IN ASSAM AND THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA: KAMRUP, 1945-52**" by **Arupjyoti Saikia** is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of this University. This dissertation is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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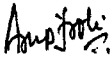
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PREFACE

I have tried in the following pages to understand the ways in which the share-croppers sought to break-out from the vicious clutches of the powerful landowners with considerable patronage from the Congress-led state government in Assam. The resistance of these peasants can be viewed both in terms of occasional violent upsurge and the 'off-stage' protest of the 'everyday' variety reflected among other actions, in the way they mocked at the landowners behind their back. Also, an attempt is made to see how the peasants' search for a less disadvantageous system was more articulated by a group of some 'revolutionary' communists. To begin with, the state government treated this communist-led adhiar movement as a 'law and order' problem and came down heavily on both the activities and the ordinary peasants. However, the realization that the problem is deeply rooted in the agrarian economy of the state, substantially aggravated by the historical process such as the large-scale immigration from the neighbouring East-Bengal, the government passed an act in the state legislative assembly ostensibly to contain the movement while conceding some of the basic demands of the peasants. I have used different varieties of sources to understand the movement and its impact on the political arena of the state. I am, however aware of the limitations

of my research at this stage and will be encouraged to work further, if the dissertation is considered to be of some value.

At the various stages of my research, I have benefitted from discussions and consultations with Amalendu Guha, Hiren Gohain, Nandita Khadria, Majid H. Siddiqui, Rajen Saikia and I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them. I am particularly thankful to my supervisor Bhagwan Singh Josh for his sustained interest and constructive criticism throughout the preparation of the dissertation. I would also like to thank the staff of the Assam State Archives, Guwahati and Assam Police Intelligence Department, Guwahati for their cooperation in the collection of material. Finally, I thank friends and my family members for bearing with the ideosyncrasy of an enthusiastic researcher.


ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA

INTRODUCTION

The district of Kamrup was rocked by a peasant movement led by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) - a Trotskyite communist group outside the Comintern - ostensibly to safeguard the interest of the share-croppers from the exploitation of the landowners, during the period 1945-52. The period has been chosen considering the impact of the movement on the political horizon of Assam and to understand the complexities of the historical processes both in the pre-Independence and post-Independence period. Although, the present study has been confined to Kamrup, an attempt will be made to locate it in the broader context of Agrarian unrest throughout Assam. The Communist Party of India and the Socialist Party of India had also tried to mobilise the peasants and articulate their grievances in Kamrup but it was limited to a few villages as compared to the wide-spread mobilisation by the RCPI. The present work seeks to answer a few questions pertaining to the widespread discontentment of the peasants and its articulation by the RCPI.

Defining the Peasants

The general understanding is that the peasants are a socio-economic category - the small-scale producers with

non-industrial technology relying primarily on what they produce for their subsistence. But it is an over-simplified understanding of the notion of 'peasants'; which strictly confines to an explicit economic categorisation.

Most of the literature conceptualise peasants primarily as a homogeneous community engaged in the agricultural activity and, also, classify them as small, middle and rich peasants.

Recent work on the peasant societies embraced wider definition for the study of peasants economy, and society.¹ Theodor Shanin offered a four-pronged delineation of peasants incorporating (a) the family farm as the basic unit of social and economic organisation, (b) the agriculture as the main source of livelihood, (c) village life and the specific culture of the small rural communities, and (d) the underdog position i.e. domination and exploitation of the peasants by powerful outsiders.² Shanin makes a more specific delineation so that the claim

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1. See, Wolf, Eric R. Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, London, 1971; Hobsbawm, E.J., Primitive Reels, Manchester, 1959. Bandits, London, 1969. Hobsbawm, E.J. and George Rude, Captain Swing, London, 1969.
 2. Theodor Shanin: 'Defining Peasants' in Peasant and Peasant Societies: Selected Readings, Theodor Shanin (ed.), London, 1971, p.59.

of peasant specificity can be presented under some characteristics by which peasants have been distinguished from others.¹ First, the economy of peasants has been said to differ by a distinctive blend of extensive self-employment, control of own means of production, self-consumption of produce and multi-dimensional occupational expertise. Secondly, the patterns and tendencies of political organisation of peasants, have often considerable similarities in different regions and countries of the world.² Thirdly, typical and closely similar norms and cognition have been singled out in peasantries far enough removed to preclude claims of simple dispersion. These patterns both reflect and influence in turn the ways of social life and production. Fourthly, the basic and characteristic unit of social organisation and their functioning have significant similarities all over the world. Fifthly, one can single out analytically a specific social dynamics of peasant societies. In particular, social reproduction i.e. the production of material necessities, the reproduction of human actors and of the system of social relations, shows patterns specific and generic to the peasants.

1. Theodor Shanin: *Defining Peasants*, op.cit., p.58.

2. Eric Wolf: *Peasant Wars*, p.54.

These concepts are neither mutually exclusive nor interchangeable, their illumination may be added up. Concepts are tools of analysis, their usefulness and usage subject to the question asked, the ways those relate into more general theoretical schemes of questioning and its illumination of reality. Peasants are a class, an economy, a "part-societies" and some other things which have not yet been conceptualised. Only the setting of a problematic makes possible for the selection of a valid framework of conceptualisation.

Another type of definition was influenced by Robert Redfield,¹ which assumed that the study of peasants is the study of villages and that peasants inhabit d[rvogov kinds of communities. Redfield's definition incorporates his major concerns: peasants cultivate their land "as part of a traditional way of life" and "looked to or are influenced by gentry...where way of life is like theirs but in a more civilized form." Thus the notions of traditional way of life and peasant-elite relationship seen in terms of ideational influence remain central.

1. Robert Redfield: Peasant Society and Culture, Chicago, 1956, p. 16.

Eric Wolf's definition of peasants used economic criteria: agricultural production, control of land and production for subsistence rather than reinvestment.¹ Although Wolf has opted for an emphasis on structural 'relations' rather than cultural content, he defines his subject-matter as peasant part-cultures and repeatedly referred to the culture of peasant segments. The concept of culture he was using was holistic, but one that saw a clear order of priorities among the components of culture. Wolf also shows an interest in communities and a conviction that the community was the key to understanding how peasants are integrated with the outside world. Communities were viewed a web of group relations which extend through intermediate levels from the level of the community to that of the nation.

Sidney Mintz argues for developing typologies of rural socio-economic groupings rather than abstract definitions of the peasantry. In the process, he takes up issues with certain conceptions of culture and thus clarifies the approach to culture that he and Wolf follow.² First, he

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1. Eric Wolf: "Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Definition", in American Anthropologists, vol.57, 1973, p. 452-478.
 2. Sidney Mintz: "A Note on the Definitions of Peasants", in Journal of Peasant Studies, vol.1, 1973, p. 91-106.

rejects cognitive views of culture and insists that what man sees is at least to some degree a function of their stakes within a structure of power, wealth, status and authority. Culture is behaviour as well as values. Social position and social action have causal priority over the "way of perceiving". Secondly, he rejects assumptions of homogeneity in 'culture' and specifically inquires into the diversity concealed by references to the "peasant culture" or the small community-which implies a homogeneous group carrying a homogeneous body of conventional understandings. Third, he criticizes notions of culture as 'blind custom' and stresses instead the element of manoeuvre. Fourthly, he attacks the idea of "traditional", the assumption that culture is something surviving or conserved from the past. In contrast, his concern is with culture as historically derived patterns of behaviour. Redfield's approach has directed attention to a search for a relationship among societal and ideational patterns that form part of different schemes of meaning. Because of its compatibility with the predominant concepts of culture and society both in the United States and in Britain, the Redfieldian approach has continued to be highly influential.

Overview of Historiography of Peasant Movement

The peasantry acquire the centrestage of historical inquiry when they become a viable threat to the existing systems. The corpus of historical works on the Indian peasantry show how they were placed in an antagonistic position with the Indian state or its subordinate agencies, the agencies which formed a network of agents ranging from landlords to moneylenders. They also inform about land revenue system, agrarian relation, commercialisation of agriculture, the moneylenders - landlord nexus, and how these elements affect the peasant societies . The three major trends in peasant historiography such as the imperialist, the nationalist and the Marxist disagree on the question of the antagonism between the peasantry and the landlord. The imperialist school treats peasant rebellion as a "disruption of law and order", which might pose a serious threat to the colonial state.¹ The nationalist historiography basically found the peasant rebellion as an outcome of colonial rule.² It was the colonialism as an institution, which impoverished the peasantry. The growing discontent of the peasantry against

1. See, Eric Stockes; the Peasants and the Raj, Cambridge, 1978.
2. See, Tara Chand, History of the Freedom Movement. in India, Delhi, 1961.

the colonial rule stimulated by the Indian national movement empowered the downtrodden Indian peasantry to raise in revolt against the colonial rule. The rebellions which occurred outside the ideological parameter of Indian National Movement were seen as a mischief, resulting in social disorder. In their construction of the peasant history, peasant resistance was integrated into the broader framework of Indian National Movement, it was never seen as a conflict between the zamindar-moneylender and the peasantry.

Then comes the widely discussed Marxist historiography which views the peasant movement as a class conflict. It was the conflict between the peasants and the zamindars-moneylenders. It was the colonial economic set up which pulverised the peasant economy resulting in the peasant upsurge. The Indian National Movement tried to exploit this latent tension within the peasantry as a tool to fight against the imperialist ruler. It discusses the problematic of economic conflict between the peasantry and landlord, the extent of peasant impoverisation, moneylending, the extent of landless labour, development of share-cropping, the nature of violence, etc., which helped the peasantry to come into the mainstream of Indian National Movement. The peasant would rebel against the zamindar or its class enemy only when it is motivated and

guided by some organised political party. Hence, it would not negate the role of the Indian National Congress in formulating the organisational shape of the peasant rebellion in the nineteenth-twentieth century.¹

This historiography overlooks some of the salient feature of Indian peasant society. As, "Marxists contested both nationalist historiography and the 'Cambridge School' interpretation but their mode-of-production narratives merged imperceptibly with the nation-state's ideology of modernity and progress. This congruence meant that while championing the history of the oppressed classes and their emancipation through modern progress, the Marxists found it difficult to deal with the hold of 'backward' ideologies of caste and religion. Unable to take into account the oppressed's lived experience of religion and social customs, Marxists account of peasant rebellions either overlooked the religious idiom of the rebels or viewed it as a mere form and a stage in the development of revolutionary consciousness. Thus, although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained

1. D.N. Dhamagare, Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950, Delhi, 1994.
A.R.Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Bombay, 1959.

debatable."

The Marxist historiographical tradition informs us that "in the modern world the peasantry is not a homogeneous social class. In the case of a differentiated peasantry like that of India, some sections of it are bourgeois...proletarian, some even semi feudal...while still others are even more difficult to characterise."¹ The peasantry work within the hegemonic ideology of the dominant class who may be represented by either the bourgeois or the working class. A political party guided and influenced by the Marxist ideology would unite and organise the peasantry against economic exploitation and for land. Thus, in the Marxist tradition the need of the outside help imbued with revolutionary potential is very much inevitable for the peasantry. Regarding the issues on which the peasant movements of the nineteenth and twentieth Century occurred, the Marxist assigned two basic issues - government taxation and the problem of land ownership.² The attempt on the part of the colonial government to extract more surplus from the peasantry forcing them to severe hardship compelled them to demand reduction in taxation.

1. Mridula Mukherjee: "Peasant Resistance, and Consciousness: 'Subalterns' and Beyond", in Economics and Political Weekly, 8 and 15 October 1988, p. 10.
2. M.Mukherjee, Peasant Resistance, op.cit., p. 2174.

"The second category of issues around which resistance emerged related specifically to those peasants who cultivated land as tenants of landlords."¹ Another demand that became the focus of struggle was for the curtailment of the arbitrariness of the moneylenders. Peasants resisted in various ways the moneylenders' tendency to charge exorbitant interest rates, to enter false sums in their accounts, to take control over their land on the plea of non-payment of interest, etc.

Ranajit Guha with his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* and the other works published in the "Subaltern Studies" plunged into this historiographical contest over the problem of peasant resistance and peasant consciousness in colonial India and the relationship between the peasantry and the Indian National Movement.² Locating the peasantry within the broader framework of the term 'subaltern' which is referred for the notion of subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and is used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationship in history, Guha seeks

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1. M.Mukherjee, *Peasant Resistance*, op.cit., p. 2174.
 2. Ranajit Guha: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi 1983 and also see Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies (Vol. I-VI)*, New Delhi 1982-1986.

to "rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work" in peasant studies. Moreover, the act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elite had exercised dominance, not hegemony over the subalterns. For Guha, the subalterns had acted in history "on their own, i.e. independently of the elite" and their polities constituted "an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite polities nor did its existence depend on the latter".

Drawing his material from historical evidences from colonial writings, in his book Guha provides a densely textured analysis of elementary aspects of the Indian peasantry and its role in challenging the colonial power and its native collaborators, whose class identity and class consciousness were divided in the course of the conduct of the policy of land settlement. Two major theme evolved in his work - the peasant consciousness and the political power articulated through a combination of the colonial state and the overlapping moneylending and landlord classes. In his attempt to restore the peasantry to the position of a "subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own", he shows it successfully that the colonial discourse on peasant insurgency was dominated by the centrality of the "security of state" - a problematic in the career of colonialism.

Guha stresses that the Indian peasantry, which was engrossed in a semi-feudal relationship of landlord dominance, could still be animated by a degree of political consciousness. This peasant insurgency as a political phenomenon is viewed by Guha from within five analytical categories - negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality.

The peasantry assert themselves via a series of negations, via their consciousness of their identity and class limits of their enemy¹ The peasant was well aware of the distance which separates him from the dominant/hegemonic group of the society, in the locality, in the district and beyond. These negations which surfaced initially at local levels invariably precedes towards a more elaborate and generalised level. The peasantry achieved these negations through two mode - discrimination and inversion. Thus Guha's discussion of the Indian peasant insurgency focusses on the dynamism underlying in any peasant insurgency.

The peasantry in Assam had a long tradition of resistance originating in the pre-colonial times.

1. Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects, op.cit., p.19-20.

Pioneering works done by Amalendu Guha, S.K. Bhuyan, Maheswar Neog, give important insight into casual and structural origin of those resistance/movements.¹ Amalendu Guha has discussed the pre-colonial peasant movements; in particular the Moamaria rebellion, with the structural reference to the crisis of feudal Ahom monarchy. The works of Maheswar Neog and S.K. Bhuyan suggest the "democratic and anti-feudal character" of the revolt. Neog does not see any definite proofs of any class formation on industrial and economic basis or of any class conflict. "In the rebellion, at least in the beginning the whole of Assam's society seems to have been divided vertically, rather than horizontally".² The peasant resistance to the colonial state in the 19th century has been discussed within the larger framework of Indian National Movement and the colonial State.³ The left-wing mobilisation of the peasants in Kamrup how ever, has been left out of

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1. For example the "Moamoria peasant rebellion" has been discussed by Amalendu Guha. See Amalendu Guha : Medieval and Early Colonial Assam : Delhi, 1991; p.98-138. Also see Maheswar Neog : Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of Mayamaria Vaishnavas, Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta, 1982.
 2. S.K. Bhuyan : Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826 : A History of the Relations of Assam with the East India Company from 1771 to 1826. Guwahati, 1974.
 3. Amalendu Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj-Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, Delhi, 1988 (hereafter Guha : Planter-Raj to Swaraj), p.181-182.

discussion in the existing literature. In the present work, an attempt will be made to examine the peasant movement in Kamrup from two different angles - the intensity of the share-croppers in the district with the stress and strain inherent in their economy and the articulation of these strains by the RCPI and subsequently, to link up the two to understand the movement as a whole.

Framework of the Study

In the first chapter, as a background to the peasant discontent, we shall discuss the colonial land revenue policy, the influx of immigrant and other factors affecting the peasant economy. Assam was brought under the ryotwari-settlement except Goalpara and Sylhet districts. The Mauzadari system of rent collection by the early 20th Century turned out to be an unscrupulous and exploitative system. The entire Kamrup district spread over both sides of the Brahmaputra river was densely populated by the tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasantry. The tribal peasantry had continued to live in an undeveloped society with a residual element of a liberal democracy inherited from an undeveloped semi-feudal society. The villages were more or less self-contained. The development of a lucrative tea industry in Assam, mostly in Upper Assam, did not lead to commercialisation of the primitive agricultural

sector to any considerable extent. The peasantry was virtually left with the exploitation of the Mauzadar and his subordinate officials and the emerging absentee landowner class. The virtual non-existence of cash-crop production did create a situation where money was not available. As money was becoming more essential due to social needs and land revenue, the peasantry had to fall into the trap of the moneylenders. The latter mostly consisted of absentee landowners, Marwari businessmen, the Mauzadar and alike. When the peasant failed to return the money, he appealed for either a remission or fell into arrear. Owing to scarcity of labour and non-profitable market conditions and the social norms the moneylender rarely attached the land of the owner-cultivator or evicted the tenant-cultivator.

The agrarian situation changed drastically since 1930s. The influx of large scale East Bengal immigrants changed the scenario both politically and economically. These "hardworking" immigrant landless agricultural labourers occupied the wasteland areas alongside the Brahmaputra river. In 1937, the United Front ministry headed by Md. Saadulla gave settlement of these wasteland areas to the immigrants which reached more than 14

thousand acres by 1950.¹ The coming of the immigrants and their engagement with cash crop production brought to them enough cash money. As these immigrants proved to be hard working agricultural labourers, the non-cultivating land owners started giving land to them as tenant-cultivator on a share-cropping basis. Earning of enough cash also helped the immigrant peasants to buy land at a high price. There was growing discontent among the tribal people about this increasing land market. There were occasional conflicts between the tribals and the immigrant peasants on the questions such as grazing and forests rights animal-theft etc. There was a vast ecological change in Assam in 1940s. Due to the indiscriminate destruction of forests to meet the heavy demands of the World Wars and the growing population, climatic scenario in Assam changed, leading to occurrences of heavy annual floods. It caused lot of land erosion and heavy damage to the crops and cattle. This chapter takes into account of the large scale landlessness mostly among the tribal peasants and simultaneous growth of share-croppers. The peasant society was on the verge of two apparent tension i.e. the tension between the landowners and the share-croppers, and the growing tension between the immigrant peasants and the indigenous peasants.

1. Guha : Planters Raj to Swaraj, p.249.

In the second chapter, we will try to locate the RCPI as a radical political platform oriented towards a 'labour and peasant raj' in the wider the context of peasant discontent in Kamrup. The aggravating peasants' condition was not taken seriously within the provincial Congress politics. The educated Assamese elites were largely absorbed into the colonial administration. According to the 1951 Census, in Kamrup district there was a numerically large category of non-cultivating landowners who had to sustain on the share produce, as except tea industry there was no industrial development in Assam, particularly in Kamrup. On the eve of independence, the political situation arising out of the "grouping question"¹ and the influx of Muslim immigrants did not keep enough space within the Congress politics to discuss the share-croppers' issue. By 1946, the North-Western part of the Kamrup was highly tensed with the pro-Pakistan activities. The anti-Bengalee euphoria which can be dated back to 19th century language controversy formed the Assamese mainstream political agenda. It was not that the share-croppers' issues were not discussed in the Congress circle. The old *ryot-sabhas* were re-organised and gave emphasis on maintaining cordial relation between the share-cropper and

1. See, Guha: Planter Raj to Swaraj, p.309-315.

the landowners.¹ The Congress failed to mobilise the tribal peasants. The prevalence of caste prejudices and other social customs created a division between the tribal peasantry and Hindu Assamese society. The 1940s had witnessed the formation of separate tribal groups which primarily talked about their socio-economic upliftment.

Assamese middle-class youth from the rural background, idealistic and without tangible prospects for the future provided the cadre for the RCPI. Under the banner of Krishak Banua Panchayat, they started mobilising the tribal share-croppers. They were asked to give only one fourth of the produce to the landowners in return for valid receipt. They also demanded the government that land should be given to the landless people. In most cases, they even stopped giving the share- produce to the landowners. The slogan "land to the tiller" naturally proved attractive to the share-croppers. The other agenda which included grazing rights, and relief to the flood affected people immediately spread among the peasantry. In contrast to this mobilisation, the Guwahati based landowners also mobilised and put pressure on the government to control the situation.

1. Ibid., p.237.

At the organisation level, the RCPI adopted a native model compared to the activities of the CPI in Assam. While the CPI was busy organising the railway workers, who were mostly Bengalee dominated and oil field workers, mostly non-Assamese, failed to give a positive agenda to the peasantry. The anti-Bengalee euphoria being already high in Kamrup, the CPI's political support to the immigrants and non-supportive to the agenda of the weak Assamese middle-class put them as anti-Assamese. The Congress and the press immediately projected the CPI's position virtually as anti-Assamese. However from the point of view of the middle-class the RCPI responded positively on these issues.

When by the early 1948, the share-croppers movement reached a serious situation, the Assam Government was forced to investigate into the problem and in May 1948, the Assam Adhiars (share-croppers) Protection Rights Act was passed. As the Act was passed, the landowners expressed their relief for they were already faced with social humiliation , economic difficulties and even physical attack. But due to lack of real intention of the government and resistance from the landowners at different level, the Act hardly proved a relief to the share-croppers.



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In the third chapter, we shall discuss the RCPI's attempt to carve out a space within the mainstream Assam politics during the period between 1948-52. Politically, the RCPI had decided to bring the class based peasant-labour movement to an advanced stage with a view to capture regional political power. With the increased denial and resistance of the adhiars to part with their production, the State government unleashed a repressive police action in the affected areas. But the law and administrative machinery ceased to function in various parts of the district. We shall also highlight that though the RCPI emerged as an alternative political force in the district it came to an abrupt end both because of its political position and the repressive police machinery. Moreover, the party's understanding of the various socio-political factors in Kamrup proved to be unsuited to the conditions.

The constraints of space and time has not permitted an extensive collection of material at this stage of the study. Besides, the underground activities of the RCPI coupled with a recurring police crack-down at the various 'camps' of the party virtually led to the loss of whatever little documents were in circulation. I have been able to collect only a few of the pamphlets which the party had issued during 1948-49. The pamphlets contain vital

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information on the alleged exploitation of the peasantry by the landowners, under the aegis of the Congress government in the state and the strategies to overthrow the government so that a more equitable 'socialistic' political system may be heralded.

I have also consulted the autobiographies of three top RCPI leaders. Written in the 1980s, at a time when the anti-foreigners movement led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) was fast emerging on the political horizon of the state, the autobiographies seemed to be an attempt at highlighting the role of the communists in articulating a separate Assamiya cultural identity in the post-Independence period, thereby suggesting that the RCPI has a long tradition of serious concern for the Assamiya identity with a particular interest in the upliftment of an exploited tribal peasantry.

The daily reports of the Assam Police Intelligence Department have documented the activities of the party which are available in the Assam Police Intelligence Department record room are also consulted. These reports are important for an understanding of the day to day activities of the movement leaders and the resistance by the peasantry, although from the point of view of a hostile government. Moreover, the Assam Legislative Assembly

debates, Assam Provincial Congress Committee Proceedings, the Annual Land Revenue Settlement Reports, the Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Reports and the Census Reports (1921-51) are valuable for the historical process in which I have tried , in some measure, to locate the movement.

I have interviewed a number of senior party members who are still active in the district. Also some old peasants from the two villages where the movement had strong mass base have been interviewed. The data so collected is important for corroborating the accounts in the documents. They also give insights into the rural political economy which is significant for a better understanding of the movement. However, while using the data I have kept in view the limitations of the oral sources on account of the inherent biases in them and the influence of the context on the narrative.

CHAPTER I

THE AGRARIAN ECONOMY AND THE PEASANT SOCIETY

This chapter will examine the agrarian economy and the intensity of the practice of share-cropping in the district of Kamrup. An attempt is also made to understand the agrarian economy of the district within the specific colonial context and the ecological setting. Various factors influencing the agrarian economy have been looked into and a few dimensions of the dependency relationship between the landowner and his *adhiar* (share-cropper) are explored. Further, the peasant society has been located in the wider context of immigration and its subsequent effect on the indigenous peasant economy. The discussion will show that the intensity of the share-cropping differs which affected the landowner and the *adhiar* relation. The large scale influx of immigrants also brought in new tension into the peasant society disrupting their economy. By the 1940, the share-cropping was widespread and there emerged scattered discontentment among the *adhiars* later to be appropriated by RCPI.

Geographical Setting

The district of Kamrup consisting of the present day districts of Kamrup, Nalbari and Barpeta was one among the

six districts of the Assam plains in the period under discussion. It is situated in the lower region of the Brahmaputra valley bounded on the north by the hill state of Bhutan; on the east by the Balipara Frontier Tract, and the districts of Darrang and Nagaon; on the south by the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and Goalpara. The area of the district was estimated as 3858 sq.miles. The broad plain of the central part of the district is of alluvial formation which is brought down by the river Brahmaputra and its Tributary Streams. The greater part of the central part of the district is covered with paddy fields "....with dotted groves of bamboos concealing the village of the Assamese".¹ The south-eastern portion of the district is dominated by off-shoots of the southern hills. The district has numerous swamps or bolls in many of which water remain even in the dry season. The river Brahmaputra was generally high during the rainy season inundating considerable areas on either side of the river. The land in the district was divided length wise into three belts : the *chapori*, the *rupit* and the submontane belts. "Next to the river lies its low, sandy and undulating flood plain" called the *chaporis*. These were sandy alluvial plain. These areas were heavily flooded during the rains. In

1. Imperial Gazetteer of India (Vol.6), New edn. Oxford, 1908, chapt. on Kamrup, pg.330.

Kamrup, residential villages were few in the *Chaporis* and far between and the intervening areas which were cleared for cultivation was under jungle and long grasses. Traditionally, *chaporis* lands were used to be put under two major crops, *ahu* (early maturing rice) and mustard sometimes with the advantage of double-cropping. The Barpeta portion of the district which is situated in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra had larger percentage of *chaporis* area. The Rupit belt had stretched on either side of the *chaporis* belt including the most fertile strips of the district. Cultivation in this belt had greater permanency as well as in the proportion of the transplanted (*rupit*) crops. Here, land was hardly relinquished. The other belt, submontane group was an upward continuation of the *rupit* belt. Because of the elevated nature, irrigation was essential here for paddy cultivation. Presence of numerous hill streams with their shallow and shifting channels make irrigation comparatively an easy task'.¹

Level of Technology

The low level of farming technology was working as a major obstacle in the agricultural sector. The

1. Guha, Amalendu : Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society Polity Economy; Calcutta 1992 p.11 (hereafter Guha : Society, Polity, Economy).

agricultural implements included a "wooden plough with an iron tipped share, wooden rakes and mallets, a rough bamboo harrow, sickles, hill hooks, knives and baskets".¹ The grafting of seedlings also required enough of labour power ".....the seedlings were planted out in handfuls by the women, who can be seen up to their knees in mud, stopping for hours together under the burning sun".² Added to this undeveloped agricultural implements was the low breed cattle. In Kamrup, there were few grazing reserves resulting in fodder insufficiency due to the highest acreage of cultivation. "In such areas, during the rains, cattle are tethered on road side or railway lands or are fed at home on paddy straw....in the cold weather they are let loose in the harvested fields and are expected to look after themselves".³ Unhealthy breeding resulted in the undersized cattle having little strength or vitality. Only professional Nepali graziers were attempting at breeding a better breed known as "domasia" or "doshalia. The cattle from Gangetic valley in North India were costlier and required much care and tending. Wild animals also killed a

1. Imperial Gazetter of India (vol.6) p.56.

2. Imperial Gazetter of India (vol.6), p.56.

3. Desai, S.P. : Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kamrup district, 1928; Shillong, 1930 [hereafter Report, Land Revenue Settlement, Kamrup], p.10.

number of cattle particularly in areas near to the forest and hills. Cattle disease assumed a significant proportion in the 1940s. During the period 1940-45, approximately 10 lakhs of cattle died or was lost in the state of Assam.¹

As noted earlier, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries inundated large area giving a serious set back to the peasant economy. Flood began to occur regularly since the major earthquake of 1897. It silted up the drainage channels causing heavy inundation of the entire area.² After the earthquake the sandy banks of the river channels gave away, the water courses were blocked and the drainage system was completely blocked rendering a large tract of land previously under cultivation waterlogged. Situation worsened in the 1940s, when serious ecological imbalance seemed eminent due to large scale destruction of forests. The demand for timber in the wake of second world war along with increasing local demands led to the heavy forest depletion leading to the annual occurrences of flood.³ The flood also resulted in the land erosion leaving many peasant families landless.

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1. Cited from Directorate of Agricultural Department, Assam Government; report published in Assamiya (Dainik), 28 January 1945.
 2. Imperial Gazetter of India (vol.6) p.330.
 3. Census Report India, 1951, part I-A, p.33.

In such an ecological setting, peasants resorted to different mode of cultivation differing from belt to belt. In the *rupit* belt, an 'established' form of cultivation was practised where 'land is cultivated year after year without any apparent diminution in its yield". The *chapor*i belts were thrown open to more fluctuating cultivation based 'on the exploitation of the adventitious fertility in the soil due to the deposit of silt and the accumulation of organic matter". This mode of cultivation resembles much closer to shifting cultivation. "Land was taken up by the villagers cultivated for 3 to 4 years at the end of which period, the yield seemed to diminish and then give up, the villagers thereafter moving on to another block where the same process was repeated".¹ Large scale abundance of fallow land encouraged the peasants to accept this mode of cultivation. In the *chapor*i belts, land clearance was comparatively easier due to lack of dense forest which wasn't the case in the *rupit* and submontane belt. In both *chapor*i and submontane belts, the peasants often "several miles away from their settled villages" would erect their temporary clusters of huts known as *pam basti* to carry on

1. Report, Revenue Settlement, Kamrup, p.8.

shifting cultivation.¹ Peasants in the north bank of the district usually resorted to this practice due to heavy pressure on the *rupit* belt.² However, this shifting mode of cultivation was gradually getting restricted because of the increasing demand for land from immigrants. It was reported that during the years 1911-30, there was 700 p.c. increase in the *chapor* belt settled areas as a result of large scale immigration from East Bengal.³ Relinquishments of land which was usually high in the *chapor* and submontane belts was decreasing. In the areas newly settled by immigrants, "the Assamese still wish to cling to fluctuating cultivation to keep fallow lands within their *pattahs* rather than run the risk of losing them altogether by relinquishing them".⁴ There was a distinct growth of land -scarcity in the heavily populated Kamrup leaving which belied the myth of land abundance. The 'bad' weather was also very much responsible for low agricultural output. Continuous drought or flood also became a common feature of the district. The official

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1. Guha : Society, Polity, Economy, p.13.
 2. Guha : Society, Polity, Economy, p.13.
 3. Report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30; Vol.(1) Government of India 1930 (hereafter Banking Enquiry Report), p.23.
 4. Report, Revenue Settlement Kamrup, p.10.

documents highlighted that "the weather conditions were on the whole favourable for crops during the year which retarded the growth of sali crop and adversely suffered from a deficiency of rain which affected all crops".¹ The climate was a breeding ground for insects and pests among which the grass-hoppers destroyed large amount of crops. The official reports also mentioned the serious damages done to the crops by this insect-pests. "In 1924, the paddy crops in at least 50 villages had been destroyed totally and the pests were appeared to be spreading to other villages and no remedy has been found".² Double cropping and crop rotation were also practised only on a limited scale. In the late 19th century, it never exceeded 13 p.c. of the net cropped area in the Assam plains.³ The settlement of 1928-29 gives a figure of 1,96,215 bighas as double cropped area while net cropped area was 2,300,397 bighas. In the south bank group of the district, it was much less i.e. 3,744 bighas and 3,89,440 bighas respectively of the double cropped and net cropped area.⁴

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1. Annual Report of the Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Districts (hereafter Land Revenue Administration) 1927-28 p.4.
 2. Report, Revenue Settlement, Kamrup, p.4.
 3. Guha : Society, Policy, Economy, p.245.
 4. Report, Revenue Settlement, Kamrup, p.50.

The same official report indicated that the percentage in the double cropped area fell from 16 to 8 p.c. This was because of the general tendency of the peasants to open out new lands wherever possible at the expense of intensive cultivation and partly to the portions of the newly opened out lands being unfit for being second crop. However, the fact remains that land reclamation being not an easy task, the peasant wouldn't shift for another area at the expense of intensive cultivation.

Thus, our discussion on the level of technology in the agrarian sector shows, there was heavy pressure on the peasant economy. The agrarian economy was more or less regulated by the undeveloped agricultural technology. Under this condition, any further pressure from outside forces would bring the agrarian economy to a certain collapse. In the next sections, it will be discussed how forms of property and revenue administration had worsened the peasant condition.

Revenue Administration

The re-settlement of Kamrup¹ in 1903 had introduced a more elaborate scheme of land classification known as `soil

1. The introduction of Kamrup to colonial revenue administration has been discussed elsewhere. See Guha : Society, Polity, Economy, p.219-232.

unit system'. Here, every "soil unit pays a certain quantity of revenue, the actual sum assessed per unit varying with the village".¹ To every bigha of land was assigned a certain number of soil units, the number varying with the class of land concerned. In the resettlement of 1903, in every bigha of homestead land there were 24 soil units whereas in every bigha of badly flooded land there were 5 soil units. In the next resettlement of 1928, the system was subjected to further modification and elaboration. The system was applicable to the established group only. Compared to the exhaustive and meticulous revenue assessment worked out in the established group, fluctuating area didn't come under this assessment. The system prepared the way to extract the maximum possible rent out of the land leaving no scope for the peasant to save his surplus produce. However, this pressure was less in the *chapor*i group. The Barpeta, Chamaria and Ramdia portions of the district shared the major percentage of fluctuating area of the district and the peasants of these areas were subjected to less revenue demand.

The peasant economy suffered from the institution of the revenue collectors too, which paved the way for the

1. B.C. Allen, Assam Provincial District Gazetteer, Kamrup; Calcutta 1905 (hereafter Allen : Kamrup), p.195.

emergence of an absentee landowners group. This process of emergence of an absentee landowners group is discussed below. The settlement rules of 1870 introduced an uniform system of administration of revenue collection called the 'Mauzadari' system. Usually, the 'Mauzadar' (the revenue collector at the Mauza level) was an "influential and well-to-do resident of the relevant fiscal division called Mauza" which turned out to be hereditary in tenure by the last decade of the 19th century. The Mauzadar was allowed to retain a certain percentage of commission on the total revenue collection. "The Beltola mauza was settled with the Beltola family at the rate of 30 p.c. commission on the collections of the mauza....the mauza being managed by any competent member of the family".¹ In the early part of the 20th century, the commission acquired by the mauzadar was considerable enough. By 1931, 'the commission paid to mauzadars on collections of ordinary land revenue, including tauzi-bahir revenue, hoe and potters' clay taxes at the rate of 10 p.c. on first Rs.10,000 and 5 p.c. on the remainder'.² The office of the Mauzadar was helped by a 'petty village based government employee' called mandal

1. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department (Assam State Archives, Gauhati) (hereafter ASA) Revenue-A/September, 1922.
2. Assam Land Revenue Manual (Vol.1), 5th edition, Shillong 1931, p.192.

whose function was to assist the Mauzadar in land measurement and maintenance of office records. The Gaonbura (village headman), a quasi-official also formed part of the revenue collecting machinery. He belonged to the cultivating class and rewarded with some revenue concession. "Gaonburas holding khiraj (full rate paying land) lands shall be granted an annual remission of land revenue up to 12 bighas of cultivated land of the best quality included in their pattahs".¹ The Mauzadars, Mandals and Gaonburas emerged as a substantial landholders in the particular mauza. Because of their privileged position, they had a choice to select and occupy 'good' (productive land) land into their possession. Often the Mauzadar allowed the revenue of peasant to fall into arrears and later on it was converted to a loan by executing a bond with the peasant. At many times, village substantial landholders acquired land in this process. The Mandals could also manipulate the land records along with land measurement to a considerable extent. That this manipulation was in practice to a considerable degree, can be said from the popular saying "Mandalei Kandal Lagayi" (Mandals create all the problems). They were seen as the centre of social conflict. Thus, the office of the revenue

1. Assm Land Revenue Mannaal (vol.1), p.197.

administration became an apparent ground of conflict between the peasants and the landowners. The former were exploited through different administrative means. The tribal peasants being less acquainted with the existing legal-administrative systems were more vulnerable to any malpractice resulting in the large scale land alienation.

Forms of Landed Property

Kamrup was part of the ryotwari settlement in the Assam plains. Here, land was settled for two types of cultivation - ordinary and special cultivation. As the area settled for special cultivation was very negligible in the district, we will not discuss it in detail.¹ The area settled for ordinary cultivation was held by numerous individuals and in some cases in compact blocks by religious institutions. Lands settled for ordinary cultivation were of three categories : *Lakhiraj* (revenue free), *Nisf-khiraj* (half rate paying) and *Khiraj* (full rate paying). The district accounted for an area of 4,70,399 acres of land for ordinary cultivation settled temporarily at full rates annually and 6,15,325 acres of land settled periodically at full rates. For the Assam plains, the

1. According to the 1951 Census Report, only 1,322 acres were settled in the district for special cultivation. Census Report 1951. Kamrup district Hand Book Appendix XII.

corresponding figures were 17,07,894 and 27,74,541 acres respectively. By 1951, in the Assam proper, there were 134 numbers of estates which enjoyed *La-khiraj* land rights¹ which included a total 93,059 acres of land. The district alone share 34,060 acres which was accommodated in 38 numbers of estates. Each estate shared an average 895 acres accordingly. This share was relatively higher compared to the average share of 603 acres in the Assam plains.² The land held under *Nisf-khiraj* and *La-khiraj* area was higher in the southern bank of the district compared to the northern bank as the following table shows:

	Total Area(In aeres)	Gauhati District	Barpeta District
Total land settled for ordinary cultivation	7,28,757	5,98,690	1,50,077
Held on ordinary tenure	5,48,412		
Held on revenue free (<i>La-khiraj</i>)	33,990	33,176	816
Half-rate paying (<i>Nisf-khiraj</i>)	1,46,355	1,13,002	33,353

The table shows different land area held under different tenure for 1911-12. Land held under *La-khiraj* and

1. Census Report India, 1951. vol.12, Appendix XII, p.424.
2. Guha : Society, Policy, Economy; p.241.

Nisf-khiraj was quite higher i.e. 25 p.c. under the Gauhati sub-division. Large scale landholding was to be found only with the La-khiraj and Nisf-khiraj landowners. Most of the big landholdings and more than half of the Assamese Brahmans were concentrated in the Kamrup district. About 85 p.c. of the state's half-rate paying acreage and 40 p.c. of the revenue-free (La-khiraj) acreage were concentrated in this district in 1895-96.¹ So the district's landholding pattern therefore was more landlord-oriented than in any other district of Assam plain. Out of the total area of 5,91,706 acres settled with the peasant sector of Kamrup in 1900-1901, 25 per cent were covered with the nisf-khiraj and 6 per cent for la-khiraj estates. Thus, an estimated one-third of the land settled with the peasant sector was shared by big landlords estates and this accounted for the largest concentration of tenants in Kamrup.

Amalendu Guha had suggested² that in Kamrup all landlords irrespective of their origin who held land twenty acres each or above could be as big (read rich) landholders. To cultivate that much of land at least three plough units would be necessary. "Given the social context

1. Guha : *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, p.242.

2. Ibid., p. 243.

and origins of the big landholding estates", Guha argues that "even while having their own cultivation did not contribute any manual labour."¹ In the nineteenth century, Hunter suggested that "a farm of above a 100 bighas...is considered to be a very large holding, for a husband's man anything below twenty bighas is a small one."² As the district shared a fair size of *La-Khiraj* and *Nisf-Khiraj* land, there was a strong tendency of sub-letting this land. The process of sub-letting was accentuated because of the simultaneous growth of absentee landownership.

The Development of Share-Cropping: 1900-1940

Share-cropping had pre-British origins, since the state permanently assigned sections of population to render henceforth their services to land grants instead of the State."³ Large bodies of tenants were found mostly in compact blocks in the landed estates after the British conquest of Assam in 1826. In 1883, two landed estates in Kamrup, one held by a Brahman proprietor and another by a temple accounted between them for no less than a thousand

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1. Guha : Society, Polity, Economy, p. 243.
 2. Ibid., p.243.
 3. Ibid., p. 254.

tenants.¹ By the 1880s almost all the tenants were found paying a cash rent supplemented by token services and payments in kind, share cropping or produce-rent (*adhi*) prevailed only to a marginal extent and that too only in the case of *rupit* lands in densely-populated tracts where such lands were available. By the last quarter of the 19th century, the process of growth of absentee landownership was fast developing in Kamrup. A tendency towards accumulation of leases in the hands of those who had ready money, such as pleaders and government servants was observed in the vicinities of town such as Gauhati, Palashbari as early as 1888.² Revenue officials like Mauzadars also found tenancy convenient for getting their newly acquired lands cultivated. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the *adhi* system was found with considerable incidence in Kamrup only but with marked variations in the operation of the system from district to district. We may draw a few essential features of the *adhi* system as follows: First, no extra payments in kind or cash over and above the stipulated produce-share were generally called for. Secondly, the system was generally associated with only the *rupit* variety of land. For productive wet

1. Ibid., p.254.

2. Guha: Society, Polity, Economy, p. 256.

lands alone could be leased out on adhi terms. Payments of government revenue remaining the landlords' responsibility, the principle half shares was implemented with modifications varying according to such circumstances as soil fertility and respective contributions of the two parties involved. Consequently, five distinct forms of produce-sharing were there:¹

- (a) *boka-adhi* or division of the field in equal parts after the tenant had cultivated the land up to the stage of puddling, each party taking charge of its part thereafter;
- (b) *gacha-adhi* or equal division of the standing crop on the fields each party reaping and transporting its own share;
- (c) *dal-adhi* or equal division of the harvested bundles, each party threshing and transporting its own share;
- (d) *guti-adhi* or equal division of the threshed grain, each party taking thereafter its own share; and
- (e) *chukti-adhi* (*thika-adhi*) or the handing over to the landlord of a fixed quantum of grain.

The rent burden under different forms of adhi tended to be the same as under *chukani* form, through adjustments like landlords' contributions towards seeds or

1. Guha : Society, Polity, Economy, p.256.

transplantation costs or both. However, our purpose here is to enquire into the intensity of this share cropping in Kamrup and to look into the various factors affecting the dependency relationship between the share-cropper and the landowner. The settlement reports¹ show that sub-letting was not common and "extreme disability" only compelled them to sublet the land. But it was a case different for the *Nisf-khiraj* and *La-khiraj* lands, which was much higher compared to the *Khiraj* land. The former were found to be located in convenient and 'established' villages with productive 'rupit' and *bastis* (home-stead land). Here, the common procedure was to charge government rates. As the landowner having land of these categories didn't have to pay or part of the revenue, the accumulation of wealth was relatively higher for them. In the South Bank group of the district, the percentage of sub-letting in these two categories were quite high which was 59 and 68 p.c. for *Nisf-khiraj* and *Khiraj* respectively.²

The *Khiraj* land had a lesser incidence of sub-letting. It was only in highly populated areas where practically all the available land has long been taken up that *Khiraj* land

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1. Assessment Report of the South Bank Group Report and Land Revenue Settlement Kamrup.
 2. South Bank Group Assessment Report, p.4 (Table B).

was sublet to any appreciable extent but still not exceeding a percentage of 10.¹ Thus, we have found that, in the entire Kamrup, out of a total 20,76,785 bighas of settled Khiraj area, only 1,06,962 bighas was sublet either on cash or grain or even mixed rent.² Both Borbhag and South Bank Groups showed a high incidence of sub-letting 6.83 and 9 respectively.³ In the *chapori* area, the incidence of sub-letting was very minimal. In the Panbari mauza of the South Bank, the percentage of sub-letting was as high as 35.9 where the land was sublet at "first class government rates, though the villages were of third class".⁴ Here, the *adhiars* had to assist the landowners in reaping and threshing the paddy. In Beltola and Ramsa mauzas, the rent varied from Rs.1-1 to Rs.1-8 per bigha apart from other customary services. In Rani, Barduar and Chayani, the rent run as high as Rs.2 per bigha; in Chayagaon Pantan and Kharija Baranti, the rent varies from Rs.1-4 to Rs.1-12 per bigha. More evidences show that in the South Bank group, the total settled area was 2,87,938 bighas which included the *Nisf-khiraj*, *Khiraj* and *La-khiraj*

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1. Report, Revenue Settlement, Kamrup; p.11.
 2. Ibid, p.11.
 3. Ibid., p.11.
 4. South Bank Group Assessment Report; p.5.

land. Here, the percentage of sub-letting was 19.6 p.c.¹

Due to its higher share of *La-khiraj* and *Nisf-khiraj* land, the lands were rented out to the adhiars. The South Kamrup again showed a relatively higher incidence of sub-letting. The adhiars were accorded to different rates of rent. Moreover, it was conditioned by relative power relation between the landowner and the adhiar. The religious ties between the landowner and the adhiar representing the temples and monasteries was impeding the mobility of the Assamese tenants to a great extent. Besides, the patron-client relationship often gave a feeling of security to the tenant against all other odds. Some tenants preferred security in bondage to freedom with insecurity. Our enquiry shows that the extra-economic coercion was much higher in the *Nisf-khiraj* or *La-khiraj* lands. In Bhogdani lands (land provided for the idol, bhog offering) the adhiars paid *bhog* in kind instead of cash rent apart from other customary services required by the religious institution.²

1. Ibid., p.5.

2. Report, Revenue Settlement, Kamrup; p.12.

In 'Dharmottar', 'Paikan', 'Pirpal'¹ land if the adhiar didn't pay their customary services, they had to pay the other half of the revenue to the funds of the temple, satra or mosque. These religious institutions had started realising full government rents by 1920s. This excess revenue was collected on various pretext i.e. seva (customary services), puja (ritual), higher local rates, costs of rent receipts, grazing fees etc. New adhiars had other obligations, too.² They had to pay *Salami* or *mukhchowani* - a kind of tribute to retain the land at least for the next cultivating season.

The form of *chukti-adhi* which was most prevalent often pushed the adhiars more or less to the verge of subsistence level or below it. The fact that Kamrup being more prone to a crop failure, as discussed earlier, the *chukti-adhi* form seemed to be an added burden on the adhiar. Again, when it was a case of *guti-adhi*, the landowner would be present in the field during the harvesting season and retain the good quality crops for himself leaving the

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1. Different categories of land owned by temples or monasteries.
 2. This was true for Khiraj land. Evidence to this account was corroborated from narratives of "Pita-Putra", an Assamese novel set in the context of socio-economic scenario of Assam of the period 1940-50. See, Homen Borgohain, Pita-Putra, Guwahati 1977.

inferior crops to the adhiar.¹

A few other sets of evidences² help us to understand the landholding pattern of the district in some details. We can know the size of landholding pattern of the owner-cultivators or the adhiars in different parts of the district from these sets of data. Thus, the 1951 census report informs that 80 p.c. of the total population of the district belonged to the agricultural population³ as compared to 72 p.c. of the Assam plains. Moreover, it shows that 20 p.c. of this total population belonged to either adhiars or agricultural labourers. The percentage of the total number of adhiars cultivators was also higher than the Assam plains percentage of 14 which was 18%. These data also suggest that the Gauhati rural area mostly comprising Beltola mauza had the maximum landless population. Because of the large scale landlessness, there was a greater tendency for sub-tenancy in this area. In the Beltola Mauza, in some of the villages, the maximum

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1. Suren Hazarika : Asmar Bhumi Sanskar Congress Sarkarar Dara Sambhavne In Natun Prithvi - November, 1972; p.74.
 2. Census Report, India, District Handbook Kamrup, 1951 Table-I-c.
 3. Census Report 1951, Vol. XII, Part I-B/Subsidiary Table 4.2.

number of people were adhiars.¹ The enquiry also shows that fragmented or small size landholding was the dominant feature of the landholding system. It also shows that land held under rent was not also large. Only 56 p.c. of the total cultivating agricultural population rented land below 1 bigha, 33 p.c. rented land between 1-10 bighas, 10 p.c. took between 11-30 bighas and only a mere 1 p.c. taking land above 31 bighas.

There were a substantial number of agricultural labourers who were virtually landless in the district. According to the 1951 census, this figure amounted to 19,442. Though the figure showed a mere 2 p.c. of the total agricultural population, in actual practice, the number could be more. In the last decade of the 19th century, this percentage was 0.84 of the total agricultural population in the Assam plains. There was a section of adhiar who substantiated their income by resorting to part-time agricultural labourer. The agricultural labour may be divided into three forms - mutual cooperation, bonded labour and wage labour.² The widely practised form of mutual cooperation was a form of village collectivity.

1. Borsajai, Saokuchi, Udalbakra, Sarumatria were the villages where all the population were adhiars.
2. Guha : Society, Polity, Economy; p.247.

The peasants usually resorted to this kind of practice only when "household labour was not enough for timely completion of harvesting or sowing operation or for house building." In a custom bound society, the co-peasants were bound to render their help and in return entertained with a "sumptuous feed". On the other hand, a certain section of landowner who were customarily debarred from "putting their hand to the plough or shouldering a load" practised *Morkia* system to get their land ploughed. The section of the peasants who had in possession a few amount of land but no cattle usually secured a loan of cattle from this section of the land owners on condition that "for each day's use of cattle on his land, he had to work two days on the land of the owner on the cattle". The Brahmins, Kayasthas among Hindus and Khalifas among Muslims were these group of people. Officially, it was reported that "it was getting difficult to secure persons prepared to work on the *Morkia* system." It cannot be ascertained why this system was becoming less in number. It may be assumed that such lands were converted into sub-tenancy. But, the small landowner who did not have any cattle or agricultural tools had a strong tendency to work on this system. Sometimes, the land held in sub-tenancy were taken back and cultivated by the landowner himself. He managed his cultivation by

keeping *bandhas* (farm servants).¹ The 19th Century scenario was that labour force was scarce and wage rates for free agricultural labour were comparatively high. While bonded male labour was used for ploughing - a masculine job, it was female wage labour which was needed for sowing, transplantation, paddy-husking and largely also for harvesting operations, as well. However, the gradual influx of immigrants also provided for cheap agricultural labour. Petty landowners began to engage section of agricultural labour leaving aside a space for discontentment among the indigenous labourers. Again, the argument that "all those who took up wage work did so on a casual basis" did not justify even the existing official data. A set of data shows that among the indigenous population in the district of Kamrup, there were 27,534 numbers of families, who were virtually landless.² Again, we have suggested that six to ten acres of land holding could only allow a peasant family just to live on a

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1. The system has been discussed elsewhere. See: A. Guha: *Society, Polity, Economy*. Rajen Saikia: *Study of the Socio-Economic Condition in Assam Under the British (1853-1921)*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Delhi University, 1993, pp. 391-399. Nandita Khadria: *Some Aspects of the Rural Economy of Assam : a study of the Brahmaputra valley districts 1874-1914*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1992
 2. Census Report, India 1951. District census Hand Book-Kamrup Table-2A.

subsistence level. In 1922, while preparing the budget of an ordinary cultivator,¹ it was estimated that a cultivator having 20 bighas (approximately 6 acres) may be regarded as a subsistence family. The economic depression of 1930s had worsened the situation. The impact of flood and draught was also increasing. The re-settlement of 1928 had increased the revenue demand by 22.42 percentage for the established group and 18.02 percentage for the fluctuating group.² So, we may suggest that most of the adhiars in Kamrup were below the subsistence level. The situation was far worse in the distant villages where the peasants were likely to get less price for produce.

The peasants were subjected to a kind of market force which was more influenced by the Marwari business men and the money lenders. Because of undeveloped communication, the trade was mostly confined to the village hats. These 'hats' were usually weekly and there was only brisk trading. Trade was practically in the hands of Marwaris. They might be the local shopkeepers or established traders in the areas adjacent to Gauhati. At Palashbari, Chayagaon area these shopkeepers were most visible with establishment

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1. Assam Secretariat Proceedings: Revenue Department, Revenue-A, June 1921, no.28, p. 27.
 2. Report, Revenue Settlement Kamrup; Table 5, p. 51.

in few villages Amtola, Nahira and Kaimari. There were local shopkeepers but only those of Palashbari area had any significant presence. Hats had a significant importance in the local economy. Goods produced in the household were sold out in these markets. "There are numerous markets all over the group which are held once or twice a week and afford the people an easy means of disposing of their surplus produce".¹ In the south Bank of Brahmaputra, Palashbari was the principal centre of trade. There were also markets at Chayagaon, Boko, Singra, Dhupdhora, Halim (in the South Bank) at Beltola and Sonapur. The price in these markets was regulated by the market at Gauhati and according to the distance of the place of sale from the town, "a distance of 10 to 12 miles means a difference in price of 2 to 3 annas a maund".²

Almost every produce came into the market. Paddy and husked rice was the primary good. Betel-nuts were largely exported from Palashbari. Jute was also exported to Bengal. Rice was also purchased in fairly large quantities by the Garos in the hats on the Boko side. They in turn bring down lac, pan and vegetables. Besides, there is a trade in pulses, eri and muga cocoons and cloths. Jute was -----

1. South Bank Group Assessment Report, p.6.

2. Ibid, p.6.

yet to be accorded a principal cash crop. The East Bengal immigrants were mainly engaged in this crop. Another important crop mustard was also marketed. However, apart from paddy, other crops were produced rather as a garden produce. The re-settlement report of 1928 mentioned that out of total estimated and valued gross produce of the total area settled for ordinary cultivation in Kamrup district, paddy occupied 74%, Mustard 24%, Jute 7% and sugarcane 8%.¹

The North Bank had some other advantages. The opening of the railway about the year 1910 reoriented the economic forces operating within the area. The areas of production were now more closely tied to outside market forces. The seasonal and irregular river communication was regularised by the railway service. Nearly every railway station had now a nearby hat and permanent business establishment sprang up with a few bazaars. Rice and mustard mills were started in Rangia, Tihu and Nalbari. The East Bengal immigrants who were settled in the North Bank primarily produced mainly non-food crop and made them dependents on the hats for obtaining their necessities. "Accordingly where there was practically no hats before, a dozen sprang

1. Report Revenue Settlement Kamrup; p.14.

up....".¹ The immigrants settlers hold a smaller area and mainly in the chapori areas only. Rather they found it more convenient to engage in non-food production as intensive cultivation. Undeveloped communication and distance from main trading centres led to a development of a chain of intermediaries between the peasant (primary producer) and the trader. The railways, country boats and steamer boats in the North Bank reduced this gap and helped in the elimination of middlemen to a considerable extent. In the South Bank, the local Marwaris purchased the produce in the hats and exported it to Palashbari or Guwahati. The export trade was mainly in the hands of Marwari merchants of Guwahati and Palashbari. In the North Bank, in Barpeta and Sualkuchi and Ramdia, the local people also monopolized the trade. Traders from Bengal sometimes came to Kukurmara in Chayagaon by the Kulsi river to Palashbari by the Brahmaputra. The Guwahati merchants exported the collected produce either to Upper Assam or Shillong.

The peasants had to sell either to procure some necessities ranging from salt or to sell off the debt or to pay land revenue. They had to borrow money from moneylender before harvesting on an agreement where he agreed to sell off his produce to the moneylender-trader at

1. Ibid; p.16.

a price which would be maximum low compared to the market price. Constraints of monetary debt, distance factor, typical nature of the hat always put the peasants in the margin. Though improved communication had reduced the gap between the producer and the merchant, "the producer knew little about the market value".¹ The spasmodic demand also caused the producers a lot of hindrance. Sometimes the Marwaris or the local traders in the North Bank would visit the villages in cart and purchase the produce at a very cheap rate. The tribal population in the distant villages were forced to different kind of expropriation by the merchants, in some cases they maintained their monopoly. In the neighbouring district of Goalpara, Buccannon reported how these traders cheated the tribal producers. The trader would monopolise the salt trade in particular distant villages and established the *gola* (retail shop). When the market price of salt was Rs.5.50 per maund in the Goalpara town, these traders sold it to the Garo peasants at a rate of Rs.8/- per maund which was adulterated with dust. They exchanged this salt per maund with 3 maund unprocessed cotton.² As the South Bank was more inaccessible due to lack of improved communications, the

1. Report, Revenue Settlement Kamrup, p.14.

2. Amalendu Guha : Zamindarikalin Goalpara Zillar Artha-Samajik Abastha. Goalpara; p.30.

producers were subjected to minimum price compared to the North Bank, the prices here were less subjected to outside market. The railway traverses only the South Bank between Pandughat and Gauhati. Close connection by feeder roads and railways had influenced the price market of Calcutta in the North Bank. The Eastern Bengal Railway had increased the importance of some of the existing trade centres and had called new ones into being - Nalbari and Rangia in the group. Sorbhog, Pathsala, Tihu and Goreswar had become depots for collecting and exporting produce.¹

The Economic Depression (1930s)

In the wake of world depression of the 1930s, produce prices began to fall drastically. "The export of primary produce didn't consequently fall as much in terms of volume as the trade in manufacture, but continued to be sold at drastically reduced prices".² The prices of jute, rice and oilseeds in neighbouring Bengal reached the lowest point

1. Assam Secretariat Proceedings : Revenue Department; Revenue-A/June, 1921; p.20.
 2. Sugata Bose discussed the intricacy of transition of world depression into the Bengal agrarian economy; p.64-67; Sugata Bose : Agrarian Bengal, Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-47, Cambridge, 1986.
- A. Cooper discusses the effects of world depression in the Bengal agrarian economy; p.37 - In Adrienne Cooper : Sharecropping and Sharecroppers struggles in Bengal 1930-1950; Delhi 1988.

between 1932-34 and remained quite low until 1937-38. Internal demand did not slacken during the depression years and the internal supply bore no significant correlation with price. We don't have a clear picture of volume of trade done on agricultural produce in the period under discussion. But it was observed that both trade in import and export on rice was fluctuating depending upon the harvest surpluses and deficiencies.¹ In fact, a substantial portion of rice was imported including the Burma rice.

Accentuated by continuous crop failure either due to draught or flood and recurring cattle disease aggravated the situation arising out of drastic fall in the prices. By 1926, there was fall in the prices of rice and mustard.² By 1931, the price fall for these two crops was 52% and 56% from the prices of 1926. During this period, the peasants suffered heavily. By the last part of 1932, it was reported that "the economic condition of the people is at present extremely poor. We are having great difficulty in collecting land revenue and land - when it gets a bid at

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1. Nandita Khadria : Some Aspects; p.467. She discusses the changes in the agrarian sector in the colonial context.
 2. Prepared from Table 21 in P.C. Goswami, The Economic Development of Assam, Bombay, 1963, p.298.

all - sells for practically nothing."¹

".....The resources of the raiyat are gradually being weakened; he has not got many reserves behind him and poorer classes of the villagers are now unable to meet this land revenue demand. Mauzadars accounts show that the revenue in very many cases is being paid in annas at a time, and petitions for *Maf* (remission) are frequently received by post and on tour".²

In September 1932, Assam Government had announced a temporary reduction of land revenue three anna per rupee of fully assessed area "in view of the low prices of agricultural produce prevailing during the last few years."³ It was also decided that "it would be impolite and unfair to give a concession to nisf-khiraj holders who already enjoy substantial privileges and it was held that any concession in this direction would mean giving concession to many other privileged holders as well."⁴

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1. C.S. Mullan, Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A; December 1933; p.14.
 2. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, December 1933, p.14.
 3. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A; December no. 6-36, p. 9.
 4. Ibid., p. 9.

Depression had led to extreme money scarcity. The value of either crops or lands were extremely low for a long period (1930-38). The official report for 1938 mentioned of the "continuing money scarcity and low value of land and crop". The moneylenders were unwilling to advance loans partly because "even the honest debtors cannot make payments regularly owing to the prevailing scarcity of money."¹ However, the emerging group of absentee landowners comprised of the government servants, saw a profitable trade in the growing land market. The peasants were forced to sell off their land to pay the revenue and to meet with their necessity. "During the depression period land was handed over to the non-agriculturist section by the peasants."² This large scale transfer of land had distinctly increased the number of peasants living as adhiars. The following table³ would give a fair idea about the amount of land that were transferred to the non-agriculturist section.

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1. Assam Land Revenue Administration Report 1935-36, p. 2.
 2. Assamiya (Dainik) 15th August 1947.
 3. Prepared from Annual Assam Land Revenue Administration Reports, 1928-29 to 1932-33.

Year	Land Transferred (in acres)
1928-29	19,085
1929-30	20,502
1930-31	22,742
1931-32	24,457
1932-33	27,052

These lands were acquired either by private arrangements or directly from the villagers. However, it does not include the lands which were not formally transferred to the moneylender's name and such cases were quite frequent.¹ The land procured in this process would be allowed to be ploughed by the tenant or he would sell it at the earliest opportunity to some one who will pay a fair price. However, in the case of the village moneylender would prefer to have the land.

Moneylenders

Moneylending had reached a very acute proportions and "the number of moneylenders was much higher than the all India average". The 1891 census has shown the highest proportion of moneylender in the district of Kamrup compared to the other district in the Assam plain. Out of

 1. Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report Vol. I p. 157.

a total 1,793 money lenders, Kamrup shared a significantly higher proportion of 65%. This strength is of great underestimation as the entire category of merchant moneylenders were not put into this category. Moreover, in most of the cases, village "well-to-do" cultivators also lent money. The number of moneylenders compared to the total population showed a higher proportion even in the late 19th century. Compared to an all India figure of 1:367, Assam proper showed the ratio of moneylenders vis-a-vis the total population to be roughly 2 per 100 which is a remarkably higher number.¹ Considering the fact that the Assam proper had never witnessed considerable money supply, "there was a regular situation where it was felt that there was money scarcity" and as the "indebtedness was increasing considerably", this ratio could be still higher. The 1901 census gives the number of moneylender 2,935.²

Moneylending being so intricate to peasant farming various social groups found their way to lend money to the peasants. The village Mahajan was the traditional

1. Aditya Mukherjee "Agrarian conditions in Assam 1880-1890 : a case study of five districts in the Brahmaputra Valley" in Indian Economic and Social History Review, vol.16, April-June 1979 (hereafter A. Mukherjee : Agrarian conditions) p.216.
2. Census Report India, 1951, part.XII Table XV; p.148.

moneylending source in the village.¹ He may be a rich peasant apart from his other source of income. The Marwari buyer of the produce² also acted as the most usual moneylender. Moreover, in the distant places, the Marwari shopkeeper who was the moneylender too came to an agreement with the producer to sell his produce at a rate the moneylender wished during the harvesting or reaping season. Sometimes, this price might be much more lower than the existing market price.

It was also noticed that though the Marwari or produce merchant trader wants the crop, he might behave in a different manner when situation demands. ".....Where, the borrower is unable to pay from the proceeds of the crops and from any other source, the Mahajan will take the land because he can get nothing".³ The land acquired in this process might be an added property to the moneylender which he would allow to be ploughed by the former lease holder. The argument that the Kayas or the Marwari moneylenders usually didn't acquire land seems to be inadequate and need further enquiry and explanations. The

1. Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report
Vol.1; p.51.

2. Ibid., p.51.

3. Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report
Vol.(1), p.51.

common explanation is that "the Marwari Kaya being a foreigner to the province, was not interested in making any investments which he couldn't carry back home".¹ However, the large profits that he was making from the trade monopoly, moneylending wouldn't force him to leave the place so immediately. In the adjoining Darang district, we found the evidence of Haribilash Agarwalla, the Marwari trader-businessman who established an important business house with 60 numbers of shops throughout Assam.² This family contributed widely to the Assamese society which was well received by the Assamese elite. Gradually the apparent socio-cultural gap between these two communities was minimized to a negligible extent. And this minimal level of antagonism worked well again in wiping out the notion of Marwari shopkeeper as outsider and accommodating him in the socio-cultural set up. However, this antagonism was much more visible in the case of Bengali community.³

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1. A. Mukherjee : Agrarian conditions, p.217.
 2. S.N. Sarma (ed.) Jyoti Prasad Rachnawalli; Gauhati 1981; p.923-927.
 3. This has been discussed elsewhere. See Prafulla Mahanta : Assamiya Madyabitta Shreeneer Itihas, Gauhati 1991, Manorama Sarma Barua : Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony. Delhi 1992; Tilottama Mishra : Literature and Society in Assam - A study of the Assam Renaissance 1826-1926, Delhi 1987.

The advantageous position that the Marwari trader-cum-moneylender had with the outside market gave him a sound position to control the market too. Heavy fall in the agricultural prices during the 'depression' increased the agricultural indebtedness. The peasant debtor had virtually no legislative protection against usurious practices. The Central Legislative Protection Act, 1918 was hardly in use. The Royal Commission of Agriculture noted "...the Act is practically a dead letter in all provinces".¹ It was also noticed that the creditors also didn't move the court as were unlikely to get any repayment when they were charging exorbitant rates of interest. This was followed by the extra legal means to recollect the debt amount. The Assam Moneylenders Act, 1934 forbidden the charging of compound interest and the rate of simple interest was limited to 12½ p.c. on secured loans and 18 3/4 p.c. on unsecured loans. This was followed by formation of Assam Debt Conciliation Act. A debt conciliation board was set up in South Kamrup in 1937-38.²

1. Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report, Vol. (1), p.158.

2. Annual Land Revenue Administration Report : 1937-38.

New Tensions

The Assamese peasant society was brought into contact with a complex processes of agrarian tension which left a major impact on the political horizon of Assam. It was more accentuated by the government policy of colonization schemes which sought to open out vast tracts of waste land area for the immigrant peasants.¹ During the period 1930-50, a total 15,088 thousand acres of land were settled for the immigrant peasants.² By the 1930s, the Kamrup was opened out for the immigration of the different groups of peasants and non-agriculturist group, which comprised of ex-tea garden coolies, tea garden coolies, Nepali grazers, peasant groups from United Provinces and the East Bengal peasants. The following table will show the area of land held by the non-Assamese cultivators in Kamrup during the period 1935-37 -³

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1. The colonisation scheme has been discussed in detail elsewhere. See Guha : Planters Raj to Swaraj; p.208-209.
 2. Census Report India, 1951 Part I-A/Table 1.24, p.76.
 3. Prepared from Assam Land Revenue Administration Reports 1935-36 and 1936-37.

	Land held in acre	
	1935-36	1936-37
Ex-tea garden coolies	11,497	12,239
Marwaris	5,698	5,928
Tea garden clerks	3,945	4,122
Peasants from East Bengal, United Provinces	1,70,353	1,76,819
Nepalis	10,604	10,625

This large scale land settlement with the non-Assamese agricultural groups brought several levels of conflicts. There was increasing local conflicts over the question of grazing rights between the indigenous Assamese peasants and the immigrant peasants. Traditionally, the indigenous Assamese peasants used to graze their cattle on the village grazing fields or neighbouring forests. Fodder crops were hardly grown on peasants own land. As the British colonial government introduced grazing fees at the rate of 8 annas per annum per head of buffaloes and 4 annas per head of cows in 1888, the peasants rights over grazing field were gradually encroached upon. Initially, though an insignificant source of government revenue, the grazing fees were indeed an expanding source of revenue because of a steady rise in the immigration of Nepali and other graziers into the district. The increasing settlement of Nepali and immigrants in the Chapori area decreased the

grazing area. Peasants resented not only against the grazing fees but also against the arbitrary and harassing ways of their collection for which there was no relief in the civil law courts.

Encroachment on the lands of the Assamese peasants were becoming a matter of serious concern. "A large number of complaints nonetheless poured into the district magistrate's office about encroachment on lands earmarked for the local Assamese people".¹ The revenue officials were also legitimizing such encroachment by indulging in corruption. Subletting of lands to immigrants and employing them as agricultural labourers by local people became very evident. Both the immigrant peasants and the colonial administration and the local interest groups were compatible to each other for various reasons. The immigrant peasants could offer higher and lucrative land prices attracting many Assamese peasants to sell out portions of their holdings. Local Marwari and even Assamese moneylenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, pulses and vegetables which could fetch more money. Such impact was more visible in the Barpeta sub-division of the district. People started believing that immigrant had

1. Guha : Planters Raj to Swaraj, p.207.

led to all round prosperity in Barpeta town.¹ Many Assamese farmers had turned into land speculators. They sold off their² lands to immigrants at a good price.

The adhiars were also losing their lands as the landowners now preferred the immigrants. This preference was largely because of the immigrants skill in cash crop production. "An Assamese person in Botahgolia mauza in Nalbari (in North Bank of Kamrup) had sold out most of his lands to almost 100 East Bengal immigrant peasants on a salami amount in spite of the protest from the local people. The Assamese adhiars on his lands were evicted".³ It was not only process of losing lands by the Assamese adhiars but suggestive of two peasant communities coming into conflict. "The immigrants are seen spreading vandalism (in the Assamese villages). The recent dacoities in the villages seemed to be the work of immigrants. A local rich mahajan received a threatening letter written in the colloquial Bengali. The incidences of housebreaking were also increasing".⁴

1. Evidence of Jagnath Bujar Baruah before Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report, Vol.(2), p.508.

2. Ibid., p.517.

3. Reported in Assamiya (Dainik) - 29th April, 1948.

4. Reported in Assamiya (Dainik) - 31st March, 1948.

Thus, our enquiry has shown that the peasant society in Kamrup was integrated into a complex arena of conflicts. At many times, the tension that was growing between the adhiars and the landowners was subsided by the apparent tension arising out of the immigrants problem.¹

The adhiars in the La-khiraj and Nisf-khiraj lands held by the religious institutions had often tried to free themselves from the clutches of the latter. We have evidence which shows that the religious institutions were trying to re-assert their authority, often with the government support to carry on their exploitative venture. The *dolois* (temple officials) of temple lands in the Kamrup which were situated more or less in Nisf-khiraj or La-khiraj land were demanding more power to realize arrears due to the temples.² The temple lands were usually given away to the adhiars. A few 'dolois' submitted a petition to the Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup in which they appealed that they may be empowered "to attach property in order to enable them to realize rents due to the temples".³ In the

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1. However, the question why the adhiars inspite of losing their land to the immigrants joined hands with the landowners needs more enquiry and discussion.
 2. Assam Secretariat Proceedings - Revenue Department/June 1922, no.41, p.1.
 3. Ibid., p.1.

petition they expressed their inability to extract the rent as the tenants knowing that the legal coercive steps weren't enforceable against didn't make any payments. In Khiraj area, the Mauzadars were empowered with extra measures to realize the revenue.¹ In their petition, the dolois of the temples mentioned that "they have to pay government for the Nisf-khiraj land one half of the revenue assessable for similar khiraj lands at the local rate of 3 annas per rupee on the amount of the revenue and for the La-khiraj land they have to pay only local rate at 4 annas per rupee on the amount of land revenue assessable for similar Khiraj lands".² But considering the fact that the adhiars' "rents are several hundred per cent higher than the land revenue taken by government,³ they were left with no other way but to live in the subsistence level. The estates failed to return the revenue payable to the government. There was lot of resentment among the tenants settled in the temple lands. In the early party of 1948 "Kamrup Devaloy Ryot Sabha" was formed.⁴ The dolois were becoming an institution of extra-economic coercion in spite

1. Ibid., p.5.

2. Ibid, p.4.

3. Assam Secretariat Proceedings:Revenue Department, Revenue-A, June 1921, no.17, p.9.

4. Reported in Assamiya (Dainik), 24 May 1948.

of their failure to return the revenue arrears, the dolois had taken 'Salami', 'Baha Kharas' (camp expenditure), receipt expenditure. Another significant feature was that in the pre-British times, the tenants, paik and deuri all had a voice and democratic participation in the temple management. However, gradually this right was taken over by the *Bor-Deuris* (senior temple official).¹

This discussion has shown that the peasant society in Kamrup bound in an enclave agrarian economy had rendered its lowest section into the worst possible misery. The undeveloped agrarian economy was made much more vulnerable to the outside market forces and the immigrant peasant economy. Subsequently, the incidence of sharecropping was increasing mostly in South Kamrup along with the simultaneous growth of absentee landownership. The tribal peasants were affected highly by the growth of sharecropping. In the following chapters we will discuss how these issues pertaining to the peasant society were taken by the RCPI.

1. Ibid., 24 May, 1948.

CHAPTER II

THE RCPI AND ADHIAR'S MOVEMENT - 1945-C.1948

In the light of the previous chapter, we can safely assume the growing tension between the adhiars and the landowners in the district of Kamrup. Though the incidence of share-cropping was quite uneven and regulated by specific socio-cultural relation, the scenario was deteriorating in the 1940s. The village and urban elites had managed to consolidate their position in the roles of landowner cum moneylender. In this chapter an attempt will be made to locate RCPI's endeavour to appropriate the growing tension among the agrarian population to consolidate its position in the political tradition of Assam. More specifically, we will emphasise on the nature of issues the Party was addressing, the nature of mobilisation and finally its impact on the larger tradition of peasant movement of Assam. The new threats which were welded into existing tension of the agrarian population are also described. The existing sources do not allow us to review the period in a chronological order and in detail. Finally, it is said that the *adhiar* movement helped consolidate the position of RCPI which compelled the provincial Congress politics to concede to the demands of *adhiars*.

The Adhiars and the Congress

The provincial Congress had hardly shown any interest into the problems of the *adhiars*. The economic depression of the 1930s and the civil disobedience movement had channelised the peasants discontent into a new direction. "...local peasant organisations were either newly started or re-activised during this period with such demands as reduction and remission of land revenue, distribution of agricultural loans, abolition of cart-tax and the like.."1 To consolidate these local movements the All Assam Ryot Sabha was formed on the basis of mauza, district etc. in 1933. Local congressmen and other rural elites formed the main chunk of the *ryot-sabhas* through participation of the peasants was much higher. However, the *ryot-sabhas* did not address the problems of the *adhiars*, rather worked as a local unit of Congress. The tribal peasants were also left out of the fold of the *ryot-sabhas*. Outside the Congress leadership, in 1932-33 Kamrup district had witnessed the agitation of the *adhiars*. They demanded "for the grant of occupancy rights through suitable legislation." Governor-in-Council also received a mass petition signed by 2,000 tenants of Kamrup for legislative redress of their

1. Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, P.181-182.

grievances."In response to the agitation, the Council recommended tenancy legislation for all temporary settled areas on 21 March, 1933".¹ In the legislation Council, the Congress was primarily concerned in the re-settlement operation in the temporarily-settled areas and the demand for reduced land revenue rates. The issues relating to the tension between landowners, usurious moneylending and the *adhiars* hardly came into discussion. "Congress-Swarajists were not all enthusiastic about legislation in these fields".² The new bills regarding these issues that were passed in the Legislative Council were to subside the discontent of the peasants only. The Assam government introduced "The Assam (Temporarily-settled districts) Tenancy Bill" in 1934 but attracted severe criticism from the landowners. "The landlord-dominated Select Committee .. voted 6 to 5 to exclude all districts except Kamrup from the scope of the view to reduce it to nullity". The government refused to proceed with the 'truncated bill', but in June, 1935 it passed bill. The Act came into force in 1937.³ The Legislative Council also passed the Assam moneylenders Act in 1934 forbidding the charging of

1. Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, p.183.

2. Ibid., p.194.

3. Guha : Planters Raj to Swaraj, p.194.

compound interest and $18\frac{3}{4}$ per cent on unsecured loans. In 1936, the Assam Debt Conciliation Act was passed.¹ But these legislative exercises did not bring any positive relief to the problems faced by the Adhiars.

In the new Legislative Assembly, a few Congress Legislators raised voice regarding the tension in the agrarian society. Issues were raised faced by the peasants living in the forest villages² and the deteriorating agrarian condition of the majority of the agrarian population.³ More interest was shown in the issue of land revenue reduction,⁴ where the small landowners were mostly affected. In the wake of new administrative measures regarding line system and colonisation schemes, articulation of a 'closed and coherent Assamese Society' became more prominent. Congress legislatures asserted the need to safeguard Assamese peasant's socio-economic identity. More stress was given to the "identity of the Assamese peasants". Still, the *adhiars* and other landless

1. Ibid : p.194.

2. Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (Hereafter ALA) Vol.III, 1937, p.2426.

3. Speech given by Kameswar Das, ALA., Vol.II/ P.1396-1398./1937.

4. Speech given by Haldhar Bhuyan, ALA., Vol.III/ 1937/ p.2614.

agricultural population did not come under primary focus of the Congress politics. The tribal agrarian population comprised the majority of the *adhiars* in the district and they were left out of the Congress politics. The superior social identity of the landowner dominating the Congress did act as an obstacle to bring the two groups into close relation.

Thus, within the provincial Congress mobilization and ongoing national movement, there was attempt to appropriate the peasant discontent but due to the failure of Congress to show serious interest into the problems of the *adhiars* paved the way for the emergence of an alternative political tradition. In this new social environment, the RCPI tried to consolidate it as a new political tradition who could cater to the discontents of students, workers and peasants.

Formation of Krishak Banua Panchayat (KBP)

The need to mobilise the peasants was felt by the newly formed RCPI.¹ Trained in radical left politics, these RCPI activists, dissatisfied in the growing insensitivity of the provincial Congress to the deteriorating agrarian condition inspired them to come with

1. See, Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj.*, p.219.

new agenda for the agrarian population. As we have already seen, severe economic depression caused a lot of hardship to the peasant society. Large-scale land alienation and subsequent growth of absentee landownership had a complex impact on the rural society. There was appeal on the part of the peasants to the government for redressal of their grievances.¹ After its formation, the RCPI came into close contact with the peasants of Palasbari mauza and tried to articulate their various grievances. They were also engaged in mobilization of the various unorganised labour groups. A few labour population from Guwahati based rice and oil mills, the drivers of the horse-ridden carts and the wage-labourers of the boats were mobilized and showed its presence. The krishak Banua Panchayat conceived of the Party's attempt to mobilise the peasants vis-a-vis the Congress Politics.² The ideas of the newly formed KBP was taken into the various parts of South Kamrup and with the support of local cadres local KBP units were formed. Though most of the party activists studied in the Cotton College - an elite educational institution of that time - they had

1. Hari Das Deka: Jiban Aru Sangam [Lawyers' Book Stall, Guwahati, 1992] p.33 [hereafter H.Deka: Jiban]
2. Initially it was known as Krishak Banua Party. Hari Das Deka who was a member of the first executive committee mentioned 2 May, 1940 as the date of formation. kedar-nath Goswami and Upen Sarma won the President and Secretary of KBP respectively.

close links with the rural society. Some of them were victims of economic depression.

The 'nature of British rule in India, the nature of Congress were explained to the peasants.' "We explained to them about the political situation, the Imperialist war, the formation of socialist labour-peasant party and its aims and objective".¹ Discussions were held and the audiences were hinted upon about the failure of government to do justice to them. The KBP activists would visit the villages in a group of 3 to 4 members with 'political literatures' meeting the villagers. Local youths were recruited and they were requested to talk to the fellow villagers about the aim and objective of KBP.

"The KBP began to address the issue like, land for landless cultivators in the forest or other wasteland areas; the reduce the amount of paddy to be given to the landowners by the adhiars to prevent the eviction of ryots.."² The rural scene in the South Kamrup was highly vulnerable to those problems. Landlessness was acute in the entire district. Almost 28,000 families were virtually landless by the end of 1950s as we have discussed earlier.

1. H. Deka: Jiban p.36.

2. H. Deka : Jiban, p.36.

KBP as an alternative platform where the local grievances could be articulated was soon becoming attractive to the peasants. The KBP gave substantial attention to local problems and tried to establish its presence.

The KBP took out a procession of 'thousand ryots' into the deputy commissioners office demanding land.¹ Most of the participants - "carrying red flags" - were landless peasants. Peasants from Boko, Chayagaon, Palasbari joined in that procession.² Most of them became landless due to the erosion in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The Land Revenue Administration and Settlement reports and news paper carried reports regarding frequent land erosion in these areas. The concerned deputy commissioner reportedly had agreed to give land settlement in one Sialmari reserve. The other reference, we have, was about the resistance of the peasants to the district authorities.³ Known as '*Dusuti Mukhar Andolon*', the movement took place in the Southern villages of Uppar Barbhag mauza. Here, the local

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1. Interview with Gobinda Kalita; 18.6.95/ Kamala Majumdar 19.06.95. In H. Deka : Jiban p.36. They claimed that the mobilisation of 29 October, 1941 was the first large peasant gathering in the district.
 2. Interview with Govinda Kalita, 18.06.95 Guwahati.
 3. Mentioned in Tarun Deka : Mukti Sangramar Adharat Jiban Katha (R.D. Publishers, 1993). H. Deka: Jiban: P.41. [hereafter T.S. Deka, p.43, Mukti]

peasants with KBP successfully resisted the intervention of the district authority while the latter attempted to do away with the local bridge to a boat contractor. Initially, the local peasants appealed to the district authority through a petition but as the latter did not pay any heed to it, they collectively resisted and succeeded in their attempt. Villagers from the neighbouring villages also came and remained with the resisting peasants.

Thus the party was taking the KBP close into the peasant discontents. Peasants were reminded of their right and its gradual erosion due to the interference of the district administration and the government. As the authority had conceded to the demands of the peasants it also legitimised the very notion of the peasant movement.

However, the party was yet to adopt a concrete agenda about the peasant problem till 1945. They were yet to dissociate from the Congress politics and the issues that had been discussed were wide. The KBP had engaged itself in bringing out procession and making appeal to the district authorities for redressal of peasant's grievances. They were intensifying the anti-Congress propaganda alleging the latter for their failure to bring redressal that were articulated. A reported peasant procession in Gauhati on 25th July, 1945 did incorporate wide range of issues and

were still without a clear orientation about what to do.¹

"On 25th July, .. about 200 peasants of Palashbari, Batarhat and Bhongaripara of the South Bank of this district came to Gauhati in a procession under the leadership of Hari Das Deka, Tarun Sen Deka...They passed through the main streets of the town with slogan and subsequently assembled in the Jubilee garden with a view to represent the following grievances before the D.C. Kamrup:

(a) Inadequate supply of food stuffs, cloths and yams (b) Hardship caused to the people due to taxation on tobacco betel nuts, (c) Want of land for cultivation for the landless people, (d) Need of maintaining the line system for the interests of the people of the province. (e) Immediate release of political prisoners and withdrawal of restriction orders. The Deputy commissioner had assured them of administrative redressal regarding scarcity of essential commodities but on the issue of land they were advised to 'apply through the proper channel. The peasants discussed the matters among themselves and went back.

1. File No.154/1945. Political History o Assam (here after PHA) Assam State Archives, Dispur. The materials in PHA files contain documents collected up to 15th November, 1955 by Regional committee for Assam Compilation of History of the Freedom Movement in Assam. This collection includes select extracts of Assam Police Intelligence Abstracts.

This was the phase when the party was consolidating among the peasants vis-a-vis the congress. The issues that were causing hardship to the peasants were immediately addressed by the party and tried to legitimise its distinct identity. Rather than concentrating on 'international issues', those RCPI activists took them more deep into the complex dynamics of peasant society. In the wake of Bengal famine (1943-44), blackmarketing and hoarding of paddy had increased local peasants economic grievances. They were deprived of a fair market. 'Bad Weather' and floods were also quoted by the Government as causing hardship to peasants.¹ Different parts of the district reported a situation tantamount to famine.² The KBP come out with definite agenda of anti-Government propaganda for its "anti-people" policies. Narrating the party's position it said, "Considering the economic condition of Assam, we appealed to the *raij* (people) not to sell paddy to any traders and asked the traders not to purchase paddy for export purpose. To implement this appeal, in many places we engaged volunteers. In the meantime, we had identified

1. Files containing Provincial Fortnightly reports from State Chief Secretary were seen (National Archives of India, Delhi). See Home Political (Foreign) 18/2/1946 FR(1) Poll(I); 18/2/1946 FR (ii) Poll (I); 18/4/1946 FR (1) Poll (1); 18/3/1947 FR (II) Poll (1).
2. Speech given by Kameswar Das. ALA Vol.II.1937, p.1396-1398.

those houses who had enough rice in their granaries. Keeping the reasonable rice sufficient for the family, the surplus was taken away and sold it to the poverty stricken people at cheap price. The money was given to the owners-family. We also sieged the carts of rice-traders and the boats carrying rice - The sieged rice was sold to the people and money was given back to the cart and boat owners."¹ The Government sources noted that RCPI was appealing to the peasants not to 'bear with the congress but they should hoard paddy and shouldn't sell it to the military or any Government agents."² Thus, the KBP was welding itself into the tension that was prevailing among the agrarian population the district.

The KBP and the *Adhiars* : 1945-48

How did the RCPI raised the problems of *adhiars* and mobilised them? In the post-second world war and after the quit-India movement, the peasants were suffering from market instability leading to more land alienation. As we have seen sub-tenancy had increased in the Kamrup district quite significantly in this period.

1. T.S. Deka, Mukti pg.97-98.

2. File PHA. no.288/1945.

The KBP organised two conferences to be followed by intense mobilisation of the peasantry in the Southern Kamrup., In November, 1945, the Assam Provincial Krishak Banua Panchayats held its conference at Bhanguripara near Palashbari,¹ Police had taken note of the conference, "a rally of the labour panchayat in Palashbari with attendance running up to 4,000" and "in Kamrup, the backwash of the All India Peasant and Labour Union session at Palashbari till continues".²

The conference reportedly decided to direct 'the liberation of the peasants and labour from exploitation and simultaneous support to the Indian freedom movement. The RCPI had also decided to strengthen its revolutionary base throughout Assam. It also discussed the problems of the *adhiars* and decision was taken to mobilise and organise *adhiars*. The slogan of 'Land to the Tiller' was adopted. The decision to mobilise the *adhiars* and the slogan of 'land to the Tillers' initiated a new trend of political mobilisation in the district. This gave hope to the landless families.

1. H.Deka: Jiban p.60, T.S.Deka: Mukti, p.50; Interview with Kamala Majumdar, 19.06.95, Gauhati. The conference held for 3 days along with few participants from Bombay and Bengal.
2. File No.PHA 97/1947.

This conference was followed by another conference,¹ where decision was taken to give a decreased amount of share-produce to the landowners. It was fixed at 8 pura² for faringati (good land) land and 12 pura for rupit land. Another resolution had decided to stop and oppose the eviction of *adhiars* by the landowners. These two conferences took initiative to mobilise the peasants on the following issues;

- (a) To decrease the rate of share-produce, which was now fixed at 8 pura and 12 puras.
- (b) to decrease the interest taken by the money lenders;
- (c) to occupy land in government waste land areas;
- (d) to stop eviction of the *adhiars*
- (e) demanding land to the tiller.

The slogan of '8 pura/12 pura' and 'land to the tiller' were carried into the villages by the local KBP units. More KBP units was formed and anti-landowner propaganda was taken up. *Adhairs* were appealed to give share-produce according to the KBP decision and encouraged

1. The conference was held at Bongaragaon in South Kamrup, presided over by Advocate Habiram Deka. The Kamakhya temple of Gauhati had its Bhogdani land Bongaragaon. Most of the inhabitants of this locality were tenants in these lands. Hari Das Deka, pg.20 and Interview Govinda Kalita.
2. 1 pura is equivalent to 4 bighas.

to be members of the KBP. A '4 anna' membership was also introduced.¹

In the harvesting season of 1946-47, more local KBP units were formed and the *adhiars* were made aware regarding their grievance. The KBP activists visited the villages and met the *adhiars* according to their convenience. This was a significant aspect of peasant mobilisation. Peasants were not ready to waste their 'precious time' and they would not listen to anybody if they had to compromise on this score. The KBP's attention and respect for the peasant's time did paid richly. Stories were also circulated in which the landowners were said to have been misbehaved and humiliated' by the peasants.² These stories had minimised the notion of non-vulnerability of the landowners. But in the absence of enough evidences we can't suggest the response of the peasants in this initial phase. Economic consideration and fear of losing land might have led the *adhiars* to hesitate to follow the KBP resolution. Probably, in the areas where the dominant

1. Interviews with Banerwar Saikia, 12.05.95 Nagaon, Ambu Bora, 14.05.95 Gauhati, Kamala Majumdar, 19.05.95 Gauhati.

2. In "Pherengadao", there is a reference of such stories. "Pherengadao", Medini Chandhmi (Bairathi Publication, Kokrajhar, 1982) Written in the context of the episodes of the life of Bishnu Rabha, a leading activist of KBP.

presence of both the KBP and adhiars was felt there was immediate and positive response. The Palashbari area may fit into this format. Here, the KBP had strong presence. Govinda Kalita, a leading KBP activist was active in this area. Several KBP meetings also strengthened the articulation of local grievances. The presence of local rich peasants in the KBP was also a significant factor.¹

The RCPI had declared the 'independence' as false and it intensified its *adhiar* mobilisation. People were reminded of a 'false independence'. In a reported public meeting at Sorbhog, Upen Sarma from the KBP had said that "the present independence is not the real independence. Till now all people will not be able to take food and clothing properly. Moreover, it is the duty of all those who are living in Assam to think for the benefit of the country. He asked the labour and peasants to form labour panchayat, so that they might be able to solve their difficulties."²

When the anti-Bengalee euphoria and pro-Pakistan movement was at its hight, there appeared new tensions in the districts. The pro-Pakistan mobilisation was quite

1. Banti Mahajan was an important KBP activist in the Palashbari area.
2. File No.PHA. 97/47.

intense in the Barpeta sub-division. Local conflicts between the immigrant Muslim peasants and the local peasants were mostly regarding grazing rights in this subdivision. But the Southern Kamrup was comparatively free from these tensions. There was an indication of anti-Bengalee propaganda in the Gauhati town.

The police Intelligence had warned the Assam Government of the continued RCPI activity among the *adhiars* of South Kamrup.¹ "The communists (RCPI) have not failed to foster agrarian discontent in the Kamrup district. They have achieved some result after the independence at Bongra...". Again, "organisations like the RCPI are working up certain anti-Government feelings among *ryots*, specially in Kamrup district".²

On the eve of 1947-48 harvesting season KBP worked up its mobilisation to the different parts of South Kamrup. These areas included the mauzas of Beltola, Rani, Chayagaon, Boko and Palashbari.³ Almost the entire South Bank of the district came under the KBP's influence. In the 1947-48 harvesting season, the *adhiars* reportedly had

1. File No. PHA 154/1947.

2. File no PHA. 154/1947.

3. These areas are confirmed from the autobiographies and the interviews.

"suddenly refused to pay *chukani* paddy to the landowners...".¹ In many parts of the southern Kamrup the *adhiars* either stopped payment of their share-produce to the landowners or decreased the share. Landowners were asked to give a written receipt confirming the share. They also refused to work for the landowners without wages.

Power Equation between the Adhiars and Landowners

The new level of tension between the landowners and the *adhiars* arising out of the presence of KBP created a new power-dynamics in the agrarian sector of Kamrup district. The landowners' mixed response to it was determined by their specific socio-economic conditions. The absentee landowners who had close access to the district administration came heavily upon the *adhiars* and pressurised the latter to pay the share. Many small landowners sought compromise with the KBP. In specific cases - of a landlord being the single landowner in a particular area dominated by *adhiars* - compromise with the KBP became a common phenomenon.² Hari Das Deka describes

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1. Speech by Beliram Das. ALA/Part.VI/1948. p.1394-1395.
 2. Hari Das Deka narrates such a case where the *Mahajan* was anticipating a communist assault. Reportedly he along with his family members did not sleep several nights fearing a communist attack. Later on, he agreed to serve all the KBP members with food-in Hari Das Deka, pg.80-81.

the reaction of the landowners as following "... A few small landowners came into compromise with the KBP and followed the KBP decisions. But others with the help of the government began to harass the *adhiars* and with the help of police forcefully either evicted the ryots or collected the *adhi*-shares. The *adhiars* also came into collective resistance".¹ On the part of the district administration, the revenue officials were asked to "help collect The *chukani* paddy peacefully".² But "the Gaonburas and the raiyats of the South Kamrup district weren't giving any heed to the notices send by the Deputy Commissioner".

The landowners also formed an organisation to "sort out their conflict with the *adhiars*' namely "Pattadar Sangha".³ The Pattadar Sangha tried to come into compromise with the *adhiars* conceding the various demands of the latter. The *Assamiya* reported that these had been "collective defiance' by the *adhiars*.⁴ Most of the

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1. Hari Das Deka, *Jiban* p.63.
 2. Speech by Beliram Das, ALP/Pt.VI, 1948, p.1394-95.
 3. According to Tarun Sen Deka, the first meeting of the landowners was held at Raibari village in the mauza of Dakhin Rani. He also mentioned that on the same day in protest the *adhiars* also took out a procession.
 4. Assamiya (Daily), 12th June, 1948.

landowners even feared losing their 'social status'.¹

"In a largely attended meeting at Dispur chaired by Beliram Das, MLA a compromise was reached between the pattadars and the adhiars. Accordingly, it was decided that the adhiars will give 10/15 puras of rice per pura of land. The pattadars also will receive it." In other parts of the South Kamrup district, the Pattadar Sangha also entered into compromise with the adhiars.²

The press viewed the agrarian tension as a law and order problem.³ Thus the landowners reminded the adhiars to maintain law and order and appealed for payment of rent for "social stability". The *Assamiya* reported "...In a meeting of Kamrup Pattadar-Ryot Peace Committee held at Guwahati with Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua in the chair appealed to the adhiars to pay the rent".⁴ Thus, the power-equation between the adhiars and the landowners was undergoing a transformation. The adhiars now, under the KBP, came to

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1. During the interviews, I was told how landowners were mocked at by the adhiars - sometimes they were manhandled also.
 2. Assamiya, (Daily) 17th June, 1948.
 3. In an editorial, Assamiya had accused the communists of inciting the 'illetterate and honest villages' to break law and order and appealed to the Government to take drastic measures to control the situation. Assamiya (Daily) 19th June, 1948.
 4. Assamiya (Daily) 13th December 1947.

dominate the agrarian society in the Kamrup district. Landowners were forced to concede to the demands of the adhiars and make necessary adjustments.

The Adhlar Movement, the Legislative Assembly and the Congress

The wide-spread adhlar movement in the southern Kamrup district, synchronizing with the emergence of the RCPI as a district political tradition, caused much concern to the landowner dominated Congress led government and the provincial Congress party. In the background of the adhlar movement, the RCPI made its presence felt in the larger political tradition of Assam. In two "sensitive" issues pertaining to the Assamese identity, the RCPI came openly and joined hands with the Assamese body politic. In the anti-grouping movement and in the immigration issues RCPI mobilised and advocated pro-Assamese identity. The adhlar movement brought the RCPI as a distinct political identity more closer to the Assamese mainstream political current.

The Congress ministry found the adhlar movement as a threat to its hegemonic presence in the power-space. The Assam Adhlar's Protection and Regulation Bill which was introduced in the 1948 budget session of the Assam Legislative Assembly was rather an attempt to adapt and appropriate the new contending political ideology into the Congress body politic so as to maintain its domineering

presence. Contrary to the prevailing notion of the new visionary attitude of the Congress, it did only concede to the demands created by the tension in the agrarian sector.

Introducing the Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Bill-1948, Bishnuram Medhi, the finance minister told that the "main idea is to give protection to the tenants". He was aware of the "large number of complaints" regarding the adhiars problem. His candid expression about the exorbitant rate of rent in kind which was realised from the adhiars told the story of the existing hardship faced by them. "The amount of rent in kind is taken to such an extent that very little is left for the actual cultivator for its maintenance."¹

There was no clear division of arguments in the legislative assembly. More or less, the representatives were in favour giving some concession to the share-croppers. A few of them expressed their concern regarding the condition of the peasants but were pulled back by their own interests. Most of the members expressed their anguish at the deteriorating law and order situation and "grave injustice/humiliation" faced by the landowners in different parts of the state, but mainly in Kamrup and

1. Speech by Bishnuram Medhi, ALA Vol.II, March, 1948, p.162.

Sibasagar districts. They were fully aware of the "vigorous propaganda" unleashed by "Communist agitators" and growing disamny between the landlord and tenants. The pro-landowner voice and appeal to safeguard their interest was visible. Though, the Congress ministry had initiated the Bill, they were more interested in the maintenance of social order. The legislators were "Kind enough" to admit the "deplorable" plight of the adhiars "...The present plight of Adhiars is indeed deplorable as the adhidars (landowners) are encroaching more and more on the rights to subsistent conditions of the adhiars whose families are suffering untold miseries. Indeed we have arrived at a critical moment when if the government didn't do something, matters will go very badly against all of us including the adhiars"...¹

The Finance minister who stood for 'adjustment to bring amicable solution between all parties and group" confessed that "quite insufficient quantity is left with the cultivator who ploughs the land and with the help of his own and uses seeds that he is to produce at the time of ploughing. The landowner, without undertaking any trouble comes to the adhiar at the time of harvest and takes away

1. Speech by Binode Kr.J.Sarwan A.L.A.: Vol.II, March 1948, pg.151.

half of the produce leaving particularly nothing for the cultivator."¹

Some members questioned and showed their apprehension regarding the fate of those landowners who were middle-level landowners. They claimed that these group of landowners - a clerk in Gauhati town having 10 acres of and - should be brought under the provisions of this bill. They claimed that this group "being unable to cultivate themselves had been giving it out on adhi". And now "all at once their share has been stopped and in consequence their family was almost starving". However, Dharnidhar Basumatari felt that when 80% people were landless, one shouldn't be serious about the fate of a few rich landowners".

The ministry was fully aware of its support base - the clerks, pleaders and other government service holders who were based mainly in Gauhati. They were looking for an amicable solution between the landowners and the tenants. It seems that the landowners were also pressurising to co-operate with the government to pass such a bill which would bring peace in society. "The landowners (*matigiri*) are also looking for a legal provision, whereby the good

1. Speech by Bishnuram Medhi ALA Vol.II/March, 1948; p.161.

relation between the two can be maintained. Because, they felt that if a bill isn't passed and brought this movement under control; then it will not be possible to keep their land to maintain their lives".¹

The intensity of the movement was becoming a matter of socio-cultural threat to the rural elite, urban babu groups. They were extremely cautious of losing their 'honour and dignity' "... The landowners feared to visit those areas to collect their share produce for fear of losing their honour and dignity."² The Assamese rural elite with their landed property and the urban population with government service practicing share-cropping were the social base of the Congress ministry. In the entire South Kamrup, as already has been discussed it was the tribal population who were mostly landless.³

The ministry had given assurance to the land owners of safeguarding their interest. "Government isn't doing any injustice to the landowners or the rich whereas they were

1. Speech by Harinarayan Barnah ALA/Vol.II/March, 1948, p.155.
2. Ibid.
3. The process of land alienation has been discussed earlier, Chapter 1.

given a helping hand only".¹ Unless, the government created some amicable solution "the poor people, deprived of the means of living might decide that necessity knows no law" which will "force the government to take the help of military police to subdue hungry and naked people in order to give protection to the people who are fattening on the flood of their fellowmen".²

Thus, the legislative assembly debate centred around the growing tension in the rural areas led by the "Communist agitator" and its impact on the rent receivers. The bill was passed in the assembly on 28th March 1948 which was known as Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Bill, 1948.

Main Provision of the Bill

The Act provided for the following provisions:

- (a) The Act sought to reduce the amount of rent to be paid by the adhiar to the landlords. Rent was fixed at 1/4th of the produce but if landlord supplied the plough, cattle it was to be one-third of the produce.
- (b) An adhiar was to get cultivation right on adhi land

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1. Speech by Harinaryan Baruah ALA/Vol.II/March, 1948, p.155.
 2. Speech by Harinarayan Baruah ALA/Vol II/March/1948/p.155.

until he willing left it. He had to leave the land in the following circumstances.

- (1) if he is voluntarily relinquishes;
 - (2) if he is ordered by an adhi Conciliation Board to vacate the land and cease cultivation on the same or if he is evicted from the land in execution of a valid order of the Adhi Conciliation Board.
- (c) The Adhi Conciliation Board was empowered to order an adhiar to vacate the land,
- (i) if the land is bonafide required by the landlord for personal cultivation;
 - (ii) if an adhiar has used the land in a manner which renders it unfit for the purpose of cultivation;
 - iii) if the adhiar kept land fallow for two consecutive years without reasonable ground or sublet it to others.
- (d) If the total area of land in actual occupation of an adhiar wasn't more than 10 bighas then he couldn't be evicted on the ground of personal cultivation unless and until he was given land of equivalent value in the locality.
- (e) If the landlord doesn't cultivate the land within one year or sublets it to another person within two years from the date he gets possession of the land, the evicted adhiar will be restored to the possession of

the land. An adhiar can be penalised, however, if he keeps the adhi land fallow for than one year, he then becomes liable to pay to the landlord for each year a sum equal to double for each year a sum equal to double the annual land revenue.

- (f) The landlord will get his stipulated share only of the major crop.
- (g) The adhiar may pay in lieu of the share of the crop, the money value of the crop.
- (h) He also had the right to obtain a written receipt from the landlord on delivery of the landlords share of the crop.
- (i) If the landlord supplied seedgrains to the adhiars it will be repaid to him from the gross crop before dividing the crop between the landlord and the adhiar.

The KBP, the Village and the Tribal Peasants

The general impression that the KBP successfully mobilised the tribal peasants needs careful analysis. The government claimed that the tribal people are being subjected to agrarian propaganda. Rowdy demonstrations are

occasionally being staged by the peasants...".¹ Assam's premier Gopinath Bordoloi noted that "the RCPI is continuing their activities among the most backward people, ... among the plains tribal population is being effectively propagated.. in some places, they have been able to sufficiently influence the people to resist payment of revenue..."²

The KBP provided a 'legitimate' platform in the village where the peasants could seek redressal. In many times, the KBP collectively supported and defended the cause of the distress stricken peasants. It also provided a speedy means to redress the peasant grievances. The government institutions were seen as saviour of the elites only. Integral to the Assamese village society is the traditional 'Mel'³ institution, where the villagers participated as jury in its own right. The decisions of the 'Mel' was binding on the society. However, the new colonial institutions did away with this tradition. Symbolic revival of KBP as the institution 'Mel' played a significant role in the mobilisation of the peasantry. The

1. Police Intelligence Deptt. File I/A-3(6)/48/X Police (SB) RCPI Activities/ consulted at the Police Intelligence Department Record Room, Kahilipara, Gauhati.
2. Ibid.
3. Village Assembly is synonymous to 'Mel'.

peasantry were encouraged to seek redressal of their grievances through the KBP. In many cases the KBP imposed implementation of their decisions. For example, "Two ryots Chikaru and Baicharu - both tribal - had decided to give share-produce according to the decision of KBP resolution. But the landowners had evicted them and engaged their own men to plough the land. The two evicted adhiars made a complaint to KBP. KBP issued a letter to the landlords asking them to follow the 'people's law'. As landowners refused to accept KBP decision, the mauza KBP accepted this challenge and asked the village KBP to serve a notice saying that KBP would transplant paddy seedlings. The landowners were asked to challenge this decision if possible. The KBP informed other KBP units asking for help and to bring seedlings and sticks. The landowners informed the police. On the specific date a few policemen arrived. Raij¹ overcrowded the field and they gheraoed the police. As ploughing began, some more police alongwith a magistrate arrived at the place. Realising the situation, the magistrate allowed the adhiars to plough the land. The landowners got panicked."²

1. Synonymous for the 'people'.

2. Interivew with Govinda Kalita, 18.6.95, Guwahati.

The KBP as a platform was nearer to a symbolic revival of a traditional institution and the horizontal participation of the peasants took place through this. It also emerged as an effective decision-making institution where speedy justice could be expected. There are references where the local influential people took initiative in forming KBP. Hari Das Deka had narrated the occasion when a reported saint (Babaji) from Beltola area came to him and told him the miseries of the local adhiars. The 'babaji' also requested him to form a unit of the KBP. The party had agreed to visit the area and consequently the KBP unit was formed there and decision was taken regarding a decreased amount of share and interest. If the landowner didn't agree, then he would be stopped from his share.¹ In a local social milieu, the importance of saints, charismatic persons are of significant importance. The KBP's ability to harness the services of these sections also added to its popularity.

Going back to the problem of the effective mobilisation of the peasants there may be two reasons which we may take into account. First, beginning from the early 20th century, the tribal peasants of lower Assam were introduced to various socio-economic reform movements.

1. H. Deka! Jiban p.62.

These movements mostly emphasise on 'opening schools, articulating socio-political issues before the government, abolition of the practice of brewing and drinking rice beer, to reduce the incidence of bride-price to strengthen the co-operative movement for ameliorating the economic ills of the masses and to minimise expenses of socio-religious observances and rituals".¹

This movement spread to different parts of the district. The new custom of holding conventions of the tribal peoples came as the initial initiative to mobilise the tribal people on a different platform away from the mainstream Congress mobilisation. People involved in this movement were adopted into the KBP fold and it make the later's initiation into the tribal society much easier.² The KBP's success in its ability to harness the involvement of traditional tribal leaders marked a significant trend in the tribal politics. Bishnu Rabha, a leading RCPI activist was the driving force behind the peasant mobilisation. A charismatic figure, Bishnu Rabha, he could dance, stage drama, sing and even drink with the tribal people. "In the

1. 'The Brahmo Movement among the Bodo-Kacharis of Goalpara district' by M.C.Saikia in Tribal Movements in India : K.S.Singh, (ed.), pg.245.
2. I was told how the Brahmo movement people came to the Tribal villages and talked about the necessity of KBP. Interview with Bhagi Majhi, 12.12.95, Guwahati.

tribal villages, the people offered him rice beer made locally. They will surround him and listen to him. They will call him 'Abou'"¹ The tribal peasants found in the personality of Bishu Rabha a symbolic presence of their tribal leader-who could lead them for better days. Many of the RCPI activists admitted how Rabha's presence made the mobilisation of the tribal peasants much easier.

1. T.S.Deka, Mukti, pg.55, 'Abou' means King.

CHAPTER III

THE RCPI AND THE ADHIAR MOVEMENT - C.1948-1952

In this chapter, it will be discussed how the party reacted to The AAPR Act, 1948 and the subsequent mobilisation of the peasants with a marked departure from the earlier tactical strategy. It will also trace the reaction of the different section of the landowners for a wider understanding of the mainstream politics in the district. In the previous chapter, we have tried to show how the mobilisation of the RCPI among the peasants worked as an emerging alternative political stream vis-a-vis the Congress, (Assam Provincial Congress). The pre-dominant presence of RCPI mostly among the tribal population and other section of poor peasants nevertheless led the party to adopt politically a more confronting attitude towards the landowners dominated Congress Ministry. This chapter will lead us to understand the level of politicisation of the peasants away from the mainstream politics and the failure of the RCPI as a major left political party to appropriate the same.

The passing of the *Assam Adhiars' Protection Rights Act, 1948* in the March 1948 Session of the Assam Legislative Assembly headed by Gopinath Bordoloi evoked sharp reaction from the RCPI. The available

autobiographical accounts are silent about the Act the Police Intelligence Department reports give accounts of the hostility of the party towards the Act and its various provisions.

"At a meeting of the R.C.P.I. at Azra (Gwahati) Upen Sarma criticised the Adhlar Bill."¹ However, due to the paucity of material, the actual extent of criticism is not known. The party questioned the genuine interest and motives of the Congress Ministry which is predominantly comprised of the landowners lobby. "Gauhati communists have worked up the peasants against the Adhlar Bill to the extent of leading a procession of 200 Kishans for anti-landlord demonstrations."²

Within the district committees of the party, the attitude towards the bill was divided. It is reported that "the communists in Nowgong welcomed the Adhlar Bill, the Gauhati party have been leading an irresponsible agitation against the party for its inadequate provisions."³ The Gwoahati branch committee reportedly had its reservations

1. Assam Police Abstract of Summary Information - Kamrup 184/5-4--48, (Assma Police Intelligence Department), Guwahati.
2. Ibid.
3. Assam Police Abstract of Summary Information - Kamrup 184/5-48.

about the provisions of the act.

The party cadres realised the limitations of the adhiar movement. Its main agenda was getting more economic benefit to the cultivators. Before the 'Adhiar Bill' which was passed in the legislative Assembly, there was confusion among the party cadres. On the one hand, the bill was to give legitimacy to the ongoing movement of the adhiars. But apart from the adhiars, the other problems that were raised, i.e., land to the landless people, abolition of the share-cropping system didn't materialise under the existing provisions of the bill. Meanwhile, the peasants had come to realise a new sense of awakening regarding their rights on the land. Participating in the debate on AAPR Act, a few legislators showed their anxiety about the growing tension between the landowners and their tenants. They apprised the Assembly about the growing numbers of litigation between the landowners and tenants.¹

The Act in a way legalised the eviction of the tenants under various conditions. Whenever the peasants were not able to meet the demands of the land owners, the landowners were evicting the tenants. Another significant demand of the party were about the replacement of produce share with

1. Speech by Md. Saadulla, ALA, Vol.II, March, 1948, p.161.

cash share also did not come under the provisions of the bill. The administrative red-tapism also did not allow the provisions of the Act to be successfully implemented. The Bill was enforced in a selected area only. In the district of Kamrup, only South Kamrup fell under the jurisdiction of the Bill.¹ It is not known why the Act did not cover the entire district. It can be suggested that the movement was more intense in the South Kamrup where the adhiars were mostly tribals. In the Northern bank of the district, mainly in the Barpeta sub-division the social structure of the peasant society was more coherent along religious lines. It was coherent in the sense that the presence of religious "Satra" institutions - a primary socio-religious network to bind the society - had a larger influence in this sub-division. In fact, Sankardeva and his disciples who initiated the Vaishnavite Movement had their stronghold in Barpeta.

The new independent government headed by the Congress ministry - as is clear from the legislative assembly debates the adhiars refusal to give share on earlier terms was misconstrued as a law and order problem.

1. Speech by Bishnuram Medhi, the ALA. vol.II/ 1949/p.863.

New Thinking within the Party

The experience of the harvesting season of 1947-48 and the subsequent adoption of the AAPR Act led to many other problems. The unwillingness on the part of administrative machinery to lend a helping hand into the problem of the share-croppers had crippled the bill. The party also denounced the bill. There emerged a situation of deadlock. The following paragraph quoted from the writing of Hari Das Deka would give an indication of the reaction of the party to the newly emerged situation.

"The party cadres who were involved in the rural areas mobilising the peasants and labours with their practical experience realised that a legal and genuine movement cannot be brought into forefront within the parameter of the law. The government who immediately felt about the necessity of restoring law and order took the side of the zamindars and the landowners and stopped the movement. The new independent Government no way seemed different from the British Government... The economic movement had already reached its higher stage - now there is no other way to advance rather than a political movement which will lead to power capture."¹

1. H. Deka: Mukti, p. 75.

But it will be inappropriate to stick to these general assumptions regarding the emerging new thinking in the party in the absence of a variety of literary or historical sources. Further scope lies here to inquire into the action of the adhiars and the party workers in this situation." The party's anti-Act campaign was penetrating deeper into tribal areas during the 1948-49 harvesting season. On the other hand, the anti-communist propaganda in the Gauhati press was very meticulously projected. The party cadres were projected as 'dacoits', 'anti-social element' and 'anti-Assamese' etc. The adhiar movement was counterposed to the interests of the 'greater Assamese society." From the platform of 'Asom Jatiya Mahasabha' - Ambikagiri Roychaudhuri¹ along with the Bengalees, the communist were portrayed as the primary enemies of the Assamese society. To an extent, this propaganda succeeded in achieving its objective, in this process the base of the party was eroded in the mainstream politics.

1. Assamiya (Daily), 9 February 1948; Assam Jatiya Mahasabha was a chauvinist Hindu Assam organisation trying to rejuvenate the caste-Hindu Asamese society in the wakw of freedom movement. A.G.Roychoudhuri was the central mouth-piece of the organisation.

Towards a Political Movement

The RCPI's political activism was mainly centred around the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and a few places in Bengal. Practical experiences in the ongoing peasant movements in different parts of the country led the party to raise the question of a political movement and capturing regional political of power. In the month of February, 1948, the RCPI held its national conference in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. "Most of the delegates were either from Assam or West Bengal. I could remember about a few delegates coming from the Bombay, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh."¹ Internal discontent became distinct in the party circle regarding the Party's proposed thesis on regional power capture by armed struggle. The Conference decided that

"By creating some liberated zone, ground should be prepared for revolution. Thus, occupying different parts of the country in this way - the rule of the rich should be brought to an end and finally road should be cleared to make peasant-labour government in the centre."²

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1. Interview with Kamala Mazumdar 19.5.95. Guwahati.
 2. T.S.Deka: Mukti p.157.

This autobiographical statement does not clearly elaborate party's distinct position regarding the nature of the Indian state, Indian bourgeoisie, the nature of the on-going peasant movement, etc. The party admitted that a revolutionary situation has emerged in India. "The present situation is such that it represents a transition from the first stage of the revolutionary crisis - which owing to the insufficient class consciousness and organisation of the masses, placed the power in the hands of the bourgeoisie - to the second stage which must place the power in the hands of the masses." To capitalise this revolutionary situation "there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting mobilisation of the masses, under the slogan of socialism" whereby India will reach a "mature revolutionary situation."

They criticised the Indian political situation as "the state- power has passed into the hands of a new class namely, the Indian bourgeoisie." The economic crisis of the war years had led to fierce post war revolutionary upsurge." The Indian left was criticised for their "failure to create an alternative revolutionary leadership." The new Government led by the bourgeoisie "has immediately turned its newly acquired power against the masses, to prevent them from participating in their newly acquired gains and

hence, "no change has taken place in the old state machinery." The Indian left parties "Socialist Party of India' (SPI), and Communist Party of India (CPI)" were projected and criticised for their "utter bankruptcy" which was responsible "for the complete politically disarmed and disoriented condition of masses". The SPI was criticised as 'a left maneuver of the bourgeoisie' whose intention was to 'drive the masses' into constitutional oppositional channels' and was seen as the "greatest impediment to the development and regrouping of the revolutionary forces in India".

The CPI was criticised for being an "agent of the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union" and was alleged to have "preached that the bourgeois government was progressive and democratic and as such deserved the support of the masses. The task ahead of the Party lay 'in preparing the masses for the struggle for power'. The Party would intervene "actively in the struggle of the masses in order to develop their organ of the struggle - the 'Panchayat". The other immediate tasks before the Party were -

- (1) "to dispel illusions of the masses about the bourgeois government" -
- (2) 'to weld the class-conscious proletariat" in the Party
- (3) to struggle ceaselessly against the unstable petty-

bourgeois parties

- (4) to organise and develop the organ of political struggle of the masses - the Panchayat.
- (5) to participate and lead the defensive struggle of the proletariat.

"Power should be to the Mazdoor Kisan Panchayats' and 'the masses can realise full democracy and improve their condition, only when they control the power through their own organs, the Panchayat and create a republic of panchayats of workers and peasants'. Though the Party accepted the necessity of 'an armed decisive struggle, the strategic and tactical position guided the Assam branch of RCPI to adopt and elaborate its agenda of the peasant movement.¹ Already the Party was criticising the government for 'inadequate provision' in the Adhkar Bill. The new line of strategy undoubtedly created a wave of sensation among the Party cadres. Now, the basic question ahead of the Party was to capture 'regional power'.

New Mould in the Party Organisation

Earlier, it was the Krishak Banua Panchayat under which the party cadres used to mobilise the peasantry. The

1. Interview with Nihar Mukherjee, 16.6.96 Guwahati
Kamala Mazumdar, 19.5.95 Guwahati
Ambu Bora, 14.5.95 Guwahati
Govinda Kalita 18.6.95. Guwahati.

KBP as a mass organisation, the mass participation was hierarchical and local decisions were taken locally. A police intelligence report described a meeting where "all the participants were encouraged to participate in the debate".¹ It indicates a spontaneous participation of the peasantry in the political activism of the party. Ganabahini became the party's open and mass organisation to be supported by the peasants. To carry on the defensive armed struggle, 'guerrilla bahini' was formed. The latter was known as People's Army.² Cadres were recruited from Ganabahini and was given training in guerrilla tactics and Marxist political education. Several training camps were set up to give guerrilla training. The Party's head office being located in the hilly region of Bonda, Birkuchi near Beltola, numbers of secret training camps were arranged in those well protracted hilly areas. Majority of the cadres were from tribal peasantry. "In the Satargaon camp, more than 300 mikirs were given training".³ This admission of one of the leading party activist shows the participation of the tribal in the camps. 'Lathi-takon' (the traditional

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1. File no.183-c/50. Governor's Secretariat
(confidential.) Assam State Archives.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Interview with Govinda Kalita. 19.6.95. Guahati. Mikirs are a cultivating tribe in Kamrup district.

stick made of either bamboos of plant) was the main weapon.¹ Infact, a few armed weapons, may be of 'sten-gun', were also collected and were used in the training. Mohan Lal Mukherjee recollected his carrying of armed weapon.² Women were also mobilised on a different platform - *Nari Mukti Bahini* [Women Freedom Front]³ Hari Das Deka wrote that *Nari Mukti Bahini* was strong in the North Kamrup.⁴ "These fronts were active in the villages where party was organisationally strong. The front was active in 'imparting marxian politics to the women' and were encouraged to participate in the ongoing peasant movement. In some places, attempts were made to ameliorate illiteracy". However, this narrative does suggest that no important role was given to women in the on going movement. But the very notion of having an women's front indicates the party ability to mobilise and raise the level of political consciousness. Most of the woman activists welded their service to the party by acting as message carrier. Kamala Mazumdar was an activist and forerunner in the higher level

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1. Interview with Gobinda Kalita, 19.6.95.
 2. As told to me in the interviews mentioned here.
 3. File no. 183-c/50, Governor's Secretariat ((confidential)).
 4. H.Deka, *Jiban* p. 83

of the party.¹

The party organ initially *Panchayat* (later on *Lal-Nichan*) was printed and published secretly from the party head office.² The party organ criticised the government for its anti-people stand, failure to protect the right of the share-croppers, failure of the government to stop black-marketing and hoarding done by the traders.

Areas Covered by the Movement

Both South Kamrup and North Kamrup became the support belt for the peasant mobilisation of the party. Before, the passing of the Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Act, 1948, the movement was mostly limited to Southern part of the district where two mauzas were largely affected - Beltola and Palasbari. Panbari, Boko, Chayagaon were other areas where the adhiars either decreased the amount of share to be given to the landowners or stopped totally.³ The two KBP conferences in the Bongra-Gaon and Bhanguripara

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1. Aparajita Mukherjee, Sabitri Chetia, Kanak Medhi, Kamala Medhi, Illashi Brahma, Bimala Sen Deka, Rajoni Bodo, Joyshree Brahma, Joyalata Bezbaruah were said to be the active participants of the front. Interview with Kamala Mazumdar, 19.6.95. Quoted in H. Deka: *Jiban*, p.65.
 2. Interview with Ambu Bora : 14.4.95; Kamala Mazumdar: 18.6.95.
 3. T.S. Deka : *Mukti* p.186.

may be a significant factor in the mobilisation of the peasants in this Southern belt of the district.

After the Birbhum Conference of RCPI which passed the resolution for 'regional power capture, the organisational activities of the party did spread into the other parts of the district apart from the Sivasagar and Lakhimpur district in the Upper Assam region. This expansion of the party activities was confined to recruiting more cadres from different villages. Most of the villages were inhabited by the share-croppers. Other than the areas which were nearer to the urban areas, a few rich landowners rented out land to their tenants in these villages. Tarun Sen Deka, Kamini Sarma took initiative in the mobilisation of the peasantry in the North Kamrup.¹ In the North Kamrup - Rangia, Kendukuchi, Mechalpur, Bhagmara, Bhabanipur, Tapa, Guagacha, Belsor, Chamata, Bomibqari became important base for the party activity. "The large number of party cadres that were recruited from these areas were given political and ideological training."²

In the Southern belt of the district party activity was extended into the areas like Birkuchi, Bonda,

1. Deka : Jiban, p.64.

2. H. Deka: Jiban, P.83.

Kalitakuchi, Amching, Jorabat, Satgaon, Kahilipara, Borbari, Tetelia, Kerakuchi, Saukuchi, Lutuma, Kuptipara, Dhalfama, Pamahi, Mainakhurang, Garhchuk, Katobajar, Ahomgaon, Garagaon, Dhirenpara, Manpara, Datalpara, Birubari mostly falling within the Beltola Mauza; The Krishak Banua Panchayat made significant progress in areas like Khetri, Digaru, Panbari and Kamakuchi in Sonapur. These areas were mostly inhabited by the tribal peasants either from Bodo, Rabha or Mikir community whereas the lands were mostly owned by Guahati based landowners.

"In the areas covered by the KBP, decision was taken by the KBP regarding the handing over of the share produce or occupancy rights in the landowner land".¹

The KBP came to occupy a decisive level in the power relations between the landowner and his tenants. By responding to the need of the share-croppers, the KBP gave a kind of legitimacy to the very existence of the KBP as fulcrum of power relations in the hostile situation. That the southern belt of the district came under the influence of KBP can be inferred from a proclamation of the Assam government.² In continuation of an earlier

1. T.S. Deka: Mukti. p.187.
2. Assam Gazette/ July6, 1949/ Part-II (Consulted at Assam State Archives).

notification, on 4th July, 1949, The Assam government felt the immediate necessity "to increase the number of police force for that area for a further period" because of the very "conduct of the inhabitants of the area". These areas included Panbari and Brahmaputra in the North; portion of Ramsarani mauza, Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the South; Panbari mauza in the East and Ramsarani mauza in the West. The area falling within this jurisdiction were to get additional police force.

Issues taken up by The Party

Though party's main agenda was to capture "regional power through armed struggle", the question of share-croppers were still a matter of tension in the agrarian Assamese society. Apart from the question of the share-croppers, the post-independence Assam witnessed the problem of black-marketing in the food and cloth market, increasing land settlement to the immigrants, and the rising numbers of landless people. 'The Assamese-Bengalee question is not taking a good shape at all and the situation is being affected more by the extremists on both sides than is safe for the province.... it needs

intervention at higher level'.¹ Jairam Das-Daultram, the then Governor of Assam expressed his official anxiety to the President Rajendra Prasad in this way. Anti-Bengalee feelings had already created a tension situation in Gauhati. From the platform of Assam Sahitya Sabha², its president Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhuri declared that alongwith pro-Pakistani frenzy and the Communists, the Bengalee language was the enemy of Assam.

While the mainstream political agenda was dominated by these issues, peasants were also asked by the KBP not to leave either the land or to evacuate the occupancy rights.³ Demands were also made to distribute the land among the actual cultivators. Significant to these demands was that the party addressed to the issues and problems faced by the lowest category of the peasant society in the Kamrup district. Rather than a monolithic peasant group it was the tribal peasants who formed the bulk of adhiars and agricultural labourers. Some other local but important

1. This has been quoted from a letter written by Jairam Das Daultram to Rajendra Prasad: in Rajendra Prasad; Correspondence and Documente Vol.13/ p.12.
2. Assam Sahitya Sabha, a premier Assamese literary organisation formed in 1917. See: Prafulla Mahanta: Assamiya Madhyabitta Srenir Itihas p.288-354.
3. Police Intelligence Department File No. 3/12/48-VI/RCPI Activities.

issues were also articulated in the course of the mobilisation. Central to these issues was the conflict between governmental intervention in the traditional right of the tribal peasants in the forest sector. The claim that 'the forest contractors weren't allowed to cut the trees¹ and "the KBP came to a decisive stage in these matters' may be a suggestive indication of the articulation of the problem. Simultaneously, demands were also made to abolish zamindari system. This articulation of the local problem into the broader framework of a peasant movement also resulted from the active participation of the peasants. Taking up the local issues also lessened the gap between the political party which was an 'outsider' and the peasant.

The period 1948-49 had witnessed the spread of the slogan 'Land to the Tiller'. The slogan conveyed the message to the large number of landless tribal peasants and the share-croppers also. Demands were made and the peasants were mobilised on the issue that "the cultivator should be the owner of the land; land should be recovered from the Mahajans"². The interim government was asked to make legislation to give occupancy rights to the ryots in the

1. H. Deka-Jiban : p.93.

2. Interview with Ambu Bora- 14.5.95, Guwahati.

land recovered from the Mahajans.

In this new scenario, the party's appeal sharply deviated from its earlier position. It was not a question of mere bargaining with the landowners on the issue of share-amount. Share-croppers were incited to forcefully occupy the land if they were ejected. The KBP was to decide the amount to be given to the landowners. The slogan of 'Land to The Tiller' created a lot confusion among small landowners. Demands were also raised for stopping of adhi-chukti; to raise the level of daily wage to Rupees Four; to accept eight hourly working time; to replace share-produce with cash.¹

Pattern of Mobilisation

Though the party had its own agenda of 'capturing regional power', till the last part 1949 confronting the landowners was the primary concern of the party. From the 1948 onward the KBP was involved in mobilising the peasantry to stop the rent to be given to the landowner and to forcibly take possession of the land, in case the tenant was evicted. The party was declared illegal and it was

1. A seiged poster from Beltola was found with these demands. Police Intelligence Department file no. 3/12/48-XI/ memo no 10370/e 16th Dec-1949. RCPI Activities.

banned by the Assam government in May, 1948. Most of the party activists went underground whereas a few leading party leaders were put behind the bars. The relation between the landowner and the adhiars turned out to be more hostile as the former frequently resorted to the police help. The law and order situation and maintaining the status-quo of the landowner became the priority of the district administration. "On 3rd June, 1948, there was apprehension of a serious breach of peace on the field of village Mailata under Palashbari police station elaka as the land owner Bhabadhar Chaudhuri wanted to take possession of his land formerly given to some ryots.¹

The response of the affected adhiars was quick and it created wide-spread response in the neighbouring localities. "The villagers of some neighbouring villages of the mauza Dakhin Rani and Chayani, numbering a thousand came to the said field to oust the landowner in case of his intervention to till the land already ploughed by the ryots. There would have been a serious riot hadn't the Palashbari police station arrived there timely. The land owner remained neutral whereas 12 men ploughed the land

1. Quoted from "Assam Police Abstract of summary Information": Kamrup : 184/5-6-48.

leading to the arrest of 2 ploughmen".¹

In order to resist the eviction the KBP formed its units in the concerned villages and members were recruited. "We asked the villagers to come in large number and to plough the field. We stick posters where help was sought for the concerned ryot. Those who were to replace him were threatened with dire punishment. Ryots from other village were discouraged to come and occupy the land"² This approach leading to the confrontation with the landowner and the law and order machinery necessitated an active and higher stage of political involvement of the ryots. Numerous examples of such cases showed the active involvement of the ryots in the political mobilisation of KBP. The mobilisation was also motivated by two other factors. The most of the landowners were a part of the caste-Hindu Assamese society. On the other hand, the tribal adhiars were yet to identify themselves with the socio-cultural identity of the caste-Hindu Assamese society. This inherent social tension found its expression in the subjection of the tribal society to an inferior

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1. File No/11-c/50 dated 6.10.50 Governor's Secretariat. (Confidential).
 2. Quated from Abstract of Summary information, Kamrup No.184. Dated 5-6-48: Assam Police Intelligence Department, Kahilipara, Guwahati.

cultural status and it generated a socio-cultural gap between the two. Economically, the adhiars and other categories of peasantry falling within the same economic position had nothing to lose from their antagonism against the landowners. Less of social-cultural interaction between the tribal peasant and caste-Hindu Assamese landowners had developed this antagonism. The areas where the caste-Hindu adhiars were dominant, the movement didn't take a militant form. The Barpeta sub-division where this case can be projected we have seen less violent reaction on the part of the adhiars or even failure to mobilise by the party. Police intelligence reports quoted extensively that the R.C.P.I workers were mostly busy in organising the illiterate tribal peasantry.

"It is reported that the Party (RCPI) is camping on vigorous organisational work in the forest and tribal areas in North and South Kamrup"¹ Again the 'RCPI activities are reported to be on the increase in the tribal areas of Sorbhog and Chaygaon in Kamrup"²

The tribal areas mostly consisted of the "interior villages' of the district. Existing evidential sources

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1. File No/11-c/50-1950 Governor's Secretariat.
 2. File No. PHA /19/1949.

don't suggest that RCPI didn't try to mobilise the caste-Hindu Assamese adhiars. However within the broader framework of 'revolutionary front' RCPI regarded the "tribals" as the vanguard.¹ The coming of Bishnu Rabha, Aniram Basumatari etc. also made it easier to mobilise the tribal peasants".

The functioning of the KBP among the adhiars might have a role model to play. Absence of model of leadership leaving the way for horizontal participation and the recruitment and importance attached to them of the local activist performing the role of 'leader' had much to do with the 'enthusiastic' participation of the tribal peasants. The role of village Panchayat (*Raizani Matheng*) was very much core to the Bodo tribal community.² The village is regulated by the Panchayats. The existence of community granary (*Raijani Bokhri*) helped the villagers who were economically in distress.

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1. Hari Das Deka addressing a public rally on 29th January, 1946 at Gauhati protested against the British Government's Intention of creating a separate 'nation' to be created out of Assam. Reportedly he said that on the issue of 'Revolution we need coherent organisation among them. Assamese (Weekly), 31 January 1946.
 2. Sibanath Barman: *Asamar Janajai Samashya; Aitihashik Utsa Jiban: Sandhan/Progressive Book House Chy-1995. p.6.*

Narrating the functioning of the KBP, the police report wrote that "...The said Panchayats have presidents and secretaries but almost all the members of the villages speak what they like and as such it is not possible for any rational being to convince them."¹

The space provided by the KBP for the active participation and even to take 'decision' encouraged the peasants to be a part of the ongoing adhiar movement under the KBP. The nature of discussion in these panchayats were of local variety but related to Socio-cultural milieu also nurtured the participation of the peasants in the KBP.² The specific nature of the tribal economy in the Kamrup district also occupied a distinct position in their behaviour of participation. Although they were in the trap of new market economy and more land alienation was engulfing them, the sense of social independence and community attachment was more coherent and strong among them. The new civil' institutions" though trying to penetrate into their society it was still regarded by them as alien to their socio-cultural milieu. The presence of village panchayats performing the task of traditional

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1. Quated from Abstract of Summary Information No.184/ Kamrup 5.6.48/ Assam Police Intelligence Department.
 2. It has been discussed in the chapter Two.

legal institution, it indicates a denial of the role of new institution. The new institutions were seen as creating chaos in their society and to the benefit of their exploiter primarily the moneylender (Mahajan) and the landowners.

The KBP to mobilise the peasants they tried to appropriate the existing socio-cultural environment rather than imposing new social ethic. While the mainstream communist mobilisation negated the importance of religion, KBP tactfully appropriated those norms to its own end . Early in 1944, we are informed that 'on 7th May, 1944 some workers of the Congres party, Communist party and Radical party went to the Ugratara temple and prayed for the speedy recovery of Gandhi'.¹ Trained in Marxian political philosophy, the communist cadres weren't expected to resort to religions practices which led to the assumption that this might be a pragmatic approach on the part of the communist cadres to have strategic alliance with the popular culture. Another evidence narrator the case when, "a big rostrum was created in front of that village namgarh² which is situated by the side of railway line of

1. File No. 288/1945. P.H.A.

2. Traditional religion worshipping place of the followers Assemese Vaishnasite.

Tihu Nalabari in the Pipalabari village. This meeting was organised by the communists. *Hum* (ritual performance according to the vedic rites) and Jatra performances were arranged to attract the people so as to get a huge gathering. The people of village are found to be pro-communists. Five seers of rice and rupees five in cash were collected from every village. to meet the expense. As the magistrate warned, no meeting or gathering was held there but 'Hum' was performed by the villagers inside the Namghar.... About 3000 persons gathered from different directions... It was difficult to disperse then... They were not violent at all... Jatra party came to perform exciting performance... 33 objectionable booklets entitled " Janashadharnor Shashan Khamata adhikari Samasya Samadhaner path"¹ issued by Haren Kalita, Bishnu Rabha, Govinda Kalita, Loknath Baruah, Nabin Medhi, Khagen Barbaruah Aniram Basumatari seized.... Some siprangs with bamboo handles were seized."²

This narrative doesn't say anything about what the 'Jatra parties' did perform but the particular

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1. This is a leaflet brought out in Bengali where the title is 'The only solution people's unpowerment. is the only solution to the problems'.
 2. Quated from Abstract of Summary information No.449/Kamrup Dated 19-3-1949.

"objectionable" booklet carried the 'anti-government' message of the party and capturing of the power by the people. 'Ritual performance' encouraged the participation of the people (we are not sure about the economical categories of the people that participated, but the rural scene in that time was of an agrarian society with a negligible secondary means of livelihood) and it was appropriated by the party cadres to unleash its propaganda. The admission that 'it was difficult to disperse them' inspite of the magistrate's warning was a denial of the authority of the district administration. However the latter was relieved as "they weren't violent at all".

Response of the Peasants

The KBP succeeded in mobilising the peasants at different levels. The response of the peasants are very much admissible in the official reports. But this response differed from place to place. The pressure of the repressive agency was also responsible for this heterogeneous attitude of the peasants.

An official report cited that "The tribal are all united and have refused to give paddy to any

landowners"...¹

The KBP had been holding secret meetings and resorting to 'verbal propaganda' "advising the illiterate masses' that ' the landholder shouldn't be allowed to possess their land " and not to pay any revenue". The KBP propaganda found more or less positive response in most of the areas. "In most of the villages, the adhiars stopped paying the landowners due - The latter feared to go the ryots to collect his share of rice"² In the year 1948, the KBP were appealing to the adhiars not to pay the rent to landowners and 'exciting the peasants to rise against their landlords as well as the existing government"³. The RCPI had already launched a frontal attack of the Congress led interim government. In the same year, in the last part of June, the RCPI made a 'large possessions of 500 persons'⁴ in carrying 'communist flags' demanded that 'the Sukani should be decided by their own Panchayats".

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1. Quated from Abstract of Summary Information No. 441/Kamrup-19-3-49. A.P.I.D.
 2. T.S. Deka: Mukti p.168.
 3. Quated from Abstract Summary Information No.193/Kamrup 12.-6.48.
 4. Quated from Abstract Summary Information No.198/Kamrup 26-6-48.

In the next few months extensive propaganda against the government and appeal to the adhiars to occupy the land of the landowners were made. The government was criticised for its " inability to supply the peasants with sufficient rice, cloth and yam". The land was to be occupied without any compensation to the owners of the same." On the eve of the 1948-49 harvesting season, the party intensified its agitation. More secret meetings were held to create a anti-landowner consciousness and to avail support from the peasants. "Loknath Baruah and Kamini Sharma with the help of Baikuntha Nath Chakrabarti and Krishna Kanta Laskar of Nalbari elaka are working underground, holding meetings secretly and requesting the peasants not to give paddy to the landowners,"¹ After the passing the AAPR Act, in many areas particularly in the South Kamrup, the peasants, either stopped paying the rent or resorted to KBP to decide the landowner's share. This was frequently the case in the interior areas.

The landowners rather than compromising approached the Assam government. The district administration was asked to help the landowners with the police force. Many landowners went to collect their shares along with the

1. Quoted from Abstract of Summary Information No.778 Kamrup/30-10-48.

police.¹ The KBP, with the active support of the adhiars, strengthened the resolve of not giving any paddy to the landowner. The adhiars responded differently to the pressure of landowner or to the police repression. They reaped the harvest and didn't pay attention to the landowner's demand.

'One night, we along with the adhiars reaped the paddy of 4 bighas of land and carried it to the threshing floor of the adhiar. After it was threshed the stuff was thrown into the nereby pond so that in the morning when the landowner come he couldn't know anything about the paddy. The paddy was kept in gunny bags and hide it."² The police also failed to recover the paddy despite its attempts. They admitted that it was 'the only instance in which the paddy could be brought from the area when on 4th June, (1948) Gauhati Police Station took possession of the paddy from the house of Praneswar Kachari peacefully after controlling the gathering of some 50 to 60 tribal people".³

The RCPI had a conference in the Khowang area in the

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1. Interview with Ambu Bora: 8.6.95/Guwahati.
 2. Interview with Ambu Bora. 14.6.95/Guwahati.
 3. Quated form Abstract of Summary Information; No.184/Kamrup/5-6-48.

Upper Assam¹. The 'secret' conference 'reviewed' the party's activities and the growing confrontation with the government. " In this conference, we decided to create some military command, to advance the peasant movement into armed confrontation, to give armed training to the 'ganabahini and to create liberated zone"²

Moreover, "we had decided to make our organisation more aggressive. Though some of the district had witnessed more organisational strength of the party, we are not yet prepared to face the government machinery... decision was taken to build up the party as more offensive"³

The Party's new militant stand vis-a-vis the Assam government situated KBP in more aggressive form. However, it would be a simplistic argument, if we don't take into account of the condition created for an aggressive posture. In the course of the adhiar mobilisation in the post-harvesting season of 1948, the adhiars refused to pay the paddy and consequent confrontation with police create a tense situation in many areas. The more the adhiars succeeded in his bargain with the landowner, the more he

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1. Specific date couldn't be confirmed but somewhere in the later 1949/during the winter season.
 2. H. Deka Jiban p.85.
 3. T.S.Deka: Mukti; p.196.

strengthened his position. The 1948-49 harvesting season had seen more propaganda by the RCPI and the subsequent police repression.

Among the tribal people of the submontane belt on the South of Kamrup district, there has been intensive communist propaganda¹. The KBP made an appeal to the peasants to 'form a volunteer corps with members of all classes of people, not to obey Assam government, to insult and drive away all persons who asked for votes and to take help of Red flag by all classes of people²'. The RCPI leadership had decided not to participate in the elections to the local bodies with increased its hostility to the Assam government. They accused the 'present government's maladministration for the ill-clad and ill-clad situation of the peasants" who were 'the backbone of the government'. A few meetings were held in different parts of the district where the Assam government was criticised.

"In Kamrup district, a meeting (attended by 2000) was held on 18th February under auspices of KBP at Kendu Kuchi, Nalbari, at which speeches were delivered urging the audience to fight against the capitalists

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1. 236(7)Kamrup/19-2-49. Quoted from Abstract of Summary Information NO. 236(7)/Kamrup 19-2-49.
 2. Quoted from Abstract of Summary Information No. 220/Sibasagar/5-2-49.

and thus achieve Krishak Raj in the country. . . . the present government was sucking the blood of the poor classes by means of systems of control and imposition of various taxes..."¹

Extensive anti-government propaganda were expressed through leaflets. The leaflets criticised the government for its anti-people stand. The Beltola mauza came under the influence the KBP by this time. Incidents of "snatching away" of paddy from the landowners; assault on the landowners or on their agents occurred on large-scale. In many cases, it was the spontaneous reaction of the adhiars to the landowners. The local KBP activists were taking a 'leading part' in the struggle.

"On 1st January, 1949, Padmadhar Bora went to Kalitakuchi gaon with his servant on two bicycles hiring a pony cart to collect adhiar revenue from Biharn Mikir, who was absent and no revenue could be collected. On his way back at Birkuchi gaon Dambarodar Injal, Dhaniram and with 15 others attacked them, snatched away the two bicycles and threw away the loads of the pony cart. 9 persons have been arrested...This is an outcome of the communist plan among

1. Quoted from Abstract of Summary Information No. 324(4)/Kamrup 5-3-49.

the tribal people."¹

The description didn't mention about the intention of the adhiar but was a sound indication of evading of the landowner by the adhiar. To escape from a place of confrontation might be a pragmatic approach on the part of the adhiar. Moreover, it was a denial of the importance of the land owners authority as the master of his fate. Landowners were stopped from coming into the villages to collect the rent.

"On 6th January, Sarat Chandra Sharma a mohorrer of Dr. Hare Krishna Das of Guwahati went to Saokuchi to collect the adhiar Revenue. On his way back at Saokuchi gaon some 10 to 12 persons attacked and assaulted him for going to the village to arrange to collect Adhiar Revenue. Dambarudhar Injal and Dhireswar Kalita took a leading part".

Again,

"it is reported that about 80 tribal women compelled two persons who have gone to Guoghuli and Kotahbari under Beltola mouza on 19th January to give an undertaking not to visit those villages to collect

1. Quoted from Abstract of Summary Information no.324 (4) Kamrup 5.3.49.

adhiar revenue before they would let them go...¹

A situation had arrived when without the active intervention of KBP, the adhiars resisted the attempt of the landowners to collect the rent. Offering resistance to the landowners or to the police by the women was the stage where the confrontation between the two had reached its ultimate high point.

During 1949-50 harvesting season, the KBP resorted to a more aggressive stand. They successfully resisted the eviction of the adhiars for their refusal to pay the revenue. They created liberated zones in different parts of the district. The Beltola mauza, Dhigheli, Masalpur, Rani were declared as liberated zone.² The liberated zones witnessed the emergence of a 'parallel government' and the KBP became the virtual authority in those areas '... the Southern part of the district more or less was running a parallel government. But we couldn't gather the strength to face the government in matter of military strength. We were avoiding the government forces. There was a total stoppage of paying rent to the landowners, landowners couldn't enter the villages, the ryots were enjoying the occupancy rights,

1. Abstract of Summary Information no. 105/Kamrup 8-1-49.
2. During my interview, many respondent told me about these areas as liberated zones.

the landowners couldn't dare to evict the tenants. There was a halt to the government administration in the villages. The necessary 'works' of the village was done according to the KBP decisions. Hunters, the government forest contractors were entering the forest with the KBP permission only¹

The more the areas were further from the district administration headquarter, the sense of local autonomy grew correspondingly. Rather a with well organised but repressive police force, the state government didn't had the adequate equipment to master their superiority over those areas. The tribal sense of independence, the traditional functional institution of village panchayats very much fitted into those propagation of the idea of a liberated zone'. The sense of assertion of power vis-a-vis the 'exploiters' was a new feeling of independence and it made them more assertive. The KBP also appealed to the police about their "village connection". " We reminded them of their attachment to the peasant families"² In many

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1. H.Deka- Jiban p.93. The Police sources although didn't refer to the " Liberated Zones' yet they warned the state government of an parallel administration run by KBP in the Beltola region. See File no. Police Intelligence Department; I/C- 6/14(C)-1950; I/C- 6/(14)-(C) 1949-I; I/A-396)-C/1950.
 2. Interview with Kamini Sarma, 21.6.95, Rangiya.

cases, the police intentionally avoided siding with the landowners. At the instance of KBP, landowners granaries were looted and these were distributed among the needy peasants according to this needs. Popularly known as " Bhakeri Bhanga" (grannery^g breaking) movement, it spread into the different parts of the district. "Beltola, Rani, Bordnar, Dhiglei etc. were the areas where the movement took an item intensive form."¹ Again, "When the ryots were taking out the rice from his two full granaries, the brahmin landowner stood there helplessly. He even feared to inform the police. The collected rice was distributed in the spot".

The looting of the granaries occurred in those areas where the food scarcity was more. The Congress ministry headed by Gopinath Bordoloi were fully 'aware' of the situation arising out of food scarcity and its high prices. The scarcity of food stuff and other essential things and their increasing prices created a situation conducive for the " Communists' for anti-government propaganda. Gopinath Bordoloi, Assam premier wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India that "...The communists propaganda will always have some influence on the masses so long as high prices and scarcity of essential things like food

1. Interview with Ambu Bora 8.6.95, Guwahati.

stuff and other commodities...continue to hold the market as now.¹

Response of the Government

The growing refusal of the adhiars to pay the rent, the increasing hostility to the landowners and the constant failure of the district administration to control the situation forced the Assam government to look into the matter seriously. In 1949 the situation in the Beltola mauza was becoming a matter of serious concern. The Police reported ' Unless the whole of Beltola mauza is declared as 'Disturbed Area' the situation may go beyond control.. this area is frequently raided by Armed police".²

In an editorial, the *Assamiya*, expressed its anxiety about 'the conspiracy of the communist among the illiterate villagers of in the back ward villages of Gawhati" which resulted in the 'lawlessness of those areas".³ It appealed to the Assam government to take rigorous measures to put an end to the 'communist arrogance'. It found the possibility

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1. Gopinath Bordoloi in 'secret and personal' communication J.L. Nehru File No.PS/4/49. [These materials were consulted at the house of Nihar Mukherjee, Guwahati].
 2. Quated from Abstract of Summary Information on 441/Kamrup/19.3.49.
 3. Assamiya (Daily), 19 June, 1948.

of a deterioration in the situation.

The Premier Gopinath Bordoloi aware of the 'communist menace', admitted that.. " in some places to resist payment of revenue in cash or kind, inspite of the fact that government by a legislation gave than sufficient concession in the matter of payment of rent and in their occupancy rights ... The Police are assuring is that in no Time the Situation will be normal".

The state government geared up itself to check any probable 'revolution'. Bordoloi admitted that 'sometimes even I myself feel that it is we who would be indirectly responsible if a bloody revolution is to come." In the month of August, 1949, the 'most important event" was the "alleged communist attempt to bring down the morale of government by forcible occupation of the government police station the government is taking all possible steps to meet this challenge... whether time is not yet come for declaring the communist organisations-R.C.P.I and C.P.I as illegal."

The RCPI under the banner of KBP had resorted to few incidents resulting in the murder and attack of government officials. A few suspected police informers were killed by the cadres of Ganabahini. "... the dead body of Bhakhara Ram Kachari, a retired forest ranger of Bajali in Kamrup

district who was missing for a long time has recently been found. It is suspected that he was murdered by RCPI workers."¹

" He was an informer to the police. He would show the houses of the party workers.... Ganabahini regarded him as class enemy and decided to kill him".²

A landowner, Ganga Sharma who led the Pattadar Sangha in Bangarpara area was also killed.³ Instances occurred when the local unit of the party incited the adhiars to resort to more violent activities. In the Northern belt of the district at the Tihu town, the local party unit decided to attack the town and to punish a few persons and the government offices'.⁴

"A few persons from Tinu town practise adhi-chukani in the villages.. They used to harass the ryots. The landowners were mostly Congress minded people.... The ryots had their anguish at the Tinu Town... In the name of capturing regional power party resorted to such adventurous

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1. File No.11-C/50, 1950 Governors Secretariat (confidential).
 2. T.S.Deka : Mukti, p.178.
 3. Interview with Govinda Kalita 18.6.95, Guwahati.
 4. T.S.Deka : Mukti, p.181-182.

task (to attack the town..).... Ganabahini attacked the town soon after the sunset. The sub-divisional collector's office was burned down. All the documents destroyed... A few houses were attacked...No one from Ganabahini could be arrested.." Quoting central home minister Sardar Vallabh Patel in the Central legislature, the Assamiya reported¹ the incident as done by the RCPI in an attempt to thwart the Assam government.

As the adhiars stopped paying the rent, the RCPI was increasing its anti-government stand. "... meetings are being held where communistic news are being fully propagated and all in the Congress government, starting from the Prime Minister of India down to the Deputy Commissioners.. are being abused in undignified and some times in filthy language".²

The government was described and mocked as the "government of Manu"³ There were rumours about the government of RCPI Rumours spread about the formation of a new peoples government. "In the 1950, the Indian Almanac

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1. Assamiya (Weekly), 18 March, 1950.
 2. Bordoloi to Nehru (personal communications), opp.cit.
 3. Abstract of Summary information no.441/Kamrup.

predicted about the formation of RCPI government".¹

The Movement in 1950

The harvesting season of 1949-50 showed a similar response to that of 1948-49. Adhiars weren't in a mood to pay their rent. But in the face of increasing police repression, where the KBP was organisationally weak the adhiars tried to come into agreement with the landowners.

"Tribal villagers of Lutuma and Udalbakra.. have paid their adhiar revenue to landlords... some villagers have been hard hit as they had to pay revenue for 2 years at one time."

More the police repression was there, more were cases where the adhiars agreed to come to compromise. Sometimes, the landowners tried to settle the things through. " The caste-Hindu Assamese adhiars were reminded of their distinct identity from that of the tribals."³

The RCPI started active propaganda against the Assam government for its failure to check the inflating price rice and the procurement drive,

1. Interview with Nihar Mukherjee - 14.5.95, Guwahati.

"RCPI members Govinda Kalita, Kamini Sharma and Upen Das armed with stun guns are reportedly making propaganda in Kerakuchi village in Kamrup district distributing a cyclostyled leaflet issued by the Assam Krishak Banua Panchayat...The leaflet urges the villagers to refuse to deliver paddy to Government agency. It alleges that Government by encouraging the blackmarketers and taking away paddy from the cultivators through procurement department have thrown the poor villagers into the grip of famine. It asked the people to organise Ganabahini and to activate the Panchayats to establish Peasant-labour Panchayat Raj"¹

The poorer section of the peasants had expressed their "resentment over the .. paddy procurement drive of the Government". The All Assam Tribal league a pro-congress platform while trying to own over the sympathy of the "communist minded tribals" towards the Government requested the later to stop th exploitation of the situation of anti-Government propaganda" by the "leftist elements of the tribal people."

Appeal was also made to the rich peasants to give loan of paddy to the poor people and exhorting the peasants not to part with land and give crop-share to the land-owners". Leaflets in Assamese with these appeals were found

circulating in Kamrup district in the month of November and December, 1950.

As the KBP leaders were arrested and many went underground and it led the way to the autonomy of the KBP local units. As the RCPI had been banned in Assam with effect from the 14th June, 1950, the State government launched its offensive throughout the province.¹

As the RCPI and CPI was outlawed, the party cadres were still intensifying its anti-government stand, appealing to the adhiars not to pay the rent. The spate of secret leaflets was increased along with secret meetings. "The party was intensifying its leaflet barrage in Kamrup district, the prominent ones being headed 'Don't surrender a grain of rice even if killed'". There were still incidents where looting of granaries were spreading into new areas. Threatening letters have been issued by the RCPI party members to some persons at Beltola to distribute paddy from their granaries to the poor". In the face of police repression, the adhiars were showing mixed response to the RCPI propaganda trying to keep its hold intact in South Kamrup. They were 'agitating the villagers not to

1. File No.6-C/50, Governors Secretariat (confidential).

pay land revenue in any form to the land owners"¹
Subscriptions were being raised at Beltola for the party fund.

The Congress ministry had decided to procure paddy to control the increasing prices and food scarcity as the prices of essential commodities were going up. This situation continued till 1950-51. " Scarcity of rice is reported from all quarters specially from Khashi and Jaintia Hills, Nowgong and Kamrup". There was ' reluctance amongst the cultivators and Traders to part with their accumulated rice on the apprehension that rice may not be available. Paddy looted from the granaries of the rich peasants, money from the businessmen were distributed among the poor. Probably, party resorted to this prototype 'Robin Hood' character to gain popularity among distress stricken population.

In the face of severe police crackdown, the RCPI attempted to strengthen its organisational set up. More training centres were started for the Ganabahini members in North Kamrup at Tihu, Digholi and near the foot hills of Bhutan hills".² The cadres were given a certain amount of

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1. Abstract of Summary Information no.184, Kamrup, 9.10.50.
 2. File no.6-C/50, Governor's Secretariat (confidential).

wage:

There was reported attempt to tactical alliance with the CPI. There were instances when RCPI cadres and CPI cadres came into open hostility. "In a bulletin in Assamese issued by RCPI .. appealed to the people of Beltola area not to believe what the CPI were saying them as the latter organisation was an agent of the Congress Government and the capitalists."¹ These hostilities were of very local nature trying to get hold of the support bases in different ares. "The CPI had few bases in the Beltola area and successfully mobilised the adhiars... Hostility between the two was quite frequent. Incidents occurred when party activities from the other party were kidnaped or captured...."² In the neighbouring Nowgong district, there was a reported 'collaboration with the RCPI by the CPI workers and tried "to engineer food riots by looting the granaries of the landlords and out-laying government go-downs". "In Kamrup district the RCPI is looking for a working alliance with the CPI and some leading members recently held a meeting at Beltola with Nilamoni Borthakur, Sushen Bhuyan and Bistu Bora of CPI for

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1. File No. 6-C/50/dated:07.9.50 Governor's Secretariat (Confidential).
 2. T.S.Deka; Mukti: p.189.

the purpose... no decision had been taken".¹

The Congress ministry, apart from police and military operations tried to win over the agitated peasants. The Tribal League was used as the suitable platform to alienate the tribal peasants away from the communist hold. Village Defense parties were formed to check the communist activities of in the villages.

"The leaders of the Tribal league are still carrying propaganda advising the Tribals to keep aloof from subversive groups and urging them to join and strengthen the Tribal League for making good use of the citizenship rights and privileges as laid down in the Constitution of India. The tribal villagers, however, are gradually joining the Congress and are forming Villages Blefence Parties'.²

Apart from the rich landowners, the small landowners who became the target of the 'communist' attack, lended their support to he Congress ministry in its anti-communist drive. The 'anti-Bengali' sentiment was on rise in the district due to the active propaganda of 'Asom Jatiya

1. Abstract of Summary Information: No.205/Kamrup/17.11.50.
2. File No.6-C/50, dt.29.11.50 Governor's Secretariat. (Confidential)

Mahasabha'. The symbolic representation of the Bengalee as 'Communist' had already alienated the latter from the necessity of mainstream Assamese political consciousness. Police and military atrocities in the villages created fear and anxiety. The socialists party of India activists while trying to fill in the vacuum created by the arrest of RCPI and CPI activists gave moderate appeal to the peasants to give only one fourth of the produce to the landowners but the "adhiars have not responded to this call so far for fear of losing the Adhiar land"¹.

In some cases, the "tribal villagers" helped the police force to trace out the party activists. A situation had arrived when the landowners were in better position of forcefully collect the adhiar and failure to pay the share-produce on the part of the adhiars led to evictions. Casual theft, robberies, looting committed by the RCPI activists also caused a situation of fear and anxiety. The flexibility of administration and the space created by the party for 'socio-economic outrages' was appropriated by professional "individual for whom crime is source of livelihood rather than an act of defiance and who is alien to the peasants as to the wealthier classes upon whom he may

1. Ibid.

somewhat more frequently".¹ The presence of party activists and the consequent police raids were regarded as "social calamity" rather than the hope of the establishment of 'peasant raj'. The continued infiltration of Bengal communists into the rural areas of the district heightened the caste-community dynamic. As more Assamese communist leaders were put behind the bars, a few Bengalee communists left behind to co-ordinate in the ongoing propaganda. This along with the growing anti-Bengalee feeling came into creation of a separate Assamese identity.

In the face of continued peasant agitation, the Congress party tried to bring the agitated peasants into their fold. In 1949, the Congress denied the necessity of a separate organisation to mobilise the "landless ryots and the tenant cultivators".² But they decided to start "Peasant organisation Front of Congress to do away with all the misunderstandings among the peasants. By March 1950, it took up the issue of mobilisation of the 'agricultural labours' i.e. adhiars, landless ryots after the ideology of

1. Quoted from 'Social bandits and other heroic criminals: by Ralph A. Austen in Donald Crummey (ed.) Banditry, Rebellion and social Protest in Africa (James currey, London; Heinemann; Protmouth N.A., 1986) p.94.
2. Assam Provincial Congress Committee Proceedings: Resolution no.10 dated 19.3.1950/Gauhati/[The Proceedings has been consulted at Nehru Memorial Musuem and Library, New Delhi] hereafter APCC proceedings.

the Congress. Resolution were adopted to form a sub-committee... to take up the work for organising such labour and forming unions line in cooperation with the congress committee in the province".¹

Contradiction and Retreat of the Party

Failure to withstand the pressure of the Assam Government and the losing social bases gave a serious setback to the organisational set up of the party.² Regarded as party 'activists', the peasants were also harassed and atrocities were leashed out to them. Adhiars were forced to pay the share-produce. The unsystematic killing of people was projected by the press as 'Party of dacoits'. In such a situation, the party cadres started questioning the validity of the 'Birbhum thesis'. "...there has been split in the inner circle of the party because some members contend that their offensive activities should be directed against the Government instead of murdering villagers while others don't want to fight the government and want to surrender. It is also reported that the party is losing its popular support due to the commission of docotities and murders by the party and the members of the village

1. Ibid, Resolution no.9, dated 11.6.1949.
2. Govinda Kalita, Hari Das Deka, Tarun Sen Deka, Kamini Sarma were arrested.

Ganabahini are hesitant to obey the orders of the leaders".¹

The main focus of debate came around the topic losing of the popular support which arose out of the 'murdering of the villagers'. To this was added the 'chaotic' calamity created by the police repression. In a coherent peasant society the 'good and decent image' of a villager no longer rested with the party activists. They were seen as 'anti-social element'. There was attempt on the top leadership level to check this split and more anti-Government propaganda was going on. The party accused that 'the Congress Government is pursuing a severe repressive policy in India like that of Anglo-American Imperialists in far East.... The people (in Assam) one being subjected to inhuman torture and incredible humiliation.² People were urged to take up arms and resist the alleged atrocities of the Government under the leadership of the party. The party felt that Assam was on

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1. File no.11-C/50, dated 7.11.50, Governor's Secretariat (confidential).
 2. The party's mouth piece 'Panchayat Raj' oct/nov, 1950. File No. 11-C/50 - 4.12.50.

the path of Revolution.¹ In 1950-51 harvesting season the adhiars were forced to pay their share-produce. The underground party activists were still carrying on their propaganda against the landowners. Paddy was reaped from the fields secretly with the help of Ganabahini. "In the Satgaon locality, there was farm land of Kalicharan Sen. We have decided to reap the paddy. Many ryots came and they reaped the harvest. The Ganabahini members were guarding us... The military knew about it but didn't intervene".² In the absence of more evidence, we cannot suggest the attitude of the ryots into the appeal of the RCPI. It was a temporary retreat on the part of the adhiars to evade oppressive police repression. However as the party remained banned their open activities came to a halt.

By 1951, Party's thesis of capturing regional power didn't seem to materialise inspite of their successful mobilisation of the peasants. In 1953, the party had its all-India conference in the Basugaon area of the Goalpara

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1. A printed bulletin entitled 'Biplafir Pathe Assam' issued by the RCPI leader Panalal Das Gupta was found in circulation in Kamrup in the last part of 1950. File No. 6-C/50 dt.6.12.50. Governor's Secretariat (confidential)
 2. Interview: Kamini Sarma dt.21.6.95 He referred the incident to the month of December, 1951.

district. The government had lifted the ban on the party on 1st January, 1953. The conference had adopted a proposal for 'united left movement'. The Birbhum thesis's emphasis on armed struggle was rejected and decided to go for parliamentary politics and mass movement.

This proposal was opposed and the party formally splited. This proposal was advanced by Haren Kalita, Haridas Deka, Upen Das, Kamala Majumdar, Chattra Singh Tenon, Loknath Baruah, Upen Das, Kamala Majumdar, Govinda Kalita, Baneswar Saikia, Nihar Mukherjee.¹

Thus, to conclude, the study of the adhiar movement has to be seen in the wider spectrum of the peasant resistance and the Indian left movement, with specific emphasis on the nature of the peasant's response to the stress and strain originated under the left wing mobilisation.

1. Interview with Nihar Mukherjee, 19.6.95/Guwahati, Kamala Majumdar, 19.5.95/Guwahati, Quoted in T.S.Deka; Mukti; p.218.

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- Baneswar Saikia : Interview was taken 12.6.95 at his residence, Haibargoan, Nagong. He was a student cadre of RCPI during 1947-52.
- Kamini Sarma : Interview was taken on 21.6.95 at his residence Rangiya, Kamrup. A local Congress activist before joining RCPI, he took a leading part in the mobilisation of the adhiars in the northern part of the Kamrup district.
- Kamala Majumdar : Interview was taken on 19.6.95 at Guwahati. She joined RCPI in 1947 and participated in the Birbhum conference of RCPI, 1948. She took a leading part in organising The Assam Nari Mukti Sangha, the women's front of RCPI.
- Bhaghi Majhi : Interview was taken on 31.12.95 at Beltola, Guwahati. An adhiar from Santhal community was a supporter of KBP. He was arrested by the police when the party was banned and he claimed that "he was tortured to the worst extent".
- Nihar Mukherji : Interview was taken on 15.6.96 and 16.6.96 at Lachit Nagar, Guwahati. He was a RCPI activist and involved in the mobilisation of the adhiars in the North Kamrup area.
- Ambu Bora : Interview was taken on 8.6.96, and 14.6.96 at Dispur, Guwahati. A student during the adhiar movement he was a KBP cadre.