

Spaces, Borders, Histories:
Identity Construction in Colonial Goalpara (INDIA)

Sanghamitra Misra

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Abstract

The thesis traces the construction of a regional identity in the historically transitional area of Goalpara, located on the western borders of the colonial province of Assam, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The relationship between the emergence of new concepts of political space and changes in the political economy informs this work, which begins with the entry of the colonial state into the region and its transition from an initially hesitant power, relying on the symbolic memory of previous empires, to a more confident and decisively interventionist one, dependent on rent collection and a centralized and effective apparatus of control. The second chapter locates the emergence of a cultural identity in a region of overlapping and multiple sovereignties, as new concepts of territoriality and sovereignty were imposed under colonial rule. It studies the subsequent displacement of indigenous concepts of space and the refashioning of social relationships between local groups. It explores the attempt at a construction of communities into singular, substantive entities in a region where, despite increasing sedenterisation, the adoption of sedentary or non-sedentary lifestyles was far from rigid and determined. Discussed here is the relationship between topography and politics. The narrative is then carried on to the third chapter, on the colonial state's determination of social and political space through the discourse of mapping and the creation of a centralized, integrated structure and system of social action, evident in the role of colonial law. The thesis does not argue for a seamless hegemony of the colonial state. Rather, it views colonial projects as being shaped in varied encounters with the colonised which involved a frequent circumvention and contestation of the state's claims to superiority. The significance of the autonomy and agency of the colonised becomes evident in history writing, a discourse of legitimacy used by both the colonial state and Assamese nationalism. The fourth chapter explores the ways in which the delimiting of different forms of space in the modern colonial district of Goalpara was both reinforced and resisted through the narrative structure of history. It recognises the role of history writing in the imagining of a 'Goalparia' identity and views such writing, which resisted singular narratives of Assamese nationalism, as discourses that always exist marginally in certain areas, challenging, destabilising and displacing the dominant discourses. The last chapter looks at similar resistance and imagining of a collective identity by Goalpara's traditional elite within the realm of language. The educated middle class who spoke in a rational and liberal voice offered better potential for political investment for the colonial state than the traditional powers but the framework of colonial law still allowed for a continuance of aspects of the 'old regime'. This chapter studies the concerns of this marginalised traditional elite and explores their reinvention of roles within the newly emerging and expanding public sphere, which centred around producing a political consciousness through a contest over the use of language.

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Glossary

Abwabs	Cesses
Adhiars	Sharecropper entitled to half a share of the produce
Aghur	Precious, fragrant wood
Amlas	Clerks or ministerial officers
Annas	1/16 of a rupee
Barkandezes	Mercenary soldiers and retainers
Bhati	Literally, downstream but also southern Assam and eastern and southern Bengal
Bhatias	People from bhati
Bigha	A measure of land, about 1/3 of an acre
Char/chapori	Flood plains
Chokeys	Toll houses
Chukanidars	Tenure holder below a jotedar
Cowries	Shells used as a medium of exchange
Dar-chukanidar	Tenure holder below a chukanidar
Desiya Bhasa	Local term for the language of Goalpara
Diwan	Zamindari officer concerned with finance
Haats	Weekly markets
Jauna	A robe
Jote/jotedar	Cultivable land/holder of a jote directly from the state or the zamindar
Kabuliat	A deed recording the acceptance of the terms of the <i>patta</i>
Lakhiraj	Rent free privileged tenure
Mahout	Elephant driver
Maunds	A measurement of weight, about 82 lbs
Moishal	A person employed to look after buffaloes
Narayani Rupees	The currency of the state of Cooch Behar
Nirikh	Rate, a market price
Paat	Jute (Bengali)
Paikars	Itinerant merchants
Pargana	Subordinate unit in revenue administration
Patta	Lease/tenancy/ownership documentation of land
Payal Pattas	Perpetual leases granted by jotedars to cultivators in order to reclaim wastelands
Phandi	Elephant catcher
Pilos	Officials of the Bhutan monarchy
Puthis	Printed or hand-written texts
Qanungo	Revenue officer
Sairat	Non-agricultural duties
Salami	Capitation fee usually paid at first assumption of tenancy or for clearing fresh land
Sanad	A deed/charter granted by a ruler
Soubahs	Officials of the Bhutan monarchy
Vamshavalis	Family Histories

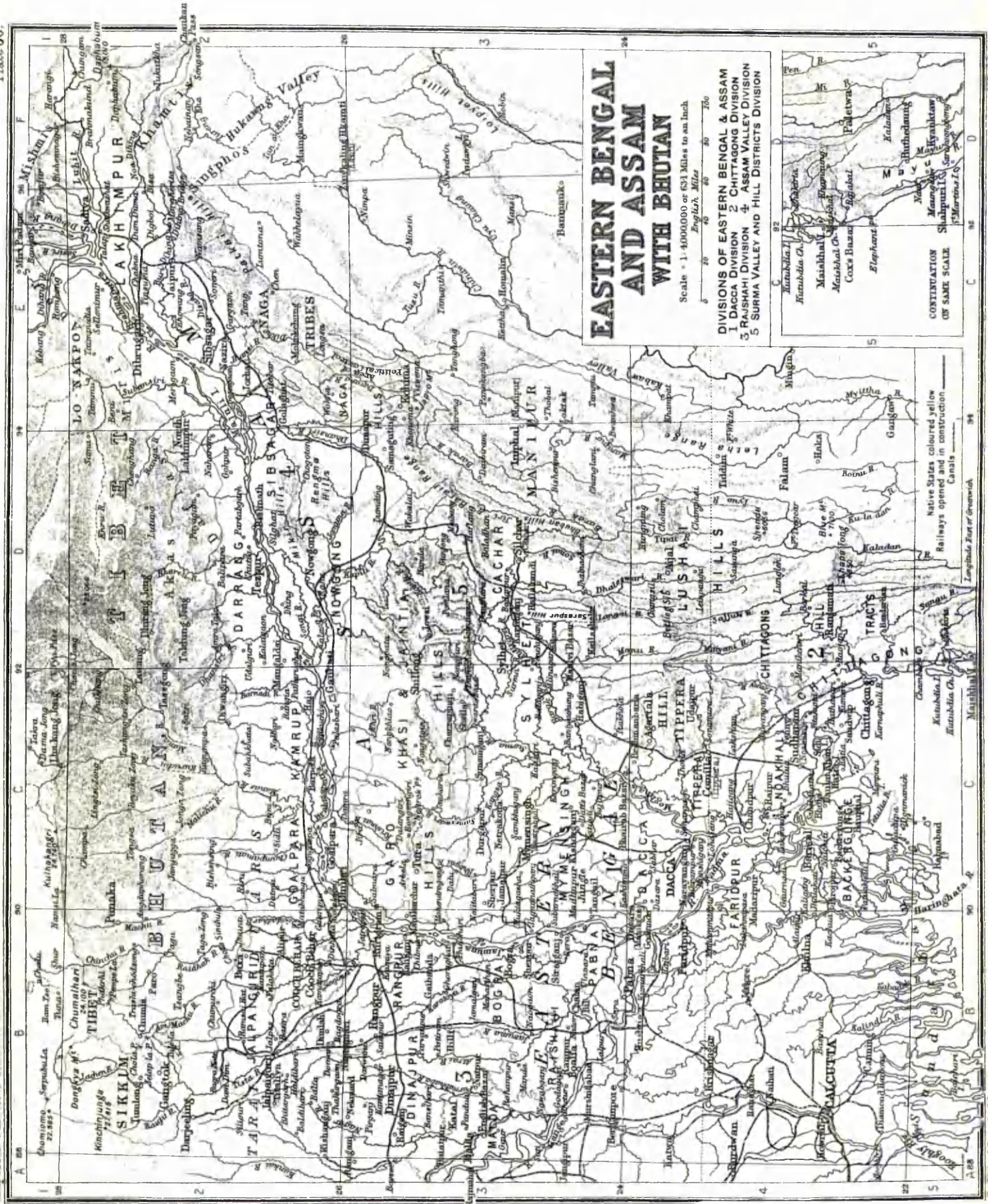
Abbreviations

ALCP	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
APAI	Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence
ASF	Assam Secretariat Files
ASP	Assam Secretariat Proceedings
BTA	Bengal Tenancy Act
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies
GTA	Goalpara Tenancy Act
HPP	Home Political Proceedings
NAI	National Archives of India
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collection
PHA	Political History of Assam

Note on Transliteration

Although 'x' is being increasingly used as the phonetically correct alphabet for the transliteration of Assamese S-sounding words, I have avoided the more scientific transliterations in favour of the conventional mode of spelling to enable an easy reading of the work. Some eighteenth century forms have been retained when it is clear what the original word is. Similarly some familiar spellings of words and place names have been retained without 'modern' transliterations in order to avoid confusion with spellings used in quotations.

Except where indicated, all translations in this work are mine. Some terms used only once have been italicised and explained in the text. Other non-English words are included in the glossary and italicised when they first appear but are otherwise printed in roman.



EASTERN BENGAL AND ASSAM WITH BHUTAN

Scale - 1:4,000,000 or 631 Miles to an Inch
English Miles

- DIVISIONS OF EASTERN BENGAL & ASSAM**
- 1 Dacca Division
 - 2 CHITTAGONG DIVISION
 - 3 RAJSHAHI DIVISION
 - 4 ASSAM VALLEY DIVISION
 - 5 SURMA VALLEY AND HILL DISTRICTS DIVISION



Native States coloured yellow
Railways opened and in construction
Canals

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Bengal State Archives and the National Library at Calcutta, the National Archives and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at Delhi, the Sahitya Sabha Library, the University Library and the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies at Guwahati, and the University Library at Dibrugarh.

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Introduction

I

In an address to a local association in Goalpara in 1928, Gaurinath Shastri, the diwan of the zamindari estate of Gauripur, observed: 'We have never been either Assamese or Bengali. They are both our neighbours. Who are we? We are neither of the two. We are we. We are the people of this area. We are Goalparia ... we are distinct and so are our culture, custom and tradition'.¹ Shastri's observations were indicative of the anxiety of members of Goalpara's local elite. They needed to reinvent themselves through the use of spaces and categories and they articulated their concerns through the imagining of a Goalparia identity in the early twentieth century.

This thesis traces the origins and nature of this process. It has three main elements: the pre-colonial inheritance and the way it evolved; the social and economic changes that were occurring in Goalpara; and the colonial and modern influences, especially among political and social elites. These elements justify the thesis's starting and ending date, and its focus. Goalpara is of interest partly because it was located on the eastern fringes of the colonial empire, and only included as the western-most district of the province of Assam in 1874, after half a century of deliberations and debates. The region's administrative history was rather fragmented, and its economic and social conditions were also in transition over time and space. One phase in its history and in its identity as a region began in the 1870s and came to an end, or at least

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to another point of transition, in the 1930s. This period is the main concern of this thesis.

Studies on the formation of regional identities in colonial India have frequently been located within the emerging public space in the nineteenth century. They focus on the growth and spread of print culture, the standardisation of language, and the emergence of a vernacular elite which subsequently transformed this language into a site for contestation. These are the standard tropes that accompany the study of identity formation, along with notions of a shared historical and cultural space.²

This work differs from many of its predecessors in that while it looks at expressions of Goalparia identity within the discursive sphere, it does so while placing them in the context of change in material conditions under colonialism. It suggests that Goalpara was a 'frontier' on the subcontinental mainstream in terms of social norms, settled production, forests and fields, long-distance trade and communication, and centralised political power, law and taxation, as well as already being liminal in regional terms between proto-'Bengal' and proto-'Assam'. This provides the context for examining the obvious power of the colonial state and the changes in the political economy of the region, points of emphasis that are reiterated through the thesis.

It is of significance that largescale changes were introduced in the region within a brief period of less than half a century. The sedenterisation of local communities, the 'colonisation of wastelands' scheme and the migration of thousands

¹Gaurinath Shastri, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samitir Gauripur Adhibheshanar Sabhapatir Abhibhasan (Presidential Address to the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.33.

² Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, Bombay, 1994; Pragati Mohapatra, 'The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', Unpublished Ph .D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1997; Vasudha Pande, 'The Making of Modern Kumaon circa 1815-

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of cultivators from the densely populated char areas of eastern Bengal altered not only the population figures and the regional economy but also the local perceptions of law and other colonial institutions. These changes were all effected between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. The thesis argues that this fairly rapid (and documented) move from fluid to normative, from jhum (shifting) to settled cultivation, and from the local to the interregional in terms of power, trade and law, transformed Goalpara. It may be taken to be a laboratory for analysing the impact of colonialism, and that too justifies the scope of this work.

There has been a tendency in the historiography invariably to project a 'successful identity' and see it as the logical outcome of the process of modernisation initiated over long periods of colonial rule. However, this is not the story of a success. The proponents of a Goalpara identity used most of the recognised criteria for defining a region, including the identification of a collective self that was predicated on a strong conception of difference, a narrative of common history, and a shared language. Despite this, the imagining of a Goalpara people remained a thwarted construction, defined by continuously shifting boundaries and overlapping and multiple notions of identity. The thesis therefore focuses on the several less dramatic moments of accommodation and fragmentation that characterised this imagining. Retaining this focus helps us understand some of the complex processes and influences involved in the articulation of collectivities in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It sensitises us to the transient nature of regional identity and to the fact that such identities are often easier to recognise by their absence than by their

1930', University of Delhi, 1999; Richard Burghart, 'A Quarrel in the Language Family: Agency and Representations of Speech in Mithila', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1993.

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presence.³ Drawing on the arguments of Willem Van Schendel, this work seeks to explain 'why...a new identity has been "invented" at all', and how 'a measure of acceptance [of] this in itself is a reflection of important and irreversible change'.⁴

A final point on the scope of the thesis is that it is mainly about the landed elite. As Goalpara's society was dominated by landed families until the middle of the twentieth century, it was perhaps not surprising that they played a significant role in the articulation of a collective Goalparia identity. There were also alternative imaginings of collectivities, marked by indifference and resistance to this idea. Indeed, the voice of the conservative, property-owning elite was becoming marginalised by the early twentieth century. Nonetheless property owners continued to be the most visible and well-documented of social groups, one that remained etched in the representations of Goalpara during this period and influenced their broad contours.

In this last respect the thesis strays into subjects that have been much studied. The financial fortunes of local powers and their declining social position in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been examined for most regions of South Asia. Most of these works concentrated on the agrarian economy, but some have considered the nature of local authority. Among others, Harald Tambs-Lyche's work on Kathiawar looks at the emergence of new social groups in a society dominated by Rajput clans and reduces this transformation into 'a shifting balance of forces', that included opposition between the rulers and the merchants and between the country and

³ Edward Royle (ed.), *Issues of Regional Identity*, New York, 1998, 'Introduction', p.11.

⁴ Willem Van Schendel, 'The Invention of the "Jummas": State Formation and Ethnicity in South Eastern Bangladesh' in Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, Abhijit Dasgupta and Willem Van Schendel (eds.), *Bengal, Communities, Development and States*, New Delhi, 1984, p.173.

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the town.⁵ Set towards the end of Tambs-Lyche's period, John McLane's work focuses on the continuing relevance of kinship in the local imagination of Burdwan in Bengal.⁶ Once again, this study on the relationship between traditional forms of political authority and the colonial state is defined in terms of 'how patrimonial values of local kinship clashed with individualistic, legalistic British culture'.⁷

Unlike these studies, this work does not view the relationship between the traditional local magnates and the newly emerging social groups as a series of dichotomous conflicts. Instead it argues that, despite their authority being increasingly both created and sustained by the colonial state, Goalpara's landed elite negotiated within the emerging vernacular public space to reinvent themselves. Often they used the tropes of modern identity formation and indigenous cultural reserves, and constructed a political community around the notion of a collective linguistic identity. In the process, they came into conflict with the emerging Assamese intelligentsia but also expanded the existing public space. The remainder of the introduction will sketch the main concerns and arguments of the thesis, partly in the context of some existing approaches.

II

The thesis is built around the historicity of the Goalparia identity which it sees as partly a product of processes of change. The various chapters are informed by the

⁵ Harald Tambs -Lyche, *Power, Profit and Poetry, Traditional Society in Kathiawar, Western India*, Delhi, 1997.

⁶ John McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in 18th century Bengal*, Cambridge, 1993.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.

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link between the emergence of new concepts of space and developments in the political economy of the region as a result of colonial rule. The idea of a regional identity therefore is seen as an imagined construct no less than the nation is, subject to moments of disintegration and accommodation and characterised by transient, shifting boundaries.

How does this compare with other studies? First, these are not recognised concepts and approaches in historical writings on Goalpara. Recent scholarship on the region includes Santo Barman's *The Zamindari System in Goalpara*, a text that limits itself to a narrative of the financial management under the zamindars and reproduces much of the stereotypical oppositions in a mixed economy, including that between the marauding 'tribes' and the settled cultivators. Published several years earlier, Amalendu Guha's *Jamidar Kalin Goalpara Jilar Artha Samajik Avastha (Socio-Economic Conditions in Zamindari Goalpara)*⁸ is, as the title indicates, a study of material conditions in late Mughal and colonial Goalpara. Guha's work however is primarily a rhetorical endorsement of the traditional Marxist approach to issues of class formation and capital and is underscored by a complete disavowal of the nature of colonial modernity and the significance of cultural technologies of colonial rule. Neither work reflects on the historicity of the idea of Goalpara or on the contingency of the Goalparia identity. This work draws from these works but moves beyond anachronistic assumptions to inquire into the imagining of a region and its people.

Secondly, the approach in this thesis depends on defending the region as a unit of analysis for studying the extraordinary impact of colonial rule in a historically transitional area over a century and a half but the various chapters also use specific

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examples from Goalpara to demonstrate larger propositions about the nature of colonial rule. Tracing the process of identity construction in Goalpara becomes the social history of the region, particularly a story about colonial power, pre-colonial continuities, the category of agency and the writing of colonial history. This combination of the local and the general, and of ideas with material conditions, has not often been attempted in the Indian context.

On the other hand, there are ways in which this study develops from recent scholarship. For example, it begins with the imagining of Goalpara in the late Mughal period, and uses Mughal accounts and early colonial travel and ethnographic writings to reveal pre-colonial representations of the area as a defined political space. However an obvious fluidity continued to characterise both the political economy and the social order. Accepting this paradox, the thesis views pre-colonial Goalpara as already experiencing 'the slow less dramatic transformations'⁹ that C.A. Bayly argues provided the context for the emergence of more clearly defined collectivities in a later period. This is particularly evident in the emergence of a rural elite, the zamindars. However, though agreeing with Bayly about the absence of 'sharp ruptures' between the pre-colonial and early colonial encounter, the thesis does not see pre-colonial continuities as the primary determinants of collectivities that were formed in the colonial period. On the contrary, the chapters work on the assumption that the colonial state's preoccupation with the political economy and political power provides the conditions for its use of cultural technologies of rule, and that these constituted influences that were taken up by local agents.

⁹ Published from Dhubri, 1984.

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This allows the development of one of the central concerns of the thesis, and a major controversy in the historiography of India, namely the relative importance of the colonial state and of what might be called an 'indigenous' inheritance or even continuity. Thus the study of the late Mughal period in this work is followed by an examining of the ways in which an initially hesitant colonial state, reliant on the symbolic memory of previous empires, was replaced by a more confident state which was decisively interventionist and dependent on rent collection as a regular source of income. The state's preoccupation with land revenue and notions of property led to a reorganisation of local power and a further entrenchment of the zamindars as the traditional elite who provided the base of support for the newly autonomous regions after the decline of the Mughal state.

Thus environment and social change are added to the agenda of the thesis. The concerns with property are extended to tell the story of continuing sedenterisation of the now colonial district of Goalpara, the categorisation of land into 'waste', 'jungle' and 'cultivated', and the strengthening of the jotedars as the class most able to extend the boundaries of settled agriculture. An important development during this period was the immigration of cultivators from Eastern Bengal, in large enough numbers through the twentieth century for the district to reach its extensive margins of cultivation by the early 1930's. It will be shown that, as part of these processes, there was increased diversification of the regional economy and an expansion of the land market, and that these were among the conditions that contributed to the creation of a unified economic territory. This in turn had significant implications for the idea of a

⁹Chris Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the making of Modern India*, Delhi, 1998, p.21.

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region. The narrative is brought up to the later period of the 1930's which saw the social and financial decline of the Goalpara zamindars, which provides an end-point for the thesis. Of particular interest are the continuing relevance of members of this traditional elite as a means of legitimacy for the state, their partial continuance through institutional contexts created by colonial law, and their reinvention of themselves within the public sphere.

The chapters acknowledge that colonial policies did not entirely modify the material conditions in the region. An increased sedenterisation and growth of the market economy did not mean an elimination of all peripatetic cultures and institutions. For instance, the second chapter suggests that the markets and communities of the Eastern Dooar region in northern Goalpara defied the universal logic of the creation of a unified market economy under capitalism. Rather, exchanges in the hilly reaches were both seasonal and stable, at times defined by the objective market forces and at other times by non-economic factors. The communities living in these areas occupied a liminal space, between settled and mobile worlds, and this liminality extended to their notions of political space which were frequently characterised by ideas of multiple sovereignty and overlapping territoriality. However, the examples of persistence of pre-colonial continuities and of resistance and appropriation that are woven through the chapters do not in any way imply an assertion of greater dominance by the indigenous communities than by the colonial state.

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This becomes evident in the discussion on the significance of the cultural effects of colonial rule. Drawing from the works of critics of colonial modernity,¹⁰ this work argues that, as in other parts of the colonial empire, so in Goalpara too a far more entrenched state, stepped in to restructure elements of local politics, based on relations between the coloniser and the colonised, in the last half of the nineteenth century. (It remained largely dependent on rent, of course, and was restructuring the local economy as well). Also, the state's search for legitimacy ensured that issues of maintenance rather than of conquest came to determine the nature of colonial knowledge, and hence the constituents of local society, as defined by it. Bernard Cohn's work¹¹ has emphasised the conscious way in which a modern colonial regime went about creating the categories in which 'British' and 'Indian' were to define themselves. From the last half of the nineteenth century onwards, in most of colonial India, a large colonial bureaucracy proceeded to classify the colonised and their attributes, with censuses, surveys, and ethnographies, and by recording transactions, marking space, establishing routines, and standardising practices.

In Goalpara the need for systematic knowledge about the colonised generated the predictable volumes of colonial gazetteers, manuals and ethnographic surveys. As part of the Bengal district of Rangpur in the early nineteenth century, the region was included within Francis Buchanan's extensive surveys and used as a base from which to collect information about the neighbouring Ahom kingdom. The next major official

¹⁰There is a vast literature on this subject which includes Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton, 2001, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On the construction of colonial power: structure, discourse and hegemony', in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks (eds.), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony, State and Society in Africa and India*, London, 1994.

¹¹ Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1990 and *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, The British in India*, Delhi, 1997.

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undertaking of ethnographic survey was W. W. Hunter's compilation of detailed statistics of Assam, followed by the publication of provincial gazetteers. Apart from Buchanan and Hunter, other significant products of the ethnographic state included A. J. Mills' *Report on the Province of Assam*¹² and F. C. Hirst's *A Brief History of the Surveys of the Goalpara District*.¹³

Hirst's publication, a collection of early colonial maps of Goalpara, traced the earliest colonial surveys of the region to 1765 and the first maps to the early nineteenth century. This raises another issue that is now familiar to modern historians. From the kind of sources available for Goalpara, there is a temptation to reiterate the perception of maps as modern, scientific representations of geographical reality and space under colonialism, and produced through power-knowledge, on the lines of the works of Thongchai Winichakul and Benedict Anderson.¹⁴ Against the idea that such knowledge was an imposition from 'a different epistemic universe', there are contentions of scholars who critique 'revisionist' perceptions and emphasise instead the role of both Europeans and Indians in the construction of cartographical knowledge.¹⁵

While this perception is no doubt necessary for a critical view of the transitional period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Goalpara's experience suggests an absence of such indigenous technologies and hence makes it

¹² Published in 1854

¹³ Published in 1917.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson's chapter on mapping in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1991, is reflected in the work of Thongchai Winichakul who viewed modern geography as 'another another kind of knowledge of space, with its own classificatory systems, concepts and mediating signs' (*Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii Press, 1994, p.34). Winichakul discusses the existence of pre-colonial indigenous knowledge systems and sees them in conflict with colonial concepts of boundaries and territorial sovereignty which were reinforced by the modern technology of mapping.

¹⁵ See Kapil Raj, 'Circulation and the Emergence of Modern Mapping, Great Britain and Early Colonial India, 1764 -1820', in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.),

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rather difficult to pursue an argument about map-making outside the colonial archive. Rather, cartography appeared to emerge in colonial Goalpara as an enterprise that was consonant with the colonial state's need to order the spatial dimensions of the political economy of the district. The external project of mapping had its resonance in the internal project of settling and categorising the population within demarcated boundaries. Hunter's statistical accounts thus marked the beginning of a new phase in colonial categorisation. It was extended further through the census which added a new dimension to classification.¹⁶

The cultural technologies of colonial rule therefore imposed new rigidities on the pre-colonial world and, as suits the demands of a modern political discourse, gave collectivities fixed and determinate forms. The expansion of the domain of colonial law to maintain both the revenue demand and the social order, in order to rationalise and legitimate the colonial system, also helped reinforce this construction of communities as singular, substantive entities. The cultivators who migrated to Goalpara from eastern Bengal had a greater degree of familiarity with colonial institutions than had existing Goalparias. This added to the processes of bringing new areas of the rural social order within the domain of colonial law and of creating new social groups while allowing for a continuance of old ones.

These too are changes that have been discussed by others. The accompanying ordering of the complex tenurial chain into proprietor, tenant and under-tenant has

Society and Circulation, Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia 1750-1950, Delhi, 2003, p.3.

¹⁶ Writings on census and colonialism include Bernard S. Cohn's 'Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologist among Historians*, Benedict Anderson's 'Census, Map, Museum' in *Imagined Communities*, and Arjun Appadurai's 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Pennsylvania 1993.

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been described by Peter Robb as part of a larger process 'whereby state intervention over landed property sought to reach ever-lower social or tenurial strata ... part of an ever extending categorisation, the attribution of "properties" defining a wider range of people and institutions'.¹⁷ In a recent essay, Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that the fundamental change effected in the discursive domain of modern politics in the colonial period was the shift from the earlier 'fuzzy' sense of the community to an insistence upon the identification of the community in the 'enumerable' sense. Earlier communities were fuzzy because they had ambiguous boundaries which were not territorially based and because they were not enumerated.¹⁸ Drawing from this, the thesis argues that it is crucial to understand colonial identity as a transformed and totalitarian one. Cultural technologies of colonial rule were central to this change. They have been described by Nicholas Dirks in a recent work: 'Resources were converted into colonial commodities through a conquest based as much on knowledge as on military success. But the conquest of colonial knowledge ran far deeper than the mere conquests of armies, for it was in the inscription of colonized spaces that colonial power was translated into saleable forms of knowledge. Colonial conquest was about the production of an archive for and of its rule.'¹⁹

The thesis, however, as has been mentioned earlier, does not argue for a complete hegemony of the colonial state.²⁰ While emphasising changes under

¹⁷ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort, Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India*, Richmond, 1997, p.xvi.

¹⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Imaginary Institutions of India', in Partha Chatterjee and David Arnold (eds.), *Subaltern Studies Vol. VII*, Delhi, 1993, p. 20. See also Peter Robb, 'The Colonial State and the Construction of Indian identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880's', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No. 2, 1997.

¹⁹ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p.105.

²⁰ The elimination of the agency of the colonised in certain works have resulted in the reduction of colonial society, particularly the middle class and the traditional elite, as subjects capable of only

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colonialism, it also accepts the persistence of pre-colonial images in the process of identity construction.²¹ It views colonial projects as being shaped in varied encounters with the colonised and as involving a frequent circumvention and contestation of the state's claims to superiority. Here again, the thesis meets those who seek a return of agency to the colonised. That view has found its defendants, among others, within the proponents of the post-Saidian historiography who have claimed that 'colonial subjects were not passively produced by hegemonic projects but were active agents whose choices and discourses were of fundamental importance to the formation of their societies'.²² A similar perception binds the collection of essays in a volume edited by Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, where the editors argue that colonialism 'was shaped in a struggle---that thinking about empire as much as the daily efforts to manage it were deeply affected in every dimension by the effects of the colonized'.²³

The use of colonial knowledge by the colonised was visible in Goalpara in the formation of formal organisations and the merging of collectivities to form larger entities, discussed in the third chapter. Despite their financial marginalization and declining social authority, Goalpara's zamindars, like their counterparts in Bengal and Bihar, successfully negotiated with colonial institutions and frameworks to present themselves as groups with 'legitimate' interests and rights. Such negotiation was also visible in the reinvention of custom as a powerful political weapon in the Eastern

'derivative' discourses. Partha Chatterjee's *The Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis, 1986, propounds this view. This view in turn is linked to the argument for the total modernity and the derivative character of nationalism.

²¹ For a work that argues against the modernity and colonial origin of identities British India, see Bayly, *Origins of Nationality*.

²² Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Pennsylvania, 1993, Introduction.

²³ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, London 1997, Introduction.

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Dooars, by communities that resented their reduction to the status of agrarian dependents instead of inhabitants of surrounding forests. New spaces for negotiation and conflict between the colonial state and these local communities emerged over issues of customary rights and practices. Custom was significant for legitimating practice within the arena of colonial law.

As would be expected from other studies, and is not denied here, the agency of the colonised was expressed most forcefully within the public space, 'something akin to a public sphere where standards would be defined and reasoned and critiques of authority considered legitimate and proper'.²⁴ Similarly, the spread of print culture provided the basic institutional setting for the formation of this sphere in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Goalpara and Assam as elsewhere. The articulation of a Goalparia identity within this discursive space is an important concern of this work because, despite its emphasis on economic and social contexts, it accepts that the proponents of this identity were reliant on the standard means for evoking a collective political consciousness for redefining boundaries or for reinforcing them.

Hence we come back to language and history. Firstly, to an extent the reinvention of roles by Goalpara's traditional elite was centred around producing a political consciousness through a contest over the use of language within the expanding public sphere. This will be discussed in the fourth chapter which also focuses on the connection between political culture and speech in Goalpara, reflected in writings which re-drew the frontiers of speech to construct the linguistic autonomy of the region.

²⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1998, p.175.

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Linguistic standardisation produced resistance to the inequalities inherent in that process. That resistance was echoed in the response from the region to a second project, history-writing. It is of interest to study the ways in which the delimiting of different forms of space was negotiated in writing from the district that resisted the mainstream narrative of history-writing from Assam. Nonetheless, the thesis does see such attempts at an alternative imagining as reproducing the narrative model of dominant discourses, excluding as they did the histories of lesser polities within the region of Goalpara.

Finally, and more significantly for the purpose of this thesis, the chapters simultaneously delineate the relevance of the regional specificities that were reflected within the discursive realm. The space of the historical narratives from Goalpara, for instance, while borrowing from the knowledge system of post-Enlightenment thought, continued to be set by the persistence of multiple sovereignties and fluid territorial and cultural boundaries in this 'historical frontier' between the regions of Bengal and Assam. The changing adaptation of a local legend about the king Naranarayan, discussed in the fifth chapter, illustrates this willingness to accommodate transitional processes within the narrative structure.

Regional specificities surfaced yet again in the complex negotiation between Goalpara's conservative elite and the colonial state over the issue of language. Thus the fourth chapter suggests that the creation of the provision for 'local option', which allowed considerable flexibility regarding the language of local communities, was an acknowledgement by the officials of the difficulty of locating boundaries of intelligibility in Goalpara, where one language was thought to shade into another more

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gradually than elsewhere. Rajbanshi was formulated as the language of the region by the rural elite and that too emphasises the importance of the context of regional histories. The region was underscored too in the elite's use of folklore from Goalpara, not merely to reinforce the obvious link between nationalism and popular narratives but to evoke the idea of the region as a 'Pranto' or 'frontier' and of its people as 'Prantobashi' or the 'inhabitants of the frontier', living in a space which appeared to be also the frontier of certain forms of civility. This space was frequently extended to include the neighbouring Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Mymensingh and the kingdom of Koch Behar.

Regional particularities therefore provide the context within which to demonstrate some of the ways in which colonial knowledge and power worked in a historically transitional area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As said, the discussion of the issues of state power and knowledge should not be seen as an attempt to locate the thesis within the realm of cultural studies. There is an effort to locate several of the arguments in their material context rather than to abstract them from it, thereby making a case for the continuing relevance of social history writing. The study acknowledges that, although the space for the agency of the colonised was frequently set by the state, to perceive of identities as being unambiguously determined by its hegemony is to flatten complex historical processes. Instead the evidence of the participation of local communities and groups in Goalpara throughout much of this period in various institutions, policies and legislation indicates the contingencies and contradictions of colonial rule and the effect they had on the agenda of the colonised.

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III

It will be helpful to briefly summarise the contents of the various chapters before concluding the Introduction. The first chapter looks at representations of Goalpara as a 'frontier', in accounts from the late Mughal and early colonial period. It explores the social and political environment which supported such representations. The second chapter examines the colonial project of reification and the determination of boundaries of various kinds. The creation of a modern state with permanent borders and undivided sovereignty and the significance of markets as sites for a confrontation between colonial and pre colonial notions of territory and sovereignty are issues of concern in this chapter. In the third chapter, the continuing sedenterisation of the region in the early twentieth century and the migration from Bengal, provide the context for exploring negotiations of space and categories by the state and the colonised. The fourth chapter focuses on the imagining of the Goalparia identity within the discursive realm of language and folklore. It considers the ways in which print culture and the emerging public space were used by a marginalised elite to argue for a distinct regional cultural identity. The last chapter is a study of the power of the historical narrative and its role in evoking a collective regional consciousness. As in the previous chapters, in this chapter too, the changes in the political economy continue to be significant. They inform the project of writing alternative histories of Goalpara.

Chapter One

Frontier Spaces: Production and Power in Pre-Colonial Goalpara

This thesis studies the imagining of Goalpara as a region, not only as a discourse but also in its material and political context. It will consider the relationship between the changing social, economic and political environment and the development of ideas of local identity. It begins therefore by tracing these conditions and representations to the late Mughal period, when the area was already demarcated as a geo-political space, though in terms quite different from those which were to follow.

Goalpara, along with Cooch Behar, and the later Bengal districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri, was part of the medieval Koch kingdom which at its height in the sixteenth century encompassed large parts of western Assam and northern Bengal. The fragmentation of the Koch kingdom was followed by about two centuries of Mughal rule. The Mughals failed to establish effective control, particularly over the eastern portions of the annexed territory but the western portion, including Goalpara, remained at least under nominal Mughal rule until its occupation by the East India company in 1765.¹ As in several other parts of India, in this region too the decline of the Mughal state in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the fragmentation of its eastern acquisitions were accompanied by the emergence of several petty principalities, in turn replaced by a gradual consolidation of colonial power.²

¹ Santo Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A case study of Goalpara district*, Delhi, 1994, p.2.

² The Eastern Dooars, a large tract of hilly country, was ruled by several chieftains of the Bhutan monarch and were accorded the status of tributaries of the king of Bhutan until its annexation by the British in 1865. Thus, even after Goalpara was formed into a colonial district in 1822, its northern hills remained under the administration of the Bhutan monarch while the rest of it continued to be a part of the colonial territory of Bengal and administered by the East India Company.

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This chapter looks at the transformation of this region into a Mughal political frontier and explores the implications of this change for the several local communities whose lives were characterised by a co-existence of agricultural, hunting and foraging strategies. The relationship between Mughal concepts of political space and changes in the political economy of the region, therefore, informs this chapter and its analysis of the emergence of new political structures. Despite the continued persistence of considerable ambiguities throughout this period, these transformations need to be seen as constitutive of a process that provides the context, as it were, for the emergence of more clearly defined collectivities in a later period. The chapter studies these processes since assumptions and understanding of pre-colonial society frequently provided, as is evident from the official reports and correspondence from the mid nineteenth century onwards, a starting point to the colonial state's response to processes of social transformation in the region.

Section I: Making a 'frontier'

The accounts of Francis Buchanan Hamilton, who visited Goalpara in the early decades of the nineteenth century, date the earliest Mughal invasions of the region to around c.1603 or 'to two years after the death of Akbar'.³ As will be evident from the discussion below, throughout the period of Mughal invasions and subsequent occupation, the region of Goalpara retained many of the characteristics of a political frontier rather than those of an internal division of the empire. Mughal political interest in Goalpara's neighbouring kingdom of Assam could perhaps be seen as reflective of 'the very essence of the existence' of empires and kingdoms, 'which saw themselves as

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continually expanding to become universal empires'.⁴ Within this pattern of expansion, the frontier emerged as a temporary halt, 'the vanguard of a forward-moving culture' and excluded from the permanent pattern of Mughal administrative control. Thus, 'from the beginning of Mughal power in India under Babar in 1526 to its furthest expansion under Aurangzeb it was always an empire of expansion ... in fact, expansion eastward to Bengal and southward to the Deccan kingdoms was an irresistible challenge for an ambitious ruler'.⁵

This tendency appears to have been particularly pronounced in the eighteenth century and is corroborated by Buchanan's comments on the 'desire of encroachment that induced the Moslems, in the reign of Aurangzeb, to invade Assam, the limits of which were then very narrow'.⁶ The annexation of Assam would have meant an expansion of the Mughal territories beyond the river Manas but was resisted by the Ahom army. Buchanan represents the people of Assam as 'fierce in their independence, invigorated by a nourishing diet and strong drink, with their princes still retain [ing] their energy of mind...not sunk under the enervating and unceasing ceremonies of the Hindu doctrines'.⁷ The resultant battles between the Ahoms, the dynasty that ruled over large parts of eastern Brahmaputra valley, and the Mughal army have been chronicled by several writers, including the anonymous chronicler of the *Padshah Buranji*.⁸

³ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Mss Eur. D75, The Account of the District or of Ronggopur Zila, Book I, p.147.

⁴ Ainslee T. Embree, 'Frontiers into Boundaries: From the Traditional to the Modern State', in R.G. Fox (ed.) *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, New Delhi, 1977, p.258.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.263

⁶ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.147.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Annales of the Delhi Badshahate, Being a translation of the old Assamese chronicle, Padshah Buranji*, S. K. Bhuyan, Guwahati, 1947. In his introduction to the translation, Bhuyan notes that, in keeping with the tradition of all medieval Assamese chronicles, the author of the *Padshah Buranji* remains anonymous. Bhuyan placed the composition of the chronicle between 1719 and 1731.

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Believed to have been written between 1719 and 1731 in the Ahom court, the *Padshah Buranji* details the long and indecisive struggle by Mughal commanders including Jai Singh, Ram Singh and Mir Jumla for the control of the Ahom kingdom. The battle between Jai Singh and the Rajas of Cooch Behar, who had asserted their independence from the Mughals, is the subject of the seventh chapter, which also has references to the role of the king of Cooch Behar in the conflict.⁹ The text tells the story of the frequent forced retreats of the Mughals, the signing of the final treaty between the two powers which laid down the river Manas as the boundary between Ahom and Mughal territory, and the setting up of a Mughal outpost at Rangpur.¹⁰ The Mughals maintained the ruler of Cooch Behar, a border state lying to the west of the river Sonkosh, as a tributary.

These political developments had important implications for the region between the rivers Sonkosh and the Manas, which coincided with the nineteenth century colonial district of Goalpara, as it saw a reproduction of notions of territorial sovereignty that were visible in other frontier areas of the Mughal empire as well. Although formally annexed to the Mughal empire, the region's political boundaries continued to be characterised by a certain vagueness and ambiguity. As already noted Embree argues that such political boundaries were a feature of the Mughal state which appears to have made contraction and expansion of imperial authority possible. The frontier was never regarded as a fixed limit and marked 'the outer limits of Mughal administrative control which could expand and contract, depending upon the abilities

⁹ Ibid., p.119.

¹⁰ 'Jai Singha halts at Patna and sends out messages to the Rajas of Cooch Behar and Dacca...part of the nine principalities of the Mughals in Eastern India. On receiving the message, the Raja of Koch Behar brought valuable presents to the Emperor and Nawab Galir Beg was dispatched to settle the boundaries between the two territories'. (Ibid., p.120)

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and resources of a ruler at a particular time'.¹¹ This was unlike the preceding period of Koch rule which was marked for the unambiguity of its political boundaries.¹² Although the recognition of natural boundaries did not in any way indicate a departure from the Mughal notions of territorial sovereignty, the region was set out by certain obvious natural markers. Thus the Upper Brahmaputra Valley and the Nawab of Bengal's territory formed the surrounding perennial or nuclear areas with the hills of the Bhutan kingdom to the north, the Sonkosh to the west and the Manas to the east.

Goalpara's location as a Mughal military and political frontier allowed for the creation of a rather fluid relationship between the Mughal state and the local zamindars. This was likely to have been aided by the fact that the area was not easily amenable to Mughal control. Several factors, including the region's physical and geographical environment and the consolidation of regional powers in the late Mughal period, appear to have ensured the continued existence of autonomous chieftains who frequently rebelled against the Mughal state and refused to pay tribute. The *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*,¹³ an account written in Persian by a commander of a Mughal expedition in this region in the mid seventeenth century, records in great detail the several rebellions by local chieftains, Koch cultivators and Mughal officials who had been appointed to regulate revenue administration in the area, details of which are

¹¹ Ibid., p.262.

¹² Thus, there are references to the demarcation of the boundaries of the empire by the Koch kings and Ralph Fitch, a merchant from London who visited the court of the Koch king, Maharaja Naranarayan, in the middle of the sixteenth century and offered details about the life of the people of Cooch Behar, allude to 'the sharp pointed cones' which although were more likely to be used for defence, also served the purpose of marking the boundaries of the Koch Empire (J. Horton Ryley (ed.) *Ralph Fitch: England's Pioneer to India and Burma*, London, 1899, p.112)

¹³ An important source for the period of Mughal rule in Goalpara is the *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, a Persian chronicle written by Mirza Nathan, a Mughal general who accompanied the Mughal army on its expeditions to eastern parts of the kingdom during the reign of seventeenth century. The chronicle has been translated and published in two volumes as M. I. Borah (ed.) *Baharastan-I-Gayabi: A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan*, by Mirza Nathan, Guwahati, 1936.

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interspersed with accounts of the difficulties of military expeditions in the forested tracts of a frontier region.

Colonial ethnographers and officials from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reaffirm representations of Goalpara as a region with the characteristics of a historical frontier in relation to the culturally more nuclear regions of Assam and Bengal. In their writings as well in the various travel accounts and official correspondence on the pre-colonial period, Goalpara during the Mughal period is presented as a historical frontier prior to its occupation by the British,¹⁴ with 'only occasional visits from the Mughal chiefs'. Buchanan's diary describes the region as ruled by 'petty chiefs, who remained nominally under the authority of the Nawab of Rangamatti through much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'.¹⁵ Writing about the 'frontier zamindars' of Goalpara, David Scott, who held the office of the Agent to the Governor General on the North East Frontier of Bengal in 1823, described them as 'lords of the marches' during the pre-colonial period.¹⁶

Scott described the Goalpara zamindars as 'indolent, incapable and devoid of any principles', characteristics that he attributed to the 'legacy of the Mughal state [during the rule of which] both petty revolutions or plans for usurpation were common'.¹⁷ His criticism of this 'legacy' led him to warn that 'rights exercised freely and abusively by the Mughal agents in Goalpara could not be grafted upon the Company's system of Government, which denied such powers rigidly even to its

¹⁴ Ibid., p.281.

¹⁵ Buchanan represented the region as ruled by chieftains 'who would have continued entirely uninterrupted in cutting each other's throats and in reducing the country to a desert' 'where is not for the Company's gigantic power which put a stop to all petty attacks'. (The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.148)

¹⁶ Letter from David Scott to W.B. Bayley, 27 September 1819, Bengal Criminal and Judicial Consultations, File no.88, December 1821.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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confidential servants'.¹⁸ Such representations drew upon strands within the colonial discourse current in the period, which saw high rents as necessary to stimulate enterprise and low rents as an encouragement of sloth.

Pre-colonial and early colonial Goalpara also consisted of areas such as the Garo Hills which were included within the jurisdiction of the Rangamati thana where 'officers of police and of justice [had] little influence... especially considering the difficulty with which the forests and thickets of reeds had to be penetrated'.¹⁹ Writing more than a hundred years later, William Hunter remarked that one of the duties of the Muhammadan military officials in charge of Rangamati and Goalpara was to encourage the growth of jungle and reeds as a protection against the inroads of the Assamese.²⁰ From these and other writings, it would appear that while the region of Goalpara and Cooch Behar was brought under the Mughal administration through periodic military expeditions, the zamindars and the local officials of the Mughal state continued to enjoy a considerable amount of political and economic autonomy throughout this period.

All of this reaffirms therefore, that the Mughal imperial authority viewed Goalpara as a part of the frontier of their territories in Bengal and excluded this border area from regular imperial patterns of administrative control and revenue administration. This would have established a relationship which allowed the chieftains to pay only a nominal tribute while assuring them a degree of autonomy in return for providing a measure of frontier defence at minimal expense to the Mughal

¹⁸ Ibid. Another colonial official, Francis Jenkins, who undertook a survey of Goalpara between 1831 and 1832 traced the roots of the 'distracted state of the country to the low rates of rent paid by the zamindars on account of their being in a frontier region'. (Francis Jenkins to Captain Reynolds, August 31 1838, Bengal Criminal and Judicial Consultations, File no.90, December 1841)

¹⁹ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.95.

²⁰ William W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 5, Calcutta, 1887, p.113.

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treasury. The decentralisation of power that accompanied the decline of the Mughal state during the second half of the eighteenth century is likely to have created further opportunities for the strengthening of local chiefs and ruling groups in frontier areas of the kingdom, as they moved from the status of 'refractory, bucolic zamindars to the dignity of the Raja'.²¹

Nonetheless, the inclusion of Goalpara within the confines of the Mughal empire in the late eighteenth century ensured its inclusion into the political economy of the empire. The following section looks at the extension of Mughal authority into an area which was marked for the co-existence of agricultural, pastoral and foraging strategies. It explores some of the ways in which the intervention of the Mughal state transformed the region's society, creating new social groups and structures of power and authority. Both the Mughal practice of leaving the border areas in the hands of tributary chieftains and the changes effected in the pre - Mughal land revenue administration, were frequently resisted and contested by local communities.

Section II: 'Settling' the frontier

According to Mughal accounts and early colonial writings, the introduction of the Mughal pattern of revenue administration in Goalpara began with the defeat of the Koch king Parikshit in 1603 A.D. This was followed by the appointment of a Mughal general or faujdar at Rangamati thana of which Goalpara formed a part, and the subsequent reorganisation of the country of Koch Hajo [Goalpara] by the revenue official, Ibrahim Karori. During the initial years of its rule, the revenues for the

²¹ C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the age of British Expansion 1770 - 1870*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 11.

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Mughal state were collected directly from the cultivators by the karori, a salaried official, who visited villages and determined the land revenue to be paid. To facilitate the collection of revenue by the karoris the country was divided into sarkars, which in turn were divided into parganas and taluks.²²

However, it was evident from early on that for obtaining a share in the revenue of a peripheral economy like Koch Hajo, the Mughal state would have to rely heavily on intermediaries and also adapt to a multiplicity of revenue extraction methods. The collection of this revenue was therefore also assigned to a class of ijaradars in the first decades of Mughal rule. The *Baharastan-I-Gayabi* records the appointment of various revenue officers and the pattern of revenue collection in Koch territory: 'Abdus Salam, who was appointed as the commander of the army at Kuch appointed in different parts of the city and in the vicinity of the river Rangammati, his own and his brother's officers and ordered Mirza Hasan, the Diwan and the Bakshi, to arrange for the collection of revenue in the parganas and other places. The Mirza, due to his great experience, divided the parganas of the Kuch territory into twenty well defined circles. Some of the lands were assigned to the imperial karoris and the faujdars to realise the revenue. Some of the land was given to mustajirs [revenue farmers] by taking the kabuliyat [the deed of acceptance] from them for those parganas.'²³

Clearly then, Mughal rule was building on the sedenterisation of peasant society that had taken place under the rule of the preceding Koch dynasty. Buchanan suggests that several of the 'scattered, settled villages in the region between the Sonkosh and the Manas rivers, surrounded as usual by gardens, reeds, forests and

²² 'During the Raja's [Parikshit's] reign', notes the author of the *Padshah Buranji*, 'there were only gaons or villages and no parganas. Sheikh Ibrahim introduced the Pargana system and the whole area

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fields and each may have contained some shops ²⁴ had their origins in the pre-Mughal period. There is evidence that some of these villages were dominated by a single caste, which in the case of the settled villages was mostly the Rajbansi Koch community who customarily paid revenue in terms of labour.²⁵ Sources from the Mughal period also observe that several of these settled villages were under a system of revenue administration called the *paik* system, which was prevalent in most parts of the Koch and the neighbouring Ahom kingdom. 'The king afterwards held a census and created the paiks...he made four people equivalent to a gote [a unit] of paiks',²⁶ states an eighteenth century chronicle from the region of Darrang about the Koch king Naranarayan. Under this system, *paiks* or armed retainers were given arable land free of revenue charges in return for their manning the border regions.²⁷ Commenting on the nature of the pre-Mughal revenue administration, the contemporary chronicle, the *Fathiya-I-Ibriya* of Shihabuddin Talish, a traveler who accompanied the Mughal commander Mir Jumla, noted that 'to collect revenue from the peasant of these areas is not the rule. From every house, one person in every three was brought for services to the king.'²⁸ Abdul Hamid Lahori's *Padshah Namah*, a chronicle from Shah Jahan's reign, observed that the paiks were given jagirs by the order of the king and were

was designated as Villayat Cooch Hajo which was divided into four Sarkars and several Parganas under a Kanungo'. (*Padshah Buranji*, p.190).

²³ *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book I, p.273.

²⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book II, p.270.

²⁵ Bhadra, 'Two Frontier Uprisings in Mughal India', in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies, Vol.II*, Delhi, 1984, p.481.

²⁶ Hem Chandra Goswami. *Darrangrajjar Vamshavali*, Calcutta, 1917, p.55.

²⁷ It is likely that the grants of land under Koch rule consisted of approximately 12 bighas for each soldier.(Amanatullah Ahmad Choudhury, *Kochbiharer Itihaas (The History of Kochbihar)*, Vol.1, Kochbihar, 1936, p.12)

²⁸ *Fathiya - I - Ibriya*, Mss. Sarkar Collection, No.77. ff. 57a, in Bhadra, 'Two Frontier Uprisings', p.482.

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employed in the capturing and driving of elephants, apart from cultivation.²⁹ Their grantees included weavers, blacksmiths and messengers.³⁰

The changes effected in this land revenue administration by Mughal commanders included the taxing of *paikan* land that had hitherto been exempt from assessment and had therefore important implications for the existing patterns of power and authority in the region. From about the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, we have evidence, in the form of several rebellions, of the response of local communities to these changes. Contemporary political chronicles and travel accounts offer detailed narratives of rebellions by different groups of cultivators, several of which were identified in terms of their ethnic groups. A significant factor behind these rebellions, which emerge as a persistent feature of Mughal rule in the region, was the reluctance of the cultivators and some of the landed classes to accommodate a centralised fiscal system based on rent collection through payment in cash or crops. They favoured the previous revenue organisation reliant on labour service and decentralised local powers.

Thus the *Baharastan-I-Gayabi* notes that 'after the departure of Raja Lakshminarayan [the former Koch king] Mir Safi introduced a number of changes in the revenue assessment of all the parganas of Jahangirbad'.³¹ The allowances made in the form of salaries for the paiks were also charged to revenue assessment. The *Gayabi* continues: 'Owing to his lack of intelligence, he [Mir Safi] did not pay any heed to the discord in the region and the sedition of the cultivators...one portion of the

²⁹ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Padshah Namah*, edited by Maulavi Kabiruddin and Maulavi Abdur Rahim, p.71 in Bhadra, 'Two Frontier Uprisings', p. 480.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jahangirbad, also known as Ghilanaya, was an important centre of administration under both the Koch and the Mughal rulers and is situated a few miles away from Dhubri, the present head quarters of Goalpara district.

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parganas was handed over to the karoris and another portion to the mustajirs. When the mustajirs after a slight increase in assessment brought the parganas under their own possession and thought of increasing it to their own benefit, it created causes of discontent among the ri'aya.³²

The rebellion in the Putimari area of the Khuntagat pargana again reflected such elements of discontent among the cultivating classes. The ryots timed their refusal to pay revenue with the onset of the rainy season, a difficult period for Mughal expeditions into forested tracts of territory. Beginning as a minor protest against the treatment meted out to the deposed Koch king, Lakshminarayan, the rebellion soon turned violent. The Koch peasants killed several mustajirs and karoris whom they charged with illegal extraction of revenue.³³ They also extended the rebel territory close to the Mughal headquarters of Rangamatti, captured the fort at Jahangirabad, and fortified the residence of the king, Parikshit.³⁴ Mughal writers describe the Khuntaghat rebellion as 'a serious uprising of the enemy' in which boats from neighbouring villages were used 'to rush upon the fort of the enemy'.³⁵ It kept the Mughal army in a state of siege for days when 'not even a straw was available for the horses, not to speak of grains'.³⁶

Resistance to Mughal systems of revenue extraction continued through this period. In the middle of the seventeenth century, a Koch chieftain named Sanatan organised several thousand Koch cultivators and staged an insurrection at

³² *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book I, pp.288-289.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Book I, pp.290-352.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.354.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.302. The text quotes Mirza Yusuf Barlas, the thanadar of Dakhinkul in southern Kamrup during the Khuntaghat rebellion: 'The enemy is driving us from place to place. They have not stopped chasing us and we have been driven back to the bank of the Brahmaputra. For the third day we are encamped on the sandy plains and we are besieged by the enemy...'(*Ibid.*).

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Dhamdhama. The message from the Mughal commander to Sanatan, which has been reproduced by the author of the *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Mirza Nathan, was indicative of the challenges faced by the Mughal officials in the collection of revenue even within the political confines of the Mughal empire. Referring to the rebel leader's opposition to Ibrahim Karori, the local revenue official, the Mughal commander 'admonished' Sanatan with the following message: 'It has been reported that Shaykh Ibrahim Karori has treated you with violence and oppression. The object of our appointment to Kamrup with all the officers is that we shall appoint another Karori if the present incumbent is found oppressing the ryots. If any trouble has been created by the ryots, we shall punish them for their impertinence so that they may not be able to display any desire for such unbecoming acts in the future.'³⁷

Sanatan's reply rejected the terms of peace and dwelt on the 'oppressions penetrated in this country' by the Mughal revenue officials, in particular by Ibrahim Karori: 'Now the ryots do not possess the power and ability to turn their attention to the payment of revenues. How can I be pacified by Your Excellency's arrival? Two of our noble Rajas accepted imperial vassalage and gave lakhs and crores. What benefit have they derived that I may consider as an advantage? I will agree to the terms on condition that: Ibrahim Karori must be severely punished; remission of our revenues should be made for a whole year; the imperial army should withdraw from Ghilanay and the allowance of the paiks should be given direct and not made an addition to revenues due to government.'³⁸ The text goes on to record the continued resistance by Sanatan, the support he received from the people in the form of provisions, and his final escape to Jutia, a fortress in the midst of forests. Sanatan's reply is significant

³⁷ *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book II p.370.

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because it clearly articulates a preference for the pre-Mughal economic relations that were altered by the Mughal regime. His remarks about the injustice faced by the deposed Koch kings also suggest the existence of strong kinship ties within the Koch community, to which Sanatan belonged, in the pre-Mughal period. This was reiterated in the following observation of a Mughal chief: 'Due to the circulation in the territory of Kuch of the news of the arrest of the Rajahs, some of the Kuch chiefs ...raised an insurrection'.³⁹

At around the same time as Sanatan's rebellion, there was another uprising in the Khuntaghat area, termed as the *Hathikheda (The Elephant Capturing)* rebellion in the *Gayabi*. The rebellion began with the refusal of several *gharuwari paiks* (auxiliary footmen) to help capture elephants for their Mughal commanders, and their subsequent death in the hands of the Mughal official, Baqir Khan.⁴⁰ Mirza Nathan, the Mughal commander, described the 'widespread discontent of the people of the region'. Baqir Khan was caught alive and killed, along with a large number of Mughal soldiers, and all elephants of the Mughal government were confiscated. 'They proclaimed a headmen of the elephant drivers as their king, rose in open revolt and created an amazing situation', remarks Nathan in his concluding section on the *Hathikheda* rebellion.⁴¹

Resistance to payment of surplus and hostility towards Mughal revenue officials characterised another peasant rebellion in the area, this time in the pargana of Bhitiband and Bahirband, situated in the vicinity of the fort of Dhubri, 'the foremost

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book II p.370, Book II, p.638-639.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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of all the forts in the Koch territory'.⁴² Mirza Nathan ordered his forces to raid the regions of Bhitaban and Bahirban and to bring the ryots under control, failing which they were to bring them as captives and drive them away from their lands.⁴³ Resistance to taxation was evidently met by harsh measures for the text goes on to recount how 'the Mirza went with his imperial colleagues and did not allow the natives any respite even to drink water for a period of four days and nights. He brought many of them as captives and seized an innumerable number of cattle; and his companions seized many beasts of burden'.⁴⁴ Shortly after the Bhitarband rebellion, the cultivators of Khatribag, the jagir of Mirza Nathan, who had taken advantage of the floods to stop their payment of revenue, were subdued with the aid of local zamindars.

These rebellions were accompanied by that of Ibrahim Karori himself. He had 'misappropriated more than 70, 000 rupees of the imperial revenues and made a great waste ... led astray an army of more than 3000 people with him and instigated a force of the Kuch regiment against Mirza Salih Arghun', the commander of a Mughal expedition into Koch Hajo. The state appears to have faced similar situations in other parts of the empire as well, which finally led to the winding up of the 'Karori experiment'.⁴⁵ The rebellion of Ibrahim Karori appears to have been reflective of larger processes that were at work in the late seventeenth century, which, as several historians have argued, was also a period during which the system of assignments of revenue on which the Mughal nobles had subsisted had begun to break down. Describing a similar situation in other parts of the Mughal empire during this period, C. A. Bayly writes: 'Too many new nobles were absorbed into the system as Aurangzeb made his

⁴² Ibid., p.231.

⁴³ Ibid., p.231.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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conquests in the south and tried to placate its indigenous nobility. Local revolts cut into the rents and custom dues on which the nobles lived, while the imperial treasury became less and less able to pay cash salaries.⁴⁶

Mughal writings and chronicles from the Ahom Court appear to indicate similar processes at work in the region of Goalpara. Moreover, despite the evident expansion of cultivated acreage, there was also a recognition of the persistence of other forms of lifestyles.⁴⁷ With their knowledge of available resources and their local roots, chieftains could be expected to collect surplus from within their span of control which could include a spread of mixed economies of settled cultivation as well as shifting and foraging ones. This must have appeared to be a favourable compromise for the Mughal state and from the mid seventeenth century onwards, there was a gradual realisation on its part of the need to replace its reliance on salaried officials of the state like the karoris, and the ijaradars, with regional chieftains.

The recognition of the significance of regional notables in extracting the surplus had been evident during the mid-seventeenth century expeditions against the Koch king Parikshit as well. 'When the Moslems settled their new conquests of Serkar Koch Vihar', writes Buchanan Hamilton, 'they gave the zemindaris or management of the soil to various officers and servants of the Raja, by whose treachery they had probably been assisted'.⁴⁸ Again, the *Baharastan-I-Gayabi* details the reliance of Islam Khan, the Mughal commander, on Raja Pratapditya, in his task of 'punishing the people of Koch Vihar'. Thus, 'Islam Khan, for the sake of drawing the attention of the other zamindars and also in consideration of the high positions held by the aforesaid

⁴⁵ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556 -- 1707*, Delhi, 1999, p.229.

⁴⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Indian society*, p.9

⁴⁷ This is discussed in some detail in the next section of this chapter.

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Raja Pratapaditya among the Zamindars of Bengal, bestowed honours upon him beyond measure, and consoled and encouraged him. On the first day he was presented with a horse, a grand robe of honour and a bejewelled sword-belt, and thus he was converted into a loyal officer.⁴⁹ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the attempts had proved temporary, to reinstate descendants of former Koch rulers such as Chandranarayan over the region of Koch Hajo in return for a nominal peshkash or tribute to the Mughal state. The system of surplus collection was now firmly in the hands of local chieftains and notables who had replaced the ijaradars and karoris and whose obligation to hand over part of the proceeds was often conveniently forgotten when empires collapsed.⁵⁰

Most of the Goalpara zamindars were a part of this local gentry. They were recognised as zamindars by Mughal sanads and gradually appropriated hereditary rights in land to emerge as powerful lords by the early decades of the eighteenth century. After the annexation of Goalpara to the Company's territories in the late eighteenth century, officials noted that 'the several states on the north east frontier of the Bengal province have never undergone a regular survey, nor have the internal resources been the subject of official scrutiny during the Mughal government; some of them were made subject to the provision of elephants with which this particular tract was abounded; the internal management of all was left almost entirely to the

⁴⁸ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.155.

⁴⁹ *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book I, p.27.

⁵⁰ For an analysis of Mughal policies of incorporating local rajas and the latter's efforts to retain legitimacy, frequently by upholding the ritual and social order, in Bengal, see John R. McLane, *Land and Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal*, Cambridge, 1993. McLane argues that the 'imperial institutions of the Mughal and the Company states met the landed rural hierarchies in the pivotal role of the zamindar [who were] subordinate but vital partners ...in governing the scattered villages'. (Ibid. p.12)

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hereditary chiefs found in possession of the estates, who were thus treated rather as tributaries than subjects'.⁵¹

A few of them, like the zamindar of Gauripur, had their origins as 'primarily tax gatherers, rather than as a tax payer [and were]... paid for their services through the nankar or allowance'.⁵² However, unlike the rest of Mughal India, the zamindars of the region of eastern Bengal, including Goalpara, had the land revenue fixed for long, unspecified periods and taken in fixed amounts which gave it the appearance of a tribute rather than that of rent. The earliest of the imperial sanads was probably issued by the Emperor Jahangir in 1606 to Kabindra Patra, who is identified as the ancestor of the Gauripur zamindar by the early colonial ethnographer, Francis Buchanan, and by officials of the Gauripur estate. Documents from the estate elucidate the greatness of Kabindra Patra, who rose from the position of a qanungo under the Mughal state.⁵³ The zamindar of the neighbouring Mechpara estate was a choudhari who, according to Irfan Habib, occupied a crucial position in revenue administration and also received a nankar for his services to the Mughal state. Buchanan Hamilton identifies him as a local chieftain who paid a nominal share of the revenue of Mechpara estate to the Mughal faujdar at Rangamati.

While evidence regarding the origins and position of most of the Goalpara zamindaris during the Mughal period is scarce, there is a considerable amount of correspondence between colonial administrators regarding the status of the Rajas of the estates of Bijni and Sidli. These colonial records offer substantial information on

⁵¹ Papers relating to Bijnee, the Cooch Behar Commissioner's Office, File no. 1, 1866 - 1868.

⁵² Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System*, p.217.

⁵³ 'His wise statesmanship and guidance ...made him a favorite of the Emperor Jahangir who decorated him as a Raja and granted sanads for several Lakherajs' and his successors, who later had their head quarters at Rangamati, were all subsequently known as Rajas'. (Papers of the Gauripur Estate, File no. 197, 1929).

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the rights and the changing status of these local powers during the pre-colonial period. Documents from the Mughal period, colonial officials observed, appeared to indicate that 'both the Rajahs had been subject to the Mughals, who could not possibly have passed into Assam and back without subjecting them' and hence, 'it would appear that the Mughals rendered the rajahs tributary and levied in the usual manner *mal* and *fauzdarry*'.⁵⁴ A petition from the Bijni Raja to the East India Company in the last decades of the eighteenth century claimed that his family had long been territorial chieftains or Rajahs in these parts and had once held all the territory from the middle of Rangpur to the middle of Kamrup.⁵⁵

The petition stated that while 'in the course of time we lost all, except the land now in our possession, and had to seek the protection of the Mughal Government, but on coming under their jurisdiction, we had to pay not rent but a tribute of elephants for the lands of Habraghat, Khauntaghat and Bijnee'.⁵⁶ Although the colonial state questioned the Bijni Rajah's claim to being a 'privileged tributary' and categorised his as an 'ordinary zamindari' estate, they however recognised that 'under the Nawab Nazim of Dacca the ancestors of the petitioner's family had held Bijnee for many years before the Company assumed the Mofussil administration of Bengal in 1765'.⁵⁷

The zamindar of the Karaibari estate, similarly, was a former chieftain of the region bordering the Garo hills whose acceptance of Mughal suzerainty established a political relationship which allowed for the payment of a tribute in elephants to the

⁵⁴ Letter from J.C. Haughton, Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, April 3, 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866 - 1870.

⁵⁵ Petition mentioned in the correspondence between J.C. Haughton, Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, April 3, 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866 - 1870.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁵⁷ Correspondence between J.C. Haughton, Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, April 3, 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866 - 1870.

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Mughal state rather than revenue from the land. The nature of political obligations and rights explained the categorisation of the zamindars of Bijni, Sidli and Karaibari as peshkashi zamindars. They had considerable military power and autonomy in political and economic affairs of estates, and confirmation of their traditional titles by the Emperor. Colonial officials observed that peshkashi zamindars of the Bijni and Sidli estates also exercised a substantial degree of judicial authority under both the Mughal state and the rule of the East India Company. 'It was not the practice of the former to obtrude law officers among a people entirely heathen and the Company had extremely little influence in the district for many years.'⁵⁸

Despite the indirect control and tribute payments, and despite a certain fluidity and flexibility in the dividing lines between local communities, there was a visible pushing forward of the margins of agriculture and a consolidation of peasant society as in other parts of Mughal empire during this period. There are descriptions in early colonial records of settled villages from the Mughal period, 'the inhabitants of which are Rajbungshees...who are by no means nomadic, but cling to their old holdings like the Hindu peasants of other districts. They have plenty of orchards and bamboo topes to bind them to their homesteads, and there is no fear of them moving suddenly and capriciously.'⁵⁹

The evidence of settled villages in these writings is also accompanied by comments on the nature of taxation which was frequently determined by measuring the land in terms of 'so much per plough' or, in places of shifting cultivation, by 'so much per the dao or the bill hook or by the kodal or hoe'.⁶⁰ Officials of the East India

⁵⁸ Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, Goalpara papers, File no. 7, 1866 - 1870.

⁵⁹ Goalpara Papers, File no. 113, 1873.

⁶⁰ Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866 - 1870.

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Company who were engaged in standardising land measurements in the nineteenth century characterised this mode of assessment as 'adapted to a zamindar or a ijaradar [which could not] be well worked by Government agency, because the Agent in the charge of the village has to watch the number of ploughs that are actually employed in the field and this is inquisitional and puts too much in the hands of a Choudhury'.⁶¹

A close grasp on local resources combined with shared kinship ties with the local peasantry, added to the process of increasing consolidation of the interests of these notables during the late Mughal period. Surplus extraction was frequently based on kinship ties between the cultivators, and the zamindars and local chiefs. Among others, the Kachari community, which was scattered over parts of Goalpara and the neighbouring Kamrup district, continued to retain assert kinship ties with their deposed ruler and contributed fixed amounts of their income as a mark of their continued loyalty. Again, several of the peasant rebellions described above were from villages consisting of people with strong kinship ties. Thus there are references in the *Baharastan-I-Gayabi* to protests by villages composed entirely of Koch peasants and led by Koch landlords against changes in the form of land revenue payment by the Mughal state.⁶²

With zamindari intervention in the processes of agricultural production, the stage appears to have been set for a growing stratification within Goalpara's rural society. Absence of rigidity did not imply an undifferentiated society. Rather, contemporary sources suggest the existence of a complex social order where apart from the cultivating classes, there was also the emergence of other classes including the *sukhwās*, who had no possessions and lived merely in service without

⁶¹ Goalpara Papers, File no. 113, 1873.

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being employed in manual labour, and the *khawas*, who were artists and traders as well. Buchanan writes that Mughal chronicles record the existence of both domestic and field serfdom in Goalpara, particularly in the eastern parts of the region, bordering the Ahom kingdom.⁶³ His notes state that 'the turbulent chiefs of the east are desirous of keeping slaves, as they are more ready than free men to perform acts of violence'.⁶⁴ Buchanan also suggested that 'such slaves were well treated and promoted to offices of considerable importance in the management of their master's affairs'.⁶⁵ Evidence of the continued existence of forms of serfdom in Goalpara from the early period of colonisation also comes in from official correspondence on the last decades of the eighteenth century, which placed the number of slaves under the Rani of Bijnee at 14,000, 'employed partly as domestic servants and partly as cultivators of soil'.⁶⁶

Indicative also of rural hierachisation was the significant role played by the zamindars in the religious and cultural life of this society and of their control over the diverse local resources under the Mughal state. The local zamindars now collected a large variety of abwabs or cesses. These included the *thulijat*, which was levied on timber stacked on the banks of rivers, the *chulunta masool*, which was levied on timber floating down the rivers, and the *rusi* and *bastoo salami*, which were taxes collected from cultivators to cover the expenses of land measurement and assessment but credited to the general income of the zamindar. There were also tolls on canoes and on traders in the several village haats or local markets.⁶⁷

⁶² *Baharastan-I-Gayabi, Book II*, p.403.

⁶³ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁶⁶ Letter from Hugh Baillie to John Shore, 31 May 1788, Papers relating to Bijnee, Cooch Behar Commissioner's Office, 1866 - 1868.

⁶⁷ Goalpara Papers, File no. 28, 1872 - 1873.



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Towards the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the decline of the Mughal state made it possible for these regional notables to seize greater privileges, we have evidence of taxes such as the *marcha*, paid to the zamindar by a bride on the occasion of a marriage ceremony among the cultivators on his estate. This tax was described by colonial administrators as 'a long established practice which the people are so accustomed to that they deem it a part of their marriage expenses'.⁶⁸ Other similar taxes which reflected the increasing assumption of the role of the local gentry by the zamindars included the *tohoori* or *parbuni*, a tax levied at the time of the annual Durga Puja and fixed at 'pice or so on each rupee of the rental'.⁶⁹

Underlining and legitimising the power of these local chiefs were the origin legends of zamindaris that were frequently summoned to confer necessary legitimacy on zamindars and their kin groups. The estate of Kalumalupara was believed to have been 'first occupied by a tribe of fishermen, who were called Chondals, and belonged to an impure tribe, who were defeated and the area occupied by the descendants of one Vishwanath Choudhuri'.⁷⁰ Again, while the descendants of the estate of Mechpara traced their genealogy from Bhagadatta, the legendary king of Kamrup, Buchanan hinted on the possibility of the region being originally under the rule of independent chiefs of the Rabha tribe.⁷¹ A different version of this origin legend related a history of conflict between the Garos, who were believed to have been the original inhabitants of the region, and the ancestors of the present occupants who belonged to the Pala dynasty of Bengal.⁷²

⁶⁸ Letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara to the Commissioner of Cooch Behar Division, 15 July 1872, Goalpara Papers, File no. 28, 1872 - 1873.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁷⁰ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.177.

⁷¹ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p. 181.

⁷² Santo Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam*, p.59.

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These legends have their resonance in similar constructions from other parts of India during this period. Particularly illustrative is Richard Fox's study of the institution of the lineage in the United Provinces in the eighteenth century. Fox suggests that origin myths were frequently used by 'the elite of the stratified lineage' to sustain the authority acquired by them through political and military pioneering on the margins of state political authority.⁷³ For the state on the other hand such acquisitions of legitimacy were crucial in ensuring a steady supply of land revenue by conferring on the local elite a considerable autonomy and power. The vast stretches of uncultivated tracts in Goalpara and the role of zamindars as reclaimers and settlers of wastelands on the fringes of the Mughal empire appears to have required the application of similar origin myths.

By extension, these myths were illustrative of claims that the founders of ruling chiefdoms had all won their power by conquering or expelling wild tribes. This fed into the early nineteenth century suggestion that the legend of conquest was necessary for an affirmation of the warrior status of the landlord. In an area with a complex political economy like that of Goalpara, stories of the mythical origins of local chieftains and landlords were significant also because they were indicative of a pejorative characterisation of unsettled life styles. The next section looks at subsistence on the margins of settled cultivation and its representation in writings on, and from, the late Mughal period.

⁷³ Richard Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule: State-hinterland relations in pre-industrial India*, Berkeley, 1971, p.49.

Section III: The unsettled landscape

The peshkash and the rent paid by the zamindars and hereditary chiefs of Goalpara to the Mughal empire was frequently irregular, with the obligation of these chieftains to hand over the surplus being largely dependent on the degree of the Mughal state's authority in the region. This characteristic was even more pronounced at the turn of the eighteenth century when the extent of the state's internal influence and, that of the arable economy were constantly in a state of flux.⁷⁴ Through much of the period of its rule in the region, however, the Mughal state benefited from the autonomy exercised by the zamindars in Goalpara as it ensured the state a share of the surplus of a peripheral and divergent economy.

Despite the evidence of the beginnings of a settled agrarian order, discussed above, a substantial part of the income of the Mughal state acquired through the zamindars consisted of non-agricultural dues. Sources for this period suggest that much of the peshkash paid to the Mughal state consisted of forest produce, local products including cotton or elephants, with the zamindars drawing upon both settled agricultural activity and the resources of the large, predominantly uncultivated stretches within their zamindaris to generate surplus. Colonial administrators noted that 'anciently, the main reliance of the frontier zamindars were on their *sairat* duties and not upon land tax'.⁷⁵ Although agricultural dues formed a substantial part of the income of the zamindar of Gauripur, the principal emoluments of the Kalumalupara zamindar were derived from custom houses and from duties levied on the cotton

⁷⁴ Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen*, 1999, p.31.

⁷⁵ Letter from the Commissioner to the Cooch Behar division to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 3 April 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

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brought in by the Garos for sale, while 'a share of everything sold in the market and duties levied on the produce of wastes' formed an important part of the zamindari income of the estate of Mechpara.⁷⁶ Knowledge of available local resources and kinship ties with local communities such as the Koches, Bodos and the Garos, discussed in the previous section, were crucial for these varied sources of surplus extraction.

The relationship of these communities with the zamindars was a part of the process whereby peripheral groups such as the Garos gradually acquired an important role in the regional economy in the Mughal period. The following extract from an early colonial account reflects this: 'Notwithstanding the numerous instances of ill treatment, and the constant succession of fraud and falsehood, the necessity which the Garos labour under of procuring salt and iron, the luxury of eating beef, fish, and other animal foods, that their mountains produce but scantily, and the desire of receiving brass rings and other finery in return for the cotton they rear in the hills, compelled them to deal with the Bengalese and the trade, in this district at least, was entirely carried on at markets held near the frontier. To these markets, when on tolerable terms with the zamindar, the Garos repaired once a week during the dry season... almost the only article they brought for sale was the cotton in the seed.'⁷⁷

The cotton grown in the Garo hills, along with a tribute of elephants and precious wood called *ahgur*, formed an important part of the peshkash paid to the Mughal faujdar at Rangamatty who confirmed the zamindars in their lordships.⁷⁸ The relationship between the Garos and the surrounding agricultural plains was a study in

⁷⁶ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, pp.177 - 180.

⁷⁷ John M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, Calcutta, p.65.

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community interaction, stretching back to the preceding period of Koch rule. The late eighteenth century saw this interaction continuing to sustain the zamindari network of tribute and trade. Simultaneously, there was an extension of the limits of settled cultivation under zamindars who occupied Garo areas in order to increase the production of cotton. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, although a large section of the Garo people continued to live in the hilly areas and practice non-sedentary forms of cultivation, others within the community 'paid a regular rent, used the plough, and cultivated with fully as much care as any of the neighbouring Bengalese'.⁷⁹

The extension of cultivation and the emergence of social groups separated by their economic interests therefore were not indicative of the diversity of the environment and of the types of subsistence strategies that were practised, in pre-colonial Goalpara. Rather, as is evident from Mughal and early colonial writings, pre-colonial and in particular late Mughal society did not reflect a consistent victory of sedentarisation. Instead, this period is often represented in these writings as one in which groups of nomads and settled cultivators, each with distinct life styles, lived a life of mutual dependence with several areas of shared economy and culture. C.A. Bayly's characterisation of the late Mughal period as consisting of frontier societies where 'the internal extent of the state's influence and of the arable economy with its more hierarchical landed society was constantly in flux'⁸⁰ could perhaps apply well to Goalpara during this period. Bayly's argument is strengthened by Chetan Singh's

⁷⁸ A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, 1884, p.245.

⁷⁹ J. M'Cosh, quoted in M. Martin, *Eastern India: Rangpur and Assam*, Vol. 5, Chapter 5, Delhi, 1976, p.690. First published: 1838.

⁸⁰ C.A. Bayly, *Indian society*, p.31. See also Chetan Singh, 'Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India' in D. Arnold and R. Guha (ed.) *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*, Delhi, 1995.

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comments on the existence of 'fiercely autarchic tribes which lay even further from the Mughal system', and of communities which 'combined a sense of social or communal cohesion that was characteristically different from the differentiated village communities of core Mughal areas'.⁸¹

Seventeenth and eighteenth century Goalpara, similarly, had several communities living on the fringes of the agrarian order, frequently in the wooded regions. These communities, which at times could not be made to conform consistently even to a loosely defined political and economic relationship with either the Mughal state or its intermediaries, reflected the problems involved in representing both the composition and location of social groups as separate, fixed categories. Mughal accounts of expeditions into Goalpara comment on the existence of an abundance of uncultivated forested stretches on the fringes of settled agricultural land. The accounts of local resistance and rebellion were accompanied by descriptions of the fortresses of regional chieftains, which were almost always located in dense forests that often took the Mughal army several days to clear.⁸² Early colonial travelers and ethnographers also described the greater part of Goalpara's hills as 'covered with forests' and 'the whole country overwhelmed and overgrown by thickets of reeds'. These writings dwell at length on the 'wastelands which were as varied in kind as the cultivated areas'.⁸³

But there are also indications that the forests seemed to be diminishing with the extension of cultivation, and methods were suggested for the clearing of these jungles, seen as a clear threat to the spread of an agrarian order. In late Mughal Goalpara the forest had advanced into zamindari estates, several of which were described as

⁸¹ Ibid., p.30.

⁸² *Baharastan-I-Gayabi*, Book I, p.461.

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'exceedingly ill cultivated, the farmers uncommonly poor and unskilled in agriculture'.⁸⁴ The descriptions of the estate of Parbatjoar, consisting of a 'very wild tract of land with some fine level land which had settled cultivation,⁸⁵ could be reproduced for most of the other zamindari estates as well. Thus, Buchanan described Mechpara in the pre-colonial period as 'divided into a hilly, forested and uncultivated area and an area with permanent villages where taxes could be fixed by the plough'.⁸⁶ He also suggested that possibilities of cultivation of vast stretches of fertile land in the estate of Kalumalupara were frustrated by its 'impure tribes'. Travelling through the region in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan still found 'thick forests dividing cultivated land, parts of which had been destroyed by the cultivation of the rude tribes'.⁸⁷

The Meches, the Rabhas and the Bodos were among the several communities in Mughal Goalpara who lived in these forested areas and whose sense of community identity was located in the choices that they made regarding their economic and cultural practices. Each of these communities had large groups of shifting or *jhum* cultivators within them who also practised other forms of non-sedentary cultivation like hoe or *baku* cultivation. Colonial records suggest that large stretches of land in late Mughal Goalpara were cultivated by clearing fresh ground and were taxed by the Mughal state according to the land cleared by the kodal or the hoe as against the plough which was the unit of measurement elsewhere in the region. In his notes titled 'On the hoe cultivation carried on by rude tribes ', Buchanan estimated the amount of

⁸³ James Rennell, November 1765, from an extract from the *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume III, No.3, pages 95-248, 1910 November 1765 published as Appendix 1 in Hirst and Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys*.

⁸⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p.176.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, pp.179-180.

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land under this cultivation in the Ronggpur district at 17,760 'Calcutta bighas', a large part of which was within the area that later formed the district of Goalpara. Although requiring greater labour, hoe cultivation could prove to be as productive per acre as sedentary cultivation with the plough.⁸⁸ As in other forms of non-sedentary cultivation the same field was cultivated for two or three years at a stretch until it was exhausted and then allowed a fallow period of four to five years.

As late as the second half of the nineteenth century, a letter from the manager of the zamindari of Bijni made the following observation about the ryots on the estate: 'The inhabitants are all Mechis, but they are much less advanced than the people of the same tribe in Koontaghat. The Raimana and the Repoo Mechis have not yet attained the idea of occupying permanently particular spots of land. One family (or two and more families in common) will cultivate a patch of land for one year and in the following year will break up new soil. While another family may take up the land thus abandoned ... few of the Raimanee or Repoo ryots took sufficient interest in their homesteads as to plant bamboo trees and none on them planted such trees as the mango, jack, soparee etc which take a long time to yield fruit. The Mechis of Koontaghat have partly advanced beyond this stage of nomadic cultivation, but yet even then, the patgiri or collector of a village has to keep a sharp look out to see that Mechi ryots do not decamp suddenly without making good the current year's rent'.⁸⁹ Society during this period in Goalpara appears to have been characterised, therefore, by a considerable degree of mobility. This was also indicated in the dwellings of the

⁸⁷ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book I, p.276.

⁸⁸ 'Each man assisted by his wife cultivates as much as a man with a plough and two oxen, that is about 15 bighas or 5 acres... the men cut and hoe and the women burn the bushes, break the cods, sow the seeds'. (Ibid., p.265)

⁸⁹ Letter from the Manager of the Bijni Estate to the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, 12 June 1873, Goalpara Papers, File no. 113, 1873.

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people, with 'the few good huts belonging to the people from the more civilized parts of Bengal, while the rest of the cultivators who could scarce be considered as having adopted a fixed life, content themselves with frames made of reeds tied together'.⁹⁰

While the techniques of shifting cultivation could explain the mobility of groups, such as the Pani Koch and certain groups of Garos, over short distances, mobility over longer distances, sometimes involving entire villages, could usually be explained by a different, though not unconnected set of factors. Observations on migratory groups in the Mughal period in Goalpara sometimes attributed this mobility to unexplained causes, to the 'capricious,' 'unreasonable' whims of the people: 'None of them thinks much therefore of removing suddenly from the homesteads which they may occupy and settling anew in the jungle. They remove capriciously and without any reasonable cause. When one of them loses a near relationship by death at his house, he generally thinks it necessary to remove to another home, build a new hut in the distance.... A whole village will remove this way if a few members are cut off by an epidemic. An outbreak of cholera (and this from their filthy habits is not uncommon) is the signal for a general public flitting.'⁹¹

A closer look at the sources from this period, however, suggests other reasons, with the possibility of an increase in taxes offering a plausible explanation for some of the long distance migrations. The *Baharastan-I-Gayabi* has references to peasant resistance to payment of land taxes, led by rebels such as Sanatan, Parshuram and Naba.⁹² There are also evidences of attempts by the Mughal state to prevent cultivators from fleeing from their land, with the emperor Jahangir issuing a *badshahi parwana* in

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Baharastan - I - Gayabi*, Book I, pp.641 - 648.

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1699 against the cultivators of the Mechapara pargana who had deserted their lands. Another sanad issued by the Mughal state in 1683 authorised the qanungo of Mechpara, Debiprasad Barua, to continue with the collection of nankar from the peasants who had fled to the Parbatjoar estate to escape taxes and had continued with their cultivation in the area.⁹³ Conditions in the Parbatjoar estate mentioned above could not have been very congenial either, as only six of its forty manors were inhabited in the late eighteenth century. The proprietor attributed this desolation chiefly to the occasional claims made by the Baruya on these lands.⁹⁴

The movement of peasants, however, could not be attributed to economic distress alone and the sparsely populated condition of the region also needs to be considered as a related factor. Movement would have been clearly difficult in areas where villages were more firmly established and lands were ploughed. However, in areas where cultivation anyway tended to rotate on account of less population and where other forms of conservation, including manuring and crop rotation, were less practised, movement was likely to have involved fewer costs and more benefits for the peasant. This is corroborated in some of the early correspondence between colonial officials, reports of surveys of the region and ethnographic accounts, a major preoccupation of which was the extremely slow and at times almost absent rate of growth of population in the region.

Although the first official census was taken in 1872, there were earlier attempts at estimating the population of the region, mostly based on an estimate of the number of plough shares and the amount of land that could be cultivated by each. The writings

⁹³ Charuchandra Sanyal, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal: A Study of a Hindu Social Group*, Calcutta, 1965, p.57 and pp.137 - 138.

⁹⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p. 176.

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on Goalpara dating back to the late eighteenth century, namely the account of Captain Welsh, as well as those from the early nineteenth century, which offer early estimates of its population, are marked by an anxiety over 'something in the district that was unfavourable to a rapid expansion of population'.⁹⁵ This anxiety extends into the pre-colonial period as well. Thus, an account of the visit of Father Fransisco Troyand who visited the region of Goalpara in 1714 during the period of Mughal rule, by his companion Father Claudius Anthony Barbier, noted that Rangamati, the Mughal pergana of which Goalpara formed a part, was known for its unhealthiness. Barbier referred to a common Bengali saying 'that of two persons who go to Rangamati, there is always one to remain there'.⁹⁶

This concern is also evident in the accounts of Buchanan Hamilton, whose notes on the *Population of Goalpara and the Causes which operate on its Increase or Diminution*, discusses the lack of energy and activity evident among the people of the Rangpur district as a whole, of which Goalpara formed a part before 1822, and then offers 'an estimate of the proportion of some of the chief causes that operate as a check on the population' of the region of Goalpara. After dismissing factors such as early marriages as negligible checks on the population growth, Hamilton identifies disease and fever as the 'grand check' and then identifies the presence of large stretches of uncultivated and forested land in the region as the principal cause of this fever. According to Hamilton, 'in parts of the country, where there is little cultivation, and where there are great forests and thickets of reeds and more specially near the hills...

⁹⁵ Moffat Mills, quoted in B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. III, Goalpara*, Calcutta, 1906, p.33.

⁹⁶ Father Barbier's letter to the Mission, January 15, 1723, in *Bengal: Past and Present*, 6, p.200.

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the fever is by far the most prevalent'.⁹⁷ Drawing from the above details, it is possible to argue, therefore, that the sparse population of the area, combined with an abundance of available arable land, offered possibilities to the cultivators for a reprieve from taxes after a period of absence from the land.

While the form of migration and its causes discussed above are usually associated with a settled agrarian order and a more clearly differentiated peasantry, the dividing lines were frequently fluid and ambiguous between groups practising the first form of migration, which accompanied non-sedentary cultivation, and those associated with the latter. Although distinct because of their specialisations, the various communities were not in any way fixed in either their geographical location or in their form of production. Thus, hoe cultivators also lived in 'fixed, settled villages, with houses and gardens', and moved only when there were disturbances from the Bengalese'.⁹⁸

Similarly, the Rajbansis, a part of the larger Koch community, which had a long tradition of plough cultivation, and from which the majority of settled agriculturists were drawn, frequently resorted to shifting or jhum cultivation for growing crops such as mustard and gram. The community persisted with this technique until the second half of the nineteenth century when there was the advent of Muslim settlers from Bengal, 'who were more accustomed to a settled life than the tenants [of the zamindari estates] who had long been the habit of skulking from wood to wood'.⁹⁹ Several settled villages practised mixed cultivation, gathering and foraging to supplement their income. The Rajbansis also included groups such as the Pani Koch

⁹⁷ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book II, p.2

⁹⁸ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p.220.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.71.

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within the community who 'lived amidst the woods and frequently changed their abode to cultivate land...almost entirely by the hoe' through the Mughal period. The Rabhas too were divided into the Patis Rabhas and the Rongdaniya Rabhas. 'The former, who are the most numerous, have adopted the language of Bengal and cultivate with the plough. The latter retain their original language, cultivate with the hoe, retain the original customs of the tribe, have in no sort adopted the Hindu doctrine and intermarry with those who still retain their native dialect'.¹⁰⁰

It is interesting to note that there were no rigid dividing lines between these groups and forms of cultivation and timber felling, settled agriculture and hunting and foraging techniques were practised alternately frequently within the same community. In most zamindari estates in the pre-colonial period, even settled cultivators appear to have built their huts in 'a scattered manner, surrounded by a few plantains and bamboo trees...the reason for this nakedness being the fact that people do not live long in one place; whenever the ground was exhausted by repeated crops and required weeding, they go to a place which has had four or five years of rest'.¹⁰¹ It would appear therefore that the agrarian locations of certain areas were in a constant state of flux, along with their human occupants. 'Neither the composition nor the location of a particular community was fixed. Land was cleared for agriculture but land became covered with jungles...herdsmen settled to till or to tax the tillers but cultivators shifted to herding; swidden cultivators took to the plough but ploughmen fled to the forests'.¹⁰²

It can be argued, therefore, that although it was in several ways a 'frontier society', with social groups continuing to live predominantly outside the rule of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.546.

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Mughal state's administrative machinery, pre-colonial Goalparia society resisted classification into clear social categories. The occupational mobility within each community appears however to have escaped most colonial official and ethnographic writings. These recognised the co-existence of forms of cultivation and of foraging techniques in the region of Goalpara but frequently resorted to clear distinctions between settled villagers and nomadic groups living in forested areas. This was evident in the use of the term 'pure' for Hindu agriculturists who had 'adopted the language and plough of the Bengalese', and 'impure' for the rest which continued to wallow in all in their impurity'.¹⁰³ These terms drew substantially from concepts of racial ethnography and created powerful stereotypes of the identity of these groups which lasted through the colonial period and into the post colonial period as well. Evidence of this is to be found in ethnographic writings of the mid twentieth century which described the Koches of Goalpara as 'flat faced, curl haired with the protuberant lips of the Negro'.¹⁰⁴

Such views were illustrative of notions of the environment as determining the identities of different social groups, and of forest folk as the definitive Others against whom civilised folk measured themselves. These notions drew upon current prejudices of the indigenous elite regarding the forest and its inhabitants, and could be located within a larger discourse on civilization and morality.¹⁰⁵ The emphasis on

¹⁰¹ Letter from J. C. Geddes, Officiating Commissioner to the Eastern Dooars, to Lieutenant-Colonel Hopkinson, Agent of the Governor General, North-Eastern Frontier, 11 July 1865, Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, 1866-1870.

¹⁰² Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200 - 1991*, Cambridge, 1999, p.29.

¹⁰³ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book II, p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Lectures on Ethnography*, Calcutta, 1925.

¹⁰⁵ This view, whether on physiocratic grounds or utilitarian arguments and Enlightenment rationalism, was an extension of more primitive fears of the forest, as against the later romantic idealization of the primitive and the uncultivated. For a discussion of these attitudes see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London, 1995, Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western*

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sedentarisation was clearly inherent in the Mughal state's notion of economy and society. In his analysis of the environment of Mughal India and the responses of the state to it, Chetan Singh argues that for the Mughals, 'a civilized society was one primarily engaged in agriculture'¹⁰⁶ and hence, 'societies which were predominantly non - agricultural in nature were viewed as primitive and as a threat to settled agrarian areas where Mughal land revenue regulations were methodically applied'.¹⁰⁷

Undoubtedly, local communities which were moving from a nomadic to a settled life and thereby creating the conditions necessary for the consolidation of an agrarian society, constituted a dominant characteristic of the social order of late Mughal Goalpara. The creation of a class of zamindars and their attempts to create a political space for themselves were developments which had significant implications for the succeeding colonial period when these classes were further strengthened by new patterns of authority and power. However, despite the trend of pushing forward the margins of settled agriculture, Goalpara's society as reconstructed in the previous two sections, also comprised the co-existence of economic systems. These succeeded in binding people to permanent settlements but often only for a brief period of time. There remained several groups which did not make a clear transition to settled life and persisted with their non-sedentary life styles while continuing to be an integral part of the regional political economy. Class differences and notions of status were less crystallised and rigid during this period and society continued to be divided into groups that were frequently bound together by ties of loyalty and kinship. Their shared cultural worlds were reflected among others, in the worship of village gods.

India, Oxford, 1999, David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, (eds.), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*, Delhi, 2001.

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In pre-colonial Goalpara, therefore, the adoption of sedentary or non-sedentary lifestyles was far from being a rigid and determined process. Rather, settled cultivators frequently reverted to, or alternated between, non-sedentary forms of cultivation including hoe and shifting agriculture, making it difficult to categorise the population within neatly defined boundaries. Mobility, reflected in the patterns of migration of various groups, added to this picture of flexibility. This diversity in socio-economic systems provides the context for British intervention in the area and the entry of the colonial state as an initially hesitant power, relying on the symbolic memory of previous empires. The next chapter discusses some of the transformations effected in this rather fluid social order by this state and anticipates the project of colonial categorisation and reification and the implications this had for a sense of a region.

¹⁰⁶ Chetan Singh, ' Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India', in Arnold and Guha (eds.), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Chetan Singh, ' Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society', p.30.

Chapter Two

Colonial Interventions: Mapping a Land and its People

The previous chapter looked at the emergence of groups based on economic and social differences in a region, which was a political frontier in the late Mughal period, and at these groups' negotiation with changes in the political economy and in indigenous notions of political space. This chapter addresses similar issues in nineteenth century Goalpara, when colonial intervention introduced new patterns of power and authority. These changes had a significant impact on the nature of social interaction between local communities and on their participation in the regional political economy. The creation of a modern state with permanent borders and undivided sovereignty provides the context within which to study these developments.

With the East India Company rule of Bengal in the late eighteenth century, a large part of what later came to form the colonial district of Goalpara came under the administration of the colonial state. The hilly Eastern Dooars in the north however continued to be controlled by the Bhutan monarch until they were finally annexed to British territory in 1866. As in several other parts of the country, the economic imperatives of the Company effected changes in the political economy of Goalpara as well. They included the introduction of a revenue settlement based on notions of private property in land. The first section of the chapter looks at the consolidation of the settled cultivating classes in the valleys of the Godadhor and the Brahmaputra in southern Goalpara, and at the emergence of many of the features of nineteenth century agrarian society. These changes continued earlier trends in the southern parts of

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Goalpara which had a primarily settled peasant society practising sedentary cultivation. What is of considerable significance, however, is the extent to which the forests and the hilly areas continued to be an important source of political and economic resource both for local powers and for the ordinary peasant, with 'control over and knowledge of this strategic domain ...[being seen as] a tradable resource in the regional political arena'.¹

In the absence of colonial influences, it can be assumed that such relations would have also persisted in the extent of Goalpara's forested and hilly terrain in the north, located as it was amidst polities whose concepts of authority and territory were markedly different from those of the colonial state's. The second section looks at northern Goalpara, differentiated from the south by the absence of a permanent settlement of land revenue in the nineteenth century as also by greater instances of shared resources among its communities. Here there was a confrontation between colonial and indigenous notions of space and power in the area of the Eastern Dooars, a territory over which Goalpara's zamindars and the Bhutan monarch, among others, laid claims to a form of shared sovereignty. The section explores the changes initiated by colonial policies of social and environmental engineering in this region.

The third section of the chapter suggests that weekly markets, fairs and the more permanent market places were among some of the most visible sites for cultural and political interaction between communities and rulers during the late Mughal and early colonial period. This was true both for northern Goalpara, a region characterised by ambiguous boundaries and the coexistence of several economic systems, as well as for the south, where the market was well integrated with the trading networks of

¹ Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200 - 1991*, Cambridge, 1999, p.199.

Bengal. The last section looks at the entry of the colonial state into this market and the impact this had on the relationship between local political authority and forms of economic transaction. The search for the permanent political and geographical boundaries of Goalpara attracted considerable attention of the colonial officials during this period. This section therefore also inquires into possible connections between the colonial discourse on geography and mapping and the emergence of an economically unified territory.

Section I: Towards sedentarisation

The continuing sedentarisation of southern Goalpara under colonial rule was unaccompanied by the regular topographical and revenue surveys that marked this process in some parts of Mughal and colonial India. Rather, in the absence of any formal settlement of land revenue,² the advent of British rule in the region merely conformed much to previous practice. Of the eighteen permanently settled zamindari estates in the district in the late eighteenth century, twelve had been parts of territories of Mughal border chieftains, paying a nominal tribute to the state.³ The colonial state introduced the permanent settlement of land revenue but initially allowed for a continuation of the payment of revenue in terms of the tribute formerly paid to the Mughals. Surveying the district of Rangpur (of which Goalpara formed a part before 1822) in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan, whose accounts provide the most detailed available source of the social and economic

² In his report of 1853, A.J.P. Mills noted that 'it is on record that neither during the Mughal government nor at any period anterior to the settlement were internal revenues made the subject of official scrutiny.' A.J.P. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1854, 'Gowalpara'.

³ A.J. Laine, *Account of the Land Tenure System of Goalpara*, Shillong, 1917, p.2.

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conditions of the region, observed that in the estates of the Bijni Raja, 'one half of the rent is paid in coarse cloth woven by the women of his tenantry'⁴ and 'in 1400 *mon* of dried fish...caught at the Tobarang lake'.⁵ Buchanan saw these modes of payment in kind, using various articles drawn from the ecological resources of the region, as continuities from the period of Mughal rule when 'the Peshkash for the Khuntaghat and the Howraghat parganas of the Bijni estate was fixed at 5,998 Narayanee rupees but the tribute was soon commuted to 68 elephants for the faujdar at the head quarters of Rangammaty'.⁶

However, the ambitions and the capacities of the colonial government exceeded those of its predecessors, and the scale of change initiated in the rural economy of southern Goalpara from the mid nineteenth century onwards substantially advanced the establishment of a village-centered peasant agriculture. In the absence of regular revenue surveys, the integration of local groups into the agrarian order has to be assessed primarily from the surveys of Buchanan and from a few scattered colonial reports. Since settled cultivation depended on the use of ploughs drawn by bullocks, the number of ploughs in the possession of each peasant family was considered a reliable indication of different communities' ability to sustain independent production. Buchanan's estimate of the settled agrarian population in southern Goalpara at 162,000, with the number of ploughs at 32,400 suggests that the valley between the Sonkosh and the Manas rivers had come to support a large settled population by the

⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Mss Eur. D 75, The Account of the District or of Ronggopur Zila, Book IV, p.177.

⁵ Ibid., p.762.

⁶ Ibid.

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nineteenth century.⁷ Colonial records from this period estimated the area of cultivated land at 677 square miles as against a total area of 4104 square miles, though forest areas and wastelands continued to occupy 3427 square miles in the district.⁸ By the turn of the century these figures had risen sufficiently for the population of southern Goalpara to be described by William Hunter as 'primarily agriculturists',⁹ with a peasantry which could be relied upon 'to cling to their holdings like the Hindu peasants of other districts...with plenty of orchards and bamboos'.¹⁰

The availability of vast stretches of uncultivated land in Goalpara and the slow growth in population through the nineteenth century however remained a major preoccupation in the correspondence between colonial officials and in surveys and in ethnographic accounts, prior to the settlement of large stretches on land by cultivators from eastern Bengal in the last decades of the that century. The first official census was taken in 1872 but there were earlier attempts at estimating the population of the region, mostly using plough shares, in the manner of Buchanan. Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Moffat Mills, a colonial official, already expressed an anxiety that 'something in the district was unfavourable to a rapid expansion of population'.¹¹

Even earlier, an account of the visit of Father Fransisco Troyand to Goalpara in 1714 by his companion Father Claudius Anthony Barbier had noted that Rangamati, the Mughal pargana of which Goalpara formed a part, was known for its

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A.J.P. Mills, *Report*, Appendix A.

⁹ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, London, 1879, p.74.

¹⁰ Letter from the manager of the Bijni Estate to the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, Goalpara Papers, File no. 113, 1873.

¹¹ Moffat Mills, quoted in B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. III, Goalpara*, Calcutta, 1906. p.33.

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unhealthiness.¹² Barbier referred to a common Bengali saying 'that of two persons, who go to Rangamati, there is always one to remain there'.¹³ Buchanan Hamilton in his notes on the *Population of Goalpara and the Causes which operate on its Increase or Diminution*, discusses the lack of energy and activity evident among the people of the Rangpur district as a whole and then offers 'an estimate of the proportion of some of the chief causes that operate as a check on the population' of Goalpara. After dismissing factors including early marriages as negligible checks on the population growth, Hamilton identified 'disease and fever as the grand check' and the large stretches of uncultivated and forested land in the region as the principal cause of this fever.¹⁴

These conditions of a sparse population inhabiting an abundance of arable land forced the government to offer a variety of leases to encourage cultivation, without the cultivators incurring any liability through enhanced assessment. Most leases of land in the zamindari estates during this period were granted in perpetuity to the occupants who paid a minimal customary rent (nirikh) to the landlord and enjoyed permanent occupancy rights after an initial period of three years. Buchanan noted that the several leases that were granted during this period 'were apparently for the benefit of the cultivator ... to secure him in the possession of the lands for a certain time at a lower rent than the maximum to encourage him to bring wastelands under cultivation'.¹⁵

These *projas* or under tenants were drawn predominantly from the Rajbanshi community which had been increasingly settling to agriculture even at the inception of

¹² Father Barbier's letter to the Mission, 15 January 1723, in *Bengal: Past and Present*, 6, p.200.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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the colonial regime and now emerged as the dominant agricultural caste in large parts of eastern Bengal and Goalpara. Several other communities, including the Kacharis, who in the 1840's were said to be 'practising a desultory nature of cultivation...with little affection for the soil they cultivate'¹⁶ and as continuing to live on the margins of settled life, were being described by colonial officials in the last decades of the century as a 'remarkably fine peasantry with a very superior cultivation of the permanent kind'.¹⁷ Hunter's account from this period too, has a similar description of the Kacharis as a 'purely agricultural group, who, with a few exceptions, live by the produce of the land'.¹⁸

In the more prosperous estates such as Gauripur and Karaibari control over the production process from the early decades of the nineteenth century onwards was being increasingly appropriated by a class of cultivators, the jotedars, drawn primarily from the Rajbanshis. From Buchanan's account, it is obvious that they were drawn from the Brahmin and Kayastha castes as well and that they 'retained only a little land in their possession, just enough to supply their numerous families with food and this they cultivated by means of those who receive a share of the crop...[T]he remainder they let at rack rent to under tenants and with the money given by these, pay their rent and purchase what luxuries they require'.¹⁹ Buchanan also mentions a gradual expansion of the class, which came to include several Muslim farmers and clerics as

¹⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book II, p.2. Hamilton observed that, 'in parts of the country, where there is little cultivation, and where there are great forests and thickets of reeds and more specially near the hills... the fever is by far the most prevalent'. (Ibid.)

¹⁵ Ibid., Book IV, p.99.

¹⁶ B.G. Hodgson, quoted in E.T. Dalton, *The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, p.84.

¹⁷ Jenkins, quoted in Charu Sanyal's *The Meches and Totos: Two Sub Himalayan Tribes of North Bengal*, University of North Bengal, 1973, p.9.

¹⁸ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.37.

¹⁹ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p.102.

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its members.²⁰ In the pattern of landownership that emerged in this period in the region, the jotedars controlled increasingly large stretches of land, frequently acting as creditors for the cultivators and for an emerging class of landless labourers. Associated with this system was an informal and imprecise style of estate management wherein the jotedar:

obtained permission from the Raja to settle and break up land; sometimes a specified quantity, but practically... took up as much as he liked, for where land abounds and ryots are few, the land is of no value. He at first with his own family and a ryot or two, cultivates what is sufficient only for their joint maintenance; by degrees, however, poor men collect around him, getting permission to cultivate and use his seed, on condition of receiving half his crop. The entire jote is estimated rudely, not according to the number of ploughs but by an imaginary standard called the plough. No measurement takes place. The plough of land on the border has been found to fluctuate between five and hundred *bighas*.²¹

In the villages of southern Goalpara and Rangpur, the jotedar was therefore more than an inferior landholder under the zamindar, renting out land to under tenants and sharecroppers. Buchanan found the bigger jotedars gradually becoming a rural elite and acquiring a social status that corresponded closely to that enjoyed by the zamindars. He described them in the following words: 'In general they are well behaved men, superior by much both in manners and education...and many of them live much better than landlords of the first families and the largest estates in the district. It is true that they do not have the same train of idle followers and flatterers, but this means that they retain their understandings and necessity of application to business sharpens their wit...so that they manage their affairs with economy and their

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Letter from T. B. Lane, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 18 November 1869.

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houses, diet and clothing are at least equal to those of the landlords and many of them can afford to ride on a horse or keep a palanquin'.²²

The dewaniya system, 'a village political device peculiar to North Bengal',²³ but prevalent in the district of Goalpara as well, reflected this position of the jotedar and his control over the process of surplus collection and distribution. The dewaniya was usually a small jotedar. Under this system, he was tied in a relationship with the ordinary cultivators or the chengra, and played the role of an agent or go-between, between them and the zamindar's agents or the officials of the colonial state. The chengra were described by Buchanan as 'the most timid creatures imaginable...being totally illiterate and afraid to speak even to the village clerk'.²⁴ The dewaniya's control over the production and distribution processes was bolstered by his dominant role in the social life of the village. Buchanan observed that 'the dewaniya seldom does any work', and instead 'encircled his head with a turban and on all occasions is helped first to tobacco and betel'.²⁵ The jotedars may have begun as cultivators who enabled the zamindar to colonise the wastelands of his estate at a minimum risk and expense, while deriving a considerable profit by subletting his surplus lands to under tenants, but were increasingly occupying a more important position within Goalpara's rural society.

²² The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p.109.

²³ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1765-1850*, Delhi, 1975, p.190.

²⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book IV, p.96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.97. The social status commanded by the dewaniya was also reflected in the layout pattern of several Rajbanshi villages in Goalpara, in which the house of the giri or the dewaniya was located in the centre of the village, surrounded by others belonging to his community. (Amalendu Guha, *Jamidar*

Section II: On Ambiguous Territoriality and Multiple Sovereignty

The extension of the margins of settled land in the region under the colonial state was accompanied after the mid nineteenth century by triangular surveys and mapping²⁶ which helped make the geography of the new district of Goalpara more comprehensive and definitive. Despite this, and the emergence of a stratified agrarian structure in the permanently settled southern areas, the triumph of the agrarian order was not yet evident. Forests and settled agricultural areas, for instance, were far from being geographically distinct regions in the Goalpara of our period. The country was described in 1765 by the surveyor James Rennell as 'very little cultivated in the neighbourhood of Goalpara and Jugigopa... with the woods abound [ing] with several kinds of wild animals...and so full of trees and jungle as to be scarcely penetrable'.²⁷

This thick forest cover continued into the last decades of the nineteenth century and almost all the zamindari estates had large stretches of forested and uncultivated stretches of lands in this period, the estate of Chapar being the only one which consisted of land that was 'populous and cultivated like Bengal'.²⁸ Large areas of several estates were 'chiefly hills and mountains covered with forests ...[or] undulating country covered with Sal forests'.²⁹ Several communities continued to live independently on the margins of settled society, while others alternated between settled and migratory lifestyles. Conversely, the forested and hilly areas frequently had

Kaalin Goalpara Jilar Artha Samajik Avastha (Socio-Economic Conditions in Zamindari Goalpara), Guwahati, 2000, p. 45).

²⁶ For details of the triangular and other surveys of Goalpara during this period, see F.C. Hirst and A. B. Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys of the Goalpara district*, Shillong, 1917. Also see Section IV of this chapter for the relationship between the demarcation of boundaries and the market in the region.

²⁷ James Rennell, November 1765, from an extract from the *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Volume III, No.3, pages 95-248, 1910 published as Appendix 1 in Hirst and Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys*.

²⁸ A.J.P. Mills, *Report*, Appendix A.

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large clearings, which were sites for shifting cultivation practised by several communities along with areas which were marked out as common grazing grounds for cattle.

Towards the north, the coexistence of peasant settlements and non-sedentary communities in the Bijni and the Sidli estates and in the Eastern Dooar region allowed for a similar shared use of resources and an overlapping of political authority and territory. A report from an expedition prior to the British occupation of the Eastern Dooars described the region as a 'narrow strip of land, ranging in breadth from ten to twenty miles, which runs along the base of the lower range of the Bootan Hills from the Darjeeling District to the Frontier of Assam [and] extends from the Dhansiri river to the River Teesta on the west. The land within these limits is by nature singularly rich and fertile; it is formed of the richest black vegetable mould, is washed by many rivers, and has a southern slope from 1,500 feet to the level of the plains of Bengal'.³⁰ Rich in ecological resources and suitable for the cultivation of cotton, the eastern part of the Dooar region separated the towns and trading ports of southern Goalpara and eastern Bengal from their markets inland, in Bhutan and Tibet. The thick forests of the Dooars were also a reliable source of strong, durable timber, especially Sal, a factor that was of considerable significance for the expanding rail network in eastern India³¹ and behind the colonial occupation of the area in 1866.

Colonial economic interests in northern Goalpara, however, had to first contend with the conditions of overlapping territoriality and sovereignty, which

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ashley Eden, *Report on the State of Bootan and the Progress of the Mission of 1863-1864*, Calcutta, 1865, p.2.

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characterised the indigenous polity of this region. From the British perspective, the Dooars, particularly the area included within the zamindari estates of Bijni and Sidli, was 'an anomaly, wherein chieftains who considered themselves independent Rajas paid revenue to the British government for half of their estates, whilst for the other half they continued to acknowledge the authority of the Government of Bhutan'.³² Officials cautioned 'that previous to arrangements being made for the management of the forests, or for the settlement of the soil, it is incumbent on the government to decide upon the status of the two persons who call themselves Rajas, and who between them, claim the whole land between the Manas and the Godadhar rivers'³³. This section explores the colonial state's attempts to determine the 'legitimate rights' and 'claims' of the local powers. It views these efforts at defining and fixing previously rather fluid realms as reflecting a confrontation between indigenous and colonial notions of political space.

In most other parts of the country under British rule, and on all questions of tributary relationships, rights and territoriality, colonial officials were frequently divided into groups which offered different interpretations and proposed policies accordingly. So it was on the nature of the relationship between the Bhutan monarch and the zamindars of Bijni and Sidli. In their search for documentary evidence to determine whether a particular tributary was independent or an integral part of the Bhutan kingdom, colonial officials relied on the sanads of the Deb Raja of Bhutan to these chieftains and were frequently confounded by the 'ambiguous nature' of this

³¹ Besides the belt of Terai forests at the foot of the Bhutan hills, there was a valuable tract of forests in the Gooma region of the eastern Dooars, stretching to the estate of Parbatjoar. Most of these forests were of Sal trees, next only to teak in its durability, though more difficult to season.

³² C. T. Metcalfe, Memorandum on the Bijnee Dooar, 20 May 1865, Goalpara Papers.

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tributary relationship. The sanad of the Deb Raja of Bhutan to Kumud Narayan, the chieftain of Bijni, stated that it had been 'customary during a long time for the Dhurma Raja to send a present of horses to the Bijni Raja and for him to send as presents dried fish, oil, endi silk and salami, all of which were furnished every year'.³⁴ It then dwelt on the rights of the Bijni chieftain over the Cheerung forests, in return for the grant of which the latter had to pay the Bhutan officials three loads of salt and 200 pieces of endi to purchase goods worth Rs.300 from Bhutan that included a fan decorated with peacock feathers. It also warned him to abstain from 'oppressing anyone' in disregard to the orders of the Bhutanese official, the zimpe.³⁵ In short, this was a statement of both superiority and interdependence, of rights and duties expressed by the exchange of 'gifts'.³⁶

Again, a sanad from the Deb Raja to Indranarayan, the Raja of Sidli, listed the following articles: '1 pair of ivory tusks, 11 pairs of nine kinds of cloth, 1 Rhinoceros horn, 1 tiger skin, 1 jari or water pot, 1 brass batta (betel box) 1 khora (cup) of pewter, 1 sari (frock), 1 mosquito net, 1 punkha (fan), 1 shade of peacock feathers, 1 Tangun pony'.³⁷ In return, the Rajah received from the Deb Raja a golden jampe or an ornament for a head dress, a jauna or a robe, a gift of Tangun horses and ponies,

³³ Memorandum submitted by Metcalfe on the newly acquired territory north of the Gowaiparah district in Lower Assam, July 1865, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866-1870.

³⁴ Translation of an undated sanad from the Deb Raja of Bhutan to Kumud Narayan of Bijni, Goalpara Papers File no. 7, 1866-1870.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ There is a substantial amount of literature on the meaning of the 'gift' in pre-colonial societies. 'Gifts of rights to land, titles, emblems, and honors by kings to their subjects became in cultural terms the dynamic medium for the constitution of political relations. These gifts linked individuals, and also corporations, symbolically, morally and politically with the sovereignty of the king and created both a moral unity and a political hierarchy'. (Nicholas Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord: Property, Law, and the Gift under the Madras Permanent Settlement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.28, No.2, April 1986, p.311)

³⁷ Translation of the sanad from the Deb Raja of Bhutan to the Rajah of Sidli, 1817, in Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866-1870.

maunds of salt, a gong and a drum. The incorporation and submission of the tributary rulers were therefore also accompanied by a certain degree of reciprocity, with the rewards from the Deb Raja often being of greater value than the tribute from Bijni and Sidli.

Unfamiliarity with the system of authority that was reflected in these sanads led colonial administrators to offer contradictory interpretations. At the same time, these interpretations reflected a shared inability to recognise the 'complicated set of categorisations and gradations of kinship relations'³⁸ that the gifts in the sanads entailed. This understanding of indigenous rights, as Nicholas Dirks has pointed out, assumed 'opposition and not complementarity'.³⁹ Thus, in his reading of one such sanad, Geddes argued that 'the Booteahs looked upon all men as removable from office and recognized no proprietary right in the soil arising from lengthened tenure. These people [the Bijni and Sidli zamindars] who occupied an intermediate position between the tehsildar of the present day and the zamindar of the Mughal empire were usually left to make what arrangements they thought fit, and their conduct was not questioned unless grievous complaint of oppression came up or the revenue fell into arrears'.⁴⁰ J.C. Haughton's response to Geddes refuted the latter's arguments but shared his view of property rights, citing evidence of occupancy rights of the zamindars spreading over more than a century under the Mughals and then under the Bhutan and

³⁸ Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord', p.312.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.311.

⁴⁰ Correspondence between J.C. Geddes, the Deputy Commissioner of the Eastern Dooars and Colonel Agnew, the Commissioner of Cooch Behar and the Dooars, 4 July 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 385.

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the British administration, as sufficient proof of their proprietorship, 'so far as such rights can exist under arbitrary governments'.⁴¹

The differences in the conceptualisation of space and authority, between the colonial state and the indigenous regimes, affected the former's understanding of the regional relationships, often reducing them to familiar economic transactions and linear hierarchies. For instance, Mackenzie appears to have judged these objects purely in commercial terms, asserting that 'the British government was most tenacious of its rights in matters of bargain ... and it would not consent to be swindled even in such things as yak tails...'⁴² In another example of the colonial state's unfamiliarity with the local system of authority as reflected in the sanads, officials dismissed the ritual exchange of gifts between the Bhutan monarch and the kingdoms of Bijni and Sidli as insignificant for the debate over the status of the chieftains of these areas.⁴³ The exchange of gifts between the Bhutan king and the chieftains of the Dooars, when evaluated in monetary terms appeared 'ludicrously in favour of the Booteahs', when in return for a *Mangon* or demand for money by Bhutan officials, the chieftains received 'some trifling article, as a piece of silk'.⁴⁴ Relationships were invariably represented as 'compulsory exchanges of food and benevolent fines' imposed by a more powerful

⁴¹ Correspondence between J.C. Haughton, the Commissioner of Cooch Behar and the Government of Bengal, 8 April 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7. 'To me, it seems that the Sanad is a recognition of the hereditary right, where it is conferred in consequence of the descent of the party to whom it is given from the last possessor', stated Haughton, refuting Geddes' arguments on the grounds that they were based on the premise that 'because the Booteahs considered themselves entitled to break their arrangements at pleasure, and they were not bound by them, those engagements were not be allowed to be of any force'.(Ibid.)

⁴² Mackenzie, *History of the relations with the hill tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, p.10.

⁴³ Correspondence between J. C. Haughton and the Government of Bengal, 8 April 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁴⁴ J.C. Geddes, Deputy Commissioner of the Eastern Dooars to the Deputy Commissioner of the Bhootan Dooars, 18 April 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7

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state, with detailed lists of commodities which construed gifts as utilitarian objects rather than as a means of communicating the reciprocal relationship of these powers.

This understanding extended to other aspects of the relationship as well. In response to a plea by the Raja of Sidli that he be allowed to retain his title, 'as the Bhutan government used to recognize his status as a Rajah by sending him honorary presents every year',⁴⁵ Geddes argued that in the absence of any documentary evidence, 'there were no means of determining the exact status accorded to the occupant of Bijni by the Bhootan government'.⁴⁶ Colonial officials failed to discover any fixed hierarchy or common system of titles; frequently titles were used without reference to any definite distinctions of status.⁴⁷ This led them to conclude that 'no importance whatever could be paid to the fact that the Petitioner bears the title of the Rajah, or as he calls himself, Maharajah. In Bhutan, anyone whose collections of revenue were so extensive as those of Sidli and who exercised judicial authority, would be called a Rajah.'⁴⁸

There were similar petitions from the Rani of Bijni in support of her minor son, Kumud Narain. She pleaded that 'the Rajah of Bijni was independent for so long that it was not necessary for him to obtain the title of Raja from any other power. Rajas of recent creation require a sanad but the Raja of Bijnee was a genuine Raja from time

⁴⁵ Petition from the Sidli Rajah quoted in a letter from J.C. Geddes to the Deputy Commissioner of the Bhootan Dooars, 18 April 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁴⁶ J. C. Geddes, Deputy Commissioner of the Eastern Dooars to the Deputy Commissioner of the Bhootan Dooars, 18 April 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁴⁷ Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, p.191.

⁴⁸ J. C. Geddes to the Deputy Commissioner of the Bhootan Dooars, 18 April 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

immemorial'.⁴⁹ In his petition to Bengal Government, Kumud Narain laid claims to the jurisdiction of the territory of Khuntaghat, Habraghat and Bijni on the grounds that, despite having to obtain the protection of the Mughal government, 'on coming under their jurisdiction, Bijni was distinguished from other landholders by having to pay not a rent but a tribute for these lands'.⁵⁰ Other petitions included one by the Rani of Bijni, Nageswari Debi. She argued persuasively that the Bhutan monarch concluded periodic settlements with the descendants of Bijni, and more significantly, that 'the annexed tract of the Bhutan territory [the Eastern Dooars], now under dispute, was neither a conquered one nor a ceded one; it is part of a tributary state and the right and interest possessed by its owner cannot be otherwise but what had been fixed by the conditions of the treaty of peace'.⁵¹ A petition from Gauri Narain, the Raja of Sidli claimed to have had judicial and magisterial powers under the Bhutan monarch, including rights to the timber transit duties, while continuing to pay rent to the Bhutia authorities.⁵²

Implicit in the petitions of the Bijni and Sidli rulers were not only an awareness of the juridical terms and categories understood by the British, but also suggestions of the existence of multiple sovereignty in the region, which allowed tributary areas to seek protection from a powerful neighbour while continuing to retain their own rights. For the Deb Raja of Bhutan, both Bijni and Sidli were frontier areas bordering his kingdom, the rulers of which could be ordered to 'settle waste lands and manage the taluks' and warned of punishment in the event of 'any injustice, hostility,

⁴⁹ Petition of the Rani Nageswari Debi on the part of Kumud Narain Bhoop, minor Raja of Bijni, dated 1 August 1866.

⁵⁰ Goalpara Papers, 1866-1867, File no. 7.

⁵¹ Petition of Rani Nageswari Debi, 24 April 1867 in the Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, 1866-1870, Goalpara Papers.

⁵² Petition dated 18 Pose 1272, from the Occupant of Sidli to the Deputy Commissioner of the Eastern Dooars, Goalpara Papers.

or an act of disturbance'.⁵³ These tributaries also continued to receive a robe and scarves of honour from the Deb Raja. The acceptance of these gifts entailed loyalty as well as a recognition of the sovereignty of these smaller powers, including the right to exercise all judicial powers within these territories, by the ruler of Bhutan.⁵⁴ Such practices were rather confusing for officials of the colonial state who understood property to govern political relations and political space, within clearly demarcated boundaries.

The arguments of both Geddes and Haughton drew upon notions of exclusive sovereignty and of fixed territoriality which negated the possibility that frontiers and sovereignties could overlap. Geddes' understanding of the status of Bijni and Sidli represented the areas as integral parts of the kingdom of Bhutan and located the disputed territories of the Eastern Dooars firmly within the sovereignty of the Deb Raja. In one of his several memoranda to the administration on this issue, Geddes argued that 'about 1786, the Booteahs took possession of the Sidli Dooar [and] the place has ever since remained subject to Bhutan. It is true that the Deb Raja did to a certain extent recognise the hereditary succession of zamindars among the Hindus in the Dooars, but this was permitted only as an exceptional arrangement for the sake of revenue, and not by any means as a right, either proprietary or hereditary'.⁵⁵

Commenting on the nature of the demands from the Bhutan government and the manner of payment, Geddes quoted from the last sanad conferred on Sidli which

⁵³ Sanad II, dated 1817 in the Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, Goalpara Papers, 1866-1867.

⁵⁴ A sanad from the Deb Raja to Raja Indranarayan of Sidli, whom Gauri Narain succeeded, stated, 'No one is to be allowed to go into your jurisdiction and you will exercise all judicial powers. The disposal of murder, dacoity, theft and rape is given to you'. Sanad II, dated 1817 in the Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, Goalpara Papers, 1866-1867.

⁵⁵ Correspondence between J.C. Geddes and W. Agnew, Deputy Commissioner of the Bhootan Dooars, April 1866, Goalpara Papers.

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laid down that, 'every year [Sidli] was to give [the Bhutan monarch] new rice and clothes and likewise...consignments and contributions and chance fees whatsoever and whosoever we shall ask'.⁵⁶ Geddes concluded that this was sufficient proof that the payments were compulsory: it was preposterous to talk of proprietary rights held under such exacting circumstances as these.⁵⁷ Bhutan therefore was a clearly bounded polity, with institutions that could be adapted to colonial rule 'to secure the greatest possible uniformity in the revenue system',⁵⁸ and the judicial authority exercised by the rulers of Bijni and Sidli was attributed to administrative necessity, these areas being at the periphery of the Deb Raja's kingdom.

Haughton's spirited defence of the rights of the Bijni and Sidli zamindars, which pleaded for the 'ancient possessors of the soil to be treated with great consideration', was based on a recognition of the sovereignty of these smaller kingdoms. This, he pointed out, was evident in the fact that their rights resembled those of other native rulers, namely to collect taxes and abwabs and to conduct an independent judicial and fiscal system of administration.⁵⁹ In his several accounts of the history of the Eastern Dooars, Haughton continued to represent the rulers of Bijni and Sidli as independent powers, small kingdoms whose sovereignty was temporarily compromised during invasions by the Bhutan monarch and later by the colonial state. However, he too ignored the existence of a relationship of reciprocity between the Bhutan monarch and the rulers of Bijni and Sidli and, together with Geddes, dismissed rituals of reciprocity --- the exchange of gifts between these kingdoms --- and

⁵⁶ Ibid.,p.10

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Letter from the Officiating Commissioner of the Bhutan Dooars to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 25 September 1865, Bengal Government Papers, 1867-1869.

attempted instead to identify exclusive sovereignties which would help the colonial state to delineate legitimate rights.

Translated into the familiar language of unambiguous sovereignty, whether of the Bhutan king or of the annexed territories of the Dooars, the debates justified the introduction of contractual relationships between the local chiefs and the colonial state in the region and erased any existing ambiguities over rights to the ecological resources of the area. The British recognised the Bhutan monarch as the sole possessor of sovereign rights over these resources in the pre-colonial period in opposition to the smaller chieftains. They identified a well-defined revenue-collecting mechanism under his rule, which had 'the soubahs as the highest officer and the tehsildars or the katams under him followed by the Jotedars, in a clear hierarchy of power'.⁶⁰

Quoting from a sanad from the Deb Raja of Bhutan to the Rani of Sidli, Geddes observed that 'the terms of the sanad for the Cheerung forests granted by the Deb Raja are so extensive as to enable the Rani to work the forests of Sidli in addition to the ones she has hitherto held ...the people of Bijni and Sidli have found their interest in arranging such things quietly and avoiding interference from their controlling authorities'. Geddes concluded that 'there is no doubt that the forests have always been looked on as state property. They have been expressly treated as such by the Bhutan authorities and even by the Bijni family'.⁶¹ Other colonial officials agreed: they too needed to establish an ideologically coherent basis for the collection of revenue. Thus Metcalfe suggested that 'in dealing with the present Raja of Sidli, it

⁵⁹ Letter from J.C. Haughton to the Secretary to the Government of India, 8 April 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁶⁰ Bengal Government Papers, File no. 385, 1867-1869.

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seems clear that the only claim that he can put forth is that of his family having collected the rents of the Cheerung Dooar for several generations'.⁶² 'The sanads granted to the Sidli family by the Bhutias [were] clearly worded as if the Bhutan government regarded the Dooars as a part of the Kingdom and delegated its authority for a certain purpose.'⁶³

Colonial intervention thus reduced complex relations to a law of property. If local rights had been totally contingent on an arrangement with the sovereign of Bhutan, then his successor, the colonial state, would have the forest resources at their disposal.⁶⁴ Such readings of local political conditions also gave the colonial state the legitimacy it needed to rule the area. 'In this respect they and ourselves are equal', observed Haughton, 'the inhabitants here as elsewhere in India have to choose between masters... they are willing to choose the English and reject Bhutia rule and hence even though we may be disliked as foreigners, we shall not be so much disliked as the foreigners we have displaced'.⁶⁵ The practical question, therefore, as one colonial official pointed out, was 'how the two objects of preservation of existing Bhutanese

⁶¹ Letter from J.C.Geddes to the Commissioner of the Bengal Dooars, 20 April 1866 Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁶² Memorandum by Metcalfe on the newly acquired territory north of the Goalpara district in Lower Assam, July 1865, Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, File no. 7.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The demand for strong and durable wood for the railway sleepers was met by the forest resources of the Eastern Dooars. In the decades following the annexation of the Eastern Dooars, the administration drew up a series of working plans which classified most of the forested areas in northern Goalpara as reserved areas. Behind the state's interest in the conservation and control over the forest resources of the region was the growth in tea plantations in the Assam valley and the subsequent extension of railways into the eastern parts of the colonial empire. For a discussion of the links between the growth of tea plantations in the Assam valley and the development of the transport network in the region. See Keya Dasgupta, 'The Formation of the Transport network in an Export Oriented Economy: Brahmaputra Valley: 1839-1914, CSSS, Calcutta.

⁶⁵ Letter from J.C. Haughton to the Secretary to the Government of India, 8 April 1867, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7

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institutions and their harmonisation with the British revenue system could best be accomplished'.⁶⁶

The representation of Bhutan as a bounded polity is of significance, particularly since there is evidence of alternative representations of the region and its inhabitants in colonial writings from the period preceding the annexation of the Eastern Dooars. Tour reports by officials from the mid nineteenth century frequently alluded to the rather fragmented and patchy power structure that was the Bhutan polity, the features of which appear to have been more pronounced in the Dooar region which remained the chief source for revenue for the officials of the kingdom until the determination of boundaries by the colonial state. William Griffiths, a medical officer travelling through Bhutan in 1837 as part of a political mission to the state, described the Bhutan government as a 'many headed government, each deb, each pillo, each soubah, each officer... bent on enriching himself at the expense of his subjects or his inferiors'.⁶⁷

Griffiths' observations suggest that political spheres under Bhutan rule were determined not by fixed territorial markers but by power relations.⁶⁸ While the 'authority regarding the internal economy of the country [was] vested in the Deb Raja... his power appeared to be extremely limited. The pillo or the counsellor [had] no check on him, his province [was] far from the capital'.⁶⁹ Several of these pillos as

⁶⁶ Letter from the Officiating Commissioner of the Bhutan Dooars to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 25 September 1865, Bengal Government Papers, 1867-1869.

⁶⁷ William Griffiths, 'Journal Of the Mission to Bootan, 1837-1838', in *Political Missions to Bhutan, comprising the reports of Hon'ble Ashley Eden - 1864; Capt. R.B. Pemberton, 1837, 1838, with Dr. Griffiths's Journal and the account by Baboo Kishen Kanta Bose*, Calcutta, 1865, p.159.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of the nature of the political system in Bhutan, see Leo Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, London, 1977. Rose sees close connections between the political and religious institutions of the kingdom during the colonial period.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

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well as the soubahs below them appear to have been on the margins of the power of the Bhutan monarch, deciding on arbitrary tributes from the inhabitants of the Dooars. 'Plunders, fines, reversion of property by death of owners, trading, and the proceeds of lands in the plains' formed the chief sources of their income in the absence of any fixed salaries.⁷⁰ Colonial records observed that 'the amount of the tribute [was] entirely dependent on the generosity of the soubahs who regarded the people of the plains with the same sort of feeling as the task masters of Egypt entertained towards enslaved Hebrews'.⁷¹

Sovereignty and physical boundaries were frequently not conterminous in this region where the powers of these Bhutan officials and those of the rulers of Bijni and Sidli overlapped. Prior to the British occupation of the region, the Kuriapara Dooar in the Eastern Dooars remained under the occupation of Bhutanese officials for eight months of the year while for the rest of the year other local powers claimed their rights to it.⁷² The collection of tribute from the Dooars could also be seasonal: in certain areas the soubah descended from the hills of Bhutan only 'when the cold air of December and January had rendered the region comparatively healthy'.⁷³ The forest resources of the Dooars also comprised the chief source of income of the chieftains of Bijni and Sidli. Geddes pointed out of the Raja of Sidli that 'as chief fiscal officer of the Dooar, he has hitherto levied forest dues of all kinds'.⁷⁴ A sanad from the Deb Raja granted the lease of the Cheerung forests to the Raja of Bijni forests and instructed

⁷⁰ Report of Ashley Eden in *Political Missions to Bhutan*, p.9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the relations of the Government with the hill tribes*, p.10.

⁷³ Memorandum from C.T. Metcalfe, July 1865, Goalpara Papers.

⁷⁴ Letter from J. C. Geddes to the Commissioner of the Bengal Dooars, 20 April 1866, Goalpara Papers.

him to pay the customary fees due to the Cheerung soubah, the official of the Bhutan government.⁷⁵

On the eastern borders of Goalpara, the Ahom rulers continued to assert rights over the produce of the Dooar region and were frequently in conflict with the state of Bhutan. Colonial records from the mid nineteenth century noted that 'the malarious and deadly character of the tract and their own feebleness in recent years have prevented the Assam Rajas from giving efficient protection to the indigenous cultivators or establishing an undisputed dominion over the soil and its products'.⁷⁶ Such ambiguous expressions of political power could result in inhabitants being subjected to exactions from several authorities all of whom could be 'equally obnoxious and equally oppressive in their dealings'.⁷⁷ There would also be frequent variations in the rents and tributes demanded. The Bhutan officials' claims changed from one sanad to the next, while the rulers of Bijni and Sidli made 'whatever demands they thought expedient'.⁷⁸

Several writings from this period appear to suggest that the situation of shared sovereignty was common to other neighbouring kingdoms as well. 'The political relations of the country are as limited as the boundaries', observed William Griffiths in his tour diary of Bhutan. 'With Sikkim they appear to have no intercourse. That they are tributary directly to Lhasa and now indirectly to China, there can be no doubt, although they most strenuously deny it.'⁷⁹ Thus, when the Raja of Cooch Behar was carried off during a raid by the Bhutan authorities who claimed a right to replace him

⁷⁵ Translation of an undated sanad from the Deb Raja of Bhutan to Kumud Narayan of Bijni, Goalpara Papers.

⁷⁶ Goalpara Papers, File no. 5, 1853-1855.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

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in what was possibly another assertion of multiple sovereignty, the colonial Government sought the intervention of the Dalai Lama of Tibet who then denounced the Bhutanese as 'a rude and ignorant race'.⁸⁰ That Bhutan formed a part of the sovereign realm of the Dalai Lama was evident in the response of the Bhutan government which 'agreed to deliver up the captive Raja of Cooch Behar and his brother, and to pay a tribute of five Tangun horses for the district of Chichacottah'.⁸¹ In another example of overlapping sovereignties, on the eastern borders of Goalpara, the Ahom king sent an annual peishkash or tribute as an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Dalai Lama of Tibet over the region.⁸²

The strengthening of 'unsettled powers', comprising huge bands of herdsmen and other wandering groups,⁸³ after the decline of the Mughal state in Goalpara, could be seen as similarly reflective of the persistence of the ambiguous spheres of power discussed above. Colonial records refer to several such groups of 'robbers and free booters who used the Dooars as their rendezvous from where they could march into Assam villages' and observed that 'in these harassed pergunnahs, the tenantry has mostly given up fixed residence. Many of them have retired within the British boundary, while others cross the river to cultivate the fields in Assam and return at night to sleep in safety.'⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, 1866-1870, Goalpara Papers.

⁷⁹ Griffiths, 'Journal Of the Mission to Bootan', p. 158.

⁸⁰ Report of Ashley Eden in *Political Missions to Bhutan*, p.3.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² 'An Account of the Kingdom of Assam' in *An Account of the Burman Empire and the kingdom of Assam, compiled from the works and MS documents of the following most eminent writes and public functionaries viz. Hamilton, Symes, Canning, Cox, Ley, Den, Morgan, Wade, Elliot &c &c.* Calcutta, 1854, p.109.

⁸³ C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, Cambridge, 1983, p .29.

⁸⁴ Rausch to Lumdsen, 7 May 1792, in Bengal Political Consultations, 8 June 1792, File no.11.

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Frequently assuming agency for revenue collection and for justice, these groups entered into new kinds of power relationships with the chieftains of the Dooars which enabled them to carry out raids on villages on the Assam border with the latter's resources, prompting a colonial official to describe the estate of Sidli as 'a community no better than an organised band of robbers'.⁸⁵ Some of these groups were said to be opportunistic: a report by J.A. Long described one such group as 'annual marauders and bandits ... a set of vagabonds and dacoits who rally under the standard of anyone who has the influence to collect them and forming themselves into parties in the neighbourhood of Assam towards the close of the rains, take advantage of the fall of the waters to enter the country'.⁸⁶ Others seem to have been better organised, with recognised leaders and some degree of permanency. Of these, a group led by Ghulam Ali, a former soldier in the Mughal army, appears to have been the most powerful, 'acquiring a kind of sovereignty over 16 villages on the eastern banks of the Manas, from which [it] received a large revenue, readily paid by the inhabitants for protection'.⁸⁷ Attempts by the colonial government to check the raids by Ghulam's successor, Manik Ray, were frustrated both by Bijni's difficult physical terrain and by Manik's negotiations with the ruler of Bijni, whom the British 'strongly suspected of sharing in the burkandezes' depredations'.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Colonel Jenkins in the Goalpara Papers, File no. 7, 1866-1867.

⁸⁶ Reverend J. A. Long, 'A report relative to Assam in 1797' in Selections from the Unpublished Records of the Government of Bengal.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Section III: Market, Political Economy and Beyond

In the expressions of ambiguous sovereignty and territoriality discussed in the previous section, the markets in the Eastern Dooars retained their significance as sites for the articulation of such concepts as well as for confrontation with colonial ideas of political space. In southern Goalpara too, markets and commercial transactions occupied a considerable political and social space. This section looks at some of the markets and trading networks in pre and early colonial Goalpara and explores the ways in which commercial transactions formed part of an extended social and political landscape in the region.

Though often rather inconsiderable in monetary terms, a considerable volume of trade was carried on from the late eighteenth century onwards in several of the weekly markets and fairs that were held along the foothills of the Dooar area. In particular, the numerous fairs formed an important element in the trading network of the region. Some were also held in the plains of southern Goalpara and were connected to local shrines. Of these fairs, the ones held at Hajo, Kuriapara and Udalguri appear to have been among the best attended ones. The Kuriapara fair, held in the Dooar by the same name on the borders of the Bhutan kingdom, was under the shared sovereignty of the states of Bhutan and Tibet and was the principal channel for the trade between Tibet, China, Bhutan and Assam. Francis Buchanan offers an interesting description of the fair as 'an annual event in which traders from all parts of Tibet, from Lhasa and places east, west and even north of it were present in the

⁸⁸ Long, 'A report in 1797'.

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crowds, some of them clad in Chinese dresses, using Chinese implements and looking to all intents Chinese. Many have their families with them and carry their goods on sturdy ponies, of which some hundreds were brought down to the fair yearly.¹⁸⁹

The annual caravan from Lhasa, 'carrying silver bullion to the amount of about one lakh rupees and a considerable quantity of rock salt halted at Chouna on the confines of the two states of Bhutan and Assam and carried back tussar cloth, iron, and lac from Assam and otter skins, buffalo horns, pearls, and corals that were imported from Bengal'.⁹⁰ Colonial expeditions into Bhutan commented on the centrality of the Dooars in the economy of Bhutan and described the region as forming the 'most valuable part of the Bhutan territory. Through them and from them are procured almost every article of consumption or luxury that the inhabitants of the hills possess. Their principal trade is with them'.⁹¹ Several mountain passes connected Bhutan with the plains of southern Goalpara and Bengal. The expeditions listed the 'numerous passes into Bootan along the frontier, some of which lead direct to the capital' and listed the Bijni, Buxa and Now Dooars among the principal Dooars or passes.⁹²

In his notes on his travels in the region, Ashley Eden observed that 'several of these routes connected northern Goalpara to Bhutan, including one which connected Bijni to Wandipur in Bhutan, and others which linked Bijni, Sidli, Bengtoli, Kachubari, Buro Bungloo, Dubleng, Cherrung to the capital of Bhutan'.⁹³ Through these passes flowed a trade in many articles. Woolen cloth, coarse cotton cloth, indigo, sandal, asafetida, cloves, sugar, ghee and oil were brought up from the plains, while

⁸⁹ Francis Buchanan quoted in Mackenzie, *History of the relations with the hill tribes*, p.16.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁹¹ R. B. Pemberton, Report on Bootan, November 1838 in *Political Missions to Bhutan*, p.17.

⁹² Ashley Eden, *Report on the State of Bootan*, p.10.

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Tangum horses, blankets, walnuts, musk orange and cow tails, from Bhutan were sold at the markets of Rangpur in the south.⁹⁴

In this trade between the markets of northern Goalpara and the south, timber from the forests of the Eastern Dooars was undoubtedly among the most important items. At the turn of the eighteenth century there was already a large timber trade in the region of the Eastern Dooars, much of which was not for local use but largely exported to Lower Bengal: the 'traders came with boats from Dacca and Mymensingh during the rainy season to buy up timber in the Dooars, on the borders of Garo Hills and up in Kamrup'.⁹⁵ Buchanan observed that 'merchants of Goalpara usually export to the low country from the forests of Howraghat and Mechpara about 1500 canoes in the year...the timber was floated down numerous rivers which included the Ai and the Manas, from the Dooar region and also from Nepal and Bhutan, towards the southern ports like Fakirgunj'.⁹⁶ The timber was also tied into rafts and then floated down to the port of Narayangunj near Dhaka. The extensive Sal forests in the Parbatjoar and Khuntaghat parganas were worked on by several duffadars and labourers, several of whom were from the neighbouring districts of Bengal and derived their livelihood solely from felling Sal timber.⁹⁷ By the last decades of the nineteenth century, trade in timber comprised of the bulk of the trade exports from Goalpara to Bengal.⁹⁸ More

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Babu Kishen Kant Bose, *Account of Bootan*, translated by David Scott in *Political Missions to Bhutan*, p.198.

⁹⁵ Correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner of the Eastern Dooars and the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, 10 May 1866, Goalpara Papers, File no. 7.

⁹⁶ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book III, p.207. Buchanan noted that 'the merchants of Goalpara were the chief dealers in the timber trade and advanced at the rate of 1 Rupee for a pair of timbers, to be delivered at a place where they will float'. (Ibid., p. 215)

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.6.

⁹⁸ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.50.

than 600 boats came up every year from Serajgunj, Dacca and other places in eastern Bengal for purchasing timber worth about 12,000 pounds.

Timber was only one of the several articles that linked Goalpara to the trading networks of eastern India in the pre-colonial period. The earliest trade in the region was in salt, for which southern Goalpara formed the transit point between Bengal and Assam. Some of the earliest references to the salt trade are in the *Asam Buranji*, a historical narrative of seventeenth and eighteenth century Ahom rule. Compiled during the eighteenth century, the text reproduces the following response of the Ahom king, Raja Rudra Singha, to a request made by the Mughal faujdar at Rangamati for establishing commercial relations with the Ahoms in June 1793: 'Is it called trade if it is limited to a few maunds of salt from Bengal and the despatch of a few boats from our place? If the Nawab is intent on the establishment of commercial relations with us, he should send his merchants to Jugigopa and Goalpara, and our leading traders will proceed to Kandahar chokey with large quantities of valuable articles. If matters are arranged along this line, they acquire the status of hat-bat or trade'.⁹⁹

To return to our concern with the significance of markets as transmitters of authority, both in the plains of southern Goalpara and in the hilly areas of the north, the markets and expanding networks of trade discussed above were also marked by strong cultural and political underpinnings. Beginning with the late Mughal period, there was an increasing assertion of authority by zamindars and other local powers over trading practices and places of exchange in the region. This was evident in the

⁹⁹ *The Asam Buranji, from the earliest times to the Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha's recovery of Guahati from the Mughals in 1682. No.6, quoted in p.50, S. K. Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations: 1771- 1826, Guwahati, 1949.*

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several dues for passage that they collected at the chokeys or custom houses set up at several points along the chief waterways.

Travelling along the western borders of Assam in the mid eighteenth century, James Rennell observed several such chokeys along both banks of the Brahmaputra near Goalpara. 'The Assam country begins from the Bonaash [Manas] river on the north side of the Brahmaputra and one of their Chokeys is placed directly opposite Goalpara...from the 2nd to the 6th of December we were employed in tracing the Brahmaputra from Gwalpara to the frontier of Assam on the southern side. We were not permitted to land on the northern side or the Assam side, all the way, there being several chokeys placed'.¹⁰⁰

The rights to the collection of these dues were frequently hereditary and an assertion of political authority. Colonial authorities noted, however, that 'several of the custom houses were also farmed out to the biggest bidder and the whole trade of the country [was] in fact monopolized by these individuals, who in terms of the treaty concluded in February, 1793 ought to leave only 10 percent on exports and imports but reality extort what they choose'.¹⁰¹ The chokeys on the Assam border appear to have been similarly regulated by the Ahom state with 'the agent of the Assam government at Asam chokey or the Kandahar chokey, called the Dooaria Baruah or Kandahar Baruah enjoy[ing] the exclusive privilege of trading with Bengal for which he paid the Assam government the annual rent of 90,000 rupees'.¹⁰² 'The Dooaria

¹⁰⁰ James Rennell, November 1765, Appendix 1: Extract from the Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Volume III, No.3, pages 95-248, 1910 in Hirst and Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys*.

¹⁰¹ *An Account of the Burman Empire and the kingdom of Assam*, p.102. See appendix to the chapter for volume of trade through Kandahar Chokey.

¹⁰² Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities and Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, Vol. III*, Collated from the original manuscripts of Buchanan Hamilton, and first published London, 1838, Indian reprint 1976, p.477.

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Baruahs realised the duty on all exports and imports' noted Buchanan. 'They received advances from the Bengal merchants for the delivery of Assam goods or accepted Bengal goods on credit. Goalpara on the south bank, Jugigopa and Rangamati on the north are the three eastern outposts of Bengal from where the merchants conducted their trade'.¹⁰³

This intervention by traditional political authorities in commercial exchanges flourished into the early decades of the nineteenth century. Buchanan noted with dismay the various transit duties and the rights exercised by the zamindars and local chieftains during this period. These included the right 'to levying a share of all goods sold at the markets as well as transit duties on all goods carried from one place to another' in the markets of southern Goalpara. 'In some places' he added, 'it was even alleged that they granted small monopolies on several of the most important articles sold, such as cotton, salt and mustard seeds'.¹⁰⁴

A particularly good example of marketplaces serving as 'an extension of a vision of patrimony'¹⁰⁵ in southern Goalpara was the weekly market on the borders of the Garo Hills. The Garo Hills were an important economic resource for the zamindars of Karaibari, Mechpara and Kalumalupara, who sustained themselves through relationships with the Garos, the locally dominant forest people who carried on a flourishing trade in cotton with the inhabitants of these estates. Colonial records noted that large areas of surrounding woodland on the fringes of these estates were eminently suited for the zamindars who 'held all the low country under the Garo Hills on that side ... and as all the cotton, then the staple of the internal eastern trade, came

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book V, p.92.

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from these hills, the Choudhuris had established at all the principal passes, haats or markets guarded by their burkandezes'.¹⁰⁶ The taxes levied in these haats on both merchants from the plains and on the Garos, formed one of the main sources of income of these choudhuris.¹⁰⁷

This conformed to similar practices in the late Mughal period, when in frontier areas, where the mal or the produce from the land was sparse, the greater proportion of the revenue came from the ability of the zamindars to extract a sair or commercial tax on all kinds of goods that passed through their territory.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the zamindars of Goalpara, 'while paying a small tribute to the Mughal faujdar of Rangpur as acknowledgement of their loyalty, were to all intents and purposes independent. They were bound in fact merely to supply a certain number of elephants or a small quantity of *aghur*, a precious wood, to support for the maintenance of garrisons and the artillery park at Dacca. Their estates were never subjected to land revenue assessment and they paid what they did pay from their "sayer" and not from the "mal". The faujdar generally made advances on account of cotton to these great choudhuris, as the zamindars were called, and received from them yearly consignments of that article'.¹⁰⁹

The revenue of several of the permanently settled estates of Goalpara was paid in cotton during the initial period of colonial rule as well, and the zamindars depended not only on taxes collected from the settled peasantry but also on the resources garnered by raiding the neighbouring Garo hills. The frequent raids by the zamindars of Karaibari and Shusang into the Garo areas however were not accompanied by an

¹⁰⁵ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, p.16.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Mackenzie, Memorandum on the North East Frontier of Bengal, 1869, published as Appendix V in Hirst and Smart, *Brief History of the Surveys*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

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incorporation of these marginal areas into the territory of the chieftains. Occupation was only temporary, as when the zamindar of Karaibari built forts in the trading passes to assert control over the cotton trade, the aim of these attacks being to compel a weaker polity to submit its allegiance.¹¹⁰ The sovereignty and independence of the Garos chieftains were allowed to coexist with that of the other local chieftains. The Bemulwa or independent Garos, for instance, formed a significant proportion of the population of the Garo Hills and were responsible for several of the innumerable raids on the Goalpara plains.

What were later described in colonial records as 'stories of violence and murder by a few independent savages'¹¹¹ were often a means of asserting the shared rights of the communities over the resources of the area as also of correcting the often unequal economic relationship conducted through the market. The Garos could hardly be defined as isolated communities defending themselves against an economically and politically more powerful civilisation of the plains. Rather, through different strategies, of which frequent raids were the most visible, they routinely asserted their control over the resources of the region while continuing to retain their political and economic independence. Periodic looting and plunder of the estates continued through the nineteenth century, establishing the position of the Garo chieftains as tributaries who were autonomous and sovereign in their own right, even though it was the seasonal haats that made it possible for them to maintain their mobile, independent lifestyle.

¹⁰⁸ See also Section II, Chapter 1.

¹⁰⁹ Mackenzie, *Memorandum*, p.21.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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This far we have looked at the ability of various chieftains and collectors of revenue in southern Goalpara to use the market as a means of realising their political and social authority. This relationship between trade and authority acquired greater significance in the northern borders of Goalpara, a transitional area where exchanges in the market place were frequently the most visible articulation of regional political powers. Contrary to Geddes' arguments, the region which later formed the northern part of the colonial district of Goalpara was neither an integrated part of the state of Bhutan nor was it under the exclusive sovereignty of the chieftains of Bijni and Sidli. This was reflected in the existence of shared rights of these powers over the resources of the area discussed in the previous section. Rather, the Eastern Dooars was an area of shared sovereignty, with its rulers tied in relationships of tributary submission with those of the more powerful Bhutan and Ahom polities, which, in turn were within the 'power fields'¹¹² of the Dalai Lama of Tibet.

The role of the market in enforcing indigenous notions of political space in the region was therefore of considerable significance. The peshkash paid by the Ahom king was offered at Chouna, a site for a market in the Eastern Dooars, situated at a distance of a two-month of journey from Lhasa¹¹³ and from where the caravans left for the Tibetan capital. There were similar markets established at Gengushur, four miles away from Chouna. Prior to the occupation of the Dooars, the Sath Rajas who were Bhutia chiefs who controlled the Kuriapara Dooar and were considered subordinates of the Towang Raja, a tributary of Lhasa, paid their tribute thorough the purchase of

¹¹¹ Letter from C. T. Metcalfe, Officiating Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, June 1873, Government of Bengal Papers, 1873.

¹¹² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii, 1994, p.100.

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cotton and other goods at the Udalguri fair, all of which were then sent to Lhasa and Towang.¹¹⁴

Colonial accounts of the nature of trade between Goalpara and Tibet during the pre and early colonial period described the flow of pilgrims into the Dooars and the plains below as a significant accompaniment of this trade. Several of the fairs in the region of the Eastern Dooars appear to have been part of a larger sacred topographical space, which differed from notions of geographical space. Descriptions of the nature of trading in the Dooar area tend to suggest that this region could have been perceived as part of one such religious space, that of the sacred sovereign realm of the Bhutan monarch. Ethnographers and travelers to the region noted that 'the Bhutias considered the Dhurma Raja as their spiritual, incarnate deity, whose trade with inferior chiefs in the Dooar region was more in the nature of some Nuzzerana or offering from these chiefs'.¹¹⁵ Religious motifs were also used to define the relationship of submission between the rulers of Bijni and Sidli and the Dhurma Raja of Bhutan. 'You will furnish everything well and in good order', stated a sanad to the Raja of Bijni, Kumud Narain, 'so the Divine Dhurma Raja and the holy Mahakal will always bless you'.¹¹⁶

However, early colonial accounts also saw the markets and fairs in northern Goalpara as situated within patterns of commercial exchange. Griffith's journal identified the town of Hajo as an 'important point in the sacred topography of the region ... boast[ing] of a large establishment of priests [who were] attached to a temple, which [was], by the Bhutiahs and the Kampas, considered very sacred, and to

¹¹³ Mackenzie, *History of the relations with the hill tribes*, p.16

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Griffiths, 'Journal Of the Mission to Bootan', p.189.

which both these tribes, but specially the latter, resorted annually in large numbers'.¹¹⁷ He also noted that 'this pilgrimage [was] however connected more with trade than religion, for a fair [was] held in the same time. Coarse woolen cloth and rock salt form [ed] the bulk of the goods which each pilgrim carries, no doubt as much for the sake of penance as for profit.'¹¹⁸

Section IV: New sites of conflict

The above section illustrates the kind of relationship between trade and authority that the English East India Company had to encounter as it began trading in the region of Goalpara and Assam towards the end of the eighteenth century. This section looks at the transformation of the market and trading practices in Goalpara into sites of political conflict between the colonial state and local powers, and explores its effects on the regional polity and economy.

Over the eighteenth century, salt emerged as the most important article in the trade between Assam and Bengal, with a vigorous trade being carried on through a few towns in Goalpara. Several European companies and individuals vied with one another for control over the market during this period and resisted the claims of local powers. Among these companies was the Society for Trade, established by Robert Clive for the sole purpose of trading in salt. The company was closed down in 1768 after the East India Company was briefly deprived monopoly over the trade. Colonial records mention several individuals who participated in the salt trade from Goalpara of

¹¹⁶ Translation of the Sanad from the Deb Raja of Bhutan to Raja Kumud Narain of Bijni, 16 Pos 1269, Goalpara Papers.

¹¹⁷ Griffiths, 'Journal Of the Mission to Bootan', p.125.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

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whom Daniel Raush and George Lear appear to have been the most prosperous. The former, according to these records, was a 'respectable Hanoverian and the principal merchant at Goalpara in 1769'.¹¹⁹ The latter was an English merchant who resided in Rangpur and like Raush, had established an independent salt factory and salt emporiums in the town of Goalpara besides several warehouses at Dacca.¹²⁰ Ganganarayan Roy, a Bengali salt merchant residing in Dacca had also stationed his agent, Robert Bigger, at Jugigopa in the Goalpara district.¹²¹

The French East India Company also had a branch established in 1755 by Jean Baptiste Chevalier who was deputed from Chanderanagore on this project and had a salt factory at Goalpara. Until 1778, when they were recalled to Calcutta by the Government, there were several French merchants at Goalpara, trading independently.¹²² The frequent skirmishes between these several trading groups required the intervention of the local powers who now 'negotiated disputes amongst the Europeans who [were] settled at Goalpara ...to more effectually secure the peace of the country and to protect Assam from free booters ...so that commerce may be carried out to the mutual advantage of both kingdoms'.¹²³

The period also saw several officials of the East India Company struggling to gain exclusive rights over the sites of the production and distribution of salt. Hugh Baillie emerged as a persuasive representative of the Company's interests in the salt trade. In a memorial to the colonial administration in 1793, Baillie outlined the

¹¹⁹ *An Account of the Burman Empire and the Kingdom of Assam*, p.103.

¹²⁰ Letter from George Lear to Warren Hastings, undated, Bengal Revenue Consultations 23 January 1781.

¹²¹ Bengal Revenue Consultations, 12 September 1780

¹²² S.K. Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam*, Guwahati, 1928, p.3.

¹²³ Warren Hastings to the Asam Raja, 14 June 1780, *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, Vol. V, No.1911.

significance of this trade and Goalpara's position in it, while arguing persuasively for the appointment of an agent which would make way for a further control of the Company over the market.¹²⁴ He argued that his experience as an agent of Clive's Society of Trade had allowed him 'the opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of the Company's business at Rungpore, and also of the interior parts of Bhutan and Assam, and the countries adjacent to Gualparah, which had never been explored by any European before' and offered to be a salaried agent of the Company, supervising the salt trade at Goalpara.¹²⁵ Baillie's appointment as the Superintendent of the Company at Goalpara in 1787 reflected the contradiction within the colonial political economy. An apparent freedom of trade coexisted with the need to control the market. By the end of the eighteenth century the Company was dealing in more than 100,000 maunds of salt in the region, imported from Khulna and Dacca in eastern Bengal through the towns of Goalpara and Jugigopa.

These trade links continued to be vibrant through the early decades of colonial rule, evident from the lists of commercial centres in Eastern Bengal in Francis Buchanan's writings on Goalpara. Buchanan suggests that the region of southern Goalpara and the Eastern Dooar area were integrated into the extensive trading circuits of Narayangunj, Serajgunj, Murshidabad and the Mughal port city of Dacca. Connections existed through the waterways of the Brahmaputra and other smaller rivers like the Godadhor and the Gangadhar. These also linked Mymensingh in south eastern Bengal to the external trading circuits of Bhutan and Tibet, the rest of Bengal,

¹²⁴ S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, p.71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

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and the internal trade networks of Assam.¹²⁶ Buchanan noted that 'by far the greater part of the grain [from Goalpara] goes to Seerajgunj in the Moymonsingh district and to Narayangunj near Dhaka but a part also is sent to Murshidabad, Calcutta and the intermediate towns. The grain that is imported, chiefly mustard seeds, comes from Bhutan and from Bihar and from Assam. These areas were also the centres of the cattle trade ... the greater part of which is exported to Seerajgunj and Narayangunj.'¹²⁷

Bhutan also exported horses, musk and paper to Murshidabad and Assam. Trade in several other products, including an illicit one in opium, linked Goalpara with the ports of eastern Bengal, while silk cloth from Murshidabad and cotton from Dhaka were imported into Assam from Rangpur and Goalpara.¹²⁸ The chief routes connecting Assam with Bengal passed through Goalpara. Accounts from the period suggest that there were three overland routes from Bengal to Assam: 'The first by Murshadabad, Mauldah [Malda], Dinagepore[Dinajpur], Rungpore and Goalpara. This is the line of the Calcutta dak but it is almost impassable during the rains. The second route is via Dacca, Dumari, Pucuoloe, Jumalpore, Singimarry and Goalpara, also nearly impassable in the rains. The third passes by Sylhet, Chirra, Nunklow, Ranneygodown, Cannymook and Gohatti [Guwahati], but from its crossing over the Khasya hills, it is impracticable for any land carriage and beast of burden.'¹²⁹

Colonial records indicate that the bulk of the trade of Goalpara was now carried on directly with Calcutta. The principal exports were mustard seeds, silk cloth,

¹²⁶ Buchanan's list of the places with which Goalpara had commercial links included 'Serajgunj, a mart which seems to have arisen since the time of Major Rennell's survey and which is now a chief place of trade in Bengal, and stands on the Jhinayi river, Narayangunj, the port of Dhaka, Murshedabad and Calcutta.' (The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book V, p.5)

¹²⁷ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book V, p.5.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.73.

¹²⁹ R. B. Pemberton, *Report on Bootan in Political Missions to Bhutan*, p.9.

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timber, and cotton and lac obtained from the Garo Hills. The growth of several towns, including that of Dhubri, was also linked to their relative importance as transit points for the trade with Bengal.¹³⁰ The following lists of articles which passed through the river ports of southern Goalpara indicates the significance of the region in the trade between Bengal and Assam in the first half of that century:

Exports from Bengal in 1809	Rupees	Exports from Assam in 1809	Rupees
Salt, 35,000 maunds	1,92,500	Stick Lac 10,000 maunds	35,000
Ghee, 1,000 maunds	1, 600	Moonga silk	11,350
Fine pulse	800	Black Pepper	500
Sugar	1,000	Long pepper	500
Stone beads	2,000	Cotton (with seed) 7,000 maunds	35,000
Coral	1,000	Ivory	6,000
Jewels and Pearls	5,000	Bell metal vessels	1,500
Spices	1,000	Mustard seeds	20,000
Gold and silver cloth	1,000	Iron hoes	600
Copper	4,800	Slaves	2000
Red Lead	1,000		
English woolens	2,000		
Tafetas	2,000		
Satin	1,000		
Benarasi Khinkobs	500		
Muslin	10,000		
Shells	100		

Source: R. B. Pemberton's, Report on Bootan in Political Missions to Bhutan, p.82.

The growth in the Bengal trade was accompanied by a gradual decline in the trade with Bhutan. John M'cosh observed in 1837 that 'in former times, an extensive trade was carried out with Bhutan and there was established a well frequented mart at

¹³⁰ E.A. Gait, B. C. Allen and H.F. Howard, *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India*, Shillong, 1905, p.519.

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Seepotah but little of that traffic now exists'.¹³¹ Colonial reports on trade from the 1870s attributed this decline to the absence of a good communication network.¹³² There was a similar decline in the trade with Tibet which 'had been lucrative...in the first decades of the nineteenth century [and] amounted to more than two lakhs rupees [but] which has for many years discontinued'.¹³³ By the first decade of the twentieth century, British officials could dismiss this trans frontier trade as 'of very little importance...the principal imports being rubber and the principal export, silk'.¹³⁴

Anxious to promote a regulated form of trade and commerce which would help realise this unified economic territory, the colonial state intervened in specific ways in the markets and the marketing practices in the region. The discovery of tea in Assam and the region's emergence as a centre of tea production also hastened the need to establish an unambiguous authority over the market. Significant among the administrative interventions was the prohibition of the exercise of indigenous privileges through local taxes and chokeys. These were seen as obstacles in the growth of free trade.

Following the views of classical political economy proclaimed by the Company, Buchanan had perceived these practices as 'prejudicial to the public, by checking cultivation and commerce'.¹³⁵ He regarded the duties levied by the zamindar of Bijni on the transit and sale of goods as a 'gross usurpation' of the rights of the ordinary trader and merchant.¹³⁶ There was a gradual restriction and prohibition of

¹³¹ M'cosh, *Topography of Assam*, Calcutta, 1837, p.66.

¹³² *Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries*, 1877-1878, Shillong, 1878.

¹³³ M'cosh, *Topography of Assam*, p.66.

¹³⁴ B. C. Allen, *Goalpara*, p.103.

¹³⁵ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Book V, p.92.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

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local taxes and dues levied at markets, on ferries, and, most importantly, by zamindars on the boat and timber trade. In March 1835, the Kandahar Chokey, which had been the most important site for the collection of dues by local rulers ever since the Mughal period, was closed.¹³⁷ Such changes were meant to undermine and erase signs of power and privilege in traditional society which interfered with the colonial state's notions of political economy and sovereignty.

On the borders of the Garo Hills and the district of Goalpara, there were more examples of the market emerging as a site for conflict between the British government and local rulers. Preoccupied with enforcing its notions of unambiguous political space, the government effected irreversible changes in the trading practices of the region. The weekly markets (haats) were now represented as 'constant sources of oppression of the innocent Garo tribes' by the inhabitants of the plains. They were places where the Garos were subjected to 'a constant succession of fraud and falsehood'.¹³⁸ Such representations legitimised the introduction of a series of regulations which were enforced with the explicit intention of 'making the exclusion of the Garos from the plains effectual'. These regulations included limiting the number of haats along the Garo-Goalpara border to twelve, prohibiting the collection of dues from the haats except by officials of the colonial state, and curbing raids by Garos on the plains villages.¹³⁹

These measures were described as part of the process of protecting the Garos from the zamindars of Goalpara who 'having been released from the responsibility of

¹³⁷ H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858*, Guwahati, 1963, p.243.

¹³⁸ Martin, *History, Antiquities and Topography*, p. 686.

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defending the country from the raids of the Garos could not be entitled to derive any profit from the lands over which they had exercised the right of property appertaining to the sovereign than those of mere land holders'.¹⁴⁰ It is difficult to assess the extent of impact of these changes on the lifestyle of the Garos, though scattered sources indicate that there was a greater diversification of occupation among them, with some slowly trickling in to join the settled agrarian population of the plains by the last decades of the nineteenth century. Colonial records also suggest that there was a diversion of Garo labour to timber work and that a large number enlisted with the colonial police.¹⁴¹

Through their introduction of regulations to ensure the smooth collection of taxes, British officials presumably dismantled the pre-existing system of political relations between the hill polities and the plain areas. The notions of shared political authority¹⁴² existed in a period when neither the geographical nor the political domains in the region were clearly demarcated. The area between the Garo Hills and the zamindari estates was 'an undefined tract on the borders of Goalpara from which the zamindars derived cesses' in the pre-colonial and early colonial period. Officials struggling to fix the territorial limits of Goalpara in the last decades of that century had to therefore frequently to accommodate not only with undefined boundaries of the Garo villages but with 'the narrow strips of land between hills into which both the

¹³⁹ David Scott's Report of the 20 August 1816, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations, 27 September 1816, File no.47.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Administration Report on the Garo Hills, 1872, Government of Bengal Papers, File nos. 19-22.

¹⁴² See Section II of this Chapter.

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inhabitants of the plains and the forested areas made occasional forays for resources'.¹⁴³

In his response to these conditions, the Secretary of State observed that 'however necessary it may be to teach the inhabitants of these wild districts that they are not inaccessible to the power of Government, it is very clear that we cannot hope to reclaim them from their savage habits, or to induce them to a higher stage of civilisation by the mere display of military strength'.¹⁴⁴ Rather, as David Scott, the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, noted on Regulation X of 1822 (which separated the administration of the Garo hills from that of Goalpara), 'to promote the desirable object of reclaiming these races to the habits of civilised life, it seems that a special plan for the administration of justice, of a kind adapted to their peculiar customs and prejudices, should be arranged...measures should at the same time be taken to free them from the dependence of the zamindars of the British provinces'.¹⁴⁵

The project of mapping and surveying went a long way in promoting these objectives of the colonial state. Between the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, there was a determination of the modern geographical limits of Goalpara which supported the revenue needs of the colonial state and helped it fix the spatial dimensions of the political economy of the district. The details of the navigation routes in the writings of James Rennell, for instance, also 'led to the discovery of routes of commercial investments'.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Goalpara Papers, File no. 8, 1860-62.

¹⁴⁴ Mackenzie, *History of the relations with the hill tribes*, p.24.

¹⁴⁵ R. Clarke, *The Regulations of the Government of Fort William in Bengal, 1793-1853, Vol. II*, London, 1854, p.659.

¹⁴⁶ Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade*, p.93.

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The replacement of local concepts of space and sovereignty with colonial ones began with the search for a definitive geography of Goalpara. A more comprehensive project of mapping and boundary marking now replaced the struggle in the early part of the century over locating the boundaries of the district. The colonial administration recognised the significance of reliable maps in a 'frontier area which was peculiarly situated and of great political importance'.¹⁴⁷ In their attempts to reinforce their notions of exclusive sovereign space, British officials persistently ordered the local chieftains, particularly those of Bijni and Sidli and also the Bhutanese officials in the Dooar region, to provide evidence of written documents identifying concrete historical boundaries.¹⁴⁸

For the ruling groups in these areas, where oral communication frequently had greater precedence over the written word, it was often difficult to appreciate the centrality of the written documents in social and political exchange. In response to one such demand for papers to determine the authority of the Bhutan monarch over some villages in what was earlier a region of ambiguous sovereignty, the Deb Raja explained that 'It is not customary for us Bhutias to be regulated by records, but by the custom of possession. If paper be approved of, I have plenty concerning the giving and taking of areas... the English and the Bhutias are very different in their modes of transacting.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Government of Bengal Papers, File nos. 33-40, 1871-1873.

¹⁴⁸ In response to these demands, the Raja of Bijni explained the absence of documents of proof of boundaries by declaring that the papers were lost in 'a plundering raid and later by a fire in his new house'. Correspondence between J.C. Geddes and Colonel Agnew, 28 April 1866, Correspondence regarding Bijni and Sidli, 1866-1870.

¹⁴⁹ Translation of a letter from the Deb Raja to the Collector of Rungpore, 14 Maung 1193, Goalpara Papers, 1866-1870.

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Faced with these different conceptions of boundaries and the absence of mapping by the local powers in the region,¹⁵⁰ the British were forced to rely on the late eighteenth century cartography of James Rennell, information from the few scattered maps from topographical surveys of the region and on the fresh surveys of southern Goalpara in the 1870's.¹⁵¹ Within the next decade or so, thirty miles of the boundary between Goalpara and Cooch Behar had been marked out by boundary pillars¹⁵² and Mackenzie's 'debatable tract of the Eastern Dooars', was incorporated into the district of Goalpara. For a region, the northern parts of which had been terra incognita for early European travellers and uncovered by surveyors, including Francis Buchanan, this geographical ordering introduced a new conceptualisation of political space. It also legitimized the use of military force and the subsequent annexation of the Dooar region, followed by the fixing of boundaries between the territories of the Bhutan monarch and the colonial state.

The separation of the Garo Hills from Goalpara into a separate district in 1869 initiated processes of surveying in 'hills which had never been crossed by an

¹⁵⁰ As noted in the Introduction, recent works have argued for a need to recognise the participation of the colonised in the construction of cartographical knowledge under the colonial state. Kapil Raj for instance, argues that 'far from consisting in the simple imposition of an already constituted European knowledge on a different epistemic universe, the birth of such an institution as the Survey of India...resulted from a complex interaction between various actors and practices, both European and Indian, which engendered a kind of hybrid result'. (Kapil Raj, 'Circulation and the Emergence of Modern Mapping, Great Britain and Early Colonial India, 1764-1820', in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation, Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia 1750-1950*, Delhi 2003. p.13). In the absence of any such evidence from Goalpara, however, map making in the region would appear to have been primarily an imposition of the project of colonial knowledge.

¹⁵¹ Government of Bengal Papers, File nos. 33-40, 1871-1873; In 1834, Captain Brodie made a map of the Bhutan boundary and also surveyed the boundary between the Ghurla and Parbatjoar estates. There was a survey of the parganas of Aurangabad, Jamira, Dhubri and Chapar in 1851-1852 and of the pargana of Khuntaghat in 1852-1853 (Hirst and Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys*).

¹⁵² Bengal Revenue Department, File nos. 34-41, 1873-74.

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European... and which the Garos believed were inaccessible to Europeans'.¹⁵³ By 1872, the several 'undefined boundaries between Garo villages and the Garo Hills and Goalpara' had been mapped and marked, and colonial officials were congratulating themselves on the 'undoubted success of a survey in a rather difficult terrain'. The detailed boundaries of the district however continued to be demarcated until the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ With the demarcation of these boundaries, colonial administrators hoped there would be 'an effective exclusion of the hill people from the plains'.¹⁵⁵ On the one hand, therefore, topography was no longer to justify different ways of life except within imposed standards of 'civilisation' and government. On the other hand, those who did not conform were both 'primitivised' and isolated within neatly drawn boundaries.

To conclude, therefore, markets and trading practices were important sites for the confrontation between colonial and pre-colonial notions of territory and sovereignty in early colonial Goalpara. From the middle of the nineteenth century there were further changes in the forms of colonial power, triggered, among other factors, by the potential of trade between the provinces of Assam and Bengal and the significance of Goalpara as a transit point for this trade. The control over the market was thus vital for a colonial state seeking to enforce its familiar notions of authority and territoriality. The imposition of forms of economic transaction that were deprived of their previous political and cultural underpinnings in commercial transactions in the region was an outcome of these colonial imperatives.

¹⁵³ Administration Report on the Garo Hills, 1872, Government of Bengal Papers, File nos. 19-22.

¹⁵⁴ The boundary between Bhutan and Goalpara had 56 boundary pillars and 110 guide marks in 1917. On the south Garo Hills and Goalpara were separated by 87 pillars. (Hirst and Smart, *A Brief History of the Surveys*)

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In all these processes, the project of mapping and determination of the boundaries of Goalpara emerged as an enterprise that was consonant with the colonial state's need to order the spatial dimensions of the political economy of the district. The external project of mapping had its resonance in the internal project of settling and categorising the population within the demarcated boundaries. The nineteenth century saw the attempts at sedentarisation translating into a strengthening of identities of various groups based on differences in economic power in the Goalpara countryside. The system of political authority and power represented by the zamindars was being gradually challenged by the emergence of new groups, including the jotedars. By the end of the nineteenth century the need of the colonial state to identify a class which could extend cultivation and ensure the flow of revenue combined with the existence of vast stretches of waste lands in the region placed this class in a powerful bargaining position vis-a-vis the zamindars.¹⁵⁶ This shift towards sedentarisation was accompanied by a decrease in the economic choices that were formerly available to people and the subsequent marginalisation of peripatetic communities.

The third chapter extends this discussion into the early twentieth century, when several of the issues explored in this chapter were to be institutionalised within the expanding domain of colonial law. Along with the recognition of rights by colonial law, shared customs and traditions of the local communities also continued to play a significant role in determining the relationships of various groups to the land. The next chapter explores the forging of new collectivities, their negotiation with local

¹⁵⁵ Goalpara Papers, File no. 8, 1860-62.

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of the emergence of the jotedars as powerful rural magnates in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Goalpara, occupying stretches of land that at times comprised of around

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custom and law and the implications this had for the formation of a 'Goalparia' identity.

three hundred *bighas*, especially in areas of expanding cultivation, and engaged in a series of conflicts with the zamindars over land rights, see Sections I and II of Chapter 4.

Chapter Three

New Classifications: Law, Political Economy and the Late Colonial State

This chapter returns to the second chapter's concerns with changes in the political economy of Goalpara under the colonial state and their effect on the emergence of a sense of a region. It extends this story into the late nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century and explores the continued creation of new spaces and categories by the colonial state within Goalpara. In this period, the ambiguous sovereignty and shared territoriality of the different areas of the region had been replaced by a district with clearly marked boundaries where agrarianisation was an overriding priority. The fixity of the revenue demand was a fundamental cornerstone of this new regime and the steady demand for revenue therefore provides the backdrop against which to study the ordering of agrarian society and the use of property as the fundamental means for this ordering.

There were significant changes in the political economy of Goalpara between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, which, while not absolutely replacing previously existing collectivities, did substantially modify and standardise them. Of these, the migration of thousands of cultivators from eastern Bengal, over a period of a few decades, was undoubtedly the most dramatic, creating new categories and reinforcing preexisting social boundaries. Law validated these new structures and categories and the debates over tenancy legislation in the district, for instance, reflected the extent to which revenue demand and the local social order were shaped by the institutional structure of the new colonial

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legal system. The arena of colonial law however was also being increasingly used by various local groups to carve out political space. The expression of some form of a symbiotic relationship between the need for these collectivities to express themselves through the new institutions of law and power on the one hand, and their continued use of notions of shared customary practices and tradition on the other, are issues of concern in this chapter.

Section I: Creating a landscape of property

By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial state's drive for agrarianisation was showing visible results in the district of Goalpara. Large stretches of forests, woodland, 'wastelands' and cultivable areas had been measured and classified into fairly distinct geographical domains. The ambiguities and fluidity in lifestyle that were suggested in early and mid nineteenth century sources, had been replaced by increasingly rigid life ways, indicated among other things, by the steady increase in the density of population dependent on settled cultivation and expansion of the area under cultivation in the region.¹ The consolidation of a rural gentry was sought initially, as in colonial Bengal, by 'permanently settling' several local chieftains and Mughal officials as zamindars on proprietary estates.²

The explicit purpose of this consolidation was to redirect the interests and energies of the local chieftains from local warfare to agrarian management and

¹ The area under sedentary cultivation in Goalpara rose from 677 square miles in the zamindari estates in 1857 (A.J.P. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta, 1853, Appendix A) to 1040 square miles in the late nineteenth century (W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, London, 1879, p.57). By 1901 this figure had risen to 366,762 acres with nearly 84% of the population in the district being settled cultivators (B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. III, Goalpara*, Calcutta, 1905, p.61).

² See Chapter II.

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investment, assuring both stability and a steady flow of revenue. Unlike the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley, the practice of leasing out land to men with capital to organise reclamation had been resorted to by zamindars in the permanently settled estates of Goalpara from the early nineteenth century onwards. The rest of Assam had a raiyatwari system of land tenure. Colonial officials hoped therefore, that the zamindari settlement in Goalpara, with the aid of fertile soil, rising prices and a continually increasing demand for produce, would prove an extraordinarily successful means of clearing the jungles and settling the marsh lands.³ It was argued that the 'raiayatwari system has not promoted the cultivation of the country and although cultivation has extended to some extent inspite of the system, the total cropped area in the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, which are under the raiyatwari settlement, is actually less now than it was a five years ago'.⁴

However, much like their counterparts in neighbouring Bengal, Goalpara's zamindars continued to shirk the responsibilities of their new role as capitalist gentry. A discussion of the reasons for their 'failure' is not possible here but it will suffice to say that little appears to have been done by the zamindars to extend the boundaries of settled arable land in the district. At the turn of the century out of a total area of 4433 square miles, the area under cultivation was only 2,143 square miles, the rest being 'waste lands', the greater part of which was cultivable.⁵ In the last decades of the nineteenth century, colonial officials were still attempting to explain the reasons behind the availability of such tracts in Goalpara: 'The death rate was higher than the

³ Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the extension of cultivation in Assam and the colonisation of waste lands in the Province, 24 September 1898, Assam Secretariat Proceedings (henceforth ASP), Revenue A, November 1898, File nos. 128-138.

⁴ Ibid.

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birth rate in Goalpara in 1891 ... there seems to the Government no necessity to look further than this for an explanation of the non-expansion of the cultivated area. That the zemindari system has certain advantages the government of India is far from denying, but it cannot check the ravages of malaria or epidemic disease'.⁶

The 'wasteland scheme' that was introduced in Goalpara to counter this trend was part of a larger concern of the state with the settlement of the uncultivated areas of the province of Assam. The disappointment with the rural gentry coincided with the late nineteenth century perception of land as 'a quantifiable measurable object of knowledge, and a resource to be controlled and improved',⁷ in the colonial imagination. The 'colonisation of wastelands' project had several elements, including the categorisation of land into 'waste' and 'arable', the encouragement of immigrant cultivators from neighbouring regions into Goalpara, and the strengthening of the jotedar class, indicating a gradual hardening of the boundaries between tenurial strata in Goalpara.

The introduction of permanent cultivation into areas which were identified as 'wastelands' was a process which had begun from the mid nineteenth century onwards.⁸ Officials described the soil of Assam as 'of the richest description', with 'no limit to its productiveness' and immigration, 'far below the requirements of the province accounting for millions of acres still lying fallow'.⁹ In the succeeding period, the anxiety of officials with 'wastelands' had given way to state organised schemes for settling Goalpara's uncultivated tracts, classified in colonial records as the

⁵ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, London, 1879, p.64.

⁶ Colonisation of Wastelands in Assam, Revenue A, November 1898, File nos. 128-138

⁷ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort, Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India*, Richmond, 1997, p.xvi.

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'colonisation of wastelands' papers. These schemes promoted the extension of agriculture into 'wastelands' and marginal areas through a promotion of settlements of migrant cultivators. The policies introduced to settle the uncultivated areas of the Eastern Dooars in northern Goalpara were similar to the ones adopted by the colonial state in the neighbouring Bengal district of Jalpaiguri.¹⁰ Officials acknowledged that 'the policy of settling the land on low rent, with grants of three years revenue free term will not attract jotedars for the colonisation of the Goalpara Dooars'.¹¹

The alternative therefore was to encourage the migration of cultivators from 'less crowded tracts in other parts of the country' into the Dooar region where the land would be settled with individual cultivators who held it directly from the state.¹² It was also acknowledged that the introduction of ryotwari areas in the Eastern Dooars was designed to secure a fixed population and to limit the spirit of emigrating. At the turn of the century, Hunter described the 'migratory habits of the Meches', the community which had the largest percentage of cultivators in the Eastern Dooars: 'They seldom stay at one place or cultivate the same soil for more than 2 or 3 years; but this can hardly be wondered at, when they have so much virgin soil at their disposal'.¹³

⁸ See Section I, Chapter 2.

⁹ Colonisation of Wastelands in Assam, Revenue A, November 1898, File nos. 128-138.

¹⁰ Subhajyoti Ray, 'Jalpaiguri Under Colonial Rule, 1765-1948', Chapter 3, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, SOAS, 1997.

¹¹ Colonisation in the Goalpara Dooars, Revenue A, July 1905, File nos. 38-41.

¹² After the occupation of the Eastern Dooars by the colonial state 'a 10 year settlement was offered, whereby, the Raja and the Rani of Bijni and Sidli respectively [who held the Eastern Dooars] received 20% and a 7% of the gross rental of these estates, which were now held khas by the government and settled annually with cultivators like the other Dooars'. (W.E. Ward, *Notes on the Assam Land Revenue System*, Shillong, 1897, p.6) Thus 'there [were] no intermediate tenures...the Rajas of Bijni, Sidli and others who have received leases, merely standing in the position of farmers'. (W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.128)

¹³ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.117.

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Thus, what a section of officials within the government described as an 'impractical, grand scheme' in 1872,¹⁴ was being seriously pursued by the state in 1897 and discussed, according to Denzil Ibbetson, in the Imperial Legislative Assembly and in the British press. Ibbetson identified portions of Bengal and Bihar as the areas from which the colonists would be drawn and observed that 'every family that is successfully transplanted to a new colony from a congested district in Bengal or Bihar, is removed from a hand to mouth struggle with poverty maintained on the brink of starvation, to a life of independence, with a certainty that hard work will bring ease and a reasonable amount of comfort.'¹⁵ Ibbetson also listed the necessary markers of ideal colonists for the unsettled areas of Goalpara: 'a sturdy independence, self-reliant resourcefulness, the existence of tribal and village organisation, a small amount of capital and the habit of combination and co-operation'.¹⁶ The colonial state's scheme of settling the Eastern Dooars, however, also drew upon discourses on agricultural improvement of the late nineteenth century. Officials, including Henry Cotton, argued that it was 'inadvisable to settle Behari and Bengali cultivators on jungle land...[Instead] the expedient might be tried of having the land cleared partially by pioneer cultivators of aboriginal tribes'.¹⁷ These ideas were representative of strands within the colonial discourse of this period which portrayed certain communities as

¹⁴ Correspondence between Henry Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam and the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 6 April 1872, Board of Revenue Papers, 1859-1872, File no. 145 B.R.

¹⁵ Correspondence between Denzil Ibbetson, the Secretary to the Government of India and the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 2 June 1897, Revenue and Agriculture, File nos. 1-28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ 'Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the extension of cultivation in Assam and the colonisation of waste lands in the Province', p.10, 24 September 1898, Revenue A, November 1898.

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yeomen farmers and stressed their role as pioneers in extending the agrarian frontiers.¹⁸

In the hierarchy of modes of subsistence that Cotton constructed, 'the rude and temporary cultivation of the nomadic and the aboriginal tribes must be a prelude to the migration of real agriculturists...these aboriginal people were good at jungle clearing, but are bad agriculturists... they can cut down trees and secure a crop out of virgin soil. When this is once done and the land requires more careful culture, their restless habits assert themselves [and] it is necessary then to import thither a colony of cultivators and to replace woodcutters by agriculturists.'¹⁹ Apart from the Garos, the Kacharis, the Meches and the Rabhas, who were inhabitants of the region, 'imported Santhals' were identified as another community which 'could constantly move forward, leaving behind land fit for cultivation'.²⁰

The suggested representation of 'waste' in official writings was as a metaphor for socially marginal regions and for the limited skills of the inhabitants of these areas. It has been argued that the concept of 'waste' was based on the evolutionist idea of nature being arranged like society into tiers of 'superior and 'inferior' with productivity as the sole ordering criterion. This discourse made it possible to view 'waste land' as a synonym for 'idle land', that is, land not being tapped, or perhaps more accurately, not being tapped for commercial purposes. Waste was transformed from a classificatory device into a social norm, indicating a particular type of society and kind of social

¹⁸ For a discussion of how these representations were related to politics of gender, see Ajay Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 3, August 1997.

¹⁹ Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the extension of cultivation in Assam and the colonisation of waste lands in the Province, p.11, 24 September 1898, Revenue A, November 1898.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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behaviour--indolent, effeminate and ignorant.²¹ The assumption again was that society and nature were malleable and therefore amenable to being shaped in the desired image and that colonial intervention was essential to transform them.

The effects of this discourse were visible in what colonial officials termed as the 'Santhal experiment' in the Eastern Dooars. The settlement, established at the initiative of the Norwegian Mission in 1880 and initially spread over 25 square miles in the Guma Dooar, was encouraged by the several concessions that it received from the colonial state.²² The colony appears to have one of other similar settlements that were encouraged by the colonial state in Bengal. For instance, a few years prior to the establishment of this colony, a group of Santhal 'pioneers' was settled in the Chunchal estate in the Malda district.

The state defrayed the initial travelling expenses of the settlers, arranged for tracts of land to be reserved exclusively for the Santhals, and fixed the rent at a reduced rate of half of the usual charge for the first year of cultivation. The 'experiment' was seen as largely a success, with the settlers managing to bring more than 3,200 acres or one fifth of the area reserved for the under cultivation by the early twentieth century.²³ 'On the whole I think that the colonists have made as much progress as could be fairly expected...they have been working hard and doing their best to push on cultivation. The houses have all been finished ... I saw a large number of fowls in every village and the people seem happy and contented', remarked the

²¹ V.K. Gidwani, "'Waste" and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.27, No. 4, 25 January 1992.

²² Letter from the Assistant Secretary to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley, 12 November 1880, Home Proceedings 1881.

²³ B. C. Allen, *Goalpara*, p.93.

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Deputy Commissioner in his tour of the area.²⁴ This area had increased to more than 16,000 acres by 1915.²⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, these several schemes of extending settled cultivation into the Dooar areas were beginning to show results. Officials recorded the migration of several thousand cultivators from neighbouring districts of Bengal into the Dooar area of Goalpara.²⁶

The encouragement of immigrant cultivators into the Dooars was accompanied by an increased control of the state over forest resources, another strategy to create a unified economic territory that could meet the state's demands for revenue. Colonial officials touring the region had identified the forested area in the Eastern Dooars of Goalpara as

one of the main sources of supply for the towns of Eastern Bengal since they formed the bulk of the Sal tree area in the region. There are other valuable species which only require to be placed on the market in sufficient and regular quantities to find a steady sale. At present, they are too scattered and this indicates the importance of adopting a system of management which will produce more or less pure crops on definite areas.²⁷

By the early decades of the twentieth century, forest management rules were in place and the colonial reconstitution of the forests had resulted in the demarcation of large parts of these forested areas as 'reserves'.²⁸

²⁴ Extract from the diary of T.J. Murray, Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, 23 July 1881, in File no. 132G, Goalpara Papers, Assam Secretariat, 1881.

²⁵ *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year 1914-1915*, Shillong, 1915, p.3.

²⁶ Letter from the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley, 11 October 1880, Home Proceedings 1881.

²⁷ G.S. Hart, *Note on the Sal forests in the Jalpaiguri, Buxa and the Goalpara Forest divisions, to which is appended A Note on the Forests of the Dooars*, by R.S. Troup, Simla, 1915, p.27.

²⁸ By 1905, there were 787 square miles of reserved forests in the district, divided into seven reserves. There was also an area of 558 square miles of 'unclassified forests' which was classified as 'simply waste land at the disposal of the Government. The earliest reserves in the Dooars were formed in 1875'. (B. C. Allen, *Goalpara*, p.78)

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The colonial state's project of social engineering and categorisation was reproduced in the permanently settled estates of Goalpara as well. However, unlike in the Dooars, where the state had relied on individual cultivators, here it was the jotedars who were to restructure of rural power relations while maintaining the revenue demand. The process of identifying jotedars as the owners of the land and creating forms of private property to ensure both a steady source of revenue and the extension of cultivation had begun in the early decades of the century.²⁹ Officials argued that

in the jotedaari system, under which cultivation has extended very rapidly in Bengal, the unit of colonization is a group of tenants headed by the jotedaar who cultivates with them, finances them and represents them in the dealings with the government and with the police.³⁰ Such a body of men is better able to face the difficulties of colonization than individual ryots and some encouraging results have already been obtained by inviting colonists of this description to the waste areas of the Goalpara district.³¹

Jotedars continued to be classified as 'reclamation' tenants well into the twentieth century as colonial officials identified reclamation as 'the main purpose for the creation of jotes ... in a pioneering district like Goalpara'.³² In several estates, this class further strengthened its position by initiating the extension of the boundaries of settled agriculture. This was particularly true for the estates of Chapar, Bijni and

²⁹ See Chapter II.

³⁰ 'The jotedaars of Rangpur, the talukdars of Chittagong, the Kunkatidars of Chota Nagpur...are but different names for the reclaimers of the jungle, who exercise a sub-proprietary right in the land that they have brought under cultivation (Colonisation of Wastelands in Assam, Revenue A, November 1898, File nos. 128-138).

³¹ Correspondence between the Chief Secretary to the Government of East Bengal and Assam and the Secretary to the Government of India, 31 May, 1906, Revenue A, October, 1906, Nos. 106-116; 'The system of jotes as at present known in Goalpara was originally introduced from the Bengal districts of Rangpur and Jalpaiguri where this system has been in existence from time immemorial. Whatever their economic utility now, there is no doubt that in the past jotes have served a very valuable colonising purpose. By this means, the zemindar is enabled, with a minimum of risk and expense to himself, to gradually open out and colonise the wastelands of this estate...' (A. J. Laine, *Account of the Land Tenure System of Goalpara*, Shillong, 1917, p.113).

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Parbatjoar, where the jotedar was still the 'enterprising cultivator who paid a prospecting visit to a likely piece of waste land and if his impressions were favourable, approached the zamindar for permission to settle'.³³ The land settled with jotedars by the zamindar of Bijni, for instance, was 'almost entirely waste land'.³⁴ He remained, therefore, the primary agent for creating a settled agrarian order in the district.

Vast tracts continued to be available. Also, from the last decade of the nineteenth century the power of the jotedars was beginning to be derived from surplus agriculture, aided further by the non residency of several of the zamindars in the region. Hunter's account describes the conditions of subinfeudation reflected in the 'hopeless intricacy' of the cultivator's holding, both as regards area, rate of rent and other terms of tenancy, and in the growing power of the jotedar: 'The actual cultivator very rarely holds his fields from the zamindar or superior landlord...ordinarily he is the subtenant of a man called the jotedar and sometimes he is a subtenant of a subtenant'.³⁵

Of course not all jotedars were equally powerful. Colonial records also identify a second category of jotedar, who was 'a mere intermediary put in by the zamindar between himself and the cultivators'.³⁶ In this respect, however, they shared something with their more independent namesakes: they would 'seek the position of the jotedar so that they may "Lord it over sub-tenants or under raiyats"'.³⁷ Officials found that 'the jotedars were now of two distinct classes: the jotedar who originally took the land from

³² A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.174.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.114. In Mechpara, the jotedar was 'the man who applied for waste land and expected to make a middleman's profit by subletting to *kolijans* or under tenants at a far higher rate than he would pay to the landlord.' ('Mechpara Estate Report', in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.66).

³⁴ Laine's inquiry into the Report on the Estate of Bijni in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.40.

³⁵ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p. 65.

³⁶ Copy of notes recorded by H. Savage, 22 April 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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the zamindar for the purpose of cultivation...are the raiyats of the Bengal Act VIII of 1869 [and those] who are...clearly are no more than the under tenant of that law'.³⁸ F. C. Monahan, the then Commissioner of Assam, observed that 'it may be generally said of this part of India that wherever a man holds more land than he can cultivate by his own labour and that of the members of his family, he sublets part of it as soon as he can find a tenant, and if the difference between the rent which he can obtain from sub tenants and the Government assessment is enough to maintain himself and his family in tolerable comfort, he sublets the whole. That is his notion of rising in the world'.³⁹ The big jotedars of estates like Gauripur and Mechpara⁴⁰ had at least three layers of subtenures beneath them. They cultivated the land with the help of chukanidars, darchukanidars and adhiars. The chukanidar is described in official records as

usually the men with ploughs and cattle and a little land, the man holding land under the jotedar, ... a mere tenant at will, and if the jotedar delivers him a notice to quit, he either must go at the end of the year or accept whatever terms the jotedar may think for to impose. In most of the estates, the chukanidars had absolutely no right of occupancy and could be ejected even 30 years of cultivation while their rents could also be enhanced indefinitely. The adhiar is of a still lower standing. Indeed in Goalpara, he is treated as a mere farm labourer who is paid by receiving half the crop which he grows on his master's land. In other parts of Eastern Bengal, he is still more numerous, but nowhere does law or custom give him any higher status than that of the under raiyat or the tenant-at-will.⁴¹

This growing sedenterisation did not of course preclude the continued existence of other lifestyle strategies. Land rights were frequently ambiguous and

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ ASP, General Department, Revenue A, June 1905, File nos. 176-178.

⁴⁰ F. C. Monahan estimated the size of the jotes in Goalpara to be between 1,000 and 5,000 bighas. (Report No.1503 R & F, 30 May 1907, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, Revenue A).

⁴¹ Copy of notes recorded by H. Savage, 22 April 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. III/R, 1913.

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several communities continued to practice various lifestyles simultaneously. The several *palataka* or abandoned land holdings in the zamindari of Parbatjoar, for instance, were left behind by cultivators who continued to subsist on shifting cultivation 'frequently abandoning their land without the knowledge of the landlords, when the soil was exhausted and finding fresh jungle land in the neighbouring pargana for fresh cultivation'.⁴² At the turn of the century, several of the estates had cultivators holding their land directly from the zamindar, without the intervention of an intermediary class, subinfeudation being primarily seen as a phenomenon associated with the immigration of settlers from eastern Bengal and the subsequent pressure on land. The zamindari estate of Chapar, for instance, had an extremely small number of tenants, who cultivated a small fractional part of the whole estate, holding lands directly under the zamindar based upon contracts which were mostly verbal.⁴³ There were still very few jotedars in Bijni,⁴⁴ the largest estate in the district, at the turn of the century and large areas of the estates were still under alternative forms of cultivation. These examples however, do not, in any way, reduce the profound nature of change in the political economy and the emergence of new patterns of authority and power in Goalpara's rural countryside. 'A whole juggernaut of social and political change had been set rolling'⁴⁵ by the colonial state and it was only a matter of time before even these formerly flexible people were forced into more rigid lifeways.

⁴² 'Parbatjoar Estate Report', in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.80.

⁴³ 'Report from the estate of Chapar', in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.100.

⁴⁴ According to B. C. Allen, Bijni had an area of 943 square miles while Gauripur, the second largest estate, had an area of 423 square miles (B. C. Allen, *Goalpara*, p.111).

⁴⁵ Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge, 1999, p.168.

Section II: The migration and new categories

From the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Goalpara's society was becoming subject to a new set of pressures which led to an extension of the public sphere and of the domain of colonial law in the district. This section looks at the phenomenon which appears to have set in motion much of these changes---the unprecedented migration of thousands of cultivators from the plains of eastern Bengal---and explores the consequences of this sudden demographic change for the consolidation of older social groups and the forging of new collectivities.

Migration of cultivators between the region of eastern Bengal and the district of Goalpara was a characteristic of the local economy during the pre-colonial period and had continued into the colonial period as well. This migration had however, remained primarily a seasonal one, linked to the demand for labour during the jute season.⁴⁶ Cultivators from Bengal were being 'invited by the offer of special conditions' to settle in the extensive wastelands of Goalpara and settlement officials had 'no doubt that Bengali colonists would have come forward in very considerable numbers to take up blocks of land on zamindari tenures, with the concession of a revenue free period'.⁴⁷ However, officials continued to express concern at the reluctance of cultivators from Bengal to migrate to Goalpara as well as to the rest of Assam despite these several incentives on offer, including an exemption of payment of

⁴⁶ *Report on the Administration of Land Revenue in East Bengal and Assam, 1905-1906*, Shillong, 1906, p.3. In the rest of the Assam valley, however, migration was a significant factor in the increase of population. The first significant wave of migration into Assam began shortly before the middle of the nineteenth century and was connected to the tea plantations. This was followed by a wave of migration of educated Bengali Hindus into the administrative and professional positions in Assam when Bengali was introduced as the language of instruction in the Province. In the census of 1891, it was estimated that one fourth of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley was of migrant origin.

⁴⁷ Letter from L. J. Kershaw, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to The Secretary to the Government of India, 5 June 1905, Shillong, ASP, Revenue A, June 1905, File nos. 176-178.

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taxes for the three years.⁴⁸ 'In the estate of Chapar, for instance', 'there were still very large tracts of khas unoccupied land and there exists no very hard competition for land excepting in some congested areas and permanent old villages. While the occupiers of the soil are of such primitive habits and not accustomed and trained to use it with a permanent interest, the idea of improved legislation is certainly premature.'⁴⁹

Attempting to explain this reluctance, colonial records suggested that 'in the neighbouring districts of Bengal from which the valley is the most accessible, and where the people are accustomed to a climate and surroundings resembling in some degree those of Assam, and are well qualified, physically and otherwise to undertake the task of colonisation, there is at present no great pressure of population to induce them to migrate'.⁵⁰ Colonial records pointed out that while there was a migration of cultivators from Mymensingh and other districts of eastern Bengal between 1905 and 1907, it did not appear to have affected the proportion of population to land and a steady annual immigration of about 2,000 would be required to maintain the 50,000 immigrants of 1901 into Goalpara at their existing strength.⁵¹ 'It might be thought that the amount of cultivable land, the fertility of the soil and the low rents prevailing would have induced some portion at least of the over crowded cultivators of Bengal to find their way ... and take up land. But this does not appear to be the case', remarked E.A. Gait, the Census Commissioner for 1891.⁵² As noted earlier, this was a repeated concern. At the turn of the century, Hunter had commented on the almost total absence

⁴⁸ Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam, 27 February 1905, ASP, Revenue A, March 1905, File nos. 6-8.

⁴⁹ 'Chapar Estate Report', in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p. 102.

⁵⁰ Letter to the Chief Commissioner of Assam from F.J. Monahan, Assam Secretariat, General Department, Revenue A, June 1905, File nos. 176-178.

⁵¹ Copy of notes recorded by P.G. Melitus, 25 May 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913

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of 'either emigration from or immigration into Goalpara, except for cultivators fleeing their lands to escape payment of arrears of rent and a few immigrants from Bengal and Hindustan, as well as from Assam [who came] to Goalpara seeking employment or for trading purposes, but their numbers [were] so few that this [could] hardly be called immigration'.⁵³ As late as 1917, colonial officials continued to despair at the land:man ratio in the district and observed that 'in the zamindari areas over great part of the district there is much more land than population, and plenty of wasteland within short distances'.⁵⁴

The first decade of the twentieth century, however, saw an exceptional rise in rural densities in several of the Bengal districts bordering Goalpara, particularly in Dacca, Mymensingh and Faridpur, the result of the pushing forward of the margins of agriculture into the rich alluvial tract of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Colonial Settlement Reports tell us that, by the end of that decade, the margins of cultivation had been reached in most parts of Eastern Bengal. Demographic pressure, the subservience of a jute producing cultivating class to market pressures and the near constancy in the yield from cultivable areas created conditions of impoverishment for the peasant.⁵⁵

The increasing density of population in Dacca resulted in a situation where it became 'a matter of consideration as to what extent the land could be induced to provide the rapidly increasing members of the cultivating classes with employment'.⁵⁶

⁵² Quoted in the *Census of India, 1921, Vol. III, Assam*, Shillong, 1923, p.40.

⁵³ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.46.

⁵⁴ Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the conditions in Eastern Bengal which led to the immigration of cultivators to Goalpara and the rest of Assam, see Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 1986.

⁵⁶ F. D. Ascoli, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Dacca*, Calcutta, 1917, p.50.

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With a density of 1,118 people per square mile, this was nearly double the average density of population in the whole of Bengal. The population in rural Bengal rose by 6.5 % in the 1920's and the increase in Eastern Bengal was high enough for the colonial officials to suggest that the region 'be marked out as a separate natural division'.⁵⁷ The colonisation of the Madhupur jungles, 'an infertile jungle tract of stiff clay' in Dacca indicated that the 'superior agricultural land of the region could no longer support its teeming population'.⁵⁸

With a mean density of 823 per square mile, Mymensingh recorded a similarly high demographic growth and a situation of indebtedness with high interest rates 'such that payment constituted a severe drain in the resources of the agricultural population',⁵⁹ 'pushing cultivators from the region of Tangail and Jamalpur to settle in the Goalpara *char* areas of the Brahmaputra'.⁶⁰ Of the several cultivators' tracts published from Mymensingh during this period with descriptions of the conditions which led to the phenomenal migration into Goalpara, those in Abdul Hamid's *Krishak Bilap* are among the most poignant and detailed. While the text focuses on the exploitation of the cultivators by money lenders, the author also offers images of sorrowful farewells to these cultivators at the Amritganj station in Mymensingh, wondering 'whether the malaria and the kala azar of Assam would prove to be even more life threatening than the mahajans'.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Census of India, 1921, Volume V, Bengal*, Calcutta, 1923, Chapter 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.50.

⁵⁹ F. A. Sachse, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Mymensingh, 1910-1917*, Calcutta, 1919, p.27; the settlement officer also reported that 'cultivation had almost reached its full limits' in the district of Mymensingh. (*Ibid.*, p.29)

⁶⁰ F. A. Sachse, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Mymensingh*, Calcutta, 1917, p. 34.

⁶¹ Abdul Hamid Shah, *Krishak Bilap*, Mymensingh, 1921, p.5.

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The migration in question involved over a million people in the first three decades of the twentieth century, as cultivators moved up the river Jamuna and north eastwards into the Assam Valley up to Guwahati. By 1911, more than 118,000 migrants had moved into the district of Goalpara alone, clearing vast tracts of dense jungles along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and occupying flooded low lands all along the river, leading to a 30% growth in the population of the district.⁶² Officials pointed out that the impact of the immigration could be assessed from the fact that the growth in the natural population of Goalpara was only 15.6% during this period.⁶³ The effects of 'this extraordinary inrush of settlers' produced almost immediate changes in the district's figures of population density, the mean density per square mile rising from 89 in 1891 to 115 in 1911 and then to 193 in 1921.⁶⁴

What colonial officials had described as the 'commencement of [a] voluntary stream of settlers' in 1911, had, by the end of the second decade of the century 'extended far up the valley and the colonists were now part of the population of all the four lower and central districts of Assam'.⁶⁵ The areas of Golakganj (density of 392), and Dhubri (density of 390) in the western part of the district, adjoining the province of Bengal, continued to be the most effected in 1921 as well, with Lakhipur thana recording a population increase of nearly 90% within a decade.⁶⁶ At the end of just a decade of migration, cultivators from eastern Bengal formed 20% of the population of

⁶² *Census of India, 1911, Part 1, Assam*, Shillong, 1912, p.8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁶⁴ *Census of India, 1911, Part 1, Assam*, Shillong, 1912, p. 10. The most spectacular rise was recorded in the western parts of the district, where the thanas of South Salamara, Lakhipur and Bilasipur showed an increase of 70.15%, 61.81% and 38.65% in the population, respectively.

⁶⁵ *Census of India, 1921, Volume III, Assam*, Shillong, 1923, p.41. According to this census, nearly 300,000 cultivators had migrated to the province of Assam of which 141,000 had settled in Goalpara alone. Of this 141,000, the highest figure of 78,000 were Mymensinghia cultivators. (*Ibid.*, p.41)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.87.

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Goalpara district.⁶⁷ The level of migration from Mymensingh was high enough for literary tracts to express fears of a depopulation of the district. In the *Adarsha Krishak (The Ideal Cultivator)*, a text from Mymensingh, the author attempts to stem this migration by linking it to the project of national self discovery in Bengal: 'Aren't you the same people who cleared the jungles and settled this part of Bengal? Our land, our civilization is superior to that of Assam's and we need more people to cultivate our lands. We will not leave this country...'⁶⁸

The following table shows the variation in the population of Goalpara between 1872 and 1921:

1872	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921
387,376	446,741	452,812	462,089	600,685	762,523

Source: *Census of India, 1921, Volume III, Assam*, Shillong, 1923, Imperial Table II. ⁶⁹

The Census Report of 1921 had ended on the hopeful note that 'the migration of 1911 was only the advance guard' and that 'the main body was only just beginning to arrive...as the news of the promised land has spread to other districts beside Mymensingh...'⁷⁰ The decade between 1921 and 1931 obviously did not disappoint and the Census Commissioner offered the following rather dramatic description of the continuing migration in 1931: 'Probably the most important event in the province [of Assam] during the last twenty five years --an event, moreover, which seems likely to

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.41. '

⁶⁸ Abdul Hai, *Adarsha Krishak (The Ideal Cultivator)*, Mymensingh, 1922, p.32.

⁶⁹ The net variation in population in the district between 1872 and 1921 was +96.8% (*Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Subsidiary Table IV).

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alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization-- has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims'.⁷¹

Section III: Economic change in the early twentieth century

The availability of cultivable land and the migration of cultivators from Eastern Bengal in such large numbers emerged as significant determinants of the nature of tenurial relationships in Goalpara in the early twentieth century. The discussion in the first section of this chapter suggests that the jotedar-chukanidar pattern had gradually emerged as the dominant feature of the agrarian structure of Goalpara. Unlike East Bengal, where there was a predominance of small peasant raiyati holdings⁷², the pattern of dominance in the several estates of southern Goalpara by the end of the nineteenth century was similar to that of northern Bengal, where the land was parceled out between big and small jotedars who also advanced credit to the cultivators. There were clear parallels between the consolidation of the jotedars as the dominant class within the village in Goalpara and a similar consolidation of this class in the neighbouring province of Bengal, particularly in North Bengal where the availability of large tracts of wastelands placed the jotedars in a powerful bargaining position vis-a'-vis the landlords.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 20.

⁷¹G.S. Mullan in *Census of India, 1931, Volume III, Assam*, Shillong, 1932, p.49.

⁷²Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge, 1986, p.15.

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In the pattern of subinfeudation that emerged in the region during this period, the zamindars (as said) frequently contracted with these prosperous jotedars to initiate the task of clearing the land by the east Bengal immigrants. In several zamindari estates, local jotedars granted perpetual leases to these cultivators in order to reclaim wastelands, thereby creating intermediate tenures.⁷³ The *payal pattas*, as these leases were known, were given for uncultivated tracts which were made revenue and khazana free for three years.⁷⁴ In Chapar, the settling of considerable stretches of wasteland with the migrants and the subsequent 'constriction of privileges' was the cause of severe discontent among the older tenants.⁷⁵

The process of forest clearing and land reclamation in Goalpara thus produced complex tenure chains extending from the zamindar at the upper end to the actual cultivator at the lower end, with numerous jotedars and other tenants in between. A distinctive tenurial system emerged as most often the immigrant peasant also acquired jotes and then went out into the forest or marsh lands to clear or settle land. Colonial officials observed that cultivable land was often being sold at highly profitable rates to the immigrants by the local cultivators: 'In several cases, the migrants took up land cleared by others and only if they could not find such land did they take up waste lands. Many Assamese had sold their lands...at a good price...sometimes for as much as Rs.200 per bigha of wasteland'.⁷⁶

⁷³ 'The jotedari system has spread in this district', remarked R. Friel in the *Supplement to the Assam District Gazetteers*, Shillong, 1914, p.5. 'These jotedars are practically middlemen and the zamindars are thus saved the trouble of dealing directly with the innumerable cultivators, who can only get their land from the jotedaars'. (Ibid.)

⁷⁴ Amalendu Guha, *Jamidar Kaalin Goalpara Jilar Artha Samajik Avastha (Socio-Economic Conditions in Zamindari Goalpara)*, Guwahati, 2000, p.60.

⁷⁵ Note from the Chief Commissioner of Assam, ASP, Revenue A, June 1927, File nos. 24-28.

⁷⁶ *Evidence of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-1930*, Shillong, 1930, p.478.

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In several estates, the migrant cultivators had gradually established themselves as 'de facto' jotedars over whole regions, which eventually coalesced into settled communities. In Bijni, for instance, where the cultivators had previously sometimes held the land directly under the zamindar, jotes were now being increasingly settled with immigrant peasants.⁷⁷ There was also a sudden rise in the number of 'speculative jotes' being taken up by both the prosperous local tenants and by the headmen of immigrant families in the estate of Mechpara.⁷⁸ A.J. Laine's survey of the district similarly traced the origin of several jotes in Goalpara during this period to 'reclamation settlements cultivated by the bhatias or the Eastern Bengal Muhammadan immigrants'.⁷⁹

The immigration marked the beginning of a second great period of economic and social expansion in the forests, marshes and the *char* areas of Goalpara. With nearly 90% of the migrants being drawn from the class of ordinary cultivators, left landless by the pressure of land in their homeland, it was now the cultivator from eastern Bengal who assumed the leading role in the extension of the frontiers of cultivation in the district.⁸⁰ There were almost immediate increases in the figures of cultivated acreage in colonial records. The area brought under cultivation by the immigrant cultivators in Goalpara rose from a negligible 2,165 acres in the pre-influx period, between 1904-1905, to nearly 23,000 acres in 1915.⁸¹ This was better than

⁷⁷ 'Bijni Estate Report' in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.36.

⁷⁸ 'Mechpara Estate Report' in A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.75. The figures of those who drew their income from rent of agricultural land rose from 52,571 in 1901 to 106,781 in 1921.

⁷⁹ A. J. Laine, *Report on the Defects of the Rent Law in Goalpara district with suggestions for its Amendment*, Shillong, 1917, p.19.

⁸⁰ *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Provincial Table IV.

⁸¹ *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year 1914-1915*, Shillong, 1915, p.3. Colonial officials writing in the late 1920's calculated an increase of 700% in the settled years during

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anything the state had hoped for in the region and the bewilderment of the officials at this sudden change was evident in the following statement by C. S. Mullan, the Census Commissioner in 1931: 'Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population ...of over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to Assam Valley. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of the government but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is a large body of ants'.⁸²

Table of figures for various years of area settled (in acres) by immigrants from eastern Bengal in Goalpara:⁸³

1914-1915	1917-1918	1922-23	1933-34	1934--35
22,580	41,496	10,256	42,992	43,495

Officials pointed out that 'in industry and skill, the migrants [were] an object lesson to the local cultivator...they [had] reclaimed and brought under cultivation thousands of acres of land ...weeded and neatly sown and shown examples of new crops and improved methods',⁸⁴ all of which 'was beneficial since the local people seem to be shaking off their old lethargy and responding to the new spirit of competition'.⁸⁵ This image of the east Bengal cultivator was countered at times by descriptions of them as unruly and refractory but the dominant image remained a

the previous twenty years in the neighbouring district of Kamrup. (*Report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929, Vol.1, Shillong, 1930, p.23.*)

⁸² *Census of India, 1931, Assam, p.51.*

⁸³ Statistics compiled from *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam, 1914-35.*

⁸⁴ Report of the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup in the *Census of India, 1921, Assam, p.40.*

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positive one and it was echoed in various committee findings and surveys of the early twentieth century. Thus the report of the Assam Banking Enquiry observed that unlike the local cultivator, who was conservative in his methods and range of cultivation, the Mymensinghia settlers produced a variety of crops.⁸⁶ Reports on the administration of land revenue in the region between 1910 and 1930 also had frequent praise for the 'migrant cultivators from Mymensingh who were setting examples of good husbandry to the people of Darrang and Goalpara'.⁸⁷

The acquisition of tenancies of various kinds by the immigrant cultivator was predicated on their knowledge of what were apparently 'superior and more intensive techniques of agriculture', particularly that of the cultivation of jute. From official reports of the nineteenth century, it is evident that jute was being cultivated by several communities of the region in the pre-migration period as well, particularly by the Hajongs, the Rabhas and the Kacharis, who had 'perfected the technique of cultivating the plant ...and produced a superior quality of jute, though in very small quantities and primarily for domestic consumption'.⁸⁸ The author of one such report from that period observed that 'the hill tribes towards Majparah ...grow really superfine jute, very clean, though not long. These men do not cut the plant at the root but near the centre, so that only the finest portion of the fibre is kept'.⁸⁹

The production of the crop however appears to have expanded considerably at the turn of the century, as an official report from that period lists Goalpara among the

⁸⁵ 'Report of the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong', in the *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Shillong, p.40.

⁸⁶ *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry* p.446

⁸⁷ *Report on the Land Revenue Administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1908-1909*, Dacca, 1908, p.3.

⁸⁸ Hem Chunder Kerr, *Report on the cultivation of, and trade in, jute in Bengal, and on Indian fibres*, Calcutta, 1874, p.xlviii.

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chief areas of jute cultivation, along with districts of eastern Bengal: 'The *Uttariya* or the "northern jute" grown in Goalpara, Rangpur, Bogra and the districts of Sirajganj was rated among the most superior of jute fibres, along with Sirajganj jute and *desi* jute from Dacca and was described as "unequalled for length, colour and fineness".⁹⁰

The growth of a market in jute in the late nineteenth century was limited by a poor transport network. The descriptions of Hajong and Rabha communities bringing in small quantities of this jute on their backs for sale to the haats of Gossaiganj, Salamara and Lakhipur in colonial records of the late nineteenth century indicate that this fine jute had found its way into the hands of local traders though not into the larger market at Serajgunj.⁹¹ 'We sell this jute to itinerant traders and rarely send it to Serajgunj. The quantity of jute exported from Gossaigaon is 5,000 maunds of very fine quality, which we bring in ponies or bangies ...from a radius of six miles. There are no pucca roads and only one dak road. We sent our jute to Serajgunj for sale this year at a cost of rs.3-6 laid down there and sold it at rs.2-4 to 2-8. [Therefore] we prefer selling this jute locally'.⁹²

The market however also appears to have benefited substantially from the integration of Goalpara with the regional trading circuits of Bengal. Several trading firms and jute mills were set up in Goalpara during this period. The Gouripore Jute

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ H.R. Carter *Cordage Fibres: Their cultivation, extraction and preparation for market*, London, 1909, p.3. Hem Chunder Kerr's report (*Report on the cultivation*) quotes the following observation of Shoar Nyshe of Teamari in Goalpara: 'Within the last seven or eight years, the people in our part of the district have taken to the cultivation of jute on a large scale. Before that, small quantities were raised by us for local consumption'. (Kerr, *Report on the cultivation*, p.xliv).

⁹¹ Kerr, *Report on the cultivation* p. xlviii. There was a trade in local products including mustard seeds which were being bought by traders from lower Assam trading centres like Sualkuchi and Barpeta.

⁹² Ibid.

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Mills used jute from Serajgunj and Narayangunj along with locally produced fibre.⁹³ Colonial reports also mention the 'several itinerant traders, locally called the bhasania beparis, who made annual trips to Goalpara from Serajgunj in the months of Aughran, Pous and Magha, and purchased jute with ready money'.⁹⁴ The pattern of jute cultivation and trade continued substantially unchanged into the early part of the twentieth century, with an expansion of the area under cultivation in the district to 35,022 acres and an annual yield of more than 348,332 maunds.⁹⁵ F. C. Monahan, the Director of Land Records and Agriculture, observed that the crop was grown primarily between the Lakhipur and the Mankachar area of Goalpara, 'on both the south and the north banks of the Brahmaputra, in the tract of the country to the north of Dhubri, lying west of a straight line drawn from that station to the eastern boundary of the Guma forest reserve'.⁹⁶

A new impetus for the production of jute in Goalpara was provided by the influx of immigrants from eastern Bengal, 'who grew a superior quality of jute'⁹⁷ in the wastelands that they brought under cultivation. There was a steady increase in the figures of cultivated acreage under this crop in the post migration period, which now rose to nearly 43,000 acres.⁹⁸ Most of the land that was sold to the east Bengal cultivators by the local population was *chapor*i land, considered ideal for jute

⁹³ Ibid. p. xv; By 1873, the firm of Jyth Mull Dhunraj had already been trading in jute and other items in Gauripur for over two decades. All these firms exported jute to the markets of Serajgunj, where it was sold as 'Gouripore paat'. (Ibid., p. xliii)

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.xliv.

⁹⁵ F. C. Monahan, Director of Land Records and Agriculture, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 7 February 1898, File no. 814, Revenue A, NAI, New Delhi.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Report on the Administration of Land Revenue in Assam, 1907-1908*, p.1.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

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cultivation⁹⁹ and by 1921, jute had emerged as the second most important cash crop in Goalpara, with its cultivation occupying more than 9% of the net cultivated area of the district.¹⁰⁰ Developments in the transport network during this period, particularly the extension of the Eastern Bengal railway along the north bank of the Brahmaputra would have contributed to the growth of the market in cash crops in the region.¹⁰¹

This increasing diversification in Goalpara's economy would not have been possible without certain facilities like a fairly well developed credit network. Jute production, for instance, was dependent on the presence of local moneylenders who advanced money in return for payment in kind. In the nineteenth century, such persons are unlikely to have formed a separate class of professional moneylenders or usurers. Rather the chief source of credit for the ordinary cultivator was more likely to have been the rich jotedar thus exercised effective control over the labour of the ordinary cultivators.¹⁰² Francis Buchanan describes this class in the district of Rangpur (in which Goalpara was included) as the grain dealers or beparis who were large farmers with more than five ploughs who kept cattle for transporting the grain collected from the village to the nearest market.¹⁰³

In early twentieth century, however, there was also the gradual emergence of a new class of moneylenders who offered advances for growing jute and mustard and

⁹⁹ *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p. 478.

¹⁰⁰ *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Subsidiary Table 1. The figures of 1921 for the cultivation of jute were an increase from 1911, when it was grown on 6% of the total cultivated area. (*Census of India, 1911, Volume III, Assam*, Shillong, 1912, p. 4)

¹⁰¹ Previously jute from Goalpara 'was taken in steamers ... to Calcutta at a charge of 9 annas to 12 annas a maund'. (Kerr, *Report on the cultivation*, p.xliii.) Jute was also sent to Serajgunge in 'Bengali boats'. (*Ibid.*, xliv)

¹⁰² Amalendu Guha, *Jamidar Kaalin Goalpara*, p.72.

¹⁰³ The Buchanan Hamilton Papers, Mss Eur. D 75, The Account of the District or of Ronggopur Zila, Book II, p.103.

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were repaid in kind.¹⁰⁴ Thus in his evidence given to an official report, a local moneylender observed that, 'In Goalparah, the conditions under which advances are made and received are various. In some places, the advancing party ...the mahajan...advances on the understanding that he is to be repaid in jute'.¹⁰⁵ 'We sell jute not to the paikars [itinerant merchants] but to traders and mahajans', reported Shoar Nysho, a cultivator from Teamari in Goalpara.¹⁰⁶

The existence of this credit network could also explain the ability of the migrants to accept far higher rates of rent than those paid by the indigenous cultivators. Agents of zamindars observed that, 'these newly settled tenants, mostly from Bengal, openly declare that they do not mind the increased rents at all, so long as they get good arable lands. Most of them who are industrious and not migratory in their habits have improved their positions...these new tenants know perfectly well what they are about', stated a report from the Diwan of Bijni.¹⁰⁷ In several of the estate reports from the period, the rates contracted by jotedars with the 'foreign tenants from Bengal' were almost always far higher than the rates paid by the local tenants who continued to pay rates fixed by the survey and settlement operations of 1869.¹⁰⁸

By the end of the third decade of the twentieth century, after over twenty years of immigration of cultivators from eastern Bengal and a resultant boost to commercial crops and to the expansion of cultivated acreage, conditions had been created for sharp

¹⁰⁴ *Report of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.2.

¹⁰⁵ Kerr, *Report on the cultivation*, p.59. 'We deal in jute. Either we buy it for cash or make advances to ryots to cultivate it for us. When making the advances, we sometimes fix the price at which the jute is to be delivered'. (*Ibid.*, p.xlvii) 'About one eighth of last season's produce still remains unsold with the mahajans and the paikars, but none of it is in the hands of the actual growers'. (*Ibid.*, p.xliii).

¹⁰⁶ Kerr, *Report on the cultivation*, p.xlv.

¹⁰⁷ Report of the Diwan of Bijni on the allegations made by certain tenants at pargana Habraghat and Dihi Botiamari, ASP, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.36.

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increases in rent and an expansion of the land market in the district. The extensive margins of cultivation in Goalpara appear to have been reached by the early 1930's. The Census Commissioner for 1931 reported that 'there had been a diversion...of the tide of migration from Goalpara into the districts of Kamrup and Nowgong during this period, most of the cultivable wastelands in the district having by this time already taken over.. [and] although there was still room for expansion in the district , the great days of mass immigration by the Mymensinghians are over'.¹⁰⁹ The area brought under cultivation had risen from 10,256 acres between 1922-23 to 45,000 acres between 1933 and 1934'.¹¹⁰

In the past, the land was of comparatively little or no value, but with the steady influx of immigrants from Bengal in recent years, and the consequent spread of cultivation, such land has steadily increased and is still rapidly increasing in value', observed A. J. Laine in the Legislative Assembly. 'With its appreciation in value, it has acquired an increased importance in the eyes not only of its owners but also of potential tenants...land lords claim the right to settle all unoccupied land belonging to them with such tenants, and at such rates, as they may think proper, and in as much as the right to property includes the right to exclude others from possessing it, they likewise claim the right to eject persons who have taken possession of their lands without their consent'.¹¹¹

Zamindari records denied any unreasonable increase in the rent in the post immigration period and instead suggested that 'only a very small number of tenants

¹⁰⁹ G.S. Mullan in *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, p.15.

¹¹⁰ *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year 1933-1934*, Shillong, 1934, p.2.

¹¹¹ Assam Legislative Council Debates, 7-9 March 1929, V/9/1367, OIOC.

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have been affected by this and the amount at stake is very small'.¹¹² Colonial records suggest otherwise and indicate that the second and third decades of the twentieth century were marked by a sharp increase in land rents in the district. All of the 19 permanently settled estates of Goalpara imposed a sharp increase in the land rents demanded from tenants, the highest being an increase of more than 25% in the estates of Gauripur and Karaibari between 1911 and 1914.¹¹³ Assessing the changes effected on local agrarian conditions by immigration, officials noted that the competition over land resulting from the rapid extension of cultivation 'have had the inevitable result of enhancing the rent, and this has been facilitated much by the fact that these immigrants have been accustomed to pay very much higher rents elsewhere and readily agree to rates in advance of the old prevailing pergunnah rates'.¹¹⁴

To this acceptance of a higher rent was added 'an increase in the cost of living and the introduction of cultivation requiring certain technical skill' [the production of jute] all of which 'benefited the immigrant...at the expense of his predecessors who are being gradually outbid, bought up and ousted from the better portions of the district with the assistance and the connivance of the zamindars who benefit from this change'.¹¹⁵ Thus, in the estate of Mechpara, suggested the report of H. Savage, an official assessing the need for tenancy legislation in the district, the zamindar had adopted 'the insidious system known in Rangpur as 'hajjat jamma' wherein the rent is fixed at a high rate but 'as a favour' only a part of it is demanded at present. Even however, the present 'favoured' rate means a considerable enhancement over present

¹¹² Report of the Diwan of Bijni on the allegations made by certain tenants at pargana Habraghat and Dihi Botiamari, ASP, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹¹³ R. Friel, *Assam District Gazetteers : Goalpara, Supplement to Vol. III, Shillong*, 1914, p.5.

¹¹⁴ Note from the Chief Commissioner of Assam, ASP, Revenue A, September 1915.

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rates and this has undoubtedly given rise to general ill-feeling on the part of the jotedars. An enhancement of 100 percent is extremely heavy in comparison with most current rates in the vicinity. In the Gauripur estate also there is considerable discontent and for the same reason'.¹¹⁶

The petitions from the older tenants of the zamindari estates protesting against rent enhancements and subsequent ejectments during this period indicate that these conditions effected both the chukanidars and the jotedars. A petition from the jotedars of the Dihi Dolgoma village of the Habraghat pargana in the estate of Bijni attributed the several rent suits in the region to the migration and questioned the right of the Rani of Bijni to eject them from holdings held by them in perpetuity over a 100 years.¹¹⁷ The petitioners accused the zamindar of having 'repeatedly brought suits against the raiyats for arrears of rent as well as ejectment' and pleaded for a sanad which would 'secure their rights from any future invasion of migrants'.¹¹⁸ Another petition from Thanda Ram Das, and other jotedars of the Khuntaghat pargana objected to the new surveys being carried out after the settlement of wastelands in the region and feared a further increase in rents after already having suffered in the hands of the Tehsildar for refusing to meet his exorbitant demands.¹¹⁹

The condition of insecurity in the land holdings of the jotedars was reproduced in their tenorial relations with the chukanidars or the under tenants. Colonial surveys

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Copy of notes recorded by H. Savage, 22 April 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913.

¹¹⁷ Petition from certain raiyats of the Bijni estate complaining of certain matters in connection with the management of the estate, ASP, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Several similar petitions were given to the Diwan of Bijni during his tour of the estate the preceding year, including one signed by 500 tenants, dated 3 November 1912. (Revenue A, September 1913).

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commented on the several cases of ejection of these under tenants by the jotedars, 'mostly on account of an inability to accept the terms of resettlement at considerably enhanced rates of rent, the motive [of the jotedar] being the desire of gain which a resettlement with a new immigrant tenant at an enhanced rate of rent would bring'.¹²⁰ Petitions submitted to the colonial government by groups of chukanidars protested against the growing insecurity in land tenure and demanded 'a permanent status for tenants who, despite being the actual tillers have no protection ... and were at the mercy of the unscrupulous jotedars'.¹²¹

With most of the 'available land in the riparian tracts suitable for settlers being already taken up'¹²² by the early 1930s, there was not much room for agrarian expansion, a factor that would have increasingly restricted the mobility within the class of ordinary cultivating tenants. Indebtedness had risen by the late 1930s and officials reported that more than 80% of the population of the district was in debt to local mahajans and Marwari traders.¹²³ Immigrants appear to have formed a large percentage of this section of Goalpara's population, were frequently described as

¹¹⁹ Petition dated 20 January 1913, from Thanda Ram Das, Kali Ram Das and others of Bajitpara and Batiamari, pargana Khuntaghat, Goalpara, in Revenue A, September, 1913.

¹²⁰ A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.150.

¹²¹ 'Petition from tenants of Parbatjoar, headed by Kali Charan Brahma' in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.25; between 1913 and 1914, there were at least five more such memorials submitted from the estate of Gauripur alone stating similar demands.

¹²² *Census of India, 1931, Assam*, p.52; There was a decline in the productive capacity of the soil in areas other than the chars settlements, with a bigha of land producing 3 maunds of paddy during this period instead of the previous 5 maunds. (Evidence of D. C. Chakravarty, Dewan of Gauripur Estate, in the *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.431). The continuing burden of abwabs along with the increased rent, however, would have left the peasantry with little means to initiate improvements in agriculture.

¹²³ *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.444.

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'reckless borrowers, improvident and thriftless', and spent a considerable amount of their money on litigation.¹²⁴

The absence of sufficient statistical evidence in the form of figures of per capita income, indebtedness and land transfers among various communities in the district makes it difficult to offer definitive conclusions about the economic conditions of social groups during this period. From the preceding discussion of the process of settlement of land by the immigrants, however, one could suggest that despite this indebtedness, the 'Mymensinghians' would have also benefited from the reclamation of swamps and uncultivated tracts. In the reclaimed areas, the high fertility of the soil, the low rents and the favourable land man ratio and the cultivation of a variety of crops, including jute, together would have created conditions for their prosperity and placed them in a position which enabled them to bargain for the security of their holdings.¹²⁵

By the end of the 1920s, colonial officials were describing 'the difficulties of regulating and guiding the legitimate land hunger of a needy but industrious people without encroaching on the rights and aims of the old established tenants' as 'one of the most difficult problems' that they had to deal with.¹²⁶ Officials warned that 'unless some remedial measures were adopted, the influx of cultivators from other parts of Bengal would lead to the eviction of the chukanidars or to the enhancement almost to

¹²⁴ Evidence of Maulavi Osman Ali Sarkar, an immigrant from eastern Bengal who settled in the district of Nowgong in Assam, in *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.360. In their evidence to this committee, several moneylenders stated that their business was more with the 'Mymensinghia people than with the local people'. (Ibid., p.438)

¹²⁵ *The Report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-1930* stated that 'many of the Mymensinghia settlers are more prosperous than in other districts higher up the valley as they have been settled here for a longer time'. (p.25) The evidence in this report also frequently suggested that the immigrants cultivators from Eastern Bengal were 'materially better off' than the local tenants. 'The Mymensinghians spend much on food and live well...unlike the Assamese, who are idle'. (Evidence of D. C. Chakravarty, Dewan of Gauripur Estate, in the *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p. 434)

¹²⁶ *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year 1927-1928*, Shillong, 1915, p.3.

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starvation point of the rents payable by those men who are the actual cultivators of most of the land of the district'.¹²⁷ Some such 'remedial measures' already seem to have come into force during this period as government reports stated that 'of late years, the Government has adopted the policy of controlling the settlement of the immigrants. Certain areas are set apart where they are allowed to settle and areas reserved for expansion of cultivation among the Assamese are barred to them under penalty of ejection'.¹²⁸ Along with some evidence of an increasing sale of land to non-agriculturists,¹²⁹ we now also have suggestions to confine transfers of land holdings to local cultivators amidst fears that the 'Assamese were losing their land and would ultimately have no land for themselves'.¹³⁰ There were also several recorded instances of conflict over wasteland resources and common grazing areas in villages.¹³¹

Section IV: Law, custom and emerging collectivities

The colonial state responded to this changing social context-- to the increasing scarcity of land and its increasing value, the pressure of population and the

¹²⁶ *Resolution on the Land Revenue Administration of Assam for the year 1927-1928*, Shillong, 1915, p.3.

¹²⁷ Copy of notes recorded by H. Savage, 22 April 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913. There was a sharp increase in the number of ejection suits instituted against the under tenant by the Jotedars and the zamindars : 42 in 1911, 64 in 1912 and 80 in 1913. (A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.27).

¹²⁸ *Report of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.16.

¹²⁹ 'There are touts and speculators whose business it is to buy land and sell them again at a profit. We did our best to introduce provisions in the Rent Law by which non-agricultural speculators may be kept out.'. (Evidence of D. C. Chakravarty, Dewan of Gauripur Estate, in the *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.430)

¹³⁰ Evidence of Jagannath Bujar Baruah , in the *Evidence of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p. 478.

¹³¹ In the legislative assembly debates of the 24 March 1924, for instance, a member pointed out that 'more than 150 houses of the Mymensingh settlers at Leptamari grazing reserve in mauza Bishwanath were set on fire to by the orders of the Deputy Commissioner, Darrang'. (Assam Legislative Council Debates, 24 March 1924, V/9/1358, OIOC)

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consolidation of rural power--and to its need for steady revenue, by identifying the occupancy tenant as the actual producer and reinstating his 'original privileges'.¹³² This was part of a broader process 'whereby state intervention over landed property sought to reach ever-lower social or tenurial strata ...[it was] part of an ever extending categorisation, the attribution of "properties" defining a wider range of people and institutions'.¹³³ As with the Bengal Tenancy Act, tenancy legislation in Goalpara, too, appear to have been informed by such imperatives, by the need of the state to create 'definite categories with rights located within them, as species of property'.¹³⁴

The issues being voiced were often an extension of the debates within the official discourse in the preceding years, which had retained the interests and rights of the jotedars and the chukanidars as their common concern. Thus, a report submitted by F. C. Monahan in 1907 had argued against the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act to Goalpara on the grounds that the Act was not suited for the protection of the jotedars.¹³⁵ Other officials also opposed the Act on the grounds that 'it had failed to protect the cultivator from exactions, legitimate or illegal ... it had led to a great deal of litigation and the poorer was generally at a disadvantage against the richer litigant in the court'.¹³⁶ Even among those who supported the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act in Goalpara, the justification for colonial intervention continued to be the

¹³² Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.2. Partha Chatterjee terms this 'a rationalisation of [the colonial state's] policies into a faith in the capacity of small peasants... to evolve the most efficient organization of production', in his essay 'Agrarian Structure in pre-partition Bengal' in Ashok Sen, Partha Chatterjee and Saugata Mukherjee, *Three Studies on the Agrarian Structure in Bengal, 1850-1947*, Calcutta, 1982, p.115. For a discussion of the intellectual roots of the concept of the 'original raiyat', however, see Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, pp.195-200.

¹³³ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.xvi.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xxv.

¹³⁵ F.C. Monahan's report, No.1503, R &F, May 1907, in the Commissioner's Conference 1909, Proceedings and Connected Papers, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Revenue A, February 1913.

¹³⁶ Copy of notes recorded by P.G. Melitus, 25 May 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913.

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protection of tenants' rights. For example, in his detailed notes on the issue of tenancy legislation in Goalpara, H. Savage argued: 'How would the jotedar stand under the Tenant Act? It has been said above that they are all at present regarded as raiyats with right to occupancy...To all these and particularly to the occupancy raiyats the Tenancy Act would afford protection against undue enhancement in future. The case of the chukanidar is different. It is their hope that the Tenancy Act would at least give them the status of raiyats without the right of occupancy'.¹³⁷

The presence of immigrant cultivators who exhibited a greater degree of familiarity with colonial institutions offered further reason for the extension of the legal system into new areas of the rural social order. This aided the emergence of new social groups while allowing for a continuance of old ones. In several estates, estate officials observed that 'it had now become necessary to enumerate the principal conditions of tenancy ...on account of the influx of new raiyats from Bengal who were usually rather well conversant with the provisions of the Bengal Tenancy Act'.¹³⁸ This familiarity of the immigrant community with the workings of colonial law was evident also in the several references in official records to the 'innate litigiousness in the character of the immigrant'. Thus A. J. Laine's summing up of agrarian relations in early twentieth Goalpara listed 'the less reputable surplus population of the litigious districts of Eastern Bengal' along with 'the several powerful families, ... and a mixed peasantry, mostly illiterate, composed partly of obstinate aboriginals'.¹³⁹ Survey officials noted that this 'increasing precision in the definition of tenancy rights,

¹³⁷ Copy of notes recorded by H. Savage, 22 April 1909, Commissioner's Conference, 1909, in Revenue A, February 1913, No.6-9, File no. IIT/R, 1913.

¹³⁸ 'Report of the Gauripur Estate' in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.49.

¹³⁹ A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.3.

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accompanied by a restriction of traditional privileges of the tenants' was more pronounced in the more settled estates of Gauripur, Mechpara and Karaibari.¹⁴⁰ In the estate reports from the second decade of the twentieth century, the creation and formalisation of boundaries of various kinds within local society were attributed to the changing social context, with migrants working as a catalyst.

The expansion of the domain of colonial law to maintain both the revenue demand and the local social order evoked responses from different social groups of the district and, in turn, was shaped by them. The petitions from jotedars and chukanidars during this period were powerful articulations of the response of some sections of Goalpara's society to the colonial project of social ordering, and, as in Bengal, they provide good examples of the use by the colonised of the institutions and frameworks of the colonisers such as the courts and the bureaucracy.¹⁴¹ The pro-tenant stance of the colonial state in this period found resonance in these petitions and other forms of institutionalised protest of the various classes of tenants. The demand for a new tenancy law had surfaced intermittently in the various petitions of groups of jotedars and chukanidars from the late nineteenth century onwards, the primary cause for discontent then being the several privileges that continued to be seen by the zamindars as part of their proprietary rights. These privileges included the high rates of salami and other forms of 'customary dues', which along with abwabs, remained the largest source of variation in what the zamindar demanded from the tenants. In the more settled estates of Gauripur, Mechpara and Chapar, these dues included the *punya*

¹⁴⁰ ASP, Revenue A, June 1927, File nos. 24-28.

¹⁴¹ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.362.

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nazar (paid at the beginning of payment of rent every year), the *bijaya dasami nazar* (paid on the occasion of Durga Puja) and the *pattan nazar* or the settlement bonus.¹⁴²

By the late nineteenth century, this discontent was being also articulated in the form of demands for tenancy legislation. Reflecting on the question of change in the tenancy law in the district, P.R.T. Gourdon, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, noted that 'The demand for the revision of the tenancy law in Goalpara is not a new one. Tenancy legislation was under contemplation as far back as the year 1883. My own experience for this demand dates back from the year 1895, when I was the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara. My attention was drawn to the unsatisfactory relations between the tenant and the zamindar which existed, specially in the pargana of Mechpara. The grievances alleged then were very much the same as they were till quite recently, e.g. the grave disabilities under which the tenants laboured owing to their being four separate collecting agencies which harassed the raiyats. The complaints from tenants of this pargana have been constant ..'.¹⁴³

In the changed context of the post migration period the scattered memorials of the late nineteenth century took the shape of more coherent demands for effective occupancy rights. The second decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of several formally constituted associations of tenants and under tenants. Zamindari records of the Bijni estate mention the activities of one such association, the Habraghat Hitsadhini Sabha, which organised a collective resistance of the jotedars against increased rent in the estate.¹⁴⁴ The Jotedar's Association was another

¹⁴² 'Chapar Estate Report' in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, 1917.

¹⁴³ Revenue A, November 1917, File nos. 42-44.

¹⁴⁴ Report of the Diwan of Bijni on the allegations made by certain tenants at pargana Habraghat and Dihi Botiamari, ASP, Revenue A, September 1913.

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organisation which occupied considerable public space and put forward consistent demands for a steady extension of tenants' rights and a curtailing of the rights of the zamindars. The Association resisted the passing of the Assam Landlord and Tenant Procedure Bill, which was the state's response to the rise of competition rents which threatened the already uncertain domain of tenant-landlord relationship.

The Act which proposed to make arrears of rent recoverable as arrears of land revenue,¹⁴⁵ appeared to favour the landlords by providing them with the means to improve rent collection. The protests against this Act from other organisations, including the Goalpara Krishak Sanmilani¹⁴⁶ and the Goalpara District Association were sufficient indication of the strengthening of the jotedars as a new class of interests. The debates over this bill provided one of the early instances where the emergence of revenue law as the most significant arena of political dispute, effected the development of wider collectivities. The tenancy debate of the 1920s broadened this arena by firmly locating proprietary interests in relation to colonial law.

Law courts, therefore, were emerging as the 'new battlefields' in our period while simultaneously helping to rationalise and legitimate the colonial system.¹⁴⁷ The marked rise in the incidence of litigation and cases about landed property in the district was illustrative of the use of colonial law by various interest groups to resolve issues of local societal conflict. Between 1907 and 1912, which was also the peak period of migration from eastern Bengal, the number of rent suits in the Dhubri Courts rose from 169 in 1907 to 662 in 1912. There was a similar rise in the cases in the

¹⁴⁵ W. J. Reid, in the Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 29 March 1922, V/9/1357, OIOC.

¹⁴⁶ In a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam, the President of the Sanmilani warned that 'such an Act would surely cause grave discontent among the tenants'. (ASP, Revenue A, November 1922)

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Goalpara Courts, from 53 cases in 1907 to 677 in 1912.¹⁴⁸ Nearly 70% and 80% of the rent suits and pure ejectment suits, respectively, were successful.¹⁴⁹ In one such series of rent suits brought by jotedars of Gauripur estate between 1905 and 1915 at the Dhubri Court against some chukanidars, the Munsif argued that the findings of a local enquiry had stressed the 'regular traffic that [was] going on in ejecting old tenants and settling new ones from the immigrant community on heavy salami. Many subtenants had been ejected without reason by the occupancy tenants, when the former had originally cleared the land and held it for many generations'.¹⁵⁰

Formal associations, representing new classes of interests, and their institutionalised protests couched in the new legal language, were but one form of response of the local society to the widening of the arena of colonial law. As in several other parts of colonial India, tenancy legislation in Goalpara and its accompanying project of social categorisation had to frequently negotiate with local notions of shared tradition and custom, particularly when the latter was evoked to validate rights in land.

This was particularly evident in the Eastern Dooars in northern Goalpara where the reinvention of custom emerged as a powerful political weapon for communities resisting their reduction to the status of agrarian dependents as the forest no longer remained a strategic resource for them. The several petitions and memorials submitted from the late nineteenth century onwards indicate that the subsistence patterns of several communities, particularly the Garos and the Meches, had been irrevocably

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord: Property, Law, and the Gift under the Madras Permanent Settlement', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.28, No.2, April 1986.

¹⁴⁸ A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.152.

¹⁵⁰ Suit Dh Muns 229, October 1915, Dhubri Munsif's records. There was also an increased registration of the transfer of land holdings during this period, indicative of the ability of landlords to couch their

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transformed by the settlement and forest policies of the state. The most visible impact was that the mobility of these communities was severely circumscribed by a ban on all residence or cultivation within the forest reserves.

As in the rest of colonial India during this period, officials in Goalpara argued that significant injury was caused to valuable timber by the firing and clearing involved in shifting or jhum cultivation practised by some sections of these communities. The government therefore took steps to prohibit it altogether. These included attempts to enlist the services of the Garos in the felling of forests within the reserves by offering them 'favourable terms'. It was hoped such terms would induce the Garos to 'abandon their destructive hill *jhuming*'.¹⁵¹ These policies were accompanied by measures to establish forest villages in the Dooar region. Those in Kachugaon were set up in 1902 to provide an uninterrupted supply of labour for the neighbouring reserve of Ripu.¹⁵² Forcible evacuation of the residents of surrounding villages was frequently required in order to settle them in the protected areas.¹⁵³ The impact of the changes on the political economy of the region is evident from the fact that 'forest reserves' were already being marked out at the turn of the century to 'provide a refuge for these tribes who were being pushed out by more astute and energetic races'.¹⁵⁴

The restrictions introduced by the colonial state however did not meet with easy success. Rather, resistance to the changes seemed to have opened up new spaces

control in the new legal language. The number of sales registered in Dhubri, for instance, rose from 347 in 1907 to 957 in 1916. (A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.25)

¹⁵¹ G.S. Hart, *Note on the Sal forests*, p.29.

¹⁵² B. C. Allen, *Goalpara*, p.79.

¹⁵³ G.S. Hart, *Note on the Sal forests*, p.2.

¹⁵⁴ This was the Garo and Mech reserve with an area of 30.7 square miles and set up in the Alipur subdivision in 1895. (F.C. Monahan, *Report of the Dooars Committee*, Shillong, 1910, p.24).

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for negotiation and conflict over issues of customary rights and practices within the arena of colonial law. Official reports on the district frequently listed 'a number of agrarian movements caused by the encroachment or fancied encroachment by each estate on the lands of the neighbouring estates or on Government land, peopled mainly by aboriginals'.¹⁵⁵ Through the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth, Garo and Mech cultivators on several zamindari estates continued to confront the authorities with allegations of zamindari encroachment of their lands.¹⁵⁶ In a memorial submitted to the colonial authorities in 1904, Mech cultivators listed among their demands the formation of forest reserves and the subsequent loss of 'valuable privileges which they had previously enjoyed'. A redrawing of boundaries between Garo villages and zamindari estates and the exclusion of certain tracts from the permanently settled areas (including the entire pargana of Habraghat), were among the demands set forth in the memorial of Sonaram Sangma, who led a sustained defiance of colonial restrictions by Garo cultivators.¹⁵⁷ Several other instances of resistance from indigenous communities to loss of customary rights continued to be reported. The petitions that followed invariably contended that these communities had 'the right to collect fuel and straw, to fell Sal trees required for the construction of their

¹⁵⁵ A.J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.4.

¹⁵⁶ A memorial from Garo cultivators on the estate of Bijni complained that the 'Hindu zamindar of Bijni had for many years been encroaching on lands which properly belonged to the Garos'. (Memorial dated 8 February 1905, reprinted in a letter from the Chief Secretary of the Government of India to the Chief Secretary of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 20 March 1908, Revenue A).

¹⁵⁷ Memorial of Sonaram Sangma and others to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 13 December 1904. (Reprinted as Appendix IV in Santo Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A Case Study of Goalpara District*, Delhi, 1994).

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houses or their ploughs, to graze cattle and to cultivate in the Sal forests, and fell trees standing on their homestead land'.¹⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, cutting Sal trees from reserved forests was among the primary charges against the Meches and the Garos in the several criminal cases that were instituted during this period. 'In most of these cases', colonial officials observed, 'the Garos or the Meches do believe that they have the right to cut from the reserved forests timber which they require ... for certain purposes'.¹⁵⁹ In the *King Emperor v Guman Singh Garo*, the court noted that 'the accused pleads not guilty to the charges and alleges that he cut four posts himself...believing he had the right to cut Sal trees ...since this is their custom from time immemorial'.¹⁶⁰ In the judgments of all these cases and in the debates within official circles, custom was significant for legitimating practice, as colonial officials set about fixing the meaning of customs in the act of encoding them:

As regards the complaints of the Garos that the formation of the forest reserves deprived them of valuable privileges, the wasteland was being treated as being at the disposal of the Government and no compensation was given for such lands. It is now proposed that ... any areas which it is found not worthwhile to retain be surrendered to the villagers. Compensation representing roughly the approximate value of the land should be paid as an act of grace.¹⁶¹

Several of the judgements appeared to reflect similar concerns. In a case where six Garo cultivators were convicted by the Magistrate for cutting trees without

¹⁵⁸ These were the common concerns of most petitions from Garo and Mech cultivators from the forested Dooar area of Goalpara during this period. The above quote is from the Petition of Mangal Singh and other Garo Raiyats of the Bijni Raj, submitted to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, on 12 May 1916, Revenue A, 1929.

¹⁵⁹ Judgement in the Court of Sessions Judge of the Assam Valley Districts, 13 May 1920, Order sheet for Magistrate's Records, Dhubri Collectorate.

¹⁶⁰ *King Emperor v Guman Singh Garo*, Case no.77, Section 411, I.P.C., Order sheet for Magistrate's Records, Dhubri Collectorate.

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permission in the reserved forests of the Bijni Raj, the conviction was later overturned by the Sessions judge who ruled that, 'the gradual regulation of these privileges has of course been objected to by the tenants as infringement of immemorial rights. It may be that some people have actually come to believe that they possess the right. The mere fact that the Raja has forbidden them to cut the trees is sufficient to put them in the wrong, but ancient customs and privileges cannot be set aside in this summary manner. In my opinion, the conviction is wrong'.¹⁶² The customs of the community and the terms of their validity, therefore, were to be decided by courts and imperial officials, as colonial law set about the task of imposing order into the 'chaotic world of traditional practices' in the region.

This need to seek or protect 'new rights' by generating and generalising 'old claims' was visible in the permanently settled southern areas of the district as well. Official reports of the conditions of tenancy legislation pointed out that almost all the rights of the jotedars that were 'denied in theory' in the zamindari estates, continued to prevail through customary usage.¹⁶³ These included the right to a resettlement on the expiry of the term of the lease and the right to inherit, sell, transfer or mortgage the land. For instance, in the estates of Parbatjoar and Bijni, which had vast stretches of uncultivated land and a less complex tenurial system, the heritability of jotedar's holdings were only 'passively recognised although their position remained uncertain'.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Correspondence between the Chief Secretary of the Government of India and the Chief Secretary of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 20 March 1908, Revenue A.

¹⁶² Judgement in the Court of Sessions Judge of the Assam Valley Districts, 13 May 1920, Order sheet for Magistrate's Records, Dhubri Collectorate.

¹⁶³ *Report of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.27.

¹⁶⁴ 'The Gauripur Estate Report', in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.55.

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On the other hand, in most estates, despite the recognition of the occupancy right of the tenant by the Act VIII of 1869 if he had been in occupation of the land for twelve years, colonial officials pointed out that 'this right remained very vague indeed, as its precise incidents were not determined under the existing law'.¹⁶⁵ The estate reports of Gauripur, Mechpara and Karaibari, on the other hand, clearly denied all such rights to the jotedars.¹⁶⁶ The 'exact nature' of occupancy rights of the jotedars remained a central concern of the civil litigation in the early twentieth century. In an ejectment suit brought to the Calcutta High Court, for instance, the judge pointed out that 'the Act VIII of 1869 also failed to distinguish between raiyats and under raiyats'.¹⁶⁷

The rights claimed by the jotedars, including the right to sublet, inherit and transfer the jote, therefore, had to be validated through custom and collective memory long after they had been identified and legitimated by colonial law in other parts of the country. In the absence of any protective legislation, petitions from jotedars appealing against increasing rent and ejectment described their rights in the land as timeless and immemorial, 'held in perpetuity over hundreds of years'.¹⁶⁸ Memory was summoned to give the necessary validity to their assertion of the 'liberty to settle or cultivate any part of the land that they pleased without the permission of the landlord', the relationship with whom was based on long prevailing customary rules.¹⁶⁹ Shared customs and traditions of the local agrarian community, also institutionalized in

¹⁶⁵ *Report of the Assam Banking Enquiry*, p.27.

¹⁶⁶ The Gauripur Estate Report defined a jotedar as a tenant who was 'bound by contract, with no occupancy rights, and liable to enhancement of rent after the expiry of his temporary lease'. ('The Gauripur Estate Report', p.48).

¹⁶⁷ Appeal No. 316 of 1918, in *The All India Reporter*, Calcutta, 1918, p.76.

¹⁶⁸ 'Petitions from certain raiyats of the Bijni estate', ASP, Revenue A, September 1913.

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relationships like the dewaniya-chengra system possibly played as significant a role in determining the relationships of various groups to the land as did the recognition of rights by colonial law in Goalpara during this period.

The rights of the chukanidars were characterised by a similar ambiguity, with their conditions of tenancy being frequently based on 'mere verbal settlements of the vaguest character'.¹⁷⁰ Colonial records found the origin of the tenancies of this class of tenants, who were drawn predominantly from the indigenous communities of Goalpara, difficult to define. In 'many cases their ancestors were probably cultivating the land long before the zamindars spread their authority and considerable numbers probably came from time to time as the original squatters'.¹⁷¹ This ambiguity, not unsurprisingly, was the central concern of the several petitions submitted by this class of tenants through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1913, for example, the chukanidars of several zamindari estates claimed ancient occupancy rights in the land but failed to establish them.¹⁷²

When the Goalpara Tenancy Act was finally passed in 1929, it enhanced the security and certainty for the majority of 'settled' raiyats, who had hitherto enjoyed continuity of residence and land holding de facto. The Act recognised the rights of occupancy of the tenant, hitherto held by custom, as well as the rights of a settled under-raiyat to land held continuously for 12 years.¹⁷³ The new rent law sought to restore the proprietary rights of the cultivator, and, to protect groups that were already

¹⁶⁹ 'Memorial of the tenants of Goalpara', submitted to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 16 September 1919, ASP, Revenue A, December 1919.

¹⁷⁰ Letter to the Chief Commissioner of Assam from F.J. Monahan, ASP, General Department, Revenue A, June 1905, File nos. 176-178.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.9.

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entrenched in the agrarian sector as owners or tenants. It also provided for 'a new classification of tenures and tenancies, based on local conditions', which divided Goalpara's society into categories of proprietor, tenant and under tenant.¹⁷⁴ This ordering of the agrarian classes through tenancy legislation, to quote Peter Robb, was an aspect of 'a wholesale definition of India, its classes and its peoples'¹⁷⁵, 'it opened new areas of life into scrutiny and regulation; it attempted to objectify and standardise them'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ A. J. Laine, 'Skeleton framework of Proposed New Rent Law' in A. J. Laine, *Land Tenure System*, p.171.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.26.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p.xxv.

Chapter Four

Imagining a Region: Language and the Reinvention of a Local Elite

By the early twentieth century, the colonial state had been strengthened by a centralised and integrated structure and its laws identified sections of colonial society which could help the state in its search for legitimacy. The emergence of an educated middle class during this period in the rest of Assam, and also in Goalpara, who spoke in a rational and liberal voice, offered better potential for political investment than the traditional powers, for the colonial state. This chapter looks at the concerns of this marginalised traditional elite and explores their reinvention of roles within the newly emerging and expanding public sphere. In Goalpara such reinventions by the local zamindars while attempting to generate a continuing esteem for their social position in the imagination of the local population, centred around producing a political consciousness that was located in a contest over the use of language.

For Goalpara's zamindars, the broadening terms of intervention of the colonial state were expressed most powerfully in the formulation and the subsequent enactment of the Goalpara Tenancy Act. The debates around this Act therefore provide the broad context for studying these processes. The Act, passed in 1929, created new categories and boundaries in rural Goalpara and identified the concept of property as the central and defining principle for such classifications.¹ Its emphasis on the occupancy rights

¹ This has been discussed in some detail in the previous chapter, in the section, 'Law, Custom and Collectivities'.

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of the proprietary peasant as against the interests and privileges of the zamindari class was indicative of the determination of the colonial state to 'intervene and restore the position of the resident cultivators, while conceding that the rights of the zamindars should not be confiscated'.² The absence of sufficient agricultural improvement was the determining factor behind this perception of the state, and zamindars were clearly being seen as having failed to improve production and generate rural prosperity. The period after the migration of cultivators from east Bengal had been followed by rapid changes in the economy and corresponding shifts in the structures of rural power, with the jotedars benefiting from the pro-tenant position of the state and emerging as a powerful collective.³

In most parts of Goalpara, the authority of the zamindars now appeared nonetheless to be created and sustained almost exclusively by the colonial state. With the exception of the estate of Gauripur, the management of all the other estates in the district by the early decades of the twentieth century was under the control of the Court of Wards, a mechanism which protected the zamindars from their visibly declining financial position. As in zamindari estates in the rest of colonial India, many estates requested government takeover in order to avert ruin. Some landholders even resorted to the legal manoeuvre of transferring their financially troubled lands to minors so as to receive the benefits of official management. Conflict among its shareholders deepened the managerial crisis in Mechpara and the estate was brought under the Court of Wards in 1917 while Chapar was under its intermittent

² Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights and Future Comfort, Bihar, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and British Rule in India*, Richmond, 1997, p.198.

³ See Chapter 3, Section II and III.

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administration from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Succession disputes in several of the estates were rapidly dissipating the zamindar's financial resources.

Legal and financial conflict between rival claimants was particularly rife in the Bijni estate, where tenants mourned the loss of 'efficient administration' and the 'ruin due to the protracted and costly litigation' inflicted on them as a result of the succession suits filed by Udai Narayan against the 'rightful heir' Bhairabendra Narayan Deb.⁴ Introducing the Bijni Succession Act in the Legislative Council in March 1931, A. J. Laine cited the rivalry among the Ranis after the death of Raja Kumud Narain, who had died without heirs, and the several suits in the court, as creating a condition where 'the only means of saving the estate from this harassing litigation is to legislate, so that everyone may know that the succession of this Raj is not a lottery in which anyone who buys a ticket can hope to draw a prize'.⁵

Laine also proposed imposing a succession fee whenever a succession occurred: 'The effect of the legislation ... would save the Raj a considerable amount of money in the way of litigation. It is therefore not unreasonable that whenever a succession occurs, and when it becomes necessary for his Excellency the Governor either to confirm a nomination or nominate in case no nomination has been made, the Bijni Raja should pay to the Government some fee'.⁶ Clearly, financial benefits were only one of the many important gains of government management of the estates, for the total net revenue paid by the estates was calculated at the extremely nominal rate

⁴ Petition from Joy Ram Pathak and other Lakherajdars, Maurashidars, Jotedars and other tenants of the Bijni Raj to the Governor of the Province, 12 June 1921, Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (henceforth ALCP), 13 September 1922, V/9/1356, OIOC. For details of the succession disputes, see Santo Barman, *Zamindari System in Assam during British Rule: A Case Study of Goalpara District*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 22-24.

⁵ A. J. Laine, ALCP 17 and 18 March 1931, V/9/1371, OIOC.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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of about 1 rupee per square mile in 1929.⁷ Zamindars agreed that the revenue paid by the permanently settled area of the district was 'almost negligible...a few thousand rupees only. It was calculated on the basis of tributes paid by the ancestors of the zamindars...in the shape of a few elephants or maunds of cotton. That was commuted to money payment and that was why the revenue was so small'.⁸

The larger objective of the colonial state appears therefore to have been the gradual replacement of traditional patrimonial relationships with a more direct system of management in the estates under Court of Wards. The attempts at a bureaucratisation of the estate management were also evident in the introduction of Bengali personnel into the estates. To quote Peter Robb in the context of Bihar, 'where landholding rights and practices had reflected a multiplicity of relations... now the colonial government tried to reduce landholding to simple, definite and uniform categories that expressed relationships in property alone rather than any broader, personal, ritual or moral connections'.⁹

Despite the changes effected, however, the Court of Wards appears to have failed to act as a protective shield for cultivators' rights in Goalpara. There were several allegations of oppression by the newly appointed personnel. Responding to several complaints from the largest zamindari estate, Bijni, an order from the Deputy Commissioner in 1903 had warned one such officer, Amrita Das, 'the ring leader, and his friends, not to raise any subscription from the raiyat nor to hold mels and stir up

⁷ Oral evidence of S. K. Chakravarty, representative of the Goalpara Zamindar's Association, before the Indian Statutory Commission, in *Indian Statutory Commission Vol. 15: Oral Evidence, Assam, 1929.*)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.xxiv.

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the raiyats against the Rani'.¹⁰ The complaints extended into the later decades of the century as well. A petition from jotedars of the Habraghat pargana in the estate of Bijni attributed the 'lawlessness that prevailed in Bijni' to 'greedy Bengali officers [who were] violating the law and sucking as it were, the blood of the tenants'.¹¹ Its signatories alleged that while the 'Rani confines herself to the inner apartments', 'the astute and the designing Bengali officers of the State practise many devices, insert unintelligible words in the Jama-wasil book and bring false suits against the defaulters'.¹² Similarly, the anger in the petitions of the tenants of Bajitpara in the Khuntaghat pargana was directed against Jagendra Nath Bhattacharya, 'the employee in charge of the cash book' who was 'tyrannical', 'had a band of 6 to 7 club men for collecting rents' and used sufficient violence so as to cause the death of a cultivator, Amrita Kanta. Despite obviously lacking local networks of power, however, Bhattacharya appears to have had the support of the zamindar and the state and was acquitted in the suit that was brought against him.¹³

Evidence from the several petitions from the chukanidars, lakhirajdars and jotedars of Bijni, Mechpara and other estates also indicate that there was a continued reluctance on the part of the landlords and the estate management to recognise the rights of the cultivators, particularly their rights to occupancy tenures, and this was reflected in the several instances of eviction of tenants and forced desertions that were discussed in the previous chapter. Several of these petitions were the subjects of

¹⁰ Substance of verbal order passed by A. H. Cuming, Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara District, after a full enquiry, *re* the various complaints made and petitions filed by the raiyats of the Bijni Raj Estate, Bilasipara, 14 December 1903, ASF, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹¹ Petition from Maheswar Nath and others of the Bijni Estate to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 3 December 1912, ASF, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹² *Ibid.*

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frequent concern in the debates in the Legislative Council in this period. Referring to the 'mismanagement' of the zamindari estate of Mechpara in the Council in July 1916, for instance, a member cited articles on the 'oppression of the raiyats' in the *Times of Assam* of 26 August 1916 and the *Eastern Chronicle* of 5 September 1916.¹⁴ Mismanagement and disputes in the zamindaris and managerial indifference to the conditions of cultivators were freely adduced during debates on pro-landlord bills like the Assam Landlord and Tenant Procedure Bill. Thus while the pro Bill section could argue that 'the estates [were] all in arrears and the tenants were all making conspiracies to stop the rents', the anti-landlord lobby insisted that 'there were no tenants who did not realise the responsibility of paying rent...refusal to pay rent originates from unlawful demands at enhanced rates'.¹⁵ Representations from the Goalpara branch of the Krishak Sanmilani offered similar arguments of continuous repression of cultivators by managers colluding with zamindars.¹⁶

Thus, despite the obvious marginalisation of the region's traditional elite, the functioning of the Court of Wards also indicated that earlier forms of seeking legitimation for the colonial state had not entirely disappeared. The state had appropriated the most significant political and economic functions from this elite, leaving them often only with ceremonial powers. But it was still dependent on rent and intervening in major ways to restructure the economy. Moreover it remained as concerned about public order as it was about revenue, and both of these were still seen

¹³ Petition from Kali Ram Das and others of Bajitpara, Batiamari, 20 January 1913, ASF, Revenue A, September 1913.

¹⁴ Phanidhar Chaliha, ALCP, 23 October 1916, V/9/1350, OIOC.

¹⁵ Rai Bahadur Nalini Kanta Rai, ALCP, 29 March 1922, V/9/1355; Babu Biraj Mohan Dutta, ALCP, 29 March 1922, V/9/1355, OIOC.

¹⁶ Letter from Dharma Narayan Ghosh, President, District Krishak Sanmilani, Goalpara, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, 9 April 1922, ASF, Revenue A, November 1922.

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as dependent on the continuation of the local elite. Institutions like the Court of Wards satisfied this need to protect the native aristocracy. It has been argued that such combinations could be explained by examining 'the peculiar and often paradoxical position of the law in the history of colonialism' which consisted of 'providing the institutional context for the partial continuance---though of course changed---continuance of aspects of the "old regime"'.¹⁷ It is against this background of a combination of continuity and change in Goalpara's rural social structure that we explore the emergence of a new kind of public sphere in the region, and the implications this development had for the imagining of a Goalparia identity.

Section I: 'A language of power'

The formation of this public space in twentieth century Assam could be traced, as in the rest of colonial India, to a fundamental element in the colonial conceptualisation of Indian society, that of the colonised as consisting of various collectivities with determinate and impermeable boundaries. As discussed in the introduction, this grid, grounded in the modern European rationalist discourse, provided the conceptual basis for colonial institutions and made the world of the colonised intelligible to its rulers. This also helps to explain the transition in the colonial period from the notion of languages as unbounded entities to a perception of them as demarcated and exclusive. Sudipta Kaviraj explains this process as a change from a 'fuzzy' pre-colonial social world, characterised by fuzzy conceptions of time and space, where social and political boundaries tended to 'shade off, merge, graduate',

¹⁷ Nicholas Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord: Property, Law and the Gift under the Madras

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to a more bounded and enumerated modern society under colonial rule.¹⁸ Language, Kaviraj suggests, is a good illustration of this principle of organisation of difference since dialects tended to change slowly and imperceptibly over distances, making linguistic differences in traditional societies 'shade off the way distinctly different colours are arranged in a spectrum'.¹⁹

Colonialism, it has been argued, introduced processes through education and print which altered this organisation of linguistic differences and created bounded vernacular languages.²⁰ The emergence of Assamese as the vernacular of the province of Assam followed a predictable trajectory. Printing presses were initially set up as an adjunct of Christian proselytization in the Sibsagar district of Upper Assam²¹ but the publication of the first bibles and other religious tracts in Assamese were soon followed by several elementary texts, a dictionary and a grammar,²² indicating a quick appropriation and extension of print culture in the province. The philological

Permanent Settlement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.28, No.2, April 1986, p.333.

¹⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Writing, Speaking, Being: language and the historical formation of identities in India' in *Identity in History: South and South East Asia*, German Historical Congress, University of Heidelberg, 1990, p.40. This theme also runs through Peter Robb's 'The Colonial State and the Construction of Indian identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880's', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No. 2, 1997 and his 'Ideas in agrarian society: Some Observations on the British and nineteenth century Bihar', in David Arnold and Peter Robb (eds.), *Institutions and Ideologies, Essays in South Asian History*, Richmond, 1993.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Recent works which explore the construction of vernaculars in colonial India include Sudipta Kaviraj's, 'The Imaginary Institution of India' in Partha Chatterjee and David Arnold (eds.), *Subaltern Studies, Vol. VII*, Delhi, 1993; Sumit Sarkar's, 'The City Imagined: Calcutta in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' in his *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1998; Richard Burghart, 'A Quarrel in the Language Family: Agency and Representations of Speech in Mithila', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1993.

²¹ 'Upper Assam' was one of the administrative divisions created by the colonial government after the occupation of the region in 1826. The division was restored to the Ahom ruler, Purandar Singha, but was brought back under colonial rule in 1838. 'Lower Assam' was another administrative division and had its head quarters at Guwahati. For more details, see S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Guwahati, 1949, pp.553-570.

²² Tilottoma Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam*, Guwahati, 1987, p.67. The Baptist missionaries of Sibsagar continued to be among the early pioneers of printing in the language and published the first Assamese periodical, the *Orunodoi*, from the Sibsagar Mission Press in 1846. The first Assamese bible was printed at the Serampur Missionary Press in Bengal.

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enterprise of the state helped 'discover' the roots and standard structures of the Assamese language. A resolution passed in 1873 introduced Assamese as the official vernacular and stated that 'the facts and memorials of the past few years have shown that the Assamese language is still the vernacular of the people. No amount of argument about derivative affinity can get over the fact clearly testified to, and nowhere really contradicted, that the people of Assam do not understand Bengali'.²³ This was preceded by a period of agitation which saw the formation of the Assamese Literary Society in 1872 and the Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha in 1888, both in Calcutta;²⁴ they helped institutionalise the language. The project of a colonial education in Assamese gave a new territorial fixation to the imagined vernacular linguistic community.

The spread of printing was accompanied by a growth in vernacular prose, indicating that the emerging intelligentsia, as elsewhere in colonial India, consciously emulated and appropriated the standardised Assamese and chose it as their primary media for imaginative expression.²⁵ Located between the language of 'high' culture and the several dialects spoken in the Brahmaputra Valley, vernacular Assamese print

²³ Resolution by the Government of Bengal, 19 April 1873, File no. 171 G 1874, Assam Secretariat Files (henceforth ASF). 'The only real difficulty in the way of recognising Assamese as the vernacular of the province', continued the Resolution, 'was the paucity of high school books in the language'.

²⁴ For details of the movement to promote the use of the language in public life and the debates in the public arena over the status of Assamese, see Tilottoma Misra, *Literature and Society*, pp144-176. The colonial government attributed its preference for Bengali as the official language, over Assamese, in the first half of the nineteenth century, to an absence of a substantial printed literature in the latter. Notions of the civilisational superiority of Bengali over Assamese were frequently used to explain this preference. See Pragati Mohapatra, 'The Making of a Cultural Identity: Language, Literature and Gender in Orissa in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', Unpublished Ph .D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1997, Chapter 2, p.39, for a similar discourse in colonial Orissa.

²⁵ In an essay published in the journal he edited, *Banhi*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, lists some of the Assamese texts from the nineteenth century. The list included Jaduram Barua's *Assamese Dictionary* (1831), Mrs. Wood's *Vocabulary in English and Assamese* (1894), Nathan Brown's *The Assamese English Dictionary* (1867), Hemchandra Barua's *Hemkosh* (1900) and *Kaniyar Kirtan* (1861) and G. Barua's *Asam Buranji* (1875). (L.Bezbaroa, 'Asamor Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha' ('A Bangla Sahitya Sabha in Assam's Gauripur'), *Banhi*, Vol.10, August 1910, p. 314.

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emerged as the most potent symbol for forging nationalist identities in the region. In T. Nairu's visually evocative phrase, 'The new middle class intelligentsia had to invite the masses into history and the invitation card had to be written in a language they understood'.²⁶

Early twentieth century linguistic nationalism in the region demanded that the relationship between the Assamese language and local history be constructed as a continuous process. Nationalist history writing was central to this project of representing the Assamese nation as an unruptured continuity.²⁷ Expanding on this idea of Assam as an unaltered historical realm, linguistic nationalists now proceeded to give this new vernacular a 'suitable ancestry'. Some of the earliest references to the language, it was claimed, were to be found in the travel writings of Hieun Tsang who visited the region in the seventh century A.D and described Assamese as 'a separate and distinct language, similar to the those of Madhya Bharat'.²⁸ Lakshminath Bezbaroa²⁹ dated the earliest books in the language to 1000 A.D. while cautioning the reading public that 'out that there were still many old puthis, heirlooms in families treasured with care but decaying and rapidly becoming illegible awaiting deciphering and publication'.³⁰

Like several other writers in Assamese, Bezbaroa declared that the history of Assamese literature extended continuously back to the sixteenth century when it was

²⁶ T. Nairu, *The Breakup of Britain*, London 1977, p.340, in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991, p.80.

²⁷ See Chapter 5.

²⁸ L.Bezbaroa, 'Puroni Asamor Jilingoni Eti' ('A Glimpse of the Ancient History of Assam'), *Banhi*, Vol.6, April 1910, p.172.

²⁹ Lakshminath Bezbaroa was one of the most prominent writers in Assamese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

³⁰ L.Bezbaroa, 'Asamor Gauṛipurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha' (A Bangla Sahitya Sabha in Assam's Gauripur'), *Banhi*, Vol.9, July 1910, p. 286.

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inalienably linked to the growth of the Vaishanava religious tradition in the region under Sankardev. Bezbaroa saw this period of literary activity in Assam as one which was 'synchronous with a similar period in Bengal...[for] in both countries the religious effects were identical. Sankardev however had of necessity to compromise with the instincts of his followers and so arose the Mahapurushis sect whose sacred seat is Barpeta [bordering Goalpara]'.³¹ 'In both Vaishnavite sects', he pointed out, 'we find that the literature takes the same form---the translation of sacred books and the writing of hymns'.³²

There was also a representation of Assamese as a language of popular communication as against Sanskrit, indicating parallels with the teachings of the reformed Vaishnava religion as against classical Hinduism, in writings which claimed that 'Sankardev had used Assamese instead of Sanskrit for spreading his message among the people [leading to] the composition of texts, songs, recitation of the Bhagavad and the Mahabharat'.³³ The linking of the growth of Assamese literature to the religious developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries conferred upon the language a historical continuity as well as a certain dignity.

Following from this, it becomes obvious that redrawing of historical frontiers was a necessary requisite of the construction of a political community around the notion of a collective linguistic identity. Several of what had been claimed as ancient

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p.285.

³³ Rajanikanta Bordoloi, *Presidential Address of the Eight Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha*, Nowgong, 1925, p.21. These were recurrent themes in several of the addresses to the Assam Sahitya Sabha in the early decades of the twentieth century. See for instance Benudhar Rajkhowa's address to the Dhubri session of the Sabha in 1927 where he quoted from the Report on the Progress of Historical Research in India to argue that one of the earliest texts in Assamese dated to 1271 A.D. (Benudhar Rajkhowa, 'Presidential Address of the Ninth Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', Dhubri, 1926, in

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Assamese texts, including some of Sankardev's early compositions, were traced to the court of the Naranarayan, the Koch ruler who ruled over a kingdom that in the sixteenth century straddled the colonial districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and the kingdom of Cooch Behar. The boundaries of this kingdom were believed to have roughly coincided with those of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa.³⁴ This region was now identified as the depository of ancient Assamese language and literature. 'The Assamese will always hold Cooch Behar in high regard. It is, after all, the place of origin of our language. Our earliest texts were composed there', stated Benudhar Rajkhowa in his address to the Assam Sahitya Sahitya Sabha.³⁵ Several of the editorials in the Assamese newspapers and periodicals of the period expressed similar views: 'However different the present language of Cooch Bihar may be, we cannot forget that this was the region where Assamese originated', suggested the editorial in a leading periodical, *Awahan*.³⁶ Others credited Naranarayan with the patronage of Sankardev and of the Assamese language and with having 'arranged for the translation of several Sanskrit texts to the *desiya bhasa* [the language of the country]'.³⁷

The shifting of historical boundaries meant that most of northern Bengal and parts of eastern Bengal could now be appropriated within the new historical past of the Assamese language. Assamese nationalists argued that '[e]ven today in regions like Rangpur, Dinajpur and Cooch Behar, the language spoken is clearly closer to Assamese. Today Bengali claims this language to be identical with itself [but] modern

Atul Chandra Hazarika and Jatindranath Goswami, (eds.), *Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanavali*, Jorhat 1961, p.194)

³⁴ See Chapter 5, Section II for a discussion of the appropriation of the history of the Koch kingdom within the narrative of Assamese nationalist history.

³⁵ Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Presidential Address*, p.211.

³⁶ Editorial, *Awahan*, Vol.11, 1931.

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Bengali has no right over it. With the passage of time, the language of Assam's frontier areas was appropriated by Bengali'.³⁸ Reflecting a strand within Assamese nationalist thought during this period which argued for an extension of Assam's contemporary political boundaries to create a 'Greater Assam', by including the Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Cooch Behar, Gyananath Bora suggested that 'as a part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrup, Jalpaiguri is of Kamrup and its language is Kamrupia, that is Assamese. Rajbanshi, the language of this area, has transformed over time into Assamese...although our Kamrup does not exist anymore, its culture and language live on in these districts of north Bengal'.³⁹ The idea of a 'Greater Assam' captured the imagination of nationalist historians and Assamese scholars alike who, through the early decades of the century, continued to envisage an administrative appropriation of parts of Bengal. Assamese nationalists claimed that 'the language of these areas is not Bengali but Assamese... the ties of language make Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri our own'.⁴⁰

The appropriation of the history and language of Goalpara was a logical extension of the process of subsuming of the old past of the region into the new past created by early twentieth century Assamese nationalism. In the imagined language map of the Assamese nationalist intelligentsia, the 'centre' or Upper Assam spoke

³⁷ S.K. Bhuyan, 'Address to the History Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', Dhubri, 1926, in Hazarika Goswami, (eds.), *Bhasanavali*, p.38.

³⁸ L.Bezbaroa, 'Puroni Asamor Jilingoni Eti', p.174.

³⁹ Jnananath Bora, 'Kamrup aru Bharatvarsha', ('Kamrup and Bharatvarsha') *Awahan*, Vol.3 1932, p.258; 'We need to find out the opinion of the people of these districts towards the idea of a 'Greater Assam' suggested S. K. Bhuyan and lamented that 'today, even 200 years later, the hearts of the Assamese people echo this one thought: my indifference made me lose the frontiers of my kingdom to the enemies. How do I transform my dream of a Greater Assam into reality?' (S.K.Bhuyan, 'Bor Asam aru Buranjir Bani', (A Larger Assam and the message of History) *Awahan*, 1931, p. 384.

⁴⁰ Bishnu Prasad Rabha, 'Brihattar Asomor Kolpona' ('Imagining a Greater Assam'), *Awahan*, Vol.11, 1931, p.1314.

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chaste Assamese while the speech of Goalpara, at the 'periphery', was represented as a pale imitation of the language of 'Assam proper'. The movement from the centre to the periphery appeared to suggest, therefore, a different value along with a difference in form. Thus it was accepted that 'Goalpara's Assamese language is mixed with Bengali to a certain extent, a phenomenon common to languages in frontier and marginal areas... where certain sections of the population do not even know whether their mother tongue was Assamese or Bengali'.⁴¹ Like Goalpara, Cooch Behar was another *bhati* area⁴², the language of which had been similarly influenced and appropriated by the neighbouring Bengali language.⁴³ The linguistic situation in these areas was explained by the historical occupation of the region by the Bengalis.⁴⁴ 'In reality', however, it was argued, 'it is difficult to deny that the language of Goalpara is Assamese, although a little corrupt and twisted'.⁴⁵

Inherent to the standardisation of a vernacular was the idea of an authentic and pure language and the recognition of a hierarchical relationship between what was recognised as standard language and a set of dialects. This idea explained Bezbaroa's assertion that 'under the availability of suitable conditions, the local dialect of a particular place might become strong enough to establish its dominance over other contemporary dialects...transforming a dialect into a language'.⁴⁶ The privileging of

⁴¹ L. Bezbaroa, 'Asamor Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha', *Banhi*, Vol.11, September 1910, p.350.

⁴² The term here broadly refers to the colonial districts of Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, *Banhi*, Vol.12, October 1910, p.367.

⁴⁴ Bezbaroa defended his analysis of Goalpara's language by arguing that 'Goalpara had been under the rule of the Nawabs...and Bengalis from professional classes have settled here as well. All of this has contributed to the strong influence of Bengali on Goalpara's language.' (*Ibid.*)

⁴⁵ L. Bezbaroa, 'Asamor Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha', *Banhi*, Vol.11, September 1910, p.350.

⁴⁶ L. Bezbaroa, 'Asomiya Bhasa Samparke Aru Keitaman Kotha' ('A few more words about the Assamese language'), *Banhi*, Vol. 2, January 1910, p. 44. In his review of *Beula*, a book by Taranath Chakravarty, a scholar from lower Assam, Bezbaroa observed that 'it was difficult to recognise the language of certain sections of the book as Assamese'. (*Banhi*, Vol. 8, No. 8, 1912).

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the dialect of Sibsagar 'which was closer to print language and dominated its final form'⁴⁷ was defended as 'the adoption of the language of the historic capital city of the Ahom kings...it was an established fact that the language of the capital becomes the language of the entire kingdom'.⁴⁸ Implicit in the process of standardisation was the also the concept of an infinite refinement of literary styles and a suggestion of increasing social difference: 'the Assamese language [was] not the language of either Upper or Bhati Assam. [It was the language] in which Sankar and Madhav have composed their texts, the language in which the upper classes speak'.⁴⁹

Lodged in the democratising aspects of print were therefore inequalities of a different kind, for standardisation clearly differentiated dialects from a 'high' language. As Bezbaroa put it, 'The people of bhati are welcome to speak their dialects at home. It is an expression of their love for their birthplace. But Assamese is the public property of the entire Assamese community and its best to keep differences aside'.⁵⁰ Like other collective identities, the project of Assamese linguistic nationalism too tended to homogenize differences conceived as being internal to the solidarity that was being forged: 'Just as the lesser freedoms have to be ignored in the interests of a greater freedom, so also the differences with the lesser languages have to be abandoned in the interest of the national language. It is like a vast ocean---the different dialects can preserve their separate identities only as long as they do not fall into this ocean'.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.44.

⁴⁸ Bezbaroa, 'Asomiya Bhasa Samparke', p.45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁵⁰ Bezbaroa, 'Asomiya Bhasa Samparke', p.43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; There was resistance however to the proposition of an appropriation of Assamese by a national language of the country: 'While it is necessary for Bharat to have a lingua franca, I see no reason why, in the shade of this lingua franca, a hundred languages cannot flourish...'.(p.49, *Ibid.*)

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There were protests through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century against what was clearly perceived as a deliberate choice of the language of Upper Assam to be the criterion of the modern Assamese identity. A petition signed by the 'people of Lower Assam' in May 1872 questioned 'the designation of the language of Upper Assam as the Assamese language... a dialect spoken only by a small portion of the population of Assam, [and] altogether unimportant and meagre and its capabilities and chances to make itself the language of the entire district ... extremely limited'.⁵² Equating the levels of comprehension of the 'Upper Assam patois' with that of Bengali for the people of Lower Assam, the petitioners focussed on the richness of the language and literature of the region. They argued that 'though presumptuously stigmatized by the Upper Assam people as provincial (dhekeri) the language of Lower Assam on the contrary does manifest a remarkable and marked superiority in this respect over its rival as the large majority of written works and all the most approved publications together with the sacred and religious writings of the people of Assam are found to have been composed in it'.⁵³ The petition dismissed the publications from the Baptist Missionary press at Sibsagar as 'a highly objectionable dictionary and one or two flimsy grammatical primers'.⁵⁴

In the beginning of the twentieth century, resistance to standardisation was primarily articulated within the pages of the several periodicals and newspapers that reflected the growing print culture in the province. Of these, Taranath Chakravarty and Pratap Chandra Goswami's *Assam Bandhav* was particularly significant for its

⁵² Letter from the people of Lower Assam, signed by 1,226 persons, to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Fort William (enclosed in the letter from the Officiating Inspector of Schools, Assam Circle, to Colonel Hopkinson, Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, 30 January 1873), Assam Commissioner's File no. 471.

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propounding of the cause of the Kamrupia language.⁵⁵ In his memoirs, Goswami traces the idea of publishing the *Assam Bandhav* to an increasing disapproval among sections of scholars from lower Assam of the standardised form and style of Assamese prose, which was marked by an absence of Kamrupia words.⁵⁶ Founded 'to create an understanding between the language of Upper Assam and that of Kamrup', the periodical engaged in a series of debates with the contributors of *Banhi* on issues of standardisation.⁵⁷ The tenth volume of the *Assam Bandhav* carried a critique of contemporary Assamese grammars.⁵⁸ *Banhi* itself published several essays which questioned the emergence of this new language of power. In its emphasis on the need for an increased publication of books in the Kamrupia language, Bholanath Kakati's essay, for instance, was a conscious effort at encouraging the literature of lower Assam.⁵⁹

Section II: 'A dialect of their own'

The writings from Goalpara were located within a similar framework of resistance to the emergence of Assamese as the language of power. They were located within, and addressed themselves to, the vernacular public space that was a product of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The *Assam Bandhav* was published from Calcutta and later from Dibrugarh, from 1908 onwards.

⁵⁶ Pratap Chandra Goswami, *Jibon Smriti aru Kamrupia Samaj, (My Life and Kamrupi Society)*, Guwahati, 1971, p. 115. Apart from Taranath Chakravarty and Pratap Chandra Goswami, protagonists of Kamrupia language and literature during this period included Lakhikanta Misra and Sarat Chandra Goswami. (Ibid., p.119)

⁵⁷ Ibid.p.119. The closing down of the periodical was similarly attributed to the fact that 'literature now had an equal number of words from lower Assam and Upper Assam and there was an end of differences between the two'. (Ibid., p.120)

⁵⁸ Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam, 1853-1921*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 171.

⁵⁹ Bholanath Kakati, 'Asomiya Sujug' ('An Assamese Opportunity'), *Banhi*, Vol.1, November 1910. Similarly, Harinarayan Datta's essay in *Banhi*, Vol. 4, 1913 recorded public resentment against the imposition of the dialect of Upper Assam on the rest of the province.

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the new forms of sociability created by printing and the periodical-cum-newspaper writing that it made possible. As in history writing, we have a motley collection of petitions, several articles in newspapers and periodicals, and addresses to public meetings. Most of these were representative of the views of the traditional upper classes or of the new urban classes, best expressed in the newspaper exchanges and the noisy legislative council debates of the 1920s and 1930s. There are no records of the conversations that zamindars had with their tenants in their visits to the villages they owned. Primary source material on popular perceptions, therefore, frequently remains limited to the petitions written by the same elite in both English and Assamese or Bengali, often to contest other such petitions which made sharply conflicting linguistic claims. Newspaper reports also, claiming to report collective activities, only tangentially reflected the concerns of the non-literate sections of society. However, the peculiar position of Goalpara's official vernacular, to be discussed in detail in the next section, invited a continuous stream of letters and petitions to local authorities, several of which had the village headman as their signatory and reflected perceptions that, at times, differed from those held by the upper classes.

Writings attempting to construct the linguistic unity of Goalpara almost invariably began with the story of a historical unity of the region. Accordingly, Goalpara was represented as part of a kingdom and ruled by dynasties. Its political history was independent of that of either Assam or Bengal.⁶⁰ Based on this historical narrative of a politically unified entity, the traditional upper classes identified 'Rajbanshi bhasa' as the language of the region between the Sonkos and the Manas, the two rivers that were believed (as said) to have been the historical borders of a kingdom

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that included the districts of Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Goalpara.⁶¹ The territorial location of Rajbanshi is continuously reiterated in several writings and was obviously central to the imagining of some form of lingual autonomy of the region. 'We speak Rajbanshi, which is a distinct language of this region and we need to work for its greater spread and usage', asserted Prabhat Chandra Barua in his address to a meeting of the Goalpara District Association.⁶²

Again, in an essay on indigenous music traditions in a collection believed to have been written in the early 1930s, Nihar Barua, the daughter of the zamindar of Gauripur, began by firmly locating Rajbanshi as the language of this region:⁶³ 'This area has its own geographical and historical distinctiveness and despite being administratively amalgamated into Assam these hundred years, it still retains its links with the Rajbanshi language and culture. For generations, the spoken language of both Hindus and Muslims in this region has been Rajbanshi.'⁶⁴ 'The people of Cooch Behar, where it continues to be the spoken language of the majority of its population, have given this language respectability', wrote Barua, while also identifying certain genres of music composed in Rajbanshi and citing these as evidence of it being a living language of Goalpara and northern Bengal.⁶⁵

This formulation of Rajbanshi was significant because it raised questions about the ways in which the speech and literature of historically transitional areas like

⁶⁰ See Chapter 5, Section II.

⁶¹ Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) *Kabindra Mahabharata*, Dhubri, 1930, p.8.

⁶² Prabhat Chandra Barua, *Abhyathana Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan*, Dhubri, 1928, p.10.

⁶³ 'The objective of my essay is to rejuvenate the language of North Bengal and Goalpara--Rajbanshi or Bahebhasi, as it commonly called'. (Nihar Barua, 'Koiketi Ancholik Gaan' ('Some regional songs'), in *Prantobashir Jhuli: Goalparar Lokjibon U Gaan*, (A Collection from the Frontier: the Folklore and Songs of Goalpara) edited by Chandra Mukhopadhaya, Calcutta, 2000, p.56.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

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Goalpara could be subsumed into dominant nationalist ideologies like Bengali and Assamese, both of which routinely claimed it to be part of their own history. Responding to the Bengali folklorist, Dineshchandra Sen, who had asserted that the language of a recently recovered local text was from Chattagram in Bengal and commented on its complexities, Gaurinath Shastri, the Dewan of the Gauripur Raj, asserted, 'We live in a place that is at a long distance away from Chattagram. Unlike Dinesh Babu, therefore, we do not find the language complex. This is because the language of the text is Rajbansi, the language spoken in Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Goalpara'.⁶⁶ Sen's arguments in his *History of Bengali Language and Literature* were also the subject of conflicting linguistic claims from Assam and Goalpara. 'Dinesh Babu discovered three Pargali Mahabharatas, one written 204 years ago, another 200 years ago and the third written 250 years ago. We have not had the chance to read these texts, but from the sections of the texts that have been reproduced in his *Banga Bhasa U Sahitya (The History of Bengali Language and Literature)*, we have seen and understood that these are all texts of this region, written in Rajbanshi, although certain regional variations may have crept in'.⁶⁷

The debate was centered on the possible date of composition of the recovered text, the Kabindra Mahabharat, and had important implications for Rajbanshi's claims to antiquity. Predictably, the propagators of the language claimed that the earliest texts in Rajbanshi could be dated to the eight century AD unlike those written in the dialect of Chattagram.⁶⁸ Such claims were strengthened by the strategic appropriation of Ananta Kandali's *Ramayan*, a seventeenth century text identified by the Assamese

⁶⁶ Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) *Kabindra Mahabharata*, p.8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9.

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nationalists as an essential part of their historical past, and of its author as a poet in the court of Naranarayan.⁶⁹

The most significant appropriation, however, as already noted in the case of Assamese, was the claiming of the vast literature produced by the Vaishnava reformers, Sankardev and Madhavdev. 'These great thinkers have written all their great works in the language of Goalpara' asserted Prabhat Chandra Barua, whose role in the recovery and preservation of these 'jewels' of local literature was frequently appreciated.⁷⁰ 'Theirs were big hearts. They lived in a period when knowledge was adored ...and not the region one came from. Their writings were for all people'.⁷¹

In this situating of Rajbanshi, and thereby, a questioning of the validity of the linguistic boundaries drawn by the colonial state and endorsed by Assamese nationalist ideology, Goalpara's traditional elite could draw upon George Grierson's idea of languages as contained entities within demarcated geographically areas. The detailed defence of the distinctiveness of the language of the Kabindra Mahabharat, for instance, ends with a citing of Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India as the authority.⁷² Grierson's survey had defined Rajbanshi as a 'well marked dialect ...spoken in the country to the north east of that in which Northern Bengali is spoken', and extending 'into the Goalpara district of Assam, in which it gradually merges into

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.13.

⁶⁹ 'Dinesh Babu has mentioned Ananta Kandali's *Ramayan*. This text belongs to our region. it has been kept with care in the homes of many people of Goalpara...Another text composed in the language of our region is Ramsaraswati's *Mahabharat*'.(pp.13-14, Ibid.)

⁷⁰ Prabhat Chandra Barua, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samiti, Abhyathana Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan (Presidential Address of the Welcoming Committee of the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.9.

⁷¹ Gaurinath Shastri, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samitir Gauripur Adhibheshanar Sabhapatir Abhibhasan (Presidential Address to the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.32.

⁷² Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) *Kabindra Mahabharata*, p.16.

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Assamese'.⁷³ He then identified with considerable precision the exact geographical boundaries of its territory:

The dialect is not confined to the Bengal Province....[i]t is the language of the west and the south west of the [Goalpara] district. To the south it is stopped by the Tibeto Burman language of the Garo Hills. In Bengal, it is bounded on the east by the Brahmaputra, with the Garo Hills on the opposite side. In its extreme south east corner, it just touches the Eastern Bengali of Maimansingh, also across the river. On the south and the west, it is bounded by the northern Bengali and on the north by the Tibeto Burman languages of the Lower Himalayas. It is spoken in the following districts: Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, the Tarai of the Darjeeling district, the Native State of Cooch Behar, together with the portion of Goalpara already mentioned.⁷⁴

As with other languages in his survey, Grierson's method also located, counted and represented the speakers of Rajbanshi on statistical charts:

Jalpaiguri	568,976
Rangpur	2,037,460
Cooch Behar(Native State)	562,500
Darjeeling(Bahe sub dialect)	47,435
Total for Bengal	3,216,371
Goalpara	292,800
Total for Assam	292,800

Grand Total 3,509,171

Source: G. A. Grierson (ed.) *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V, Indo-Aryan Family, Eastern Group, Part I: Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese languages*, Calcutta 1903, p.163.

In the 1920s and 30s, Grierson's findings were extended to defend the objectives and location of several of the literary meetings and conventions that were held in Goalpara, primarily through the initiative of the zamindar of Gauripur, Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua. These included several sessions of the Uttar Banga Sahitya

⁷³ G. A. Grierson (ed.) *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V, Indo-Aryan Family, Eastern Group, Part I: Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese languages*, Calcutta 1903, p.166.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.163.

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Sanmilan, held at Gauripur and Kamakshyadham in the Kamrup district.⁷⁵ Severely criticised in Assamese newspapers for what was seen as a courting of Bengali, around which nationalists had constructed an elaborate theory of 'otherness',⁷⁶ these literary meets were significant for their expressions of the idea of a shared language and history across Goalpara and northern Bengal. 'Our objective is to revive the language of this region and restore its lost pride' stated the President of the fifth session of the Uttar Banga Sahitya Sanmilan (North Bengal Literary Association). He then went on to evoke a collective historical consciousness, institutionalised in the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti which had been formed with the explicit purpose of 'recovering the lost history' of the region.⁷⁷ Once again, Grierson's comments about the geographical boundaries of Rajbanshi were used to validate linguistic claims. Equally importantly, these initiatives were also indicative of a reinvention of the roles by the traditional elite, evident in their abandoning of the old language of protection, loyalty and kinship and their adoption instead of the new vernacular public space for expressions of collective identity.

The territorial fixation of Rajbanshi was accompanied by a few scattered arguments about the distinctive structure of the language. Gaurinath Shastri, for instance, made an attempt to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Goalpara's language through an exercise that involved comparing some representative specimens of sentences in Rajbanshi with Assamese and Bengali.⁷⁸ The preface to the Kabindra

⁷⁵ Pratap Chandra Goswami, *Jibon Smriti aru Kamrupia Samaj*, p.121.

⁷⁶ See for example Jnananath Bora's, *Asomot Bideshi (The Foreigner in Assam)* Guwahati, 1928, and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's series on the 'Asamor Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha' in the issues of *Banhi*, July-October, 1910.

⁷⁷ *Sixth Session of the Uttar Banga Sahitya Sammilan (North Bengal Literary Association)*, Calcutta, 1917, p.50.

⁷⁸ Shastri, *Sabhapatir Abhibhasan*, p.18.

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Mahabharat also traced a few grammatical differences between Rajbanshi and Bengali.⁷⁹ These attempts however remained rather unconvincing and despite the writings from Goalpara attempting to follow the standardised conventions of constructing speech into language, it was clear that the autonomy of Rajbanshi was to be found not so much in its formal linguistic structure but in its territorial identification as the language of a region.

The political consciousness that was reflected in the concern over giving Rajbanshi a suitable past and determined territoriality extended into the realm of folklore as well. Several writers have commented on the clear links between the emergence of populist strands within nationalism and the discovery of collections of folk literature and songs.⁸⁰ In Bengal this was reflected in the appeals to the urban *bhadralok* to re-establish links with rural life and a gathering together of folk literature, songs and fairy tales, as in Dineshchandra Sen's collection of folk ballads from Mymensingh.⁸¹ In Goalpara too, such strands, though less visible in this period, manifested themselves through often veiled appeals to the traditional upper classes and the new urban intelligentsia to re-establish links with rural life.

One of the early collectors of folk songs from the region was Nihar Barua, daughter of Prabhat Chandra Barua, and in the manner of most members of the zamindari families of Assam, exposed to the intellectual world of Calcutta, including Tagore's Santiniketan and the company of Sukumar Sen.⁸² Although Barua wrote consistently on different aspects of Goalpara's folk literature through the 1930s and

⁷⁹ Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) *Kabindra Mahabharata*, p.18.

⁸⁰ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London, 1978; J.W. Fernandez, 'Folklore as an agent of nationalism', in I. Wallerstein (ed.) *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, New York, 1966; S. H. Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan (eds.), *Another Harmony*, Delhi, 1986.

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40s⁸³ and gathered together most of the folk songs in her collection between 1925-1926, her first essay, 'Prantobashir Jhuli' ('A Collection from the Frontier') was published only in 1953 in the Bengali periodical, *Desh*.⁸⁴ The recent edition of her collected works, however, indicates possible links between claims of communal ownership over the folklore of the region and imaginings of regional identity in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the opening paragraph of her essay, 'Prantobashir Jhuli', Barua locates her collection of folk literature and songs firmly within the frontier or the 'Pranto'--- 'Goalpara is on the frontier of Assam, of Cooch Behar, the Garo Hills and the kingdom of Bhutan. It is the frontier of every place and its people are the inhabitants of a frontier' ('the Prantobashi').⁸⁵ In several of her other essays, too, there is a suggestion of the region as a unified historical entity where apparent variations in language between Goalpara, Cooch Behar, Mymensingh, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri masked an underlying unity.⁸⁶ 'The folk songs sung in this region are products of this frontier area and the Rangpur district', writes Barua. The different genres of folk songs, which included the Bhauiya and the Biyer Gaan are identified as common to the region of Goalpara and North Bengal.

There is a similar suggestion of shared elements in the structure of languages of these areas in Dineshchandra Sen's collection of folk ballads from Mymensingh: 'The songs are generally sung in that indigenous mode of music which is called

⁸¹ Dineshchandra Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, Calcutta, 1923.

⁸² Nihar Barua, *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.15.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Introduction, p.6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Barua, 'Prantobashir Jhuli', *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.1.

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"bhatiyal". It is the favourite mode of the rustics, especially the boatmen. Its plaintive appeal has a peculiar power. In the vast expanse of the East Bengal rivers, in the blue tinted Brahmaputra...in the foaming Padma, the boatmen yield to the irresistible fascination of their favourite Bhatial raag...⁸⁷

Like other collectors of folklore, Barua defends her project as a search for the true repositories of Goalparia life, the rural peasants and those who lived on the margins of civilization---the *mahouts* (the elephant driver), the *phandis* (elephant catchers) and the *moishals* (buffalo catchers).⁸⁸ The mahout and the moishal, in particular, emerge as the most complete representatives of Goalparia society, the 'least contaminated by foreign influence and [the] most in touch with the nation's recent past'.⁸⁹ Both the Goalparia mahout and the moishal are 'resourceful and independent,' and as opposed to the upper classes, characterised by their 'endless courage, physical strength, and the possession of all qualities desired in a man... he does not fear the tiger even'.⁹⁰ Such representations were indicative of the material and cultural distance between the traditional elite and the rural classes to which the mahouts belonged. It was a distance that would have been sufficient for the elites to attribute exotic qualities to the life style of the local people. The 'mahout and moishal songs' and the stories of

⁸⁶ Barua, 'Koiketi Ancholik Gaan' ('Some regional songs'), *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.56. It is interesting that the publication of the collection of folk songs and essays by Nihar Barua is accompanied by a map of the region of Goalpara and parts of northern and eastern Bengal.

⁸⁷ Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, p.xciv.

⁸⁸ Barua *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.14; 'She sought to capture the poetry that lay hidden in the speech of the ordinary man'. (Introduction, *Ibid.*); In a similar project of self discovery in Bengal, Dineshchandra Sen described the composers of the Mymensingh ballads as 'materially different from and opposed to, the dogmas of the Renaissance Brahmins'. (Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, p.xxvi)

⁸⁹ Peter Burke, 'We, the people: popular culture and popular identity in modern Europe', in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.) *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford, 1992, p.297.

⁹⁰ Barua, 'Reflections of the Moishal's life in songs from the Bhawaiya region', *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.78.

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their lives were 'discovered' and narrated by people whose knowledge was likely to be borrowed.

A reconstruction of the everyday life of these people often required the narrative to be drawn into the early nineteenth century, 'when this region was covered in forests and wild elephant grass, for the essence of their life stories is connected to this history'.⁹¹ In a representation that probably drew from the ideology of the European Romantics, Barua defined the 'outside life' of the mahout in terms that set it in opposition to the settled cultivated world. The season of activity for the mahout began with the onset of winter, when he accompanied the elephant catchers (the phandis) to the forest, and ended with the beginning of the rainy season and summer. Since agriculture too was similarly structured by seasons, it is likely that these songs may have had a resonance with many at that time. The cycle of activities of both the mahout and the moishal was therefore structured by seasons,⁹² marked by long periods of separation from their families. This was reflected in the songs of longing and separation, like the '*Chariya na jaan, mur moishal bondhu re*'⁹³ or the '*O mur dotal hatir mahut re, she din mahut Asham jai narir mon mur jhuria jai re*'.⁹⁴

In the descriptions of a life set apart in unspoiled nature and marked by seasonal rhythms, was a strong spatial imagery of a world free of social norms, a realm of freedom. The return of the mahout to the forest therefore was a return from a constrained social order to an archaic, untouched way of life,⁹⁵ to a 'world which knows no differences of community, caste or region and recognises none of the

⁹¹ Ibid., p.77.

⁹² Barua, 'The daughter of the elephant and the story and songs of the mahout', *Prantobashir Jhuli*, p.91.

⁹³ 'Don't leave me behind, O my beloved moishal'.

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ordinary rules of settled social life. It is a world in which the natural leader is the one who has proved to be the most dexterous and courageous in catching elephants.⁹⁶ This space was reinforced by the relationship of dependence shared by the mahout and his elephant, which was the subject of most of the genre of 'mahout songs'.⁹⁷

These representations crystallised to form stereotypical images of a world that was 'Goalparia', defined in opposition to the settled Assamese society.⁹⁸ The tension between the norms of settled society and transgression of these by the mahout and his unsettled life was revealed in the songs of the woman left behind in Assam by her lover: 'If you go away, my mahout friend, will you come back again? You graze the elephant under the wild bamboo groves...do tell me the truth, tell me where is your home?'.⁹⁹ While settled Assamese society needed its social codes, the mahout from Goalpara was the romantic hero, whose transgressions were both celebrated and condemned. Similarly, the world of the mahout and his elephant was represented as one which escaped attempts to either capture or define it. It indicated an entire way of life that was fast disappearing and created a temporal and spatial imagery that yet again reinforced these images of Goalparia society.

⁹⁴ 'O my mahout of the great tuskers, My woman's heart keeps yearning for you when you go away to Assam'.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.80.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.92.

⁹⁷ In a well loved song from the region, quoted in Barua's collection, the mahout sings to his elephant, 'Alas, O my beloved daughter of the elephants! You have no compassion to spare for a mahout'. (Ibid., p.92)

⁹⁸ In the post colonial period, these images of Goalpara have been recreated in the popular imagination of the Assamese people through the songs of Pratima Pandey and Bhupen Hazarika's rendering of songs like the 'Gouripuria Gabhoru Dekhilo, Hati Dhoriboloi Goi...' (I saw this beautiful maiden from Gouripur, on my expedition to catch elephants...')

⁹⁹ Birendranath Datta, *A Study in the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, Guwahati, 1995, p.186.

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Colonial restrictions on elephant catching by zamindars in the late nineteenth century¹⁰⁰ had evoked strong protests from the zamindars of all the estates, who argued that the Doar Hatishala, was a privilege enjoyed by them from Mughal times and later in the colonial period, with the consent of the state.¹⁰¹ In their replies to questions from officials, zamindars asserted their 'immemorial right and ownership to all moveable and immoveable, trees and animals which may exist in the land in their possession'.¹⁰² The granting of pottahs to catch elephants, they pointed out, formed an important part of zamindari income in an area which was thinly inhabited and cultivated.¹⁰³ The initial response of the officials attributed this intervention to the changing practicalities of the colonial administration while acknowledging that the privilege, though not proven through documents, was conceded and never formally taken away'.¹⁰⁴ 'Absence of sufficient documentary proof' served, as always, to justify the acquisition of privileges from the traditional elite by the state and zamindars were instructed to 'produce evidence, documentary or other, in support of their claims...with sufficient proof of the limits within which they had been exercised'.¹⁰⁵ The restrictions on elephant catching, it was argued, were necessary because of the

¹⁰⁰ Legislation which prohibited elephant catching in the region included the Regulation Act of 1876 which banned 'hunting of elephants without a written license within the Garo Hills', the Forest Act of 1878 and the Elephant Preservation Act of 1879 which extended the terms of the 1876 Act. (Extract from the Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills' letter no.499, 18 September 1880, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Political Proceedings, (henceforth HPP) April 1881, No.5.

¹⁰¹ Replies of the zamindars of Goalpara to official queries regarding their right to catch elephants in their estates in the correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara and the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 20 January 1879, HPP, No.29.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ The reply of the Gauripur zamindar in the correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara and the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 20 January 1879, HPP, No.29.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara and the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 20 January 1879, HPP, No.29.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, 28 January 1879, HPP, No.30.

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'entrance of elephant catchers into the Dooars and the Garo Hills...without license [as] there [were] no permanent haunts of wild elephants within zamindari lands'.¹⁰⁶

Significantly, however, despite the officials' readily available arguments about the practical uses of the animal,¹⁰⁷ the Elephant Preservation Act of 1879 accepted that 'the zamindars cherish this right, not so much for the pecuniary profit thence derived as because they fancy it increases their social importance'.¹⁰⁸ It would appear therefore that the abolition of the privilege and its assumption by the colonial state also reflected 'an invention of tradition', 'establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority' by constructing a continuity with a suitable historic past.¹⁰⁹ This was most evident in the following response of the colonial state to the legal representative of the zamindars:

Even where Government claims this right, it is not in its capacity as the owner of the soil, but as the sovereign and representative of the former rulers who always claimed and reinforced this right...Its has indeed been urged broadly that the rights to elephants as royal beasts is one of the attributes of sovereignty, at any rate in North India, and that no private right, adverse to that of the government can without express grant by the ruling power be recognised...Where, as in the countries formerly subject to the rulers of Assam, this right was continuously asserted by the sovereign, this argument seems valid...[T]he right to capture elephants is one of the attributes of sovereignty in Bengal and Assam.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ 'The ordinary law regulating the position of ferae is not strictly applicable to wild elephants--no other animal of the forest is susceptible to being tamed and utilised as it can be. It has always been considered a most invaluable auxiliary for military movements and the preservation of the species for State purposes justifies special legislation'.(Ibid.)

¹⁰⁸ Correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner of the Garo Hills and the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 January 1881, HPP, No.7.

¹⁰⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, p.5.

¹¹⁰ Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Legal Remembrancer, Calcutta, 5 July 1880, Home Proceedings, Revenue and Agriculture, July 1880, No.5.

Section 3: Negotiating spaces, crafting identities

The production of a sense of political community around the Assamese language was therefore accompanied by a redrawing of the frontiers of speech by Goalpara's traditional elite and sections of its emerging middle class, with folklore being also used as instrument for creating a sense of solidarity and justifying claims of autonomy. This redrawing reflected attempts by a declining zamindar class to acquire some form of social cohesion that would legitimise its eroded political authority and social status. Equally significantly however, these expressions of a separate linguistic identity raised broader questions about the more complex historical processes that were involved in the marking of linguistic boundaries than was conceded by the discourse of Assamese nationalism.

The use of language to reconceptualise social and political space was reflected in suggestions of the possibility of creating a politically autonomous area consisting of parts of northern Bengal and Goalpara,¹¹¹ and the distinctiveness that lay in the sense of ambiguity that characterised the Goalparia identity as in the statement with which this thesis began: 'We have never been either Assamese or Bengali. They are both our neighbours. Who are we? We are neither of the two. We are we. We are the people of this area. We are Goalparia ... we are distinct and so is our culture, custom and tradition'.¹¹² Several cultural elements, including the cuisine, attire and social norms, were illustrative of this 'independent identity' and could be used to evoke a new

¹¹¹ Gaurinath Shastri, *Sabhapatir Abhibhasan*, Dhubri, 1928,p.32.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p.33.

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people, argued Shastri.¹¹³ 'Our district has become the victim of 'political football', mourned Prabhat Chandra Barua. 'We have been forced to accept as our mother tongue the languages of those communities which have scored a goal'.¹¹⁴

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the expressions of autonomy and distinctiveness discussed in the section above were sharpened by the projects of colonial knowledge, which though not in a position of seamless control, played a powerful and obvious role in defining identities in the region. An increasingly interventionist state now used its analysis of language and the legal structure to determine how claims of identity and political representation were to be made, while continuing to create categories within which the colonised were to define themselves. The British efforts at social engineering, in particular through the census, were accompanied both in Goalpara and in Assam, however, by efforts by particular groups to resist, appropriate, and modify the social categories of the colonizers. This section explores how this dialogue between the colonial state and its subjects affected ideas of language and identity in the region.

Colonial sources indicate that the linguistic boundaries of Goalpara continued to be debated upon long after its political boundaries as a colonial district were firmly laid down. Late nineteenth century exchanges between officials described Goalpara as 'a debatable land', 'with respect to its language as well as its administration and physical aspect'. Apart from the several distinct communities with their separate languages, there were also 'a considerable number of pure Bengalis...and the so-called

¹¹³ Ibid. p.32-38; 'You have lost your sense of identity and see no wrong in aligning with others. You have to help yourselves and fight for your own space', (Ibid. p.14).

¹¹⁴ Prabhat Chandra Barua, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan (Presidential Address to the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1926, p. 7.

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Assamese, whose ethnological and philological relation with the Bengalis [was] so warmly disputed'.¹¹⁵ Thus, the Resolution which had introduced Assamese as the official vernacular in 1874, advocated 'a policy of dichotomy for Goalpara' on the grounds that 'the people of the district had expressed their choice for both Bengali and Assamese'.¹¹⁶ This policy was extended into the early twentieth century when J.B. Fuller decided in 1903 to discontinue Bengali as the language for teaching Assamese but accepted that Goalpara had to continue to be exempted from the order.¹¹⁷ Several petitions favouring Bengali and counter petitions in support of Assamese had been submitted in the last decade of the nineteenth century and its likely that Fuller's response was shaped by these inputs.¹¹⁸

Around this time, there appears to be an increasing recognition within the official discourse of the impossibility of locating boundaries of intelligibility in an area where one language shaded into another more starkly than it did elsewhere. For a more 'precise' definition of Goalpara's language, the state relied on Grierson's survey. However, his findings, while offering a definition of Rajbanshi as the dialect of western Goalpara and elaborating the colonial analysis of languages,¹¹⁹ also appreciated the existence of broad frontiers in languages, where one regionally dominant pattern of speech merged into another.¹²⁰ Grierson's analysis and findings

¹¹⁵ R. Cornish, Assistant Commissioner, in a letter dated 16 November 1872, 'Assamese language 1862-1873', File no. 471, Assam Commissioner's Files.

¹¹⁶ Resolution by the Government of Bengal, 19 April 1873, File no. 171 G 1874, ASF.

¹¹⁷ ASF File nos. 52-57, August 1903, Home A.

¹¹⁸ A protest memorial signed by 3366 people, favouring the introduction of Bengali Goalpara, and some counter petitions were submitted to the Deputy Commissioner in 1896, Home A, December 1897, ASF nos. 50-54.

¹¹⁹ Grierson (ed.) *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V*, p.166.

¹²⁰ Thus while Grierson explained that the language spoken in western and south western Goalpara was pure Rajbansi, he suggested a more fluid category for the eastern part of the district, which he claimed, spoke 'western Assamese, which is Assamese influenced by the Rajbansi dialect'. (Grierson (ed.) *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V*, p.394)

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informed the Census of 1901, which, like the preceding census, used language as a key indicator for determining identity.

The framework within which the census commissioners functioned were however subjected to the institutional constraints of the colonial state, significant among which was the growing importance of numbers and in the colonial imagination and their use to demarcate social groups into neat, bounded categories. The notion that frontiers of speech could be collapsed into administrative boundaries reflected these conscious attempts to define the constituents of society. Working with this notion, colonial officials now used enumeration and classification to consolidate the linguistic boundaries of the province of Assam. The Census of 1901 had columns for the categories of Assamese, Bengali and other recognised languages. Rajbanshi was not returned, although Koch, also classified by Grierson as a dialect, was given a column in this and later censuses as well. Goalpara's language had broad frontiers, not definitive borders, a condition which confronted the colonial state's understanding of both social and territorial boundaries as unambiguous and exclusive.

Equally significantly, however, the linguistic policies of the state in Goalpara during this period appeared to indicate the extent to which colonial projects were shaped by their encounters with the colonised. In his reply to a query in the legislative council in 1914, regarding the introduction of Assamese in the district, A. W. Botham described the issue to be as 'under consideration'.¹²¹ In the same year, in an apparent acknowledgement of the fluidity of linguistic boundaries in the district, a government order created a provision for the principle of 'local option', which allowed the villages of Goalpara to petition for or against the introduction of either Assamese or Bengali in

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the local schools.¹²² Official records note that 'in 1914...an enquiry was made to ascertain what really was the vernacular of the district. It appeared that neither pure Assamese, as spoken in Central and Upper Assam, nor Bengali as spoken in Nadia, was the vernacular of the district ...in the eastern part most of the people spoke a form of Assamese similar to that spoken in the adjoining district of Kamrup while in the western portions, the dialect was closely akin to the Rajbanshi dialect of northern Bengal.'¹²³ Responding to the enquiry, the Chief Commissioner's order laid down that 'both languages should be taught, the choice in each case being in the hands of the majority of the inhabitants of each village...and the change from one language to another could only be brought about by an application from the majority of the villagers concerned'.¹²⁴ Later official correspondence noted that 'the deciding authority, although this was not expressly stated, was to be the Deputy Commissioner'.¹²⁵

Over the next few decades, the principle of 'local option' emerged as a defining element in the colonial state's language policy in Goalpara. There is evidence of several petitions being filed by village headmen for changes in the local medium of instruction and records of the resultant changes. On 3 February 1914, a petition filed by the headman of the village of Hakma, near Bilasipara, asked for a substitution of Bengali by Assamese in the lower primary school. This was followed by a counter petition which opposed the change and was signed by a greater number of signatories.

¹²¹ A.W. Botham's reply to Padmanath Barua, 5 January 1914, ALCP, V/9/1350, OIOC.

¹²² Chief Commissioner's order No.177E, dated 16 January 1914, quoted in a letter from the Deputy Inspector of Schools, Dhubri, 7 August 1923, Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289.

¹²³ Letter from J. E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, 12 March 1919, Shillong, Ninth Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms, Q/IDC/46, OIOC.

¹²⁴ Note from J.H. Cunningham, Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289.

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Numerical majority being the deciding condition of the principle, the language of the school remained unaltered.¹²⁶ In response to a petition for the introduction of Assamese in another school in Bilasipara, however, the Deputy Inspector of Schools for Dhubri agreed to effect the necessary changes.¹²⁷ The language used in the petitions was a crucial element for reinforcing the arguments of its signatories. A petition from the village of Adalguri in Bijni was necessarily written in Assamese as it was demanding the removal of Bengali on the grounds that 'although [Bengali] was prevalent for quite sometime in the region, our spoken language remains Assamese.'¹²⁸

Several similar letters and petitions from different villages of Goalpara during this period reflected some of the ways in which the colonised found ways of circumventing the projects of the state. Petitions for change were filed from Tipkai, Kamalsing, Binnakhata, Fakiragram, Lakhigang and Barkanda through the second decade of the century.¹²⁹ In Lakhigang and Barkanda, Bengali was reintroduced and teaching resumed with the help of teachers who had Bengali as the medium of instruction, 'although they also imparted instructions with the assistance of their own local terms'.¹³⁰ In Fakiragram, on the other hand, orders for the introduction of Assamese had to be revoked after 21 villagers signed a petition in favour of Bengali.¹³¹ Colonial officials noted that the extract from the petition in the records was

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Letter from the Deputy Inspector of Schools, Dhubri, 7 August 1923, Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Letter from Deputy Inspector of Schools, Dhubri, 5 April 1924, Education B, October 1924, ASF nos. 300-301.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

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in Assamese, 'which indicated the home language in that locality'.¹³² Petitions could also voice concerns that were contrary to those of the educated elite of the district.

The school at Tipkai, with a Middle Vernacular status, was started in 1914 for the Brahma and non-Brahma sects in the Bodo community. Through a series of petitions that resisted attempts by the traditional elite to appropriate them, the community pleaded for the introduction of Assamese in their school. The petition of the 7 March 1914, for instance, was signed by '49 leading Brahmas and non-Brahma Meches of different Bodo villages for introduction of Assamese in all schools attended by the children of their tribe'.¹³³ Official correspondence noted that by 1917, several localities in the district had successfully effected changes on the medium of instruction in their area. Clearly then, it was possible for colonial projects to be effective and vulnerable at the same time and the functioning of the state continued to be affected considerably by its engagement with the colonized.

The contours of the dialogue between Goalpara's traditional elite and the colonial state over the question of language remained a central concern in the debates over tenancy legislation in the district as well. The tenancy debate that took place in the region in the first three decades of the twentieth century created, as would be expected, groups with conflicting economic and political interests. The 'waning position' of the zamindars under colonial law was the primary concern of the several petitions from zamindari associations during this period. 'It is obvious that originally the rights of Zemindars and their raiyats were not defined and the former class being more powerful exercised fullest powers over their tenancy', wrote Prabhat Chandra

¹³² Ibid.

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Barua. 'Law has gradually regulated the rights of the Zemindars...narrowed down their powers and influence too'.¹³⁴ The remedy for this decline lay in the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act into Goalpara, 'in order that that the laws and conditions of all the permanently settled areas may not become widely divergent with the separation of these estates for administrative boundaries',¹³⁵ and in an increased representation of the landlords in the Legislative and Imperial Councils. In a memorial to the Chief Commissioner, for instance, zamindars argued the while in the Assam Legislative Council official members 'would naturally represent the interests of the raiyots...at least two members with a sympathetic Government may be expected to safeguard the interests of the zemindars to some extent'.¹³⁶

While articulating the personal grievances of the zamindars, these petitions and memorials, however, also contributed considerably towards an extension of the existing public space. The nature of colonial law made it possible for the zamindars to articulate their personal grievances in terms of general statements of principle rather than particular statements of private interest, and despite the strengthening of new land holding classes like the jotedars, Goalpara's zamindars continued to be the best organised and effective of collectivities in the district, with several organisations continuing to favour their interests until the end of colonial rule.¹³⁷ More significantly

¹³³ Ibid. Other petitions included one by Kalicharan Brahma, the founder of the Brahma sect among the Bodo community, dated June 1912.

¹³⁴ 'Letter from Prabhat Chandra Barua to A. J. Laine, 23 September 1918', in *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes by the Zemindars and Raiyats of the District of Goalpara, from 1874 to the present time*, Calcutta 1925, p.39.

¹³⁵ 'Note by Prabhat Chandra Barua as representative of the Zemindars and President of the Assam Association to the Government during a conference at Dacca, 18 August, 1909', in *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes*, p.9. The meeting of the Zemindars of Goalpara held on the 27 and 28 June 1912 at the Gauripur House, Dhubri, voiced similar concerns. (Ibid., p.12)

¹³⁶ *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes*, p.20.

¹³⁷ To quote Peter Robb in the context of the Bengal Tenancy Act, '[M]arking the transitional nature of the Tenancy Act, however, great care continued to be shown for the landlord's position. Every move the

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for the imagining of a 'Goalparia' identity, this consolidation of group interests through the tenancy debate also indicated the development of broader collectivities, for 'land law could become an important frame of nationality, once it embodied "rational" features, specifically individual property regulated within legal classes as economic and political interests'.¹³⁸

As a powerful criterion for defining such collective identities, language was used to validate these claims for land rights and legislative representation. In a letter to the government in 1912, Prabhat Chandra Barua used the idea of a shared language in Goalpara and the contiguous Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Dinajpur, to legitimise zamindari demands for a common tenancy law for the region.¹³⁹ In what could be seen as an example of the inherent instability and multiplicity of identities, the idea of a shared language and culture was also used to support claims for separation of the permanently settled estates from Assam and their eventual assimilation into Bengal.¹⁴⁰ These arguments drew upon a much older, pre-existing debate over the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal. As early as 1874, with the formation of the separate province of Assam, there had been petitions from the landed classes arguing for the region to be placed under the jurisdiction of the laws of

Government made was softened by concern for the zamindar. Their representatives were always consulted and listened to. They were consulted not only because they were organised but also because they were seen as having legitimate interests. By the later nineteenth century, the government's alliance with the zamindars took the form of a working partnership'. (Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.238).

¹³⁸ Robb, *Ancient Rights*, p.245.

¹³⁹ 'Note from Prabhat Chandra Barua to Sir Charles Bailey, Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam, through the Raja of Dighapatia, 12 January 1912', in *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes*, p.14.

¹⁴⁰ Zamindari petitions from the first decade of the twentieth century also suggested this as an alternative to the introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act into the permanently settled portions of Goalpara.

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Bengal.¹⁴¹ 'The prayer [of a transfer to Bengal was] based on a community of feeling arising out of past history, traditions, ties, language, religion and land tenure--all these being substantially similar to those governing the Zemindars and people of the adjoining districts [of Bengal]'.¹⁴² Another memorial expressed fears of 'being completely swamped by the Khas Mahal holders of the Assam Valley--a body with which they have nothing in common'.¹⁴³

By the early 1920s, the idea of the zamindari estates forming a separate territorial unit which could be transferred to Bengal was becoming a recurring theme. The debates in the legislative council echoed this drift in the arguments of the zamindars, with their representatives expressing concern at 'the antipathy in the Assam Valley against the Goalpara landlords and those in that district who side with Bengali culture'.¹⁴⁴ 'The Tenancy Legislation' argued Brajendra Narayan Chaudhuri, 'which is to adjudicate the rights between the tenants, the jotedars and the landlords will be made the occasion for a fight for the spread of Assamese and Bengali culture. [T] his Bill[Goalpara Tenancy Act] will be made the occasion for the bigger issue---what should be the boundaries of the province of Assam... We should postpone this Bill ...till the boundary question is finally settled [for] votes will be cast ...only on the bitter prejudice of culture and language.'¹⁴⁵ In the several meetings of zamindars during this period, earlier anxieties with the lack of sufficient zamindari representation

¹⁴¹ 'Petition from the inhabitants of the Dhubri Subdivision praying for a transfer of that subdivision from Goalpara to Rungpore' Home Judicial B May 1874, File nos.27-29, NAI.

¹⁴² Memorial from the zamindars of Goalpara to John Napier and Baron Chelmsford, Viceroy and Governor General of India, 12 March 1919, Ninth Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms, Q/IDC/46, Appendix IV, OIOC.

¹⁴³ 'Memorial of the Zemindars of Goalpara to Mr. Beatson Bell, Chief Commissioner of Assam, 18 September 1918', in *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes*, p.33.

¹⁴⁴ Brajendra Narayan Chaudhuri in the Debate on the Goalpara Tenancy Bill 1927, ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC.

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in the legislature were now woven in with fears of 'a movement to foist the Assamese language on Goalpara'.¹⁴⁶ In a letter to the colonial government, the President of one such meeting asked 'If it is absolutely necessary to keep us in Assam, can we not reasonably expect that the Rent Law in Goalpara should be the same as in Bengal and our language should not be in any way interfered with...?'¹⁴⁷

These representations of Goalpara as the 'favourite hunting ground of the Assamese'¹⁴⁸ found explicit support among members of local associations. Thus, despite opposition from certain members, the Goalpara Association in 1918 passed a resolution which recommended in turn, that the Assam Association pass a resolution stating that 'Goalpara being mainly identical in race, language, social customs and system of land laws with Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, ... it [should] be placed under the same laws and administration with the [above] districts'.¹⁴⁹ We also have evidence of petitions, one of which was signed by 6863 signatories, citing 'close resemblance with the people of North Bengal' and 'a growing discontent with the introduction of Assamese' to explain the need 'to reunite the district with Bengal'.¹⁵⁰ In what could be described as an effort to extend the idea of the collective to signify more wide ranging notions of society and community, Prabhat Chandra Barua, who had emerged as the most prominent spokesperson of the regional elite, addressed

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Proceedings of the Goalpara Zamindar's Conference relating to the Goalpara Tenancy Bill, September 1927, Revenue A, ASF nos. 42-53. This was echoed in various memorandums submitted by zamindars, including the Memorandum by the Goalpara Zamindar's Association to the Indian Statutory Commission, May 1928, Confidential B, ASF nos. 212-223.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Brajendra Narayan Chaudhuri, ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC.

¹⁴⁹ Resolution passed on 15 December 1918 in the Proceedings of the meeting of the Goalpara Association, Gauripur. Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, (henceforth APAI) 4-1-19 to 6-12-19, PHA, File no. 97/292.

¹⁵⁰ Memorial by the people of Goalpara to the Viceroy, sent by the President, Goalpara People's Memorial Committee, Dhubri, April 1920 in *Some Memorials, Representations and Notes*, pp.67-70.

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himself to village headmen and tenants of Chapar and Bijni.¹⁵¹ Barua organised several public meetings in Goalpara's villages through the late 1920's and 30's against both the proposed GTA and the introduction of Assamese.¹⁵² In its edition of October 28 1929, the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported that one such meeting of the All Goalpara District Conference had an estimated gathering of 'about 10,000 people, including 400 ladies, representing all classes of people and of all shades of opinion'.¹⁵³

There were protests against these ideas of a collective identification of Goalpara's society with Bengal. Textual constructions of the Bengali as the externalised 'other' formed a recurrent theme within Assamese nationalism during this period¹⁵⁴ and allowed expressions from Goalpara to be constructed as a zamindari genuflection to Bengali, the discursive 'other' of the Assamese language. Speaking in the legislative council, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi¹⁵⁵ described the zamindar of Gauripur as 'the President of the Assam Association...[and] an Assamese [although] Bengal influence may in the meantime have caused a change in his mentality and he wants to go to Bengal now'.¹⁵⁶ The publication of a weekly Bengali newspaper from Dhubri, the *Prantobashi*, which had several zamindars as its patrons,¹⁵⁷ sharpened such

¹⁵¹ APAI, 4-1-19 to 6-12-19, PHA, File no. 97/292.

¹⁵² 'Agitation against the Assamese Language and the Tenancy Bill', APAI, September 1927-October 1927, PHA.

¹⁵³ 'Goalpara Conference', *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, Friday, October 28 1929, Calcutta.

¹⁵⁴ Using the standard tropes of linguistic nationalism to consolidate the position of Assamese, scholars of Assamese literature grounded this new norm language in a strong conception of difference with Bengali. The several presidential addresses to the Assam Sahitya Sabha quoted in this chapter and L. Bezbaroa's, 'Asamor Gauripurot Bangla Sahitya Sabha' ('A Bangla Sahitya Sabha in Assam's Gauripur') that was published in four parts in *Banhi*, Vols. 9-12, September 1910 are good examples of this exercise.

¹⁵⁵ Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was one of Assam's most visible leaders of the Assam Association and the Congress in the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁵⁶ Nabin Chandra Bordoloi in the Debate on the Goalpara Tenancy Bill 1927, ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC. Speaking in the same debate, Bepin Chandra Ghosh, a representative from the district, saw such representations as 'the idea of an insignificant minority, i.e., of the zamindars, led by the Raja of Gauripur, who is by birth an Assamese [but] instigated by his foreign amlas to join the agitation'.

¹⁵⁷ Proceedings of the meeting of the Goalpara Zemindar's Association, 25 October 1927, Education, 1928, ASF nos. 662-664.

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criticism. 'From the 'kumar' title prefixed to the name of the editor, we know that he belongs to a zamindari family. The zamindars, who are mere puppets in the hands of the Bengali amlas and the Brahmans, Jotedars and Talukdars who are their loyalists, claim to be speakers of Bengali. The *Prantobashi* is a foreign Assamese newspaper... a conspiracy of these rich sections'.¹⁵⁸

Thus the nationalist rhetoric which conceived of the people of Goalpara as a part of the immemorially ancient community of the Assamese¹⁵⁹ also exhorted them to recognise the zamindars as the Bengali 'other' and the creators of the fraught linguistic situation in the region. 'I ask my Goalparia brothers! How long will it be before you are stopped being swayed by people with a foreign language...and recognise instead the greatness of your civilization and ancient pride? A few zamindars may wish to be Bengali. Why let their propaganda affect you?' appealed Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his address to the Dhubri session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha.¹⁶⁰ By extension, such representations of expressions from Goalpara were also reflective of a critique from within the Assamese nationalist discourse of the idea of the collectivity as envisaged by the zamindars. A strand within this discourse, for instance, critiqued the use of the tenancy debate to project the ideal of the zamindar as the primordial provider and protector, an ideal that could also be a powerful instrument of solidarity. This was evident, it was argued, in the objectives of the *Prantobashi*, which were 'not to fulfil the interests of the poor praja but emphasized

¹⁵⁸ Taranath Chakravarty, 'Goalparar Biruddhe 'Prantobasir' Sarajantra' ('Prantobashi's Conspiracy against Goalpara'), *Asamiya*, Vol.17, 14 August 1927.

¹⁵⁹ L. Bezbaroa, 'Address to the Dhubri Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1926', in A. C. Hazarika (ed.) *Bezbaroa Granthavali, Vol. II*, Guwahati, 1988, p.1880.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

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instead on the understanding between the king and his ministers'.¹⁶¹ Listing the several memorials that he has received from tenants in support of a new tenancy law, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi described Goalpara's landlords as 'those born with silver spoons in their mouths... thriving at the expense of tenants and who live in Calcutta in the grandest style possible'.¹⁶²

These arguments could draw upon the several petitions signed by 'tenants' which argued against the extension of the Bengal Tenancy Act and in favor of the new Goalpara Tenancy Act and prefaced their position on tenancy legislation with details of a shared culture and history between Assam and Goalpara. A memorial submitted to the Viceroy stated: 'The indigenous people of this district are Assamese...any expert and impartial philologist will admit that the language spoken by the people of Goalpara is just like that...of lower Assam...The Raja of Gauripur is an Assamese and his Rani Sahiba is a scion of the great Baishnabite reformer of Assam, Sri Madhab Deb, the zamindars perform all their rituals in Assamese...'¹⁶³ The memorial doubted the benefits of the Bengal Tenancy Act, an act 'framed with a specific reference to the circumstances of the Bengal tenants which are very different from those of the Goalpara district'.¹⁶⁴ Another petition submitted in the same year and arguing for a new rent law, similarly found it necessary to categorise the zamindars as Assamese

¹⁶¹ Chakravarty, 'Goalparar Biruddhe "Prantobasir" Sarajantra'.

¹⁶² Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC. Nilmoni Phukan was arguing along similar lines when he stated that, 'the Raja of Gauipur or any zamindar are not the nation. It is the mass of people that must hold the destiny of the nation'. (Ibid.)

¹⁶³ Memorial from the people of Goalpara to John Napier and Baron Chelmsford, Viceroy and Governor General of India, 20 May 1919, Ninth Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms, Q/IDC/46, Appendix IV, OIOC.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

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and the district as an integral part of Assam, with strong marital ties with the neighbouring areas of lower Assam.¹⁶⁵

Identities clearly, then, were moving categories, the social boundaries of which were subject to constant change. Along with the transitional nature of identities, this conflict over the categorisation of language was also a reflection of the ways in which colonial efforts at social engineering were contested and even appropriated by the colonised. Moreover, in response to the changes in the social context suggested by the passing of the Goalpara Tenancy Act, the imagining of a Goalparia identity could now co-exist with, or be subservient to, the overlapping identity of the Assamese or Bengali nation. This was reinforced in the transformation of the census in the 1920s and 1930s into a site of contest on how speech was to be socially constituted.¹⁶⁶

The Census of 1921 had been a defining moment in the debates over linguistic representation in the region. Goalpara's language continued to defy any easy generalisations and posed, according to the census commissioner, the same conflict that had risen between Bengali and Assamese in the previous census.¹⁶⁷ Despite attempting to resolve the problem 'by ordering that the language should be entered as returned by each person for himself' and thereby ensuring that 'the language question was taken out of the hands of the subordinate staff as far as possible and instructions

¹⁶⁵ Memorial of the inhabitants of Goalpara on behalf of the tenants to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 16 September, 1919, Goalpara, ASF, Revenue A, December 1919, File nos. 41-42; Bepin Chandra Ghosh cited the evidence of some 'counter memorials in his possession...protesting against the idea of transfer of the district from Assam to Bengal by the zamindars'. (ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC)

¹⁶⁶ Apart from Bernard S. Cohn's 'Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, and Benedict Anderson's 'Census, Map, Museum' in *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983, recent works on the role of number in the colonial project include Sudipta Kaviraj's, 'The Imaginary Institution of India' in Partha Chatterjee and David Arnold (eds.), *Subaltern Studies, Vol. VII*, Delhi, 1993 and Arjun Appadurai's 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Post Colonial Predicament*, Pennsylvania 1993.

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given for the language taught in the village school to be entered for the corresponding area', the commissioner was unhappy with the results. The final return showed the proportion of Assamese to Bengali speakers somewhat less than the corrected estimate made in 1911 and much greater than the tabulated figures of 1911.¹⁶⁸ The table below indicates the wide variations in the schedules of Bengali and Assamese speakers in the census figures of the first three decades of the century:¹⁶⁹

	1901	1911	1921
Assamese	11,397	115,436	138,810
Bengali	320,050	317,365	405,710

That the categorisation of language in this liminal area appeared to demand a softening of boundaries was evident also in this statement from the census commissioner: 'To illustrate this difficulty in this district, I quote the opinion of a former Chief Commissioner who had the knowledge of the rural life of the province. He said, ' We may take it as settled fact that as long as we attempt to work upon a basis of "Bengali" and "Assamese", the language statistics of Goalpara will be worthless. The plain fact is that the people of Goalpara all speak "Goalpari". At the Bengal end, they speak it with a tinge of Bengali; at the Assam end with a tinge of Assamese and in between with a tinge of both.'¹⁷⁰ However, the preoccupation of the state with the reliability and validity of the census ensured that neither 'Goalpari' nor Rajbanshi would be returned as a column in census reports. Colonial policy either did

¹⁶⁷ *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Shillong, 1923, p.116.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Figures compiled from the Imperial Table X, *Census of India, 1901, Assam*, Shillong, 1902, *Census of India, 1911, Assam*, Shillong, 1912, *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, Shillong, 1923.

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not recognise the existence of this language or refused to record it on the grounds that it would upset the projections of previous censuses.

The anxiety of the Assamese intelligentsia over the results of the census however, yet again reinforced the idea of the significance of inputs from the upper classes in determining linguistic and other categories. There were allegations of a 'vitiation of census schedules' from the vernacular Assamese press¹⁷¹ and in an analysis published in the periodical *Awahan*, the writer argued that the variations in the census figures had led to 'an inexplicable rise of the Assamese speaking community in Goalpara by 11% between 1911 and 1921'.¹⁷² 'The 1911 census provided a god-sent opportunity for the chauvinistically inclined officials to...do a bit of patriotic work for Bengal. In 1921 too...a similar struggle ensued and there was perceptible pressure from interested groups to inflate the Bengali population'.¹⁷³ There had been similar expressions of discontent in the legislative assembly after the 1911 census when members from Assam had commented on the 'absurdity of the Goalpara language schedules' and quoted from a report of the Census Superintendent. The report had noted that 'where though parents born in Kamrup were shown as speaking Assamese, those of their children living in the same house who were born in Goalpara were returned as speaking Bengali, while their brothers born in Kamrup apparently followed their parents'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ *Census of India, 1921, Assam*, p.117.

¹⁷¹ P. Das, 'Asomot Census Bibhrat' ('The Census and Commotion in Assam'), *Awahan*, 1940.

¹⁷² Nilmoni Phukan, 'Asam Jatiya Mahsabha', *Awahan*, Vol.6, 1935.

¹⁷³ Durgeswar Sarma, Diwan of the Bijni Estate quoted in the *Report of the Assam Sahitya Sabha*, Guwahati, 1955.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted by Tarun Ram Phukan in the ALCP, April 1913, V/9/1350, OIOC. 'The absurdity of this [the schedules] led to further inquiries which showed that in a few instances, persons born in Rangpur and living in the west of Dhubri subdivision were returned as Assamese speakers'. (Ibid.)

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Responding to the allegation that the 'returns were vitiated, mostly in the direction of showing fewer Assamese and more Bengali speakers than actually existed', the colonial official present in the council had acknowledged that 'the difficulty of discriminating absolutely between Assamese and Bengali as spoken in the district of Goalpara is very great'.¹⁷⁵ Eventual changes in the returns after an official inquiry resulted in an increase in the speakers of Assamese and a decrease in the speakers of Bengali respectively.¹⁷⁶ The figures for Assamese rose from 85,329 to 115,436 and those of Bengali decreased from 347,772 to 317,365.¹⁷⁷ As in 1911, the demands for an inquiry into the census returns of 1921 were followed by an inquiry that colonial officials claimed 'required the visiting of every house by the Deputy Commissioner' and a subsequent revision of the language figures for Goalpara.¹⁷⁸

Like law, the census too, it would appear, was not just a colonial imposition, which totally eliminated the autonomy and agency of the colonial subject. Rather, it was modified and structured substantially by responses from within the emerging vernacular space in Assam as also by the patriarchal voice of property owning elites that was etched in representations of Goalpara's language in this period. Through the remaining decades of colonial rule, the categorisation of language and linguistic identities continued to reflect the ways to which rulers reexamined their own hegemony and altered their policies when challenged by the colonised.

¹⁷⁵ W. M. Kennedy in the ALCP, April 1913, V/9/1350, OIOC.

¹⁷⁶ 'The revised figures showed an increase of 30607 for Assamese and a decrease of 30907 for Bengali'. (L. Bezbaroa, 'Address to the Dhubri Session' in A. C. Hazarika (ed.) *Bezbaroa Granthavali*, p.1878.

¹⁷⁷ *Census of India, 1911*, p.97.

¹⁷⁸ Letter from the Deputy inspector of Schools, Dhubri to the Inspector of Schools, Assam Valley Circle, 7 August 1923, Education Department B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289.

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Thus, on the one hand, despite a representation of Goalpara as a region that 'historically and ethnologically differed considerably from the rest of Assam',¹⁷⁹ the centrality of the notion of unambiguous political boundaries and the accompanying idea of exhaustive citizenship continued to determine the state's response to claims of separation and autonomy. This allowed officials to argue against the idea of a shared history of tenancy legislation between Goalpara and Bengal: 'The passing of a revised tenancy enactment will not constitute a break in the continuity of the legislative associations of Goalpara with Bengal because so far as tenancy matters are considered, it had never had such an association', stated A. J. Laine in the legislative assembly debates.¹⁸⁰

On the other hand, however, a closer reading of the colonial sources indicates an attribution of more coherence to the state's enterprises than they actually warrant. While dismissing the possibility of contemplating the transfer of the district by any 'process of consent',¹⁸¹ the colonial state continued to reveal competing agendas for using power as well as doubts about the legitimacy of the venture in its language policy during the last two decades of its rule. Throughout this period, local communities in rural Goalpara continued to petition and initiate changes in the medium of instruction. Among others, the people of Bagribari petitioned successfully against the introduction of Assamese in the local lower primary school.¹⁸² Again, in response to a letter from the Goalpara District Association, which alleged an

¹⁷⁹ Letter from J. E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Appendix IV, Ninth Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms, Q/IDC/46, Appendix IV, OIOC.

¹⁸⁰ ALCP, Debate on the Goalpara Tenancy Bill 1927, ALCP, 20 July 1927, V/9/1364, OIOC.

¹⁸¹ Letter from J. E. Webster, Q/IDC/46, Appendix IV, OIOC.

¹⁸² Note from E. Soames, 20 May 1924, Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289.

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imposition of Assamese on the students of the Dhubri subdivision,¹⁸³ E. Soames, (the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam) pointed out that 'the language had been introduced in 6 schools 8 years ago after a local verification of the wishes of the people of the locality and the Government did not think it advisable or expedient to revert to Bengali'.¹⁸⁴

That colonial regimes were not omnipotent or monolithic was evident also in the reviewing of the decisions taken in the early decades of the century by officials. Earlier mechanisms of assessing the 'local option' were critiqued in the changed context of the 1930's and replaced by efforts that reflected a continuous refashioning of the relationship of difference between the coloniser and the colonised.¹⁸⁵ Thus in 1929, the 'mere opinion of the schools committee' or of the 'parents or guardians of the pupils' was ruled out as a factor for determining change in the medium of instruction. Application for change, instead, was to come from the villagers.¹⁸⁶ Writing about the 'vexed question of languages in the schools of the district', the Inspector of Schools noted that 'the propaganda by zamindars to introduce Bengali had been so active that in a number of schools which took advantage of the orders of 1914 and adopted Assamese, Bengali had been re-introduced'.¹⁸⁷ Counter petitions from Assamese

¹⁸³ Letter from Nabin Chandra Pal, Secretary of the Goalpara District Association, Dhubri, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, 19 December 1923, Education A, ASF 21 December 1923.

¹⁸⁴ Note from E. Soames; In a report to the government dated 20 October 1923, J. Cunningham encouraged 'petitions which complained of infringement, to provide materials for enquiry'. (Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289)

¹⁸⁵ Colonel Gourdon, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division had suggested that either the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Laine, or a European Officer of the Education Department, or Shri Durgadas Barkataki, should go around the villages...assemble the parents of the children and ask them one by one whether they wish their children to be taught in Assamese or Bengali. (Education A January 1914, ASF nos. 92-98)

¹⁸⁶ Note from the Director of Public Instruction in schools in Goalpara, Education A March 1929, ASF nos. 28-33.

¹⁸⁷ Correspondence between the Inspector of Schools, Assam Valley Circle, and the Director of Public Instruction in schools in Goalpara, Education A March 1929, ASF no. 29.

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nationalists expressed 'great alarm' at the manner in which 'Assamese was being driven out of the local boards of Goalpara district'.¹⁸⁸

Reflecting on these petitions, strands within the colonial discourse acknowledged the difficulties of working with the 'local option'. 'Originally it was assumed that once a majority of villagers voted for a particular language, there may be no demand...from the public for a change again', pointed out M. Saadulla, the then Minister of Education. However, in a situation 'where a petition for change was invariably followed by a counter petition',¹⁸⁹ modifications, clearly, had to be made in colonial policies. Instructions needed to be laid down, asserted officials, regarding 'whether a school should be allowed to change the language as often as there is a petition from a number of people'.¹⁹⁰ The introduction of bilingual schools¹⁹¹ was seen as a possible solution to the controversy but these were abandoned on grounds of potential government expenditure, including the production of textbooks in two languages and an increase in the school staff.¹⁹² Offering a temporary resolution to the colonial state's predicament, R. Friel suggested 'greater powers for the local boards in ascertaining that 'the majority of the villagers who may be concerned with the school

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Chandradhar Barooah, Secretary of the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, to the Government of Assam, 8 February 1929, Education A March 1929, ASF no. 30. A counter petition from Saifur Rahman, President of the Anjuman-i-Islamia, dated 28 February 1929, asserted that Bengali was the prevailing language of the district' and accused the Sarbajanik Sabha of attempting to 'extirpate Bengali from the district'. (Ibid.)

¹⁸⁹ Correspondence between the Inspector of Schools and the Director of Public Instruction, March 1929.

¹⁹⁰ Letter from G. A. Small, Acting Director of Public Instruction, Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, 8 January 1929, Education A, March 1929, Assam Secretariat Proceedings.

¹⁹¹ In a note in the file Education B September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289, P. C. Dutta states that 'where local opinion was substantially strong, provision may be made for teaching in both languages'. (Education A March 1929, ASF nos. 28-33). Again, the Inspector of Schools observed that 'it appears that there are already a number of schools in the district where both the languages are taught'. (Correspondence between the Inspector of Schools and the Director of Public Instruction, March 1929).

¹⁹² J. Cunningham's report to the Government, 20 October 1923. (Education B, September 1924, ASF nos. 273-289)

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were consulted'. Friel also suggested for a provision, which allowed the minority community in the village to demand an extra teacher in their language on the condition that they contributed towards his salary,¹⁹³ thereby keeping the option of bilingual teaching open.

That Goalpara continued to defy any unambiguous categorisation of its language was evident yet again in the report of the Census Commissioner of 1931. Despite the continued attempts to construct communities as entities with determinate and impermeable linguistic boundaries, C. S. Mullan observed that 'as might be expected in a district which is the meeting place of two languages, [it] has developed a dialect of its own.'¹⁹⁴ The new category of bilingualism that was introduced in the Census of 1931 (and which Mullan conceded applied to the people of Goalpara alone) also appears to have failed sufficiently as a tool of linguistic representation. The Commissioner was to remark that 'the true boundary of Assam from a linguistic point of view would be the line drawn from the north to south almost exactly half way through the middle of the Goalpara district'.¹⁹⁵ As late as 1940, an exception continued to be made in the linguistic policy for Goalpara although Assamese was the medium of instruction in the rest of the valley.¹⁹⁶

The evidence discussed in the section above would appear to suggest that colonial efforts at social engineering provide an insight into the ways in which people who lived inside these categories were capable of circumventing and undermining them. The subjectivity of the colonised, both individual and communitarian therefore,

¹⁹³ Letter from R. Friel, Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Director of Public Instruction, Assam, 19 February 1929, Education A, March 1929, ASF no.31.

¹⁹⁴ *Census of India, 1931, Volume III, Assam*, Shillong, 1932, p.177.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

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continued to constitute an important dimension in the discourse on identity in the region through the entire colonial period. The postcolonial state in Assam relied on the institutional continuity of the census but also enforced the idea of a 'majority' language in its attempt to accord legitimacy to the Assamese regional linguistic identity. The following quote from the Assam Gazette of 1948 articulates the state's preoccupation with cultural homogeneity and determinate linguistic boundaries:

The question of protecting the Bengali speaking minority of Goalpara district does not arise...the geographical territory of Assam can no longer be disturbed on any grounds of linguistic basis...Assamese must be the state language of the province. So the question of language is solved once and for all. The Assamese people as a whole will not tolerate any other language or culture imposed on theirs. All the languages of different communities and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture.¹⁹⁷

To conclude, during the emergence of an Assamese linguistic identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, its proponents drew from the colonial linguistic project as well as from indigenous cultural reserves to create a political community that threatened to subsume that imaginings of a region in Goalpara. Resistance to the imposition of a standardised vernacular from the conservative traditional elite in Goalpara transformed language into a symbol for this class while also becoming associated with other social roles and group identities. In all these processes, this chapter has argued, the colonial imagination of languages and categories played a significant role. It set the terms for the creation of a public space and the standardisation of language in the region. However, the colonial project was also moulded in various ways by responses from the colonised. The significance of

¹⁹⁶ M. Kar, 'Assam's Language Question in Retrospect', *Journal of the Indian School of Social Sciences*, Vol.4, September 1975, p.33.

¹⁹⁷ Nilmoni Phukan in the *Assam Gazette*, Vol.VI, Guwahati, 1948, pp.581-582.

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the autonomy and agency of the colonised appears to have become more evident in another discourse of legitimacy used by the colonial state, that of history writing. The frequently anachronistic nature of several of these writings, which allowed for a construction of the history of Goalpara as a unified entity and the imagining of a collective identity within this narrative structure of history, forms the central concern of the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Writing Histories: Counter Narratives and the Idea of a Goalparia Identity

The previous chapters have explored the transformation of pre-existing relationships in Goalpara under colonial rule and the reconstitution of territories and communities as bounded entities by the latter half of the nineteenth century. Apart from altering the nature of connections between Goalpara and neighbouring regions like Bhutan and Tibet, which were beyond the newly drawn boundaries of colonial territory, the colonial state's economic needs and forms of knowledge created new inner civilisational and political boundaries. This chapter explores the response of history writing from Goalpara and also from Assam to these changes in political and cultural boundaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It looks at some of the ways in which the idea of a region and the imagining of a collective identity were negotiated within the narrative structure of history writing during this period. In particular, it looks at the response of this narrative to the irrevocable altering of shifting alliances, shared sovereignties and ambiguous affinities that had existed between settled, hilly and forested polities, and argues that these changes effected ideas as well as material relations.

The uses of history writing to create a sense of nationhood through an evoking of a collective historical consciousness have been explored by several scholars, who have looked at the project of writing nationalist history as one of power and

representation.¹ And yet, while being 'agendas for power' in their own right and resisting colonial domination, these nationalist histories almost invariably told the story of the successful emergence of a nation. The new forms of knowledge that accompanied colonialism and informed the writing of history in our period transformed this writing into a form of resistance to colonial power but simultaneously submerged several regional histories.

Characterised by what Partha Chatterjee terms a 'tidal wave of historical memory about Arya-Hindu-Bharatvarsha',² nationalist histories were frequently based on Orientalist 'rediscoveries of India's past' and the readings of or translations of texts which generally produced an idea of India and its past within a Sanskritic tradition and colonial political borders. As in other parts of colonial India, histories from Assam partially subscribed to this tradition, either by reinforcing it or by presenting it as uniquely able to accommodate and absorb variety. The histories from Goalpara, on the other hand, represented another way of responding to the new boundaries, to associated historical claims and positivist empirical standards of history writing. Further, these histories often dissented from the larger surrounding units, claiming parity with them.

¹ Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications*, Calcutta, 1988; Daud Ali (ed.) *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, New Delhi, 1999; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments, Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993; Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', in Partha Chatterjee and David Arnold (eds.), *Subaltern Studies, Vol. VII*, Delhi, 1993.

² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p.6.

Section I: A narrative of accommodation: nineteenth century histories from Goalpara

If the formation of a region is about the creation of different prerequisites (including a new kind of boundary, sovereignty, margin) at different moments of time and place, then, for the newly created colonial province of Assam in 1874 one of them was the role played by history writing in constructing the notion of an enduring past. Over half a decade, beginning with the colonial annexation of the Ahom kingdom in 1826, a series of military conquests in the easternmost frontiers of the colonial territories in India identified and concretised the limits of the province of Assam.

This involved the integration of territories including Goalpara which colonial officials recognized were ethnically disparate and historically unconnected to the rest of Assam.³ This process in the second half of the nineteenth century, which included the demarcation of boundaries between the region of the Garo Hills and Goalpara, the annexation of the Eastern Dooars, and the inclusion of Goalpara in the province of Assam, created the conditions for the writing of a new kind of history from Assam which could accommodate the changes initiated under colonial rule within its constructed narrative of historical and regional continuity. To quote Thongchai Winichakul writing about a similar role played by the narratives of history in the context of nineteenth century Siam, 'the demand for a new account at a time when there is a tension in the moments of continuity and discontinuity is not uncommon...the turbulent times were never suppressed or erased from memory. Rather they were fully recognized but only to be shaped and explained in such a way

³ Letter from J.E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, 12 March 1919, Shillong, Ninth Despatch on Indian Constitutional Reforms, Q/IDC/46, OIOC.

that the ruptures were accommodated to an enduring past'.⁴ The colonial constitution of the region of Assam similarly resulted in the production of a nationalist historiography located within an anachronistic context to create a sense of unbroken continuity on the life of the region. This provides the broad context within which to locate the process of reconstruction of Goalpara's past in histories from the region.

From the late nineteenth century onwards histories from Assam attempt to offer a clear and unambiguous narrative of the emergence of the region. In Goalpara, although the literature is scarce and scattered, unlike the history writing from the district in the early decades of the twentieth century, we have evidence of the emergence of a mixed body of history writing. This scattered body of writing included a few texts with claims to being formal histories, some historical atlases of the region of Goalpara, *vamshavalis* (family histories) and genealogies commissioned by local zamindars, sections of printed lectures delivered to political and cultural associations in the district, and several essays published in periodicals. Unlike mainstream history writing from Assam, these were not the works of major historians and it is difficult to see them as forming a continuous political tradition of history writing. This is partly because, despite its claims to an alternate past, this body of writing was subsumed quite definitively in the grand narrative of Assamese nationalist historiography by the first half of the twentieth century. Further the collectivities, which used these alternative narratives as a technique of staying together and reinforcing their boundaries, were similarly suppressed to make way for the claims of the emerging region of Assam.

⁴ T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, University of Hawaii, 1994, p.142.

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We compare here two texts from the late nineteenth century, the *Asam Buranji* (*History of Assam*) which, to quote the author, was a study of Assam 'from the earliest times to the end of 1875', and the *Bijni Rajvamsha*, a family history of the zamindar of Bijni, a small chieftainship that was integrated into the district of Goalpara under colonial rule. This comparison will show how alternate constructions of Goalpara's pre-colonial past negotiated with representations in mainstream history writing from late nineteenth century Assam. The *Asam Buranji* by Gunabhiram Barooah is a good example of the historical memory of the emerging Assamese intelligentsia during this period. Most members of it had received a western or western influenced education in Calcutta and hence had been exposed to the influences of European historiography. Barooah's work marked the beginning of a fairly continuous tradition of history writing in Assam, which reflected clear elements of a nationalist historiography by the early decades of the twentieth century.

The histories from Assam during this period however, did not constitute a tightly coherent historiography which expressed uniform views through a time span of several decades. The historiography expressed differences of nuance, emphases and points of view. These differences and contradictions were frequently located in the need to accommodate the objective reality of colonial rule in the region with the claims on the past being made by the present. Colonial rule meant the imposition of hard territorial boundaries and unchanging and fixed categories. The reliance of texts like Barooah's on empiricism allowed him to acknowledge that 'Assam' is a modern term for the region. And the boundaries that have been determined now did not exist earlier either...There is no mention of Assam in the *Mahabharata* and the

Kalikapurana. The term 'Assam' is a derivation from the term Ahom for the dynasty that ruled the region of Upper Assam'.⁵ At one point in the narrative, the *Asam Buranji* dates the determining of the boundaries of the region to the sixteenth century when 'the river Karatoya was determined as the boundary between the Ahom kingdom and the Mughal territory of Bengal, prior to which the boundaries of Assam were constantly changing'.⁶ In the introduction of another text, Lakhinandan Bora's *Asamor Sankhshep Itihas (A Brief History of Assam)*, the author recognizes the possibility of the borders of Assam not being historically immutable and consistent.⁷

This evident acceptance of the historical fact that those boundaries were to an extent recent and also arbitrary was however challenged by the demands of historical continuity from the newly created province of Assam. The formation of this province in the late nineteenth century meant that a dominantly reassuring account of the past had to be produced which could give the region a territoriality that had existed from immemorial times. There was a tension between admitting the complexity of the historical facts and the need to give the emerging Assamese nation a past, as it were. The attempt to resolve it necessitated a reification and ahistoricizing of Assam. Thus although they could not be described as nationalist texts in the strict sense, several texts from nineteenth century Assam certainly appealed to ideas of a continuous past and space, appropriations of the past that occur in other nineteenth century history texts as well.

Gunabhiram Barooah's *Asam Buranji*, for instance, begins by defining the geographical space that he identifies as the historical reality of the modern province of

⁵ Gunabhiram Barooah, *Asam Buranj*, (*History of Assam*) Calcutta, 1876, p.7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

Assam. Establishing a political realm purely through the process of historical projection, the *Asam Buranji* locates Assam as 'the country in the northeastern corner of Bharatvarsha...most parts of which were within the limits of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa. Apart from the present province of Assam, the region of Jalpaiguri and Rangpur in Bengal and the kingdom of Cooch Behar were also within the boundaries of the kingdom of Kamrup.'⁸ The construction of this idea of a realm of a 'Greater Assam' (which became more articulated in the early twentieth century) required the evoking of a classical past located in essentially unchanging superior civilizational values. Within this idea of a 'core civilization', Assam's past was that of the glorious history of the kingdom of Kamarupa. 'This country is ancient...from ancient times it has been the abode of rishis and the centre of civilization and prosperity,' says the *Asam Buranji*. This glorious history of ancient Assam was also at times represented as an Aryan past so that, despite the ancient realm having been ruled by several non Aryan rulers, 'it was the worship of Vedic goddesses including the *Debi* which was prevalent'.⁹

The attempts to create national solidarity by evoking a historical memory of a classical past of the region are not as evident in the historical consciousness of this period as in later writings, but there was the creation of a realm of a permanent and indivisible territoriality. This required a frequent collapsing of the boundaries between myth and history. This was visible in descriptions of the extent of the kingdom of

⁷ Lakhinandan Asamar *Sankshsep Itihas (A Brief History of Assam)*, Guwahati, 1875, p.4.

⁸ G. Barooah, *Asam Buranji*. There are similar descriptions of the geographical entity that was Assam in other texts from the late nineteenth century.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Kamarupa and its achievements.¹⁰ Within this pre-determined political territory, Assam's sovereignty over the outlying provinces and tributary chieftainships of the pre-colonial period was represented as undisputed through history. Most of the texts invoke figures of glorious mythical kings of Kamarupa who became part of a dynastic sequence that ended with the rule of the Koch dynasty in the seventeenth century. The *Asam Buranji* identified the several dynasties that ruled over this permanent and indivisible country and included the Koch kings of the *Bijni Rajvamsha* within it.¹¹ The text begins the dynastic sequence with the mythical kings of the kingdom of Kamarupa: 'In the beginning there was Mahiranga Danab, and then Narakasura and Bhagadattta. After Naraka's dynasty, the Kshtriyas, then the Brahmaputras, then the Baro Bhuyans and then the Muslims ruled over Assam'.¹² In the tradition of what Partha Chatterjee calls 'Puranic history',¹³ Gunabhiram Barooah explains dynastic changes in terms of divine intervention. Thus, Narakasura of the Asura dynasty was 'a powerful king who died at the hands of Krishna for his misdeeds'.¹⁴ The narrative then continues with the 'righteous rule of Bhagadatta', the son of Naraka, who 'fought bravely for the Pandavas and dharma with his elephants in the Mahabharata'.¹⁵ This historicizing of the myths, despite the positivist allegiances of the writer, to evoke images of 'a golden past' was indicative of the role that the Assamese intelligentsia was beginning to envisage for history writing in the making of a region in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁰ Commenting on the significance of the Puranas as a source of history, Gunabhiram Barooah explained that they formed the main source of knowledge for his construction of the history of ancient Assam. (G. Barooah, *Asam Buranji*, p.7)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.31.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, p.85.

¹⁴ G. Barooah *Asam Buranji*, p.8

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Locating the *Bijni Rajvamsha* in a similar if parallel tradition of historiography proves to be a more difficult exercise. It was commissioned as a family history by the Raja of Bijni, Kumud Narain Bhoop, in the early 1870's. In the period after the collapse of Mughal rule in the late eighteenth century, Bijni was one of the most powerful chiefdoms in the region, which later came to form the colonial district of Goalpara. It straddled the hills of the Eastern Dooars and the plains below and in other areas shared its sovereignty with the rulers of Cooch Behar, Bhutan, Assam and Tibet.¹⁶ In the preface to the text, the author Tarini Prasad Sen attributed his work to the 'encouragement that he received from the Raja Bahadur ' and from the Dewan of Bijni estate who provided him with the necessary papers to construct a genealogy of the kings of Bijni.¹⁷ The text recounts the history of the dynasties that ruled Bijni, through a series of episodes concerning certain selected heads. Those events, which were necessary for establishing the origins of the present Bijni king, were considered most significant. With the genealogies providing the basic narrative frame of the text, the *Bijni Rajvamsha* covers a period of around four hundred years beginning in the mid fifteenth century AD.

The principal purpose of any *vamshavali* in the late nineteenth century was to narrate the past of the region in a manner that would help establish the rights of the rulers. Thus, the concluding sections of the Bijni *vamshavali* are largely in the form of an appeal to the colonial government to restore some amount of autonomy to the erstwhile Raja who had been settled as a zamindar of the Bijni estate.¹⁸ Through much

¹⁵ Ibid., p.9

¹⁶ See Section II of Chapter II.

¹⁷ Tarini Prasad Sen, *Bijni Rajvamsha (The Chronicle of the Bijni dynasty)*, Goalpara, 1876.

¹⁸ Sen, *Bijni Rajvamsha*, p.123.

of the text, these claims of the Raja are sought to be constructed through a narration of events which allowed Bijni to be represented as a determinate region, with clear and fixed boundaries in the pre-colonial past, and as an area which included most parts of the colonial district of Goalpara. In the anachronistic narrative that Tarini Sen constructed, a clearly bounded political entity of Goalpara appeared to replace the non-bounded hierarchical political realm of the pre-colonial period.

The text begins with the author identifying the rulers of the Koch dynasty as the rulers of the region, whose descendants, it was suggested, continued to rule Bijni in the late nineteenth century. This was followed by a description of the extent of the kingdom of the various Koch kings 'who ruled Bijni and the rest of Goalpara through the centuries... Under the rule of the first most powerful ruler of this dynasty, the boundaries of the kingdom were extended to include the kingdom of Pragjyotisha in the east and Cooch Behar in the west'.¹⁹ The rule of Naranarayan and Chilarai who were among the most powerful kings of this dynasty during the sixteenth century, was followed by a period of rule under the Mughals, during which, the author asserted, 'Bijni maintained complete independence and paid only 85 koris annually to the Emperor'.²⁰

The rigidifying of Goalpara's political space and the assumption of its unambiguous sovereignty within the domains of local history becomes even more evident in the elaboration of the details of the battles fought by the several dynasties from this region with the Ahoms who ruled over most parts of the Brahmaputra valley. In mainstream Assamese historiography, the Mughal invasions of the Ahom kingdom

¹⁹ Ibid., p.104

²⁰ Ibid.

during the seventeenth century formed a sustaining example of foreign threats against which the country was successfully defended. These invasions, are however, represented rather differently in the *Bijni Rajvamsha*. There are several pages of descriptions of the techniques of war used by the Koch king Jayanarayan to win the war on behalf of the Mughals against the Assamese. The war ends with the Koch king taking over 'the fort of the Assam king and beheading several Assamese soldiers while the army of the Samrat [the Mughal Emperor] started blowing the victory bugle'.²¹

The text notes that 'as a token of gratitude for the help that he received from the Koch king Jayanarayan of Goalpara, Ram Singha, the Mughal general, praised him for his strategies and reinstated him as the king of Pragjyotishpur, the kingdom of his ancestors'.²² The narrative goes on to describe the eventual submission of the Koches to the Mughals in the eighteenth century and the temporary reduction of their status to that of tributaries. The story ends with an emphasis on the tradition of freedom enjoyed by the ruler of Bijni, expressions of loyalty to the colonial government and an appeal to include the territories that were historically a part of the kingdom within the permanently settled estate of Bijni.²³

The above details may seem repetitive and as suggested in the beginning of the discussion of the text , may also appear to have been written keeping the colonial state in mind with the objective of securing privileges for the zamindar of Bijni. However, these details are important for our story as they also question the manner in which conventional history writing from Assam, particularly from the early decades of the twentieth century, set about the task of determining which pasts were to be accounted

²¹ Ibid., p. 65.

²² Ibid.

for. While the narrative of the text may frequently appear to be vulnerable and even unsatisfactory, the alternative ways of remembering the past that it suggests are significant also because such voices have gone almost unnoticed in contemporary histories from Assam where the historical rights of the colonial province of Assam have been privileged over those of smaller regions. It is significant, for instance that while these writings from Goalpara contributed to the mainstream idea of a classical past, this contribution was often a partial one.

This is evident in the response in these writings to the process of hardening of cultural and political boundaries that accompanied the subordination of forest communities and the consolidation of inner frontiers under colonialism. In the decades preceding the formation of the province of Assam, the colonial state's application of a unified political authority in a region of multiple sovereignty had systematically dismantled the pre-existing ties between forest polities and settled areas. In the region which came to form the colonial district of Goalpara, large parts of the chieftainships like that of Bijni and Sidli were marked out as 'protected forest reserves'. The colonial state's assistance to zamindars of settled areas against forest polities like the Garos furthered the creation of inner frontiers.

These developments increasingly led these chiefs to disassociate themselves from the now relatively powerless forest communities, also as they no longer needed to create shared sovereignties to sustain their authority. This greater rigidity of social definition that had been brought about by colonial rule in the region appeared to have been reinforced in the mainstream historical narratives from Assam from the late nineteenth century. Claims are put forward in these writings of the civilizational

²³ Ibid. ,p. 107.

superiority of the plains in order to reinforce the concretising and delimiting of the 'others' whose political and social space was demarcated as outside that of the plains.

This process of identifying the 'others' can be traced back to mid-nineteenth century texts from Assam in which such claims were being used to create a regional community comprising of the inhabitants of the plains and excluding the communities living in the surrounding hills. In a textbook which was introduced in the primary schools of Assam, the author, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, ²⁴ dwelt on the differences between the Mikirs, the Garos and other hill communities, with the population of the plains: 'There are differences between the people of different countries. There are the civilized and the uncivilized. The people of this country, and the Mikirs, the Garos and other hill people are not the same. They are uncivilized and we are superior to them in all respects. Some of them do not know how to cultivate ...they lead nomadic lives. They build their houses with bark and they are very uncomfortable to live in. Most of them are naked and do not know the art of weaving or of cooking'.²⁵

In Phukan's reading of the relationship between civilization and topography, therefore, civilization was synonymous with sedenterisation and defined by certain essential unchanging customs. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, informed by European discourses of rationality and historicity exemplified in the colonial ethnographic works on the region, these differences were being used to articulate the collective though as yet indeterminate 'we' of the emerging Assamese nation. The

²⁴ Dhekiyal Phukan was a member of the nascent Assamese intelligentsia and served in several positions with the colonial administration in Assam in the mid nineteenth century.

²⁵ Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, *Asamiya Larar Mitra (The Assamese Boy's Friend)*, edited by Gunabhiram Barooah, Goalpara, 1875. First published: Calcutta, 1849.

Koches who ruled Goalpara were frequently described as 'a community which had sections living in the forests' and was hence 'uncivilized'. The Daflas similarly were 'very cruel and violent', while 'the Bhuts [or the inhabitants of Bhutan hills] were the more civilized'. Of all these communities, the Ahoms were described as 'sharing the closest similarities with our people...[as] they did not live in the hills anymore'.²⁶ The examples are endless. The relationship between the forested hills and the surrounding areas was represented as a fundamentally antagonistic one, with periodic raids being seen as the most dramatic expression of this antagonism.²⁷

In the writings from Goalpara, on the other hand, there is a willingness to recognise a different relationship between topography and civilization. While attempting to identify a similar collective 'we' for the region, they are silent about civilizational boundaries between settled and forest communities. Thus the *Bijni Rajvamsha* and some of the other genealogies and local histories from Goalpara appear to tell another story within the same past. The space of their histories was informed by similar certainties of political boundaries in the context of the region of Goalpara. However, they simultaneously pointed to the discrepancies and ambiguities involved in the creation of a new past for the region of Assam. As the *Bijni Rajvamsha* illustrates, the collapse of the Mughal empire, meant that smaller regional chiefdoms like that of the Koch kings which were at both the ecological and political periphery, took on a new importance in the region.

In its story about the mythical origins of the Koch dynasty, for instance, the text focuses on one of the popular legends in the region of Goalpara and Assam---the

²⁶ G. Barooah, *Asam Buranji*, p.25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26

rebuilding of the Hindu temple of Kamakhya by the Koch king, Naranarayan, in the sixteenth century.²⁸ There appears to have been several versions of the legend in the late nineteenth century when these texts were being written. The parts which were included within the *Bijni Rajvamsha* were those that traced the movement of the Koch community from the ecological and political peripheries to the 'centre'. It includes the representation of the Koch king, Naranarayan, as the chief of a forest polity and his subsequent transition into the ruler of a vast settled kingdom that included large parts of colonial Assam as well.

According to the text, the legend tells us the story of how Naranarayan, while out hunting in the forests with his brother Chilarai and his followers, wandered off by himself and lost his way. He then discovered the site of the abandoned temple of Kamakhya in the middle of the forested hills²⁹. From the same legend, the *Bijni Rajvamsha* then describes in considerable detail the episode in which Naranarayan is transformed into a devotee of the goddess Kamakhya, and the subsequent renovation of the temple during his reign³⁰ as well as during the rule of the later Koch kings. Henceforth, the story in the legend is that of a settled bounded Hindu kingdom. One could suggest however that the representation of the relationship between the forest and the Koch rulers indicates an attempt to portray a complementary relationship between the hilly forests and the settlement in the plains below. There are several references to the legend in other texts from both Goalpara and Assam during this period. In the histories from Assam, the earlier part of the legend is invariably left out

²⁸ Ibid.,p.20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ According to another popular legend from both Assam and Goalpara, the stone statues inside the temple of Kamakhya are those of the Koch king Naranarayan and his brother Chilarai.

and the story tends to begin with the renovation of the Kamakhya temple by Naranarayan.

Again, in another history text from Goalpara, Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch dynasty, is described as the chief of a community of Koch hunters.³¹ In what appears to be an acceptance of the idea that the Koches, the community to which Biswa Singha belonged, were originally a group of wandering hunters, the legend tells of the difficulties encountered by Biswa Singha while worshipping the goddess on account of his ignorance of the accepted forms of rituals.³² These difficulties were eventually resolved, and Biswa Singha's family, particularly his son Naranarayan, was then associated with the worship and the renovation of the most important Hindu temple in the region. The inclusion of this part of the legend into the text implies a distance of the Koch community from what was increasingly emerging as the 'mainstream culture' of the area. It also suggests an acceptance (or memory) of both the incorporation of new groups into the fold of the Hindu community and their transition to a more settled way of life.

The frontiers of difference are visible but less so than in the histories from Assam during the same period. Instead of identifying the forest and unsettled communities as the definitive others, the *Bijni Rajvamsha* and other texts tell a story of ambiguities and the transition. Such representations were true for both genealogies and family histories commissioned by the zamindars as well as for history texts published independently by sections of Goalpara's intelligentsia. The recognition of these transitional processes indicates new ways of responding to the imposition of hard

³¹ Prakash Chandra Barooah, *The History of the Koch kings of Goalpara*, Goalpara, 1882, p.22.

³² *Ibid.*, p.25.

categories by colonial rule and to associate historical claims. There is also an admission of the existence of plurality and of the possibility of identities not being coextensive with boundaries.

Section II: Resisting and reproducing appropriation: history writing in the twentieth century

By the early decades of the twentieth century, colonial developments, including the rise of Assamese as a distinct regional language had made a clearer identification of the idea of an Assamese nation and a collective 'Assamese' community possible. Mainstream history writing, which was recognised as playing an important role in creating this sense of a region, built up a plausible and powerfully articulated narrative of the province's immemorial past. As would be expected, this narrative displayed the characteristics of other dominant narratives from this period. This included an emphasis on historicity as the correct means of retrieving the past. However, while the existence of a tradition of history writing was seen as an indicator of the degree of civilization and rationality, history texts from Assam did not begin with a lament for the absence of historical consciousness among the people of the region.³³ Rather Assam's historians asserted that 'The writing of history has always been a tradition in Asam Desh...[and was] revived after a brief break that was caused by the Burmese invasions in the end of the eighteenth century'.³⁴

³³ For instance, there is none of the reproach for the absence of 'a proper history' which reflected an awareness of the region's past and selfhood that characterises nationalist histories from Bengal from this period. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Imaginary Institution of India' and Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 1995.

³⁴ G. Barooah, *Asam Buranji*, p.8

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This identified tradition of history writing was that of the *Buranjis*, which were political chronicles from the Ahom period. By the first half of the twentieth century, several of these texts had been 'recovered', translated and published by individuals frequently commissioned by the colonial state and by institutions set up to promote the formal study of history in Assam, including the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Guwahati. Several officials of the colonial state participated in this 'recovery' of 'indigenous traditions of history writing' from the late nineteenth century onwards. Edward Gait, the Director of Ethnography during this period, published a detailed *Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam* in 1897 in which he listed the 'several *Ahom Buranjis* discovered in the houses of several people.'³⁵ Introducing them as 'descriptions of the Ahom rulers and their reigns', Gait classified the *Buranjis* as historical texts, as opposed to genealogies which he categorised as 'quasi historical writings'.³⁶

In his introduction to his *A History of Assam*, Gait identified the *Buranjis* as early forms of rational history writing from the region's pre-colonial past and asserted that they could be treated as historical records and were generally very trustworthy.³⁷ 'The inhabitants of other parts of India had no idea of history. On the other hand, the Ahom conquerors of Assam were 'endowed with the historical faculty in a very high degree', suggested Gait. He went on to attribute the Ahoms' historical sense to 'their

³⁵ Edward Gait, *A Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam*, Shillong, 1897, Introduction.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1905, p.11.

priests and leading families [who] possessed Buranjis which were periodically brought up to date'.³⁸

Gait was lauded for his efforts by nationalist historians from Assam in the early twentieth century, in particular for his recognition of the existence of historical consciousness in the pre-colonial period. In his editor's introduction to one such published *Buranji*, Hemchandra Goswami details the efforts of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1894, Sir Charles Lyall, for the preservation of these Buranjis 'which had not yet been destroyed': 'He [Lyall] had sanctioned some funds for the purpose...The Secretary of the Treasury, Sir Edward Gait, was commissioned to begin historical research in Assam. As a result of his research and investigations, 6 Buranjis written in the Ahom language and 11 Buranjis written in the Assamese language were found. This text is one of those 11 texts'.³⁹ The writings of Goswami and several other historians from Assam during this period, repeat the assertion that historical consciousness existed in pre-colonial Assam. Thus is allowed an appropriation of these Buranjis from the medieval Ahom period into a broader 'Assamese tradition' of history writing. These writings then located twentieth century history writing within this tradition, thereby simultaneously giving the nascent Assamese nation both a history and a tradition of writing it.⁴⁰

These assertions were accompanied by the notion of a 'true historical account'. 'The ancient Hindus had a different notion of what is history' suggested the historian Hem Chandra Goswami. 'They used the word *itihāas* [history] in a very broad sense to

³⁸ Ibid., p.10.

³⁹ Hemchandra Goswami, Introduction, *Purani Asam Buranji (The History of Ancient Assam)*, Guwahati, 1922.

include Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksa. They depended on divine intervention in the final results. They did not consider the listing of names of rulers as a matter of national pride'.⁴¹ This was contrasted with the tradition of writing *Buranjis* from the Ahom period which, it was argued, 'was based on scientific methods [and where] the truth was of utmost importance'.⁴² Goswami also suggested that the 'the prevalence of truth in these *Buranjis* could be verified from the fact that the information provided in several *Buranjis* tally. The information could be verified further with dates on stone tablets and copper plates'.⁴³ Archaeological remains were thus incorporated into the map of Assam as Lakshminath Bezbaroa argued that 'after Huien Tsang's departure and till the middle of the twelfth century we have no accounts of Assam. With the help of inscriptions on rock faces we can now throw light on this period'.⁴⁴

The repeated exhortations to the Assamese people to discover their own past were therefore located in the idea that a region could be imagined within the realm of history.⁴⁵ The emphasis on a scientific rational history was also extended to attempts at revealing the historical core of epics and other mythical texts. S.K. Bhuyan stressed the need to recognise the authenticity and historicity of the characters in the epic, *Mahabharata*, as well as the possibility of its use as a source of scientific history.⁴⁶ 'Hidden below the layers of myths and legends that comprised of this epic', argued

⁴⁰ 'Assam has a tradition of history writing from the thirteenth century onwards. It was considered a matter of shame for people of this country not to be learned in the history of the region'. (Ibid.)

⁴¹ Hemchandra Goswami, *Purani Asam Buranji*, Introduction.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ L. Bezbaroa, 'Assam', in *Banhi*, Vol.3, January 1911.

⁴⁵ 'We alone have to retrieve the history of our community and of our country, Assam. Only those *jatis* or communities which have succeeded in this have been recognised as civilized and educated', exhorted Kanaklal Barooah in his 'Presidential address to the History Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha' in Nanda Talukdar (ed.) *Kanaklal Barooah Racanavali*, Guwahati, 1973, p.27.

⁴⁶ S.K. Bhuyan, 'Address to the History Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', 1926, in Atul Chandra Hazarika and Jatindranath Goswami (eds.), *Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanavali*, Jorhat, 1961, p.45.

Bhuyan, is the 'original historical' text which forms a reliable source of the early history of the region.⁴⁷

Despite the privileging of the rational historical narrative over that of the mythical, the break between myth and history in these writings cannot be exaggerated. Myths evidently continued to be an essential part of the historical consciousness of the period with even 'real, objective history writing' attaching validity to it. Thus, *The Early History of Assam*, written by Kanaklal Barooah, the President of the Kamrup Anushilan Samiti, which was an institution promoting formal historical research in Assam, claimed to present 'a connected history of the old kingdom known as Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa from the earliest times till the end of the sixteenth century'.⁴⁸ Mythical history makes its way into the narrative as the author tells us that 'about 1000 years before the Christian era, the greater part of lower Bengal was probably under the sea while the greater part of northern Bengal was included within this kingdom. Allusions to the smaller kingdoms in Bengal then above the sea, are rare in the Aryan records, but Pragjyotisha is mentioned in the Epics and the Puranas'.⁴⁹

The persistence of mythical history allowed for an evoking of the elements of the 'ancient' and the notion of superior civilizational values. The image of the ancient glorious kingdom of Kamarupa emerges as a powerful theme in Assamese mainstream history and is important for our story as it included the region of Goalpara within it. Or

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ K.L. Barooah, *Early History of Kamarupa: From the earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century*, Shillong, 1933, Introduction.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.1 . There are several similar examples of the use of mythical history to invoke notions of a unified past, some of them from Assam's more established historians. ' We must go beyond the boundaries of conventional history for the earliest mention of Assam. A properly organised state existed in this region long before the struggle between the Brahminists and the Buddhists and is illustrated in the Mahabharata. In those remote times, Assam had a powerful voice in the affairs of the subcontinent '. (S.K. Bhuyan, 'Address to the History Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', p.46)

rather, as one of Assam's leading nationalist historians, S.K. Bhuyan, noted, 'Goalpara was not only an integral part of Kamarupa but the centre of this ancient civilization ... it was never an independent kingdom.'⁵⁰ Historians asserted that 'it is almost undisputed and has been suggested by scholars that Kamrup's capital in those times was either in the Goalpara district or in the region of Koch Bihar'.⁵¹ In making mythical capitals representative of the whole region the attempts of history writing to make identities co existent with modern boundaries were visible.

A projection of notions of exclusive sovereignty into the past allowed the boundaries of this ancient kingdom of Kamarupa to be seen as timeless and indivisible, while changes were represented as 'losses' of territory. Within such history writing, rulers from this past appeared as some form of national heroes. The list of these heroes begins with the mythical king Bhagadatta, 'who fought for the Kauravas' and is brought up to the medieval ruler Naranarayan, the Koch king who was claimed by Goalpara's historians.⁵² Naranarayan is described as 'one of modern Assam's three objects of pride', credited with a 'period of glorious revival and the restoration of territorial losses in the sixteenth century',⁵³ the other two being the temple of Kamakhya and the Vaishanva reformer, Sankardev. Thus, through standard nationalist elisions which submerged or ignored alternative claims to the regions past, this historiography negotiated with the relationship between history writing and boundaries.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.26.

⁵¹ L. Bezbaroa, 'Puroni Asamor Jilingoni Ati', ('A Glimpse of the Ancient History of Assam') *Banhi*, Vol.6, April 1910.

⁵² L. Bezbaroa, 'Asam', *Banhi*, Vol. 2, 1910, p.50.

⁵³ S. K. Bhuyan, 'Address to the History Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', p.30.

It was against this narrative and its evoking of a regional consciousness, that the agenda of a Goalparia historiography from this period was determined. The immediate context for Goalpara's historians setting out to claim for the region a past that has not been distorted by Assamese historiography is provided by a movement for a collective Goalparia identity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Based primarily on the notion of a shared linguistic and cultural identity, this idea of a collectivity as envisioned by Goalpara's elite, drew substantially from the notion of a shared historical experience distinct from that of Assam's. The body of history writing that this section looks at emerged, therefore, from within an arena of confrontation with mainstream Assamese historiography.

We begin by looking at a series of historical atlases of the region of Goalpara that were published in the early decades of the twentieth century. There were at least five such atlases published during this period. Unlike the genealogies of the nineteenth century these were not commissioned by local zamindars but were published independently by local authors, frequently through the Hitsadhini Press in Dhubri. We will focus on one such text, which was fairly representative of the others, *The Historical Atlas of Goalpara*, published in 1904. The author stated in the introduction to the text that the book was meant for 'scholarly use' and that its information differed from that being taught in the schools in Goalpara.⁵⁴ The maps in the atlas were not confined to those of the region of Goalpara from the colonial period. Rather, based almost purely on the historical memory of Goalpara's elite, the series proceeded to construct an entire scheme of what was represented to be the region's history.

⁵⁴ S. Barua, *The Historical Atlas of Goalpara*, Calcutta, 1905, Introduction.

The author's construction of these maps is informed by a knowledge of modern geography, for he apologizes for maps of which the 'boundary line may not be mathematically accurate, although they are as correct as available information allows...while the indefinite or unascertainable boundary lines of the district [had] been deliberately dropped'.⁵⁵ The earliest map is of what the author identifies as the unified region of 'Goalpara in the Puranic period'. The note accompanying the map tells us that according to the *Kalikapurana*, the *Bishnu Purana* and the *Mahabharata*, Goalpara formed part of a large kingdom, which consisted of the hills of Bhutan, the district of Rangpur in Bengal, the region of Cooch Behar and parts of the western Brahmaputra Valley.⁵⁶ The second map is a construction of the kingdom of Bhaskarvarman who was a contemporary of the king Harshavardhana and the extent of his kingdom is marked out as 1700 miles. This is followed by a map of the historical kingdom of Kamatapur and another of the establishment of the Koch dynasty by Biswa Singha in the sixteenth century. The last few maps are representations of the invasions of the region by the Nawabs of Bengal and the Mughal army and of the territories of the new colonial district of Goalpara.⁵⁷

Several themes emerge from these maps. The entire set taken together attempts to build an alternative history of the region of Goalpara. The historical sequence constructed in the atlas builds a story of the emergence and growth of a historically unified region called Goalpara. The several invasions of the king of Gaur and of the Ahoms, who ruled neighbouring Assam, are projected as minor ruptures in this story of continuity. The maps locate the political history of Assam very firmly outside this

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.5

story. A map depicting 'invasions by foreigners' was invariably followed by another of a consolidated and enlarged kingdom.⁵⁸ Once again, contemporary notions of exclusive sovereignty are read back into the past to make identities coexistent with boundaries.

However, there appears to have been a recognition of transitional processes as well and of the idea that fixed boundaries were recent products of colonial ideology. In a note accompanying the Puranic map of the mythical kingdom of Pragjyotisha, the author concedes that the boundaries of the region during that period 'changed all the time...they extended during the rule of the powerful kings and shrank during the rule of the weak rulers'.⁵⁹ But the establishment of the rule of Bhaskarvarman dated to the seventh century A.D. is recognised as marking the beginning of the historical period, one of unchanging boundaries. The atlas questioned the singularity of the Assamese nationalist narrative in other ways as well. The maps of the Puranic period and of the kingdom of Pragjyotisha gave the region a sense of continuity over time and civilization. They thus made the idea of a classical past for Assam, an uncertain one.

As discussed in the previous section, differences existed in the ways in which events from the past were classified, represented and interpreted in the writings from Goalpara and Assam from the late nineteenth century onwards. In the early decades of the twentieth century however, these differences were being used consciously to evoke a sense of historical consciousness in assertions of a collective Goalpraria identity and the subsequent movement for the separation of the region from Assam. This is evident in several of the lectures and publications of local political associations from the

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.23-29.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

district which convey an urgent need to reclaim the region's past. The reproaches and laments for the absence of a historical consciousness among the people in 'the ancient glory of Goalpara' indicate that the past was being increasingly used as a source for the production of collective identities by the region's elite. 'What could have happened to make us forget our ancient glory and pride? If we have indeed forgotten the glorious chapters in our region's history, then come, let us recollect them today!' exhorted Gaurinath Shastri in his presidential address to the Goalpara District Association.⁶⁰

This emphasis on the need to represent oneself is visible in the introductory sections of the few formal history texts from this period as well, where the authors located the process of the recovery of the classical past of Goalpara in the present. The Goalpara's intelligentsia should have felt orphaned in the absence of a long tradition of history writing from the region indicated their refusal to locate their writings within the medieval tradition of *Buranji* writing, unlike the mainstream histories from Assam. 'We have an identity that is independent of both Assam and Bengal. These differences have persisted since time immemorial...our identity is located in our region and our history reflects this'⁶¹ stated Prabhat Chandra Baruah.

History writing therefore needed to interpret the past in a way that was contingent with the expressions of a collective Goalparia identity. In the political discourse from Goalpara in the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a clearer identification of both a historically unaltered political realm of Goalpara and of the community which could act as the agent of assertion of a collective Goalparia

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.15.

⁶⁰ Gaurinath Shastri, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samitir Gauripur Adhibheshanar Sabhapatir Abhibhasan (Presidential Address to the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.3.

identity.⁶² The picture of an unruptured history that the maps in the historical atlases conveyed assumes greater significance when seen as a part of this political tradition of history writing. While acknowledging the limits of a rational construction of the ancient past of Goalpara, history writing reinforced the unambiguous sovereignty of Goalpara that these maps projected. Thus historians agreed that the beginning of the historical period could be dated to the seventh century AD, as the maps had represented.⁶³ The identification of a permanent political realm, it was conceded in all the writings, could be traced to the beginnings of the Kamatapur kingdom. This again was a reaffirmation of the historical sequence represented in the maps.

From this period, Goalpara's history was that of a 'frontier kingdom' which was located outside the narrative of the mainstream history of Assam.⁶⁴ 'The history of our district is the history of an independent frontier kingdom', stated the historian K.M. Dhar. 'Together with Jalpaiguri and Rangpur in northern Bengal and the region of Koch Behar, it formed part of the Kamatapur kingdom which was ruled by several dynasties through history, particularly from the seventh century onwards. This independent kingdom later spread eastwards to encompass Assam and westwards up to Munger'.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Prabhat Chandra Barua, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samiti, Abhyathana Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan (Presidential Address of the Welcoming Committee of the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.13.

⁶² See Chapter 4, Section II for a discussion of the role of language and the emergence of a public sphere in creating this new collectivity.

⁶³ Prabhat Chandra Barua, *Abhyathana Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan*, p.8.

⁶⁴ 'Prior to even the rise of the kingdom of Kamatapur in the thirteenth century, this frontier area was under the rule of Gaureswar. We can term this region as a 'frontier'. It was neither Assam nor Bengal', argued K.M. Dhar in his work *Purbabanga U Asamer Sankhipta Biboron (A Brief Description of East Bengal and Assam)* Silchar 1911, p.9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

The evoking of the period of the medieval kingdom of Kamatapur as the 'golden past' also allowed the colonial construction of the district of Goalpara to be represented as an artificial process which ignored the 'shared civilizational values' that existed in the region.⁶⁶ Further, anachronistic readings led the demarcation of modern district boundaries to be viewed as 'loss of territories of this frontier kingdom' while the notion of a 'great civilization' encompassing the districts of north Bengal mentioned above and the district of Goalpara, was used to explain the existence of a larger space of a 'Greater Goalpara' and its continuity over time, in these writings.

The 'recovery' of some texts which were believed to have been produced in the region in the pre-colonial period reinforced the attempts by the local intelligentsia to create an alternative historiography of Goalpara. Of the works that were edited and published by the local elite during this period, the 'recovery' of the text *Kabindra Mahabharata* was considered to be the most significant. The text was edited and published by the Dewan of the zamindari estate of Gauripur, Gaurinath Shastri. Shastri begins his introduction by alluding to the various controversies that had emerged over the question of correctly identifying the original composer of the text, the language and the region of its composition.

The fact that there were several versions of the original text by the early twentieth century did not make his task any easier. The introduction begins with a story of the search for the *Kabindra Mahabharata*, the manuscript of which, according to Shastri, 'was to be found in the region of Goalpara and Rangpur in Bengal since very early times.'⁶⁷ The author traces his search back to a community of people called

⁶⁶ Prabhat Chandra Baruah, *Abhyathana Samitir Sabhapatir Bhasan*, p.13.

⁶⁷ Gaurinath Shastri (ed.) *Kabindra Mahabharata*, Dhubri, 1930, p.1.

the Padkirtaniyas who he claimed 'lived in the region of Khuntaghat in Goalpara and sang parts of this *Mahabharata*'. He then tells us of how the text continues to live in the collective memory of the people of other areas of Goalpara⁶⁸ and finally traces a copy of the text in the archives of the zamindar of Gauripur.

The text is therefore located squarely within the history of the region. Shastri identifies its author as Kabindra Patra, who was a qanungo under the Mughals and was later recognised as the zamindar of Gauripur through a sanad. Kabindra Patra, the editor tell us, composed the text at the 'behest of the Paragal Khan, who was an official of Alauddin Khan who ruled over the region of Goalpara...each section of the text thus ends with a stanza in praise of Paragal's bravery and courage'.⁶⁹ Shastri dated the composition of the text to the sixteenth century and identified its language as Rajbansi, the language spoken in the region of Goalpara and parts of northern Bengal.⁷⁰ One could suggest that the recovery of the *Kabindra Mahabharata* and its eventual location within the tradition of history writing in Goalpara performed the function of reestablishing continuity in the writing of history from Goalpara.

Equally significant is the emphasis on an alternative modern historiography of Goalpara that was clearly articulated in Shastri's detailed introduction to the text. It is significant that the editor seeks proof of the historical authenticity of the text in contemporary history writing from Goalpara and Bengal and not in conventional history texts from Assam.⁷¹ Thus N.N. Vasu's *Social History of Kamarupa*, which was criticized as 'a false history with an incorrect representation of facts' by Assam's

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.1.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.5.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.8.

⁷¹ Shastri also quotes from the works of Rakhaldas Bandopadhyaya, a historian from Bengal.

mainstream historians⁷² is quoted extensively by Shastri when building a narrative of the history of pre-colonial Goalpara along with several passages from the *Darrang Raj Vamshavali*. The latter was another family history and genealogy of the Koch dynasty, which had been claimed by Goalpara's intelligentsia, and published by the colonial government. In the introduction to the text, one of Assam's nationalist historians described the Koch kings as having played an important role in Assam's past and 'expressed the hope that the book would help to restore the old happy relations between Goalpara and Assam'.⁷³ Critiquing the introduction, historians from Goalpara argued that such publications of local histories from Assam reflected a continued appropriation of these contiguous areas.

The production of history writing from Goalpara failed to influence either the colonial or the dominant historical narrative from Assam. Several of the texts from Assam that were discussed in the chapter provided some of the basic information for colonialist histories including Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*⁷⁴ and the several ethnographic treatises that were produced during this period. Yet, the histories from Goalpara did create an arena of confrontation, which made it difficult for the Assamese nationalist narrative to appropriate the past of the region completely. It is significant that these histories continued to be produced despite the introduction of history textbooks written by mainstream historians from Assam in Assamese.

Moreover, in some ways, these writings constituted more than a form of scholarly resistance for they also performed the political function of the historical

⁷² Rajani Kumar Padmapati, 'President's address to the fourth history session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha', 1930, in Atul Chandra Hazarika and Jatindranath Goswami (eds.), *Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanavali*, Jorhat, 1961, p. 58.

⁷³ Hemchandra Goswami (ed.) *Darrang Raj Vamshavali*, Guwahati, 1917, Preface.

narrative, that of producing and maintaining cohesion. By challenging the idea of a coherent 'Assamese national identity', the writing of counter histories from Goalpara suggested that 'the presence of identity is merely a temporary discursive conjuncture in which certain discourses have stabilized their hegemonic forces upon the domain. But other discourses always exist marginally in certain areas, and new ones can emerge to challenge, destabilise and displace the dominant discourses---thus reinscribing the domain and hence the identity'.⁷⁵

Thus, within the histories from Goalpara again, it is the story of the emerging region that is often heard to the exclusion of the histories of smaller tributaries and polities. The familiarity of Goalpara's elite with the new knowledge and technology of political space however meant that their representation of their region as a unified political entity frequently reproduced the subsuming structures of mainstream narratives that they sought to resist. Thus while making claims for an alternate past of the region, these narratives from Goalpara also simultaneously erased any signs of uncertain sovereignties and overlapping territoriality from the pre-colonial past, particularly in the histories of small polities like Bijni and Sidli in northern Goalpara. Because they failed to be born as legitimate political entities, they were subsequently annexed and made into integral parts of the new political space defined by new notions of sovereignty and boundary.

These attempts at erasing ambiguities of space between polities and communities once again transformed the project of history writing into a continuous process of displacement, one characterized by appropriations within appropriations.

⁷⁴ First published in 1905 from Calcutta.

⁷⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p.173.

Writing Histories

Several of the regional histories from this period thus have the characteristics of a strategic discourse, which contested key themes of nationalist historiography. The histories from Goalpara were built around a similar contestation of, and resistance to, the grand narrative of Assamese historiography. As in regional history writing from most parts of India during this period, the methods, concepts and framework of knowledge of this 'counter history' from Goalpara too were largely contained within the forms of post Enlightenment thought.⁷⁶

However, this chapter has argued that this 'counter history' from Goalpara also attempted to negotiate with the claims on the past, the demands of an empiricist methodology and the burden of colonial knowledge, through an independent application of the methods of history. Despite being used as a technique of reinforcing of community identities, the space of the historical narratives from Goalpara continued to be set by the objective reality of multiple sovereignties and fluid territorial and cultural boundaries in this 'historical frontier' between the regions of Bengal and Assam. This could perhaps explain the willingness of the authors of these histories to admit pluralism and accommodate transitional processes within the narrative structure, even while continuing to coincide identities with boundaries.

⁷⁶ See Partha Chatterjee on nationalist historiography from Bengal during this period in his *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p.9.

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The overarching story in this work has been about the transformation of Goalpara, a liminal space in many senses of the term, into a bounded colonial district, the subsequent articulation of a regional identity, and its eventual disintegration. The thesis began with an examination of conditions in late Mughal Goalpara, when a considerable degree of fluidity marked the social and physical environment. Thus the first chapter searched for the early imaginings of Goalpara as a region in the Mughal and early colonial writings, and emphasised both the process of sedenterisation and the evidence of easily-crossed boundaries between settled cultivation and other life-style choices. It argued that the character of the region as a peripheral and divergent political and economic space, with mobility as a defining feature, provides the background for studying the beginning of colonial intervention in the nineteenth century.

The later chapters of the thesis together looked at the rapid and profound modification brought about in the political economy of Goalpara by the colonial state, and the ways in which this helped shape the nature of other changes in local society. The second chapter explored how the colonial state pursued its ideal of a society based on settled cultivation, altered relations between settled and peripatetic communities, and integrated the region with the trading networks of eastern India, in the late nineteenth century. It argued that the regulation of commercial transactions, the prohibition of 'illegal cesses', and the replacement of pre-colonial custom houses with

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colonial ones were all measures that contributed towards the state's objective of creating an economically unified territory.

The changes in the political economy provided the material context for the accompanying replacement of indigenous notions of political space, which had been marked by a certain fluidity, with new ideas of sovereignty that relied on determinate political boundaries. Thus it was argued that markets were transformed into sites for confrontation as the colonial state gradually deprived them of their cultural and political underpinnings, particularly in the hilly reaches of northern Goalpara.

With the annexation of the Eastern Dooars in the late 1860s, the political unification of the district had been achieved. An entrenched state then proceeded to appropriate its acquired territory, and to intervene in and reconstitute the relations between state and society. Crucial to the process of consolidation was the introduction of new social categories and a reinforcing of the old ones, while institutions including colonial law provided the necessary legitimacy and rationale for the continuance of the system. These were the concerns of the third chapter which explored the ways in which political boundaries were fixed, communities enumerated and concepts of colonial law extended into aspects of everyday life. They were reflected too in the codification of customary practices. The project of mapping, particularly the determination of the boundaries between the surrounding Garo and Bhutan hills and Goalpara, was another strategy of legitimation, along with that of the census. The chapter suggested links between these changes and the imagination of larger collectivities, including a regional identity.

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These links were particularly evident in the various responses of local groups from the district at the turn of the century. The third chapter also discovered that, despite the evident domination of the state in the realm of political economy and culture, the colonised reinvented custom and tradition in order to negotiate with forms of colonial knowledge. They worked with the state's project of categorisation to create spaces for self-representation, and some even made successful use of the new economic opportunities. Changes in the political economy continued to influence social changes. In the early twentieth century, the migration of thousands of cultivators from the neighbouring districts in eastern Bengal not only transformed the pattern of demography and land use, but also introduced new ways of thinking about rights, law and categorisation.

The articulation of a Goalparia identity within the emerging public space during this period was a product of all these processes, and was primarily representative of the response of the educated traditional elite to changes under colonial rule. This response is the focus of the fourth and fifth chapters of the work. An important theme in both these chapters is the resistance, in writings on history and language from Goalpara, to the appropriation and standardisation attempted by the discourses of Assamese nationalism, and to a lesser extent by those of Bengali nationalism. Like other nationalisms, Assamese regionalism depended on endowing the Assamese community with a certain natural quality. This was an idea of the region as a given and timeless historical and cultural entity. It denied that conscious choices were involved in its formation. Clearly, however, there were moments of difficulty in fitting an Assamese language and culture of considerable antiquity, with a relatively

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new regional identity. Such moments required an extension of the narrative of the region to include other communities which had little to do with the Assamese. The fourth chapter argued that the writings from Assam from this period offer several such examples of the attempted appropriation of communities. The historical reconstruction of cultural and linguistic boundaries and the inclusion of Goalpara within the linguistic map could therefore be seen as a response that might both reinstate the dominant nationalist narrative and strengthen a vulnerable regional identity.

As in the rest of the thesis, in these chapters the emphasis was on regional specificities that continued to provide the context for the use of language, folklore and history by Goalpara's elite, as they imagined a cultural identity for the region. While frequently reproducing the same structures as those used by the dominant Assamese nationalist narrative, the writings from Goalpara also reflected and accommodated the persistence of ambiguities and fluidities. These, it was argued, were characteristic of the region's society and economy even in the middle of the twentieth century.

The significance of a concept of difference has been long emphasized with regard to the construction of collective identities. It is of interest, therefore, that from the later part of the 1920s, concern was expressed within Assamese nationalist writings over the increasing settlement of land by migrants from eastern Bengal, and that this appeared gradually to extend into a consistent construction of them as the Other of Assamese society. Instances of conflict over resources between the migrants and the 'indigenous Assamese' were now frequently viewed in terms of cultural difference, reinforcing an idea of Bengali migrants as the opposite against which Assamese identity was predicated. The debate over the proposed abolition of the Line

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System represented in several ways a culmination of such conflicts. The System, adopted in 1920, involved the drawing of a line across districts with a large migrant population from Bengal in order to separate their settlements from those of the 'native Assamese'. What had originated as a measure to offer economic security to the 'indigenous population',¹ now overlapped in official reports with constructions of the immigrant as 'the troublesome neighbour...obsessed with far greater greed for land than the native of the Province...[and] often driven to commit offences and disturb the peace and tranquility of the Province'.²

The stereotypes are of particular interest, though repeated in countless other instances. They led to the inclusion, among the three reasons initially given for setting up the Line System, of the need to protect the 'easy going Assamese [who] could not put up a fight against the virile Mymensinghia'. Such colonial stereotypes also reinforced the ideas of difference that were reiterated in the evoking of a collective 'we' by the various strands within Assamese nationalism. It was partly by redrawing boundaries and the creating of 'domiciles' and 'natives', that the narrative of the Assamese nation excluded and divided communities during this period. In response to a memorandum submitted by the Assam Domiciled and Settler's Association, an organisation representing the interests of migrant communities in the Province, an Assamese nationalist leader observed that 'the problem of the domicile was not a superficial one. If it can be grafted into the national life, it works for vigour and strength but if it grows like weeds, wild and untrimmed, then the whole soil is ...unfit

¹ *Report of the Line System Committee*, Shillong, 1938, p.2.

² *Ibid.*, Chapter II.

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for any cultivation.³ 'Justice to the domiciled communities must be done', he continued, 'but not before one knows clearly who they are'. Responses from the 'domiciles' were along predictable lines, seeking assimilation into the imagined region: '[the domiciles] managed to merge themselves into the life of Assam, and their "Bengaliness", mingling with the local values, helped to create a new people. This interchange of values, this co-mingling of blood, is as true in the life of Assam as of every province in India.'⁴

However, although this might seem like the usual story of such nationalisms, it also raises another important issue: the extent to which discord and notions of difference were constructions of colonial rule. Goalpara's experience allows us to examine the process involved, in the response of local communities to the immigration from Bengal. The first wave of this migration was directed almost entirely towards Goalpara and, as has been discussed in the thesis, substantially changed the way people saw themselves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This immigration also explains my initial research interest in the region which was triggered by the belief that a demographic change on such a vast scale would undoubtedly create visible social and economic conflict between local communities and the migrants. Interestingly, however, there was little evidence of such a response to be found. On the contrary, the transitional nature of Goalpara's society, including the persistence of a certain fluidity in notions of cultural and linguistic boundaries, appears to have accommodated large numbers of settled cultivators in a manner that

³ Nilmoni Phukan, 'Notes on the Domicile Question', *Assam Tribune*, October 6, 1939. Phukan was then the President of the Jorhat Town Mouza, Congress Committee.

⁴ 'Social Composition of the Assamese People', Report from the Annual Conference of the Assam Domiciled and Settler's Association, 1940, PHA.

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was rather different from the rest of Assam. In his report on the response, or lack of it, to the debate over the Line System, from his district, the Goalpara Deputy Commissioner attributed this to 'the district being contiguous to Bengal, the language of the bulk of the people more akin to Bengali than Assamese and [hence] the indigenous people ... could easily accommodate themselves to the immigrants' ways and modes of life and ... the inherent hatred which local people entertain against the immigrants [was] non-existent'.⁵

The Deputy Commissioner believed in fixed essences so that the only reason he saw for the lack of reaction in Goalpara was its location between the 'fixed points' of Assam and Bengal. This thesis has argued that the fixed points appear through the efforts of agents and the impact of circumstances. Therefore, by this argument, the non-appearance of discord would appear to be attributable less to supposed similarities and more to the lack of a discourse of difference. What explains the lack of a response from Goalpara? To understand this, we need to consider the literature that argues for the significance of the historical context in the formation of identities. Several works have alerted us, for example, to the need to recognise caste as only one among several categories that were used for organizing and representing identity in the Indian context.⁶ Commenting on the nature of such identities in Bengal, in a recent work, Sekhar Bandopadhyay suggests that 'studies on caste, power and politics ... should

⁵ 'Report of the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, on the Immigrant Question in that District', *Report of the Line System Committee*, Shillong, 1938.

⁶ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton, 2001, Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi, 1998. Peter Robb, 'The Colonial State and the Construction of Indian identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880's', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No. 2, 1997, Willem Van Schendel, 'The Invention of the "Jummas": State Formation and Ethnicity in South Eastern Bangladesh' in Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, Abhijit Dasgupta and Willem Van Schendel (eds.), *Bengal, Communities, Development and States*, New Delhi, 1984, Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Richmond, 1997.

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focus on the conjunctural nature of social identities, that is, on the complex interplay between identities and their contexts, the changing meanings of boundaries and their markers, as well as the subtle interactions between the ideologies of protest and ambitions of power'.⁷ It is this transient nature of identity that is evident in the specific context of Goalpara as well. Unlike what might be supposed from the representations of the Deputy Commissioner of the district, Goalpara was neither 'fixed' nor (demographically) 'full', and it was these conditions that best explained its reaction to migrants. Rather than demonstrate some form of an essential Other in the Bengali immigrant, the expressions of a Goalparia identity continued to be moulded by new challenges and new kinds of interests. These in turn led to the construction of new narratives and types, including histories of Goalpara elites, folk myths expressing links with rather than opposition to forests, and so on.

As in other regions, identities in Goalpara were defined by a complex mix of economic, political and legal contexts, despite the role of the colonial state in shaping these contexts. The idea of Goalparia identity arose out of elements of a remembered past and a shared present that represented current interests and experiences, mainly of particular landed and educated elites; but those interests were not sufficient to enable it to grow and break away from its bigger neighbours in Assam and Bengal. The movement for a separate regional identity and demands for its assimilation into Bengal had become increasingly fragmented by the later period of the 1930s and disappeared altogether from colonial records afterwards. But this failure, and the political conditions in the ensuing period, also illustrate the importance of context and

⁷ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony, Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, 2004, p.36.

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contingency. The fragmentation of the Goalparia identity in the 1930s and 1940s was accompanied by the growth of other collectivities that were forged around notions of ethnicity, religion and class. These were frequently located beyond the district. The period saw an increased politicisation of the immigrant cultivators from Bengal and the emergence of leaders from the community, including Maulana Bhasani. At this time too, the Rajbanshi movement spread into the district; it implied negotiation with issues of caste and community beyond Goalpara. Finally, the influence of the Communist Party of India was growing, and there were the beginnings of class-based critiques of the zamindari system. The frequent indifference of all these collectivities to the idea of a Goalparia identity is a possible subject for future research. Like the Goalpara identity these solidarities too were confronted with the more powerful discourse of Assamese nationalism which threatened to subsume them.

Yet again, Goalpara illustrates the problems of trying to build a single trajectory through historical time without considering the significance of the contingent and the transient. The imagining of a Goalparia people affirms that regional cultural identities do not constitute some fixed and constant quantity of traits. Nor are they defined by some unchanging underlying essence. Instead, like any other collective identity, they are subject to historical processes that define their growth and eventual decay. An example from contemporary political movements illustrates this. The last chapter of the thesis explored the representation of the Kamtapur kingdom as a political entity comprising of certain districts of North Bengal and Goalpara in history writing from the region.

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This is also to say that identities are built from elements that have existed, in some sense, and that may well persist, enabling what has been 'lost' to be repeatedly 'rediscovered'. Thus, the memories of shared history and culture had significant implications for twentieth century politics in the region. Suggestions were put forward by several political organisations (including the movement for a Rajbanshi identity) for 'combining the frontier districts into a separate political entity in order to protect the region's ancient glory and history'.⁸ In recent years, the region of northern Bengal and Goalpara has seen the growth of a powerful separatist movement called the Kamatapur movement. Its demands include a separate state of Kamatapur, comprising of certain districts of north Bengal and the undivided colonial district of Goalpara.

The boundaries of this proposed Kamtapur coincide significantly with the 'frontier kingdom' that Goalpara's historians had written about in the early decades of the century. 'A few intellectuals from this region have come forward to write a concrete history of Kamatapur...[in order] to establish the link between the glorious past and the present. Scriptures are being quoted, legends interpreted and folk songs and ballads rewritten', states one of the pamphlets of the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation. While this reflects continued attempts of suppressed histories from this region to find a voice within dominant narratives, nearly half a century after the 'failure' of such articulations, it also validates the central argument of this work, namely that identity can be an elusive entity and that collectivities can be imagined but also de-imagined, perhaps more so in a historically liminal area like Goalpara.

⁸ Panchanan Barman, quoted in Gaurinath Shastri, *Nikhil Goalpara Jila Samitir Gauripur Adhibheshanar Sabhapatir Abhibhasan (Presidential Address to the All Goalpara District Association)*, Dhubri, 1928, p.32.

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