Colonial Legacies and Post-independence Transformations in Land Revenue Administration and Agrarian Land Rights in Assam, 1826–1985: A Historical Study of Upper Assam

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Abstract

Land has long underpinned Assam's society and economy. From 1826, British rule transformed landholding and revenue administration through surveys, settlements and registration designed to consolidate state control. Tea plantation expansion and wasteland grants to European planters disrupted customary rural land relations. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, formalised this administrative framework, much of which survived independence in 1947. Subsequent tenancy and land ceiling legislation sought to reform agrarian relations, although the extent of practical change remains a matter of historical debate.

This paper examines land administration and cultivators' rights in Assam between 1826 and 1985, focusing on Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat. Drawing on legislation, archival material and historical scholarship, it explores institutional continuity alongside reform. Its central argument is that post-independence measures changed policy objectives while continuing to rely on inherited legal categories, land records and administrative structures. District-level outcomes require careful assessment against implementation evidence.

Keywords: *Assam, colonial administration, land revenue, agrarian rights, land reforms, tea plantations, Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, Upper Assam.*

Introduction

Land has shaped Assam's agricultural economy, rural society and relations between communities and the state. Its administration evolved from pre-colonial arrangements for

organising labour and resources into colonial systems of revenue collection, and later into post-independence programmes focused on development and social justice.

After taking control in 1826, the British gradually replaced Ahom administrative arrangements with surveys, settlements, revenue assessments and registration.[1] These procedures redefined relations between cultivators and the state. Tea plantation expansion added a commercial dimension: wasteland grants to European planters and distinctions between agricultural, forest and commercial land reshaped access to resources.[2] The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, consolidated the legal framework for settlement, revenue assessment and recognised land rights.[3]

After independence, Assam introduced legislation on land ceilings, consolidation, tenancy, Gramdan and Bhoodan.[4] These measures shifted policy towards redistribution and cultivator protection without dismantling the inherited administrative framework. Colonial land records, institutions and classifications continued to shape how reforms were implemented.[5]

The paper therefore asks how institutional continuity interacted with administrative and agrarian change between 1826 and 1985. Upper Assam provides the regional focus for examining this relationship.

Research Objectives

- Trace changes in land revenue administration and agrarian land rights between 1826 and 1985.
- Examine the relationship between colonial institutions and post-independence reforms.

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[1] Goswami, S. K. (1986). *A History of Revenue Administration in Assam, 1228-1826 A.D.: A Detailed History of the Revenue System of the Ahom Rulers*. Spectrum Publications. pp. 55-70

[2] Saikia, A. (2008). *State, peasants and land reclamation: The predicament of forest conservation in Assam, 1850s–1980s*. The Indian Economic & Social History Review 45(1), pp. 77-114. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460704500103

[3] 1886). *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886*. Government of Assam. https://legislative.assam.gov.in/documents-detail/assam-land-and-revenue-regulation-1886

[4] (1956). *Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956 (as amended)*. Government Of Assam Revenue & Disaster Management DIRECTORATE OF LAND REQUISITION ACQUISITION & REFORMS. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/assam-fixation-of-ceiling-on-land-holdings-act-1956-as-amended

[5] Roy, N. (2021). *Changes in Landholding Pattern in The Eastern Himalayan State of Assam Since Independence*. Journal of Mountain Research 16(1), pp. 25-34. https://doi.org/10.51220/jmr.v16i1.3

- Assess how land classification, plantation expansion and legal recognition shaped cultivators' access to land.
- Compare Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat, distinguishing legislative intentions from implementation where district-level evidence permits.

Research Methodology and Historical Sources

The study adopts a historical and analytical approach based on documentary evidence. It traces developments from 1826 to 1985, comparing colonial and post-independence policies and examining changes in legal and administrative practice. Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat provide the basis for district-level comparison where sources permit. The study draws on primary sources, including land regulations and acts from both the colonial and post-independence periods. Moreover, the Study uses various secondary sources, such as books and journal articles.

This analysis distinguishes legislative intention from implementation. Tenant protection under the Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971, must be assessed through court records, tenancy registers and local reports, rather than inferred from statutory recognition alone. Similarly, ceiling legislation requires evidence of land identification, acquisition and distribution. Oral histories from families can supplement these records but should be evaluated alongside documentary evidence.

Historical Background: Pre-colonial Land Administration and British Intervention

Before British rule, land and revenue administration formed part of the Ahom kingdom's system for standardising agriculture, labour and state service. *Paiks* were central to its administrative and military structure, with obligations linked to service to the state.[6] This differed from the colonial emphasis on measuring land, assessing monetary revenue and recording rights. After 1826, British officials experimented with revenue arrangements before developing more standardised procedures.[7] Surendra Kumar Goswami's work provides the basis

[6] Nath, M. (2025). *The Paik System in Ahom Society: A Socio-Economic Study*. Soc Sci J Adv Res 2025;5(4)19. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1234567

[7] Wary, J. & Brahma, B. (2020). *British Colonial Agriculture in Assam: Revenue Policies and Agrarian Transformation*. Aryan Culture 27. https://aryanculture.org/records/5450

for comparing these systems and identifying which earlier practices were abandoned, modified or retained.[8]

Development of Colonial Land Revenue Administration, 1826–1874

Between 1826 and 1874, British officials laid the foundations of colonial land revenue administration. They sought to identify cultivable land, assess revenue liabilities and establish procedures for bringing land under regular settlement.[9]

Surveys and settlement operations made land subject to official measurement, classification and documentation. An expanding bureaucracy supported revenue collection and resolved land disputes, while strengthening state authority over rural society. Shrutidev Goswami's Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam examines how these arrangements developed.[10]

For cultivators, access to land increasingly depended on revenue payments and official recognition. These early changes established the administrative foundations for the more formalised system of the late nineteenth century.

Institutionalisation of Colonial Land Administration, 1874–1886

Assam's establishment as a Chief Commissionership in 1874 marked a further stage in administrative consolidation. Land classification, settlement rules and revenue management became increasingly important, alongside the expansion of commercial agriculture, particularly tea.[11] The category of 'wasteland' was central to this process: it enabled land not cultivated in ways recognised by officials to be allocated through grants and leases for commercial use.[12]

Saikia (2008) examines conflicts over wasteland among the colonial state, tea planters, forest officials and village communities. These disputes show that classification was not simply a technical exercise; it affected access to land and environmental resources. Grants to planters

[8] Op.cit. Goswami, S. K. (1986). Pp. 55-70
[9] Goswami, S. (1987). *Aspects of revenue administration in Assam, 1826-1874*. Mittal Publications.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Behal, R. P. (2006). *Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule*. International Review of Social History 51(14), pp. 143-172. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859006002641
[12] 0p. cit. Saikia, A. (2008). pp. 77-114.

favoured commercial interests while marginalising customary claims, reinforcing the state's authority to classify, settle and allocate land.[13]

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, consolidated rules governing landholding, settlement and revenue administration.[14] It distinguished categories of rights and strengthened the role of written records in relations between landholders and the state. Its principal provisions discussed here are:

- Landholders' rights: Section 9 recognised rights to use, occupy and inherit land, subject to revenue obligations; section 11 limited settlement-holders' rights to the terms of their leases (secs. 9–11).[1]
- Government land: Section 12 addressed the disposal of government land and the removal of unauthorised occupants.[2]
- Settlement operations: Sections 17–18 identified surveys, boundary demarcation, revenue assessment and records of rights as components of settlement.[3]
- Records of rights: Section 40 provided for records documenting rights over land.[4]

Together, these provisions reshaped land administration in three ways:

1. Recognition and classification of landholding rights.
2. Systematic surveys and revenue assessments.
3. Reliance on written records in land claims and administrative decisions.

The Regulation remained influential after independence, demonstrating continuity in the legal and administrative framework. However, its present consolidated text incorporates later amendments and should not be treated as an unchanged reproduction of the 1886 enactment.[15]

[13] 0p. cit. Saikia, A. (2008). pp. 77-114.
[14] (1886). *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886*. Government of Assam. https://legislative.assam.gov.in/documents-detail/assam-land-and-revenue-regulation-1886
[15] Ibid.

Tea Plantation Expansion and Agrarian Land Relations

Tea plantation expansion was a major influence on colonial land policy. In the nineteenth century, British authorities encouraged European companies and planters to establish large estates through land grants, linking revenue administration to commercial development.

Wasteland classification facilitated this expansion but often obscured existing community uses.[16] Land without permanent cultivation could still support grazing, fuelwood collection, shifting cultivation and the gathering of wild foods.[17] Official classifications therefore did not necessarily reflect the importance of these resources to rural livelihoods.

Saikia (2008, pp. 77–114) describes overlapping claims by planters, forest officials and village communities to wasteland and forest resources. Plantation expansion consequently involved more than a change in crops: it altered access to land and intensified competition over livelihoods and resources.[18]

In Upper Assam, plantation growth interacted with agricultural settlement and revenue administration. Comparisons between Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat can help establish how these processes affected land rights under different local conditions.

Colonial Land Administration in Upper Assam: A District-Level Perspective

Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, together with Jorhat as a comparative area, provide a regional framework for examining land administration in Upper Assam. District-level analysis considers plantation expansion, agricultural settlement, landholding traditions and administrative practice. It avoids assuming that province-wide policies produced uniform outcomes. The profiles below establish a framework for comparison rather than final district-level findings.

[16] Hoop, E. d. & Arora, S. (2017). *Material meanings: 'waste' as a performative category of land in colonial India*. Journal of Historical Geography 56, pp. 82-92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.10.001
[17] Baruah, S. (2001). *Clash of resource use regimes in Colonial Assam: A nineteenth-century puzzle revisited*. The Journal of Peasant Studies 28(3), pp. 109-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150108438777
[18] Op.cit. Behal, R.P. (2006). pp. 143-172.

Sibsagar

Sibsagar offers a setting for examining the transition from Ahom land administration to colonial revenue arrangements. B. C. Allen's Sibsagar District Gazetteer (1905) provides a source for its history, geography and economy.[19] The analysis focuses on settlement and revenue assessment, land classification and plantation expansion, with particular attention to the relationship between inherited practices and colonial procedures.

Lakhimpur

Lakhimpur provides a comparative setting for tracing agricultural expansion, settlement and official recognition of land rights. Comparison with Sibsagar centres on how local agrarian conditions and administrative practice shaped the application of common policies.

Jorhat

Jorhat's historical relationship with the former Sibsagar administrative area makes changing boundaries central to the comparison. Colonial and post-independence records must be interpreted using the boundaries applicable at the time, rather than present-day district limits.[20] Plantation growth, agricultural settlement and landholding arrangements form the principal lines of enquiry. Conclusions about revenue, ownership and tenancy require detailed settlement reports and archival evidence.

Land Revenue Administration after Independence, 1947–1970

Independence changed the objectives of land policy towards agrarian reform, redistribution and cultivator protection. Implementation nevertheless relied on inherited institutions and procedures. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, remained central to land administration, alongside new legislation intended to reorganise agrarian relations.

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[19] Allen, B. C. (1906). *Assam District Gazetteers: Sibsagar*. pp. 1-323. https://rhinoresourcecenter.com/library/references/assam-district-gazetteers-vol-7-sibsagar-2/

[20] Das, M. & Bhuyan, C. (2022). *Reorganisation and Changing Territorial Framework of Assam since India's Independence*. Northeast India Through the Ages, pp. 137-154. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003157816-6

Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951

The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951, sought to reform intermediary landholding arrangements. For this study, the key question is how the abolition of intermediary interests interacted with existing procedures for recording and managing land rights. Its effects in the selected districts must be assessed through acquisition notifications, settlement records and implementation reports.

Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956

The Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956, sought to limit landholding concentration. According to the Government of Assam's Directorate of Land Requisition, Acquisition and Reforms, it came into force in the plain districts on 15 February 1958; amendments in 1971 and 1972 subsequently reduced the ceiling.[21] The amended framework included companies and corporate bodies, bringing excess tea-garden land within its scope, subject to provisions for special cultivation.[22] This raises an important question for Upper Assam: how did ceiling reform interact with plantation interests?

Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960

The Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960, addressed fragmented agricultural holdings as part of a wider programme of agrarian reorganisation.[23] Its practical effects in the selected districts require examination of consolidation proceedings, village records and administrative reports.

[21] (n.d.). *Ceiling On Land Holdings*. DIRECTORATE OF LAND REQUISITION ACQUISITION & REFORMS, Government of Assam, India. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlets/ceiling-on-land-holdings
[22] (n.d.). *Fixation of Ceiling on the Land Held by the Tea Garden*. Directorate of Land Requisition Acquisition & Reforms. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/information-services/fixation-of-ceiling-on-the-land-held-by-the-tea-gardens
[23] (n.d.). *The Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960*. https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/19553/1/mdf_the_assam_consolidation_of_holding_act%2C_1960..pdf

Assam Gramdan Act, 1961 and Assam Bhoodan Act, 1965

The Assam Gramdan Act, 1961, and the Assam Bhoodan Act, 1965, supported voluntary redistribution and community-oriented approaches to agrarian reform.[24] The relevant question is whether land-gift initiatives produced lasting changes in landholding patterns. [25]District-level records are needed to assess their implementation in Upper Assam.

Tenancy Reforms and Agrarian Rights, 1971–1985

The Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971, sought to define and protect the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords.[26] Its significance for the period 1971–1985 can be considered under three headings:

- **Territorial scope:** The Act expressly included Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.
- **Recognised arrangements:** Its definitions covered agriculturists and tenants, including cultivators in adhi, barga, bhag and chukti arrangements.
- **Exclusions:** Specified categories included forests, public-purpose land, town areas and special-cultivation estates such as tea plantations. These distinctions are important when comparing plantation and agricultural land in Upper Assam.

Statutory recognition and exclusions must be distinguished from actual outcomes. Assessing the Act's impact up to 1985 requires evidence of how rights were recorded, disputes resolved and protections enforced, as well as how land classifications affected eligibility.

Continuity and Transformation in Land Administration

The central issue is not whether land administration changed, but how reform operated through inherited institutions. Colonial surveys, settlements, revenue procedures and records established a durable framework. Post-independence legislation pursued different objectives

[24] (1961). *The Assam Gramdan Act, 1961*. Government Of Assam. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/the-assam-gramdan-act-1961
[25] n.d.). *Bhoodan and Gramdan Movement*. Government Of Assam Revenue & Disaster Management DIRECTORATE OF LAND REQUISITION ACQUISITION & REFORMS. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/bhoodan-and-gramdan-movement
[26] (1971). *The Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971*. Government of Assam. https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-sub-innerpage/the-assam-temporarily-settled-areas-tenancy-act-1971

within that framework.[27] The following comparison summarises the relationship between continuity and transformation.

Colonial and Post-independence Land Administration: A Comparison

Dimension	Colonial period	Post-independence period
Main objective	Revenue generation and administrative control	Agrarian reform and social justice
Land records	Surveys, settlements and registration	Continued use and modification of inherited records
Land classification	Revenue and administrative categories	Continued importance in settlement and reform
Land rights	Recognition under colonial legal arrangements	Additional legal recognition and regulation
Tenancy	Administrative and legal regulation under colonial arrangements	Specific tenancy reform legislation
Land ceilings	Colonial emphasis on revenue and commercial interests	Statutory ceilings on landholdings
Administrative structure	Colonial revenue hierarchy	Continued use of inherited administrative institutions

The comparison highlights selective continuity rather than a complete administrative break in 1947. New policy objectives were pursued through modified laws, inherited records and established institutions. Evaluating the consequences requires evidence of implementation as well as legal change.

[27] (n.d.). *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 (Regulation 1 of 1886)*. https://leap.unep.org/en/countries/in/national-legislation/assam-land-and-revenue-regulation-1886-regulation-1-1886

Major Findings

The discussion identifies four principal themes. These distinguish changes in the legal framework from questions that still require district-level evidence.

- **Transformation of** Customary Land Relations

Colonial administration increasingly translated customary relations into legal categories, settlement procedures and written records. This changed the basis on which access to land and resources received official recognition.

- **Institutional** Continuity **after** Independence

The continued influence of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, illustrates the persistence of inherited procedures. Post-independence reforms changed policy objectives while operating through much of the existing administrative framework.

- Legislative Intention and Implementation

Ceiling and tenancy legislation expressed commitments to agrarian reform, but statutory provisions alone cannot establish their practical effects. Assessment requires acquisition and distribution records, tenancy cases, administrative reports and evidence of cultivators' experiences.

- Regional Variation and Comparative Evidence

Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat provide a basis for investigating regional variation in plantation development, agricultural settlement and landholding arrangements. Whether these differences produced distinct reform outcomes must be established through comparative district-level evidence.

Conclusion

Between 1826 and 1985, Assam's land administration developed through overlapping processes of institutional continuity and reform. Colonial surveys, settlements and land classifications strengthened state control, while plantation expansion intensified competition over land and resources. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, consolidated a framework that remained influential after independence.

Post-independence legislation shifted policy towards limits on landholding, redistribution and tenant protection. These objectives were pursued through inherited institutions and records rather than an entirely new administrative system. The central historical question is therefore how legal reforms altered agrarian relations within that continuing framework.

Comparative study of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Jorhat can clarify this interaction, provided changing boundaries and the limits of available evidence are recognised. The paper offers a framework for that enquiry; conclusions about the extent of redistribution, tenant protection and local change require detailed implementation records.