



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-III, Issue-III, November 2016, Page No. 362-374
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Exploration on Recorded and Unrecorded Tenants in the Backward Agriculture of Barak Valley in the State Assam

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Abstract

Leasing of land under share cropping is a common feature in the economy Barak Valley in Assam. A very high percentage of cultivated land in Barak Valley under share cropping is mostly done on the principle of equal shares, (may be equal cost sharing or without cost sharing), although in some cases, the land owners made arbitrary deduction even before the produce is shared. Also the share cropping contracts led to some kind of dependency relationship between the share cropper and landlord (Roy & Bezbaruah, 2003). The nature of the landlord tenant relationship is based on deep-rooted traditions, coupled with modern legislation designed to regulate the terms and conditions of share cropping contracts. In fact, Assam has one of the progressive Tenancy Reforms Legislation in the country which provides for conferring occupancy right to non-occupancy tenants who are working with the same land-owner for a period of three years (Assam Tenancy Act, 1971). Thus, in order to preparation of tenants records of rights, the government of Assam was conducted as 'Crash Programme' during the mid of 70's in the state which was also declared as 'Land Records Year' for updating records. In this drive, in Barak Valley region along with the state as a whole numbers of unrecorded tenants were made as recorded tenants. The data collected by field survey from the six ADO's circle in different areas of Barak Valley has been presented which explores the incidence of recorded and unrecorded of tenancy.

Keywords.. *tenancy reforms, land record, Adhi, informal market, oppressive tenants, reverse tenancy.*

Introduction:

The orally transfer of land under tenancy is one of the oldest agrarian institutional setup evolved in order to facilitate adjustments in agricultural factor markets. Besides Technological factor, productivity in agriculture is largely depend on institutional factor. The institutional reforms in form of land reform measures include the redistribution of land ownership infavour of the tenants so as to provide them a sense of participation in rural life, improving size, farms, providing security of tenure and to regulate rent next paid and thus, adversely yield benefit on productivity (Dasgupta 1995, Partha Sarathy and Murthy, 1997). Insecurity of tenure impedes agricultural production or productivity. The possibilities of the tenants neglecting investment in fixed or durable capital can not be ruled out. Land

improvement activities, such as the digging of the wall, lowering or rising the level of the land, which increase output on a long term basis will be left out because the tenants future control over leased in parcel is doubtful (Jacoby,1953). Insecure a land tenancies give rise to uncertainty. Durable investment contributes to higher productivity in land for some years in future will not be to the advantage of the tenant. Thus, security of tenure is essential for productive efficiency and therefore, the tenant should be given security under legislation.

Review of Literature:

There has always been controversies among the agrarian economist on the issue relate to the tenurial security and productive efficiency. Several arguments which undermine the significance tenurial security. For instance, it is argued that “even if uncertainty of occupancy is reduced by long lease terms of mutual understanding between landlord and tenant, the latter is reluctant to invest in permanent or semi-permanent improvement because they enable the landlord to increase the rent, and at the determination of the lease the tenant’s equity in these improvements is unprotected and subject to seizure by the landlord. He either must meet the higher bid of an outside tenant, or quit” (Schickle, 1941). Moreover, as regards the desirable period of security, there are different views. On purely economic grounds it seems that the tenant’s right of occupancy should not be too long. Very long term leases will protect the tenant from competition and will make him an indifferent cultivator. So the period of occupancy right of the tenant should not be too long. Limited tenant mobility from one farm to another is desirable. In fact, the ability to evict or change tenants is sometimes used as means for ensuring greater efficiency (Singh, 1989).

There are but few studies which relate tenurial security and productive efficiency of the tenant. Even though Feder’s study is not directly related to security of tenants, it is an important one in that it deals with the impact of land-ownership security on farmers’ input use and output value.¹ The study employs farm level data from three provinces in Thailand to test the propositions outlined above. The data pertain to samples of squatters, who lack secure legal ownership, as contrasted with legally titled farmers. The results confirm that the provision of secure ownership can increase productivity significantly (Feder, 1987). Chadha and Bhaumik (1992), examined whether the ‘Operation Barga (OB) programme of the Left Front Government in West Bengal had a positive effect on productivity, by comparing the ‘recorded,’ tenants with security and the ‘unrecorded’ tenants without security. But Pal (1995) has shown that the programme had a depressing effect on productivity because bargadars lacked entrepreneurial ability and supporting facilities. Thus the evidence from West Bengal does not conclusively show that security of tenure has a favourable effect on land productivity.

1. If security of tenure is provided to the tenant it will motivate the tenant to adopt new technology. In the absence of security the tenant will not be ready to take risk associated with the new technology. The security will increase the capacity of the tenant to undertake both durable and non durable investment (Feder, 1987, pp16-30)

Should the security of tenure has a far reaching and positive influence on land use efficiency, there would be a strong case for devising policies which promote formal and

written lease arrangements instead of spending time perfecting or drafting anew the laws seeing to end the divorce between ownership and cultivation of land. Such efforts in the past, as noted earlier, have only driven tenancy underground and if any, have made the petty tenant more vulnerable. It may be argued that even if the emphasis on security of tenure is a little misplaced in any particular context, it may have a profound influence on productivity if an element of dynamism is injected into the system. In a situation marked by rapid changes in technology, security of tenure can be demonstrated to have far reaching influence on rate of adoption of the technology and therefore on productivity. The more recent input having great potential in rising productivity is used with a lag by tenants and in fewer quantities (Parthasarathy and Prasad, 1974). Insecurity impedes innovation.

Existing Empirical Works on Tenancy in Assam:

While analyzing the agrarian reforms in the state many studies though not based on pure economic analysis have been conducted to highlight the tenancy situation and the problem associated with it. In this respect the studies by Goswami (1962), Guha (1991), Chakravarty (1995) and Gautam (1995) have found to be outstanding. These studies explore the nature and pattern of tenancy in the state of Assam. Until the ends of nineteenth century, the *adhi* system (share cropping) was of marginal importance in Assam (Guha 1991). *Adhi* assumes various forms, but in practice, the rent burden under different forms of *adhi* tend to be the same as under fixed rent system through adjustment like landlords contributions towards seeds or transplantation costs or both. The study also touches upon the issue of economic conditions of the tenants.

Goswami (1962) analyses the terms and conditions of tenancy contracts in Assam and has observed that there exists direct association between the pattern of crop and cost sharing by the landlord.

Gautam (1995) in his well researched study covering eleven villages of two districts of Central Assam, Kamrup and Darrang, has examined the agrarian relations between the tenant and the absentee landlord in respect of the duration of tenancy, sharing of crops, costs of cultivation and debtor-creditor relationship between the two. He has observed that in Assam the landlord-tenant relation depends on local customs, traditions, types of crops grown, economic status of the parties and compulsion under distress. The study also highlights that in the presence of tenancy system, agricultural development in the state depends on cooperation and cordial relations between the contracting partners, the degree of dependency of landowner on agriculture, the cost sharing provisions and the economic condition of the landlord as well as the tenant.

Chakravarty (1995) on behalf of the land reforms unit, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy, has prepared a report on the tenancy situation of Assam. The data for the study have been collected by the IAS probationers of 1987, 1988 and 1989 batches between September 1988 to May 1991 covering seven districts of the State to explore the incidence of recorded and unrecorded tenancy. The study highlights the prevalence of concealed tenancy in the state. This study is an important account of the terms and conditions of tenancy that are persisting in different parts of the state.

Nag (1991) has made an appraisal of the tenancy situation in Assam and tried to find out the reasons why land reforms Acts designed to improve the lot of the tenant farmers have not been implemented in Assam. In a similar study, Phukan (1991) has also reached the conclusion that tenancy reforms in Assam have not had a favourable impact upon the tenant farmers. Sengupta (1991) in his study of impact of land reform in the Karimganj District has shown that as a result of land reforms, the tenants and ryots of the district who have been freed from exploitation by the zamindars are being exploited by the State Government. Agnihotri (1984) in his study on land reform legislation in Assam as a means of rural development has traced the origin and development of tenancies in historical perspective and also provided a critique of the land reform measures that were undertaken in the State with a view to protecting the interest of the tenants including sharecroppers. Das (1980,1984) provides a critic of land reform policy in Assam.

Khatun (1984) has made an extensive study on the extent of tenancy in Assam by analyzing NSS and Census data, argued that tenancy arrangements in Assam whose terms and conditions are mostly verbal – are often misused by the landlords, and the tenants, who are the actual tiller of land, are the sufferers. The size-class analysis of tenurial households has provided a better picture of the economic status of the tenurial class.

The studies reviewed above in the context of Assam to highlight the problem of land reform in general and tenancy institution in particular, suffer from methodological shortcomings. The main limitations of many of the studies reviewed are: casual empiricism, tautological explanation and unwarranted suggestions. Though its limitations, but tenancy is a theoretically rich institution with its multivariate dimensions but no effort has yet been made in the Barak Valley of Assam to correlate empirical observations with the existing theoretical propositions.

In this disquieting back dorp, the present study is an attempt to explore the incidence of recorded and unrecorded tenancy in Barak Valley of Assam, their socio economic status and the problems associated with the security of tenure.

Data and Methodology:

The study has been taken up in the Barak Valley region of Assam. The micro level analysis is mainly based on primary data selected through a process of multi stage sampling. To retain the representatives of the entire region it has been decided to select the sites for sample survey from all the Agricultural Sub-Divisions in the region. There are six agricultural sub-division in the three districts namely Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. From each of these six sub-division one Agricultural Development Officer (ADO) Circle has been selected for field study. For the study of tenancy situation, the selection of the tenants posed some problems, No frame was available giving the list of tenants with target Villages, As such an attempt was made first to construct the frame for each selected villages in consultation with the officials of the agricultural department, so on and ascertaining information direct and indirect means . This was necessary because the tenants are not recognized as legal category. Besides the informal tenants names are not entered in the revenue records. Form each ADO's circle four villages have been chosen at

random. In the second stage about ten percent of farm house households in each selected villages have been selected in random. Two Hundred and Eighty One farm households selected in this manner from the six selected ADO circle of the region constituted the whole sample of the field study.

The sample households have been classified in the three form sizes as small, medium and large farms. Further the same household has been categorized as recorded and unrecorded.

For analyzing the factors associated with tenancy, information regarding types of lessors, financial help by the lessors, interference of lessors in decision making, output sharing arrangements, tenancy duration, nature of rent, cost sharing, securities of tenure etc. have been collected which are broadly discussed under..

Results and Discussion:

In order to preparation of tenants records of rights, the government of Assam was conducted as 'Crash Programme' during the mid of 70's in the state which was also declared as 'Land Records Year' for updating records. In this drive, in Barak Valley region along with the state as a whole numbers of unrecorded tenants were made as recorded tenants. The data collected by field survey from the six ADO's circle in different areas of Barak Valley has been presented in the following Table-1 which explores the incidence of recorded and unrecorded of tenancy.

TABLE .1
DISTRIBUTION OF RECORDED AND UNRECORDED
TENANTS IN THE SAMPLE FARM HOUSEHOLDS

CIRCLES	TOTAL NUMBER OF RECORDED AND UNRECORDED TENANTS	RECORDED TENANTS WHO LEASED IN LAND		UNRECORDED TENANTS WHO LEASED IN LAND	
		NO.	AREA (HA)	NO.	AREA (HA)
1	2	3	4	5	6
Fakira Bazar	28	7 (25.00)	5.33	21 (75.0)	17.91
R.K. Nagar	41	13 (31.7)	9.20	28 (68.5)	24.42
Narshingpur	41	8 (19.5)	6.38	33 (80.5)	26.98
Salchapra	39	6 (15.4)	4.74	33 (84.4)	28.44
Banskandi	40	9 (22.5)	6.02	31 (77.5)	26.01
Hailakandi	35	8 (22.8)	4.84	27 (77.2)	23.80
Overall	224	51 (22.8)	36.51	173 (77.2)	147.53

Sources: Field Survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicate percentages of the total.

The overall situation of the study indicates that of the total 281 number of farm households in the sample survey areas, 224 numbers of households has been found to be both recorded and unrecorded tenants. Among the total numbers of 224 farm households (recorded and unrecorded), 22.8 percent are recorded tenants and 77.2 percent are unrecorded tenants. This shows that while the crash programme for recording the rights of a small percentage (22.8 percent) of the tenants but major percentage (77.2 percent) of the tenants continue to be unrecorded.

The figures in the above Table-1 also shows that the average leased in area 0.85 hectares of unrecorded tenants is higher than the average leased in area 0.72 hectare of recorded tenants. This pattern is more or less consistent in all the selected circles. Further, it is reveals that the unrecorded tenants operated 84.13 percent of the total operated area. This is the indicative of the prevalence of unrecorded tenants/concealed tenancy in the Barak Valley region of Assam.

Status of Recorded and Unrecorded Tenants

The class status of the tenants (both recorded and unrecorded) would be better reflected by size class of leased area in and operated. The distribution of recorded and unrecorded tenants and size class of area leased in by them is given in the Table-2.

TABLE – 2
DISTRIBUTION OF RECORDED AND UNRECORDED
TENANTS BY SIZE CLASS OF OPERATED AREA

FARM SIZE (IN HA)	TOTAL NUMBER OF RECORDED AND UNRECORDED TENANTS	RECORDED TENANTS WHO LEASED IN LAND		UNRECORDED TENANTS WHO LEASED IN LAND	
		NO.	AREA (HA)	NO.	AREA (HA)
0—0.5	79 (35.27)	25 (49.01)	7.05	54 (31.21)	52.21
0.5 — 1	86 (38.39)	7 (13.73)	3.99	79 (45.67)	44.06
Small	165 (73.66)	32 (62.74)	11.04	133 (76.88)	60.27
1 — 2	48 (21.43)	15 (29.41)	15.45	33 (19.08)	33.95
2 — 3	8 (3.57)	2 (3.92)	4.00	6 (3.47)	12.95
Medium	56 (24.00)	17 (32.33)	19.45	39 (22.55)	46.90
3 — 4	3 (1.34)	2 (3.92)	6.02	1 (0.58)	4.36
Above 4	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Large	3 (1.34)	2 (3.92)	6.02	1 (0.58)	3.36
All size	224	51	36.51	173	147.53

Sources: Field Survey

Note: Figures in brackets indicate percentages of the total.

The figures in Table-2 indicates that 76.88 percent of the unrecorded tenants have leased in up to 1 hectare, 22.55 percent have leased in between 1 to 3 hectares and only 0.58 percent have leased in between 3 to 4 hectares. The corresponding figures for recorded tenants are 62.74 percent, 32.33 percent and 3.92 percent respectively. The overall situation indicates that 73.66 percent of both recorded and unrecorded tenants have leased in up to 1 hectare, 24.0 percent have leased in between 1 to 3 hectares and only 1.34 percent have leased in above 3 hectares. It has been found that the distribution of land, *inter-alia*, is one of the major determinants of the size and nature of the lease markets. Small farmers predominantly lease in land while the medium sized farmers lease in as well as lease out land. Both the traditional tenancy (big lessor and small lessee) and reverse tenancy (small lessor and big lessee) co-exist on a widely different scale in our sample villages. In case of class status, bulk of the recorded and unrecorded tenants are mainly poor tenants and lower middle class tenants, however, unrecorded tenants have slightly better edge over the recorded tenants in terms of their status as upper small class.

It can thus be stated that:

(a) Bulk of the recorded and unrecorded tenants belong to the status of poor tenants and lower middle tenants and only a small fraction among them belong to the status of upper middle tenants.

(b) The lack of legal rights does not place the unrecorded tenants in an adverse situation with respect to the area leased in.

Nature and Forms of Tenancy

Form of tenancy: The form of tenancy and the basis of determination has been the subject of considerable empirical research in India (Rudra, 1975; Reddy and Murthy, 1978; Murthy, 1987; Vyas, 1970; Bhaumik, 1993; Dwivedi and Rudra, 1973; Sharma and Dreiz, 1996; Bhalla, 1983; Chakravarty & Rudra, 1973; Bharadwaj & Das, 1975). In Assam, like the most other Indian states, several types of Tenancy contract co-exist (Chakravarty, 1995; Hunter, 1982; Guha, 1991; Goswami, 1985; Roy and Bezbaruah, 2002; Kuri, 2004; Dutta, 2003). The most important and widely used practices among them are share cropping and fixed rent tenancy. Though both the forms of tenancy, namely share cropping and fixed cash or kind are prevalent in our sample survey area, yet share cropping emerges as the dominant form. The figures in Table -3 shows that 10.67 percent of the tenants have leased in on fixed cash or kind terms, 83.34 percent of tenants on share cropping terms. The fixed cash or kind is prevalent in almost all the sample farms. The prevalence of fixed cash or kind terms in the sample farm is not an indicator of developed or commercial agriculture. But it is an accident of historical situation, non-occupancy tenants who are conferred the status of occupancy tenants as a result of the records of rights drive conducted by Assam Government between 1977 to 1980 pay fixed cash rent terms which is only three times the land revenue. The Assam Government recognised share croppers as tenants as late as 1971 (Assam Tenancy Act, 1971) and hence most of share croppers were unaffected by earlier tenancy reforms.

The Table -3 shows that 94.8 percent of the unrecorded tenants have leased in share cropping terms whereas only 43.13 percent of the recorded tenants have leased in on share cropping terms. Thus, unrecorded tenancy and share cropping emerge in strongest term in our sample farms.

The reason for tenants preference to share cropping are not difficult to find. The agriculture in the sample survey depends mainly on rainfall and there are fluctuations in the occurrence of rainfall. Occasionally, excessive rainfall causes flood and scarcity of rainfall causes draught. In such an uncertain condition of cultivation share cropping provides adjustments for failures of harvests and fluctuations in the price level of farm produce. Thus the share cropping provides risk-sharing provision between the contracting parties in the case of an uncertain and backward agriculture under share cropping, a tenant at the worst may lose only remuneration for his labour and investment in the case of crop failure. But he is not asked to pay the value of the landlord's rents, and it, therefore, transfers substantial part of the risk of cultivation from tenant to the landlord owner. Households with large number of family members and other productive assets like land and bullocks are generally poor and more vulnerable to risk and uncertainty. These households are expected to opt for share tenancy because they want to avoid risk. Under rain-fed situation, share cropping seems to be a preferred arrangement, as the risk of crop loss gets distributed among the land owner and the tenant (Rao, 1971). Share cropping contracts in many cases include an implicit loan from the landlord in the form of rent being postponed until the harvest. The advantage of cost sharing is easier to achieve under share contract than under fixed rent contract. Therefore, the system of sharecropping dominates the other forms of tenancy in the sample villages.

Terms of Tenancy: It has been seen from Table-3 that 73.21 percent of the share croppers get half of the gross produce without sharing cost by landlords. 10.26 percent of share croppers get half of the produce with equal cost sharing of both landlord and tenant. Thus, the predominant term is half the share of the gross produce (50:50 share crop basis) for the share cropper. This mode of crop sharing is known as *Bhag Chash*. Obviously, those who get 50:50 crop share without cost share are placed in adverse circumstance and those who receiving 50:50 crop share with cost share placed much more favourably. In our sample area, crop share 50:50 without sharing cost is predominant. It is dominant on unrecorded tenants, because bulk of whom are also informal, and share cropping contracts are generally verbal in nature. Thus, there are no predetermined rules and regulations in tenancy contracts governed in the study area.

TABLE – 3

CIRCLE/TERM OF TENANCY	FAKIRA BAZAR		R.K. NAGAR		NARSHI NGPUR		SALCHAPRA		BANSKANDI		HAILAKANDI		ALL Jamal Uddin	
	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants	No. of recorded tenants	No. of unrecor- ded tenants
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Crop share 50:50 without cost share	2	18	13	24	1	27	1	30	2	23	2	21	21	143
Crop share 50:50 with cost share	0	3	-	4	1	2	0	1	0	5	1	6	2	21
Fixed rent (Cash/ kind)	5	0	0	0	6	4	5	2	7	3	5	0	28	9
Total	7	21	13	28	8	33	6	33	9	31	8	27	51	173
Period of tenancy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Seasonal less than 1 year	0	3	0	6	0	7	0	8	0	10	0	5	0	39
1 year	0	11	0	18	0	15	0	21	0	12	0	13	0	90
More than 1 year but less than 3 years	0	5	0	3	0	6	0	3	0	9	0	7	0	33

Above 3 years	7	2	13	1	8	5	6	1	9	0	8	2	51 (100 .0)	11 (6. 38)
Total	7	21	13	28	8	33	6	33	9	31	8	27	51 (100 .0)	173 (100 .0)

Sources: Field Survey

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicates percentages of the total.

The security of tenure: The figures in Table-3 shows that 22.54 percent of unrecorded tenants face the frequency of change of plots / eviction seasonal or less than 1 year, 52.02 percent have tenure only for 1 year, 19.76 percent are also insecure but are in slightly better position as they had a tenure ranging from 1 to 3 years. Another 6.38 percent had a tenure of more than 3 years. These tenants whose period of working with a the same landowner is far more than 3 years are more secure than those whose tenure is for less than 3 years. There is a clear cut differences in the pattern of recorded and unrecorded tenants, it has been found that the recorded tenants invariably have longer tenure and the unrecorded tenants have shorter tenure.

The dominant practice of agricultural in the sample villages characterized by the institution of tenancy. A very high percentage of equal share cropping in mostly done on the principle of equal share (may be equal cost sharing or with cost sharing). Although in the same cases, the land owners made arbitrary deduction even before the produce is shared. Also the share cropping contracts led to some kind dependency relationship between the share cropper and the landlord (Roy & Bezbaruah, 2003).

Conclusion: Landlord tenant relation is an important agrarian institution, leasing in land under share tenancy is a common features in the economy of Barak Valley. All tenancy contracts are informal and unrecorded. The land lord did not share any cost cultivation . under the circumstances, the landless poor small and marginal farmers are in capable of taking any risk of agricultural modernization. More over, in the absence of security, the tenants have no incentives for higher productivity. As a result, the agricultural scenario in the region is still highly under developed. On other hand, the tenurial conditions by no means is universally perfect in the background of agriculture. The imperfection market, feudal relationship and unequal economic power in some cases have resulted in ‘oppressive’ tenurial conditions in the region. Thus, the backward nature of agriculture in the region calls for oppressive tenancy contract to be made under control by introducing a new ‘reform package’ including a massive device of the recording of rights to the tenants. Incidentally, legislations for tenancy reforms are already in existence for quite sometime. The Assam Adhiar Protection and regulation Act, 1984, for instance, seems to have enough provisions to protect the interest of the sharecroppers by fixing the maximum rent paid by them. Share croppers are required, according to the provision of this Act, to share their principal crop only, which should provides some incentive to them to raise additional crop too. Ejecting adhiars was also made more difficult (Goswami, 1986). But despite the provision of the act sharecroppers are still exploited by landlord. Though tenancy reforms have been recognized

as one of the principal goals in the five year plan documents, only a very few states in the country have successfully implemented such reforms². In this context the Crash Programme in the state of West Bengal popularly known as ‘Operation Barga’ may be cited. The ‘Barga’ programme in West Bengal Reforms Act, 1955, thus safeguarding tenant farmers interest in sharing of crop *vis-à-vis* cost of cultivation with the landowner.

2 In case of fixation of rent, Punjab, Harayana and Andrapradesh achieved the targets prescribed in the 5 year plant, while except in West Bengal sharecroppers, by and large beyond the benefit of tenancy reforms (Throat,1997)

The Operation Barga programme also brought about remarkable changes in the society (Dasgupta, 1995, Parthasarathy and Murty, 1995). Close on the heels of this reform programme came the Panchayat Raj system. ‘the pro-poor bias in Panchayat composition in this state is a direct consequence of the land reform programme undertaken in the state. Perhaps a lesson for the other states that Panchayat system alone would not deliver for the poor, unless its composition is changed by way of land reform (Dasgupta, 1995). Considering the loopholes of operational barga programme, a new reform policy package must be taken up in the backward agriculture of Barak Valley in Assam taking the positive aspect of operation barga programme so that the provision of the legislation to protect the interest of tenants farmers can be enforced in letter and spirit.

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