

IMMIGRATION IN ASSAM DURING THE BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD

Dr. Sahabuddin Ahmed,
Associate Professor, Dept. of History,
Karimganj College, Assam, India, 788710.

ABSTRACT

The impact of the provincial election of 1937 held under the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935, had been enormous all over India, but in Assam it was different. The politics in Assam in general and the Muslim politics in particular had centered round to issues of unusual nature – the issue of the immigrants and the introduction of line system. Except some sporadic anti-British outburst of Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, almost all the politicians of Assam, irrespective of parties, became involved with those local issues. With the passage of time, the Muslim league became a dominant force in Assam by bringing the immigrant Muslims under its banner. The hard truth was that long before 1940, the year in which the Pakistan Resolution was adopted, immigration and line system had transformed into a communal issue. Assam politics until the partition of India in 1947 had revolved round it. In other words, immigration in Assam during the British colonial period was a focus of Muslim politics in Assam.

Keywords: migration, immigration, colonization, revenue, line system.

During the British colonial period, one of the prominent topographical features of Assam was the existence of large tracts of waste lands. As early as in 1833, captain Jenkins, Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General of India for Assam, had submitted the first scheme for colonization of these waste lands.¹ He urged upon the Government to encourage the farmers for growing export oriented cash crops and to take measures for the immediate finalization of these waste lands and to make provisions for speculators to acquire land.² The Government was also not unaware of the serious imbalance between the flourishing plantation sector and the retarded agricultural sector of the Brahmaputra Valley and was interested in the settlement of cultivators from neighboring Bengal. Sarah Hilaly observed

that the issue of developing the waste lands by settlement of surplus population from the over crowded tracts in other parts of the country found an audience with the government of India.³

It was Henry J.S. Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam (1896-1902) who took up the issue seriously and had launched extensive investigation on the subject. In his *Note on Colonization* cotton had suggested some measures for encouraging immigration of cultivators from the over populated and congested districts of Bengal.⁴ Sir Patrick playfair, a mercantile member of the Indian Legislative Council, while making a Budget speech in the Assembly in 1897, had expressed his views in favour of immigration of cultivators from Bengal and also anticipated that with their contribution, Assam could export food grains to Bengal.⁵ playfair's proposals had found supporters from the zamindars like the Maharaja of Dharbhanga, The Assam Chamber of Commerce and the Indian Tea and Jute Associations.⁶ A large section of the Assamese middle class people also welcomed the immigration scheme. They could realized that the ultimate reclamation of lands is infallibly destined to be a great source of revenue for the province of Assam.⁷ Gunabhiram Baruah, one of the great social reformers, had estimated that no less than a million people could easily be settled from outside on these wastelands. He enumerated three factors for favouring immigration: (i) existence of cheap and fertile land, (ii) attractive earning opportunity for skilled labours and craftsman in view of local manpower shortage, and (iii) possibilities of matrimonial alliances with local families.⁸ Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor General also had the same opinion.

However, from the very beginning, the government did not impose any restriction on the immigrants, rather encouraged migration as a matter of policy and practical politics. These illiterate and landless people were quite ignorant about the topography, climate, language, politics and the culture of the people where they were going to settle. The only consideration they had was a desperate search for land and food. For them, the vast waste lands of the neighboring province were the obvious choice.

The beginning of 20th century saw the start of the influx into Assam of thousands of Muslim peasants from the neighboring districts of Eastern Bengal in general and from Mymensingh in particular.⁹ Between 1905 and 1915, Assam had witnessed about 70,000 migrants from the districts of Dhaka, Mymensingh, Pabna, Bagura and Rangpur. The main cause of this exodus was the pressure of population on land in their native districts.¹⁰ It may be noted in this connection that the district of Mymensingh had a population of over five million which was greater than the population to the Assam Valley.¹¹ The density of

population of Mymensingh in 1931 was 823 per square mile. In comparison, the Assam Valley had a density of 171.¹² So, it was quite natural that it attracted the people of over – crowded and famine – stricken districts of Bengal. No one included them to move and settle in Assam. It was a natural phenomenon.

Besides, with the extension of railway connection between Assam and Eastern Bengal there followed a dramatic incase of agriculturists into Assam.¹³ The British colonial government opened up certain tracts along the railway line to encourage settlement of railway *coolies* as cultivators. This not only increased the land revenue of the province but was also a step towards commercializing agriculture. The raw material potential of the province was enhanced.¹⁴ The following table¹⁵ demonstrates the gradual increase of the flow of immigrants from Eastern Bengal during the five decades, from 1881 to 1930:

Decade	Number of Immigrants
1881-1890	17,3000
1891-1900	17,700
1901-1910	74,700
1911-1920	1,95,800
1921-1930	2,26,000

These immigrants, mostly from Mymensingh, had settled in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. It seemed that no mass movement of immigrants had occurred until the first decade of the 20th century and of 74,700 in 1901-1910, 83 percent were tea garden labourers recruited by the European Planters themselves from Bihar, Orissa and Nepal and the number of Muslim immigrants from Bengal had been very negligible.¹⁶

During the first decade of the 20th century, the large scale movement of peasants from Eastern Bengal had started moving to Assam, it gave the British Government the much awaited chance to enhance their exchequer. They did not raise the question with whom the settlement of land would be made. They might be Assamese, Bengali peasants or any other but it was of no interest to the British. With the rapid increase of new settlers-peasants the demand for land began to grow at an alarming rate. The administration, instead of checking the large scale influx of Bengali peasants into Assam, started making arrangements for the settlement of the incoming migrants.

However, from the very beginning the British administrators of Assam were mainly interested in enhancement of revenue. The ethnic, linguistic and communal problem of Assam never came in the policy making at the time. When the immigrants poured into Assam

by thousands, the Government welcomes them and made rules and regulations for the settlement of waste lands. As early as in 1916, the Director of land Records first put forward a proposal for a special colonization officer to assist the settlement, but it failed to get approval of the then Chief Commissioner of Assam.¹⁷ Again, in 1920, Sir William J. Reid, the Executive Councillor, had addressed the Government with similar suggestions. Though the Chief Commissioner of Assam remained indifferent to the issue, the District administrations had undertaken the settlement proceeding. In a conference of District Officers held in Shillong in 1928, colonization schemes were first discussed and the proposal was raised to charge *Salami* (a kind of non-refundable deposit) on all new settlements of lands. But the general policy of the colonization scheme was approved in Sept. 1928 in the conference of official and non-official members of the council. Accordingly, a premium of Rs. 25 for a *bigha* was fixed but subsequently reduced to Rs. 10 and a colonization officer was appointed in Nowgong to settle all available waste lands in the immigrant area on the block system. However, when the scheme went into operation, in some subdivisions it had to be abandoned due to the extreme poverty of the immigrants.¹⁸

Again, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup had earlier devised a system of drawing lines in the Barpeta Sub-division, across which new immigrants were not permitted to settle. The Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong had also drawn lines to put restrictions on indiscriminate settlements in villages of Nowgong district. The division by lines originated entirely with the District Officers concerned and was not adopted in execution of any orders of Government.¹⁹ Since the Government did not interfere in the steps taken by the district administration, the system gradually developed in all districts except in Goalpara. *The Line System* was a unique system by which Muslim immigrants from Bengal, especially from the district of Mymensingh, were required to settle in certain definite areas of the Assam Valley districts and was not allowed to take settlement of land under the Government in other areas.²⁰

In Nowgong where the system originated, villages were divided into following categories:²¹

- (i) Exclusively reserved for the Assamese;
- (ii) Exclusively occupied by the immigrants;
- (iii) Areas in which a line had been drawn on the Assamese side of which no immigrant was allowed to acquire land called the 'Line System'; and
- (iv) Areas in which both immigrants and Assamese were free to settle.

From the Govt. point of view, any proposal to restrict inter-provincial migration was not acceptable. It always wanted to enhance its revenue. The larger the number of the immigrants, the greater the amount of provincial revenue. Sir John Kerr, the Governor of Assam (1911-1927) was also not in favour of taking any measure in that direction. He, however, wanted to leave the issue to the people's representatives in the legislature. Basically economic in character, migration became an administrative and social issue, causing in the Assamese Hindu mind an apprehension of being numerically and otherwise swamped by new comers. But interestingly, they refused to accept any restriction on their right to transfer land to those people.²²

No objection was raised from any section regarding migration and settlers until 1924 and 1925, when Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah, an Assamese member of the swarajya party in the legislative council had moved a resolution for putting restrictions on immigration and for the settlement of all available waste lands with the Indians only with certain amount of preference to the Assamese for the next five years.²³ Some other members in the council supported the resolution and also made some amendments. But the European members strongly stood against the resolution. They considered it an obstruction of natural flow of capital and enterprise and as such the waste lands would be left in an unproductive state of nature, depriving the revenue, trade and prosperity of the province.

The Muslim Opinion, on the other hand, was decidedly against any restrictions on the settlement of immigrants. Khan Bahadur Nuruddin Ahmed of Nowgong was the first Muslim member of the Assam Lagislative Council, who had officially moved a resolution in 1936 for the abolition of the Line System.²⁴ He had placed a number of arguments in its support. According to him, the line system effectively obstructed and hindered assimilation of the immigrants with the Assamese and kindled and fostered a sense of animosity and rivalry between them. The motion was lost by seven votes to twenty with all seven Muslim members supporting, all Hindu members opposing, and the Govt. side refraining from voting.²⁵ The second attempt had been made again in 1937 by Munawwar Ali, a young member of the Council from Sylhet, for the total abolition of the line system. In fact, with the introduction of provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act, 1935, Political Developments in Assam Led to the emergence of an immigrant Lobby which in course of time, became a powerful force.²⁶

Instances were not wanting that the new comers to the province were fleeced right and left not only by indigenous inhabitants but also by the *Matbars* and *Dewans* who were the leading men in their community. Thus, a large number of these immigrants fled from the frying pan into the fire and in their attempt to escape difficulties and oppression at home, became prey abroad. Definitely, a time soon arrived when, because of their numbers as well as politicization of the whole issue of immigration, it received a new colour and interpretation. They became unwanted people after having greatly contributed to the wealth of Assam.

To sum up, the problem was sought to be tackled through indulgence and executive authority. The attempt failed because of the dimension it assumed and of the cross currents of Assamese interests. The immigration, the line system and the colonization scheme, the only steps taken by the Govt. did not solve the problem but only perpetuated by the gradual induction of communal, racial and political questions into it. Formation of the first popular Ministry in Assam in 1937 and the Congress attitude to it made the problem insoluble. Henceforth, the immigrants, as the Muslim in general, more and more veered round the Muslim League. The All India Muslim League for the first time officially took up the matter. In its 25th session held on 15-18 October 1937, it adopted a resolution condemning the Line System. So, the immigrants and their supporters regarded the Line System as an instrument of injustice and oppression which, they pleaded could be remedied only by the establishment of Pakistan.

References:

1. Sarah, Hilaly, "Railways in Assam and Immigration of peasants in the colonial period", *Proceeding of NEIHA*, 22nd session, Shillong, 2001, p. 225.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid*, p. 226
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sajal, Nag, *Roots of Ethnic conflict: Nationality question in North East India*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 87.
6. *Indian Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1897.
7. Sajal, Nag, *op. cit.* p. 87-90.
8. Amalendu Guha, *planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electroral Politics in Assam 1826*, Delhi, (ICHR) 1977, p. 68.
9. 'Report of the Line System Committee', *Indian Annual Register*, Jan-July, 1938, Vol. I, p. 1-4.
10. 'Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Delhi, 1985, p. 68.
11. *Census Report of India*, 1931, Vol. III, Assam, Part-I, p. 1-3.

12. *Ibid.*
13. Sarah Hilaly, *op.-cit.*, p. 229.
14. Sarah Hilaly, *The Railways in Assam 1885-1947*, Varanasi, 2007, p. 188.
15. Sajal, Nag, *op. cit.* p. 90.
16. Atful Hye Shibly, *Abdul Matin Choudhury* (Trusted Lieutenant of Mohammad Ali Jinnah). Dhaka, 2011, p. 100.
17. *Ibid*, p. 101.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Line System Committee*, p. 3.
20. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *op. cit.* p. 22.
21. *Line System Committee*, p. 3.
22. Makhanlal Kar, *Muslims in Assam Politics*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 15.
23. *Ibid*, p. 10.
24. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *op. cit.* p. 22.
25. Makhanlal Kar, *op. cit.* p. 15.
26. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *op. cit.* p. 26.