

CHAPTER II

MUSLIM IMMIGRATION IN ASSAM

Assam came under the political map of British India by the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 having five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley namely, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, which were formerly ruled by the Ahom Kings. Since the last part of the eighteenth century the East India Company was well aware about the political condition of Assam. They came directly in contact with Assam in 1792 when captain Welsh came to Assam to assist Gaurinath Singha. But he returned from Assam on account of non-intervention policy of Sir John Shore in 1796 followed by civil war and the Burmese invasion in 1821. Finally Burmese were expelled from Assam by the British East India Company in 1826 on the basis the terms of the treaty of Yandaboo. Assam was then formed into a Division of the Government of Bengal under a Commissioner.

In 1874, Assam was created a Chief Commissioner province as a result of the reorganization of the administrative system of Bengal. It consisted of the districts of kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhaimpur, the Bengal districts of Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara and the Hills district of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills (present Meghalaya), the Naga Hills (present Nagaland), the Lushai Hills (present Mizoram) and the North East Frontier tract (present Arunachal Pradesh).

During the period from 1905 to 1911 Assam was tagged to East Bengal which formed a single province under the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam under Curzon plan of Bengal partition. Again in 1912 following the annulment of the partition, Assam was made a separate province under a Chief Commissioner. In 1921, Assam became a Governor's province which continued during provincial autonomy introduced by the

Government of India Act, 1935. Finally in 1947 when India achieved independence, Assam became a separate state without Sylhet, which by a referendum went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) except three and half police stations of Badarpur, Ratabari, Patharkandi and a portion of Karimganj.

The term 'Line System' can broadly be defined as a colonial devise of racial segregation. Such colonial policy has been found in South Africa where the British colonial Government introduced a system known as Pass Laws in the Cape Colony and Natal during the nineteenth century. Pass Laws in South Africa were designed to segregate the population and put a limitation on the movement of non-white populations.

In the context of Assam the 'Line System' is associated with the immigration of land hungry peasants from the district of Mymensingh of East Bengal. The immigration in Assam started with the last decade of the nineteenth century with the encouragement of colonial officials. It is to be noted here in this context that the immigrant population mainly belonged to the Muslim community who settled in wastelands of Assam by clearing the forest and started cultivation.

The large scale immigration resulted into a tremendous increase of population in the first three decades of the twentieth century. As observed by Dr. Nripen Dhar the population of an area grows in two ways, an excess of birth over deaths and an excess of immigration over emigration. In case of Assam, the number of immigrants exceeded that of emigrants during the period under study.

In Assam by the 'Line System', villages were mainly divided into four classes. In the first place some villages were exclusively reserved for the indigenous people. Secondly, some other villages were exclusively meant for the Bengali immigrants. Thirdly, there were villages in which a line was drawn either on the map or in the ground, on the one side of which immigrants could settled and on the other side of which their settlement was forbidden. Fourthly, there were villages in which both immigrants and indigenous people were free to settle. The lines drawn on the map or on the ground were somewhat arbitrary as no fixed principles were followed determining them. The 'Line

System' at first owed its origin in the district of Nowgong in 1920. It was, in fact, a device to segregate the Bengali Muslims from the indigenous population including tribal and backward classes.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century a steady stream of agricultural immigrants from adjoining districts of Bengal mainly Mymensingh, Dacca, Bogura and Rangpur started to come to Assam, most of which were Muslims. They settled permanently with their families mainly on the vast culturable wastelands lying in the riverine belt of the lower and central districts of the valley namely Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. It coincided with the creation of a new province in the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam following the partition of Bengal. Lord Curzon had given the partition a political colour by stating that the Muslims would get a province where they would be majority. Accordingly, the colonial Government was encouraging immigration particularly to the *chars* of Goalpara. It was in 1911 that the Census Commissioner first pointed out the dangers of immigrants who had gone beyond the *chars* of Goalpara. By 1921, the movement had extended in all four lower and central districts of the valley to a considerable extent.

Moreover, during the partition of 1905 when Assam was merged with the Dacca division of Bengal, the communication gap between the people of Assam valley and those of Eastern Bengal narrowed down. This also facilitated the movement of people from one region to other. The completion of Assam Bengal Railway reduced the remoteness of Assam from the rest of India.

The Table 2.1 gives us an idea of the expansion of population during the first three decades of the twentieth century in Assam (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Population Growth in Assam (1911-41)

District	1911-1921			1921-1931				1931-1941				
	Muslims		Others	Muslims		Others		Muslims	Others			
	Total increase	Per cent	Total increase	Per cent	Total increase	Per cent	Total increase	Per cent	Total increase	Per cent	Total increase	Per cent
Goalpara	104,928	49.5%	56,952	14.6%	71,219	22.5%	49,006	11.0%	81,215	20.9%	50,332	10.2%
Kamrup	46,919	72.6%	47,924	7.9%	128,876	116%	85,199	13%	127,100	53%	162,354	22%
Darrang	16,230	79.9%	84,391	23.6%	30,968	85%	75,914	17%	53,492	79%	102,482	19.8%
Nowgong	54,893	349.9%	39,492	13%	107,180	152%	57,480	17.5%	72,351	40.5%	75,868	20%
Sibsagar	5,276	18%	127,622	19.3%	8,913	25.4%	101,216	13%	7,862	18%	133,553	15%
Lakhimpur	2,027	15%	117,279	26%	10,503	68%	125,784	22%	18,630	71%	151,630	21.7%
Total	230,273	64.8%	473,600	17.2%	357,659	61%	494,599	15.3%	360,650	38.2%	676,209	18.2%

Source: ASF RD 23/43 p.4

Table 2.2 Statement showing the Khiraj Area and area settled with immigrants

Districts	Total settled Khiraj Area				Area settled with other immigrants as Mymensinghias, Railway coolies, and U.P. Cultivators, (other than Ex-Tea Garden Coolies, Nepalese and Santhals)					
	1911-12	1921-22	1931-32	1941-42	1921-22		1931-32		1941-42	
	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres	Acres Area	% of total settled area	Acres area	% of total settled area	Acres area	of % of total settled area
Goalpara	.....	.....	180,527	183,767	.....	.....	39,989	22%	60,142	32.7%
Kamrup	549,456	658,398	898,039	1,042,394	32,052	5%	118,438	13.2%	206,539	19.8%
Darrang	316,527	419,204	545,949	649,046	10,832	2.6%	30,728	6%	42,333	6.5%
Nowgong	262,442	355,438	480,856	586,299	56,770	16%	135,832	28%	190,102	32.4%
Sibsagar	617,531	715,486	837,101	878,339	1,129	16%	4,077	.5%	4,123	.5%
Lakhimpur	284,969	396,003	568,378	663,421	4,710	1.2%	6,607	1.2%	11,893	1.8%
Total	2,236,245	2,606,645	3,510,850	4,003,266	114,032	4.4%	335,671	%	515,186	10.3%

Source: ASF RD 23/43 p.4

For the first time in 1913, the problem of agricultural immigrants and the need of preventing interference with the indigenous Assamese had begun to attract attention of the colonial Government. Interestingly both the Assamese middle class and the colonial Government encouraged immigration to settle in the wasteland considering the economic prospect of the province. In view of the increasing number of immigrants the colonial bureaucrats like Deputy Commissioners considered steps to meet the situation. A plan was framed in 1916 and was first applied in Nowgong. According to which the new coming immigrants should not be allowed no longer to settle anywhere they liked but would be confined to certain areas in villages demarcated by lines. J.C Higgins, Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong in his order in 1923 officially inaugurated the 'Line

System' though it had already been implemented and in operation in 1920. The Government could device no better measure to tackle the immigration problem of settlement and as the number of new comers increased gradually, the Government gave their approval vide letter No.2132 R, dated August, 1925.

Therefore, initially, the problem of immigration in Assam was sought to be tackled by the colonial official circle. The official attempt failed because of multi-dimensional character of the problem. It should be noted that the colonial handling of the situations gave rise to communal consciousness and the matter was taken up by the public representatives.

An attempt for the solution of immigration problem was made with the formation of 'Line System Enquiry Committee' in 1938 under the chairmanship of F.W.Hockenull. The report submitted was an amalgam of conflicts, contradictions and compromises. They could not suggest any clear cut solution of extremely complicated problem. To sum up the Muslim members of the committee condemned the 'Line System' and recommended its abolition while the Hindu members commended it with some restrictions in future. By the time of enquiry the matter had further complicated by the introduction of the question of language.

In September 1938, the Saadulla coalition Ministry was broken by the first Congress coalition headed by Gopinath Bardaloi who was able to do nothing better to solve this problem which began to assume racial, communal, linguistic and political colours. The resignation of Bardaloi left the field open for Saadulla, who had formed his coalition Ministry in February, 1940. Till 1946, he was Premier for a number of times and followed a policy of settlement which was subjected to severe criticism by the Congress, both at national and provincial level. The policy of evictions of large scale immigrants pursued by the Bardaloi Government in 1946 met with strong opposition from the Mulsim League and their followers. It resulted in communal tension prevailed all over province till the declaration of 'Mountbatten Plan' for referendum of Sylhet.

Thus the 'Line System', immigration issue and the policy of evictions had split up the province more deeply and widely than any other things. The rise and fall of Ministries was linked up with the issue which defied any solution because of divergent approaches of the political leaders which only hastened communal bitterness and tension. Against such background, the emergence of Muslim League as a formidable force in Assam politics serves only to intensify the communal cleavages. The All India Muslim League officially took up the matter of immigration problem in Assam, condemning the 'Line System' as an instrument of injustice and oppression and declared that it could be remedied only by the establishment of Pakistan. Finally the British colonial policy of 'Line System' furnished as a pretext for the separation of Sylhet from the mainland of Assam.

However, Assam is situated in one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind.¹ Down the ages she received people of different strains who added new elements to the country's population and culture complex. Across her geographical boundaries there came men, ideas and means of production to mingle together with the aboriginals and shape a new mode of living and a rich culture.

The contacts so achieved, with both inside and outside India, were both lasting and ever increasing. Her contacts with China, Tibet and Burma are also well known. In the medieval period, Assam could successfully resist the eastward expansion of the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal rulers of India towards Burma and beyond.² She maintained her independent status till 1826, when finally she passed on to the hands of the British.

Since the revolt of 1857, Assam has completely identified herself with the main stream of Indian culture. In the national struggle for freedom as well she played a part

¹ J. H. Mills, *Assam Review*, March, 1928, p.24

² S. K. Chatterjee, *The place of Assam in the History and civilization of India*, Gauhati University, 1970, p. 45.

no less significant than other states of India. Even since independence, she has been sharing the weal and woe of the nation and contributing towards the country's progress.³

Thus, Assam became a museum of races in the ancient past as it is situated on one of the great migration routes of mankind. For geo-graphical reasons, one of the channels of her communication with the rest of India has been through the Brahmaputra, the Ganges and the land routes. Of the four routes between Assam and Bengal, three were overland and one was water route, the latter being the easiest and most popular. It connected the two parts of India through Goalpara via the Jennai from Jamalpur leading to Pabna River reaching the Ganges. A part of the journey which required twenty five to thirty days from Goalpara to Calcutta covered the Sundarbans. The first land channel connected Goalpara, Bogura, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad and Calcutta and was the line of the Calcutta Dak. The second one was via Goalpara, Singimari and Jamalpur to Dacca. The third passed through Gauhati, Ranigaon, Nongkhlow, Mowphlang and Cherra connecting Kamrup, Khasi Hills and Sylhet.⁴ As a result of intercourses through these routes both ethnographic composition and culture of Assam today present a very complicated and composite picture.

The process of racial migration of the earlier stages was necessarily slow. But with the dawn of the medieval ages, this type of migration was somewhat replaced by planned military invasions. These new factors thrust themselves too rapidly upon Assam and created a turmoil introducing different social dynamics. As a matter of fact, this turned Assam's history from an almost self contained complacent existence into one on tremendous transformations in various directions. The beginning of the thirteenth century was the turning point. Assam witnessed two waves of invasions, the Muslim invasions from the west i.e. Bengal and the Ahom invasion from the east. Thus began a fateful reaction between an ancient traditional society of already divergent groups and two more organized and compact peoples with social, economics, political and cultural orders, differing completely from one another as also from the prevailing ones. The

³ S. L. Baruah, *A comprehensive History of Assam*, Dibrugarh University, 1985, p.3.

⁴ J. M. Cosh, *Tropography of Assam*, pp. 8-9.

Ahoms ultimately conquered Assam over which they ruled for more than six hundred years. For over four centuries, the Muslims tried to conquer Assam but failed. But their knowledge of the region became more and more intimate and over the time, in various spheres of Assam's life, they attained an importance which remains yet to be comprehended.

Muslims came to Assam in various manners and phases. Different parts of Assam were explored by them at different times through different routes. The earliest Muslim attempt to enter Assam forcibly was their invasion of 1205 A.D. led by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji from Bengal as depicted in the North Gauhati inscription of 1127 Saka Era. It is on record that before the first Ahom appearance in 1228A.D., several Muslim invasions had already taken place and affected the district of Kamrup and adjoining territories. Some of the captive mercenaries and others decided to settle in those places. Therefore, the camp-followers of military commanders must be regarded as the pioneers of Muslim settlers in Assam.⁵ The first invasion was guided by Ali Mech, a mech chieftain whom Muhammad had converted to Islam.⁶ This was perhaps the earliest instance of Muslim proselytisation which synchronized with their appearance on the borders of Assam. Though Kamrup was free from serious Muslim invasions since then till the end of the fifteenth century, "occasional Muslim raids, particularly from the direction of Mymensingh" continued.⁷ Kanak Lal Barua mentions a colony of Muslims established round about Hajo in Kamrup after the unsuccessful invasion of Allauddin Hussein Shah in 1498. A mosque was erected there by one Ghyasuddin Aulia who subsequently died and was buried near the Mosque. This was perhaps the earliest recorded Muslim settlement in Assam.⁸

The history of the Ahoms of the seventeenth century was the history of Ahom-Mughal conflicts. In course of conflict between Kutch Behar and the Mughals, Kamarupa or the eastern Kutch country lying between the rivers Sankash and Barnadi

⁵ M. Kar, *Muslims in Assam politics*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1990, p. 2.

⁶ K. L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa*, New Delhi, C.T.Publication, pvt ltd, 1988, p. 136.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 153.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 175.

which Muslim historians call the province of Kutch Hajo and which now forms the Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam came under the Muslims in 1612.

The Muslim army conquered and annexed Kutch Hajo. Thus the imperial frontier was connected upto the Barnadi on the north-east and the Mughal Government came into contact with the Ahom Kings who ruled over Central and Eastern Assam across the stream of the Brahmaputra. They also consolidated their rule in Kamrup by effecting the financial settlement of the country.⁹

Mir Jumla, appointed Governor of Bengal in 1660, had orders "... to punish the lawless Zaminders of the province especially those of Assam and the Mughls (Arracan)," and also made an attempt to extend Muslim power over Assam. His invasion in 1662 was the last serious and well organized effort of the Mughals to conquer Assam. By the humiliating treaty of Ghiladari, 1 January 1663, Jayadhvaj Singha, the Ahom King, had to surrender vast territories to the Mughals and "Assam west of the river Barnadi on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and west of the Kallang river on the south bank was to be annexed to the empire. Thus the Mughals were to get more than half of the province of Darrang.¹⁰ It may not be wrong to say that a large number of Muslims settled permanently in Kamrup and Darrang by right of conquest. It would be interesting to study how far Aurangzeb's Islamic ordinances issued soon after his second coronation in 1659 had been applied to the newly conquered territories which remained under the Mughals for a considerable time. It was the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha (1681-96) who in 1682 wrested western Assam from the Mughals and restored Assam's original frontier along the river Manas.¹¹

So far as Goalpara was concerned, the Ahoms could hold it for about eight years before they were compelled to retreat by Mir Jumla's army. From this time onward, the district formed part of the Muslim dominion till with the rest of Bengal, it was ceded to the British in 1765. An inscription unearthed at Gachhtal in Nowgong indicates that its

⁹ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, Spink & Co., 1926. P. 117

¹⁰ Jadunath Sarkar, *Short History of Aurangzeb*, p.122.

¹¹ S. K. Bhuyan, ed. *Tungkhungia Buranji*, DHAS, Gauhati, 1932, p. XVIII.

earliest contact with the Muslims took place during Ghyasuddin's invasion of Assam in 1227.¹²

Though Muslim settlements in Assam valley may be said to have commenced in Western Assam long before the Ahom-Mughal contact of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, "... their infiltration into the upper part of the valley cannot be traced prior to the invasion of Mir Jumla," in 1662. During Major Jenkin's enquiry as late as 1838, some Jorhat Muslims traced their ancestry to those who had accompanied the fourteen *Omrahs* under *Nawab* Mir Jumla.¹³

In 1384, a spiritual-cum-military leader, Shah Jalal, conquered Sylhet which already had a settled Muslim population. The last Hindu Raja of the Laur Kingdom of Sylhet embraced Islam during the reign of Aurangzeb and that naturally inspired further Muslim settlement there. Bengal was absorbed into the Mughal Empire by Akbar and Sylhet and Cachar formed parts of the province. Till the granting of the *Dewani* in 1765, this territory was ruled by a succession of *Amils* subordinate to the *Nawab* of Dacca. Since then it was administered as a part of the Dacca Division of Bengal till 1874 when it was transferred to Assam (by Government of India Proclamation dated the 12 September 1874).

Cachar was brought under Ahom control by Rudra Singha who ruled from 1696 to 1714. When the Kacharis established their new capital at Khaspur on the bank of Madhura river, they "found themselves in presence of an already settled population of Hindus and Musalmans from Sylhet who had overflowed that district into that valley". Cachar's fertile Barak valley had, for long been attracting farmer migrants from Sylhet due to pressure of population there. The Barak valley, lying between the Assam Range Hills on the north and the chain of Manipur Hills and Lushai Hills on the east and south, was open only on the western side and this provided an outlet for the Sylhet farmers, a very large number of whom belonged to the Muslim community.¹⁴

¹² N. N. Acharyya, *History of Medieval, Gauhati, 1966*, Assam, p. 135.

¹³ H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, 1826 – 1858*, Gauhati 1980, p. 264.

¹⁴ Assam Secretariat press, 1896, *Report on the province of Assam*, p. 78.

The territory was taken over informally by Lt. Fisher on June 30, 1830. By a proclamation of Lord William Bentinck on 14 August 1832, it was annexed to the British territory and administered for a time by a Superintendent under the supervision of the Agent to the Governor General. Then it was placed in the Dacca Division of Bengal. Within a few years of annexation, the upper parts of the territory were transferred to the Nowgong district of Assam. The rest of it came under Assam Chief Commissionership in 1874. At the time of annexation the Muslim portion of the population was the most numerous.¹⁵

Brahmaputra valley's contact with the Muslims as also the Ahoms created an unfavourable reaction towards foreigners. All men from Bengal and other parts of India were looked upon as sources of danger and they were given the common appellation of *Bangals*, though later on, the term came to be applied to the Bengalees.

But there were exceptions to this rigid definition of strangers. The Ahom rulers encouraged men from other parts of the country to settle in Assam provided their introduction was of advantage to her. They included artisans, draftsmen, weavers, accountants, scholars and saints, both Hindus and Muslims. Many Muslims were appointed in the several departments of the state for deciphering and interpreting of Persian documents, carving inscriptions on copper plates and other metals, minting of coin, embroidery work, painting, carpentry, sword and gun making, manufacture of gun powder, tailoring and weaving. As useful members of a community they were recognized by the Ahoms as citizens but of a lower status. No outsider could aspire to rise high in the Ahom court. The Ahom Kings allowed the Muslims to follow their own faith. Some of the Muslim religious leaders known as *Dewans* were granted revenue free lands generally called *pirpal lands*, to settle on. Thus, long before the beginning of the modern history of Assam, Muslims had formed a permanent part of Assam's society though their number cannot be determined.¹⁶

¹⁵ D. Datta, *Cachar District Records*, Silchar 1968, pp. 178-179.

¹⁶ S. K. Bhuyan, *op.cit.*, p. XXX.

Historians of Assam rightly emphasize the fact that Assam as a whole was never a part of the Muslim dominion. But while their victories were short lived, it is not historically correct to say that they did not leave lasting effects on Assam's life. They have a history as a distinct community in all its aspects. Their invasions certainly had, among other things, a lasting demographic effect on Assam's population even long before the modern Muslim immigrants began to set foot on the soil. It is interesting to observe that those places of the Brahmaputra valley which were subdued and controlled by the Muslims between 1603 and 1682 ultimately became the important centers of Muslim population and their preponderance.

The table 2.3 below gives an idea of Assam's population and per centage of Muslims on the eve of reorganization in 1874 in which year it was placed in charge of a Chief Commissioner. Till then it consisted of the districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibsagar, (and a small part of Cachar) headed by a Commissioner under the Lt. Governor of Bengal.

By 1850, farmer migration from Sylhet to Cachar had considerably decreased and by 1874 it had practically ceased. The population of Cachar was, however, very scanty and there was a vast expanse of very fertile land, only the best portions of the soil being under cultivation and occupation.¹⁷ The Muslims accounted for 36.3% rising to 50% by 1881.¹⁸

¹⁷ W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, vol, III, p. 281.

¹⁸ Census 1881 and Administrative Report of Assam, 1881, p. 35.

Table 2.3: The population of Assam and percentage of Muslims in 1871

Total Population in 1871	Total Muslim Population	Per centage of Muslims to total Population	
Darrang	2,35,300	13,859	5.9
Kamrup	5,61,681	45,823	8.2
Lakhimpur	1,21,267	3,826	3.1
Nowgong	2,56,390	10,066	3.9
Sibsagar	2,96,589	12,619	4.3
Total	14,71,227	86,193	5.9

Source: ASF RD 23/43, p.4

The reconstitution of 1874 automatically brought in a large number of Muslims raising their total percentage in the Province from 5.9 to 28.8 as shown in Table 2.4

Table 2.4 : Total Muslim population and their percentage in 1874

Total Population in 1874 on the basis of 1871 Census	Total Muslim Population	Per centage of Muslims to total Population	
Cachar	2,05,027	74,361	36.3
Sylhet	17,19,539	8,54,131	49.7
Total	19,24,566	9,28,492	48.2
Darrang	2,35,300	13,859	5.9
Goalpara	4,44,761	89,916	20.1
Kamrup	5,61,681	45,823	8.2
Lakhimpur	1,21,267	3,826	3.1
Nowgong	2,56,390	10,066	3.9
Sibsagar	2,96,589	12,619	4.3
Total	19,15,988	1,76,109	9.2
Total Population	38,40,554	11,04,601	28.8

Source: ASF RD 23/43 p.4

From 1871 to 1881, the Muslim population increased by 19.17% against the provincial increase of 19.23%. According to the Census Commissioner, 1881, there was

a doubt that the real number of Muslims was underrated in the previous Census and he claimed greater accuracy for figures.¹⁹

Reconstitution of the province had another result. Of the total population of 38,40,554, Bengalee alone numbered more than twenty lakhs, a fact of tremendous significance in the social, economic and political life of Assam.

Farmers from other parts of Bengal continued to come to the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1901, the total immigrant population was 7,66,000 and of them eighty three per cent were tea garden labourers. Of the remaining seventeen per cent numbering 1,30,220, the number of Muslim farmer immigrants is not ascertainable, but apparently it was small.²⁰

The English merchants introduced tea cultivation in the province after the British occupation. This at once necessitated the recruitment of labourers for the plantations as such labourers were not locally available. The Tea Industry was responsible for bringing these labourers in a planned manner as the industry developed since the middle of the nineteenth century. Many lakhs of them, on the expiry of their contract called Ex-tea garden coolies, settled in areas adjacent to the tea gardens. This settlement was treated by the planters and the Government as a purely economic problem and was so made as to serve their own interests. Other immigrants came out of their own in search of livelihood. But the coming of the Muslim farm labourers from Bengal since the opening of the century is of the greatest significance.

We have seen that migration from Sylhet and Cachar had practically stopped by the middle of the nineteenth century. Immigration from other parts of Bengal continued independently in droplets and till the end of the century the number of foreigners in Assam other than tea labourers was very small.

Sir Charles Elliot, Chief Commissioner, Assam (1881-1885), for the first time alluded to the existence in the Brahmaputra valley of large areas of waste land-good flat

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 35-36.

²⁰ P. C. Goswami, *The Economic Development of Assam*, Bombay, 1963, p.92

alluvial land-awaiting the sickle and the plough to produce large crops. Thus a new interest was generated by Elliot and the Government of India began to give thoughts to the settlement of these vast tracts by agriculturists from Bengal and Bihar. During the next twenty years, they considered various plans. But sharp differences of opinion between the Chief Commissioner and the Government of India ultimately led to the abandonment of the idea of planned settlement by Sir Henry Cotton in 1899.²¹

Farmer migrants from Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogura and Rangpur continued to come in small numbers. But as the century advanced this migration took the form of large scale influx into the Brahmaputra valley and ultimately became, from a basically economic problem, a matter of extremely complicated controversy with ramifications into social, political, cultural and linguistic aspects of Assam's life. It is relevant to observe that the Bengal immigrants and their descendants furnish about seventy seven per cent of Assam Muslim population. As eighty five per cent of them came from Mymensingh, it was not surprising that the term "*Mymensinghias*" became synonymous with immigrant.²²

To follow the history of immigration, it may be profitable to refer back to the Muslim population of Assam shown in Table 2.3 above. The administrative reorganization of Assam into a Chief Commissionership in 1874, added about twenty four lakhs of people to the existing total of about fifteen lakhs. Of this, the Muslims numbered 11, 04,601 or 28.8 per cent. But in the Brahmaputra valley, there were only 1, 76,109 Muslims out of a total population of 19, 15,988 and they constituted 9.2 per cent of that total.

Mymensingh was the most populous of all the Bengal districts nearest to Assam next to Goalpara. In 1874, the total population of the district was 23, 51,700 which was 4, 35,707 more than the total population of all the Brahmaputra Valley districts.²³

²¹ A. S. F. No. Rev. A. Nov. 1898, Nos. 128,138.

²² Kingsley Davis, *The population of India and Pakistan*, Delhi 1981, p. 119.

²³ *Census of India*, Bengal, 1881.

There were four and a half million acres of land in the district of which about half was cultivated and the other half included waste and other categories of land where as in Assam, the total cultivable waste was 67, 79,978 acres of which 12, 58,277 acres were cultivated. However, according to the District Administration Report of 1873-74 in an ordinary year, the production was estimated to about 135 lakhs of mounds of rice of which 27 ½ lakhs were exported, the remainder being consumed in the district.

Of the total population of 23, 51,695, eighty per cent were agriculturists, ten per cent professionals, three per cent fishermen, three point eight per cent labourers and one point two per cent followed hereditary occupations.²⁴ On the one hand, the Brahmaputra devastated thousands of acres of land; on the other, the population increased so that by 1900, the actual inhabitants of the district numbered 38, 00,058 of whom ninety five per cent were landless tenants and only two per cent were Talukdars. The per capita cultivable land was sixteen *kathas*.²⁵ This short account of the district would clearly show that any further pressure on land which was inevitable with the increase of population, would create a situation to escape from which, the farmers would have to seek new outlets. Of the total population of 39, 15,068 in 1900, 27, 95,548 (i.e. about sixty seven per cent) were Muslims and 10, 88,857 were Hindus.²⁶ It would thus appear that in case of any large scale migration, the bulk of the migrants would be Muslim farmers.

Even in absence of any plan of reclamation and settlement, the vast expanse of cultivable wastes in Assam could not have escaped the notice of the millions of landless Muslim farmers of Mymensingh. In the Census of 1901 no one from Mymensingh was recorded in Assam. The Census Commissioners of 1891 and 1901 were of the opinion that the people of Bengal would not come to Assam as cultivators as there was no inducement and recruitment as in the case of the tea gardens. “Curiously enough, despite

²⁴ A. S. F. No. Rev. A. Nov. 1898. Nos. 128-38.

²⁵ *Census of India*, Bengal, 1901.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Bengal's longstanding congestion of population and scarcity of land, the mass migration of Bengalees into the valley of Assam did not start until after 1900".²⁷

The next decade witnessed the beginning of large scale immigration of Muslim farmers from Mymensingh. It is relevant to note that nowhere, till 1924, the exact causes which led to this sudden phenomenon had been ascertained. The economic cause was, however, obvious. A detailed diagnosis was made by the "Bengalee" on July 22, 1924 publishing an article entitled 'Bengal peasants stream of Emigration to Assam'. It wrote that the density of population in Eastern Bengal had reached a saturation point and emigration was solving the problem of acute congestion.

The journal further observed that the rich virgin tracts in Goalpara and Kamrup in Assam had been penetrated by the pioneers with the result that there was an ever increasing stream of families going over the border.

It would be hard to find a more conservative individual than the Bengali cultivator. His village is his life. He seldom goes beyond it. When away from a few miles from his own home he feels a stranger in a strange land and home sickness is a poignant malady. Only the most pressing economic conditions could drive him from his *Bari* (home) so dear to him.²⁸

The partition and separation of holdings had its effects, the minimum had been reached, and the cultivators were no longer able to support their families on the small plots of land falling to their lot. The strongest and the most intelligent migrated first and thus the "loss to the community is very great. Bengal's loss is Assam's gain and the Bengali cultivator in Assam is already affecting the output from the districts in which he has settled, to the material benefit of the whole province". In all countries in the world, emigration had solved the problem of over-population and it was bound to come

²⁷ Kingsley Davis, *op.cit.* p.118.

²⁸ M. Kar, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

in Bengal. In other provinces in India subject to famines, emigration from the affected zones had been occurring for years.²⁹

Bengal, however, is not a country liable to famine and her people are being driven away, because the land has been made to support too heavy a burden.

That a holding of one and a half acres supports a family of six seems preposterous. Yet, by double cropping, 40 or 50 mounds paddy may be obtained and the value of 5 or 6 mounds of jute pays for the balance of food stuffs required. *Rabi* crops and garden crops bring some grist to the mill but it cannot be called plentitude and there is little wonder that the cultivator who cannot add to his earnings by engaging in some industrial work, has to decide on emigration to his new unsettled lands. They were thus leading a life of difficulty with the drawbacks peculiar to under tenants of Bengal Zamindars and “it was quite natural for these industrious agriculturists to be attracted in large numbers”.³⁰

The western part of the district of Goalpara including South Salmara, Lakhipur and Bilashipara was the earliest and most affected. The number of immigrants till 1881 was 49,059. The population of the district increased by one point four per cent (1.4%) during 1881-91 and two per cent during the next decade. But between 1901 onward, the men of Mymensingh advanced to Goalpara in large numbers. The decade witnessed a natural population growth of fifteen point six per cent (15.6%). The number of immigrants rose from 49,059 to 1, 18,233 forming nineteen point seven per cent of the actual population of Goalpara. The Census Report of 1911 was the first document on the extra-ordinary influx of farmers to the *chars* of Goalpara from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogura and Rangapur. Soon, almost all the available lands of Goalpara found suitable by the immigrants were covered. It was during the next decade that these Muslims spread to other districts of lower Assam and the colonist’s formed an important element of the population in all the four Lower and Central districts. These Muslims, almost without exception farm labourers and cultivators, came at first as single

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

³⁰ Kingsley Davis, *op.cit.* p.119.

adventurers. But by the next decade, the colonists began to settle by families and not singly. It was reported that the men generally came first to secure the land and build houses and then the families followed. About eighty five per cent (85%) were Muslims and fifteen per cent (15%) Hindus.³¹

In 1911, the total Muslim immigrants numbered 2, 58,000 in the Brahmaputra valley and 6,000 in the hills.³² In Goalpara, they formed nearly twenty per cent of the population. The next favorable district was Nowgong where they constituted about fourteen per cent.

In Kamrup, they rapidly took up lands especially in the Barpeta sub-division. During this decade, the settlers had not explored much of Darrang district and did not penetrate far from the Brahmaputra banks. But as the inflow continued and their number increased, they expanded further up the valley and away from the river. By the next decade, the settlers numbered 3, 48,000 in the valley.³³ By the time, the entire waste land in the Goalpara and Nowgong districts had been explored by the immigrants. Barpeta could actually hold no more and the Darrang district had already started being taken up. Sibsagar had, till then been practically untouched but could not expect to remain so as a number of them had already settled in North Lakhimpur. Thus, this advent of thousands of farmer migrants was a slow but steady process covering the Brahmaputra valley where there was no end of waste lands awaiting the cultivator's plough.

The number of Muslims in Assam, except Sylhet, had risen from 5, 03,670 in 1901 to 12, 79,388 in 1931. Thus in thirty years, the increase was more than one hundred and fifty per cent (150%) which, of course, included natural growth of population. Of the total, about half were women and children. The total number of Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley in 1941 was 16, 96,978 against the total Hindu population of 32, 22,377.³⁴ The bulk of them constituted more than fifty per cent (50%) of the number of

³¹ *Census of India*, 1961.

³² Kingsley Davis, *op.cit*, p.118.

³³ *Ibid*, p.115.

³⁴ *Census of India*, Bengal, 1961.

Hindus and were clearly immigrant Muslims. The decennial increase of their number from 1941 to 1951 was 2, 98,895 and their number on the eve of partition was 18, 46,457. Including Sylhet, they numbered more than thirty five lakhs accounting for thirty four per cent of the total provincial population and were only four per cent fewer than the Hindus. The so-called indigenous Muslims were also included in the total figure as they were never enumerated separately. Such enumeration would perhaps explode the hollowness of the dichotomy of the Muslim community injuriously devised by political interests which will gradually unfold themselves.

Having noted in brief their numerical increase in one hundred years, we now proceed to make a few general remarks about the immigrants who form the bulk of the province's Muslim population.

It was not easy for the immigrants to come to Assam, occupy waste land and start cultivation. The destination only was known to them. But there was no organization, private or official, to undertake settlement. Most of the available lands had first to be reclaimed and made suitable for human habitation as they were infested with malaria and wild animals and were extremely unhealthy. The expenses of journey, reclamation of land and building of abodes must have been considerable. The element of uncertainty entered into the transactions involving purchase of lands from the Assamese as the immigrants were strangers to the places. Instances were not wanting where a seller wanted back his land after getting the stipulated sum. No attempt has yet been made to ascertain the amount of money that flowed in the transactions and the number of lives that had to be sacrificed before the waste lands of Assam became the homes of the immigrants.³⁵

Considering his needs and the new environs full of hazards calling for great labour and sacrifice, a certain amount of roughness and intolerance was perhaps inevitable but admittedly, the immigrant became peaceful with passage of time. However, it is to be noted that two groups of people with different ancestries, religions,

³⁵ M. Kar, *op.cit*, p. 13.

customs and habits, economic conditions, cultures and languages came face to face and some unpleasant memories of these initial contacts were not wholly unexpected. But these memories were utilized at a later stage for the sake of political propaganda.³⁶

Greed for land is universal among men and it was not unnatural that in a society pervaded by inequality and injustice, the immigrants “have acquired by subsequently purchase for the most part, large blocks of land amounting to as much as five hundred or even in some cases, a thousand *bighas*.”³⁷

In the absences of any restrictive laws the Assamese themselves also had done so. However, such transactions were not limited to the new comers and the local inhabitants. They also became objects of exploitation by the richer sections of their own community, officials of the Government and non-official public.” It is not however, only the land holders and leading men among the immigrants who have been convicted of making money out of new comers, but we heard of many instances of Assamese speculators also, especially in the earlier days in Nowgong, who made large sums of money by selling lands that they had either taken up specially for that purpose or had not taken up at all. This species of corruption, moreover, was not found to be practiced only by the non-official public and the Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong was able to give us many instances of corruption among the land records staff, in their dealing with the settling of land altering lines and giving pattas.....”³⁸

Again, 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 of their community.³⁹ 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. Finally, 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

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁸ *L.S.E.C. Report*, Govt. of Assam, 1938, p. 5, para-3.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.6, para-5.

after having greatly contributed to the wealth of Assam. Their attitude as a class hardened against being treated so and with political developments, both the Assamese and the Muslims sought to resolve the problem politically but did not succeed. This politicization of an essentially economic problem reveals social and political attitudes of the parties concerned.