

# Situating Migration In Colonial Assam: Impact And Reaction

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*Abstract: The massive population movement, usually called human migration, is one of the most important chapters of history of social science. It has wider social, economic, political, demographic and ecological implications. The establishment of the colonial rule facilitated immigration from across the border of Assam particularly from East Bengal. In respect of East Bengal peasants there were a lot of general factors which tend them to move towards Assam. As the peasant community of East Bengal were subjected to inhuman oppression and exploitation caused by the Zamindari settlement, also became victims of natural calamities like flood and famine in their homeland, so in order to get a better way of life they looked for a new territory which they found in Assam. It is no doubt that the new comers enhanced their capacity of exploit resource potential more scientifically and thereby contributed a lot to the economic growth of Assam, but at the same time brought a tangible transformation in the demographic character of the province, also posed a serious threat to the survival of the indigenous inhabitants of the Valley which further paved the way for the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations. The Assamese people feared that it would not only endanger their identity but also create loss and crisis in their economic, social and political spheres and they began to protest against this large scale migration. On the otherhand the movement against the migration contributed to the emergence of regional nationalism among the people of Assam which became more strengthened in the post colonial period though in vain. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the migration particularly of the East- Bengal peasant community into Assam and its impact on the socio-economic and demographic structure of Assam and the response of the Assamese people towards it.*

**Keywords:** Assamese, Colonial, Demographic, Migration, Zamindari.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Migration was an integral part of the historical development in the colonial period. Besides the British and other Indians, the East-Bengal peasant community particularly from Mymensing, Pabna, Rongpur, Boghra and other districts of East Bengal started migrating to Assam with their families in group to settle down permanently. As the peasant community of East-Bengal became victims of the *Zamindari* system that existed in Bengal during that time, also become victims of natural calamities like flood and famine in their homeland so in order to get a better way of life they looked for a new territory which could satisfy their needs. Moreover, there were vast areas of cultivable land lying fallow in the districts of Brahmaputra Valley and the Government did not formulate any plan for bringing this

valuable land under cultivation and the peasant community with a view to explore these land moved to Assam as they found it suitable to upgrade their economic position. On the contrary, the colonial government observed that the collection of land revenue was very poor in Assam proper because of the population of the province is poor in number also adopted the scheme of jute cultivation to get economic benefit which they expected to be fulfilled by these group of people. But gradually these people tried to acquire more and more land and also their increasing numbers led to the rapid growth of population in Assam which brought a great change in the demographic structure of Assam. The problem of population balance was interlinked with linguistic problem. As majority of immigrants (as termed by British District Administrators) speak Bengali so the percentage of Bengali speaking people had increased in the districts where they settled. As the flow of

immigrants brought about an abrupt change in the demographic pattern of Assam so the natives feared that it would not only endanger their (Assamese people) identity but also create loss and crisis in their economic, social and political spheres and they began to protest against this large scale immigration.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER**

- ✓ The main objective of the paper is-
- ✓ To study the migration particularly of the East- Bengal peasant community into Assam.
- ✓ To highlight the impact of migration on the socio-economic and demographic structure of Assam.
- ✓ To view the response of the Assamese people towards these migration.

**II. METHODOLOGY**

- ✓ Basically Historical methodology is adopted for the work.
- ✓ Archival documents touched and so far untouched are consulted and cross – examined.
- ✓ Primary and Secondary data are collected.
- ✓ Multi – disciplinary approaches are adopted.
- ✓ An extensive study of existing literature is conducted.

With a view to explore the land lying fallow in the districts of Brahmaputra valley and as the Government also did not formulate any plan for bringing this valuable land under cultivation the peasant community moved to Assam because they found it suitable to upgrade their economic position. In other words, to utilize Everett Lee’s concept of ‘Push’ and ‘Pull’ which viewed migration as an economic phenomenon. (Mathew and others, 2005) The lack of opportunity for advancement leading to economic misery ‘push’ the people of East Bengal to come out of their region for searching of the better livelihood and opportunities in Assam. On the otherside, the vast areas of cultivable land which provided economic necessities ‘pull’ these people towards Assam. This ‘push’ and ‘pull’ theory in the case of migration from East Bengal to Assam can be illustrated in the following table :

Push Factors (East Bengal)	Pull Factors (Assam)
Uneconomic land holdings, famines, rapacious Zamindari system	Vast tracts of unused waste land lying on the banks of river Brahmaputra which was conducive for the cultivation of cash crops like pulses, jute, mustard, sugarcane, etc.

Table 1

In this regard it is again reasonable to quote the theory of E. G. Ravenstein where she argues that “people usually moves from rural areas to neighboring urban centers seeking more and better employment opportunities” (Ibid). It may be reiterated that the East Bengal peasant community migrated to those regions where the hope of job and economic

opportunities were in greater abundance. The following table illustrates the above view.

Source Region	Recipient Region
Rangpur, Mymensingh, Bogra, Pabna etc.	Goalpara, GaroHills, Mankachar, Nagaon, Dhubri Region.

Table 2

The movement of these people were also facilitated by the development of communication particularly railways and steamer services between Assam and Bengal through the river Barak or Surma and Brahmaputra. Homeswar Goswami states that, “Prior to 1902, the only conveyance between Assam valley and Eastern Bengal was navigable river transport. But in 1902 the valley was connected by railways with Western Bengal through Eastern Bengal and in 1904 with Eastern Bengal through Surma valley” (Goswami, 1985). Redford Arthur holds the view that “The railways, ..., induced many people to migrate for long distance who would otherwise not have moved far, but also induced many more people to migrate for short distance who would otherwise not have moved at all” (Redford,1974 ).

Within the next three decades these immigrants occupied the Char-Chapari (as termed by British District Administrators) means riverine land, explored almost all the available land that were found suitable for cultivation, spread to various parts of the province and formed an important segment of the population of the province. The census report of 1911 states that out of the total population 85% were the Muslims and 15% were the Hindus. (Census of India, 1911). During 1904-11, a total number of 54, 000 people moved out from their homes in East Bengal districts of Mymensing, Rongpur, Jalpaiguri and reached Assam (Baruah, 2011 ) out of which 51, 000 settled in the district of Goalpara and the rest on other district of the Brahmaputra valley (Census of India,1921). It is stated in the census report of 1921 that “Almost every train and steamer brings parties of these settlers and it seems likely that their march will extend further up to the valley and away from the river before long.” (Ibid, 41). The East Bengal settlers began to increase on mass scale in the Brahmaputra Valley and the total numbers of them were nearly 3, 000,000 in 1921 (Ibid, 86). Infact “The East Bengali settlers had moved up to the Brahmaputra valley and formed 14% of the total population of Nowgong district in 1921” (Ibid ). According to official document, most of the grazing reserves of Nowgong like Dhingarati village grazing reserves, Chalapathar, Dhupguri, Jakaruabil, Botodrove Borbheti, Ditto Saruphisa village grazing reserves were occupied by these immigrants (Assam Legislative Assembly Debates). The influx of people into Assam in three decades and total number of persons who accommodated in each district of the Brahmaputra Valley is shown in the following with a bar diagram (Census Report of Assam, 1901-1961).

Year	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong	Sibsagar	Lakhimpur
1900-11	77000	4000	7000	4000	14000	14000
1911-21	159000	44000	20000	59000	14000	14000
1921-31	170000	134000	41000	120000	12000	19000
<b>Total</b>	<b>406000</b>	<b>182000</b>	<b>68000</b>	<b>183000</b>	<b>40000</b>	<b>47000</b>

Table 3

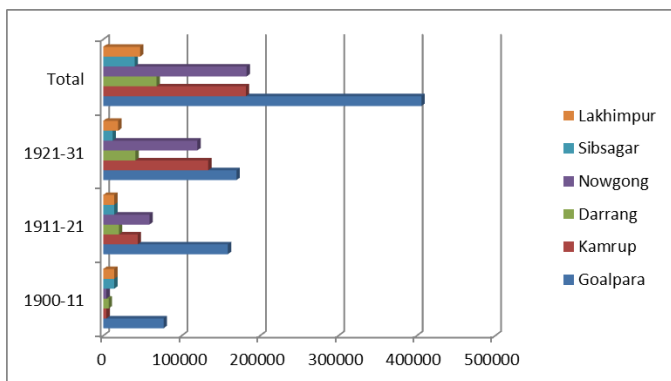


Figure 1

As these immigrants tried to acquire more and more land by hook or crook it led to the rapid growth of population in Assam. M. Kar observes that “new comers (immigrants) were turbulent in nature and when they entered into Assamese areas, the latter were compelled either by allurements of better price or for reasons of oppressions to sell their periodic pattas to the former” (Kar, 1997). In some of the places these forcible occupation of land led to violent incidents also and conflict between the local people and immigrants had arisen. It is mentioned in an official document that, ‘in Kalikazar of Mikirbheta mauza of Nowgong (present Nagaon) district some immigrants forcefully occupied patta lands of ‘Lalung’ (present Tiwa) and other tribal people’ (Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, 1937). ‘A large number of Kachari people who failed to encounter with the immigrants took shelter in protected areas’ (Ibid, 13<sup>th</sup> March). ‘In Paka and Sarukhetri mauza of Barpeta sub-division, similar incident occurred’ (Ibid, 5<sup>th</sup> March). In tribal villages like Kaurabha, Benibari, Ulubari, Rangdia and Banjarapam of Howli mauza of Barpeta Sub-Division of Goalpara district the immigrants encroached nearly 100 bighas of land of local people (Baruah, 2011).

The problem of population balance was interlinked with linguistic problem. As majority of immigrants speak Bengali so the percentage of Bengali speaking people had increased in the districts where they settled. In this connection Amalendu Guha states, “...the proportion of Assamese speakers was adversely affected between 1911 and 1931 by the influx of East Bengal immigrants...” (Guha, 2015). The following table till 1921 indicates continuous rise of percentage of Bengali speaking people of Assam including Barak Valley and all Hill districts (Census of India, 1921).

Percentage of Assam	1901	1911	1921
Population speaking			
Assamese	22.0%	21.7%	21.6%
Bengali	40.1%	44.9%	45.1%

Table 4

It indicates that the problem of immigration not only remained confined with the population balance but it also cropped up with linguistic problem.

As the flow of immigrants brought about an abrupt change in the demographic pattern of Assam and also carried a great change in the socio-cultural life of Assamese people so they feared that it would not only endanger the identity of the Assamese people but also create loss and crisis in their

economic, social and political spheres and they began to protest against this large scale immigration. Mahadev Sharma pointed out that ‘the nature of the immigrants were quite different from the Assamese people’ (Baruah, 2011). He quoted the remark of one Deputy Commissioner and stated that the nature of immigrants was “(as) sudden and quick in quarrel, greedy of land sometimes impatient to control” (Ibid, 63). W. C. M. Dundas who was the then Inspector General of Police of Assam said, “the immigration has brought with it a culture following of thieves, burglars and forgers of currency notes... and with whom murder is little more than an unfortunate incident” (Dhar, 2005). As all these paved the way for social tension in Assamese society so a protest movement was started by the Assamese people against this immigration who appealed to the Government either to stop this immigration or to restrict the settlement areas for the immigrants.

The Assam Association in a sitting at Nowgong District (present Nagaon) offered its suggestion to Government to take necessary steps to stop immigration (Assam Police Abstracts of Intelligence, 1926). Under the Chairmanship of T. R. Phukan a public meeting was organized at Curzon Hall, Guwahati, on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1920 in which resolution was passed stating that “That the meeting views the grant of huge areas of waste land to foreign capitalists and adventurers... which has been detrimental to the interests of the ‘children of the soil’ and strongly urges on the Government to grant lands to the bonafide Assamese” (Assam Secretariate File, 29). On the other hand, Asomiya Samrakhsini Sabha pleaded for a restricted entry of people and favoured their assimilation with local language and culture which was also supported by some prominent Muslim leaders of the Brahmaputra Valley (Bhuyan. A.C. and De. S, 1980). It is observed that against this large flow of population, the Assamese people started a protest movement as they began to think that these immigrants would create a great danger to their language, culture and society in future course of time.

It was however, to overcome the problem, the Government Officials including the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong District formulated a plan in 1916, allowed the new comers (immigrants) to settle only in certain areas in villages demarcated by a line came to be known as the Line System which put into practice in the districts of Nowgong and Kamrup in 1920.

In 1924, Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah made first attempt in a legislative interference with migration also proposed to make resolution on this problem. In December, 1925 the members of Assam Association in their meeting at Nowgong asked the Government to stop immigration (Ibid, 1084-1105). Although Government agreed to examine the issue but very diplomatically it handled the whole matter. With an object to derive more revenue benefits, the Government put effective control on settlement areas but never tried to stop the inflow of immigrants (Guha, 1988). It is recorded that only in Nowgong District the net amount of revenue collected in 1906-07 was Rs. 40, 000 which becomes eight times during 1935-37 and it was because of the settlement of the immigrants in the wasteland of the Valley (Ibid.)

In 1928, the district officials at Shillong evolved the ‘Colonization Scheme’ which was approved in September

1928 in a meeting of the *All Party Committee* with A. W. Botham as the Chairman. Under the scheme a small family was to be given about 20 *bighas* of land on payment of premium (*Assam Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1931). This scheme first came into practice in the Nowgong District and later on extended to Barpeta and Mongoldoi sub-divisions. However, the '*Colonization Scheme*' could not satisfy the immigrants and sometimes they tried to acquire thousand *bighas* of land and brought labourers to work on it. Even they pressurized the Government to review again the whole issue.

The movement against migration assumed a new dimension when Sir Muhammad Saadulla became Premier of Assam under the Act of 1935. He favored the cause of the immigrants also received support from two leaders namely Abdul Hamid Khan popularly known as Maulana Bhasani and Abdul Matin Choudhury who made efforts to help the immigrants. In order to get favour of the immigrants he promised to provide available lands to them on the ground that the immigrants were mostly landless labourers (*Asomiya*, 1940). Taking the cause of immigrants the Muslim League launched all-out propaganda campaign particularly the immigrant's inhabited areas. The League members announced that it would expose the cause of the landless immigrants settled in Assam for the speedy redress of their grievances (*Assam Tribune*, 1940). Saadulla convened a conference including the members of the Legislative formulated a scheme in 1940 which was known as "*Land Development Scheme*" and decided to bring all cultivable lands at their disposal and to divide those lands among various communities. In terms of this scheme again restrictions were imposed on those immigrants who had come to Assam after 1<sup>st</sup> Jan, 1938 (Bhuyan. A. C., and De. S, 1980). In fact, the chief features of this scheme was the allocation of wastelands into various slabs for indigenous Assamese, Tribal people, and Immigrants.

The policy of Saadulla again created a great resentment among the people of Assam and to protest against it. The *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* organized the "*the Assam land policy protest day*" on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 1944 (*Assam Tribune*, 1944). Under this circumstances Saadulla by convening a conference from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1944 made some recommendations on which the Government passed a resolution on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1945 and decided to keep the reserves forest intact and tried to locate all wastelands for the settlement of both local people and immigrants particularly those who had come before 1938 (Guha, 1988). But the members of Muslim League opposed Saadulla's actions and carried several charges of indiscipline against him (Dev and Lahiri, 1978) Saadulla had no options other than to make an agreement with Gopinath Bordoloi and Rohini kumar Choudhuri, the then leaders of the Congress Party according to which they decided to review the land settlement policy so that they could protect the interest of the local people.

On 11<sup>th</sup> February, 1946 the Congress Government headed by Gopinath Bordoloi came to power in Assam and they decided to evict the immigrants from the professional grazing reserves particularly from Darrang, Kamrup, and some other areas near Guwahati. The presence of National level Muslim leaders encouraged the *Assam Provincial League Committee* to form a *Committee of Action* under the leadership of Maulana Bhasani on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1946 which directed the

Muslim League workers and volunteers to protest against the eviction policy of the Congress Government all over the province (*Star of India*, 1946). In such a situation, it became difficult for the Government to drive out the encroachers (Home Poll. File No. 18/3/47).

With an objective to make a compromise on the question of eviction, Saadulla suggested to form a Committee consisting at least one member each from the Muslim League, Congress, and other distinguished public servants to examine the whole matter again. On 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1947 Abdul Matin Choudhury attended the meeting of *Action* held in Delhi in which he requested Saadulla to send a note to Jinnah stating about the political scenario of Assam. It was however, gradually the immigrants failed to receive adequate financial support from their League High Command to carry their movement against eviction.

In the meantime, the entire political scenario of India entered a new phase. The declaration of Atlee and Cabinet Mission Plan brought about an uncertainty on the fate the province by placing Assam in Group 'C'. The Muslim League demand for inclusion of Assam in Pakistan also created a new tension in Assam. Mahammad Ali Jinnah who visited Assam in March, 1946 had already claimed Pakistan as consisting of six Muslim provinces, Assam being one of them in a meeting at Guwahati (Kar, 1997). The leaders of the *Provincial Congress Committee* of Assam began to realize that grouping would virtually mean Pakistan. Under this circumstances, the question on immigration was dropped and the Congress leaders including Gopinath Bardoloi, the head of the Government jumped into the anti-grouping movement in Assam.

In conclusion it can be said that the continuous inflow of immigrants and gradually their effort to acquire more and more land not only affected the demographic structure but also the socio-economic structure of Assam. It further paved the way for the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations. Although the Government evolved the Line System however it proved ineffective. The diplomatic attitude of the Government which chief intention was not to stop the inflow of immigrants but to get more revenue benefits sometimes even provoked the immigrants towards extremism and they resorted to violent activities to fulfill their demands. The movement against the immigration contributed to the emergence of a new kind of political consciousness among the people of Assam and with it their regional nationalism became more strong in the later phase. Again by taking the cause of the immigrants the Muslim League tried to gain popularity and increase their hold among the immigrants and even demanded Assam to be included in their Pakistan scheme which was partially fulfilled by acquiring the district of Sylhet after the Sylhet Referendum in 1947. It must be mentioned that the issue of migration have dominated the public discourse of Assam since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to do so even at the present time. A range of factors spanning from economic to political have spurred the onrush of migration into Assam from Eastern Bengal. Although in the colonial period, economic compulsion have triggered migration from Eastern Bengal into Assam but in the post colonial period, political factors mainly the partition of India in 1947 and liberation of Bangladesh in 1971(during the

course of which more than a million Bangladeshis died at due to the depredation of the Pakistani army) led to onrush of refugees from Bangladesh into Assam. Since the colonial time, the issue of migration from Eastern Bengal had a communal undertone to it (as a majority of the migrants were Muslims) and it has continued to be so more particularly after 1971 and in the wake of the *Assam Agitation* of 1980's as well as due to the frequent clashes between the indigenous tribes and the immigrants. Last but not the least, it must be noted that migration from East Bengal will continue for some decades and this time environmental degradation in the form of global warming which may submerge under water some of the coastal and riparian regions of Bangladesh may lead to further migration into Assam from these regions.

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