

Contested Soil: East Bengal Immigration and its Impact on the Peasants of Assam, 1920-1947

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Abstract:

Human migration is a universal phenomenon that encompasses a historical process. Migration contributes to the socio-cultural assimilation and acculturation among various communities in a specific place and region. As it shapes an area's social formation, it also fosters socio-economic sensitivity among migrants and the indigenous groups of that location. Likewise, Assam has experienced large-scale immigration during the colonial period, primarily from East Bengal. The Immigrants were mainly impoverished peasants who were exploited by the Zamindars of Bengal. The settlement of these immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley contributed to the emergence of communal politics in Assam, resulting in clashes between indigenous peasants and East Bengal immigrant peasants.

Keywords: Immigrants, Peasants, Indigenous. Zamindar, East Bengal.

Introduction

Immigration is one of the most important processes of human civilisation. It began with the birth of human civilization. From the prehistoric period, people were moving from one place to another in search of a better livelihood. In the colonial period, immigration began with the arrival of British rule. Immigrants from different provinces of India, such as Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, as well as from neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bihar, and Myanmar, began arriving in the province. There were two major phases of immigration in colonial Assam. First, the prospect of tea, coal, and petroleum, along with various business opportunities,

attracted immigrants from various parts of India. Second, immigrants from Modern Bangladesh were largely seeking opportunities in the province's untapped agricultural potential. Landless immigrant peasants from the overpopulated East Bengal found land in Assam's riverine areas for settlement. They came up the Brahmaputra Valley by steamer and boat and reclaimed these areas. All they wanted was land. The Curzon plan for the partition of Bengal and the reconstitution of the province of Assam also helped East Bengali cultivators come to Assam on economic grounds. As immigrant peasants began settling in the wasteland of the Brahmaputra Valley, conflict emerged between them and the province's indigenous people. Administrative measures also helped immigrant peasants settle in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Statement of the Problem

Although many authors have written on immigration, particularly from the East Bengal province of Assam during the colonial period, no authors have discussed the relationship between indigenous peasants and East Bengali peasants in depth. The colonial government promoted immigration to extract revenue from the province. This, in turn, directly or indirectly disrupted the lives of the indigenous peasants in Assam. The Muslim League's role in the immigration issue in the Assam Legislative Assembly was also notable. In this regard, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and Syed Muhammad Saadulla played key roles.¹ This paper primarily focuses on the causes of East Bengali peasants' immigration to Assam and its impact on indigenous peasants of Assam.

¹ Misra, U. (2017). *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition—Unresolved Issues*. Oxford University Press. pp.38-72

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the primary causes of East Bengal immigration into Assam and how East Bengal immigrant peasants affected indigenous peasants of Assam. The paper also highlights Assembly debates among various political parties on immigration into the Brahmaputra Valley.

Methodology

This paper is based mainly on primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, this paper uses Assam government records preserved in the Assam State Archives. Secondary sources are drawn from books, journals, articles, and PhD theses and MPhil dissertations by various resource persons.

Historical Context and the Factors Responsible for the East Bengal

Immigration into Assam:

Various social, political, and economic factors led to immigration. In this regard, immigration from East Bengal to Assam was notable. Improvements in water transport and the introduction of railways also helped the spread of immigration. The causes of immigration into Assam were divided into two parts – ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Immigration driven by prevailing conditions in East Bengal falls under push factors.²

Under push factors, many conditions forced East Bengali immigrant peasants to come to Assam. These included high population pressure in East Bengal, a repressive land-revenue

² Saikia, N., Saha, A., Bora, J. K., & Joe, W. (2020). Immigration and Bengali population in Assam: Evidence from direct and indirect demographic estimation. In *Population Dynamics in Eastern India and Bangladesh* (pp. 393–416). Springer.

administration under the zamindari system, widespread poverty, an unfavourable political scenario, and hostile natural conditions. East Bengal experienced much higher population pressure than many other areas of India during the middle and later half of the 19th century. Within the province of Bengal, the East Bengal Division, which bordered Assam, had a much higher population density.³ Mainly in the selected districts of East Bengal, namely Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra, and Rangpur, the population pressure was heavier. On the other hand, before 1911, Mymensingh district had the fastest population growth, other than Chittagong district, among all districts of undivided Bengal. Between 1891-1901, the population in Mymensingh increased by 12.75%, whereas between 1901-11, it increased by 15.53%. This trend continued in 1911-31; the district's population increased by 27.2% (Chakraborty, 2007). In 1921, when immigration from East Bengal to Assam had gained considerable momentum, the population density of the Assam Valley was 76 per sq km; in neighbouring East Bengal, it was 258 per sq km.⁴ These figures help us understand the level of population pressure in Bengal, which was regarded as a major “push” factor responsible for immigration.

The Permanent Revenue Settlement and its consequences in Bengal were another factor driving immigration into Assam. The first effect of the Permanent Revenue Settlement was that it elevated a class of tax-farmers to the exalted position of landlords with absolute property rights in the land. Second, the raiyats, who had earlier enjoyed permanent and heritable rights in land, were reduced to the status of tenants. On the other hand, the new practice of imposing taxes known as ‘abwabs’ placed an undue economic burden on the lords' subjects and further strained peasants.⁵ Sub-inundation was another major effect of the Permanent Settlement. The Land

³ Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I—Report.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Bengal Land Revenue Commission, *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal, with Minutes of Dissent*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Government Press, 1940)

Revenue Commission of Bengal observed that the margin between land revenue and the land's economic rent created several intermediate interests between the Zamindar and the actual cultivators, further increasing oppression.⁶

Population pressure, exploitative land tenure, and landlessness worsened the economic condition of many peasants in Bengal. This was more pronounced in East Bengal, where socio-economic conditions were worse than in the other half of Bengal. The situation became more unbearable because essential commodities, particularly food grains (paddy), were more expensive in some East Bengal districts adjoining Assam during the first decade of the 20th century. Indebtedness and poverty among East Bengal peasants also pushed them to immigrate to Assam. Natural calamities such as cyclones, earthquakes, floods, storms, and droughts also greatly affected Bengal's people.⁷

Important pull factors that induced peasants from East Bengal to migrate and settle in Assam included Assam's sparse population, an easier land-settlement policy, the availability of wastelands and a lower cost of living, improved transport and communication, and a conducive political situation in the state.⁸

Introduction of the Line System

The Line system, first introduced in 1916 and adopted in 1920, was a device to settle the immigrants in segregated areas far away from the indigenous people. It was intended to keep them in separate settlements to avoid clashes between immigrants and indigenous peasants. In this system, a line was drawn in the district to separate the areas of immigrant peasants and

⁶ Islam, M. M. (1983). Some aspects of the problem of subinfeudation in undivided Bengal. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 20(2), 205-216.

⁷ Sharma, J. (2011). *Empire's garden: Assam and the making of India*. Duke University Press. pp. 99-102

⁸ Saikia, A. (2008). State, peasants and land reclamation: The predicament of forest conservation in Assam, 1850s–1980s. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 45(1), 77-114.

indigenous people. By the line system, the villages of Assam were divided into four classes. In the first class, some villages were reserved exclusively for indigenous people, while others were reserved exclusively for Bengali immigrants. Thirdly, there were villages in which a line was drawn either on the map or on the ground, one side of which immigrants could be settled, and on the other side of which their settlement was forbidden. Fourth, some villages allowed both immigrants and indigenous people to settle. Mr Scott, the revenue member, pointed out that these divisions existed for three reasons. First, the division was made to help immigrants. Because Assamese foreigners and the Land Records Staff sold their land to immigrants, even though the land was government land and they were not allowed to sell it, a colonisation officer was appointed to settle the immigrant peasants.⁹

On the other hand, it is also said that, to help the indigenous Assamese, especially people like Kacharis, they were offered prices for the lands which they found hard to resist; the easy-going Assamese could not put up a fight against the “Virile Mymansinghia”, and the play of natural forces would drive them from their homes and give the government the benefit of premium money, which, before the control system went into the hands of speculators.¹⁰ The lines drawn on the map or the ground were somewhat arbitrary, as no fixed principles were followed in determining them. The line system was mainly a device to segregate the Bengali Muslims from the indigenous populations, including tribal and backward classes. The immigrants were financed by their own Headman (*matbar*), as well as by Marwari and Assamese (Barpetia)

⁹ Government of Assam. (1938). *Report of the Line System Enquiry Committee, 1938*. 3 vols. Shillong: Government Press.

¹⁰ Ibid.

moneylenders. Even the *hati* (indigenous cooperative bank) funds of Barpeta were involved in this financing to a small extent.¹¹

With the formation of the Line System Enquiry Committee in 1938, F.W. Hockenull, the committee chairman, attempted to solve the immigration problem in Assam. The Committee contained members representing different communities and political interests, and the report included conflicting views and dissenting notes. The final recommendations sought to reconcile these positions.¹² The colonial government encouraged immigration to increase land revenue in the province. Under the Colonisation Scheme, the government generally allotted a small immigrant family about 20 bighas of land in exchange for a premium. Both schemes helped develop land revenue and boosted the province's economy. Over time, the immigrant issue became a political issue. Although the committee recommended reserving large areas for expanding indigenous cultivation in the province, it defended settling landless immigrant peasants there, which the province's indigenous people did not accept.¹³

Jute Cultivation and Commercialization of Agriculture:

Although Assam's climate was favourable for jute production, Assamese people did not cultivate it widely for many years. Even in the early 20th century, jute was not an important crop in Assam. In the 20th century, the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra Valley underwent rapid land reclamation. This, in turn, affected jute cultivation and factory production in Bengal. By the end of the 19th century, after a long official enquiry and some local experiments, it became clear that the riverine char area of the Brahmaputra Valley was suitable for the cultivation of jute. Such

¹¹ SattwaKar, B. (2013). The immigration issue, line system and legislative politics in colonial Assam (1927–1939): A historical study. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 11(4), 01-03.

¹² Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 24 February 1938, pp. 404–405;

¹³ Op. Cit, Sattwakar, B.

areas were located in Nowgaon, Lakhimpur, the eastern part of Darrang, the eastern duars of Goalpara, and the Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup.¹⁴

In 1898, E.J. Monahan, Assistant Director of the Assam Land Records and Agriculture Department, in an exhaustive report on the possibility of jute production in Assam, agreed that as Assamese peasants would not expand their jute acreage, the peasants from the neighbouring East Bengal could be encouraged to reclaim some lands from the western part of the valley (Saikia, 2014). On the other hand, Henry Cotton, the chief commissioner of Assam, also supported him for the cultivation of jute in the province. Pressure was mounting from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and jute industrialists to open low-lying tracts in the western and central parts of the valley to jute cultivation.¹⁵ (Saikia, 2014).

Many factors drove East Bengali peasants to migrate to Assam. Among these, the most important was the lack of surplus land in East Bengal at the time, which led peasants to migrate into the Brahmaputra valley. Famine in the Bengal countryside during 1896-97 had also forced people to emigrate from the densely populated tracts of East Bengal to Assam. In addition, the government of India argued that the valley needed the 'stout and fanatical Mohamedan' of East Bengal to cultivate jute.¹⁶ The colonial officer also supported Bengali farmers as future settlers in the valley, which helped immigrants migrate there. These immigrant farmers were hardworking and strong, and they were always ready to survive in difficult conditions.

A certain kind of labour was needed for jute cultivation and fibre production. Because of labour scarcity, jute cultivation in Assam was not popular in the 19th century. Jute was a labour- and capital-intensive crop. Assamese peasants did not learn the delicate method of removing

¹⁴ Wary, Jaysagar. (2024). "Jute Trade in Colonial Goalpara of Assam." *Indian Historical Review*, 51(1), 56–68.

¹⁵ Saikia, A. (2014). A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900. Conclusion. *Century of Protests: Peasant Politics In Assam Since 1900*, 327-332.

¹⁶ Ibid.

fibre from dead stems.¹⁷ Fibre production also required access to clean water. So, the only alternative was to bring peasants from East Bengal to cultivate jute in the Brahmaputra valley. East Bengali peasants knew how to cultivate Jute, as they had done so for several years. Three varieties of jute, such as *Deshal* (sada), *tusha*, and *Mesta*, were cultivated by the East Bengali peasants in the Brahmaputra valley. *Desha* was used to produce jute varieties; *tusha*, on the other hand, was used for household walls in the char area of the valley. A long history of clashes between Muslim tenants and their Hindu landlords in East Bengal also made the former open to the new possibility of migrating to the uplands in search of arable land.¹⁸ The valley also shares a similar ecology with its neighbour, North-East Bengal. Linguistic and ethnic similarities, a shared ecology, the ecological crisis in East Bengal villages, and a shared history of economic exchange helped peasants migrate to Assam. The railway routes and rivers also made it easier for peasants to immigrate. To reach the western districts of Assam, they had to walk for a few days across rivers and wetlands.

In the first decade of the 20th century, immigrant peasants reclaimed a large area of land, including uncultivated low-lying riverine areas and unclassified state forests and later grazing reserves, for jute cultivation. From 1904 to 1920, the area under jute cultivation was increased mainly in the Kamrup and Nowgang districts.

In 1920, the area under jute cultivation was 137,337 acres, and in 1933 it rose to 303,000 acres. From 1920, the area under jute cultivation increased by about 45%.¹⁹ The land reclamation policy quickly commercialized the Assamese agrarian economy. It also reduced resources available to Assamese peasants. The land reclamation and area included under jute cultivation

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 90-95

¹⁹ Indian Central Jute Committee, *Report on the Marketing and Transport of Jute in India* (Calcutta, 1940), 66, Table 8.

resulted in localized clashes between the Assamese peasants and East Bengali immigrants in the province. The land reclamation policy also gained the Colonial Government's support.

As jute prices fell, immigrant East Bengali peasants began shifting to paddy cultivation. This meant they had to look for a new area suitable for paddy cultivation. This led to clashes between paddy-producing Assamese cultivators and earlier jute-producing immigrant cultivators in the province.

Most of the raw jute was sent to Calcutta by rail and river because, at that time, there was no jute factory in Assam. Jute cultivation and the jute industry were linked to each other. Jute was also produced on a commercial scale for export, mainly in the districts of Goalpara and Sylhet adjoining Bengal. It was mentioned that increasing jute cultivation in the jute-growing area helped the jute industry grow. The government introduced many schemes to develop jute cultivation. A jute mill was established at Silghat, near Nowgaon, only in 1970.

Impact on Assamese Peasants

The conflict between East Bengali immigrants and Assamese peasants was evident from the first day of immigration. The Assamese peasants remained aloof from the everyday life of the neighbouring immigrant peasants. Among the immigrant peasants, some land speculators renewed the periodic *patta* in their name, which originally belonged to tribal peasants. They forcefully collected the granaries from the peasants. Clashes between Assamese peasants and immigrant peasants were also notable. The immigrant peasants not only had an economic impact on the Assamese peasants but also affected their everyday life. The petition by Assamese peasants against immigrant peasants suggests that their relationship was strained. Limited interaction between the parties was evident in land transactions. Immigrant peasants also affected

Assamese peasants by cultivating new crops. Although Assamese peasants did not know how to cultivate jute, they faced many problems. The government land-settlement policy created many problems for Assamese peasants in the valley. Because if the wasteland of the Brahmaputra valley were given to the immigrant peasants for cultivation, it would become a danger for the future generation of the province. Land reclamation and the commercialisation of local resources led to growing clashes between immigrant Bengali peasants and Assamese peasants. As the jute prices fell, the immigrant peasants began to shift to the cultivation of paddy. This also meant that they had to look for newer areas suitable for paddy cultivation, unlike their customary preference for low-lying lands suitable for jute cultivation. This immediately led to clashes with paddy-producing Assamese peasants. The East Bengali immigrant peasants never appreciated the Assamese point of view. They said that if all the men were equal in the eyes of Allah, why should thousands of acres of land remain waste, particularly when men in search of a livelihood were available to turn them into a smiling field.²⁰ All they wanted was a plot of land for cultivation and settlement. But the Assamese point of view differed sharply from that of the immigrants. Several plain tribes were accustomed to shifting cultivation in government reserves, grazing reserves, and village community land as part of their way of life. These lands were integral to their way of life, and they did not view them only in terms of crops and revenue.²¹ Immigrants initially occupied the *Char-chapari* land of Assam. Once they occupied uncultivated land, they transformed it into a permanent, regular crop-yielding area. With better cultivation techniques, they cultivated crops for commercial purposes. The immigrant peasants adapted the practice of double cropping. The indigenous peasants also knew this practice, and they grew

²⁰Op.cit. Guha, A. (1976).

²¹ Misra, S. (2017). Bengali Communities in Colonial Assam, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History.

mustard or *matikalai* after *ahu* in the winter season. But the Assamese peasants' area under double cropping was less than that of the immigrant peasants.

Conclusion

The Assamese middle class played a significant role in shaping the patterns of East Bengal immigration into Assam. Driven by ambitions to become Zamindars, they facilitated the settlement of East Bengal peasants on both private and government lands. They also supported the British colonial administration's land reclamation policy in the Brahmaputra Valley, seeing it as a means of economic advancement. At the same time, Maulana Bhasani actively assisted East Bengali peasants migrating to Assam and settling in the low-lying areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. Bhasani's departure from the Indian National Congress was motivated by his dedication to advocating for the rights of marginalized and impoverished immigrant peasants in Assam. Nevertheless, British immigration policies from East Bengal had detrimental effects on the indigenous Assamese population, leading the Bordoloi Government to introduce remedial measures. These interventions achieved only limited success, and immigration and settlement issues continued after Assam gained independence.