CHAPTER III

IMMIGRATION FROM EAST BENGAL TO ASSAM: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS
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An attempt to find out the roots of immigration in a particular place deserves an in-depth study of the push and the pull factors. Push factor is related to the mother country which is accepted to be suffered from many problems like population explosion, absence of employment, educational and health care facilities; excessive pressure on agricultural land, hostile climate and so forth. These sets of factors work in de-populating a large area. On the other hand, pull factor is related to the host country having abundant agricultural land, prospect of rapid economic expansion, better means of transport and communication and so forth. Roots of immigration from East Bengal into Assam including Nowgong are no exception from the rest of the world. But it should be noted here that our study covers the colonial period when both Assam and Bengal were under the British rule. So, we attempt to find out the roots of East Bengali immigrants in Assam in the light of colonial administration, which may in some way be different from the immigration history of other independent country.

Push factors: Natural and man-made hardships
Here we try to find out the factors that pushed the farmers of East Bengal to Assam during the colonial period. The East Bengali farmers found it difficult to remain in their homeland and ultimately chose neighbouring Assam as their destination place.

Flood and weeds
Growth and development of a place depend on its geographical location. The Indus Valley Civilization of India, the Egyptian Civilization on the bank of the Nile, the Mesopotamian (Tigris and Euphrates) Civilization of present Iraq and so forth have shown how the geographical agents such as river influenced human civilization. Changes in the course of rivers sometimes may bring good fortune to the people of one part, while the others have to suffer great hurdle in carrying out development activities. Rivers are thus prominent partner of human beings in their civilization march. During the colonial
period, Bengal was divided into numerous natural divisions such as North, East, West and Central keeping in mind the homogeneity of its character. East Bengal had administrative divisions like Dacca and Chittagong. Dacca Division comprised of the districts of Bakarganj, Dacca, Faridpur and Mymensingh and Chittagong Division included the districts of Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali and Tippera. The upper and lower portions of the deltas of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra helped in the formation of the plains of East Bengal. It was bounded by the Bay of Bengal to the south, the Tippera and Lushai Hills to the east and the Garo Hills to the north. The western frontier of East Bengal which included a part of Pabna once extended up to the Karatoya River. The entire tract was divided into three portions; the central portion designated as East Bengal proper formed the upper portion of the delta. It comprised of the districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur and Tippera. The second portion was the lower delta comprised of Bakarganj, Noakhali and Chittagong of the shore of the Bay of Bengal and third portion consisted of Hill Tippera and Chittagong Hill Tracts. Although no river system originated in East Bengal, however, East Bengal was a land of open drainage and active rivers. Flow of river water into East Bengal was not happened suddenly. In ancient period, the entire tract was left untouched by the Ganges. However, in the late 16th century, it linked up with the Padma, which enabled its principal course to flow directly into the mainland of East Bengal. The Brahmaputra passing through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam flowed round the Garo Hills and joined with the Meghna. Again, in the 18th century the Tista, which entered present West Bengal from Sikkim, underwent high flooding. Its water suddenly taken eastward direction and reinforced the Brahmaputra. The swollen Brahmaputra in turn began to cut into minor stream, which by the early 1800s came to be known as Jamuna. These rivers often changed their courses which caused much damage to the entire topography of East Bengal. Deposition of silt in the river beds caused high floods and the shifting of river courses wiped out hundreds of

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3 Donnell, op. cit., 39.
villages and valuable cultivable land. About 80 per cent land of East Bengal was floodplain. On account of the changing character of the courses of the rivers in East Bengal, there often emerged numerous *chars* submerging the older ones. Regarding the character of the rivers of East Bengal W. W. Hunter writes:

"The Brahmaputra-Jamuna is a river of many changes. After the survey (1850-56), it swept to the eastward and washed away several villages on the bank of the river; but afterwards retired towards the west forming a new channel, and leaving a number of sandbanks and alluvial accretions on the east of its bed. The banks are abrupt or sloping, according as the current sets from one side of the river or the other; but, in the consequence of numerous alterations in the current, they change their appearance almost yearly."5

Hunter shows that changes in the river course of East Bengal had great impact on the settlement of the inhabitants. But one prospective side of the changed river courses was that they made the soil fertile. This fertile soil made possible the better cultivation of wet rice. Higher concentration of Muslim population during the colonial period in the Eastern Delta of Bengal was attributed to the fertility of soil. This deltaic region produced so much surplus grain that rice was exported from the Chittagong Port as far east as the Moluccas in South East Asia and from Satgaon as far west as Goa.6 But fertility of soil and larger concentration of population created other problems for the populace. Formation of new lands by the rivers generally attracted people. However, during the colonial period, when Bengal was under the *Zamindary* system, the peasants could hardly acquire the right over the newly formed *char*. The *Zamindars*, the *Talukdars* as well as the *Jotedars* or rich farmers were the actual owners of the lands in East Bengal. They maintained a band of retainers known as *Lathiylas* which helped them besides other, in securing control over the new *char*. The poor Bengali people did not secure right over the

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6 Dasgupta, op. cit., 33.
newly formed char, their land was swamp away by the rivers leaving nothing to them. Under such situation, out-migration remained as the only alternative before them.

During the colonial period, the East Bengali peasants had to bear the brunt of ecological impact. The entire fertile area of East Bengal was a floodplain covered by numerous waterborne plants. Here, the cultivators also faced the problem of water hyacinth along with a grass called uri which became the chief pest. For it, every year the cultivators had to make an extensive area as fallow. In Mymensingh alone, the cultivators gave up producing any crops over an area of hundred square miles due to extensive damage caused year after year by the water hyacinth. It was reported in the Anand Bazar Patrika on 21 August 1928 that 15 to 20 per cent of winter paddy aman in low lying areas was being damaged year after year by this weed. Jute, the principal commercial crop of East Bengal was also affected by this weed. Besides, the water hyacinth prevented the inland navigation. Moreover, the traditional method of ploughing was also affected due to the presence of this weed. In spite of commercialization of agriculture, modern machineries were yet to be introduced in agricultural sector of India; the farmers still used wooden ploughs drawn by bullocks and buffaloes. But the farmers could hardly take care of the cattle in absence of suitable grazing fields which were covered by water hyacinth. Due to the lack of grazing, the cattle suffered from indigestion after eating water hyacinth. Thus the East Bengali peasants found innumerable hardships in carrying out their cultivation.

The Colonial maneuver
The natural hardships were less significant to the peasants in comparison to man-made difficulties. The colonial Government had totally ignored the environmental history of Bengal in initiating the new regulations to suit its policy. In order to suit their administrative and economic needs, they undertook the construction of railways. In the deltaic region, construction of railway lines necessitated them to build embankments of same proportion. But those embankments prevented the natural flow of water. A section of British officers realized that blind way of building roads and railway embankments

8 Ibid.
would make it difficult for smooth flow rainwater which would have ended East Bengal’s predominance as the richest rice producing area.\textsuperscript{9} Although beneficial, railways in East Bengal destroyed the ecological balance; the result was that the crop fields of the poor peasants were destroyed during the rainy seasons. Gradually, the agricultural adversities of the peasants increased day by day due to other related factors which compelled them to seek their fortune somewhere else.

**Population pressure**

The entire socio-economic condition of Bengal must be examined from the point of view of its demographic composition. Bengal was the largest province of British India. The total population of Bengal estimated in the first Census was 3, 46, 87,003 persons. Between 1901 and 1911 Bengal showed an increase of 6.7 per cent of its population, but it was 12.1 per cent in East Bengal. The other natural divisions of Bengal showed much less increase in comparison to East Bengal. The percentage increase of population in West Bengal during 1901-1911 was 6.7 per cent, while it was 4.5 per cent in Central Bengal and 8.0 per cent in North Bengal.\textsuperscript{10} The highest increase in East Bengal was due to high birth rate amongst the Muslims who were more prolific than the Hindus.\textsuperscript{11} This percentage increase helped East Bengal to become the densely populated area of entire Bengal. The table below shows the total population of East Bengal between 1901 and 1951.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Table 3.1: Population (in million) of East Bengal (Bangladesh): 1901-1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>28.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>31.555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>33.254</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>35.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>41.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>41.933</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In 1901 population of East Bengal was 28.027 million. It showed a continuous increase up to 1941 when it recorded 41.999 million persons. Between these four decades, East Bengal had to feed about 13.072 million more persons. But at the same time, it is to be noted here that growth of population in two divisions of East Bengal, that is Dacca and Chittagong Divisions was also not similar. The Dacca Division which contained Mymensingh, Dacca, Bakarganj and Faridpur districts witnessed higher growth than the Chittagong Division. In 1901 population of Dacca Division was 1,07,42,442 persons which was increased to 1,38,64,104 persons in 1931. But population of Chittagong Division was 48,03,634 persons in 1901 and increased to 68,26,414 persons in 1931.12

It has been mentioned above that the Muslims of East Bengal were more prolific that the Hindus. The Muslims accounted 67.5 per cent of the total population of East Bengal between 1901 and 1911. Their percentage increased in the subsequent Censuses. In 1921 they accounted for 68.1 per cent of the total population of East Bengal. Their percentage increased from 69.5 per cent in 1931 to 76.9 per cent in 1951.13 The Muslims were

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mostly found in Dacca Division. They accounted for nearly three quarters of population in the district of Mymensingh which included within the Dacca Division.\textsuperscript{14}

Concentration of such large number of population in East Bengal created many problems. It was barely possible for agriculture alone to support such astonishingly dense population.\textsuperscript{15} The density of population in East Bengal had reached the saturated point and only emigration could ease the situation. Population pressure forced the poor cultivators of East Bengal to search for new land.\textsuperscript{16} As Assam was the neighbouring province of East Bengal, it became a favourite destination of thousands of East Bengali farmers. The partition of Bengal and the creation of new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam came as bless in disguise from heaven to thousand of poor peasants of East Bengal. This administrative arrangement helped the poor Muslim farmers of East Bengal to seek their fortune within this newly created province. Regarding the arrival of the Muslims in Assam, the \textit{Mihir-O-Sudhakar}, a Calcutta Muslim paper writes that ‘the Muslims would henceforth have to compete with the backward people of Assam.’\textsuperscript{17} Thus, population pressure worked as pushing agent in shifting the home of lakhs of East Bengali peasants into Assam during the colonial period.

**Destruction of Bengal’s traditional industry and fragmentations of holdings**

In the eighteenth century, besides agriculture weaving was one of main occupations of the Bengali people. They were ‘so happily blended together’ that the same hand at one season governed the plough, at another guided the shuttle in producing world admired texture.\textsuperscript{18} Bengal was famous for its handloom industry and millions of people were engaged in it. But with the inauguration of colonial rule, the prosperity of Bengal began to wane. The handloom industry was recognized as competitor of British textile industry. So, through a systematic and planned manner, the Britishers succeeded in destroying this

\textsuperscript{14} A. E. Porter, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{18} Muin-ud-din Ahmed Khan, “Socio-Economic Condition of the Muslims of Bengal (1757-1830),” http://www.bmri.org.uk.
industry and converted Bengal into a market for their finished goods. Millions of people engaged in this industry found no other alternative means of livelihood and took shelter in agriculture. Faraizi calls this process as re-peasantization in Bengal.\textsuperscript{19} It led to the increased dependency of people on agriculture. In 1891, 61.6 per cent of the populace of Bengal depended on agriculture which increased to 73.2 per cent in 1921.\textsuperscript{20} Overpressure on agriculture could not help in procuring more yields from the field; rather it resulted in fragmentation of holdings. It became one of the ruinous features of Indian agriculture particularly Bengal during the colonial period.\textsuperscript{21} In Bengal, sub-division not only of holdings but of individual plots between three and five brothers proceeded at a rapid pace.\textsuperscript{22} Sub-division of the holdings among the female members of the family was one of the important land related problem in the over-crowding districts of East Bengal. The Mohammedan families owed much of their poverty to the sub-division of their estates among female heirs according to the Mohammedan Law of Succession.\textsuperscript{23} Increased fragmentation did not mean that the farmers got the occupancy rights; rather it meant gradual assertion of control by various super holders over the lands of the peasants through their obnoxious practices. Due to this fragmentation, the rural families of East Bengal possessed less than two acres of land.\textsuperscript{24} That amount of land was not sufficient for an agriculture based family to survive. There broke out clashes amongst the members of the family for the possession of ancestral land.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Introduction of cash crops}

The Bengali cultivators were no longer able to support their families on the small plots of land. It necessitated undertaking cultivation of such crops which would help them to subsist and also to pay the exorbitant demands of land revenue and other abwabs. Before

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} A.R. Desai, \textit{Social Background of Indian Nationalism} (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1948), 44.
\textsuperscript{24} Saugata Mukherji, op. cit., PE12.
\textsuperscript{25} Mansur Ahmed, retired (31.12.1992) teacher of Kaliadinga M.E. Madrasa, aged 80 years of village Kaliadinga (Juria mauza) informed the researcher that his grandfather along with his family came to Nowgong from Mymensingh around 1920 due to family clash over land. See Appendix E, Part II.
the inauguration of colonial rule, rice was the staple food of Bengal. But as rice failed to provide much needed money, they abandoned it. Therefore, the peasants began to grow cash crops like indigo and jute. Soil of Bengal was favourable for indigo plantation. Demand of indigo from the textile industries of Britain led to beginning of cultivation of this crop in Bengal. Cultivation of indigo gradually spread throughout rural Bengal and by the beginning of 19th century while other countries together produced only 14,000 maunds of indigo, Bengal alone produced 39,000 maunds. P.R. Chakravarty in his book Neel Bidroho O'Bangali Samaj mentions that Bengal produced 128,000 maunds of indigo in 1815-16. But, this crop did not bring happiness to the peasants. Indigo cultivation destroyed the fertility of soil. The peasants had been compelled to grow it under duress. The European planters often made advances to the peasants for cultivation of indigo at a very high rate. But in their failure to return the same, the peasants were compelled to part with their plough, cattle and homestead. Under such condition, the indigo farmers revolted against this systematic exploitation and oppression committed by the colonial agents. The Indigo revolt of Bengal 1859-60 was one of the notable peasant uprisings against the malevolent colonial practices.

After the failure of indigo cultivation, the peasants of Bengal grew jute (locally called naila) in their fields. The floodplain of East Bengal was suitable for jute cultivation. The Crimean War (1855-56) also compelled England to turn to Bengal for jute as a substitute for Russian hemp. Thus jute began to grow in Bengal. The years from 1907 to 1912 were the boom period for jute. In 1914 jute was cultivated in 5, 87,620 acres of land in Mymensingh district of East Bengal and average outturn was not less than 15 maunds per acre. It meant that around 620 lakhs of rupees came to the district alone from jute during a good harvest. By 1925, 60 per cent of the jute grown in Bengal came from the East Bengal districts and this fiber occupied about 27 per cent of total cultivated areas of

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26 Cited in Anindita Dasgupta, op. cit., 76
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
30 F.A. Sachse, op. cit., 51.
Mymensingh district. Although jute cultivation did not require any major structural modification in the organization of production, however, it necessitated a lot of care and a large sum of money. Besides, the value of this cash crop was always determined by the world market, which in turn again depended on international politics. Hence, its demand could not be extended indefinitely. All important major events of the world affected the jute growing peasants of East Bengal. Besides, due to lack of storage facilities and transport, the poor cultivators sold the crop at the fields at prices fixed by the traders. The need for cash to grow this crop pushed the farmers into the clutches of Marwari traders, landlords and the Jotedars. This resulted in their inevitable fall into a web of debt from which they could not come through, but lost everything. Moreover, a fifth of their due from jute was eaten away by a chain of middlemen like farias, beparis and aratdars, who handled the trade of jute. It led to the increase of indebtedness in rural Bengal. F.D. Ascoli, the Settlement Officer of Dacca had calculated in 1917 that the accumulated debt in the localities in Dacca adjoining Mymensingh was at Rs. 21 per head of the whole population. Cultivation of jute also affected the cattle of the farmers. It reduced the area of straw, the only fodder for the cattle. Moreover, the entire process of getting fiber from jute plants brought in its trail the proliferation of malarial fever. Jute produced a more offensive smell while being steeped, thus adding a new horror to the dreadful autumn of Eastern Bengal. Thus introduction of cash crops in Bengal brought hardships to the peasants to such an extent that only out-migration remained as the main option before them for leading a happy life.

Zamindary Settlement and the oppressors of peasants

The colonial Government introduced the Zamindary Settlement in Bengal in 1793 with a desire to get fixed land revenue with the assistance of indigenous agents, who in turn

31 Sujata Bose, op. cit., 470.
33 Ibid., 471.
34 Ibid., 472.
would help it in reclaiming the waste land of Bengal. This Settlement made the Zamindars the proprietors of land. It also introduced a network of parasitic classes like Putnidars, Talukdars, Jotedars and so forth in rural Bengal.\textsuperscript{37} The Jotedars were composed mostly of the respectable agricultural castes (Sadgops, Aguris and Kaivartas in West Bengal and Sheikh Muslims in East Bengal) as well as the higher intellectual section. They were the dominant land holding class and gave loans to the farmers. At least half of the whole cultivation of Bengal was carried on with the money or grain advanced by the Jotedars for which the cultivators remained indebted to them.\textsuperscript{38} They became the petty Zamindars in Bengal.\textsuperscript{39} They often took possession of the land of poor farmers due to the failure of the latter to repay the loans. Once the farmers' lands were taken over, the Jotedars again employed them to cultivate the lands on the basis of a half share of produce without giving any legal tenancy right.\textsuperscript{40} This process of de-peasantization worked out to render homeless thousands of East Bengali peasants.

The most immediate oppressor of East Bengali farmers were the Zamindars. They treated the cultivators not as their tenants, but as slaves and compelled them to render various services without making payment. Besides, the Zamindars imposed numerous abwabs (illegal taxes) like Agomoni khorcha, Shradh Khorcha, Mukaddama Khorcha and so forth upon the peasants.\textsuperscript{41} These taxes were collected from the peasants at the point of bayonet. In case of failure of the farmers to pay such taxes, they were beaten with shoes, forced them to stand in the burning sun.\textsuperscript{42} Such torture compelled the peasants to revolt against the Zamindars and other colonial oppressors. The Faraizi movement of 1830s was one such organized movement was against the oppressors. This movement was also related to the issues of char and reclaimed land in forests.\textsuperscript{43} With the passing of time, opposition of the peasantry became more acute. The colonial administrators and the elite sections of

\textsuperscript{39} Ramkrishna Mukherjee, “Social Background of Bangla Desh,” \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, Vol. 7, Nos. 5-7 (February 1972), 269.
\textsuperscript{40} Rajat and Ratna Ray, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{41} Mohsin Ali, \textit{The Bengali Muslim}, 20-21 cited in Anindita Dasgupta, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{42} R.C. Majumdar, op. cit., 361.
\textsuperscript{43} Partha Chatterjee, op. cit., 184.
Bengal needed some ways of pacification. They encouraged the poor farmers to migrate and occupy land in neighbouring Assam. Thus, it is easily comprehensible that the Zamindars and the colonial Government of East Bengal tactfully helped in flushing out a large number of peasants into Assam where there was abundance of waste land and thus saved their own interests.\footnote{Sagar Baruah, *Migration from East Bengal to Assam: Response, Reaction and Assimilation (1900-1947)*, (Guwahati: Jagaran Sahitya Prakashan, 2007), 14.}

Some other subsidiary factors also pushed the East Bengali peasants towards the frontier of Assam. The economic Depression of 1929-30 brought about some specific changes in the agricultural sector of Bengal. The moneylenders who had already given loans to the farmers failed to collect any interest for their capital.\footnote{WBSA, Government of Bengal, *Proceedings of the Commerce Department*, File 2E/11/39, February 1939, Progs 374B cited in Saugata Mukheiji, op. cit., PE 16.} They had to be satisfied with their principal. Therefore, they withdrew from the lending activities in rural Bengal. The colonial Government’s interference with currency and credit to meet its obligation to the metropolis further reduced the money supply and diverted funds from agrarian credit and trade.\footnote{Sugata Bose, “Starvation amidst Plenty: The making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942-45,” Cambridge University Press, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1990), 709.} Thus disinvestment in agrarian sector in Bengal left the poorer farmers in a critical position. They did not get the due price of their jute. Under such circumstances, they farmers decided to leave their homeland.

The World War II created an inflationary trend in India including Bengal. The supply of Burmese rice to Bengal was cut off which resulted in rise of rice price. Between 1940 and 1941 price of rice increased from 33 per cent to 69 per cent.\footnote{Ibid., 710.} To add misery to the poor people, a devastating famine broke out in 1943. Bengali peasants lost 9,00,500 plough cattle during 1943. About 37 per cent of Bengal’s wage earners were ill in 1944 and about 37 per cent of all persons employed in industry in 1931 became destitute in 1944.\footnote{Richard Schneer, “Famine in Bengal: 1943,” Guilford Press, *Science and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1947), 175.} Thus extreme poverty coupled with the calamities placed the poor agriculturists in a helpless situation. Therefore, they chose out-migration as the only survival strategy.
Pull Factors

We have already seen how a set of complex combination of factors created such a situation which could hardly be tolerable for the East Bengali peasants in their homeland. They, therefore, sought shelter in neighbouring Assam, where they could resettle down permanently. Assam in the early period of colonial rule did not have much population. But from the twentieth century onwards Assam witnessed higher growth rate of population. This, according to Arthur Geddes would have been by no means possible without immigration from East Bengal. So, immigration from East Bengal to the Brahmaputra Valley districts is a fact, but, we need to find out why the East Bengali farmers had chosen particularly the Lower Assam districts as their destination place.

The Local gentry

No doubt, individual motivations of the immigrants are most important in the entire process of immigration, however, according to Alejandro Portes, the interests and plans of prospective employers are not less important. In case of agricultural Assam, the prospective employers of the East Bengali immigrants were the Assamese gentry, the colonial Government as well as the Muslim League. They had varied objectives behind their encouragement to such immigration. In the pre-colonial Assamese society, the gentry or the nobility performed the same function as that of the middle class of colonial period. In the Ahom monarchy, the gentry had great influence; they possessed vast areas of land as well as enjoyed the service of the paiks*. Besides, they kept bondi-golam* for their household works. But inauguration of Company's rule in 1826 brought about a great change to the entire administrative structure of Assam. The new administrators gradually abolished the paik as well as the bondi golam systems. They introduced money economy in which the farmers, instead of cultivating the field of nobility could cultivate

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* During Ahom rule, an adult male between the ages of 16 to 50 was called a paik. Three or four paiks formed a got and had to serve the state alternatively. They had also to serve the nobles.
* Bonded labourers.
their own field and in turn paid the land revenue in cash to the Government. The dissolution of these institutions created problem for local gentry because they could not get workers for their patrimonial farms, locally called khats. Besides, they were also affected by the earthquake, by the enhancement of the revenue demand. This situation was further aggravated by decrease in the numbers of local people. Therefore, they supported the cause of immigration of farmers into Assam from other areas, who could cultivate their lands either on adhi or as tenants. Immigration was hailed as a positive phenomenon by the middle class of Assam. They thought that improvement of the province in terms of agricultural prosperity could be effected only through migration from other parts of the country. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, the leading intellectual of Assam in the first half of the 19th century supported migration into Assam for improvement of agriculture. In his memorandum submitted to Mills, Phukan earnestly entreated the Government to bring out from Europe and Upper India a sufficient number of men well versed in the art of agriculture to teach the people the better management of their farms.\footnote{A J. Moffatt Mills, Report on the Province of Assam, 2nd ed. (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1984), 103.} He believed that people of badly provided parts of Bengal well versed in the art of agriculture could be invited to Assam.\footnote{Maheswar Neog, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan: Plea for Assam and Assamese (Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1977), 43.} Gunabhiram Baruah through a series of writing highlighted the need of immigration into Assam during 1885-86. No doubt the tea garden immigrants had entered Assam, but the middle class were not satisfied with their numbers. Durgadhar Sarma Barua and Dhelaram Deodhai Phukan of Sibsagar opined before Lord Northbroke in 1874 that tea gardens had failed to encourage immigration of large numbers of people to Assam. Hence through a memorandum, they requested the Government to bring a good number of people from Oudh, the Belgium of India, who was superior in physique and morals.\footnote{Ramesh Kalita, “Prabajankarir Samasya Aru Asom: Anandaram Dhekial Phukkanarpapra Gopinath Bordoloioloike,” in D. Bora & H. Gohain ed., Asom Andolan: Pratismti Am Phalasmti (Guwahati: Banalata, 2001), 14.} Thus the middle class became the supporters of the immigrants in Assam.

But in Goalpara, where most parts were under the Zamindary Settlement, the matter was quite different. In 1765 it became a part of Bengal and the class of Zamindars began to
appear in this territory. These colonial agents in Goalpara decided to supplement their revenue by bringing the vast waste land under cultivation.\textsuperscript{55} As the local people did not show any eagerness to clear the jungle for growing crops, the Zamindars brought East Bengali peasants to Goalpara. As Goalpara was contiguous to the overcrowded Bengal districts of Rangpur and Mymensingh, it was not entirely impossible for them to bring agriculturists from those densely populated areas of Bengal. Thus, the Zamindars of Goalpara were the prospective employers of the East Bengali immigrants.

**Government initiative**

In other provinces of India, migration of people was more or less spontaneous and did not depend upon the direct action of Government, but in Assam the growth of the population largely depended upon the introduction of a number of people by the Government.\textsuperscript{56} The colonial Government had taken initiative to bring immigrants from the very beginning of their rule. Since the assumption of administration of Assam in their hands, the colonial administrators decided to raise maximum revenue from land as the Laizzeze Faire (free trade policy) had prevented them from raising additional taxes. They commutated the paik service existed during the Ahom period into money payment of Rs. 3 and converted the paiks into ryots. They recognized the ryots' right as proprietors of their respective holdings, which according to Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the greatest boon conferred by the British Government.\textsuperscript{57} The ryots had to pay land revenue to the Government directly. But the rate of revenue was not the same at all places. It was varied according to the quality of land, between one rupee and six annas in Kamrup, between one rupee eight annas and four annas in Darrang, and between one rupee and eight annas per hearth in Darrang and one rupee per head in Nowgong.\textsuperscript{58} Any person wanted to occupy excess land had to pay Re.1 and 8 annas per pura of land.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 100.
By the time of their occupation of Assam, the British found that vast areas of Assam were La-khiraj (revenue free) and Nisf-khiraj (half revenue). Moreover, vast tract of land was laying waste without cultivation. There were about 67,79,978 acres of cultivable waste lands in the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Of this, 12,58,177 acres were cultivated by 1875-76 and by 1897-98 the area under cultivation was increased to 16,85,078 acres.

For the British, millions of acres cultivable land lying waste represented millions of rupees. Therefore, they started granting waste land on leases for farming. In case of Upper Assam, lands were granted to tea planters, but in Lower Assam, the soil was not suitable for tea-plantation. It was suitable for ordinary cultivation only. Charles Elliot, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1881-85) observed that this huge area of good, flat, alluvial land had been awaiting the sickle and the plough. The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Henry Cotton believed that absence of sub-letting in the Brahmaputra Valley was the root cause of slow process of reclamation of waste land. In Bengal, where the Zamindary method of management had been introduced by Lord Cornwallis (1793), the waste lands were cultivated in every direction. Actually, availability of waste land and the difficulties in its reclamation promoted Governor General Cornwallis and the Court of Directors to introduce Permanent settlement in Bengal. The system of sub-letting associated with the Zamindary Settlement of Bengal helped in the reclamation of waste lands. Even in case of Sylhet and Cachar, Surma Valley districts of Assam, where no discouragement was given to sub-letting, cultivable areas expanded year after year. But absence of such system in the Brahmaputra Valley districts of Assam resulted in slow progress of expansion of cultivable lands. The Government, therefore, proceeded on a mission for reclamation of the waste lands of the Brahmaputra Valley districts. But, here question arose with regards to the people associated with that mission. The Government had to choose either the local people or people from North and Easter India or the cultivators from East Bengal for reclamation of waste land.

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60 Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation, op. cit., 12.
61 M. Kar, “Muslim Immigration to Assam,” Social Scientist, Social Scientist, Vol. 8, No. 7 (Feb. 1980), 70.
Local people of Assam, according to the colonial officers were averse to manual work. The Assamese believed that by doing manual work they would compromise their respectability. But it is to be noted that the peasantry of Assam lived in comfort and contentment unlike the peasantry of Bengal. They did not fall into the clutches of the Mahajans. As Fitzpatrick, the Chief Commissioner of Assam remarked in 1889 that the peasantry of Assam ‘perhaps of all others in India earned a livelihood with the greatest ease.’ They did not want to toil for the cultivation they practised. They carried on temporary cultivation. In spite of the fertile soil, they abandoned the plot of land after two or three years of cultivation, which was a matter of great concern for the administration. More particularly, the chapari and faringati lands were relinquished frequently by them, because it was thought more economical to take fresh areas than to involve in removing weeds in particular areas for years, which needed more manual labour. According to Melitus, the Commissioner of Assam Valley districts, the peasantry of Assam could procure maximum crops with minimum labour from fertile soil of the province. As they got all they wanted according to their modest standard of living, they had no desire to work for more. Under such circumstances, the colonial Government did not see any prospect of reclamation of waste land in Assam with the help of local people.

It is to be noted that climatic effects are also responsible for laziness of the local people. Moreover, opium had also its degrading effects on the morals of the people; it made them reluctant towards hard work. When Kala-azar made its appearance in Nowgong, an idea was floated that opium was the only preventive medicine to this epidemic. As a result, people began to take opium. According to Moffatt Mills, the barrier to improvement of the province was the immoderate use of opium. He even thought of doing something to check the abuse of opium and rescue at least the rising generation from indulgence in a luxury which destroyed the constitution, enfeebled the mind and paralyzed the industry.

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64 Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue & Agricultural Department of the Government of India, March 1901, Resettlement of the Assam Valley (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1901), (Guwahati: Assam State Archives), 11.
65 Moffatt Mills, op. cit., 50.
66 Assam Opium Enquiry Committee Report, 1925 (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1925), (Guwahati: Assam State Archives), 76.
Anandaram Dhekial Phukan also realized that the universal use of opium converted the Assamese, once a hardy, industrious and enterprising race into effeminate, weak, indolent and a degraded people.67

Besides, at that time large increase of population of the province was checked by the ravages of cholera and epidemic disease.68 Kala-azar was the dreaded epidemic disease which ravaged the Lower Assam districts, particularly Nowgong. It is mentioned in a Government report that as far back in 1869 the disease came to the notice of the Government which decimated and depopulated numerous areas of Garo Hills district.69 It spread gradually through Goalpara and entered the south bank portion of Kamrup in 1888 and reached Nowgong.70 In 1889, it broke out at Raha and two years afterwards at Nokhola. It gradually spread all over Nowgong district. Over the decade 1891-1901, the decrease of population was 7 per cent in Kamrup, 25 per cent in Nowgong and 9 per cent in Mangaldoi Sub-division of present Darrang district. It was due to the outbreak of Kala-azar.71 Nowgong thus suffered more than any other district from the scourge of Kala-azar. Due to its virulent effect, Nowgong was looked disastrous with decrease of population and fall of revenue. The decrease of revenue between 1893-94 and 1900-01 was 23 per cent. The Government was compelled to give abatement of revenue. Settled khiraj area of the district was also decreased to a great extent. From 1892-93 to 1900-01 such areas decreased from about 2,78,000 acres to about 1,97,000 acres. It was a huge loss to the Government in terms of revenue accumulation. They began to think measures for immediate reclamation of abandoned lands which become over grown with jungle.72

67 Ibid., 79.
68 Ibid., 5.
69 Report of an Investigation of the Epidemic of Malarial Fever in Assam, or Kala-azar, 1897 (Guwahati: Assam State Archives), 1-2.
71 Ibid.
Already the *Kala-azar* had caused devastating effects on the population. In the meantime another major danger appeared before the people. A major earthquake broke out in Assam in 1897. Its most virulent effects were seen in Kamrup. However, Nowgong was no less an affected district. The terrible earthquake of 1897 had complete deteriorating effects on Nowgong. Fertile fields of the district were covered with silt. In the tract lying between the Brahmaputra and the Kallang, sand was deposited in large quantities. The fertility of the soil was diminished to a great extent. Flood became a usual occurrence in Nowgong district after the quake.

Due to the aforesaid factors there was total stagnation throughout the province including Nowgong district. The province, in spite of its scanty population was dependent on importation of rice from Bengal. By the time, the immigration of tea labourers into the gardens began to increase. In addition to this, the Assam-Bengal Railway also brought a large number of grain-consuming foreigners into this province. In 1901 total numbers of immigrants in Assam was raised to 7, 75,000 persons, most of whom were food consumers, not food producers. So, there arose a big question before the Government as to how the large population engaged in tea industry and railways would be fed. Solution to this question was found in Bengal rice. Thus, the Government was compelled to import rice from Bengal. The following table illustrates the fact.

Table 3.2: Net Import of Rice: From Bengal into Brahmaputra Valley 1876-1898

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount (Maunds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876-77</td>
<td>4,11,431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-82</td>
<td>4,42,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885-86</td>
<td>4,21,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-96</td>
<td>7,14,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-97</td>
<td>9,63,947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-98</td>
<td>6, 94,725</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that in 1876-77 about 4,11,431 **maunds** of rice were imported from Bengal to Assam. In the succeeding years the amount went on increasing. In 1896-97, about 9,63,947 **maunds** of rice were imported into the province. During the year ending 31st March 1900 rice not in husk imported from Bengal by rail and river were 43,713 and 6,62,196 **maunds** and valued at Rs. 1,36,603 and Rs. 20,69,362 respectively. Thus a significant portion of revenues were spent on importing food grains.\(^{73}\) On the other hand, it was an unnecessary drain on the resources of Bengal which in turn was compelled to import rice from Burma during the time of famine. The area of uncultivated land in Assam suitable for rice cultivation was practically unlimited. This was a lamentable condition that Assam should be an importing and not an exporting province. Land abundant Assam offered possibilities of surplus agricultural crops which could be exported to the famine hit areas of India. For this, waste land of the province should be opened for cultivation.

As local people of the province contented with the existing standard of living had no plan of reclamation of waste land for extension of cultivation, the Government decided to involve the tribes in reclaiming waste and jungle lands. The Government established a Santhal colony in Goalpara. It even made provision for free traveling from their home to the settlement and granted advances free of interests to the settlers until they reap a crop of their own. In 1885, the area under cultivation was 1216 **bighas** and the Santhal population was 584. Besides the Santhals, the **Meches** and the **Rabhas** also joined the settlement, and by 1896-97, cultivated area was increased to 4,867 **bighas**. Out of these areas, 3730 **bighas** were cultivated by a colony of 1361 Santhals.\(^{74}\) This was quite an unsuccessful plan and the Government’s objective was not realized at all. The main cause of failure was that the tribes were good at jungle clearing, but bad agriculturists. The tribal involved in a particular area till they could collect yield with ease, but when the soil demanded more labour they abandoned it.

Meanwhile, the Government initiated the plan of reclamation of waste land with the time-expired **coolies**. By 1897-98, the time-expired **coolies** cultivated 55,929 acres of land.


\(^{74}\) *Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation*, op. cit., 11.
The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Henry Cotton encouraged immigration of *coolies* so that they could settle down when their terms of agreement were worked out. The following table shows the area given to the time-expired *coolies* in Assam between 1882 and 1897.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>3,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887-88</td>
<td>15,357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-89</td>
<td>17,997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-92</td>
<td>27,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-95</td>
<td>37,161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-96</td>
<td>42,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-97</td>
<td>44,811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-98</td>
<td>55,929</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The table shows that with every succeeding year the areas settled by *coolies* were increasing. But encouragement given to reclamation of waste land by tea garden *coolies* affected the tea industry. The tea planters opposed such initiative. The opposition of the tea planters against the scheme introduced by Chief Commissioner of Assam, Henry Cotton was such that he had to resign from the post. When all the plans of extension of cultivation failed, the Government decided to open up the waste land for settlement of surplus population from the overcrowded tracts in other parts of the country. They looked towards the people of Bihar. The people of Bihar although good as cultivators, however, they lacked self reliant resourcefulness and capital. Under such circumstances, the colonial administrators of Assam decided to bring cultivators from Bengal. Captain J. Butler, the Collector of Nowgong anticipated that unless Assam was being colonized from Bengal, there would be no prospect or hope of the province being fully under

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cultivation for centuries to come. Moffatt Mills was also not in favor of granting waste land to the native of the province, instead he emphasized colonization of the province from Bengal. The colonial Government, therefore, selected the stout and fanatical Mohammedans of East Bengal as primary settlers. They did not take opium and strong enough to cultivate fields after clearing jungles. Moreover, population pressure on the districts of East Bengal also attracted the attention of the Government. They were concerned with the reduction of population over the crowded districts of East Bengal. According to government view, people of East Bengal living in poverty, if come to Assam, would find a life of independence, with a certainty that hard work would bring ease and a reasonable standard of comfort. It seemed that the colonial Government also aimed at the wellbeing of the East Bengali people and hence encouraged their immigration to Assam.

Another reason behind the colonial Government’s inducement to the East Bengali peasants’ migration into the Brahmaputra Valley districts was the introduction of commercialization of agriculture. It was one of the methods that helped to fulfill the coffer of the colonial Government by two ways, firstly by introduction of cash crops which became the raw materials for their industries and secondly, by realization of more revenues from expanded cultivable land. Captain Jenkins was much very fascinated by it and provided incentives for such marketable commodities like tea, sugarcane etc. by initiating a set of rules known as Waste Land Rules for the settlement of vast tracts of lands lying waste in the province. The first important commercial crop of Assam was tea which became a major agro-industry in Assam. Jute, another important cash crop was yet to be a favourable crop for the local people of Assam. Although there was plenty of soil ideal for jute throughout the Brahmaputra Valley districts of Goalpara, Nowgong, Barpeta Sub-division of Kamrup and Darrang, however, the farmers were not enthusiastic about this crop. Bengal was the largest jute producing province in India and East Bengal supplied more than 50 per cent of jute in Bengal. The Muslim cultivators of East Bengal

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76 Moffatt Mills, op. cit., 455.
77 Letter from Denzil Ibbetson, Secretary to the Govt. of India to Chief Commissioner of Assam, in *Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation*, op. cit., 10.
78 Ibid.
were assets in this respect to the colonial Government. These hardy cultivators were really at the base of economic development of entire Bengal. The worldwide demand for jute necessitated the expansion of its cultivation. Moreover, the cultivation of jute in East Bengal had reached at a saturated stage and there was no possibility of further expansion owing to the non availability of waste land. The Bengali cultivators also abandoned this crop due to hardship caused by water hyacinth in parts of Bengal. So, the Government as well as the jute traders was in search of favourable areas for the expansion of this cash crop. The colonial administrators of Assam wanted to increase the cultivation of jute in Assam. A survey conducted by F.J. Monahan, the Director of Land Record and Agriculture in 1897 found that extensive tract on both banks of the Brahmaputra River appeared similar to char lands in Bengal where jute was cultivated.\textsuperscript{80} It was identified that the tracts lying between Nowgong and Kamrup on the Gauhati branch of the Assam Bengal Railway were favourable for this crop.\textsuperscript{81} This identification of soil necessitated the importation of farmers specialized in jute cultivation from East Bengal.

After identifying the immigrants, the colonial Government decided upon the plan for bringing the Bengali farmers to Assam. It realized that only improved means of transportation could help in bringing the immigrants to Assam. So, the Government now proceeded to improve the transport and communication of Assam for the better movement of the farmers from East Bengal to the Brahmaputra Valley districts. Already the land route running from Rangpur in Bengal to Dhubri in Goalpara district of Assam helped in the settlement of immigrants in this area. Jenkins introduced steamers on the Brahmaputra to facilitate the movement of goods and people.\textsuperscript{82} The steamer service in the Brahmaputra helped in carrying out immigrant labourers to the tea industry of Upper Assam. Besides, many farmers from Bengal used the water route from Padma River to the Brahmaputra River to come to Assam and settled down on the banks the Brahmaputra.\textsuperscript{83} But this slower mode of transport was later on superseded by the railways. The Government believed that extension of railways could help to work out a

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Priyam Goswami, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{83} Ismail Hossain, \textit{Asamar Char-Chaparir Jiban aru Samaj} (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2008), 2. The researcher have been informed by one Nurul Islam Mukhtar Aged 72 years, retired teacher of Moinabari High School that his grandfather came from Danybari, 7 miles north-west of Mymensingh, first arrived in Goalpara by boat and then came to Dhingghat via Kharupetia of Darrang district. See \textit{Appendix A}, Part II.
large scheme of immigration into Assam.\textsuperscript{84} Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam thought that the completion of the railways between Assam and Bengal would be a great incentive to the jute cultivators of East Bengal. Thus, the Assam-Bengal Railway and the Eastern-Bengal Railway was the result of government initiative to connect Assam and Bengal. The Assam-Bengal Railway started in 1892 with its three main sections—one from Chittagong to Cachar, the next from Gauhati to Tinsukia and the third from Lumding to connect the first two sections, played a major role in the movement of people across the provincial lines.\textsuperscript{85} Map in Figure III shows the railway line between East Bengal and Nowgong district of Assam. It is to be noted that within Nowgong, the Government built railway line connecting different parts of the district for smooth movement of people and jute. The Chaparmukh-Silghat Line (81.80 km) and Senchoa-Moirabari Line (24 km) within Nowgong district were opened in 1920 and 1930 respectively. Again, in 1902 the Eastern-Bengal Railway Line from Calcutta to Dhubri in Assam was completed which was extended to Amingaon in 1909-10. The construction of this railway was to supply Assam with redundant labourers, to pour grains in time of famine to Bihar and of opening of some of richest portions of the country.\textsuperscript{86} The construction of both these lines facilitated large scale immigration of cultivators from East Bengal to Assam. The Assam-Bengal Railway provided special facilities to the immigrants since the beginning of 1906 by arranging tickets to tea-garden coolies on presentation of a credit note, signed by the Manager or Superintendent of any garden in Assam.\textsuperscript{87} The same facilities were also provided to the East Bengali immigrants. A family ticket of Rs. 5 was enough for an immigrant family to arrive in Assam.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the Extension of Cultivation, op. cit., 18.
\textsuperscript{85} S. B. Medhi, Transport System and Economic Development in Assam (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1978), 64.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{88} Appendix E, Part II.
Figure-III: Map showing railway line from East Bengal to Nowgong

Railway line from East Bengal to Nowgong

Scale: 1 CM = 45 KM

REFERENCES
Railway Line
Role of the Muslim League

One of the important pulling agents of the East Bengali immigrants in Assam was the Muslim League. It was founded in 1906 at Dacca on the eve of anti-partition movement. In order to establish their hold over the politics of Bengal, it worked for the benefits of the Muslims. It supported the partition of Bengal in 1905 in the hope that removal of barrier between Assam and Bengal would encourage the migration of Muslim peasants from the overcrowded districts of East Bengal to Assam. Nawab Salim Ullah Khan, a prominent Muslim leader and one of the founders of the League in his public meeting at Dacca exhorted the Muslims to migrate to Assam and settle there. The result was that thousands of starved East Bengali farmers got encouragement to come to Assam. Until 1937 the League had no practical influence in the politics of Assam. Its branch in Assam was formed at Sylhet on 28th January 1928 with Munawwar Ali as the president. Before it, the members of the Muslim League from Bengal came to Assam, tried to win over the Muslims using religion as the primary binding factor. The League’s definite aim was to make Assam a Muslim dominated province and that would be realized only after the coming of landless farmers from Bengal. Saadulla, the popular leader of the Assam Valley Muslim Party joined the League in 1937 and became its President in 1939. The Muslim League under Saadulla remained in power from 25th August 1942 to 23rd March 1945. During this period, Saadulla encouraged the immigrants to occupy the waste land in the province. Through different schemes like the Development Scheme, Grow More Food Campaign, Saadulla opened the grazing reserves of the province to the East Bengali immigrants. The league members in the Assembly fought for the abolition of Line System, the only restrictive measure on the immigrants. Another prominent League leader, Maulana Hamid Khan Bhasani fought for the rights of immigrants in getting lands in the province. This Pabna born leader came to Assam in 1904 and became the leaders of the immigrant farmers. In 1937 he was elected to the Legislative Assembly from where he fought for abolition of Line System. Under his leadership, Assam Chashi Mazur

Samiti, an association of the immigrants was founded. Bhasani exhorted the immigrants to occupy the grazing reserves of Assam. He upheld the view that land was the gift of Allah, so he demanded the settlement of land in Assam to the Bengali immigrants. It was on account of the role played by Bhasani that thousands of immigrants got their resettlement in Assam.

It is thus found that a combination of natural and man-made hardships worked as pushing agents of the East Bengali immigrants. The constant and rapid changes of the river courses of East Bengal often wiped out villages and destroyed the cultivation, but the peasants failed to get into the new land called char formed after the floods which were occupied by the Zamindars. Weeds like uri and water hyacinth also made it difficult for the farmers to grow crops. But those natural hardships were less significant in comparison to man-made difficulties. The construction of railways by the colonial Government in East Bengal prevented natural flow of river waters, which in turn destroyed the crop fields. Again, population in East Bengal during the colonial period was increased at an alarming rate. As the traditional handloom industries had been systematically destroyed by the colonial Government, there was overpressure on agriculture in the absence of other occupations. It resulted in fragmentations of the holdings of the cultivators. To support their families on the small plot of lands, the cultivators decided to grow cash crops like indigo and jute (naila). But it is found that those two crops, whose price depended on world market, did not bring happiness to the Bengali farmers. Even the introduction of Zamindary settlement by the colonial Government in Bengal brought many hardships to the poor farmers most of who were the Muslims. The farmers were exploited by the Jotedars and the Zamindars. The Zamindars compelled the poor peasants to pay numerous abwabs. The peasants could not live under such condition and out-migration remained the only option. Sometimes, they organized movements against their exploiters. The colonial Government and the Zamindars of Bengal in order to suppress the movements helped in migration of peasants to land abundant Assam. Besides, during the time of economic crisis of 1929-30, the poor farmers lost everything even their lands to the rich farmers. When the Second World War

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broke out, the rising prices of commodities on one hand and the outbreak of devastating famine in 1943 on the other hand had placed the poor peasants in a helpless situation. Therefore, they decided to leave their place and migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley.

So far as the pull factors of immigration into Assam are concerned, the local gentry acted as its agents at the beginning. The gentry who lost their *paik* service enjoyed during the time of the Ahom monarchy encouraged immigration of people from other parts of India to work in their *khats*. The intellectuals’ urge for agricultural prosperity of the province encouraged the colonial rulers to bring the immigrants into the province. Availability of vast waste land in the province in one hand and lack of industry amongst the local people on the other hand compelled the Government to bring famers from other places to reclaim waste land. At the same time the Government felt that food consuming population of the province had increased due to the arrival of garden *coolies* and other professional groups. Importation of rice to the province began to increase. Hence, the colonial Government decided to grow crops in the province and encouraged settlement of lands by the tribes and time-expired *coolies*. But such plan remained far away from success. Therefore, the colonial administrators of Assam decided to bring farmers from East Bengal, most of who were Muslims. It was hoped that population pressure in East Bengal would be reduced by such immigration into Assam. Moreover, the Bengali cultivators were experts in jute cultivation and the Government believed that they would expand it in Assam too.

The Muslim League founded in 1906 in Dacca on the eve of anti-partition movement encouraged the Muslims of Bengal to migrate to Assam. The League wanted to reduce the pressure of population in Bengal by encouraging migration to Assam. Since 1937 the League’s influence was felt in the politics of Assam. Under Saadulla’s leadership, the League remained in power from 25th August 1942 to 23rd March 1945. In order to maintain their hold over the politics of Assam, the League encouraged settlement of East Bengali peasants in Assam even in grazing reserves. Using his political power, Saadulla made provision for settlement of the immigrants in the province. Besides Saadulla, Maulana Hamid Khan Bhasani, another leader of the Muslim League also encouraged the Muslim peasants of East Bengal to come to Assam. Thus, due to the encouragement
received from the above agents, the East Bengali peasants migrated to Assam. After their arrival in Assam including the district of Nowgong, they were given resettlement. The resettlement issue of the East Bengali immigrants has been discussed in the next chapter.