CHAPTER VI

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Immigration from East Bengal to Assam during the colonial period was possible due to territorial proximity between these two regions. Assam has a legacy of close relationship with Bengal since ancient times. Many parts of Bengal were included into the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. With the advent of the Muslims in Bengal in the early thirteenth century, a prolonged warfare had started between these two kingdoms. In due course of time, large number of Bengali soldiers who were either defeated or arrested as war prisoner settled in Assam. Not only that, even the Ahom rulers invited the Bengalis who were skilled in different fields like blacksmithy, architecture, Persian translation and so forth to Assam. This type of invitation may be called 'kings and officials sponsored immigration'. In course of time, those Bengali Muslims adopted the Assamese way of life and had come to be known as Asamiya Musalmans. During the time of the Mughals, Goalpara, the westernmost part of Assam became the part of the Mughal territory of Bengal. In Goalpara, the majority of the people considered Bengali to be their mother tongue. In the colonial period, the territories of Assam and Bengal had become closer when Sylhet, a district of Bengal was attached to Assam in 1874. Thus linguistic affinity as well as territorial proximity made possible the easy movement of people between Bengal and Assam.

References to this inter-Provincial movement of people between Bengal and Assam have been found earlier than the twentieth century. But the Census Report of Assam 1911 had for the first time referred to this kind of movement as immigration. Goalpara district of Assam had witnessed the immigration of Bengali peasants due its close territorial proximity with Bengal. In 1911 the immigrants from Bengal constituted 19.7 per cent of the actual population of Goalpara. Next to Goalpara, Nowgong situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra Valley had also been affected by the East Bengali immigrants. The immigrants mainly came from Dacca and Mymensingh districts of East Bengal. The Dacca immigrants were professionals, whereas the immigrants from Mymensingh were agriculturists. Most of the East Bengali immigrants were from Mymensingh and were Muslims by community. About 89 per cent of them were Muslims, whereas less than 11 per cent were Hindus. So, contemporary Government documents and

1. See Chapter II, 25.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 29.
4. See Chapter IV, 73-74.
reports often referred to them as *Mymensinghias* and Muslim immigrants. In Nowgong their numbers had increased from 652 in 1901 to 1,20,000 in 1931. By 1951 they had constituted 25.7 per cent of the total population of Nowgong.

The changed demographic pattern of Nowgong attested to the fact that immigration from East Bengal had started conspicuously in the district since 1901. As Nowgong was not a tea garden district, the East Bengali immigrants were mainly responsible for spurt in population. The highest increase of population (41.35 per cent) was found between 1921 and 1931. The *mauzas* situated in the north and settled by the East Bengali immigrants like Bokoni, Dhing, Juria, Laharighat, and Laokhowa showed an unprecedented growth of 645.23 per cent between 1921 and 1931. Growth rate of the Muslims was higher than the Hindus in Nowgong. In 1901 the Muslims constituted 5 per cent of the total population of Nowgong and in 1951 in rose to 40.53 per cent. Such growth rate of the Muslim population in Nowgong was due to the arrival of the East Bengali immigrants.

Although the East Bengali immigrants during the colonial period cannot be termed as ‘environmental migrants’, however, a host of natural adversities had pushed them from their homeland. They had often lost their crop fields and houses due to floods. But their loss was not compensated by the Government and the *Zamindars*. They were not permitted to take up the *char* land formed after the floods. Weeds like *uri* and water hyacinth prevented them from growing crops in their fields. Besides, the colonial Government in its modernization drive had completely destroyed the ecological balance while constructing railways lines in East Bengal. Floods had become a normal phenomenon in East Bengal due to the prevention of natural flow of water by railway embankments.

Population explosion was another man-made difficulty which posed a big challenge to the East Bengali farmers in their homeland. Between 1901 and 1951 there was an increase of about 13.006 million people in East Bengal. Here, percentage rate of proliferation of Muslim population was conspicuous. They accounted for 68.1 per cent of the total population of East Bengal in 1921 and the same was increased to 76.9 per cent in 1951. But there were no new

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5. See Chapter II, 37.
6. Ibid., 39-40.
7. See Chapter III, 48.
8. Ibid., 49.
avenues of livelihood for the people. On the contrary, the traditional handloom industries, one of the principal occupational sources of the people, had been systematically destroyed by the colonial ruler. Its immediate effect was found in agriculture. Those traditional weavers who had lost their occupations took shelter in agriculture which resulted in fragmentation of the holdings of the people.

The land intensification process adopted by the East Bengali peasants through the introduction of indigo and jute, failed to bring happiness to them. Need of money to grow these crops had thrown them into a web of debt woven by the moneylenders which led to increased indebtedness of the peasants in rural areas.

The colonial Government’s new land tenure had also brought more hardships to the poor farmers. The Zamindary Settlement introduced by the colonial Government had handed down more power to the colonial agents like the Zamindars and the Jotedars. In East Bengal religious bond did not protect the poor people from economic hardships. The Muslim Jotedars of rural Bengal had rather become the exploiters of the poor Muslim peasants. They had appeared as moneylenders and in turn exploited the poor farmers by imposing high rent on loans given to the farmers. The Zamindari exploitation also knew no bounds. The Zamindars compelled the peasants to serve them without pay. The peasants were also compelled to pay numerous abwabs at the point of bayonets. To ameliorate their conditions, the peasants resorted to revolt against their immediate oppressors, the Zamindars as well as the colonial exploiters. The Faraizi Movement of 1830s and the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 were actually some attempts by the people to ameliorate their condition. With the passing of time, the revolting attitude of the peasantry had become more acute. So, the colonial Government and the Zamindars of Bengal as a means of pacification encouraged the peasants to migrate to land abundant Assam. The peasants themselves did not want to remain in their homeland under duress. 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 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. Thus lack of flexibility and openness of unequal systems as well as economic hardships had led the Bengali farmers to seek land extensification i.e. expansion of cultivable land in frontier Assam.

9. Ibid., 54.
10. Ibid., 55.
The economic benefits of immigration is always given priority over the political and cultural. Economic compulsion had precipitated the move of the local gentry to encourage migration from outside the province without any consideration of language and religion. They needed labourers to work on their fields, because they had lost their paik and the bondi-golam service under the new administration. Moreover, leading intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baruah, among others wanted to remove the backwardness of Assam by bringing waste land under cultivation. They, therefore, had asked the Government to bring agriculturists into the province for opening the vast land lying waste and thereby promote agriculture rather than plantation. The Zamindars of Goalpara, the westernmost part of Assam had brought the East Bengali farmers to cultivate the waste land under their possession and thereby to maximize their revenue.

The same economic consideration had induced the colonial administrators of Assam to bring farmers from East Bengal. In Assam, the rate of revenue was lower than the contemporary Bengal. On the other hand, in spite of availability of waste land throughout the province, particularly in Lower Assam, the local people did not take up more land on the fear of paying more revenue. But at the same time, growth of population in the province had been retarded by Kala-azar which had particularly ravaged Nowgong. The Assamese had also lost their energy due to opium eating habit. To all those odd was added by a new group of food consumers, who were mostly the tea garden labourers and other professionals. The Government imported large quantity of rice from Bengal to feed them. It was a drain of wealth from Assam. Therefore, realizing that it was well nigh impossible to open up the vast lands of the province with the help of local people, the colonial administrators of Assam decided to bring agriculturists from East Bengal, most of who were Muslims by community. It was also hoped that population pressure in East Bengal would be reduced by such immigration into Assam. Moreover, the Bengali cultivators had been accustomed to the process of commercialization of agriculture in Bengal and were expert jute cultivators. As the soil of Lower Assam was suitable for jute, the Government hoped that the immigrants would expand the jute cultivation in Lower Assam. Therefore, it encouraged immigration of East Bengali farmers to Assam.

Volume of immigration increases with the diminution of intervening obstacles, i.e. distance. This diminution is possible through the improved means of transport. The colonial Government,

11. Ibid., 63.
therefore, improved the means of transport between Bengal and Assam. Existing water transport was too slow to carry the immigrants. Hence, it started building of railways connecting East Bengal and Assam. The Assam-Bengal Railway and the Eastern-Bengal Railway had connected the two provinces. These two railways had provided facilities to the immigrants. A family ticket of Rs. 5, arranged by the railways helped the immigrants to arrive in Assam.  

The East Bengali immigrants who specialized in agriculture gathered more in Assam due to encouragement received from people and organizations of same religion and language. The political organization of the Muslims, the Muslim League founded in 1906 was the supporter of the Muslim immigrants. In order to reduce the pressure of population in Bengal as well as to strengthen their base in the politics of Assam, the League had encouraged migration of Muslim farmers from Bengal to Assam. Its leader Saadulla, who formed the ministry from 25th August 1942 to 23rd March 1945 by virtue of his political power, had encouraged the Muslim farmers from East Bengal to occupy the waste land of the province. Through the instruments like the Development Scheme, the Grow More Food Campaign, he had opened up the grazing reserves (village grazing grounds and professional grazing reserves) of the province for the resettlement of the East Bengali immigrants. Maulana Bhasani, another immigrant League leader had worked hard using the public platform to resettle Muslim farmers in Assam. Due to the encouragement received from the above agents, the East Bengali immigrants had come to Assam and settled down permanently.

Nowgong was a land abundant district of Assam situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River. The northern part of the district had no permanent cultivation. Therefore, the colonial administrators had allowed the East Bengali immigrants to bring those areas in the north under cultivation. The immigrants had mainly settled in 11 mauzas of the district namely Bheleuguri, Bokoni, Dhing, Juria, Kachamari, Khatwal, Laharighat, Laokhowa, Mayang, Mikirbhet and Moirabari. The immigrants had adopted various ways to get resettlement. Sometimes, they had bribed the local revenue officers. The local people of Nowgong had also been tempted by the immigrants to sell their land by offering high prices. Another way of getting resettlement by the immigrants was that very often they had occupied land of local people by foul means like letting loose the cattle on the crop fields and compelling them to leave their places.

12. See Appendix E, Part II.
The volume and rate of immigration had increased in the absence of any restrictions to prior 1920s. Greed for more land brought the East Bengali immigrants into conflict with the local people and that led the district authorities to introduce some restrictive measures. The Line System introduced in Nowgong in 1920 by the district authorities, not by the provincial Government, was a measure only to prevent indiscriminate settlement by the immigrants. By it, some areas had been reserved for the East Bengali immigrants and restricted their entry to the villages inhabited by the local people including the ethnic tribes. Besides, the Government issued the *Annual pattas* without transferable rights to local people in order to prevent them from selling their lands to the immigrants.

The colonial Government which aimed at the maximization of revenue did not prevent the immigrants and instead found ways for their resettlement. In 1929 it introduced a Colonization Scheme in Nowgong. It was nothing but a systematic policy of resettlement of the immigrants without incurring the displeasure of the indigenous people. Under the scheme about 1,59,839 *bighas* of land in four *mauzas* of Nowgong, namely Bokoni, Laharighat, Sahari and Mayang were allotted to the immigrants including the landless local people. The land was allotted on payment of premium of Rs. 25 per *bigha* of land. This scheme helped only the immigrants in getting land in Nowgong, because the landless indigenous people did not take up land near the immigrants.

The issue of resettlement of the immigrants had become a part of political dialogue of the parties like the Congress and the Muslim League after the formation of popular ministries in Assam in 1937. By that time, the spirit of “nativism” had also become prominent in the province. The Congress-coalition ministry (19th September, 1938 to 16th November, 1939) led by Gopinath Bordoloi responded to it by adopting a resolution which accepted 1st January, 1938 as the cut off year for getting resettlement by the immigrants. But Saadulla, who formed next ministry, had the aspiration of retaining political power with the support of the East Bengali immigrants. He had introduced a new resettlement scheme called the Development Scheme in 1940. In Nowgong about 64,000 *bighas* of land under the Development Scheme had been opened for the immigrants and local landless people. The East Bengali immigrants had been given lands in *mauzas* like Gobha, Garubat and Lanka. The local people opposed this scheme,

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13. See Chapter IV, 84.
15. Ibid., 89.
because they did not want to take up land near the East Bengali immigrants. Governor Reid was pressurised to discard the Scheme. Saadulla inaugurated the Grow More Food Campaign in Assam in the wake of the Second World War. By it, he had opened the professional grazing reserves in Darrang, Kamrup and Nowgong for the immigrants as all the available waste land had already been settled with the immigrants. In Nowgong an area of 17,838 acres of Laokhowa reserve forest was opened for colonization in 1943-44. He had also extended the cut off year for settlement of lands to the immigrants from 1938 to 1942. His policy of opening the grazing reserves was intended to satisfy the Government of Bengal which wanted abolition of Line System in Assam.

Saadulla’s intention behind introduction of such resettlement policy was to increase more Muslims in the province with whose support he could remain in power. By that time the immigration issue and the demand for inclusion of Assam into the proposed Pakistan had been mixed up due to the activities of the Muslim League under Saadulla and Maulana Bhasani. The Assamese opposed the resettlement schemes of Saadulla ministry. After the general elections of 1946, Gopinath Bordoloi formed the ministry and had started eviction operation in Darrang, Kamrup and Nowgong districts. But the encroachers could not be completely evicted due to the opposition of the League. After independence immigration from East Pakistan to Assam continued, but it lost its former tempo.

Resettlement of the immigrants had serious implications on the socio-politico and economic environment of Assam in general and Nowgong in particular. The land hungry East Bengali immigrants, without any doubt were the best agriculturists. They had brought all the waste lands under permanent cultivation. In spite of absence of modern agricultural tools, they had cleared off the jungle with manual labor and had turned those areas into green crop fields. They had reduced the dependency of Assam on Bengal rice to a great extent. Jute was their favorable crop. They had turned their settlements into prosperous jute growing areas. We have seen that since 1901 areas under jute cultivation had begun to increase in Nowgong. Between 1901 and 1951 jute growing areas in Nowgong had increased by 99.92 per cent. Jute grown by the East Bengali immigrants had been exported to Calcutta from different Railway Stations of Nowgong like Senchua, Raha, Puranigudam, and Samaguri.

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16. Ibid., 92.
17. See Chapter V, 102.
Resettlement of the immigrants had greatly diminished the land-man ratio in Nowgong. The immigrants had reduced the relinquished areas in Nowgong district. It dropped from 7.86 per cent in 1914-15 to 0.63 per cent in 1929-30.\textsuperscript{18} They had helped the Government to realize more revenue by bringing all fertile land under cultivation. The Government collected Rs. 4, 60,394 during 1901-02 as land revenue in Nowgong, but the demand was increased to Rs.8, 79,282 in 1929-30.\textsuperscript{19} Simultaneously, land value in Nowgong also increased due to the settlement of the East Bengali immigrants who had offered astonishingly high price to the local people.

The importance of rural \textit{hats} or \textit{bazar} (markets) had begun to increase after the arrival of the East Bengali immigrants. Many daily or weekly rural \textit{hats} began to be held near the areas settled by the immigrants where locally produced items were marketed. The \textit{Marwari} traders, locally called had entered into those hats with cash. They had bought jute from the immigrants and the local people also got ready cash from the immigrants by selling local items. Thus monetized economy entered into the rural areas through these \textit{hats}.

To derive the benefits of immigration, the district had sacrificed many things. The East Bengali immigrants in their land extensification drive had destroyed the grazing reserves and forests used by the villagers especially by the Nepali graziers. Many grazing reserves and village forests as well as vast areas of Laokhowa reserve forest had been thrown open to the immigrants in Nowgong.\textsuperscript{20} The professional graziers, whose primary source of income was milk, lost the source of fodder of their cattle. The Government also lost the grazing fees levied on the graziers. Many valuable trees like \textit{Simul}, \textit{Sisu}, \textit{Gamari} had also been cut down and diminished from Nowgong. Besides, by occupying those areas, the immigrants had indirectly pushed the future progeny of local people to a landless world.

De-reservation of large areas for resettlement of the immigrants affected the \textit{Tiwas} and the \textit{Kacharis}, the two principal ethnic tribes of Nowgong. These habitual \textit{laopani} drinkers and believers in witchery had been easily persuaded by the immigrants to sell their lands. The occupation of grazing reserves and forests by the immigrants left them without their source of fuel. Later on, realizing that it was not possible for them to live near the ethnically, linguistically and religiously different people, many \textit{Kachari} and \textit{Tiwa} families of Nowgong had left their

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 108-109.
villages. Out-migration of those tribes from many *mauzas* of Nowgong like Dhing, Laharighat, Juria, Laokhowa and Khatwal had been directed towards Lakhimpur district which was less affected by the immigrants.

The Assamese had reacted vociferously against the immigrants. It led to an unprecedented political activism in Assam since 1930s. The immigrants had spoken Bengali language and most of them were Muslims by community which was totally unacceptable to the Assamese Hindus. The growth of those linguistically and religiously different people in Assam had created fears in the minds of the Assamese that they would lose their identity in their homeland. They upheld the idea of ‘son of soil’ and demanded prevention of immigration. But at the same time communal propaganda flared up the environment of Assam.

Assimilation of the East Bengali immigrants with the Assamese society was the urgent need to create a peaceful environment in Assam. No doubt, a section of the Assamese intelligentsias realized that homogeneity of Assamese society could not be achieved without the integration and assimilation of the immigrants. Benudhar Rajkhowa and many other intellectuals using the platform of the *Asam Sahitya Sabha* had worked for incorporation of the immigrants into the Assamese society. The result was that in 1951 most of the East Bengali immigrants declared their language as Assamese. This move on the part of the immigrants may be accepted as their survival strategy as well as a gesture towards the demand of the people of Assam.

In the final analysis, it may be said that territorial proximity and cultural affinities between Bengal and the western part of Assam had made possible immigration of East Bengali farmers into Assam. Both natural and man-made hardships had pushed them towards Assam, where a host of agents had been waiting to invite them. The local intelligentsia’s urge for removing the backwardness of the province, the colonial Government’s aim of maximization of revenue from land and the Muslim League’s preparedness for increasing its base in the politics of Assam worked as the impetus towards immigration. Available waste land, particularly in the northern part of Nowgong, attracted them towards this district. Sometimes, the immigrants settled by using fair and foul means and at other times through the different schemes introduced both by the colonial and elected Government of Assam. Resettlement of those East Bengali

immigrants in Nowgong enhanced the agricultural productivity and linked the rural agricultural economy to the world economy. But they had pushed the 'son of soil' and their future progeny of this agricultural province into resource less world. It led to an unprecedented political activism and at the same time to communal disharmony in the province. Realization of the gravity of the situation urged upon the intellectuals to work for integration of the East Bengali immigrants into the Assamese society and this integration was achieved in 1951 when the immigrants had declared their language as the Assamese in place of the Bengali.