CHAPTER – 3

MUSLIM IMMIGRATION IN THE 19th AND THE EARLY 20th CENTURY
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3.1 Introduction

The advent of British colonial rule in the 19th and early 20th century created favourable circumstances that accounted for the swelling of the Muslim population in the region during this period. The development process, which they undertook in north-east, led to the increased utilization of the region's rich natural resources. In particular, their policy of wasteland reclamation and establishment of plantation industry in Assam and Tripura brought large-scale immigrants from various parts of India, especially from Bengal, who in course of time settled in the regions. A large proportion of these immigrants were Muslims.

By the early part of the 19th century the British discovered tea, oil, and coal.1 With the discovery of tea they took up plantation industry.2 Along with the plantation industry, vast tracts of land, especially in the province of Assam, which were hitherto lying waste, were brought under cultivation in order to raise revenues to fill their coffers. One of the outcomes of these developments was the opening of the floodgates of immigration. Along with the increase in the quantity of tea-trade came steamers on the two main rivers of

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1 Captain R. Wilcox recorded the existence of coal as early as 1826. Coal was found in extensive beds in upper Assam lying along the Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts. In the last quarter of the 19th century there was great demand for coal by the factories, however no steps were taken to exploit the mineral. Coal required for the tea industry was mostly imported at a higher cost from Bengal. Work at the Tikak, upper Ledo, and Ledo coal mines begun in 1882, and on the Namdang and Tirap mines in 1897 and 1898 respectively. By 1899-1900 the output of coal was 242,000 tons. For details, see S. K. Barpujari, “Working of Coal-Beds in Upper Assam in the 19th century,” IHC, Proceedings, 35th Session (1974).

2 The enterprise for enlarging tea plantation was one of the outcomes of the Revolt of 1857. The strong anti-white feeling in the north and south India compelled Britishers to look towards the north-east where it was safe to settle and invest. See J. C. Jha, Aspects of Indentured Inland Emigration to North-East India, 1859-1918, p. 21.
Assam by 1850. Railway enterprise was started by 1883 to connect Dibrugarh and the rivers with the coalmines of Margherita and Ledo Lohich. This was followed by the construction of the Bengal and Assam Railway (around 600 miles) in 1893, which was to connect Chittagong port with Dibrugarh and Surey.

An adequate supply of labour was the pre-requisite for the establishment of such a commercial enterprise. Unfortunately, there was acute shortage of local labour in the north-east. In Assam, since the Ahom rule various historical calamities had reduced the local population. Also, the protracted occupation of the region by the Burmese and their mayhem had resulted in a steep fall in population. Added to it was the wide spread epidemic of cholera and smallpox in 1839, 1847 and 1852. Besides the cacharis, the Assamese were, as per the British official accounts, either too indolent, or too affluent to accept regular employment. Furthermore, the high rate of opium consumption by the native male population also deterred them from hard labour. Under such a state of affairs induction of labour from outside the province became indispensable for the Britishers. Thus, one important aspect of the whole colonial development in north-east was that it opened the floodgates of immigration, which brought significant changes in the demographic profile of the province.

Till the early part of the 20th century three categories of people emigrated: (i) labourers who mainly worked at tea-gardens, oil refinery (at Digboi), coal mines and in the few sawmills (upper Assam) and railway undertakings, etc.; (ii) amlahs (office employee from Dacca, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur, and other districts of Bengal), merchants and tradesmen from Rajasthan and Bengal; and (iii) agricultural labourers. Around 13 per cent of the persons,

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3 L. W. Shakesphere, History of the Assam Rifles, pp. 3-4.
censured in Assam on 1st March 1901, were born outside the province. The highest numbers of immigrants were from the province of Bengal (64.9 per cent), followed by NW Province (14.0 per cent) and Central Province (10.8 per cent).

Table 3.1: Increase in Immigration in Assam Province, 1891-1901

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>% (+) or (-)</th>
<th>% of increase on total increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>418,360</td>
<td>503,876</td>
<td>+85,516</td>
<td>+20.4</td>
<td>+32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>3,844</td>
<td>84,170</td>
<td>+80,326</td>
<td>+2,089.6</td>
<td>+30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provinces</td>
<td>57,851</td>
<td>108,900</td>
<td>+51,049</td>
<td>+88.2</td>
<td>+19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Provinces</td>
<td>10,654</td>
<td>21,571</td>
<td>+10,917</td>
<td>+102.4</td>
<td>+4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>6,214</td>
<td>+5,378</td>
<td>+643.3</td>
<td>+2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>1,101</td>
<td>+782</td>
<td>+245.1</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>1,287</td>
<td>+456</td>
<td>+54.8</td>
<td>+0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Isles</td>
<td>4,877</td>
<td>9,334</td>
<td>+4,457</td>
<td>+91.3</td>
<td>+1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajputana</td>
<td>11,377</td>
<td>21,347</td>
<td>+9,970</td>
<td>+87.6</td>
<td>+3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1,723</td>
<td>18,044</td>
<td>+16,321</td>
<td>+947.2</td>
<td>+6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>510,672</td>
<td>775,844</td>
<td>+265,172</td>
<td>+51.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, by the early part of 20th century, Bengal exported over half a million emigrants to Assam. Of these almost half of the total came from Chotanagpur while Burdwan, Patna, and Bhagalpur account for over three-fifths of the remainder. Most of the emigrants from these places served as tea-garden coolies while those from Dacca, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Mymensingh and the Presidency worked as cultivators, government officials and traders. The immigrants from Nepal either served in the Gurkha regiments and military police battalions, or took up their abode in the hilly terrains as herdsmen and cultivators, while the immigrants from Rajputana, mostly Marwari merchants, took over the trade of the Brahmaputra Valley. Besides Nepal, the largest number of

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 38.
8 Ibid., p. 33. The highest percentages of emigrants were from Chotanagpur (50.3 per cent), Burdwan (10.7 per cent), Patna (10.4 per cent), and Bhagalpur (10.3 per cent). See ibid., p. 38.
immigrants from outside India were from Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, and Baluchistan.\(^9\)

In sum, out of the every 1,000 persons censured in Assam as on 1\(^{st}\) March 1901, no less than 126 were born outside the province; a proportion which was higher than that of any province in India in 1891 except lower Burma (129), and was much higher than that for the whole of India for the same year (32).\(^{10}\)

The total number of traders, clerks, and other educated men, who had come in search of employment to Assam (and its adjoining territories which were also under the British rule namely, Manipur and Tripura), was relatively small. The large majority of immigrants were either garden coolies or cultivators. The cultivating class was concentrated mostly in the border districts like Sylhet and Goalpara, while immigrant population censured in large numbers in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, and Darrang districts could be assumed to be coolies.\(^{11}\)

In due course of time, the amlahs – mostly from Bengal – well trained in the art of the administration of the company, ousted the local official aristocracy, who were inept to the new system of administration. The situation was further worsened when the government introduced Bengali instead of Persian as the official language of Assam for administrative convenience. The service of amlahs became all the more important in almost all the government educational institutions, whether vernacular or Anglo-vernacular, since local teachers were not available in adequate numbers. The virtual domination by the Bengali amlahs in all the departments bred an ill feeling and deep resentment among the local counterparts.\(^{12}\)

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 34.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., pp. 34-35.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 33.
3.2 Tea-Plantation in Assam

Robert Bruce, a former agent of Ahom rulers, is acknowledged to be the first person, who discovered the wild tea species grown in the upper part of Brahmaputra through a chief of the singpho tribe while he was on his trading trip to Garhgaon in 1823. Some specimens of the plant were sent to C. A. Bruce, his brother in England, and some to David Scott, the first agent to the Governor-General in the north-east frontier. The latter further sent the specimen to the superintendent of the Botanical Gardens, Calcutta for examination. After an analysis it was confirmed that the plant was of the same family, but of different species, from which the Chinese manufactured their tea.

In 1832 the Government commissioned Capt. Jenkins to survey and report on the resources of Assam including tea. The Government subsequently established a Tea Committee consisting of seven civilians, three Calcutta merchants, two Indians and Dr. Wallich of the Botanical Gardens, Calcutta. Mr. Gordon, the secretary of the Committee, was sent to China to procure tea plants, seeds, and persons skilled in tea manufacture. C. A. Bruce was appointed Superintendent of the Government Tea forests. He was supplied with some skilled Chinese tea manufacturers and the
Chinese seeds brought by Mr. Gordon from his trip to China. In 1837, C. A. Bruce for the first time packed 46 boxes of finished tea, but only a few reached England as much of it was spoiled due to defective packing.\(^{16}\)

The first Government tea-plantation farm was established at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Kundil rivers, but was later shifted to Jaipur due to poor soil quality. The Jaipur farm was sold in 1840 to the Assam Company; a private enterprise formed in 1849. The Assam Company established factories at Dibrugarh. By 1859 it had 4,000 acres under cultivation and a turn-over of 760,000 pounds of tea. The number of gardens increased, and the existence of indigenous tea in Cachar and Sylhet were discovered.\(^{17}\)

The Jorhat Company was formed in 1858 in the estates of one Messrs Williamson. Shortly, tea-gardens were opened in almost all the districts. W. Robinson started tea-plantation in Kamrup in 1853; while in Darrang district it was established by Mr. Martin at Balipara in 1854. In 1885 tea plant was discovered in the Surma Valley and George Williamson took up initiative for its plantation. The first tea-garden in Sylhet was opened at Malnicherra in 1858, which soon made rapid progress.\(^{18}\)

In 1872 about 27,000 acres were covered by tea farms in the Brahmaputra Valley, 23,000 acres in Cachar, and 1,000 acres in Sylhet; with the respective turn-over of 6 million, 5 million, and a third of a million pounds. However, in 1866 around 96 per cent of the tea imported into Britain came from China and only 4 per cent from India. But by 1903 the imports of Chinese tea had fallen to 10 per cent, while that from India and Ceylon increased to 59 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.\(^{19}\) By 1887 there were around 873 tea-

\(^{16}\) Antrobus, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 353-55.

\(^{17}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 355.


\(^{19}\) Antrobus, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 356-57.
gardens covering an area of 950,171 acres, and was spread throughout the Assam province.20

3.3 Labour

The tea-plantations, unlike other cash crops based industry, is an all-the-year labour-intensive exercise. Since the inception of tea manufacture there was a great scarcity of local labour and the reputedly indolent nature of the local population added to labour shortage woes. The planters and district officials even resorted to and endorsed the futile means of increasing the rate of land revenue in the province so as to force the food-producing cultivators to work in the tea-gardens in order to bear their rents.21 As a result, the Government had to rely on labour from outside. Moreover, tea-cultivation in Assam was confined to wastelands, situated largely in remote areas, which further necessitated the system of wage labour. Acquisition of labour in the early stage was a difficult task. It was hindered by rumours in the recruiting districts that those who emigrate to Assam were never heard of again as they had all famished and died. Assam was detested for its regular floods, epidemic, etc.22 Furthermore, there was an acute communication bottleneck; getting the labourers to Assam was also always problematic, as tea-plantations were located in remote wilderness, with very little communication. For many years, the only way of reaching the tea-gardens was by a streamer and that too after journeying for several days up the Brahmaputra river. Besides, an emigrant had to undertake a long railway journey.23

22 Antrobus, op. cit., p. 387; J. C. Jha, op. cit., p. 23.
23 Ibid., p. 387. Up till 1925 Assam had high mortality due to deathly diseases such as kala-azar, cholera, and malaria. The newly arrived coolies not being acclimatized to the climate and having a low standard of living were especially susceptible to the diseases. See Kingsley Davis, The Population of India and Pakistan, p. 116.
The Government realized that the tribes of Chotanagpur and the people of the plains of Bihar and United Provinces (U.P.) had proved very successful in sugar plantations of Mauritius and West Indies. Accordingly, it started importing labourers to Assam from these areas. Garden sirdars were deputed to get families of labourers willing to work in the tea-gardens. Besides, they also requested the district officers, where there was a surplus population to recruit labourers for them, on payment of commission per person of the numbers recruited.

The immigrant labourers thus gathered were enrolled as indentured labour for five years under the Acts of 1871 and 1873. They were often kept forcibly on the plantations and were controlled by the use of police. In course of time labourers from the Gangetic plains flocked to Assam, mainly due to decline of the cottage industry, large-scale unemployment among the artisans, and the oppressions and rack-renting by the zamindars under the Permanent Settlement. Moreover, the oppressions of the lower castes at the hands of the higher castes were also one of the causes for their flight. Under the kamiauti system, they almost become slaves for life. Sometime, even their children had to serve for the debt they had not cleared. In such an appalling situation emigration was the only alternative.

The first batch of 400 labourers, recruited by H. Busch at Rs. 4 a month each, against the stipulated wage of Rs. 3.8, had to cover a distance of over 160 miles by land from Rangpur to

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24 J. C. Jha, op. cit., p. 22. Surma Valley was able to get hold of a certain amount of labour, either locally or from adjoining districts of Bengal. But in the Assam Valley there was shortage of supply of local labour, and it was found impossible to obtain supplies from areas nearer than Chotanagpur and Bihar. See Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, p. 359.
Gauhati.\textsuperscript{28} Soon Assam became the main attraction for labourers from far and wide.

Generally, a labourer who was bound by a contract to serve for a specific period on the garden to which he was recruited, was liable to be punished if he failed to work without reasonable cause, or absconded. Besides, the planter also had the authority of arresting an absconder. Over time, the wages of a labourer rose, and there came up a group of contractors and professional recruiters, known as \textit{arkattis}. Many of whom in course of time started adopting various means to secure the large prices obtainable for the supply of labourers. Abuses and exploitation became frequent in the recruiting areas, particularly in Chotanagpur. It was only much later that the Government through several legislations decided to rule out all kinds of recruitment except by garden \textit{sardars}.\textsuperscript{29}

Nevertheless, owing to the impoverished conditions at home, large number of the labourers preferred to settle down as cultivators or as herdsmen and carters after the expiry of their contracts. Many labourers received from the tea-gardens small plots of land to cultivate their own crops. So they were not only labourers, but in a way were also cultivators. The area of government land settled by ex-\textit{coolies} in the province increased from 96,993 acres in 1901 to 106,003 acres in 1902-1903. Besides these, the \textit{coolies} rented land from the gardens in which they were employed, and they also held land as sub-tenants of ryots or \textit{mirasdars}. Over 600,000 ex-gardeners were settled on government lands and according to the census report of 1921 it was estimated that the number of foreigners in the province attributable to the tea

\textsuperscript{28} Antrobus, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 384.

\textsuperscript{29} Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, p. 360.
industry, was 1-1/3 millions, i.e., 1/6th of the whole population of Assam. 30

Table 3.2 : Birth Places of the Tea-Garden Population in Assam Province, 1901 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Place</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surma Valley</td>
<td>83,577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>92,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill districts of Assam</td>
<td>544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam unspecified</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Assam</td>
<td>177,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Bengal</td>
<td>307,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Provinces and Oudh</td>
<td>60,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Provinces</td>
<td>75,801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>19,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And from other States</td>
<td>13,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries in Asia beyond India</td>
<td>919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries in Europe</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other places outside Asia and Europe</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>657,331</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be noted that the large-scale immigration, which the province of Assam owed to the tea industry, did not affect the increase of the Muslim population significantly.32 In fact, Muslim constituted a small proportion in the tea-garden labour population of the Assam province. Out of the total tea-garden population of 657,331 (273,939 in the Surma Valley and 383,392 in the Brahmaputra Valley) as per the census count of 1901, Muslim population was recorded at 15,083 (8,676 in the Surma Valley and 6,407 in the Brahmaputra Valley). The census report does not conclusively give the figure of immigrant Muslim tea-garden labourers, as the total censured population given above also

30 Resolution on Labour Immigration into Assam for the Year, 1902-1903, Shillong, 1903, p. 13. The planters always tried to build up a permanent labour force settled in Assam. So emphasis was laid recruiting families rather than individuals. It was because of this that women were almost as numerous in tea-gardens as men. Moreover it was believed that women were more efficient than men in plucking the tea-leaves. Even children were employed on the estates, which were beneficial because of the generally low wage scale; and the wages were calculated on a family basis. See Kingsley Davis, op. cit., p. 116; Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, p. 361.


includes local Assamese Muslims. A classification of the Muslim labourers in the tea-gardens on the basis of caste is shown below:

Table 3.3: Muslim Population in Tea-Garden in Assam Province by Caste

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kazi</th>
<th>Khan</th>
<th>Mughul</th>
<th>Muslim unspecified</th>
<th>Parsi</th>
<th>Pathan</th>
<th>Saiyyad</th>
<th>Sheikh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar Plains</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Surma Valley</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1,317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Brah. Valley</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2,502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Plains Or Province</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1,108</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>7,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>4,843</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Tea-Plantation in Tripura

Tea industry came very late in Tripura. The quest for new lands for tea cultivation made the British enterprisers to turn to Tripura as a prospective area. Thus, for the first time in 1916, British threw open the extensive wastelands of Tripura for tea-plantation. In 1916-17 four tea estates were opened in two northern divisions of the state – Kailashhar and Dhamenagar. Thereafter the number of tea estates multiplied.\(^\text{34}\) The following table shows the areas of land under tea-cultivation from 1916 to 1943:

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But unlike in Assam, tea industry could not make much progress here, as it was not able to shake off the pernicious effect of the depressed tea market. Moreover, lack of capital, limited size of estates, and the tea restriction measures of the Government of India hindered the progress.36 As tea industry could not make it big in Tripura, consequently the population of tea-garden labourer was low. They were recruited mostly from the tribal belts of Bihar, Orissa, Madras, and Madhya Pradesh. Unlike the case of Assam there is no available data, which classifies the tea-garden labourers by religion. So, it is not possible to account for the Muslim population here. But it can be safely concluded that the number of Muslim labourers must be of miniscule proportion as the labourers were mostly tribals.

3.5 Reclamation of Wastelands

The massive depopulation that took place owing to the Maomaria rebellion, Burmese invasion and the subsequent occupation (1815-1821), and the frequent occurrence of floods, epidemic and other natural calamities left vast tracts of land waste throughout the Assam province. As per a survey by a British official, Mathews, by 1827 in lower Assam alone, out of 1,659,694 puras only a meager 529,735 puras of land were under cultivation while the rest remained waste.37

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35 See Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. II, III & IV.
37 H. K. Barpujari, *op. cit.*, p. 234. As per the traditional land revenue system, all the free population was divided into khels (or clans), according to caste or
Given this situation, the British government since the inception of their rule in Assam, acknowledged the fact that unless these wastelands were brought into use, neither the revenues of the Government nor the resources of the people could be enhanced. To this effect, various proposals were put forward for granting wastelands to enterprising immigrants.

In 1827, a British official, Scott proposed a scheme of granting wastelands on the condition that the grantee should bring $1/4$ of the allotment into tillage by the expiry of the third year, $1/4$ in sixth year and another $1/4$ in ninth year, after which the grantee would be authorized to hold the land in perpetuity on paying the usual assessment upon $3/4$ of the whole. Finding the scheme inadequate, Jenkins endorsed instead, the execution of “Gorukhpur Rules” to the Government of Bengal in 1836. As per these rules “the necessity of registration of the extent of land cleared from the commencement of the fourth year. From the fifth year there will be two, and from the sixth year and the following year till the whole grant has been brought into cultivation three different rates of revenue.”

The Board of Revenue accepted Jenkin’s proposal and recommended for its approval with slight alterations so as to promote foreign enterprisers by making the terms more moderate even at the cost of the public revenue. The Board presented a more comprehensive scheme similar to the “Sundarban Grants,” which received Government’s approval by August 1936. Under this scheme, wastelands were categorized into: a) the forest and high wastelands; b) the extensive high reed and grass (nal and khagrī);

vocation. Each khel had around 1,000 to 5,000 able-bodied men. The khels were further sub-divided into gotīs of three or four paiks (or freemen) each, and one paik of each got was compulsory to render personal service throughout the year to the king or to any officer of state for which the king conferred to each paik in the got two porahs of land. The land of the paik absent on service was cultivated for him by the rest of the got. This allotment was known as goamutti or “body land.” For details, see M. Makenzie, The North-Eastern Frontier of India, p. 6.

38 H. K. Barpujari, op. cit., pp. 234-35.
c) grasslands amidst cultivated lands. The first to be held for five years rent-free, second for 10 years, and the third for 20 years. After the expiry of each of these terms each would be brought under assessment as follows:

Table 3.5: System of Assessment of Wastelands in Assam Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue per pura</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 annas</td>
<td>6th year</td>
<td>11th year</td>
<td>21st year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 annas</td>
<td>7th year</td>
<td>12th year</td>
<td>22nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re 1-2</td>
<td>8th year</td>
<td>13th year</td>
<td>23rd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re 1-8</td>
<td>9th year</td>
<td>14th year</td>
<td>24th year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For 21 years from the 9th, 14th and 24th years, the grant of the first, the second and the third class respectively, the revenue would remain fixed, i.e. at Rs.1-8 per pura till the close of the entire period of settlement when 3/4th of the whole area of each grant would be liable to reassessment. The remaining 1/4th of the grant was to be exempted from assessment in perpetuity for the site of houses, roads, tanks, etc., and for possibilities of error.39

Till the mid 1840s very few applied for the grants and the few who did, were termed as “the most wandering and least industrious of the people.” It was realized that with their “indolent contentment” no development could be brought about in the province. So, the Government suggested for motley of people, particularly of European descent, who would be hard working and would produce varieties of crops under improved methods of cultivation. To this effect, the Board of Revenue recommended further amendments, which were approved by the Government of Bengal in September 1854. Accordingly, no grant could be less than five hundreds acres in extent, and 1/4th of the grant was to be exempted for assessment as before, but the remaining 3/4th of it was to be granted rent-free for a period of 20 years, after which it was to be reviewed at a graduated rate from one anna and half to six annas per acre till the 99th year. One-eighth of the grant was to be cleared and rendered fit

39 Ibid., p. 236.
for cultivation in 5 years, 1/4th in ten years, one half in 20 years, and 3/4th by the expiry of the 13th year, on the failure on which the entire grant was liable to resumption.40

In spite of the changes, no distinction was made between indigenous and foreign speculators. The petty cultivators were indirectly debarred from applying for these grants, as the ceiling of grants was raised to 500 acres. In the absence of proprietary right of the land, European speculators were also least interested. With further recommendation from the Commissioner of Assam, the Lt. Governor of Bengal reduced the ceiling to 200 acres and in special circumstances to 100 acres. In the interest of foreign entrepreneurs, the Court of Directors, in 1857, agreed to grant wastelands in perpetuity to any person of substance and respectability on the condition that the applicant possessed certain amount of capital for cultivation. The scheme remained unimplemented till 1861 when Lord Canning laid down that in future wastelands should be granted in perpetuity without any condition or to clear any portion of the grant within a specified time.41

Till the end of the 19th century, the number of foreign immigrants other than tea-garden labourers in the province of Assam was small. It was from the following century that immigration of farm labourers took place on large-scale and it ultimately became a complex problem and issue, touching socio-political, cultural and linguistic aspects of natives.43

40 Ibid., pp. 237-38.
41 Ibid., p. 238.
43 It is worth noting that by 1901, in Assam province, Bengali was spoken by 48 per cent as against Assamese with 22 per cent. Bengali became the common vernacular of the Surma Valley, where it was used by 87 per cent, and 69 per cent in Goalpara district. See W. W. Hunter (ed.), Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. VI, p. 43.
An assessment of the immigration trend of farmer-migrants is hindered by the fact that separate figures of farmer-migrants are not available in the contemporary census counts. The only means to get the figure of the farmer-migrants for a particular census year is by deducting the available figures of tea-garden labourers from the total figures of immigrants. Thus, by 1901 the number of farmer-migrants stands at 118,513. But, the above figures also include labourers in oil refinery at Digboi, coal mines and saw mills in upper Assam and in the railway undertakings, and office employees. However, the aggregate figure of the labourers besides the farmer-migrants was quite small.

Contemporary census counts do not give separate figure of farmer-migrants, or their strength based on religion. Thus, it is difficult to give the figure of Muslim farmer-migrants. The trend of immigration of Muslim farmer-migrants into Assam province could be gauged from an analysis of the change in the Muslim population as found in the census reports. In the first census enumeration of 1872, Muslims constituted 29 per cent in the Assam province; 48 per cent in the Surma Valley and 9.38 per cent in the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1881 the overall increase of the Muslim population was 19.7 per cent while in the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys it was 19.32 per cent and 18.36 per cent respectively. The increase of Muslim population in Sylhet was mainly attributed to proselytizing activities. There was significant increase of Muslim population in Cachar, recorded at 24.25 per cent, which was mainly due to the large-scale migration of Muslims from Sylhet; a trend noticed in the census enumeration of 1881. The increasing population pressure in Sylhet pushed out many farmer-migrants, who in turn made their incursion into the fertile Barak Valley of Cachar district; a large number of whom belonged to the Muslim community. The process was further facilitated by the geographical position of the

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valley. Cachar Valley lies between the Assam range hills on the east and south and is open only on the western side towards Sylhet. This provided an easy outlet for the Sylheti farmers. In the Brahmaputra Valley, Goalpara district recorded the highest increase of Muslim population at 21.3 per cent. A general allusion to immigration of farmers on a small-scale in the Assam province from the neighboring districts of eastern Bengal was recorded for the first time in the census count of 1881.46

By 1901, Muslims constituted one-fourth of the population of Assam province out of which 83 per cent were recorded in the Surma Valley. Since 1891, the population increased by 6.6 per cent in the province and 3.6 per cent and 5.7 per cent in the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley respectively. Immigration of farmer-migrants from the neighboring districts of eastern Bengal was also recorded in the district of Goalpara and Kamrup. In Goalpara the immigrants were from the cultivating class and the proportion was as high as 9 per cent. In Kamrup it was a miniscule proportion of 2 per cent.47 In all probability, Muslims too might have constituted a section of these immigrants. There was immigration of Muslim tradesmen from mainland India, for instance kabulis from Afghanistan, who took to peddling in the province. They turned up every year with merchandise goods, which they hawked about in the village and tea-gardens. But, they were mostly temporary visitors and their number was insignificant.48 The overall increase of Muslim population in the Brahmaputra Valley could be ascribed to natural growth and immigration of tea-garden labourers and farmer-migrants. Muslims formed 52.7 per cent in Sylhet. The rapid increase of the population was not exclusively due to immigration but to certain socio-cultural related factors: superior fecundity, absence of restrictions on widow

46 Ibid., p. 24.
48 Ibid., p. 34.
remarriage, less marked disparity between the ages of the husband and wife, greater prevalence of polygamy, etc.\textsuperscript{49} In Cachar Valley, the incessant immigration of garden coolies increased the proportion of the Hindus; consequently Muslims formed only 31 per cent of the whole. The increase of Muslim population was still attributed to the large-scale influx of farmers from Sylhet.

Muslims had insignificant presence in the hilly regions and it was attributed to internal migration and immigration of few tradesmen from mainland India. Garo hill district has the highest concentration of Muslims with 5 per cent (7,804). The large concentration was due to the entry of Muslim peasantry from Goalpara into the plain portion of the district, and tradesmen from mainland India.\textsuperscript{50} Tradition has it that the marwari Muslims in Meghalaya migrated to the region between 1895 and 1905 from Suikar and the adjoining states of Rajasthan.\textsuperscript{51} The Muslims censured in the north Cachar hills were mostly temporary visitors who had come to work in the railway construction.\textsuperscript{52} Muslims constituted 1,118 in Khasi and Jaintia, 5,804, in north Cachar Hills, and 142 in Naga Hills, according to the 1901 census.

In Manipur, according to the census of 1881 out of the total population of 221,070, Muslims constitute 4,881 (2.20 per cent) as against the Hindus and hill tribes with 130,882 and 85,288 respectively. The population of Muslims increased to 9,137 (3.21 per cent) out of the total population of 2,83,957 in the census of 1901. The increase was attributed to natural growth.\textsuperscript{53}

By 1931, the population of Muslims had increased altogether by 25.3 per cent as against 16.8 per cent in 1921 and 20.2 per cent

\textsuperscript{50} B. C. Allen, \textit{Census of Assam, 1901}, vol. I, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{52} B. C. Allen, \textit{Census of Assam, 1901}, vol. I, p. 43.
in 1911, and constituted 30 per cent or one-fifth of the total population of the Assam province and 31.9 per cent of the population of the British territory of Assam. The tremendous increase of the Muslim population could be accounted by the large-scale immigration of Muslims from Bengal into the Brahmaputra Valley. The increase of Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley by 1931 was 61 per cent as against 65 per cent in 1921 and 42.8 per cent in 1911. The first instance of large-scale immigration of Muslim farmer-migrants from eastern Bengal, especially from the bordering Muslim dominated Mymensingh district, to Goalpara was recorded in the census enumeration of 1911. In fact, the overall increase of Muslim population in the Brahmaputra Valley has been attributed to the large-scale immigration of Muslims from eastern Bengal to Goalpara. In the census count of 1921 too, the large majority of the Bengal immigrants in the Brahmaputra Valley were Muslims. Significant immigration of Muslims from eastern Bengal districts into the plains of Garo Hills was also recorded. By 1931 the main districts affected by the Muslim immigrants besides Goalpara were the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, and Darrang where Muslim population had increased by 115 per cent, 152 per cent, and 85 per cent respectively. Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts were the only districts less affected by the Muslim immigrants.

In the Surma Valley, by 1931 Muslim population had increased by 12.2 per cent as against 5.5 per cent in 1921 and 16.3 per cent in 1911. There was little immigration into this valley and the increase throughout was attributed to natural growth and socio-cultural factors. Muslim population then constituted 58.9

per cent of the total population of the district as against 56.4 per cent in 1921, 55.2 per cent in 1911, whereas the population of the Hindus had shrunk to 40.9 per cent in 1931 from 46.8 in 1901. In a similar way in the Cachar Valley the percentage of the Muslim population increased from 30.5 per cent in 1901 to 36.4 by 1931. This was due to the migration of Muslim farmers from Sylhet. 59

Table 3.6: Population Distribution of Assam Province by Religion, 1891-1931 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Divisions</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hindus</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Animists</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>2,997,072</td>
<td>1,483,974</td>
<td>969,765</td>
<td>16,844</td>
<td>7,697</td>
<td>1,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3,258,522</td>
<td>1,570,934</td>
<td>965,027</td>
<td>35,924</td>
<td>8,766</td>
<td>2,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,838,769</td>
<td>1,901,032</td>
<td>1,239,280</td>
<td>66562</td>
<td>10,513</td>
<td>3,701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4,362,571</td>
<td>2,219,947</td>
<td>1,256,641</td>
<td>132,106</td>
<td>13,520</td>
<td>5,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5,204,650</td>
<td>2,780,514</td>
<td>992,390</td>
<td>249,246</td>
<td>15,045</td>
<td>6,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1,710,844</td>
<td>240,287</td>
<td>483,574</td>
<td>6,817</td>
<td>6,933</td>
<td>1,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1,881,050</td>
<td>248,842</td>
<td>466,618</td>
<td>12,526</td>
<td>7,940</td>
<td>1,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>2180339</td>
<td>355,320</td>
<td>538,994</td>
<td>21272</td>
<td>9,791</td>
<td>2,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>2,652,129</td>
<td>586,192</td>
<td>562,742</td>
<td>38,723</td>
<td>12,075</td>
<td>4,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>3,409,854</td>
<td>944,129</td>
<td>277,440</td>
<td>73,704</td>
<td>13,554</td>
<td>4,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surma Valley</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1,256,002</td>
<td>1,236,830</td>
<td>27,717</td>
<td>1,452</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1,328,212</td>
<td>1,307,022</td>
<td>19,416</td>
<td>1,701</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1,403,985</td>
<td>1,520,392</td>
<td>15,580</td>
<td>2629</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1,418,990</td>
<td>1,604,012</td>
<td>14,879</td>
<td>3,366</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1,447,198</td>
<td>1,799,551</td>
<td>9,160</td>
<td>5,617</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hills</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>30,226</td>
<td>6,857</td>
<td>458,474</td>
<td>8,575</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>49,260</td>
<td>15,070</td>
<td>478,993</td>
<td>21,697</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>254,445</td>
<td>25,320</td>
<td>684,706</td>
<td>42661</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>291,452</td>
<td>29,743</td>
<td>679,020</td>
<td>90,017</td>
<td>1,393</td>
<td>902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>347,598</td>
<td>36,834</td>
<td>705,781</td>
<td>169,925</td>
<td>1,410</td>
<td>987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has been seen that large-scale immigration of Muslim farmers took place mainly from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra, and Rangpur (then a part of Bengal), which are in close proximity with Assam. Some of the main factors that pushed the Muslim farmers from these districts are:

a) oppression of the Hindu Zamindars;

b) landless status of the people and exploitative share-cropping arrangement; and

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59 Ibid., p. 35.
c) incentive from Assam (both from the local government and private landowners) to settle down in wasteland.

From Bengal province, Mymensingh exported the largest immigrants and the term Mynmensinghias became synonymous with immigrants. Mymensingh was the most populous of all the Bengal districts, closest and adjacent to Goalpara district in Assam. The population of the district mustered 23,51,700 by 1874, which was 4,35,707 more than the aggregate population of all the districts in the Brahmaputra Valley, in 1881. The district had four and a half million acres of land, out of which about half was cultivated and the other half laid waste as against the cultivable wasteland of 67,79,978 acres in Assam of which only 12,58,277 acres were under cultivation. Out of the total population of 23,51,695, about 80 per cent were agriculturists, 10 per cent were professionals, 3 per cent were fishermen, 3.8 per cent were labours while only 1.2 per cent followed hereditary occupations. Further, in Mymensingh the population increased rapidly, by 1900 the population touched 38,00,058, of which 95 per cent were landless tenants while a miniscule 2 per cent were talukdars. The per capita cultivable land was 16 kathas (1 bigha=5 kathas). All these meant further pressure on land. Out of the total population of 39,15,068 in 1900, 27,95,548 (67 per cent) were Muslims and 10,88,857 were Hindus. Thus, it became natural that in case of any large-scale migration, the bulk of the migrants would be Muslim farmers.\footnote{M. Kar, History of Muslim Immigration, pp. 8-10.}

There were few Muslims immigrants from Mymensingh in Assam until the 1901 census. The Census Commissioners of 1891 and 1901 were of the opinion that the people of Bengal would not come to Assam as cultivators, because there was no inducement and recruitment, like in the case of the tea-gardens.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 9-10.} Large-scale migration of Muslim farmers from Mymensingh begins from the following century. In fact, even in the absence of any arrangement
of reclamation and settlement, the vast expanse of cultivable wastes in Assam could not have escaped the notice of the millions of landless Muslim farmers of Mymensingh.

The exact causes that led to the large immigration of Muslim farmers had not been established until 1924. It was spelled out for the first time in article titled, “Bengal Peasants – Stream of Emigration to Assam,” published in Bengalee, on 22nd July 1924. The paper concludes that the density of population in eastern Bengal had reached a saturation point and emigration was the remedy to the crisis of acute overcrowding. The paper observed that:

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

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

Bengal, however, is not a country liable to famine and her people are being driven away...because the land has been made to support too heavy a burden. That a holding of one and a half acres supports a family of six seems preposterous. Yet, by double cropping, 40 or 650 maunds paddy may be obtained and the value of 5 or 6 maunds of jute pays for the balance of foodstuffs required. Rabi crops and garden crops bring some grist to the mill but it cannot be called plentitude and there is little wonder that the cultivator who cannot add to his earnings by engaging in some industrial work, has to decide on emigration to his new unsettled lands.63

In addition to the economic compulsions, the local Muslim population, political leaders and other influential and affluent farmers had extended support in settling the immigrant Bengali Muslim farmers. At that time they did not visualize that it would

63 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
disturb the demographic and socio-economic conditions of the province in the future. The matter worsened when the Muslim League Ministry under the Chief Ministership of Syed Muhammad Sadullah (1937-38), settled over a million of the east Bengali Muslims in rural areas of Assam with his much disparaging slogan “Grow More Food” under “Development Scheme.” Lord Wavel, the then Viceroy, lambasted the Chief Minister's scheme as “Grow More Muslims.”

During the provincial autonomy, Line System, introduced in 1920, was the most vital issue in Assam politics. The Line System was an arrangement under which Bengali immigrants, especially from Mymensingh, were made to settle only in demarcated regions of the Assam Valley districts. It was a means to separate the Bengali farmer-migrants from the original inhabitants of Assam province. The arrangement in a way acted as a defensive measure against the incursions of the immigrants and as a deterrent to the mounting social tensions and conflicts between the local population and the immigrants.

The arrangement of Line System was formulated entirely by the district officers. It was not adopted in execution of the orders of the higher government officials and the latter did not interfere with the system. The system was implemented for the first time in Nowgong district in 1920 and it was adopted gradually, although

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64 Syed Sadullah was born in 1885 at Gauhati to Syed Muhammad Tayebullah and claimed descent from Azan Pir. He taught Arabic and Persian in Cotton Collegiate High School, Gauhati; completed his law from Earle Law College, Gauhati; served as assistant lecturer of chemistry at Cotton College, Gauhati, 1908; as lawyer in Gauhati Bar, 1909-1919, and Calcutta High Court; member Assam Legislative Council, 1913-20 and 1923; Minister for Education and Agriculture, 1924-29; member Executive Council Assam Government for Law and Order and P.W.D, 1929-30, and for Finance, Law and Order, 1930-34; joined Muslim League during 1937-38 in response to Jinnah’s appeal; became leader of Muslim League in Assam; Prime Minister (coalition ministry), 1937-1938. See Naresh Kumar Jain (ed.), *Muslims in India-A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. II, p. 121.

not in a similar way, by all the districts of lower Assam. According to the arrangement, some villages were reserved exclusively for the local Assamese population while some villages were reserved exclusively for the Bengali farmer-migrants. In certain villages a line was marked or sketched on the map or on the ground where one portion of the land was allotted to the immigrants. Immigrants were not allowed to encroach on the other lands. There were also some villages where both the locals and immigrants could settle together. However, the lines drawn on the map or on the ground were somewhat arbitrary as no particular rules were followed in delineating and determining them. 66

The Line System besides containing the settlement of immigrants also checked fraudulent measures practiced by the revenue officers. Usually, immigrants bribed the revenue officials with high prices for land. Hence, lured by bribes the officials in charge of land revenue indulged in indiscriminate settlement of immigrants in wastelands, reserves, and lands that belonged to the local inhabitants. The system also especially helped in checking settlements of the land of indigenous minority natives like cacharis, lalong, etc., who without some sort of protection were very likely to be wiped away by the land-hungry immigrants. 67

Immigration became a socio-political and economic issue for the Assamese from the 1930s. By around mid-30s most of the wastelands were occupied and after 1935, the large scale immigration endangered the interest of the local people, as the new settlers began to settle down in forest land, and even tried to dispossess the Assamese people of their land, particularly in the tribal areas, by forceful occupation, purchase, mortgage, etc.

Initially the settlement of immigrants in the wastelands, increased the total agricultural production in the province, expanded the area under multiple cropping and the overall

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66 Dr. Bimal J. Devi & Dr. Dilip K. Lahiri, op. cit., p. 23.
economy of Assam. But after the mid-30s it created acute economic problems for the future generation, more so for the native farming community.\(^{68}\)

As a result of continued incursion of immigrants the agricultural sector of the economy had practically passed to farmer-migrants. In due course of time they, by virtue of their hard work became peasant-proprietors. Through their entrepreneurial qualities they acquired for themselves a new socio-economic status. They, in fact, became the backbone of Assam’s economy. For example, the credit for producing nearly 20 per cent of India’s total jute in Assam can be wholly attributed to the immigrant Muslims.\(^{69}\)

Almost all the previously unoccupied lands covered by thick jungles and lands seldom cleared for permanent cultivation, were soon occupied by Bengali farmer-migrants. They introduced jute cultivation, which was unknown to the local population. The pam land, which was unfit for permanent cultivation, was good for jute cultivation. The immigrants had the economic advantage in that they could make more out of land than the local Assamese farmers. They were quite used to the grueling struggle for existence in their own land. Where the indigenous farmers cultivated two crops in a year the immigrants managed to grow as many as five crops from the same field in a year. They were used to new and superior techniques of cultivation and use of good agro practices like rotation of crops, farm manures, etc.

### 3.6 Tripura

In Tripura, the history of immigration dates back to long before the advent of British and was effected by the Manikyas, the ruling family of Tripura, who out of their religious zeal introduced Hindus from Bengal. The tipperah tribe, who also happened to be

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\(^{69}\) Dr. Bimal J. Devi & Dr. Dilip K. Lahiri, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
the ruling family, was animist by religious disposition. They came under the religious and cultural influence of the Bengali Hindus, and encouraged the flow of Hindu immigrants from Bengal. These Bengali immigrants propagated their religious, linguistic and cultural ideas among the local population resulting in the embracing of Hindu religion by a majority of the population of Tripura. It is said that Ratna Manikya, who ruled in the second half of the 15th century, invited people of all castes from Bengal to settle down in Tripura. This was conceivably the first instance of immigration into Tripura from the west. Besides immigrants from the north and north-east, i.e. Assam, Manipur, Cittagong hill tracts, etc., also thronged into Tripura. Hill tribes from across the eastern boundary also made their entry, by and large in quest of fresh jhum-land, and to obtain new settlements of wastelands. 70

Thus, in the initial period it was royal patronage and to some extent religious zeal of the rulers of Tripura that encouraged the Bengalis to move towards and settle in Tripura. Thereafter, it was the modernization process initiated by Bir Chandra Manikya in the second half of the 19th century that further encouraged Bengalis to emigrate. The modernization process necessitated the recruitment of a number of administrative, judicial, police, and forest officials. As the number of educated persons among the native was few, the Bengalis filled most of these offices. 71

The rulers, in order to bear the expenses of the mounting public expenditure, required more revenues. Since land revenues and taxes on agricultural crops and duties on imports and exports were the main sources of revenue, the rulers encouraged land settlements and expansion of agricultural activities in the state. As the tribals generally practiced jhuming in the hills and were unfamiliar with the technique of settled cultivation, the extension of agriculture through reclamation of wastelands in the plains was

not possible only through the efforts of the native cultivators. Thus, encouragement had to be provided to bring in cultivators from the adjoining district of Bengal. Moreover, a number of hill tribes of nomadic pursuits or new settlers who could not adapt themselves to the climatic condition of the state migrated from Tripura.\textsuperscript{72} Migration of the hill tribes was also owing to the constant raids by the \textit{lushai} tribe and oppressions by the hill officials.\textsuperscript{73} As Tripura had then a scantly population (as per the 1872 census, total population of Tripura Plain was 35,262) and abundance of cultivable land, attempts were made by the rulers for inviting peasants from outside to undertake reclamation of lands. To this effect, Department of Immigration and Reclamation was instituted which gave land-grants to the immigrant.\textsuperscript{74} In a resolution passed by king Birendra Kishore Manikya in 1908-09, it was declared, “we should by all means encourage immigration and discourage migration. Systematic efforts may be made every year to establish colonies of cultivation in the interior.”\textsuperscript{75}

\begin{table}[h]
\caption{The Rate of Immigration and Emigration Between 1911 and 1922 in Tripura}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & No. of Families & No. of Families \\
& Immigrated & Emigrated \\
& into Tripura & from Tripura \\
\hline
1911-12 & 887 & 535 \\
1912-13 & 1,892 & 653 \\
1913-14 & 1,463 & 953 \\
1914-15 & 1,360 & 593 \\
1915-16 & 1,540 & 911 \\
1916-17 & 1,489 & 878 \\
1917-18 & 1,456 & 829 \\
1918-19 & 1,985 & 689 \\
1919-20 & 1,597 & 936 \\
1920-21 & 2,583 & 990 \\
1921-22 & 1,409 & 695 \textsuperscript{76} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{72} Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, vol. I, p. 281. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, vol. II, pp. 493-94. \\
\textsuperscript{74} Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, vol. III, p. 966, \\
\textsuperscript{75} Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, vol. I, p. 22. \\
\textsuperscript{76} Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, vol. II, p. 376.
But the immigration of Muslims especially from the districts of Bengal took place in the Tripura Plain. The rulers of Tripura held the region in the form of zamindar estate, called Chakle Roshnabad, since its subjugation by the Mughals in A.D. 1733. It remained to be held like any other zaminidari under the British government in the province of Bengal. This zaminidari covered an area of 589 sq. miles of plain's land falling within the districts of Tripura (Comilla), Noakhali and Sylhet. It was the most valuable source of income for the king. In fact, the total yield of zaminadari exceeded that of whole of Hill Tripura. The ryots of the zaminidari were mostly Bengali peasant immigrants from the adjoining districts of Naokhali, Chittagong, Dacca, Sylhet, etc.77 A large chunk of these immigrants were Muslims, who were pushed by the heavy pressure of agricultural population on land in their native districts. These Muslims, who hardly ever returned to their native districts, gradually merged with the general population. Unfortunately, it is hard to determine the figure of Muslim immigrants, as tables for religious divide is not available.78

The rapid increase of Muslim immigrants in Tripura could be gauged from the census counts. According to the census of 1872, out of the total population of district of Tripura at 1,533,931, Muslims numbered 993,564 (64.8 per cent) as against Hindus at 436,433 (28.5 per cent).79 By 1901 the figure of Muslim population increased to 1,494,020 (71 per cent) as against the 622,339 (29 per cent) Hindus.80 It is worth noting that the population of Muslims shows a sharp decline from the 1960s. In the census of 1961 Muslim constituted 20.14 percent, which in 1971 came down to 6.68 per cent.81 The lowering down of the Muslim population was

78 Ibid., p. 379.
79 Ibid., p. 374.
80 W. W. Hunter (ed.), *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. XXIII, p. 383.
81 Census of India, 1971, series 20, Tripura, pt. II-C (i), pp. 4-5.
due to their immigration to Bangladesh and heavy influx of Hindu population, which out numbered the local Muslim population.

There was not much progress in Muslim population in Hill Tripura. Muslims numbered 14,228 (53.3 per cent) as against Hindus with 4,339, out of the total population of 74,242 as per the rough estimate made by the Political Agent in 1872.82

3.7 Summary

The wasteland reclamation and plantation industry, undertaken by the British in north-east - mainly in Assam and Tripura - opened the floodgates of immigrants, a large chunk of which were Muslims. Even though tea-plantation labours did not bring much impact on the overall growth of Muslim population in both the regions, farmer-migrants, especially from the districts of eastern Bengal, brought significant impact on the overall Muslim population.

The first instance of the immigration of farmer-migrants, on a small-scale, from eastern Bengal to Assam province was recorded in the census of 1881. But it did not make much impact to the overall increase of Muslim population. The increase of Muslim population in the Brahmaputra Valley could mainly be attributed to natural growth and the immigration of Muslim tea-garden labourers. The large concentration of Muslim population in Sylhet was mainly due to proselytising activities and various socio-cultural factors while the rapid increase of Muslim population in the Cachar Valley was the result of the migration of farmers from Sylhet. Muslim made their entry in the hill districts, but they were mainly internal migrants. By and large, till the end of 19th century, there was no significant instance of large-scale immigration of Muslim farmer-migrants in Assam province from Bengal. Between 1872

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and 1901 the overall Muslim population in Assam Province increased by 42.21 per cent.\(^{83}\)

It was from the census count of 1911 that large-scale immigration of farmer-migrants from the eastern Bengal, especially Mymensingh, was noticed. The rapid increase of Muslim population in the Assam province was attributed to the large immigration of farmer-migrants. It is worth noting that from the 20th century the immigration of tea-garden labourers had reduced to a great extent; instead the second generations of the first batch labourers supplied the labour force. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the brunt of the immigration was borne mainly by Goalpara, Nowgong, Kamrup, and Darrang districts. Surma Valley was less affected by immigration of farmer-migrants and the increase of Muslim population was mainly due to natural growth and certain socio-cultural aspects of the Muslims. The overall increase of Muslim population between 1911 and 1931 in Assam province was 46.26 per cent.\(^{84}\)

In Tripura too, large-scale immigration of Muslim farmer-migrants from east Bengal took place in the lowlands, which was taken over from the Muslims by the British as a zamindari estate in A.D. 1765.

The main factors which brought about large-scale immigration of farmer-migrants from eastern Bengal are: first, oppression of the Hindu zamindars; second, over-population and landless status of the people and exploitative share-cropping arrangement; third, encouragement from the local Muslim population, political leaders and other influential and affluent farmers of north-east India.

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\(^{83}\) C. J. Lyall, *op. cit.*, p. 35; B. C. Allen, *Census of Assam, 1901*, vol. II, pp. 7-9

\(^{84}\) C. S. Mullan, *op. cit.*, p. 198.