3.1. **Introduction:**

As stated in the previous chapters, the beginning of the process of the entry of Muslims in Assam can be traced back to 1206 i.e. with the invasion of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khilji which was followed by many such invasions during the medieval period. In course of such invasions, many captive soldiers permanently settled and got assimilated with the local population. Besides, many local Assamese people got converted into Islam under the influence of 'saint preachers' who entered Assam in course of Muslim invasions. Further, some Muslim professionals having expertise in different fields, were invited by the Ahom Kings for efficient administration of their kingdoms and were allowed to settle permanently. In this way, the Muslims came as conquerers, administrators, preachers and invitees of the local Kings and their number was considerably increased in the medieval period. However, their population was so small that they could hardly influence the politics of the State.\(^1\)

From its British annexation till 1873, Assam remained under the administration of Bengal Presidency. In 1874, when Assam was converted into a Chief Commissioner's Province, the Bengali-speaking districts of Cachar and Goalpara were attached to it, and later on the Muslim-majority Sylhet district was also added to it to make it a viable province. This led to a conspicuous increase of the Muslim population of the state from 5.9% to 28.8% as these three districts had a large Muslim population.\(^2\) However, the most important factor which contributed to the enormous growth in the population of Assam in the 20th Century, is referred to as

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1. For details please see the Introductory chapter.
2. Please see the chapter on Sylhet -Bengal Reunion for details.
the phenomenon of ‘immigration’. Since the early years of the 20th century vast plots of cultivable waste lands began to attract a large number of cultivators, mainly Muslims, from adjoining Bengal districts, mainly Mymensingh where plots of such land were very scarce. As a result, cultivators from East Bengal, mainly Muslims, began to settle in increasing numbers in the Brahmaputra Valley districts, that ultimately resulted in the conspicuous increase in the Muslim population of the State, and more importantly, caused apprehension among the Assamese Hindus of being numerically swamped by the immigrants. Such apprehension of the Assamese people was of great political significance, as it gradually converted the issue immigration which was basically an economic issue to begin with, into a general socio-political issue of the Assamese people, an issue which remained the most important political issue of the province in the decades to come till independence. 3

In this chapter an attempt has been made to analyse the politics of immigration in Assam since the beginning of the 20th Century till 1947 and the role of Muslims in such Immigration Politics in the State.

### 3.2. Historical Background of Bengalee Muslim Immigration in Assam during the British Period:

Since the annexation of Assam, the British colonial administrators were convinced from the very beginning that unless the vast tracts of waste lands of the province were brought under cultivation, neither the resources of the Government nor of the people could be improved. As early as in 1830's the desire of converting these "wastes and haunts of wild beasts into fruitful fields of sugarcane, mustard, mulberry, lac, tobacco and vegetables" was expressed by the administration. As a result, the experiments in the plantation sector were started in 1830's and Tea was taken up for experimental cultivation. By 1850's Tea Cultivation began to flourish

3. Please see Introductory chapter.
in the province but the planters had to face immense difficulties, regarding availability of labour force both skilled and unskilled. They had to import Chinese Tea-makers, which was very expensive. The local Assamese cultivators were reluctant to work as day labourers despite competitive rates which were offered from time to time, as they had limited wants and were satisfied "with the humblest of food, plainest of clothes and smallest of habitations" and with whatever was being produced by their own toil. The planters, therefore, had no option but to import tea labourers from Bengal, Central Provinces and United Provinces.4 It is observed that the planters brought the tea-labourers from the areas of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.5 This resulted in the remarkable increase in the population of the State which increased from 12 Lakhs in 1853 to 15 Lakhs in 1872, and this increase is said to be mainly due to imported plantation-labourers.6 Of the total population of 18 Lakhs in 1881, nearly 3 Lakhs were immigrant labourers and their number reached more than 6 Lakhs in 1901. Out of 7, 75,844 outsiders in the province in 1901, 6, 45,000 were tea-garden labourers alone.7 It is to be noted that large-scale immigration of Bengali Cultivators from Eastern Bengal had not begun till then.

By 1880's immigration of plantation workers into Assam was taking place on an extensive scale. The food production of the indigenous peasants of Assam was insufficient to meet the need of a growing population. It, therefore, became necessary to bring more lands under cultivation and produce more to overcome the food deficit. More farmers had to be imported and settled on waste lands to produce the deficit crops. Besides, the world-wide increase in jute-trade necessitated the expansion of jute-cultivation, and as the production of jute in Bengal was

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7. Based on Census Report, 1901, cited in Ibid.
insufficient and as there was no scope for increased production there, the jute-traders turned towards Assam. In order to fulfill this dual task of increasing food production, as well as for the production of jute and other 'cash crops' or profitable crops, the Muhammadan farmers from Eastern Bengal were considered to be the most eligible for settlement in the wastelands of Assam, as they were hard-working and expert in cultivation. As a result of the Government initiative, a marginal inflow of agriculturists from Eastern Bengal to Assam had begun. The Government initiative to introduce jute-cultivation in Assam formally began in 1897 and till then Assam was not a jute-producing area. Hence, the introduction of jute-cultivation was linked to the immigration of peasants from Eastern Bengal who were expert jute-cultivators. As the Assamese peasants were neither willing nor sufficiently skilled for the job, the colonial administration brought East Bengal peasants into Assam. As a result, the area under jute-cultivation increased from less than 500 acres in 1901 to over 6000 acres in 1911.8

Thus, the Muslim cultivators were invited by the British administrators to settle in the wastelands of Assam and owing to the fertility of those lands varieties of crops were expected to be produced. In fact, the basic motive of the colonial administration was to increase revenue and taxes, and also to produce profitable crops as well as more raw-materials for the industries of England. After giving allotment of permanent 'patta' of the occupied land to the immigrant farmers, the Government levied taxes on them. This opportunity gradually began to attract more and more Muslim farmers from Eastern Bengal to migrate to Assam for permanent settlement in the years to come. In this way, the process of immigration of Eastern Bengal Muslim farmers in Assam began under Government patronage.9

In the beginning, however, despite Government initiative, the settlement of

immigrant farmers from Bengal was remarkably insignificant till 1901 which induced the Census Commissioners of 1891 and 1901 to opine that the people of Bengal would not come to Assam as cultivators as there was no inducement and recruitment as in the case of tea-garden labourers. This, however, was proved wrong in the following decades. But till that time despite scarcity of land in Bengal and congestion of population, mass-migration of Bengalees did not start. Of course, certain number of persons from neighbouring districts of Mymensigh, Dacca, and Rangpur crossed the boundary and settled down in Sylhet and Goalpara but this can "scarcely be called immigration" in the words of the Census Commissioner of 1891 as "they have only moved a few miles from their original homes".

But the nature of agricultural migration changed in the very next decade. The density of population in East Bengal in general and the district of Mymensingh in particular, had reached the saturation point thereby creating immense pressure on the pieces of land which were scarce. The Bengali cultivators were no longer able to support their families with the produces of their small plots of land and as a result began to migrate in large numbers to Assam. Thus, the large-scale immigration of farmers from Eastern Bengal began and as more than 85% of them were from the district of Mymensingh, the term "Mymensinghia" became synonymous with immigrants.

The district of Goalpara was to be the earliest and most affected by immigration. By 1911, almost all the available waste lands in the district had been explored by the so-called industrious agriculturists. The population of the district increased by 30% because of the migration from Mymensingh and the number of migrants rose by about 150% forming about 20% of the district's population.

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10. M. Kar, Muslims in Assam Politics (1946-1991), New Delhi, Vikas, 1997, p. 6. (Hereinafter Kar(n.10).)
population. These immigrants at first came alone and brought their families later on when they had secured land and built houses. 85% of these migrants were Muslims and the rest the Hindus. Thus by 1911, the total number of Muslim immigrants in the Brahmaputra Valley was recorded as 2,58,800 and in the next ten years the number of Muslim settlers rose to 3,48,000. This explains why the immigration of cultivators from Bengal resulted in a steady growth of Muslim population of the State in general and that of the concerned districts in particular.

In this way, in the decades to follow, waves of immigrants began to sweep over the bordering districts of Goalpara and Kamrup and later on penetrated through Darrang and Nowgong districts of Central Assam to Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. As a result, there was an enormous growth in the Muslim population of the State. The number of Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley was 3,65,540 in 1911, which rose to 5, 94,981 in 1921, and again to 9, 53,299 in 1931. The proportion of Muslims in the population of the Brahmaputra Valley had increased from 9% in 1881 to 19% in 1931, and increased to 23% by 1941. In Barpeta subdivision of the Kamrup district, the Muslims constituted only 0.1% of the total population of the sub-division, which rose to nearly 49% in 1941. Such increase also resulted in the remarkable growth in the overall Muslim population of the State. The scale of growth of the Muslim population in the State between 1921-41 can be gauged from the following table -

13. Census 1911, History of Immigration, cited in M. Kar, Muslims in Assam Politics, New Delhi, Omsons, 1990, p. 11 (Hereinafter Kar (n.13)).
Table 3.1

Population of Assam in 1941 (Showing Muslim population percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Muslim Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surma Valley (Hills &amp; Plains)</td>
<td>42,18,875</td>
<td>13,94,614</td>
<td>21,27,254</td>
<td>6,97,007</td>
<td>50.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra Valley (Hills &amp; Plains)</td>
<td>59,85,858</td>
<td>27,47,405</td>
<td>13,14,295</td>
<td>19,24,148</td>
<td>21.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of Assam</td>
<td>10,20,47,33</td>
<td>41,42,019</td>
<td>34,41,549</td>
<td>26,21,155</td>
<td>33.72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that the Muslim population in 1941 was 34,41,549 (More than 34 Lakhs) while Hindu population was 41,42,019 (i.e. more than 41 Lakhs) and the difference was only 7,00,470 (i.e. slightly more than 7 Lakhs). In terms of percentage, while the Muslim percentage was 33.72, that of Hindus was 40.58 i.e. a difference of about 7%. This difference was further narrowed down which is evident from the following table -

Table 3.2

Population of Assam (Plains) Hindus-Muslims and others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1941</th>
<th>Increase in 20 years</th>
<th>Average Annual Increase</th>
<th>Increase from 1941 to 1947</th>
<th>Population in 1947</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>31,67,406</td>
<td>41,08,438</td>
<td>9,41,032</td>
<td>47,051</td>
<td>2,82,306</td>
<td>43,90,744</td>
<td>43.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>8,80,426</td>
<td>34,28,969</td>
<td>25,48,543</td>
<td>1,27,427</td>
<td>7,64,563</td>
<td>41,93,532</td>
<td>41.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>28,33,939</td>
<td>18,78,674</td>
<td>-9,55,265</td>
<td>-47,763</td>
<td>-2,86,579</td>
<td>15,92,095</td>
<td>15.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. Based on Population of Assam (plains only) as per Census of India, 1941, with figures of subsequent years added, Ibid., p. 45.
From the above table the scale of rise in the Muslim population from 1921-1941 and from 1941 to 1947 can be clearly understood. From 1921 to 1941, the Muslim population of Assam Plains rose to 34,289,69 from 8,80,426 i.e. it rose to the scale of more than 4 times with an increase of 25,48,543. This growth of the Muslim population which is incomparable to the growth of Hindus and others was mainly due to the mass-scale immigration of the East Bengal Muslim farmers. Then within a short-period i.e. in between 1941 to 1947 the number of Muslims in Assam Plains rose from 34,289,69 to 41,93,532 which was a growth to the scale of 22.3% and as a result became almost equivalent to the Hindu population. As per the table, the percentage of Muslim population became 41.2% in 1947 and the Hindu population in the same year was 43.15%. The Muslim population combined with others as mentioned in the table together formed 56.85%. Of course this growth between 1941-47 is mainly attributed to the land settlement policy pursued by Saadulla's Governments in general and "Grow More Food" Scheme adopted by the Assam Government in particular.21

3.3. Factors Contributing to the Phenomenon of Immigration:

It is desirable at this juncture to outline some of the major factors which contributed to the growth of immigration of East Bengal farmers to Assam in large numbers-

The first important factor which is already discussed and which is an economic one, was the excessive pressure on available land in Eastern Bengal districts (mainly Mymensingh) with the growth of population, and side by side existence of vast plots of cultivable wastelands in the bordering Assam districts. The cultivators were no longer able to maintain their families with the produces of

21. Ibid., pp. 45-46; It is to be noted that these figures are based on the population of Assam plains only as provided in the table. By adding the Hills population, the Muslim population percentage may come down slightly, but still the figures clearly uphold the fact of abnormal rise in the number of Muslims during 1921-1947 as a result of mass-scale immigration of Muslim farmers from Eastern Bengal.
small plots of land and therefore, gradually migrated to bordering districts of Assam where vast plots cultivable wasteland were available.\textsuperscript{22} It is observed that without extreme economic compulsion, they would not have left their ancestral place so dear to them and "only the most pressing economic conditions" could drive an East Bengal farmer "from his bari (home) so dear to him."\textsuperscript{23}

The next important factor was the development of transport facilities by the Government and incentives provided for settlement on the wastelands of the State.\textsuperscript{24} The development of transport facilities, particularly, railway and steamer service between Assam and Bengal since 1880's greatly facilitated the movement of the people from Bengal to Assam. In 1883, a daily steamer service was introduced between Assam and Bengal through the Brahmaputra, and a similar service was introduced in 1887 through the Surma River under improved conditions. Besides, Assam- Bengal Railway was opened in 1905 to traffic from Chittagong to Lumding through Tripura, Sylhet, Cachar and North Cachar Hills. Then Lumding was connected to Gauhati and Dibrugarh. The construction of railway lines in Kamrup and Goalpara thus connecting Bengal with Assam proper, further facilitated the movement of the people from Eastern Bengal to Assam.\textsuperscript{25}

A different variety of immigrants were the 'sub-tenants' imported from Eastern Bengal and were being settled by the indigenous landlords of Assam who obtained lands directly from the Government and sublet the same to the immigrant cultivators. The Assamese middle class with a view to employing cheap labour and becoming some kind of 'Zamindars' induced the immigrants to migrate and settle as their ryots.\textsuperscript{26} In such an exercise Marwari traders and Assamese money-lenders of Barpeta played a significant role in providing a substantial part

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.6.
\textsuperscript{23} The Bengalee, July 22, 1914, quoted in Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Nag, op.cit., p. 99.
\textsuperscript{26} Nag, op.cit., p. 95.
of the finance so that the immigrants could reclaim lands and expand the cultivation of jute, ahu rice, pulses and vegetables.\textsuperscript{27}

Another factor which is a political one, is Government Sympathy for the Muslim leadership between 1921 to 1942 and the Muslim prospect of converting Assam into a Muslim majority zone. It is already discussed in the last chapter that since the Partition of Bengal and the creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, the advantage of being majority began to catch the imagination of a section of the Muslim leadership, who dreamt of converting Assam into a Muslim majority zone.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, "the carving out of new province generated amongst the Muslims political advantage based on numerical strength".\textsuperscript{29} Although the scheme of partition was annulled in 1912 and Assam along with Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara was reverted to a Chief Commissionership\textsuperscript{30}, the advantage of numerical strength continued to haunt the minds of the Muslims for which they supported immigration of Eastern Bengal Muslim farmers and consistently opposed any move to restrict the same till 1947.\textsuperscript{31} Such a prospect was later on converted into demanding the inclusion of Assam in Eastern Wing of Pakistan in the wake of partition of India.\textsuperscript{32}

It is observed that the policy of settling immigrants was pursued as a matter of policy by the Muslim leadership whose role has been outlined by a writer in these words: "And when the Muslim leadership spoke to the East Bengal people of the availability of land, cheap cost of living, the poor people in quest of land came out of their ancestral home"\textsuperscript{33} to migrate to Assam and settle in the wastelands.

Finally, the policy pursued by Saadulla Governments between 1937 to 1946, regarding immigration and settlement is said to have greatly favoured and encouraged

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Guha op.cit., 206.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Bose, op.cit., p.62.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Kar(no.10), p.32.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.33.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Political Developments from 1921-1947 reported in proceedings of Legislature and other government records bear testimony to this fact.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Bose, Loc. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 63.
\end{itemize}
immigration of Muslim farmers from Eastern Bengal and to settle in the wastelands in increasing numbers. The Government of Assam not only encouraged the Muslim cultivators by offering Railway concessions, but also by providing family ticket of Rupees Five only for the entire family to come from Mymensingh to Nowgong.\textsuperscript{34} The Land Settlement and Immigration Policy of Saadulla Governments will be discussed in details in the next chapter.

All these factors together contributed to the rise and growth of the phenomenon of immigration. The mass-scale immigration of the East Bengal Muslim farmers, which started in the first decade of the 20th Century and continued till "the attainment of independence and partition of India" although there is a school of thought in Assam which believes that mass-scale immigration of Muslims from Eastern Bengal continued even after independence and to a great extent continuing even today, but to examine this is beyond the purview of the present study. What is important for the present study is the fact that such mass-scale immigration on the one hand led to the enormous growth of the Bengali-speaking people in the province and on the other hand, as already stated, to the conspicuous rise in the number of Muslims in the State. These two factors gradually gave birth to ethnic conflicts based on Valley-rivalry and at the same time to communal politics based on Hindu-Muslim question.

3.4. \textbf{Administrative Restriction- Politicisation of Immigration:}

As already stated, the mass-scale immigration and indiscriminate settlement of the East Bengal migrants resulted in the conspicuous increase in the Muslim as well as Bengalee population of the State, which gradually caused apprehension among the Assamese Hindus of being numerically swamped by the new comers and such apprehension gradually converted the issue of immigration- basically an

\textsuperscript{34} Ahmed op. cit., p.4.
economic one, into a general socio-political issue of the Assamese people. In fact, the farmer migration from Bengal which was slow till the first decade of the 20th century, but gradually it became a rapid and steady process and by 1931, the Muslim immigrants from Bengal spread in different directions and had gone almost every corner of the Brahmaputra Valley where cultivable waste land was available. In the beginning, the Government encouraged immigration as an economic necessity. It was in 1911 that the Census Commissioner for the first time pointed to the dangers of immigration by referring to it as "a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hoardes of Mymensingh army." For the first time in 1913, the problem of agricultural immigrants and the need of preventing interference with the Assamese began to attract attention. The number of immigrants, however, till that time was very small and the Government policy was to encourage immigration. But the Government proposed certain rules in September, 1915 under which it was intended to empower the Deputy Commissioners to make settlements subject to Chief Commissioner's orders. All the settlements were to be made on an 'annual patta' basis which conferred on the settlers only the right of users and no right of inheritance and transfer. After a reasonable time during the cultivation took on a permanent nature, an 'annual patta' was to be converted into a periodic one either by the Deputy Commissioner or the Additional Deputy Commissioner, depending on the area applied for.

The Assamese public opinion as expressed through the press and the Assam Association in November, December, 1915, was opposed to these rules as they thought that it would affect the permanent heritable and transferable character of tenures. After that in March, 1920 again, the opposition to the Government land settlement policy was expressed at a public meeting at Gauhati in which it was

36. Kar (n.13), pp.16-17.
resolved to view with alarm the grant of huge areas of wasteland to foreign capitalists
and adventurers, which was detrimental to the interests of the 'sons of the soil' and
to urge on the Government to grant lands to the bona fide Assamese applicants.37

As the number of immigrants and their settlements began to increase at a
massive scale in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Assamese began to complain that
more and more land was passing to the immigrants through settlement directly
obtained from the Government, by purchases from Assamese periodic patta holders
and by unauthorized and forcible occupation without any grant of lease from
Government or sale from holders of periodic pattas. Besides, it was also
complained that the immigrants were thus penetrating into those areas where formerly
there were only Assamese settlers.38

Under these circumstances, the Deputy Commissioners apprehended possible
friction between the immigrant settlers and the indigenous people. In order to avert
a possible clash between the two, they considered steps to meet the situation.
Accordingly, a plan was mooted in Nowgong in 1916 under which the immigrants
were not to be allowed any longer to settle anywhere they liked but would be
confined to certain areas in villages demarcated by lines. This device intended to
put restriction on settlement of immigrants came to be called the "Line System".39

3.5. Introduction of Line System- Attempt at Restricting Indiscriminate Settlement
of Immigrants:

The 'Line System' which was first mooted in Nowgong in 1916, was
officially inaugurated on 16th May, 1923 by J.C. Higgins, Deputy Commissioner,

37. For details please see Ibid., pp.17-18.
38. Ibid., p.18.
39. Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council (Hereinafter ALCP). The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, September 15,
1937 p. 321 ; Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (Official Report) Vol-II, No. 22, 6 December, 1941 p. 1401
(Hereinafter ALAD).
Nowgong, though it had already been implemented and was in operation since 1920.40 Under the Line System, all available waste lands were divided into three categories, viz., first, those in which immigrants were allowed to settle; second, those in which they could not settle; and third, those in which a line was drawn and the immigrants were allowed to settle only on one side of it.41 The villages under the Line System, were classified into four types - first, villages exclusively reserved for the indigenous people; second, villages exclusively meant for the Immigrants; third, villages in which a line was drawn either on the map or on the ground, on the one side of which immigrants could settle and on the other side of which their settlement was forbidden; and fourth, mixed villages in which both immigrants and indigenous people were free to settle.42

In other words, the Line System was nothing but a short title for the system by which Muslim immigrants from Bengal, especially from the district of Mymensingh, were required to settle in certain definite areas of the Brahmaputra Valley districts and were not allowed to take settlement of land under the Government in other areas. It was a device to segregate the Muslim immigrants from the indigenous population including the tribal and backward classes. Thus, the System was originally intended to be protective measure against the indiscriminate settlement of immigrants for the purpose of avoiding social conflicts and tensions.43 Besides controlling the settlement of immigrants, the Line System was also intended to prevent fraud committed by the Revenue officials.44 Further, it was also stated that by virtue of this system, the revenue authorities expected to keep a controlling hand over the so-called land hungry immigrants.45

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43. Dev and Lahiri, op.cit., p.23.
44. bid., pp. 23-24.
As already stated, the Line System first originated in the district of Nowgong in 1920. Subsequently, similar Lines were also drawn in the districts of Kamrup and Darrang. The system gradually developed although not on parallel lines, in all the lower Assam districts except Goalpara. Of course, it originated entirely with the Deputy Commissioners and was not adopted in execution of the orders of the Government. However, the Government did not interfere with the system as it "could devise no better means to tackle the problem of settlement and as the number of new comers increased they gave their approval to the Line System".

The Line System succeeded to some extent in restricting the large-scale and indiscriminate occupation of waste lands by the immigrants. It was, however, not full-proof and soon the 'mixed' and 'closed' villages were turned into immigrant settlements. This was made possible because of the fact that the Assamese people in certain instances "could not resist the temptation of high prices offered by the immigrants" and sold away their lands to the immigrants in contravention to rules and regulations governing the Line System, and "when the revenue authorities found that the sale deeds had been executed bona fide and the required possession of the land so sold had been made over to the purchasing party by the Assamese pattadar, the necessity arose to convert the Assamese line into a mixed line or to abolish the line altogether". When some of the Assamese owners sold and delivered the possession of their land to the immigrants, the rest were gradually

47. LSEC Report, 1938 P.3 cited in Ibid. In reply to a question in 1937 in the Council, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the Revenue Minister informed the house that the Line System was not in force in Goalpara, ALCP. The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, September 15, 1937, p. 311.
50. PHA-II, p. 310.
52. Speech of Muhammad Amiruddin, in ALCP, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, September 15, 1937, P. 322. Citing Evidence, he showed how Assamese villages were converted into mixed villages in the district of Nowgong. For details please see his speech in Ibid., pp.322-23.
compelled to do the same.\textsuperscript{53} There is, of course, another line of argument according to which, the conversion of the 'mixed' and 'closed' villages was made possible as the district settlement officials were not sincere in the thorough discharge of their duties, and because of their "dubious attitude and leniency" encroachers into the grazing reserves and "closed villages" could not be evicted.\textsuperscript{54} Besides, it was also alleged that the "Assamese Immigrant lines generally made by pencils on the maps were found to have been tempered with in many cases according to the convenience of the revenue staff".\textsuperscript{55} These had been the main grievances of the Assamese people against the Settlement and revenue officials. In the main, however, the Line System failed to prevent acquisition of land and settlement by the immigrants in the prohibited areas "in view of the existence of large areas of unutilised land as well as the tempting prices they offered to the Assamese owners".\textsuperscript{56}

The year 1924 witnessed a very lengthy and interesting debate among Government officials on the issue of settlement of land with the immigrants. The most conflicting views were expressed by responsible Government officers all of whom except one, viz. D.K. Mukherjee, Assistant Director of Land Records, were Europeans.\textsuperscript{57} Mukherjee came forward with a plan to stop encroachment by the immigrants on the Assamese lines. On 30th April, 1924 he wrote that the Assamese often could not resist the tempting prices offered by the immigrants and sold their land to the latter without thinking about the lot of the future. Unless some measures were devised, according to him, the indigenous people would be compelled sooner or later to leave the place and immigrate elsewhere. He, therefore, offered three important suggestions-

First, all land of the Assamese blocks should either continue to be settled on annual leases or a clause should be added to the periodic pattas prohibiting

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{53} Kar (n.13) p. 21.
\bibitem{54} PHA-II, p.310.
\bibitem{55} Bishnu Charan Bora's speech in the council, ALCP, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, August 17, 1927 p. 1090.
\bibitem{56} Kar (n.10) p.8.
\bibitem{57} Kar (n.13) p.21.
\end{thebibliography}
transfer without Deputy Commissioner's special sanction.

Second, if any Assamese was found to sell his land to the immigrants within the Assamese blocks, his patta would be cancelled and the immigrant settlers would be evicted at once; and

Third, the dividing lines, once fixed should not be altered and on no account would the immigrants be allowed to cross it and occupy land within Assamese block by purchase or otherwise.\(^58\)

However, the Assamese resented any infringement of their right to transfer land.\(^59\) Besides, any proposal to restrict inter-provincial migration, was also altogether unacceptable to the Government as it maintained that the settlement of migrants is beneficial as they were increasing the provincial revenue.\(^60\)

3.6. **Colonisation Schemes:**

The period 1924–27 witnessed continuous efforts on the part of the Assamese people to press for restricting settlement of immigrants and to reserve land for future generation, both inside and outside the Council. The issue was raised by the Assamese members in the Legislative Council \(^61\)(which will be discussed in details in the next section) and opinions in the Council began to get divided on communal lines with Hindus supporting restriction on settlement of immigrants and Muslims opposing the same.\(^62\) In brief, the Assamese people demanded a rigid policy in the matter.\(^63\)

Although the Government was not ready to accept any kind of restrictive legislation, it agreed to call an all-party meeting to thrash out the issue.\(^64\)

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58. Ibid pp. 21-22.
59. Ibid p.22.
60. Kar (n.10) p.9.
61. In 1924, Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah, an Assamese member of the Council proposed to move a resolution recommending restrictions on immigration, but later on, did not go ahead the with the same. In 1925, he moved another resolution with the same purpose. In 1927, Mahadev Sarma moved a resolution with a similar end in view.
63. Guha, op.cit., p. 207.
64. Ibid., pp. 207-208.
A conference of the district officers was held at Shillong in April, 1928 under the Chairmanship of Governor Sir L.H. Hammond, in which the Line System was generally considered successful, though in some parts of Kamrup it failed. It was decided to continue the System with the number of "lines" reduced, simplified and straightened as far as possible with the objective of allocating considerable blocks of land to each community. Besides, it was found desirable that the pattas in an area lined for the Assamese and other indigenous races would remain annual till at least cultivation took on a settled character in order to control transfers. Further, it was also decided to introduce a scheme of Colonisation under complete Government control like a similar scheme in operation in Nowgong since 1921, under which a Colonisation area was to be opened on an experimental basis and settlement therein made on application and payment of a prescribed rate of premium. In this way, the Colonisation Scheme originated with the initiative of the British officers. It was endorsed in September, 1928 in a conference of the All Party Committee, with A.W. Botham as the Chairman. The Committee consisted of the official and non-official members of the Council with four European and five Indian members, including Saadulla and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi. It advocated a positive Colonisation policy, mainly on revenue considerations and argued that an administrative control over the process of natural migration, so necessary for a planned settlement, was in any case preferable to haphazard squatting. Bardoloi advocated for compact Colonisation areas outside which the immigrants should not be allowed to settle afresh. He also suggested that enough land should be left vacant to accommodate future progeny of the Assamese people. All these points were acceptable to the Government although opinions varied as to the quantum of wastelands actually available in the Brahmaputra Valley. In this way, with the

67. Ibid; Guha, op.cit., p.208.
68. Guha. Loc.cit.
approval of the All-Party Committee, the general policy of the Colonisation Scheme for immigrants came into existence.

Thus, the Colonisation Scheme, though initiated by the British Officials, derived its legitimacy from the deliberations of an All-Party Conference. The first Colonisation Scheme started in Nowgong in 1928, was successively followed by one each in Barpeta and Mongoldoi sub-divisions.69 Under these schemes, a small family was to be given about 20 bighas of land on payment of a premium at the rate of Rupees Twenty Five per bigha.70 The Barpeta immigrants, however were too poor to pay the premium and the scheme was abandoned there. In 1935 the premium of Twenty Five had to be reduced to Rupees Ten due to general economic depression. It is observed that the scheme in Nowgong and Mongoldoi succeeded to a great extent while the one started in Barapathar did not achieve much for which it was abandoned later on.71 The areas allotted under the Nowgong Scheme to 1,619 Muslims and 441 Hindus immigrant families amounted to 47,636 acres till March, 1933.72

It is thus clear that the problem of immigration was initially sought to be tackled through the executive authority. The attempt did not succeed because of the dimension it assumed and of the cross currents of Assamese interests. With the development of public feeling which merged in political and communal consciousness, the Government became cautious and left the question to be dealt with by the popular representatives. The postulates of the 'Line System' and the 'Colonisation Scheme', the only steps taken by the Government, not only failed to solve the problem of immigration, but also perpetuated it through the gradual induction of communal, racial, valley and political questions into it.73 What is

69. Ibid pp. 208-209.
73. Kar(n.13),p.31.
important from the viewpoint of the present study, with the induction of communal question in to the issue, the Hindu and Muslim minds worked in opposite directions, which made the solution of the problem impossible. While the Hindus in general supported restrictive measures, the Muslims were opposed to any such measures which sought to restrict immigration as they gradually sensed a political advantage based on numerical strength which was enhancing with the immigration of Muslims from Eastern Bengal. Thus, because of the diametrically opposite perception of the issue and of the objectives, the period between 1924-1937 "witnessed the alienation of the two communities", which got reflected in the legislative debates of the period on the issue of immigration.

3.7. Legislative Interference with the Issue of Immigration and the Line System:

The Assamese opinion against the immigration was initially voiced mainly through the Assam Association and also the Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha. In a sitting at Nowgong, the Assam Association urged the Government to stop immigration. The earliest attempt at legislative interference into the problem of immigration was made in 1924 when Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah, an Assamese member of the Swarajist Party proposed to move a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council, recommending restrictions on immigration. But the Governor was of the opinion that so far as the resolution dealt with inter-provincial migration it was inadmissible, but if the mover wanted to prohibit settlement of land with the immigrants, the proposal could be admitted. Hati Baruah, however, did not move ahead later on as he thought that the Assamese land owners would not agree to any curtailment of their right to dispose of land to anyone they desired.

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74. Kar(n.10) p.10.
75. PHA-II, p.311.
3.7. A. Debate on the Motion of Hati Baruah:

Hati Baruah moved another resolution in 1925 which recommended to the Government of Assam that under proper conditions, all available wastelands in the province should be settled with Indians only, with a certain amount of preference to the Assamese for the next five years and that ordinary practice of settlement of land for ordinary cultivation should be so modified as to encourage greater utilisation of greater amount of land for ordinary cultivation on a big scale. In moving the resolution, he expressed that he was guided neither by communal nor by racial considerations but those of betterment of future generations of the Assamese. He also expressed the fear that if settlement of land went on at the then rate for another decade, there would be no land left for the "children of the soil" to cultivate for earning their livelihood.77

The Assamese members of the Council came in support of the resolution in their own ways. Tara Prasad Chaliha contended that in African countries and the United States of America, Government reserved a certain amount of land for the natives but in Assam it provided for no such safeguards. Kuladhar Chaliha, another member, stated that they did not want the province to be opened up too quickly, otherwise the people of the soil would be reduced to the state of 'hewers of wood' and 'drawers of water’. Nilmoni Phukan said that he did not subscribe to the view that the immigrants should not come at all from outside the province, at the same time, however, he supported settlement of lands with natives only and demanded extension of preference to the "children of the soil" in other matters, political and communal also.78

The European members were equally vocal in opposing the resolution.

78. Ibid.
W.H. Warren termed the resolution as a "cry of class preference" and contended that the economic impact of such a measure would be bad as it would obstruct a free flow of capital and enterprise, thereby adversely affecting the revenue, trade and prosperity of the province. As regards the cry of "children of the soil", another European member A.H.W. Bentink commented, "so far as the Assam Valley is concerned the Assamese other than the Ahoms came from the West, the Ahoms came from the East, the Kacharis from the North, the Sylhetis, Bengalees and Mymensingias came from the south, the Europeans came from overseas. Which of these have the best right to be called the children of the soil?"  

The Muslim Viewpoint:

The Muslim opinion was also against the resolution. Dewan Muhammad Wasil Choudhury of Sylhet was of the opinion that there was enough land available for settlement and the province of Assam required further opening. He considered the resolution to be dealing with the distant future for which the time had not then arrived to think about as he said, "Another fifty or sixty years may very reasonably be allowed to pass without disturbing ourselves with this far fetched question". Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury, another member from Sylhet, felt that if the resolution as moved by Hati Baruah was adopted it would interfere with the genuine claims of the immigrants and apprehended that "the bogus claims from the children of the soil may frustrate the just claims of outsiders intending to come and settle in Assam who may possibly require the settlement of land more urgently". He, however, had no problem with the resolution if it did not hamper the genuine claims of the immigrants and therefore, he proposed an amendment by adding "without hampering the claims of immigrants" at the end of that resolution.  

It is to be noted here that Hati Baruah had already accepted another
amendment moved by J.J.M. Nichols Roy, the Christian member from the Khasi Hills, to the effect that wasteland in the province should ordinarily be settlement with the natives of the province for special and ordinary cultivation with a view to encourage agriculture by small capitalists of the province. Now, it was the turn of the amendment moved by Alauddin Ahmed Choudhury, which was also accepted. The acceptance of the amendment moved by Choudhury paved the way for enlisting Muslim support into the resolution. As a result, the resolution was adopted by 27 votes to 12. 17 Hindus and 9 Muslims and Nichols Roy voted for the motion. Only one Muslim viz. Kutubuddin Ahmed, the Executive Councilor and 11 European members voted against the motion. Thus, the Muslims although expressed opposition to the move ultimately voted for the resolution as the interest of the immigrants, majority of whom were the Muslims, was seemed to be protected by accepting the amendment.

The legislative pressure, however, failed to convince the Government to provide some relief to the Assamese people who demanded restriction on immigration as well as on the settlement of the immigrants. In fact, the Government from the very onset of this problem took the stand that "there were sufficient waste lands available in Assam for the settlement of outsiders".

3.7. B. Debate on the Motion of Mahadev Sarma:

In 1927, Mahadev Sarma, an Assamese member moved a resolution in the Council which read as under -

"This Council recommends to the Government of Assam that with a view to prevent or restrict the settlement of waste lands in the province with the immigrants from the other province and foreign lands a committee with non-official majority be appointed to enquire and report on -

81. Ibid.
82. PHA-II, p.311.
a) The available wasteland at present for settlement;
b) The desirability of reserving adequate areas of wasteland for future development separately in every district in view of population;
c) Whether the existing area of game reserves, fuel reserves and grazing reserves should be increased or decreased in view of people's demand in each district”.

In moving the resolution, Sarma admitted that from a broader and higher standpoint, the resolution would not sound well, but the peculiar economic condition of Assam had forced him to take recourse to such a step. The people of Assam, according to him, were agrarian people and a piece of land was the only source of wealth for the average people. They had no ideas of industrialisation. If, however, no provision was made for preserving land for future development, the future generation would be jeopardized for want of new avenues. He then gave reasons for a "persistent cry" all over the Brahmaputra Valley to stop immigration. The reasons for it were two according to him. These were - first, the large-scale influx of immigrants which was increasing at an alarming rate; and second, the nature of the immigrants which was quite opposite to the meek and submissive nature of the Assamese. 83  Regarding the nature of the immigrants he quoted official remark of the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup saying, "They are sudden and quick in quarrel, greedy of land and sometimes impatient to control". 84  He also quoted Mr. W.C.M.Dundas, Inspector General of Police in Assam who observed - "the immigration has brought with it a cultured following of thieves, burglars and forgers of currency notes who are introducing with great rapidity crimes of a nature and violence hitherto unknown in this valley and with whom murder is little more than an unfortunate incident". 85  The local people also suffered a great deal at their hands. In some places they forced by oppression the original inhabitants to

83. Mahadev Sarma's speech in introducing the resolution, ALCP, in The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, August-17, 1927, pp.1084-1086.
84. Quoted in Ibid.
85. Quoted in Ibid.
leave their ancestral homesteads. Finally, he put it on record the general Assamese sentiment against immigration and said that a bigger section of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley had strong sentiments against the immigrants. He, therefore, urged the government to enquire into the matter and to see whether further settlements might be made for the present development or whether it should be stopped for the present in view of the future development. 86

The resolution was strongly supported by the Hindu members of both the Valleys. Bishnu Charan Bora, an Assamese Hindu member, in supporting the resolution stated that he was strongly against the immigration and the enquiry committee as suggested in the resolution was urgently needed in the interest of the indigenous people looking into the mass-scale immigration that was taking place. Citing the example of the Nowgong district, he showed how the rules set under the Line System were violated by the immigrant encroachers during 1920-24 who forcibly encroached on the lands of the local people and also on a grazing reserve. This was made possible, according to him, with the assistance of the Revenue Staff who were found to have tempered with the "Assamese immigrant lines generally made by pencil on the maps" according to their convenience in many cases. Lack of strict supervision on works of the revenue staff and the practice of relying too much on their reports and the connivance of the higher authorities in Shillong had deprived the local people of their lands and consigned them to poverty for all time. He, however, urged that it should be a warning to the authorities not to repeat the same in other districts as well. 87

Kasinath Saikia, another Assamese member, in supporting Sarma's resolution, also commented on the nature of the immigrants. Referring to the speech of Munawwarali who said that the immigrants had brought the improved method of cultivation, he wanted to remind everyone that the immigrants not only

86. Ibid.
87. Bishnu Charan Bora's speech in Ibid., pp.1089-91.
brought the improved methods but also "various subterfuge methods of chicanery and vice and seek to implement these unholy methods on hapless and unsophisticated people like the Assamese". The resolution was also supported by other Assamese members like Sadananda Dowerah, Taraprasad Chaliha, Rohini Kumar Choudhury and some other Hindu members of both the Valleys. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi spoke in a slightly different voice than some other Assamese members. He said that he was not in favour of restricting immigration, but only wanted to reserve some land for future generation of the expanding indigenous population. That is why he felt that the wording of the resolution was rather unfortunate as according to him, instead of saying 'restricting' if the resolution would have sought some more land to be reserved for the future generation that would have been more useful.

Brajendra Narayan Choudhury, the Surma Valley member while supporting the resolution gave a communal turn to the debate by looking into the issue of immigration as a Hindu-Muslim question. He said, "the Hindus as a class whether they be Assamese, Bengalees or up-country people, are home-keeping people, they do not take kindly to emigration. You will find that the up-country jamadars, durwans and peons who have been serving in the various parts of Assam for many years, in fact for a whole lifetime, never marry or settle down in this country; they go back to their own country, so that Sir, when after a few years, say 10, 20 or even 30 years, all that land is taken up by the outsiders and the Hindu population of Assam find that they require more land, what I ask, would be their fate?"

The European members were vocal enough in opposing the resolution. The most interesting arguments against the resolution were put forward by A.W.Botham, the Government spokesman, who spoke next to the mover of the resolution after

89. For details please see their speeches in Ibid pp. 1091-1103.
90. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi's speech. Ibid., pp. 1091-1093.
91. Brojendra Narayan Choudhury's speech, in Ibid., pp. 1095-96
moving the resolution by the latter. He started by commenting on the resolution with these words:

"When I go fishing, if I am doubtful what fly is likely to attract the fish, I attach to my line a number of different flies of different colours in the hope that if one of those flies does not attract the fish, another one will! I can not help thinking that when my Hon.friend framed this resolution he was following the same principle. His principal fly seems to be the question of the Mymensinghia, but presumably he thinks there may be some fish who will not be caught by that fly and so he adds another one about the immigrants from foreign lands; and then as some fish may not be attracted by either of these flies we have at the end a third fly or rather a whole bunch of flies; about the game reserves, fuel reserves and grazing reserves. But something seems to have happened to that fly, Sir, and we have not heard anything more about it .. well, Sir, that is a perfectly orthodox and legitimate experiment with the fisherman but I submit, Sir, that is not a convenient method of taking the opinion of this Council on important questions of policy".  

He also gave reasons for his opposition to the resolution. He was of the opinion that proposed reservation or restriction without prohibition of transfer of land by the Assamese through legislation, would be useless, as in the past, and would open "the door to underhand dealings of every sort". Besides, he thought that there was the important question whether the Government would be justified in foregoing present revenue and in holding up the development of the province in order to provide for future demands. Further, citing figures of land settled with immigrants and the indigenous people in different subdivision of the Brahmaputra Valley during the last ten years, he tried to show that the invasion by outside

92. A.W. Botham's speech in Ibid., p. 1086.
93. Ibid., pp. 1086-1087.
immigrants was a much less serious matter than what was sometimes supposed.\textsuperscript{94} Other European members viz, W.E.D.Cooper, H.M.James and W.D.Smiles also opposed the resolution. In fact, they were opposed to any policy of checking or restricting immigration.\textsuperscript{95}

**Muslim Opposition to the Resolution:**

The Muslim opposition to the Resolution was clearly reflected in the views expressed by the members belonging to the community in course of their speeches.

**Munawwarali's Views:**

Munawwarali, a Sylhet member, started by asserting that if the province of Assam was happier than any other province, if she had a brighter future prospect than other province, it was on account of her wastelands. In order to convert the wastelands into resources and sources of revenue it was essential to bring them under cultivation. He wanted an Assam where every bit of her earth was brought under cultivation, for which he was opposed to any attempt to stop immigration. He, therefore, said "it would be committing economic suicide to stop settlement of lands with persons who really require settlement, coming though they may be from other province". He further said, "Sir, the immigrants certainly bring with them a harder, and improved method of cultivation and many other things which go only to add to the prosperity of the province".\textsuperscript{96}

Opposing the demand of reserving lands, Munawwarali stated: "Sir, by

\begin{table}[h]
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Sub Division & Areas settled with Immigrants (in acres) during last ten years & Areas settled with Indigenous inhabitants (in acres) during last ten years \\
\hline
Mangaldoi & 15,260 & 1,60,000 \\
Tezpur & 5,900 & 1,55,000 \\
Nowgong & 79,000 & 69,000 \\
Gauhati & 13,000 & 52,000 \\
Barpeta & 18,000 & 68,000 \\
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\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., pp. 1087-1088. Botham cited the following figures:

\textsuperscript{95} For details please see their speeches in Ibid., pp. 1091-96.

\textsuperscript{96} Munawwarali's speech in Ibid., pp. 1088-89.
giving more lands to one family than is necessary that family is simply made indolent and stands in the way of bringing about an industrial regeneration and if each family goes on like this the people of Assam will never become an industrial nation ... Sir, Keeping to ourselves more land than we require means living from hand to mouth". He thought it better to allow the Indian people from other parts of the country to settle in the waste lands of the province than leave them to the wild animals. He observed,

"So far as I know, Assam with an area of 80,000 square miles has a population of 79 Lakhs souls whereas Bengal with an area of 75,000 square miles has five crores. Sir, if this be the state of things now, is it not our duty to help immigration rather than retard it? What shall we do keeping so much land? Make those places abodes of tigers and wolves? If your Indian people in other parts of the continent of India - if they want footing in your province which you can very well afford to give, is it not humane to give them shelter? Is it not humane to call them by your side and make them your friends instead of leaving your jungles to elephants, buffalows, bears and wolves?"\(^{97}\)

**Sayidur Rahman's Views:**

Sayidur Rahman, another Muslim member, of course, from the other Valley i.e. the Brahmaputra Valley, also rose to oppose the resolution. He began by saying that he was opposing the resolution not with any "communal bias" but on "broad principles of equity and justice". Reacting to the view of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi who told that the resolution wanted protection of "children of the soil", and extension of concession to them, he said that no spot in the globe could possibly be claimed as one's own by any particular race or community. The population of Assam, according to him, was "composed of successive hordes of immigrants, from the

\(^{97}\) Ibid.
great line of the Mongolian race in Western China on the one hand and successive hordes of immigrants pouring in from the West... even the sturdy Ahoms whose descendants today claim the country as their own were a tribe of Shans who migrated to this country". He regarded immigration as a natural phenomenon and objected to the attempt on the part of the so-called indigenous people through the resolution to change a natural course of things and to stop immigration by legislation. In this context he also quoted the Governor who said, "you can no more stop immigration than you can stop the Brahmaputra".98

Sayidur Rahman then touched the point of future development of the Assamese people as cited by the mover of the resolution. The desire of the mover, according to him, to have an adequate area of land for future development of the Assamese was a very laudable one although he expressed full sympathy with that object. He, however, asked the mover whether he had bestowed any thought over the question of land which the tea garden coolies, whose number would not be less than 10 Lakhs in the province, are entitled to get settled in the land near about their gardens under the provision of the Land Revenue Regulation.99

He also raised the important questions of exploitation of the Assamese by the Marwaris, settlement of other categories of immigrants, and discriminatory treatment of the Muhammadan Immigrants from Mymensingh. He complained that the trade and industry of the province had slipped into the hands of the Marwaris who were termed by him as "Vampires" sucking the life-blood of the people. He also called them the "Indian Shylocks" and thrown certain questions addressed towards the mover in this manner- "you are showing great solicitude for your available waste land, but what about your own cultured and homestead lands? Are they not fast slipping out of your hands? Are not most of the home stead properties

99. Ibid.
of the Assamese people encumbered in the hands of these Indian Shylocks? I ask the hon. mover if he has seriously considered about saving the already settled lands from the grasp and domination of the Marwaris? I ask him if he has devised any means to oust the already settled Nepalis, the up-countrymen, the ex-coolies, the Dacca tradesmen from Assam? Unless you have done all this, your attempts to keep out some Namasudras and some Muhammadans from Mymensingh and other places is of no avail". 100

Regarding the contribution of the Mymensinghias in the economic development of the province he stated:

"Miles and miles of arid waste land on either side of the Assam- Bengal Railway line from Lumding to Gauhati, the cradle, the breeding ground of 'anopheles' and 'kala azar' germs, have been converted into smiling fields of mustard and paddy, jute and pulses and other crops. The volume of business has increased, wherever these Mymensinghias have gone". 101

He further said that these people i.e. the Mymensinghias "are an object lesson of industry, enterprise, patience and labour to their easy-going and happy-go-lucky brethren of Assam. In fact, during last 10 years Assam has developed beyond recognition on account of the influx of these much maligned people... Assam owes its position as a major province most on their account". 102

Finally, he commented on the future of these Bengalee immigrants in Assam. He pointed out that these people had come to settle in Assam once and for all and they would also assimilate into the Assamese society in course of time. He asserted, "Today they are Bengalees, but tomorrow they will be absorbed among the Assamese-speaking population. They will become Assamese- not domiciled Assamese like many people but Assamese in fact as much as the Ahoms and the

100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
Kalitas became Assamese” and asked "so why raise sentimental objections to their coming? Why construct artificial barriers to keep them out? Why attempt at the impossible task of legislating against their advent into Assam?" 103

**Keramat Ali's Views:**

Keramat Ali, another Brahmaputra Valley Muslim member, regretted that he could not give support to the resolution as he believed that "God's spare lands are surely intended for God's spare population" and wanted to impress upon the house that "there can not be artificial restriction to natural immigration". He stated that it was only the surplus population of Bengal that had come to take shelter in Assam and if those poor and miserable people who had been compelled by circumstances, were prevented to come into Assam, he asked, "where do my humble friends want them to go". 104

Regarding the contribution of the Mymensinghias in the economic development of the province, he reiterated almost the same views as expressed by Sayidur Rahman. With particular reference to the district of Nowgong, he contended that the Mymensinghias had turned the "howling jungles into smiling fields" in both side of the Assam-Bengal Railway line in the district. Big business houses had sprung up in the district and the Assamese young men- graduates- had started taking to business with great success. Besides, the Assamese farmers had started taking to jute- cultivation which was completely unknown to them, and they had learnt it by seeing how "the Mymensinghias grow it". As a result, the Assamese gradually began to emerge as the jute producer and were selling "thousands of maunds of jute". Thus, the Assamese people learnt so many useful things from the Mymensinghias, according to Keramat Ali. 105

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103. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
Strongly reacting to the negative remarks on the character of the Mymensinghias who were branded as "oppressive", he narrated a story of an influential Assamese gentleman, who after getting settlement of a piece of land reserved for the Assamese, sold the same to two different Mymensinghia Musalmans at a time and realised a large amount of money. When these two Mymensinghias went to take possession of the land, a fight ensued between the two and both of them got serious injuries and had to go to law court and spend a lot of money. After narrating the story, he asked who was the clever man in that case the Assamese gentleman or the Mymensinghias. He also observed that attempts had been made earlier to reserve land for the indigenous people but those did not succeed and in certain quarters, lands reserved for the Assamese people were being sold by the Assamese people themselves as cited in the story, after getting settlement, to the Mimensinghia Musalmans.\footnote{106}

He, however, agreed with the view that in the settlement of lands, preference should always be given to the Assamese applicants, but at the same time he was strongly opposed to prevention or restriction of immigration. He then complained that while there were about 10 Lakhs of coolie population and 6 Lakhs of foreigners in the Assam Valley districts, why was there the grudge against the immigration of the Mymensinghia people alone.\footnote{107} Finally, he appealed for adopting humanistic approach towards the immigrants who contributed a lot towards the development of the province. In his own words:

"These Swampy lands and these dense jungles were lying as such for centuries. The indigenous people did never dare to go into them. Now after these poor people from Bengal have opened them I do not think we shall be justified in telling them 'Go out- there is no place for you in Assam'. "\footnote{108}
Thus, the Muslim opinion as expressed through the representatives of the Community was clearly against any move to restrict immigration as well as settlement of immigrants.

After lots of debate, the resolution was put to vote and was lost by 18 Votes to 24. All the eighteen supporters were Hindus from both the Valleys. Of the opponents, 12 were Muslims and the rest were Europeans.\(^{109}\)

Although the resolution was defeated in the Council by a majority vote, in view of the strong sentiment of the Assamese people against immigration expressed through their representatives, the Government "agreed to call an all-party Conference to thrash out the issue".\(^{110}\) Such attempt on the part of the Government resulted in the formulation of the "Colonisation Schemes" which have been discussed in the previous section of this chapter.\(^{111}\) In the coming years the solution of the issue looked extremely difficult due to lack of consensus among the representatives of the Hindus and the Muslims who took diametrically opposite stands on the issue of immigration guided by motives of quite opposite character. In fact, with the induction of political and Communal dimensions into the issue, whenever there was any discussion in the Council on the same, the house clearly got divided on a Hindu and non-Hindu basis. This made the things easier for the Government which was not prepared to commit itself to any kind of restrictive legislation on the issue of immigration.

**3.8. Muslim Attempt at Abolition of Line System:**

As already stated, the Line System not only failed to solve the problem of immigration but also perpetuated it through the induction of communal and political questions to it. As a result, the Line System gradually became the most important

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111. For details please see the earlier section of this chapter titled "Administrative Restriction : Politicisation of the Line System".
political issue, a dividing line between the Hindus and Muslims of the State. While the Muslims began to demand its abolition as they saw it as an obstacle on the way of free settlement of immigrants and their assimilation into the Assamese society, the Hindus supported its retention as they considered it to be a protective mechanism against the invasion of the province by the so-called outsiders.

The first Muslim attempt at securing a legislative action against the Line System was made in 1936 by Nuruddin Ahmed, a Brahmaputra Valley member of the Council. While participating in the General Discussion on the Budget in the Council on 16th March, 1936, he demanded abolition of the Line System as according to him, this System had been preventing the immigrants from being absorbed into the Assamese people. He said:

"My Hindu friends of Assam Valley, in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the organizers of the Domiciled and Settlers' Association have been telling the immigrants that they regard them as Assamese people. But it is no use calling them Assamese without giving them the status of the Assamese".\textsuperscript{112} He then appealed to the Hindu members that if they were truly sincere in giving the immigrants the status of the Assamese, they should join hands with him in asking the Government to at once abolish the Line System, at least as regards those immigrants who had already got settlement of lands.\textsuperscript{113}

In the same year i.e. in 1936, Nuruddin Ahmed made the first Muslim attempt at abolition of the Line System. He moved a resolution to the effect that the Line System which was being maintained in some districts of the Assam Valley in order to confine settlement of immigrants in certain areas only should be forthwith abolished.\textsuperscript{114} In moving the resolution, he enumerated a number of grievances of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nuruddin Ahmed’s speech during Budget Discussion in the Council in ALCP, The Assam Gazette, (Part-VI), April 22, 1936, p.340.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the immigrants against the System, the most important one being that the Line System obstructed and hindered assimilation of the immigrants with the Assamese thereby indefinitely delaying the former's securing of rights of privileges of permanent citizens. Besides, the system gave the immigrants feeling of segregation and fostered a sense of animosity and rivalry between the immigrants and the local people. Most importantly, he raised a very important point regarding discrimination in settlement of lands with immigrants and said that the Line System discriminated in favour of Hindu immigrants from other parts of the country who were free to settle on Government lands wherever they found and wished, whose number had grown more than the number of the East Bengal immigrants. Their settlement was not objected to as they were Hindus and could easily be merged into the Assamese people. He objected to such discrimination and said, "...it is not at all fair nor desirable that the settlement rules should be harsh as regards one set of settlers and quite easy as regards the others." Finally, he suggested prohibition of settlement with all without prior Government sanction and pleaded for reservation of some land for the indigenous people.\footnote{115}

The resolution was supported by the Muslim members of both the Valleys. Abdul Mazid Ziaossahms of the Brahmaputra Valley, while supporting the resolution, complained of a South African type of discrimination against the immigrants and asked, if Indians looked for humane treatment in Africa, why the Bengali Immigrants should not be treated in the same manner. He also complained that for political reasons the immigrants were counted upon but when the purposes were served they were very often thrown aside. In stead of such treatment, he appealed that the immigrants should be treated by the Assamese people as their kith and kin. He also objected to being called an immigrant.\footnote{116}

\footnote{115. Ibid.}
\footnote{116. Ibid.}
Abdul Khaleque Choudhury of the Surma Valley also came in support of the resolution. He stated that the Line System not only blocked the way of expansion of the immigrants but also encouraged and kept alive the racial distinction among the different communities. He complained further that it was an obstacle to the creative genius of man to achieve better resources. Finally, he lamented that the system was only meant to treat a section of mankind "like lower animals" in certain confinement.117

The Assamese Hindu members quite naturally opposed the resolution. Nilambar Dutta opined that the object of the resolution was definitely a laudable one from the Muslim point of view but at the same time it was detrimental to the interest of the Hindu masses. Rohini Kumar Choudhury, another Assamese member, said that the immigrant settlers resented being called immigrants and he had full sympathy with such sort of a complaint. He, along with Nilambar Dutta, therefore, proposed withdrawal of the resolution so that the issue could be discussed in a cooler atmosphere.118 Such a proposal, of course was hardly acceptable to the Muslim members.

Although the Muslims were supported by the Europeans and Government members, the Government side did not vote when the voting on the motion took place. As a result, the motion of Nuruddin Ahmed was lost by seven votes to twenty. All the seven supporters were Muslims and all the Hindu members voted against the motion.119 In this way the first Muslim attempt at abolition of the Line System through legislation failed.

117. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
3.9. Second Muslim Attempt at Abolition of the Line System: (Munawwar Ali Moves Resolution in the Assam Assembly):

It has already been stated elsewhere that in the election of 1937, which was the first election to the Assam Legislative Assembly as per the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935 that introduced Provincial Autonomy, the Congress Party emerged as the Single largest Party but could not obtain a majority.\textsuperscript{120} As the party did not move ahead in the direction of Ministry formation as per the instruction of the Party high command, Saadulla, who was an experienced parliamentarian with the longest record of membership in the Assam Legislative Council, and had "an unbroken administrative experience of whole

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|l|c|}
\hline
Party & Seats & Party & Seats \\
\hline
(i) Congress & 33 & (vii) Europeans & 9 \\
(ii) Independent Hindus & 10 & (viii) Backward Tribes & 4 \\
(iii) Muslim Praja Party & 1 & (ix) Labour & 4 \\
(iv) United Peoples Party & 3 & (x) Independents & 14 \\
(v) Assam Valley Muslims & 5 & (xi) Others & 20 \\
(vi) Surma Valley Muslims & 5 & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Result of the 1937 Elections and strength of different parties emerged from the poll were as follows :}
\end{table}


However, another source demonstrates that results of the elections (1937) and the position of different political parties representing the Muslims in the Assembly as follows :

\begin{itemize}
\item Assam Valley Muslim Party : 5
\item Surma Valley Muslim Party : 5
\item Muslim League : 9
\item Independent Muslims : 14
\item Muslim Praja Party : 1
\end{itemize}

Total : 34

For details please see A.C. Bhuiyan and Sibopada Dey (eds) Political History of Assam, Vol. - III (1940-47) Guwahati, Government of Assam, 1980, pp. 252-53 (Hereinafter PHA-III). It is to be noted that the fluctuations occurred in the strength of various parties and groups as a result of the promotion of new groups and alliances. Fluctuations in the strength of the various parties and interests in the first assembly may be summarized as under.

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. General seats including Schedule Castes : 47 (Congress-33, Non-Congress-14)
\item 2. Muslims (Muslim League-10, the Muslim Party-24) : 34
\item 3. Others including European : 27
\end{itemize}

Total : 108

\textit{Source :- PHA-II, p.333 (Foot Note - 59)}
decade, 1924 to 1934, first as a minister and later as an executive Councillor". He got the opportunity to from a five member coalition ministry with three Muslims of the United Muslim Party (including himself) and two non-Muslims, with the support of the Europeans and other tribal and non-tribal members. Thus, Saadulla formed the first Ministry under the Govt. of India Act, 1935 on 1st April, 1937, and remained the Premier of Assam for 5 terms till 1946 "with short breaks totaling about 24 months". However, owing to the repeated assault by the Congress supported by the Muslim League in the Assembly, he had to resign and reconstitute his Ministry once again on 5th February, 1938, in order to include two Muslim League stalwarts viz. Munnawwar Ali and Abdul Matin Choudhury in the Ministry.

Besides, as stated elsewhere, the immigration of a large number of farmers, mainly Muslims, created an apprehension among the Assamese of being numerically swamped by the newcomers (mainly Muslims) from Eastern Bengal. Such a "fear complex" was further "aggravated by the remarks of the census Commissioner

122. The United Muslims Party was formed with the newly elected Muslim Members to the Assembly from both the Valleys, under the leadership of Saadulla. For details please see PHA-II, p. 337 and PHA-III, pp. 252-53.
123. PHA-II, p. 338; The first coalition Ministry formed by Sadulla was as follows:
   1. Muhammad Sadulla
      United Muslim Party  Premier, Finance, Home and Public Works.
   2. Muhammad Waheed
      United Muslim Party  Education and Forest.
   3. James Joy Mohan Nichols Roy
   4. Rohini Kumar Choudhury
      United Peoples Party  Revenue, Justice, Legislation, General Department.
   5. Ali Hyder Khan
      United Muslim Party  Agriculture, industry, Co-Operative Societies and Registration.
124. Ibid., p. 337.
126. PHA- II, pp. 345-46. For details please see Guha op.cit., pp. 222-226, Munawwar Ali was a prominent Muslim leader of Sylhet, became the first President of the Muslim League's branch in Assam formed in 1928, and played a leading part in organizing League's branches in the Brahmaputra Valley districts; PHA-II, pp. 251.

Abdul Matin Choudhury, also of Sylhet, started his political career as a non co-operator. Some years later he joined the Muslim League. He was not only in the forefront of the Surma Valley League, but also for long recognized as a Provincial Leader by the All India Muslim League in absence of any organization in the Brahmaputra Valley till 1938. Besides, he is said to be a close associate of Jinnah during the latter's political exile. In 1933, he was elected as the Vice President of the All India Muslim League representing Assam (Kar, (n.13)p.316). For details please see Ibid., pp. 310-316.
C.S. Mullan in his Census Report of 1931.\textsuperscript{127} In presenting his Census Report, Mullan who is branded as an "irresponsible European Civil servant"\textsuperscript{128} and who is said to have "instigated a hate campaign against the immigrants"\textsuperscript{129} made some controversial remarks about the immigrants. He says, "Probably the most important event in the Province during the last 25 years, an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did not Burmese invaders of 1820, the whole structure of the Assamese culture and Civilisation - has been the invasion of a vast hordes of land hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh. The invasion began sometime before 1911."\textsuperscript{130} He further noted: "By 1921 the first army crops of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army crops which followed them in the years 1921-31 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed the conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely but the few thousand Mymensinghias in North Lakhimpur are an outpost which may during the next decade prove to be a Valuable basis of major operations".\textsuperscript{131} He then made the most objectionable remarks by comparing immigrants with "vultures". In his words "Wheresoever the carcass, there the vultures be gathered together. Where there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias".\textsuperscript{132}

Mullan further prophesied that Sibsagar would ultimately remain the only district where an Assamese race would find a home of its own.\textsuperscript{133} Although his prophecy of such a gloomy future of the Assamese people proved wrong but it

\textsuperscript{127} Guha, op.cit., p. 212.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Census Report 1931, P. 51 quoted in Guha, Loc.cit.
\textsuperscript{133} Guha, Loc.cit.
was that "false prophecy of 1931", according to Amalendu Guha, "that provided a rationale to Chauvinism which was to plague Assam for many years to come and a major section of the Assamese public was noticeably agitated over the outsider issue."\textsuperscript{134}

It was under these circumstances that the provincial Autonomy was introduced in Assam under the Government of India Act, 1935, and after that the circumstances leading to the formation of the Saadulla Ministry has already been discussed. It was during the first term of Saadulla's Premiership viz. (1st April, 1937- 5th February, 1938) that Munawwar Ali, a member from Sylhet and also a Muslim League leader moved a resolution in the newly elected Assam Legislative Assembly demanding abolition of the Line System on 5th August, 1937,\textsuperscript{135} thereby made the second attempt after Nuruddin Ahmed towards securing legislative action for abolition of the System.

3.9. A. \textbf{Debate on Munawwar Ali’s Resolution on the Abolition of the Line System :}

Munawwar Ali's resolution was worded in the same language as that of Nuruddin Ahmed's Resolution recommending abolition of the Line System moved in 1936. The resolution moved on 5th August, 1937 by Munawwar Ali in the Assembly read as follows.

"This Assembly recommends to the Government of Assam that the Line System, which is being maintained in some districts of the Assam Valley in order to confine settlement of lands to immigrants in certain areas, be forthwith abolished".\textsuperscript{136}

In moving the resolution, Munawwar Ali strongly opposed the Line System

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\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, p. 213; For details please see Ibid., pp. 211-14.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., p. 225.
under which, a line was arbitrarily drawn, according to him, in the Brahmaputra Valley in order to prevent the Indians of the neighbouring provinces, particularly of the province of Bengal, from crossing the line. He further stated that even a Sylheti is not permitted to go beyond the line, and the misfortune of a Sylheti, according to him, was that he was "treated as a foreigner in his own province".137

**Views of the Muslim Members:**

Munawwar Ali, however, did not elaborate much and left it on Abdul Matin Choudhury, another Sylhet member and a Muslim League stalwart to deal with the subject in detail.138 Strongly supporting the resolution moved by Munawwar Ali, Abdul Matin Choudhury began by criticizing the Line System under which, according to him, people were segregated in well-defined areas, by reason of the race to which they belong, and were not allowed to acquire land beyond the area to which they were confined. He lamented that under the Line System, an "unjust" and "arbitrary" distinction was made between what was called the indigenous Assamese and the "immigrant Bengali" on the basis of whether their ancestors came to this province a few centuries ago or during the course of the last 50 or 60 years. On this point he elaborated in these words:

"If Sir, your ancestors came to Assam either with Mirzumla or Ahom King, if you came as invaders, despoiled the population, usurped the land, and settled here, you will be called an 'indigenous Assamese', you will be treated as the pet child, you will be shown all the favour that benign Government can bestow. But Sir, if your ancestors came as pioneers, if they developed the country, if they cleared the jungle and made prosperous villages and habitable tracts, if they contributed to the development of the province, you will be called an 'immigrant', you will be treated as a pariah in your land and you will be saddled with all the difficulties and

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137. Ibid.
138. Ibid., p. 304.
all the disadvantages that human ingenuity can invent. Sir, a more unjust, a more illogical and a more absurd system it is difficult to conceive. It makes no difference, Sir, that you both are born and brought up as children of the same soil, that you pay the same tax- in fact you pay higher one including premium- that you owe common allegiance to His Majesty the King, and that you are the children of the common motherland of India; that makes no difference. A sort of vested interest is created in favour of so-called indigenous population to the detriment of the interest of so-called immigrants".  

Choudhury further stated that the Line System "is a system of racial prerogative, a system of economic exploitation" as according to this system, "the 'Haves' retain the right to possess all the land they do not need, and the 'Have-nots' are compelled to pass a very miserable existence within their narrow boundary line". It was a method he said, according to which the Bengalees from outside the province as well as from within the province from the districts of Sylhet and Cachar, were precluded from acquiring land beyond the line, to which they were confined. He complained that thousands of Bengalees from Sylhet and Cachar had settled in Nowgong, Jumunamukh and other areas in the Brahmaputra valley as permanent residents but their children were not allowed to acquire any land beyond the line where they were confined.  

He then highlighted the baneful economic effect of the System on the immigrants by saying "as an immigrant living inside the immigration line can not acquire property beyond that line, when he sells land he does not get its full economic value". He also touched another important aspect and by citing figures showed that in the immigrants area there were more population than the land could bear, while in the Assamese area there was more land than they were able to

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139. Abdul Matin Choudhury's speech in Ibid., p. 305.
140. Ibid.
cultivate. The political effect of the Line System which was termed by him as a "policy of segregation" would be disastrous as it created "a gulf between the people living within the same province" and closed "all avenue of approach and reconciliation between two major races inhabiting the province".

Choudhury also raised the important question of discrimination against the immigrants from Bengal and complained that the objection against their settlement was not based on economic ground but on "racial and communal prejudices" as immigration of tea-garden coolies and the people from Madras, Central Provinces, Chota Nagpur, Ranchi and Ganjam, was not objected to, but objection was raised only to the Settlement of immigrants from Bengal who were "predominantly Mussalmans". Finally, he placed certain important questions before the House and said;

"The real issue is whether artificially created vested interest should survive or whether the fundamental rights of citizenship should prevail, the issue is whether racial discrimination and racial prerogative should be tolerated and encouraged or whether the immigrants should be given the right to live and expand; and the issue finally is whether the vast tracts of land in the Assam Valley should be given to human beings to earn their livelihood or whether they should be left for wild beasts to roam upon; and I leave it to the sense of the House to decide".

Another member from Sylhet Dewan Muhammad Ahammad Choudhury said that the whole concept of the Line System was "based on a wrong foundation of provincial patriotism" which was a "curse and bar to the growth of the United India Nation." Quoting Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu who condemned such patriotism based on "Valley Nationalism" or "Provincial Nationalism" or "District Nationalism", and described it as "Geographical Nationalism", he

141. Ibid., p. 306.
142. Ibid., p. 307.
observed that such "geographical nationalism" separated one brother from another. He also referred to another sort of provincialism- "Punjab for Panjabi’s, Bengal for Bengalees, Assam for Assamese"- which set up one province against the other. Regarding the Muslim opposition to such "geographical nationalism" he said:

"We, Sir, as Mussalmans, can not support this principle of geographical nationalism. We follow the principle which is founded on the basis of Universal equality and fraternity. In the words of Dr. Md. Iqbal, China and Arabia are ours, India is ours, we are Muslims, and the whole world is our motherland". 143

Coming to the question of the Line System in Assam, he said that it was against the principle of humanity which had "thrown a challenge to the whole of India and waged a war against the people of Bengal, who were neighbours of the people of Assam. Strongly reacting against the use of the word "immigrant", he observed :

"We know the people of Sylhet and Mymensingh are known as immigrants in the other side of our province. The resolution regarding the abolition of the line system will be an acid test for those who claim to have a monopoly of Indian Nationalism and will serve as an eye-opener to all. It is an uncharitable expression which cannot be applicable to them. We are ruled by the same Government, live in the same country and I do not know how they may be called immigrants. The term is an insult to us".144

He asserted further that the issue regarding the abolition of the Line System would test the sincerity of the so-called advocates of Indian freedom and nationalism and declared that the "Valley Patriotism" which was the basis for support to the Line System by the Assamese people, mainly the Hindus, was "worse than the

143. Dewan Muhammad Ahammad Choudhury’s speech in the Assembly in Ibid., pp. 307-08.
144. Ibid., p. 308.
"Our brothers of the advanced school of thought accuse us of communalism; call us the enemies of Indian freedom and nationalism. But this Valley patriotism was worse than the communalism. Now the time has come when the whole world will test their sincerity of purpose and consistency of their words. If they are sincere in their hearts and true to their ideal, I appeal to them that they should land their unanimous support to the abolition of the Line System". He added further "If the anti-Asiatic laws of America is a crime, to me this inhuman and uneconomic line system is more than a crime".  

Ahhob Choudhury, therefore, appealed to all in the name of humanity to abolish the Line System and declared himself to be supporting the resolution moved by Munawwar Ali.

The resolution was strongly supported by the representatives of the so-called "immigrants." Abdul Hamid Khan and Motior Rahman Mia from Goalpara- both representing the immigrants, strongly resented the prevalent Line System and demanded its abolition. Abdul Hamid Khan complained that the Line System was discriminatory as it was discriminating against a particular section of the people i.e., the Immigrants. It was also against humanity, according to him, as it prevented one set of human beings to be assimilated with another set of human beings and to get latter's association. The immigrants were deprived from getting association and company of the indigenous people by the Line System, and thereby deprived them of one of the basic rights of the human beings to get association and company of others. Highlighting the contribution of the immigrants in the development of Assam, Motior Rahman also complained that through the Line System the "Bengali Muslim immigrants" were discriminated against and were

145. Ibid.
146. Ibid., pp. 308-09.
147. For details please see the speech of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan (in Bengali) in the Assembly. Ibid., pp. 313-16.
deprived of the rights. He demanded equal right for the "immigrants" who had come to the province to settle permanently and were living as permanent citizens.  

148 Muhammad Amiruddin, another member representing the immigrants from Nowgong, citing example of Nowgong, showed how the Assamese people in utter disregard of the principles of the "Line System" sold their land to the immigrants, and as a result the Assamese Villages had to be converted into mixed villages. In this regards, he observed:

"....if the Assamese people in contravention of the rules and regulations governing the Line System sold away their lands under the greed of money to the immigrants that are always land-hungry, it is no fault on the part of the latter and when the revenue authorities found that the sale deeds had been executed 'bona fide' and the required possession of the land so sold had been made over to the purchasing party by the Assamese "pattadar", the necessity arose to convert the Assamese Line into a mixed line or to abolish the line altogether".  

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He said further:

"I can cite, Sir, lots of instances in which Assamese Villages have been converted into mixed villages, and in some Assamese Villages irrespective of the Line System and in total disregard of the principles underlying it and without even converting them into what are called mixed villages, the Deputy Commissioners and Settlement Officers have under the aforesaid and other varying circumstances issued 'pattas' in the exercise of their discretionary power to the immigrants who settled in the Assamese Villages...."  

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He also informed that the actual cultivators holding 'pattas' near about the line hardly wanted the existence of the Line System. He finally appealed to the House to look into the question not as a "party" or "group" question but from the

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148. Please see Motior Rahman Mia's speech (in Bengali) in the Assembly, Ibid., pp. 317-320.
149. Muhammad Amiruddin's speech, in the Assembly, Ibid., p. 322.
150. Ibid., p. 323.
point of view of "human justice, fairness and equity".\textsuperscript{151}

The resolution was also supported by many other Muslim members. Maulavi Abdur Rahman stated that the issue of immigration and the Line System assumed a serious turn due to the "horrible remarks" made by Mr. Mullan in his Census Report of 1931, wherein it was remarked that if the immigrants were allowed to pour into the province any longer, the indigenous people would become practically extinct. Abdur Rahman also said that such remarks were mainly responsible for the prevalent agitation of the Assamese people against immigration and immigrant settlement.\textsuperscript{152} Mubarak Ali, another Muslim member, rose to support the resolution and began by strongly reacting to the view of some of the Assamese members who described the Line System "as a line of honour". According to him, "line of demarcation" could never be a "line of honour" as it prevented "the people from coming in and acquiring land". He expressed opposition to the view of reserving lands for future generation as he said: "Land must not be kept in reserve for future generation by artificial means. Land must not be treated as 'Wedding Cakes' not to eat but to dream upon. On a point of fact it is also detrimental to the interests of the indigenous natives of the province and to the interests of the Government itself". He further asserted that the immigrants, whether getting any land or not, were not going to return to their ancestral homes. In this context he said,

"Sir, whether they get any land or not, they are not going back. They have given up the hope of returning to their original place. They have burnt their boats. If, Sir, lands are settled with them, they will become responsible citizens but without lands they cannot be expected to be so and they may become a danger to the society".\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Maulavi Mubarak Ali's speech, Ibid., p. 867.
Mudabbir Hussain Choudhury alleged that C. S. Mullan, the Census Commissioner, 1931 was guilty of promoting ill-feeling, hatred and enmity against a section of the people through his Census Report. Raising objection against the remarks of Mullan who described the immigrants as "Land Hungry" people, Choudhury nicely put a very important question addressed to both Mr. Mullan and to the House in general in this manner-

"I would ask Mr. Mullan himself and this House as well to judge whether these settlers who have come from a neighbouring district of Bengal are greater land-hungry people than Mr. Mullan and his comrades, I mean his white comrades, who travelled from more than seven thousand miles by land and sea at great personal discomfort to settle in the jungles of Assam where formerly wild beasts and birds only roamed about". 154

Views of the Hindu Members:

The Hindu members of both the Valleys representing diverse interests like Nabakumar Dutta, Promode Chandra Dutta, Kumeswar Das, Krishna Nath Sharma, Mahi Chandra Bora, Haladhar Bhuyan, Mahendra Nath Saikia, Omeo Kumar Das-all supported retention of the Line System and opposed the resolution, 155 like earlier occasions. The members representing the backward people and hill tribes like Khirosingh Terang, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Rup Nath Brahma and J.D. Marak also opposed the resolution as they thought abolition of the System to be against the interest of the backward and tribal people of both the hills and plains. 156 Rup Nath Brahma, who represented the plains tribal people even demanded introduction of the System in the district of Goalpara if it had not been introduced earlier in that

156. Please see the speeches of the Tribal Members in Ibid., pp. 313-323.
district, for the protection of the interest of the tribal people in the district.¹⁵⁷

Rohini Kumar Choudhury, who was the Revenue Minister in the first Saadulla Cabinet at that time, was in a precarious position. He could neither openly support nor could oppose the resolution. Being the representative of the Assamese Hindus he could not openly oppose the resolution like other Hindu members as he was the member of a Muslim-majority cabinet headed by Saadulla. He began by adopting a sympathetic approach towards the Immigrants and said that when the Mymensinghias began to come in large numbers to settle in Assam they were deceived in various ways as they were mostly ignorant people. In fact, they were in great need of land and found that they could purchase them for much less than they had to pay in Bengal. They paid for it and thought that they had it and being the ignorant people, they did not know that they had got no title over the land. He admitted that some speculators including even the officers of the Land Record staff participated in that sort of "illicit bargain". Gradually it was found that as soon as the Mymensinghias approached a certain plot, the owners of the plots in the neighbourhood became apprehensive and on that account "party feuds" grew up in the villages. Consequently, some Assamese, according to him, "in order to feed fat their grudge against certain villagers, would sell the land to the Mymensingh immigrants and themselves lived elsewhere". It was under these circumstances, according to Rohini Kumar Choudhury, in order to protect the immigrants as well as the local indigenous people, that the Line System was introduced which did not at all mean, as he said, the "prohibition of settlement to the Mymensingh immigrants", but only brought about "an arrangement convenient to both parties". Besides, he stated that the System was also intended to "prevent unnecessary unpleasantness and quarrel between the two different sections of the people".¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Rupnath Brahma's speech in Ibid., p. 320.
¹⁵⁸ Rohini Kumar Choudhury's speech in the Assembly, Ibid., p. 309.
Choudhury thus adopted a via-media between the Hindu and the Muslim viewpoints on the issue by adopting a sympathetic approach towards the immigrants and at the same time by defending the Line System. He then communicated the Government decision regarding the appointment of a representative committee to review the whole question provided the Resolution was withdrawn and said:

"....Sir, in order to review the whole question carefully, in order to protect the indigenous people of this province and in order also to protect the interests of the permanent settlers who are known as the Mymensingh immigrants and also to find out the exact legal position on this question, the Government has decided that, if this resolution is withdrawn by the hon. mover, they will appoint a small representative committee in order to go into the whole question".  

He further informed that the Committee would move from district to district or at least visit the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Lakhimpur and Darrang and would call for necessary papers that would be supplied by the Government. It would also examine the witness in the localities concerned and the case put forward by the Immigrants as well as the indigenous people and would also take into account the position of the tribal people. After the Committee would submit its recommendations, those would be placed before the House for discussion. The Minister assured that the Government would act according to the opinion arrived at by the House on the recommendations of the Committee, and on giving such assurance asked the mover of the resolution, to withdraw the same. 

**Views of the European Members:**

The European members sided with the Muslims on earlier occasions whenever there was any move by the Assamese to restrict immigration. However,

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159. Ibid., p. 310.
160. Ibid.
regarding the question of the abolition of Line System, they could not back the Muslims as they did not support sudden abolition of the System which was introduced with a definite purpose. Participating in the debate on the resolution moved by Munawwar Ali, C. Goldsmith, European member, defended the line system by saying that it was introduced "for the purpose of preventing breach of peace and undue encroachment on the possession of the indigenous people" and until and unless such a possibility could be completely ruled out with the help of "facts and figures", he maintained the System must be retained. Other European members like F. W. Hockenhull and W. Fleming supported the offer of the Revenue Minister to appoint a Committee of enquiry, and also suggested the mover of the resolution to accept the same.161

Initially, Munawwar Ali, the mover of the resolution was hesitant in taking a decision regarding the offer of the Revenue Minister and more importantly, for the first time, it came to the light through Munawwar Ali, that there was party-mandate, that too of the Muslim League to press for the resolution, as he said:

"Sir, My difficulties in coming to a decision was this. I had a party mandate to press this resolution to a division, but in the light of the appeals that had been made to me repeatedly I was thinking if it would not be better to continue the debate to the next available day so that I could in the meantime place the matter to the party and have a discussion with the Hon'ble Revenue Minister and come to a decision".162 To be noted that by that time Munawwar Ali was one of the stalwarts of the Muslim League in the province who had become the first president of the League's branch in Assam when a branch of the Muslim League was formed at Sylhet in 1928.163

Before Munawwar Ali could take any decision on the matter of withdrawing

161. Please see the speeches of the European members in Ibid., pp. 323-325, 331.
163. For details please see PHA-II, p. 251.
the resolution, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the Revenue Minister informed the House that the Committee would consist of nine members - three Hindu Members including one Scheduled Caste, three Muhammadan members one from the Surma Valley and two from the Assam Valley, one being from the Mymensingh settlers; one European member, one tribal member and the Revenue Secretary.164

Abdul Matin Choudhury wanted one more member from the immigrants to be included in the Committee so that the immigrants' interests were effectively represented. Munawwar Ali then wanted to know whether the Revenue Minister would give serious consideration to the suggestion advanced by Matin Choudhury. When the Minister assured that the suggestion would be taken into consideration, Munawwar Ali, the mover agreed to withdraw the resolution.165 Finally, the leave to withdraw the resolution was granted by 63 votes to 34, and the resolution stood withdrawn.166 Although the resolution was withdrawn owing to the Government assurance of constituting a Committee representing diverse interests, the debate on the resolution again revealed a clear communal divide on the issue, while Muslim members strongly supported the abolition of the Line System, the Hindu members opposed the same with the same of vigour and enthusiasm.

3.10. Summary:

Thus, the legislative debate on the issue of immigration and the Line System during 1924-1937, clearly revealed that the legislators got clearly divided on the issue on Communal lines. While the Hindu members in general, of both the Valleys, supported the move to restrict immigration, the Muslims of both the Valleys opposed any such move. As a result, the Line System, which was introduced to some districts to avert possible friction between the immigrant

164. Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the Revenue Minister's speech in the Assembly, in the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Assembly, The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, October 13, 1937, p. 875.
166. Ibid., pp. 875-77.
settlers and the Assamese, and also to prevent undue encroachment upon the Assamese land, gradually became a "dividing line" between the Hindus and the Muslims. This is because while the former began to support the same, latter began to oppose it and even attempted its abolition by means of legislative action. In fact, the Assamese Muslims from the very beginning did not oppose but rather welcomed the immigrants and that with a motive as it is observed:

"....the Assamese Muslims in general welcomed immigrants with the hope that they would be Assamised in due course and numerically strengthen the base of Muslim communal politics in the province". 167

Perhaps this is the reason why not only the Assamese Muslims but also the Muslims of the Surma Valley never opposed immigration but rather opposed any attempt at restricting the same. Although the communal bias was not apparently traceable in the speeches and views expressed by the Muslim legislators, yet their sympathy towards the immigrants and justification provided in support of immigration and settlement of the immigrants, most of whom were the Muslims, automatically spoke a lot. On the other hand, regarding Hindu members' opposition to large scale immigration of Mymensingh immigrants, if the Government records on waste lands were to be believed, their "plea of scarcity of land ten, twenty or thirty years earlier was clearly untenable" 168 and this fact can be confirmed from

167. Guha, op.cit., p. 211.
the following official data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Culturable Waste Lands other than Follow</th>
<th>Net area Sown during the year</th>
<th>Percentage Total of Land Area Sown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>4,18,050 Acres</td>
<td>9,83,260 Acres</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>14,38,790 Acres</td>
<td>4,99,689 Acres</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>7,18,890 Acres</td>
<td>5,54,231 Acres</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>14,82,573 Acres</td>
<td>7,54,856 Acres</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>14,86,599 Acres</td>
<td>5,03,442 Acres</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As the Hindu opposition to immigration on the plea of 'scarcity of land' was untenable and was not backed by proper official figures on wastelands, it is observed that "the irresistible conclusion with regard to Hindu opposition would, therefore, be their unwillingness to allow more Muslims to settle in the province".169

Besides, formation of the first popular Ministry in Assam in 1937 under Saadulla and the Congress attitude to it made the problem insoluble. Further, the issue took a new turn when the All India Muslim League for the first time officially took up the matter in its 25th session held on 15th to 18th October, 1937, by adopting a resolution condemning the Line System in Assam, proposed by Abdul Matin Choudhury of Assam. Henceforth, the immigrants, as the Muslims in general, veered more and more round the Muslim League which took up the issue of Immigration and Line System in Assam. Later on, after the passing of the "Pakistan Resolution" in 1940 at Lahore by the League, the immigration issue in Assam gradually got linked with the League demand for inclusion of Assam in Pakistan.170 This will be discussed in details in the coming chapters.

169. Ibid.
170. Ibid. p.32.