CHAPTER - I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem:

The defeat of Burma at the hands of the British East India Company in the First Anglo – Burmese war and the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, was a watershed moment in the history of Assam in more than one ways: it led to the gradual annexation of Assam into the British Indian Empire and paved the way for the inevitable exit of the 600 year old Ahom rule in Assam. British rule brought about the much needed stability, peace, and order in Assam after the region witnessed half a century of political chaos, unrest, and bloodshed. It must be pointed out here that the British East India Company which was in the helm of affairs in Assam, post 1826, was a trade concern and it was primarily motivated by economic and strategic reasons to annex Assam. Discovery of tea and prospects of mineral exploration being the economic reason (this was more significant as the company was loosing its monopoly over the tea trade in China and therefore was looking for an alternative source of supply) and prevention of the reoccurrence of the Burmese invasion was the strategic factor.

Major colonial policies in Assam were initiated invariably with two objectives in mind which was in fact the case with the rest of India – revenue maximization and resource exploration/exploitation. Direct appropriation of the colony’s surplus in the form of revenue was needed to finance the cost of administration, purchase of colonial products, and also to
maintain the army.\textsuperscript{1} At the same time the colony was to be transformed and developed as a reproductive colony in the agricultural and mineral spheres.\textsuperscript{2} Two major economic transformations initiated by the new colonial regime immediately after the annexation of Assam was the monetization of the revenue system by doing away with the personal service associated with ‘\textit{paik}’ system and assessing each ‘\textit{paik}’ in a lump sum of Rs 3 for his homestead, garden and rice lands.\textsuperscript{3} The other major change was the massive colonial investment to develop the tea, coal, and oil industries of Assam. All these economic changes naturally led to structural changes in the administrative fronts primarily in the maintenance of revenue records, and also in the administration of justice by providing for law and order and promoting private property rights in land.

Assam at the time of British occupation had a ravaged economy with a scanty population. Civic infrastructure in the form of educational institutions in the modern sense of the term was almost absent. The erstwhile Ahom rulers of Assam paid minimal importance to trade and commercial activities; barter was the general mode of transaction, and monetary economy was virtually non existent. The native population therefore failed to respond positively to these structural changes and the limited opportunities the new regime offered. Hence the British had no other option but to encourage immigration into Assam of those groups who could assist it in realizing its economic interests in Assam. Immigration was encouraged into those occupations where the local population was found to be in short supply either in terms of skills or numbers or both. To emphasize this point, the present work has taken the study of four migrant groups.

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\textsuperscript{1} Chandra, Bipan. \textit{Essays on Colonialism}, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2000, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{ibid}, p. 65.
\end{flushleft}
A) The Bengali Caste Hindus from Sylhet and Bengal – Early exposure to the British system of administration and institutions, presence of a relatively superior educational infrastructure in both Sylhet and Bengal, and the apathy of the colonial administration to replicate the same in Assam, led to a situation where the local population was found to be short of new professional skills to avail themselves of the several new opportunities spawned by the new administrative and governance restructuring of Assam and hence left the space for a long time to be filled by the Bengali caste Hindus.

B) The Migration of the Marwaris – This was another instance where the local population was found to be deficient particularly in the field of trade and commerce. Due to limited trade activities during the pre colonial period, and the near lack of commercial contacts and capital, led to the virtual absence of any trading class in Assam and the void space was to be filled by the astute merchants of Marwar.

A.J.M. Mills in his report on the administration of Assam in 1853 wrote “Assam is prolific in minerals, but the want of labour deters speculators from embarking their capital in developing its resources.” Mills also wrote about Assam being endowed with superabundance of land but again lacking in labour to develop them. Resource whether in the form of waste lands or mineral extracts needs a huge labour force to develop and Assam was lacking in that front too. This led to the migration of two of the largest migrant groups into Assam –

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5 *ibid*, p. 17.
C) Migration of the Tea Garden Labourer – A heterogeneous group of myriad backward tribes hailing from several parts of India and even Nepal, they came mainly to work in the tea plantations of Assam, and this migration was a closely coordinated government affair involving several provinces of British India.

D) The East Bengali Muslim - One of the most prolific races of South Asia, and mainly working as farm cultivators in the congested districts of Eastern Bengal, their migration started during the early decades of the 20th Century.

Objectives – The present work attempts

A) To analyze in an in-depth manner the various factors that led to the migration of these above mentioned groups into Assam, more specifically in the districts of the Brahmaputra valley, and also to examine the various stages of their migration during the colonial period.

B) To examine the various incentives offered by the colonial government in Assam to encourage the migration of these above mentioned groups.

C) To examine the nature of the relationship between these migrant groups and the indigenous Assamese population, the issues where they were in conflict with one another and the matters where they cooperated.

D) To explore the various factors that led to the rise of Assamese sub nationalism in the 19th and 20th Century vis-à-vis their clash of interests with the immigrant groups.
Significance of the Problem:

The issue of migration has been a dominant central theme in the social and the political discourse of Assam ever since it became a part of the British Indian Empire in 1826. During the post colonial period influx of immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan and then Bangladesh led to a series of agitations spearheaded by the All Assam Student Union. At the same time conflict continued to persist between the different migrant groups and the indigenous tribes of Assam. All these agitations and conflicts centre around two vital questions: Whether immigrants are threatening the cultural and political identity of Assam? Whether some of these immigrants groups are dominating the economy of Assam at the cost and the exclusion of the natives? The present work attempts to seek an answer to these questions by examining the different aspects of migration into colonial Assam in its proper historical context.

Hypothesis – The present work will test following two hypotheses –

A) The colonial government encouraged immigration into Assam purely on economic reasons based on their twin objectives of revenue maximizations and resource exploration.

B) Clashes between the migrants and the indigenous population took place on cultural and economic issues and since the Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) competed with the indigenous section of the population on both these spaces, Assamese were more anti Bengali in their sentiments than anti immigrants. Again the way, the colonial government reshaped the political boundary of Assam in 1874 with the addition of certain Bengali dominated areas more particularly the inclusion of
Sylhet into Assam, had a lot to do with the anti Bengali spirit of Assamese subnationalism movement.

Review of Literature –

Migration into Assam has been looked at from a variety of perspectives by different scholars. Some of the notable works are outlined below.

1) Ahmed Abu Nasar Saied, edited, *Nationality Question in Assam*, *The Economic and Political Weekly, 1980 – 81, Debate*, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati & Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006. – The work is mainly a collection of articles/letters published by the journal ‘Economic and the Political Weekly’ which led to a good amount of intellectual debate on the nature, the context, and the rationale of the Assam movement spearheaded by the AASU (All Assam Student Union). In trying to locate the genesis of the anti foreigner movement back to the colonial times, Amalendu Guha’s article titled ‘Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist, Assam Anti – Foreigner Upsurge, 1979 – 80’, puts the blame on the Colonial rulers and their policy of divide and rule for the never ending enmity between the immigrant Bengali and the indigenous Assamese on a range of cultural and economic issues. This and other set of articles are extremely useful in understanding the different trends of sub nationalism in Assam.

2) Barpujari, H. K. (Edited), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Volume IV, V, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 1993. – Both these volumes deal in detail with the early history of the British rule in Assam and the transition brought about by the colonial rule in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of Assam. But
the volumes do not give us a complete picture on the different dimensions of immigration into Assam during the colonial period to the extent that one feels that this aspect of the colonial rule in Assam is almost ignored. But there are important chapters in both the volumes dealing with genesis of the Assamese middle class and the role they played along with certain socio-political organizations and the press in arousing political consciousness among the Assamese.


4) Barpujari, H. K. The American Missionaries and North – East India (1836 – 1900), Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1986. – This book primarily focuses on the activities of the Christian Missionaries in North East India from the early decades of the British occupation of Assam, till the beginning of the 20th Century. In making an analysis of their activities, the book highlights one of their major initiatives or rather their most notable contribution in resurrecting the Assamese language after its dislodgement from the schools and courts of Assam. Relying on a cache of primary sources in the form of official letters, the book challenges one of the ‘myths’ that the Bengali clerks were entirely responsible for the imposing their language in the schools and courts of Assam and rightly puts the blame on the colonial authorities for that wrongful act.

5) Baruah, Apurba Kumar. Social Tensions in Assam, Middle Class Politics, Purbanchal Prakashan, 1991. – This work is extremely beneficial in exploring the
various trends of Assamese sub nationalism both during the pre and the post independence period and also the various aspects of the conflicts between the Bengali caste Hindus and the Assamese more particularly on the language issue.

6) Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *David Scott in North East India, A study in British Paternalism*, Munshiram, Manoharlal Publications, New Delhi, 1970. – The book explores the major transformations brought by the British in the administration and the economy of Assam during the tenure of David Scott who was appointed as the Agent of the North East Frontier to the government of Bengal during the course of the Anglo – Burmese war. The book briefly narrates as to how these changes, more particularly in the area of administration led to the immigration of Bengali clerks and officials into Assam.

7) Barooah, Nirode Kumar. *Gopinath Bardoloi, ‘The Assam Problem’ and Nehru’s Centre*, Bhabani Print and Publications, Guwahati, 2010. – The book is mainly focused on the political life of Gopinath Bardoloi from 1937 till 1950, though it also presents a meticulous and exhaustive account of the politics of Assam during the freedom struggle and the first three years of the post independence era.

8) Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press, 1999. – This book makes an attempt to trace out the genesis of Assamese sub nationalism from the colonial period, thereby focusing on the activities of the socio cultural organizations like the ‘Assam Samgrakshini Sabha’ and the role of Assamese public intellectuals of that period like Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and others on the issue of immigration, with a brief analysis on the
background of the different immigrant groups that poured into Assam during the colonial period.

9) Bhuyan, S. K. *Anglo – Assamese Relations, 1771 – 1826*, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1990. – This book is an useful reference to understand the socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in Assam in the period preceding the annexation of Assam to the British Indian Empire following the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826.

10) Bhuyan, Arun Chandra and De, Shiba Pada. (Edited), *Political History of Assam*, 1940 – 1947, Volume III, Publication Board, Assam. 1999. - This book deals mainly with the events following Assam’s participation in the Indian national movement but at the same time the book contains valuable information relating to the activities of the Assam Provincial Muslim League and the role played by the government headed by Muhammad Saadulla in encouraging the settlement of East Bengali migrants in Assam on the plea of ‘Grow More Food Campaign’ from 1940 – 45.

11) Bhuyan, Arun. *Nationality Upsurge in Assam*, Government of Assam, August, 2001 – This work contains s number of articles written by a host of prominent authors, academicians, and researchers, concentrating on the genesis and trends of Assamese sub nationalism. There are two articles in this book, one titled as ‘Nationalism: Pan Indian and Regional in a Historical perspective’ by Amalendu Guha and another titled ‘The Assamese literature and the Nationalist Upsurge’ by Gobinda Prasad Sarma which are particularly relevant for the purpose of this work.
12) Chakravorty, Gorki. *Assam’s Hinterland, Society and Economy in the Char Areas*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2009 - The book provides an insight into the historical perspectives of the different factors that led to the migration of the East Bengali Muslims into Assam by offering valuable inputs on the deplorable economic conditions of the congested districts of Eastern Bengal and its people in the early 20th Century, which left them with no options but to migrate into Assam in search of greener pastures.

13) Chowdhury, Prosenjit. *Socio – Cultural Aspect of Assam in the nineteenth Century*, Vikas Publishing House Private Limited, New Delhi, 1994. – This book is mainly a collection of articles which attempts to study objectively the different significant aspects of 19th century Assam. The work is important in the sense that it tries to comprehend and analyze the socio – historical roots of linguistic nationalism in Assam that dominated its socio – political landscape for many decades.


15) Gait, Sir, E. A. *A History of Assam*, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1926, Reprinted, 1997. – This book is basically a comprehensive history of Assam from the ancient to the modern period and the last few chapters of this book dealing with the History of Colonial Assam are quite valuable.

16) Gohain, Hirendranath. *Assam, A Burning Question*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1984. – Mainly focusing on the Assam Movement of the 1970’s, this book also deals with the different issues which put the migrants and the indigenous...
population at odds with each others, more primarily the conflicts between the caste Hindu Bengalis and the Assamese. The author’s insightful observations on the genesis of the Assamese middle class are quite valuable for the present work.

17) Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826 -1947*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2006. – In this book, the author analyses the socio-economic and political conditions of Assam during the colonial period. It also deals with the nature of the relationship between the various immigrant groups and the indigenous Assamese community, more particularly the emphasis is on the Bengali immigrants – both Hindu and the Muslims. But the crucial part of this book is the epilogue where Amalendu Guha explains the nature of the tensions between the ‘Pan Indian Nationalism’ and the ‘Regional Nationalism in Assam’ during the colonial era. The work primarily focuses on the horrible condition of the tea garden labourer, as well as the different aspects of the electoral politics in Assam during the colonial period. The work provides us with valuable insights on the various incentives and exemptions enjoyed by the European planters in Assam at the expense of the native Assamese peasant.

18) Guha, Amalendu. *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society, Polity, Economy*, Published for Centre for Social Sciences, Calcutta, by K. P. Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1991. – As the title of the book suggests, this work examines the socio-economic, political structures of Assam from the medieval period and also focuses on the early impact of the British rule in Assam. The overhauling of the revenue system, the monetization of the economy, the beginning of the tea industry in Assam, the evils associated with the opium trade in Assam and the impact that the
Bengal renaissance in the 19th century had on the social fabric of Assam are all analyzed in detail in this book.


20) Goswami, P. C. The Economic Development of Assam, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1963. – This book is one of the first of its kind which entirely concentrates on the myriad challenges that hinder the economic development of Assam, tracing the roots of the economic woes of Assam to the colonial period and in the processes of the examination of these challenges, this book also analyses the demographic transition brought about by immigration during the colonial rule in Assam.

21) Goswami, Priyam. Assam in the Nineteenth Century, Industrialization and Colonial Penetration, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 1999 – This book focuses on the pattern of industrial development in Assam during the colonial period and deals in a very limited but with insight the issue of migration into the tea gardens of Assam and other related industries.

22) Goswami, Priyam. (Edited), Changing Pattern of Economy and Society, (19th and 20th century North - East India), Department of History, Gauhati University, 2007. - This book is mainly a collection of selected papers presented at the seminar on ‘Changing pattern of economy and their impact on Society in North East India
during the 19th and the 20th Century’ which deals with a range of themes like Changing pattern of land ownership, Industry and Labour, Demography and Social Change, Missionary Activities, Gender and society, Development and Environment.

Two of the papers: ‘The role of the East Bengali Immigrants in the Economy of the Brahmaputra valley’ by I. S. Mumtaza and ‘The Marwaris and the Economy of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Early Twentieth Century’ by Barnali Sarma makes an attempt to examine the role of the East Bengalis and the Marwari migrants respectively on the economy of Assam.

23) Griffith, Percival Joseph. The History of Indian Tea Industry, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967. - This book is a historical narrative on the development of the tea industry in the Indian subcontinent during the pre independence and post independence period. The book also focuses on the various issues of the labour - management conflict in the tea industry of Assam.

24) Hazarika, Sanjoy. Strangers of the Mist, Tales of war and peace from India’s north – East, Penguin Books, 1994. – The book is an attempt to understand the various secessionist activities prevailing in some of the states of North – East India, the author concentrates particularly on the state of Assam and Nagaland, in its proper historical context.

25) Hussain, Monirul. Assam Movement, Class Ideology and Identity, Manak Publications in Association with Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1993. - This book mainly examines the various aspects and issues of the Assam Movement of the late 1970’s and early 80’s and also tries to analyze the issues of immigration and Assamese nationalism from a historical perspective tracing the roots of the problem
of immigration from the colonial period. The book is extremely vital as the author tries to demonstrate through various statistical data on the extent of assimilation that had taken place among the immigrant communities more specifically among the Eastern Bengali Muslim with the Assamese language and culture.

26) Kar, M. *Muslim Politics in Assam, Pre Independent period*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati, 1990. – The book presents a detail account on the migration of the East Bengali Muslims into Assam during the last part of the 19th and first decades of the 20th Century. In this book the author has focused on certain important issues like the legality of the ‘Line System’ and the legislative debates on the matter, the response of the Saadulla ministry and the Congress government on the unabated migration of the East Bengali Muslims, and more importantly the reasons that made the All India Muslim League decide to have Assam within East Pakistan.


28) Misra, Udayon. *The Transformation of Assamese Identity*, H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture (4) The North –East India Association, Shillong, 2001 - This work attempts to initiate a debate on the tangled question of Assamese identity and the challenges it had faced and continue to face during the colonial and post colonial period.

30) Nag, Sajal. *Nationalism, Separatism and Secessionism*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 1999. – This book mainly explores the various aspects of sub nationalism in India, the factors which were responsible for its emergence and also the various regional trends of sub nationalism across India.


32) Sharma, Dr. Manoroma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam, Middle Class Hegemony*, Ajanta Publishers, New Delhi, 1990 - The book focuses on the genesis of the Assamese middle class whose leadership and ideas shaped and influenced the Assamese sub nationalism movement during the colonial period and even beyond it.

33) Sharma, Dr. Devabrata. (Edited), *Migration and Assimilation, Society, Economy, Politics of Assam* (A Collection of Research Paper submitted at the National Seminar), Jorhat College (AMAL) in Collaboration with Danish Books, 2009. – This book is mainly a collection of papers submitted in the course of a national seminar on the issue of migration and the process of assimilation of the various migrant groups with the greater Assamese nationality. A good number of these
papers have focused on the migration of the multi lingual tea garden labourers and the East Bengali Muslims into Assam during the late 19th and early 20th Century. Different questions pertaining to their migration and their inclination or non inclination to assimilate with the Assamese society and the numerous stumbling blocks which stands on the way of this process are all highlighted in this work.

34) Timberg, Thomas A. *The Marwaris – From Traders to Industrialists*, Vikas Publishing House, 1978. – The book focuses primarily on the trade and industrial activities of the Marwari community throughout India, their rise as an influential trading community since the colonial period in different regions of India. Section ‘E’, Appendix ‘A’ of this book is particularly useful in having an idea about the regional variation of the Marwari migration in different parts of India.

35) Weiner, Myron. *Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict*, Princeton University, 1978. – This book presents a lucid analysis on the roots of ethnic conflicts in India and as one of its case study tries to focus on the conflicts that had taken place between the different immigrant groups that had migrated into Assam and the indigenous Assamese population, on a range of unresolved and controversial questions like identity, economic domination of the migrants, etc.

**Journals and Seminar Papers**

*Proceedings of the North East India History Association (NEIHA).* – Research papers submitted by numerous scholars during the annual proceedings of the North East India History Association have focused on a range of issues relating to the polity and history of North East India. Among many such scholarly works, two papers contributed by
Ramesh Kalita and three papers submitted by Sajal Nag are relevant for the present work.

a) Kalita, Ramesh. ‘Immigration into Assam, British Policy and Assamese Middle Class’, (1826 – 1900), Volume, XIII, 1992, and Kalita, Ramesh. Immigration into Assam, British Policy and Assamese Middle Class, (1930 - 1947), Volume, XIV, 1994. - This set of two articles focuses on the issue of migration during the colonial period in Assam and the policy followed by the British colonial government in encouraging migration and the response of the emerging middle class of Assam towards migration during the period.

b) Nag, Sajal. ‘Economic Roots of the Regional Capitalist Class, A Study of the Primitive Accumulation of the Marwari Community in Assam’, Volume IV, 1983. – This paper is an attempt to narrate in detail the various economic activities of the immigrant Marwari traders in Assam during the colonial period which ultimately led them to dominate the entire internal trade and commerce of the North – East region.

c) Nag, Sajal. ‘Social Reactions to Bania exploitation, A Study of the Ideological Revolt of Assamese Against Merchants and Usurers as found in a 19th century poetry collection’, Volume VI, 1985. - This work provides a detail analysis on the collection of poetry as found in the booklet ‘Chintanol’ by Kamalakanta Bhattacharya who tried to raise the awareness of the youth of then Assam against the usurious exploitation of the Marwari ‘Mahajans’ practiced against the helpless peasant of Assam who were ultimately pushed to the brink of
penury, as they were trapped in a never ending debt trap of these Marwari ‘Mahajans’.

d) Nag, Sajal. – ‘Emergence of Assamese nationalism in relation to language politics’, NEIHA, Volume 2, 1981 and ‘Language, Class, Superstructure’, Volume VII, 1986. – Both these articles by Sajal Nag focuses on the question of the language controversy issue, following the dislodgement of the Assamese and the imposition of the Bengali language on Assam in 1837 and the role played by it in the emergence of linguistic nationalism in Assam since the 1850’s.

The above mentioned books and Journals and related Seminar Papers deals with the various issues relating to the inflow of migration into Assam during the colonial era in a very limited manner. Some of them focus only on a particular migrant group while others deals with the different migrant groups in the context of the emergence of Assamese sub nationalism and the Assam movement of the 1970’s thereby not making a comprehensive analysis on the different questions pertaining to migration in Assam during the colonial period. The present work attempts to fill this vacuum.

**Chapterization**

The work has been divided into five chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion.

The main Chapters are divided as

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Early Migrant Groups into Colonial Assam (A study of the migration of the Bengalis, the Marwari Merchant traders and the tea garden labourers)
Chapter III: Migration of Farm Cultivators from East Bengal

Chapter IV: The Assamese Middle Class and the Roots of Assamese Sub Nationalism.

Chapter V: Summary and Conclusion

Bibliography

Appendix

Glossary

Maps

Methodology

The work has relied on Primary as well as Secondary sources subjecting them to critical -
external and internal – analysis.

Data Collection

Data has been collected from -

Primary Sources –

A) Records of the Assam Legislative Council/ Assembly Debates.

B) Land Revenue Reports, Manuals,

C) Census Reports of Assam.

D) Other Relevant Reports.

E) Accounts of Government officials.

Secondary Sources
A) Authoritative Historical books and literature.

B) Journals and Seminar Papers.

C) News Papers/ Magazines.

D) Miscellaneous.