The Brahmaputra Valley or Assam proper did not face any large-scale immigration from outside in the pre-British days. The medieval Assam was averse to the admission of foreigners into the country. The Ahom rulers had a bitter experience of the western rules. From the time of Muhammad Bin Baktiyar Khillig's invasion in 1205 up to the final expulsion of the Mughal in 1622 Assam was subjected to frequent attacks by the Muhammadans from Bengal and consequently the people from Bengal and other parts of India were treated as a potential source of danger. All the people living in the west of the Ahom territory were known as "Bengal" and the term was later applied to the Europeans also. The Ahom rulers admitted only the licensed foreigners to their country and insisted on cutting off all their connections with the country of their origin. The new entrants were expected to be assimilated with the old Assamese folk 'in language, manner and racial sympathy'.

The invention and institutionalisation of the boggy of 'Ednial' was a shrewd political move of the Ahom rulers to create a fear psychosis and distaste among the people of the region about the people and system of the West. Their aim was to preserve and

expand their rule towards the West. The Muslims who came to settle permanently in Assam were accepted by the Ahoms and they supplied to the State certain specialised services like deciphering and interpreting Persian documents, carving inscription, making swords and guns and manufacture of gun-powder. The Muslims settlers of the Ahom age identified themselves completely with the indigenous Assamese of the valley.

Shihabuddin Talish, the Muslim chronicler who accompanied Nawab Mirsumla to Assam during his expedition of 1662-63 found among these Muslims "nothing of Islam except name, their hearts were inclined far more towards association with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims.” The Muslim settlements in Assam proper commenced in the western part long before the Ahom-Mughal conflicts of the sixteenth century and in the upper portion with Mirsumla's invasion of 1662. Even before the advent of the Ahoms in the eastern Assam the western Assam sustained several Muslim invasions from Bengal and consequently Muslim settlements were established in Kamrup and its adjoining areas. It was during the Ahom-Mughal conflicts of the seventeenth century that the Muhammadans were able to establish their control over Kamrup and Goalpara of western Assam. They also established their own financial administration in these

4. ibid., p. 295
places. As a matter of fact a large number of Muslims settled permanently in Kamrup and Darrang through conquest. The early Muslim settlements in Howgong were also contemporaneous with the expedition of Qhyasuddin in 1227, but those in the upper valley were not before Mirsamla's invasion of 1662. It is interesting to note that the later Muslim immigration took place in the places of the valley where they had their earlier control between 1603 and 1682. The early Muslim settlements in the valley created no socio-political conflicts and the Hindu Assam of the Ahom age suffered neither tension from the Muslim immigrants nor any problem in assimilating them into their own fold.

Immigration in the real sense began in the modern period and that too after the annexation of the country by the East India Company. The colonial economic developmental process of the British period opened the flood gates of immigration from the West. The period from 1826 to 1874 was a period of transition of Assam from the pre-capitalist economy to the colonial phase. During the period the collaborating trades, the bankers, the lawyers and the clerks from other Indian provinces came to Assam as the camp followers of the new colonial masters. The closed society became exposed to the immigration of labour, new skills, new vices and the new ideas.

5. Kar, M., Pre-Independence Muslim Immigration to Assam and Attempts to Legislative Restrictions - Seminar on 'State Politics in Eastern India', 21-22 March, 1986, Dibrugarh University, ICSSR, Shillong, pp. 3-4
6. Guha, op.cit., p. 25
There were mainly three streams of large scale immigration during the British period. The first stream consisting of thousands of labourers were recruited annually from outside the province to man the tea gardens of Assam. These immigrants were the biggest group. The inflow of this group continued up to the forties of the present century. The second in importance was the stream of immigrants consisting of the people from eastern Bengal, of whom about 85 to 90 per cent were Muslim peasants. This stream continued to flow till 1947. The third stream was the Nepali graziers from Nepal and Darjeeling. The inflow of these immigrants was of such a scale that the indigenous components of the valley of the Brahmaputra came down in percentage term by the end of the nineteenth century. Amongst the classes of the immigrants the Bengalees as a group was linguistically and culturally dominant and they came in conflict with that of the Assamese of the valley. They not only responded poorly to the process of assimilation but also aspired for the same dominant role in Assam proper. These immigrants created problems in regard to land, language and religion of Assam. The Muslim immigrants of rural Bengal came forward to demand more and more lands in Assam and the Bengalee Hindus residing mainly in the urban areas of Assam claimed jobs in the province. The latter also claimed the bilingual status

of Assam. The Bengalee immigrants, both Hindus and Muslims, generated conflicts and tensions of multi-dimensional nature, viz., economic, social, linguistic and political. In the present chapter, however, the discussion will be confined only to the role of the immigrants, particularly of the Muslim immigrants in the growth and development of the linguistic-cultural identities of the North East India.

The First Phase (1826-1901):

It was only after the restoration of the British occupation that the avenues of employment in offices, trade and other economic pursuits in Assam were opened and the influx of people from the neighbouring districts of Bengal, viz., Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensingh and Rangpur began. These newcomers from Bengal were experienced in the art of administration of the Company and entered as 'amlahs'. These 'amlahs' replaced the traditional official aristocracy of Assam who were lacking in skill required for colonial administration. The inflow of the Bengali amlahs was intensified as Bengali replaced Persian language in the Courts of Assam in April 1831. The introduction of Bengali made the Bengalees indispensable for the schools of Assam. The virtual monopoly in the offices of the Government departments by the immigrants from Bengal generated

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8. Baruah (Mrs.), op.cit., p. 598
ill-feeling and deep resentment amongst the upper classes of the Brahmaputra Valley as they were the first victims of the immigration. All that the Assamese knew about the Bengal character, at this stage, was from the life led by the Bengalee amlahs and the former developed a low opinion about the virtues of the latter. This opinion, however, changed as the Assamese themselves proceeded to Bengal presidency in pursuit of trade and higher education and started acquiring a correct picture of the Bengalees. The Bengalees also, though came as fortune seekers, settled down permanently and linked themselves with the people of the soil. It was not the cultural or linguistic domination but the economic deprivation of the period that made the first Bengalee immigrants the eyesore of the high-ups of the Assamese society.

The condition of the indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley at the time of expulsion of the Burmese had been deplorable. The Burmese invaders by their barbarous and inhuman conduct had caused destruction of more than half of the already thinned population of the later Ahom period. In 1876 the officials estimated only 830,000 people in the depopulated

12. Gait, op.cit., p. 341
Assam. The population further decreased to less than seven lakhs during the first few years of the Company rule. In 1853 a marked increase was recorded when the population of the valley including that of Goalpara was found to be more than twelve lakhs. The population rose to fifteen lakhs in 1872. The gradual increase in the population of the valley was mainly due to the influx of outsiders, particularly the imported labourers, who were recruited from outside and brought to meet the requirements of the tea plantations. Of the total population of eighteen lakhs in 1881 nearly three lakhs were immigrants. 13

Between 1870 and 1901 the positive factor in the increase of the population of the province was immigration. The immigrants of the period mostly were the tea garden labourers and a small section of them comprised the Muslim cultivators from Bengal. The indigenous population of the Brahmaputra Valley was stagnant or to some extent decreased during the two decades before 1901 and the immigrants more or less neutralised the real decline. Thus the result was that the non-indigenous population became at least one quarter of the population of Assam proper in 1901. Two-fifths of the population of the district of Lakhimpur were returned as persons born outside the province and only 39 per cent of them recorded Assamese as

their mother tongue. The outsiders constituted a quarter of the population of both Darrang and Sibsagar, the two Assamese heartland districts. In 1901 the total immigrant population was 766,000 and of these about 83 per cent was the tea garden labourers, most of whom were the Hindus. The Muslim immigration during the period was very small. The largest number of the outsiders were recruited by the European tea planters and a small portion came on their own in search of economic sustenance in the new British province. Before the emergence of separate Chief Commissioner's province in 1874, Assam consisting of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar had 86,197 Muslims of the total population of 14,71,227. The percentage of the Muhammadan population was only 5.9.

The constitution of Assam into a separate Chief Commissioner's province by incorporating the districts of Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet in 1874 brought change into the percentage of the Muslim population as well as in the linguistic and religious character of the traditional Assam. The percentage of the Muslim population automatically increased from 5.9 per cent to 28 per cent due to the existence of about ten lakhs of Muslims in Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara.* Even

14. Das, S.K., Infiltration Issue in Assam: A Demographic Study, Indian Citizen Preservation Committee, Guwahati, pp. 7-8
15. Kar, M., op.cit., pp. 3-4

*At the time of reconstitution in 1874, the total Muslim population of the Brahmaputra Valley was 1,76,109 against a total of 19,15,988; Sylhet's total population was 17,19,539 of whom 8,54,131 were Muslims. Cachar had 74,361 Muslims out of total of 2,35,027. - Kar, op.cit., p. 5
though Assam was separated from Bengal it remained a Bengali dominated province. The Census of 1901 enumerated 167 languages in Assam and Bengali, which became one of the indigenous languages of the province since 1874, was returned as the language of 48 per cent of people. Assamese, the language of Assam proper, was returned by the 22 per cent of the people. The other main indigenous north eastern linguistic groups were Bodo including plain Kacharis with 218,000 population, Kiri (40,000), Garo (30,000), Rabha (20,000), different Naqa dialects including Mikira (82,000), Lushai (72,000), Kuki (47,000), Khasi (123,000) and Syntangs (54,000). The noticeable feature of the linguistic behaviourism in the Brahmaputra Valley, during the period, was the adoption of Assamese by different indigenous linguistic groups including the tribesmen. The gradual adoption of Assamese, the lingua-franca of the valley, by the tribesmen came as a natural outcome of economic interdependence of the hills and the plains. 16

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or the wide acres of Assam. The fertility of the soil, attractive earnings for skill labour and the prevailing conditions of easy matrimony into local families were viewed as favourable conditions for accommodation of large-scale immigrants into Assam. In the face of love and hatred spectrum of the Assamese-Bengali relations, the enlightened section of the people, however, hailed the changes as inevitable and necessary.17

The Second Phase (1901-1921):

During 1901-1921 the natural growth rate in the indigenous population became positive and the overall rate of population increase was accelerated due to the increase in immigration. With the labourers of the tea industries, the inflow of a new stream of the Nepalese joined. The flow from the "East Bengal colonist" intensified. The trend of neck-to-neck increase due to immigration and the natural rate continued up to 1921. Since about 1905, the land-hungry peasants from East Bengal began to pour into the valley and settled down on the uninhabited reverine tracts. According to the birth place data of the Census of 1911 the immigrants from the neighbouring Bengal districts numbered only 51,000 in Goalpara and 3,000 in Assam proper. By 1921 it increased to 141 thousand in Goalpara and 117 thousand in Assam proper. The number of the East Bengal

17. Guha, or. cit., pp. 67-68
settlers, together with their children in the Brahmaputra Valley, was estimated at 300 thousand by the census authorities of 1921. The virgin and fertile land of the valley attracted the Muslim agriculturist population from the neighbouring province from the very beginning of the present century. Assam with its unexplored fertile lands in the sub-continent of India became the destination of the immigrant farmers seeking land for cultivation. From the point of view of economics it was a "farmer migration" as distinct from that of the tea garden labourers. The "Farmer migration" involved short distance movement from the adjoining districts of Bengal. The attraction was very real for the people of Mymensingh as it had tremendous pressure on land. Oppressed by the Zamindars the land seeking cultivators of this district came to Assam. The Census Report of 1911 for the first time mentioned about the movement of the immigrant farm labourers from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogura and Rangpur to Assam. The settlers first settled in the 'Char' lands of Goalpara. The population of Goalpara district rose in the decade 1901-11 by 30 per cent in place of 2 per cent in the previous decade. Since then immigration went on unabated. After 1911 this class of settlers spread beyond Goalpara to other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. They came with their families and

18. Das, S.K., op.cit., pp. 8-9

*In 1900 Mymensingh had a population of 39,16,068, of which 27,95,548 (67 per cent) were Muslim, and 95 per cent were landless labourers (Far, V., op.cit., p. 5).
became part and parcel of the permanent population of the province. The settlers settled in all the four lower and central districts of the valley, namely, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong. Only the two Upper Assam districts, viz., Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, however, remained unaffected. One-fifth of the population of Goalpara and one seventh of that of Nowgong were the Bengal-born people by 1921. Kamrup was also filling up fast and Darrang became explored by the settlers who extended on the river banks. Between 1901-11 there occurred a four-fold increase in the East Bengal settlers in the Province.  

Although immigration was an welcome phenomenon for the labour short, land abundant Assam, from the economic point of view it created a serious threat to the cultural identity of the indigenous people of Assam. By the time the 'farmer migration' took the form of large scale influx and the Muslim population entered into the Hindu dominated valley of the Brahmaputra, the economic problem became a complicated issue touching social, political and culturo-linguistic aspects of Assam. As 85 per cent of these immigrants were from the district of Mymensingh, the immigrants were termed as 'Mymensinghghias'.  

Their mother tongue was Bengali. Although they were Muslims by religion, they were distinguishable from those

20. Far, M., op.cit., p. 5
of the assimilated Muslims of Assam on the basis of their habits and customs. The hazards of life and calling, sufferings and sacrifices made the immigrants somewhat rough and intolerant in their dealing with the people of the province. Two groups of people with different ancestries, customs and habits, economic condition, cultures, language, thus, came face to face and inevitably came into confrontation with each other.  

In view of the indiscriminate settlement of the immigrants in the Assamese dominated areas, the Deputy Commissioner of Nongong formulated a plan in 1916 segregating the newcomers and allowing them to settle in certain areas demarcated by lines. Thus lines were drawn on the maps of different localities to indicate the boundaries beyond which the immigrants were not allowed to settle. The phrase "Line System" was used to indicate the arrangement. It formally came into force in 1929. Due to the communal rivalry that was thriving under the patronage of the British Government and the growing economic pressure in the valley the immigrants both the Hindus and the Muhammadans became persona-non-grata to the province. Since 1901 the Bengali speakers were outnumbering the Assamese speakers in the province and in 1911 the census Commissioner pointed out that aspect in his report. Moreover, the Congress

21. Ibid., p. 7
23. Guha, op. cit., p. 206
resolution of 1917 accepting the principle of reorganization of the provinces on the linguistic basis also raised doubts and apprehensions in the mind of the leading sections of the Assamese middle class about the future of their province, since immigration from East Bengal continued. The Goalpara separation movement of 1918 under the umbrella of language and culture as well as the move to introduce Bengali as the language in the schools of the distinct increased their intensity of fear. Thus along with economic objections the culturo-linguistic considerations also came to dominate the attitude of the Valley towards the East Bengal immigrants.

**Developments during 1921-36:**

In the Reformed Council the issue of the East Bengal Muslims' immigration revolved round the Line System. On this issue the House was generally divided on communal lines. The Muhammadan councillors demanded the abolition of the Line System whereas the Hindu counterparts defended it to safeguard the interests of the Assamese people. With a view to restrict the settlement of the waste lands of the province with the immigrants as well as the foreigners, Mahadev Sarma moved a resolution in 1927. The resolution suggested the appointment

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24. Baruah (Mrs.), op.cit., pp. 573-74

of a Committee with non-official majority to examine the availability of the waste land as well as the desirability of preserving certain lands for the future development of the indigenous people of Assam. The mover characterised the immigrants as rough and aggressive in nature as against the 'weak and submissive' Assamese and felt the need for the protective measures. Basanta Kumar Das, a councillor from Sylhet also spoke in favour of protecting the interests of the children of the soil. Brojendra Narayan Chaudhury, a Swarajist councillor of Sylhet viewed the problem as Hindu-Muslim one and explained that the Hindus consisting of the Assamese, the Bengalees and others, as a class were home-keeping and they did not look favourably to the immigrants. He favoured reservation of lands for the Hindu population of Assam against the outsiders. The Muhammadans and the European councillors opposed the measure. A.W. Botham on behalf of the Government explained, by quoting figures that the alleged 'invasion' of the immigrants was much less than what was claimed by the members. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi did not object to the allotment of land to the immigrants, but at the same time favoured some protective measures for the local people. Sayidur Rahman, a councillor from Dibrugarh viewed the problem differently. He was not in favour of any restriction and found Bardoloi's claim unwanted.

27. Guha, op.cit., p.207
28. Kar, op.cit., pp. 16-18
He explained the reasons as follows:

"I must remind Mr. Bardoloi that protection and free trade are terms which come within the range of economics, but have no place in history. No spot in the globe can possibly be claimed as one's own by any particular race of community. Nowhere in history of the world has any particular community or race enjoyed monopoly of exclusive occupation in one place." 29

Regarding the future of the Mymensinghias in Assar he said,

"Today, they are Bengalis, 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 Ahoms and the Kalitas became Assamese. So, why raise sentimental objection to their coming? Why construct artificial barriers to keep them out?"

He further claimed,

"Let our war cry be not Assam for Assamese, but in the memorable words of His Excellency the other

Karamat Ali, a councillor from Jorhat also opposed the resolution and claimed that "God's spare lands are surely intended for God's spare population." The House ultimately rejected the resolution by 24 to 18 votes. The councillors who voted for the resolution were all Hindus. The Assamese opinion against the large scale immigration was, however, voice through the Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha. The Sabha pleaded for a restricted influx of the people and favoured their gradual assimilation with the local language and culture.

The tension over the large scale immigration of the East Bengal people intensified during the publication of the Census Report of the 1931. It revealed that from 1901 to 1931 the number of the Muslims in the Province, excluding those of Sylhet increased by 150 per cent as against the natural growth rate of 20 per cent. The observation of C.S. Mullan, the Superintendent of Census operation in Assam supplied fuel to the fire. His observation was as follows: "... by 1921 the first army crops of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army crops which followed them in the year 1931 has consolidated their position in that district and has also

30. ibid., p. 1095
31. Kar, op.cit., p. 17
33. Kar, op.cit., p. 6
completed the conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrana is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely, but the few thousand Mymensinghias in the North Lakhimpur are an outpost which may during the next decade prove to be a valuable basis of major operation. Wheresoever the carcass there the vultures be gathered together. Where there is wasteland thither flock the Mymensinghias.\(^34\) He not only forecast the future course of 'invasion' of the Mymensingh immigrants but also prophesied that "Sibsagar would ultimately remain the only district where an Assamese race would find a home of its own."\(^35\) In spite of the above observation the fact remained that the immigrant Muslims, for economic reasons, adopted Assamese language. The Governor of Assam explained to the legislative Council that there was no indication that the newcomers were destroying the culture and language of the Assamese in the valley. He pointed out that the immigrants were becoming Assamese. He quoted the Census Report to apprise the members about the linguistic position of the valley. The Report commented, "It is interesting to observe that in spite of large increase in the population of Assam at every census since 1901, the percentage of speakers of Assamese to the total population has remained steady. It is clear from the figure of the increase in the

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34. Census Report 1931, p. 51 cited by Baruah (Mrs.), op.cit., p. 577

35. Baruah (Mrs.), op.cit., p. 577
speakers of Assamese at this census that the language is not present in no danger of supersession." The Governor further observed, "Nothing could show more clearly the absorption that is going on. The speakers of Assamese are increasing in the same percentage as the immigrants. And this of course is what every student of history would expect. It is essential to bear in mind the distinction between immigration and armed invasion." He, thus, tried to impress the Assamese that they should not suffer from any lack of confidence in their own culture and language which could never be destroyed or submerged. 36 Despite Government assurance the apprehensions as well as anxieties persisted among the Assamese.

In course of time there came a change in the attitude of the Muhammadan councillors of the province and they came closer to each other in spite of their valley differences. Thus, in 1928 they passed a resolution recommending the retention of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam in the face of opposition of Hindu councillors of both the valleys. 37 Although there was no social intercourse between the Assamese Muslims and the new Muslim immigrants, the former were not critical of the latter. The former came forward to welcome the latter with the anticipation that the newcomers would be Assamised like them in due

36. ALCD, 1933, vol. XIII, Governor's Address, p. 5
37. ALCD, 1928, vol. VIII, see pp. 711-812
course and numerically strengthen the base of the Muslim communal politics in the province. This strategy worked well during the functioning of the Simon Commission and later under the system of Communal Award. With the changing demographic pattern between the Hindus and the Muslims the immigration issue assumed a political character. The Muslim leaders of both the valleys voiced their opposition to the anti-immigration move of the Brahmaputra Valley. The first Muslim effort to secure legislative action against the Line System came from Khan Bahadur Nuruddin Ahmed, a councillor from Nowgong. He, in 1936, moved a resolution to the effect that the Line System maintained in some districts of Assam Valley for confining settlement of the immigrants to certain areas only, should be abolished forthwith. He claimed that the Line System prevented the immigrants from being assimilated into the Assamese society. He pointed out that the system was discriminatory in nature as it applied only against the Muslims and not against the Hindu immigrants. He also pointed out that the system facilitated exploitation of the immigrants by the non-immigrant Bengalees as well as the interested Assamese who deliberately impeded assimilation for their own purpose. The House once again divided on communal lines. The Muhammadan councillors, irrespective of valleys, supported the resolution. Abual

38. Baruah (Mrs.)
39. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, pp. 1524-26
40. Kar, op.cit., p. 19
Mazid Ziaosshams of Goalpara complained that South African type of discrimination had been meted out to the Muslims in Assam which deserved abolition. While declining to be treated himself as a representative of the immigrants he claimed that the immigrants should be accepted like kith and kin. 41 Abdul Khaleque Chaudhury, a councillor from Sylhet also termed the system as 'cankar' of the society which encouraged and kept alive the racial distinction among different communities. 42 The Hindu councillors of both the valleys, on the other hand opposed the resolution. Mahendra Nath Gohain viewed that the subject matter of the resolution involved a life and death question of the indigenous population of the valley. 43 Sanat Kumar Das of Cachar defended the Line System and found it necessary to safeguard the race and language of the Assamese people. The abolition of the Line System, according to him, would mean the wiping out of the weak and meek Assamese by the mighty people of Mymensingh. 44 J.J.M. Nichols Roy of Shillong requested the councillors to consider the problem dispassionately as well as from the point of view of the indigenous people as no one wanted to be driven out from his own land. 45 Nilambar Duurse,

41. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, pp. 1529-30
42. Kar, op.cit., p. 20
43. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, p. 1534
44. ibid., p. 1532
45. ibid., p. 1538
viewed the resolution as an electioneering campaign of the mover and found it laudable from the point of view of the Muhammadans only but highly detrimental to the interests of the Hindu masses. In the face of all these arguments Nuruddin Ahmed, the mover of the resolution while highlighting the historical process of assimilation that worked over the Ahoms and the Muhammadans in Assam, wanted the adoption of the same approach towards the new immigrants from Mymensingh.

Till 1935 both the Bengali and the Assamese pupils of the Brahmaputra Valley received their instructions through their respective mother tongues in the Government schools of the province. But following the decision of the Calcutta University on the adoption of mother tongues as the media of instructions in place of English at High School stage, the Government of Assam decided to introduce unilingual schools in the province. It, thus, abolished Bengali sections in the Government schools of the valley and encouraged setting up of new aided schools exclusively for the Bengali children since 1935. The new system widened the gap between the Assamese and the Bengali communities. In view of the politico-economic changes in the province, the influential Bengali Hindus of

46. ibid., p. 1541
47. ibid., p. 1544
48. Guha, op.cit., p. 213
the Brahmaputra Valley also felt the stakes to their interests and in collaboration with some Marwaris formed the Assam Domiciled and Settlers Association in 1935. The Association, while proceeding with its own interest, tried to forge alliance with the Bengali Muslim settlers on common issues. But the latter maintained equidistance from the Assamese Muslims and the Bengali Hindu politicians of the valley. By 1936 Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, popularly known as Maulana Bhasani emerged as the accredited leader of immigrant Muslims of Assam.

**Developments during 1937-47:**

By this time the socio-economic problems attached to the Muslim immigrants acquired a political character. In the Assembly election of 1937 as many as five immigrant Muslim leaders were returned to the Assam Legislative Assembly. The large scale Muslim immigration and the Line System became a vital issue for the Assembly as well as the people outside. In 1937 Maulavi Munawwarali of Sylhet moved a resolution demanding the abolition of the Line System. He made a searching criticism of the system as being invidious as well as against the principle of nation building. Abdul Matin Chaudhury, a Muslim League stalwart found the measure humiliating not only for the

49. Deb. B.J., op.cit., p. 333
Bengalees from outside the province but also for the Bengalees within the province as well since the people of Sylhet and Cachar suffered the same fate when they came to settle in the Assam Valley. He claimed that the system created a division between the people living within the same province. It was also pointed out that it prevented the natural intercourse between the people and fostered a spirit of racial antipathy. The system was characterised as politically disastrous with baneful economic effects.\^51 Maulavi Dewan Ahbab Choudhury of Sylhet viewed the system as based on a wrong foundation of provincial patriotism which acted as a curse. According to him it barred the growth of a united India. He explained that a section of Indians were carrying wrong interpretation of geographical nationalism while dividing the Indian nationalism into several parts. They were giving rise to 'provincial nationalism', 'Valley nationalism', 'district nationalism' and so forth at the cost of Indian nationalism. He condemned these concepts and quoted Sarajini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore who described geographical nationalisms as "crime of all crimes" and "geographic idolatry". Identifying it as a caste system of Indian politics, he pointed out that the new concepts like "Punjab for Punjabis, Bengal for Bengalees, Assam for Assamese", were setting one province against the other. Thus he claimed that the abolition of the Line System would be a victory of

\^51. ibid., pp. 235-36
Indian nationalism over the divisive forces.52

The above resolution was moved ignoring the strong public opinion of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Ryot Sabhas of the valley organised meetings in different parts to oppose the move.53 Tin Diniya Asomiya, a local paper in its editorial dated 23 July, 1937 reminded the Assam Valley members that the firm opinion of the valley wanted the retention of Line System and opposition to the moves for its abolition.54 The valley’s strong opposition to the move was voiced in the Assembly through the representatives of the valley. The Hindu members, particularly the newly elected tribal leaders expressed their strong opposition to the abolition of Line System. Fhorsingh Terong, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Rupnath Brahma, Jobang D. Marak felt that abolition of the system would be detrimental to the interests of the tribal people. Omeo Kumar Das - a Congress leader also advocated the Line System as a protective measure necessary for the tribal people.55 Appreciating the arguments of the contending parties Rohini Kumar Chaudhury, the then Revenue Minister proposed the constitution of a Committee to examine different aspects of the Line System. In view of this declaration of the Government the resolution was withdrawn. The liberal approach

52. ibid., pp. 237-38
53. Tin Diniya Asomiya, Gauhati, July 13, 1937; July 27, 1937
54. ibid., July 23, 1937
55. ALAD, 1937, vol. I, see pp. 243-68
of Rohini Kumar Chaudhury was resented and he was subjected to
criticism in the local press.\textsuperscript{56} The net gain of the move, from
the Muslim point of view, was the expansion of the influence of
the Muslim League over the Muslim immigrants.

The linguistic issue connected with immigration con­
tributed to increase tension in the valley. Not only the
Bengali Hindus but also a section of the Muslim immigrants
demanded equal rights for the Bengali language. Matiur Rahman
Mia, a member elected from Goalpara West constituency claimed
in the floor of the Assembly as follows:

"We are Bengalees. Our mother tongue is Bengali! . . . .
Under the circumstances if the Assamese language be
imposed as a new burden on our shoulders, on our
children's shoulders and if we are deprived of our
mother tongue, then that will amount to depriving
our children from opportunities of education."\textsuperscript{57}

The linguistic-cultural conflicts between the immigrants and
the local people were examined thoroughly in the Line System
Committee which was constituted in 1938. The witnesses, both
official and non-officials appeared before the Committee and
explained the real position of the immigrants in the soci­

\textsuperscript{56} Tin Diniya Asomiya, July 27, 1937

\textsuperscript{57} ALAD, 1938, pp. 66-71 cited by Guha, A., op.cit., p. 259
cultural structure of the province. The Sub-Deputy Collector of Dhing Circle apprised the Committee that though the immigrants had previously adopted Assamese language and culture, they now changed their approach at the instance of the Muslim leaders of Bengal as well as due to the movement of the settlers and domiciled people of Assam. In the process of naturalisation also similar changes appeared. The official witnesses in general favoured the retention of the Line System and wanted to introduce separate lines for the people of Sylhet and Cachar who were settling in the Assam Valley. 58 Nilmani Phukan found the cultivating section of the immigrants in the process of assimilating themselves with the Assamese population. He, however, accused the Muslim leaders of the province for encouraging large scale immigration for their political gains and making the problem complicated. 59 Maulavi Amiruddin Ahmed a member of the Muslim League explained the Muslim attitude in the following words:

"When they first came, they were not unwilling but recently they are so on account of the movement of the Assam Samrakshini Sabha and other restrictions imposed on them. If these restrictions are done away with they have no objection to adopt Assamese." 60

59. ibid., p. 22
60. ibid., p. 26
He favoured the absorption and assimilation of the immigrants into Assamese culture. It repeatedly came before the Committee that the immigrants initially adopted Assamese but due to the activities of the Domiciled and Settlers' Association certain adverse changes took place in the process. Nuruddin Ahmed of Nowgong appearing before the Committee explained the other aspect involved in the poor response of the immigrants towards the process of assimilation. He apprised the Committee that at first the number of the immigrants was few and far between and so they assimilated themselves with the local people. The process suffered due to the increase in their number. They became strong enough to live by themselves. He identified the Line System as an obstacle in the way of mixing up of the immigrants with the Assamese. He also informed the Committee about the efforts taken by the Assam Samrakshini Sabha to bring the immigrants into Assamese fold. According to him the immigrants responded favourably to the call of the Sabha as the latter softened its attitude towards the Line System. He stressed the need for assimilation of the immigrants and held that the status of the domiciled people should not be given to the immigrants if they failed to adopt Assamese language and culture. 61

The Line System Committee failed to supply any practical solution to the vexed problem involving the immigrants

61. ibid., p. 41
excepting Abdul Matin Chaudhury, stressed on the assimilation of the immigrants with the country of their adoption. Almost all the members agreed on the following point: "Assamese should be learnt by them and taught in their school since it is an undoubted fact that the vast majority of the immigrants have come to this province to settle for good and have renounced all connections with the province of their origin. We consider that, as far as it is possible, consistent with original customs and habits, they should be merged into Assamese people. The process may take a long time in case of actual immigrants but there is no doubt that their descendants will find it very much easier and will eventually retain no recollection of the country from which they had come." 62 All the members excepting Dr. M.N. Saikia recommended the removal of restrictions on migration of the settlers from other districts of the province. Rabi Chandra Kachari, Kameswar Das and Sarveswar Barua in a separate note stressed on the necessity of assimilation of the immigrants into the Assamese fold. They also wanted to make it a condition prior to settlement of any

*The Committee was constituted with the following members: F.W. Hockenhull, as Chairman, Abdul Matin Chaudhury (Sylhet), Syed Abdur Rouf (Barpeta), Kameswar Das (Barpeta), Sayidur Rahman (Lakhimpur), Dr. Kahendra Nath Saikia (Nowgong), Sarveswar Barua (North Lakhimpur), Rabi Chandra Kachari (a tribal representative of Kamrup) and A.G. Patton as members. - Report of the Line System Committee (1930), vol. I, Shillong, 1938, p. 19

land with the immigrants in the valley. They also insisted on the retention of the Line System.\(^63\) Abdul Matin Choudhury and Syed Abdur Rouf on the other hand demanded recognition to the linguistic-cultural rights of the immigrants. They, in their note, wrote: "The word "assimilation" hardly admits of precise definition. To ask a Bengali to give up his mother tongue and inherited culture of which he is much proud as an Assamese of his own, in exchange for a patch of land to which he is as much entitled as an Assamese - is to ask him barter away his birth right for a mere mess of polldge. This attempt to convert the Bengali immigrants into an Assamese, under the duress of economic pressure, is foredoomed to failure. Years of German rule failed to compel the people of Alsace and Lorraine to adopt German language and culture, where the mightiest forces in other parts of the world have failed, the protagonist of Assamese Samrakshini are not likely to succeed. Minorities in all parts of the world cling tenaciously to their own language and culture. This is one of the fundamental rights which no one would light heartedly agree to relinquish."\(^64\)

The assimilation process which was going on among the Muslim immigrants suffered a set back due to the stepped up activities of the Bengali Hindu settlers. The Bengali Hindu

\(^63\) ibid., p. 20
\(^64\) ibid., p. 25
leaders of the urban areas wanted the Brahmaputra Valley to be a bilingual area. They established the Assam Domiciled and Settlers' Association. The Association in its third Session held at Nowgong demanded equal citizenship rights as well as education through one's own mother tongue, irrespective of race and language. The conference was permeated with the spirit of challenge to the unilingual concept of the Brahmaputra Valley as upheld by the Congress in Assam since 1920.\(^\text{65}\) The Association in its Nowgong session of 24 March 1945, which was presided over by Radha Kumud Mukherjee, changed its nomenclature and adopted a new name as the Assam Citizens' Association to make it broad-based. The Association highlighted the Government's discrepancies in the treatment towards linguistic groups of other provinces residing in Assam. It also blamed the Government for creating difficulties and communal problems affecting the interests of the minorities.\(^\text{66}\)

The Muslim immigrants' issue ultimately fell into the grip of the communal politics of all India level. The third session of the Assam Provincial Muslim League held at Habiganj in Sylhet on 30-31 January 1941 urged the Government to abolish the Line System. Kasimuddin Ahmed the mover of the resolution declared in the conference that they wanted to see Assam as a

\(^{65}\) Guha, op.cit., pp. 259-60

\(^{66}\) Amrit Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, March 29, 1945
Muslim majority province. The settlement of immigrants in large scale was suggested as the best means of doing it. Saadulla also accepted such an approach towards Assam. He favoured the joining of Assam with Bengal to form a part of Pakistan. The Line System and the immigration of the Muslims acquired a new dimension and the Muslim League came forward to champion the cause of the immigrants in Assam. It launched an all-out propaganda campaign in the rural areas. The League members announced that they would espouse the cause of the landless immigrants settled in Assam and move heaven and earth for the speedy redress of their grievances. The Muslim League, guided by its political design incited the innocent immigrants to spread throughout Assam and occupy all available lands to frustrate the Government's land settlement policy. The move caused serious disorder in the normal and peaceful life of the people of the valley. The activities of a section of immigrants generated tension among the indigenous people of Assam and a large number of Hindu families were made to abandon their ancestral village out of fear. The politically motivated section raised offensive and prejudicial slogans and intimidated the indigenous inhabitants of the Valley. The League ultimately failed to convert Assam into Pakistan and the provincial League went into disarray.

67. Dev, B.J., op.cit., p. 338
The politics over the immigrant Muslims reflected the inner contradictions among the Muslims of the North East. The Assamese Muslims identified themselves with the land and society of the Brahmaputra Valley and in spite of their common religious affiliation with the immigrant Muslims maintained their social distance with the latter. They welcomed the co-religionists but expected them to be Assamised so as to enhance their communal political position in the power structure of the province. They although remained alive to their Assamese status and extended conditional support to the cause of the immigrants. The provincial Muslim League also faced this contradiction. Saadulla, being an important leader of the Muslim League could not endorse the activities of the militant group. Saadulla, who wanted to follow a soft-line of action keeping parity with Assam's provincial interests, came in conflict with the programme of Maulana Bhasani which highlighted the cause of the immigrants. Thus in the field of Muslim politics of the province Saadulla was relegated to the background and Bhasani with his immigrant mass-base came to the forefront. The rift between the two leaders kept the Muslims of Assam divided. A section of the Muslims in Assam was committed to Assamese nationalism and upheld the Assamese identity. The immigrant Muslims of British Assam were the landless peasants of Eastern Bengal and they came in search of land. Their early batches were satisfied with

their land rights in the province and voluntarily submitted to the process of assimilation. The later groups, though subjected to certain restrictions, were also concerned with the acquisition of land in Assam than in preserving their language. As they were large in number their cause and numerical strength came to be utilised in the political game of the province in the pre-independent days and that left its legacy behind.