Chapter VI

Conclusion

The last chapter, that is, Chapter VI deals with ultimate finding of the whole dissertation. In the second chapter, while discussing the attitude of the colonial authorities towards immigration in Assam it appears that since the annexation of Assam the colonial rulers took such steps which were intended to transform Assam’s economy to fulfill their economic need. In the process the Brahmaputra valley witnessed the entry and settlement of three kinds of immigrants, tea garden labourers, Nepali grazers, and East Bengal cultivators the bulk of which were Mymensinghia Muslims. It was with Mymensinghia peasant cultivators that raise the conflicts of interest with the Assamese cultivators.

Immediately after the conquest, the colonial rulers explored the possibility of tea cultivation in Assam and accordingly tea industry was established in the middle of nineteenth century. As the indigenous cultivators showed little interest in it, the planters had to turn to immigrant tea cultivators. Besides tea, for other industries like coal, oil as well for the construction purposes the colonial rulers had to depend upon those immigrant labourers.

As the tea industry prospered in Assam in the second half of the nineteenth century, more and more tea garden labourers were brought to Assam by the planters under modified emigration rules, as
such immigrants creates food scarcity. Therefore, to meet the crisis, food grains began to be imported in Assam from outside the province which was considered by the colonial officials as an extra burden for growing tea industries. Besides, there were other factors like black fever or kalaazar, disastrous earthquake and subsequent floods which were considered responsible by colonial officials for slow agricultural growth in Assam. Under the circumstances, the colonial rulers decided to bring more land under plough to meet the food deficit.

From the official correspondence between the Government of India and the Chief Commission, Assam it appeared that the colonial government was seriously considering a plan of colonization of wasteland in Assam by bringing more cultivators from outside the province. Though they considered various risk factors like climate, language, health and rate of mortality were involved on the way of reclamation of wasteland in Assam, yet the colonial rulers were convinced that for the prospect of Assam immigrant cultivators should be encouraged to settle in Assam under liberal settlement rule.

The worldwide demand of jute on the eve of twentieth century provided an opportunity to the colonial officials of Assam to encourage East Bengal cultivators to extend jute cultivation in Assam. Meanwhile, under the encouragement of zamindars of Goalpara some peasant cultivators of Bengal had already entered and settled in the riverine tracts of Goalpara which is evident from the Census Report of 1911. It also revealed the inflow of Bengal cultivators from bordering districts of Dacca, Bogura, Rangpur and Mymensingh to Assam in search of vacant land for cultivation. Slowly it took the shape of influx affecting the population composition of the Brahmaputra valley.
In 1874, the percentage of Muslim population in the Brahmaputra valley was 5.9%, by 1941 it rose to 23%. Compared to the all India population growth rates of 0.3%, 5.7% and 11% of the first three decades of the twentieth century, Assam population grew at much higher rates at 16.8%, 20.2% and 20.1% and this was considered due to immigration. Moreover, with the increase of immigrants, along with their settlement the homogenous nature of tribal caste population of the 19th century very soon shifted to heterogeneous population of non-tribal complex with ethnic, linguistic and religious differences mainly in the Brahmaputra valley.

The push and pull factors also played an important role in the process of migration of East Bengal cultivators to Assam. The scarcity of food grains, shortage of manpower for the reclamation of wasteland, extension of jute cultivation and absence of any restrictive law created pull factor for the migration of East Bengal peasant cultivators in Assam. The Colonial officials saw land abundant Assam as a solution of East Bengal’s problem of land scarcity. On the other hand, overpopulation, land shortage, abnormal price hikes on food grains, Zamindari oppression were responsible to push a sizable section of East Bengal agricultural population towards Assam.

The motive of the Colonial officials was also partly political balancing Hindu and Muslim population of Assam. It was undoubtedly one of the striking features of colonial political control. From the statement of Lord Curzon, Viceroy and P.G.Melitus, Revenue Member it appears that they considered Assam a suitable place where the surplus population of other provinces could be absorbed.
In Assam, during the period under study, it appears that the in absence of any proper scheme of settlement or officer to regulate their settlement the immigrants started settling wherever vacant lands were found available. Under squatting system prevailing in Assam at that time, the immigrants were allowed to settle without any let or hindrance on any government wasteland, except reserve land. After the immigrants opened up the land by clearing jungles and prepared it suitable for cultivation they were provided annual patta by the concerned authority.

Things were sufficiently well so long as immigrant cultivators were engaged in filling up the vacant spaces in the riverine area. But as the immigrants began to come closer near the areas inhabited by the indigenous people, it soon became apparent of the clashes of interests between them and the local people. In those areas in particular which were predominantly populated by tribal and backward classes, it was apprehended by colonial officials that the introduction of an advanced and pushing element like Mymensinghia immigrants if permitted might spell disaster to the local population. District colonial officers, therefore, in absence of any clear cur direction from Government adopted such measures which was likely to prevent or at any rate check, the spread of immigrants to indigenous areas.

In pursuance of this policy, some lines were lay down on maps and on the ground to demarcate the areas between the immigrants and the local people. That was commonly known as “Line System”, a system which has served its purpose as a method of controlling the influx of immigrants and directing it to more or less compact areas instead of allowing indiscriminate squatting all over the province.
But the immigrants opened up the land on their side of the lines more quickly than the indigenous people on their side. Therefore even after the immigrants settlement had become established, the indigenous village adjoin it still contained much waste land, on which the immigrants often proceeded to encroach.

It was noticed by the colonial Government that the indigenous people had the tendency to sale or transfer of their land to immigrants when they were offered fabulous prices by the immigrants. In the process the immigrants not only purchased land under annual lease but also proceeded to capture lands under periodic lease. The Government considered that such a tendency on the part the indigenous people might prove detrimental in the long run.

Therefore, considering the interest of the local people colonial Government in Assam modified the land settlement policy by which the right of inherit and transfer of land held under annual lease was prohibited and allowed only right of use. It also empowered the Deputy Commissioner to eject any person from land who had not acquired requisite norms to possess the land.

But the introduction of Line System failed to restrict the transfer of lands as such executive orders were effective in case of new settlement of waste lands and lands under annual lease. Moreover, it was found that the Assamese pattadars having periodic lease continued to transfer lands to immigrants even within the line of restriction tempted by fabulous prices. This is evident from the report of Devendra Kumar Mukherjee, Assistant Director of Land Records, Assam. As under the existing law no pattdar under periodic lease could be prohibited from transferring his land to another cultivator. Such steps on the part of the Assamese pattadars made the problem of
settlement more acute. Therefore, the Colonial Government considered that certain legislation was necessary to forbade transfer of land under periodic patta which should be brought by people’s representatives in the Legislative Council.

Meanwhile, to accommodate large number of immigrants in Nowgong and Kamrup, the Government in Assam announced Colonisation Scheme. According to which, large blocks of lands, formerly waste and unattractive to the indigenous people were constituted as colonization areas for settlement of immigrants.

Hence it appears that it was a deliberate colonial policy to encourage immigration in Assam on the one hand for enhancing the economic prosperity of the province as they transformed the vast uncultivated wasteland into a field of multiple crops like paddy, mustard, jute; pulses and others. On the other hand, their settlement was restricted within a certain area considering the interest of indigenous people by the device of Line System. While doing so the colonial Government emphasized the protection of indigenous community as a special responsibility of the Governor. The colonial handling of the land settlement problem gave rise to communal consciousness and gradually the matter was taken up by the public representatives.

Immediately on the ushering in of Provincial Autonomy measures which had been taken earlier for administrative reasons began to be measured by communal and political standards. As a result, the Line System was charged as being an unfair and perhaps illegal method of control, and the evictions which were an inevitable part of it were subjected to one sided criticism. An Enquiry Committee was appointed by the first Saadulla Ministry, formed under the
Government of India Act, 1935. It submitted a report with a general conclusion to support the policy of evictions and to recommend a reform of the Line System.

Meanwhile, the inflow of immigrants continued as more immigrants began to come attracted by the prospect of getting land in Assam. However, many immigrants who came earlier had prospered and bought up lands allotted to their neighbours. They formed a small and wealthy class of landowners. With large areas under their control, they began to employ cultivators by importing them from native districts. Such labourers formed the nucleus of that largest class of landless immigrants whose presence was recognized by all and for whose relief Muslim leaders like Bhasani and later Muslim League ministries had tried to devise further schemes of settlement.

It had become a great controversy whether to provide land to those entire landless immigrants who were working under some person. Because, after getting land they might import another group of labourers from their native places to work under them, and the newcomers might also demand land for them in future. And thus the problem of providing land for the landless would never be any solution.

Therefore, over the question of accommodation of landless immigrants the members of the Assam Legislative Assembly appeared to be divided into two groups and no one could prescribe a real solution. Meanwhile, the Congress Coalition Government issued a Resolution indicating their general policy in the matter just before their resignation in 1939. It was not accepted by Saadulla Ministry which succeeded it.
Since the Muslim League’s declaration of Lahore resolution of 1940, the Two Nation Theory became the central theme of Indian politics and in Assam it got mixed up with the immigrant issue. The Line System was condemned by Muslim League as instrument of injustice and oppression and declared that it could be remedied by the establishment of Pakistan.

Saadulla followed a policy of extension of colonization areas for immigrants and re-examination of the necessity or reserving such large areas for professional graziers. Moreover Development Scheme under Saadulla was considered by the Congress party as an attempt to dispose all the available land among the immigrants. Later, under ‘Grow More Food Campaign’ the restrictive ‘Lines’ had been withdrawn in a number of villages to enable immigrants to obtain settlement of land on the Assamese side of the land. All these steps were severely criticized by the Congress as well as Assamese Hindus which was considered as an attempt by the Muslim League Ministry to incorporate Assam within the scheme of Pakistan.

Finally, Bardaloi Government’s decision of large scale eviction of illegal immigrants from Assam precipitated the communal tension followed by civil disobedience movement by the Provisional Muslim League in Assam. It soon became a battle cry for Pakistan. The announcement of Mountbatten plan forced the Provisional Muslim League to accept the fait accompli and naturally the issue of Line System receded to the background.

Another dimension of the immigrant problem was the language issue and valley rivalry. Initially under the encouragement of Colonial officials Bengali Muslim immigrants were willing to identify themselves with the Assamese people but later began to assert
themselves as Bengalis. It is evident from the report of Abdul Matin Choudhury and Syed AbdurRauf, who were the members of Line System Enquiry Committee. According to them that one’s culture and language was the fundamental rights which no one would light-heartedly agree to relinquish. They also considered it undesirable to insist the immigrant from East Bengal, Sylhet and Cachar to adopt different culture and language for the sake of a piece of land. During the course of their enquiry the question of cultural and language emerged as important question which made the issue of Line System more complicated. Besides, as the prominent Muslim League leaders of the province were from Sylhet and the Bengali identity of the immigrants were always asserted during the period of evictions, the Assamese leaders wanted to get rid of linguistic problem. So they favoured the idea of immediate transfer of Sylhet to Bengal which, culturally and linguistically was different from the Brahmaputra valley.

The introduction of Line system in Assam also intensified the rivalry of the two valleys as people of Surma valley were shown as immigrants by the colonial official though Sylhet was a part and parcel of Assam. In fact, one of the factors which created jealousy between the two valleys was the superior position acquired by people of Sylhet in government services.

With the influx of immigrants from Bengal, the Bengali speaking population went on increasing from census to census, which alarmed a major section of Assamese community. It further widened over the question of medium of instruction in education, establishment of University and High court in the Brahmaputra valley. Such fear was more intensified when under Cabinet Mission plan the Bengal and
Assam was grouped together. It was considered by the Assamese people as a denial of Provincial status of Assam and destructive of the socio cultural life of the Assamese people. They also thought that the Group formula would result in the total domination of the Assamese by the Bengalese.

Under the circumstances the separation of Sylhet became a life and death problem for the Assamese who wanted to curb out a linguistically more homogenous province. So they welcomed the plan of referendum declared by Mountbatten which ended up with the separation of Sylhet from Assam. Thus the colonial policy of immigration and Line system proved to be very effective in the context of Assam and it furnished as one of the pretext for the partition of Assam.