Abstract

The term Line System can broadly be defined as a colonial device of racial segregation. In the context of Assam the Line System is associated with the immigration of land hungry peasants from the districts of Mymensingh of East Bengal. The immigration in Assam started in the last decade of the nineteenth century with the encouragement of colonial officials. It should be mentioned in this context that the immigrant population mainly belonged to the Muslim community who settled in wastelands of Assam by clearing forest and started cultivation. In Assam by the Line System, the villages were divided into few categories. According to which some villages were exclusively reserved for indigenous people, and some for Bengali immigrants. There were certain villages in which a line was drawn on the map or on the ground, on the one side of which immigrants could settle and on the other of which their settlement was forbidden. The Line System at first owed its origin in the district of Nowgong in 1920. It was, in fact, a device to segregate the Bengali Muslims from the indigenous population including the tribal and backward classes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The present study sought to explore the origin and development of Line System as a colonial device in Assam. An effort has been made to focus on the causes of change in the colonial policy of immigration from nineteenth to twentieth century and highlight the colonial attitude of making division between the Indian communities.

For the first time in 1913, the problem of agricultural immigrants and the need of preventing interference with the indigenous Assamese had begun to attract attention of the colonial Government. Interestingly both the Assamese middle class and the Colonial Government earlier encouraged immigration to settle in the wasteland considering the economic prospect of the province. In view of the increasing number of immigrants the colonial bureaucrats like Deputy Commissioners considered steps to meet the situation. A plan was framed in 1916 and was first applied in Nowgong. According to which the new coming immigrants should not be allowed no longer to settle anywhere they liked but would be confined to certain areas in villages demarcated by lines. J.C Higgins, Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong in his order in 1923 officially inaugurated the Line system though it had already been implemented and in operation in 1920. The Government could device no
better measure to tackle the immigration problem of settlement and as the number of new comers increased gradually, the Government gave their approval vide letter No.2132 R, dated August, 1925.

Therefore, initially, the problem of immigration in Assam was sought to be tackled by the colonial official circle. The official attempt failed because of multi-dimensional character of the problem. It should be noted that the colonial handling of the situations gave rise to communal consciousness and the matter was taken up by the public representatives.

An attempt for the solution of immigration problem was made with the formation of Line System Enquiry Committee in 1938 under the Chairmanship of F.W.Hockenhull. The report they submitted was an amalgam of conflicts, contradictions and compromises. They could not suggest any clear cut solution of extremely complicated problem. To sum up the Muslim members of the Committee condemned the Line System and recommended its abolition while the Hindu members commended it with some restrictions in future. By the time of enquiry the matter had further complicated by the introduction of the question of language.

In September 1938, the Saadulla coalition Ministry was broken by the first Congress coalition headed by GopinathBardaloi who was able to do nothing better to solve this problem which began to assume racial, communal, linguistic and political colours. The resignation of Bardaloi left the field open for Saadulla, who had formed his coalition Ministry in February, 1940. Till 1946, he was premier for number of times and followed a policy of settlement which was subjected to severe criticism by the Congress, both at national and provincial level. The policy of evictions of large scale immigrants pursued by the Bardaloi Government in 1946 met with strong opposition from the Muslim League and their followers. It resulted in communal tension which prevailed all over province till the declaration of Mountbatten plan for referendum of Sylhet.

Thus the Line System, immigration issue and the policy of evictions had split up the province more deeply and widely than any other things. The rise and fall of Ministries was linked up with the issue which defied any solution because of divergent approaches of the political leaders which only hastened communal bitterness and tension. Against such background, the emergence of Muslim League as a formidable force in Assam politics serves only to intensify the communal cleavages. The All India Muslim League officially took up the matter of immigration problem in Assam, condemning the Line System as an instrument
of injustice and oppression and declared that it could be remedied only by the establishment of Pakistan. Finally the British colonial policy of Line System furnished as a pretext for the separation of Sylhet from the mainland of Assam.

**SURVEY OF LITERATURE:**

Makhan Lal Kar in his book *Muslims in Assam politics (New Delhi, 1990)* highlighted the settlement of Muslims in Assam since the earlier period, their socio-economic position along with their progress in education sector. In this book the role of Muslims in the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly were also discussed. It was also discussed that the Muslims after securing land and numerical strength became more vocal in echoing the views of separate interests in all spheres of life in the thirties. The book also mentioned about the Muslim legislators, who were divided into numerous groups, sort out their differences under the leadership of Saadulla and owed their allegiance to the All India Muslim League. By 1944, the Assamese Hindus realized the dangers of the demand for the creation of Pakistan. On the other hand, Assamese Muslims wanted Pakistan in which they desired to include the whole of Assam. The Assamese Hindus opposed Pakistan, and advocated for the inclusion of the Bengali district of Sylhet with a Muslim Majority in Pakistan.

Bimal J Dev and Dilip Kumar Lahiri in their book *Assam Muslims: politics and Cohesion (Delhi, 1983)* highlighted the social settings and sentiments of the Muslim people in Assam. It highlighted the various factors for the rise of Muslim League politics in the history of Assam. The role of the All India Muslim League in Indian politics and Assam as its part was also discussed in this book. It also mentioned the Muslim League movement in Assam and the role of the Press in it.

Homeswar Goswami in his book *Population Trends in the Brahmaputra Valley (Delhi, 1985)* highlighted the factors responsible for the growth of population in Assam. The book also deals with the attitude of the colonial teak planters towards the indigenous cultivators due to slow agricultural growth in the province.

Sanjib Barua in his book *India against itself: Assam and politics of Nationality (Pennsylvania, 1999)* highlighted the colonial manipulation in their effort for economic transformation of Assam which caused enormous demographic shift. It also highlighted the colonial concept of wasteland and affect to local gentry and peasantry of the region. The
author also tried to relate the immigration of nineteenth and twentieth century with the post-colonial ethnic problem in Assam.

Amalendu Guha in his book *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom and electoral politics in Assam (1826-1947)* (ICHR, Delhi, 1977) highlighted the attitude of colonial officials towards opening of tea and other industries in Assam. It also highlighted the Assam’s plantation economy, opium problem, along with problem of influx of immigrants, peasant and workers struggle, evolution of the Ryotsabhas, trade unions and of the Communist party. The author also discussed the role of various organizations in settling the question of linguistic and regional identity along with the issue of immigration in Assam upon which depended the existence of Assamese race.

Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza in his book *Muslim Students and Pakistan Movement-selected documents, 1937-47* (Lahore, Pakistan, 1988) highlighted the role of the Muslim students in the freedom struggle against the British colonial rule and their faith in the ideology of Pakistan. The book also focuses the activity of the Muslim students while participating in the movement since 1937 throughout India.


H.M. Bareh (New Delhi, 2004) in the book *Encyclopedia of North East India* discussed the factors responsible for retarded agricultural growth in colonial Assam. The author also highlighted the attitude of political leaders towards immigration problem in Assam.

**OBJECTIVES:**

Though all these aforesaid works have dealt with the immigration issue and communal parties of Assam in the twentieth century, the present study seeks to highlight the virgin field that focuses the colonial manipulation to divide the two religious communities with the help of Line System and finally to create two opposing linguistic communities, that is, the Assamese and the Bengalese. The study also seeks to explore the correlation between the immigration, Line System and the socio economic aspect of Assamese life and creation of valley politics in Assam. The present study concentrates its attention on the ethnic, racial, and
religious politics which began with the large scale land hungry, economically pauper Memensinghia Muslims in Assam and the colonial British policy of divide and rule. It is also important to explore how the British Government changed its position in connection with immigration problem in Assam and encouraged local inhabitants, Assamese people as well as Muslims to stand against each other on this issue. It can also be said that how the British Government followed the policy of racial segregation in Assam, which had a serious impact not only in the history of Assam but India as well and which still exists as a problematic issue in Assam.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

(i) The present study seeks to highlight the issue of immigration into Assam in the early twentieth century.

(ii) The study also tries to show the policy of the colonial Government towards the issue of immigration.

(iii) The change of Government policy and official discouragement of immigration issue through Line system.

(iv) The study wants to explore the attitude of the Congress and Muslim League politicians on the issue of immigration into Assam.

(v) The study also seeks to explore the new elements like language and culture which emerged in Assam politics as a consequence of Line System.

**DATA AND METHODOLOGY:**

The present study has adopted empirical method. Therefore, both primary and secondary sources have been discussed for the purpose. For the primary sources, the study has adopted archival methods. Much importance is given on collecting primary data. The Assam State Archives, Dispur, Guwahati, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, and Indian Official Documents (IOD) Section of the National Library, Kolkata have supplied the major source for primary data. The Assam Secretariat Files, published and unpublished Government official reports under colonial rule, Administrative Report, Report on Line System Enquiry Committee, District Gazettes, Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly proceedings, various official correspondences have been consulted for the purpose.

Various secondary sources like journal, magazines, books, have been consulted available in the National Library of Kolkata, State Assembly Library, Dispur, Assam,
CHAPTERISATION:

The entire work has been divided into six chapters including the present one, which is an introductory and contains the main themes of the study. An effort has been made to give an image of immigration problem in Assam which started with the large scale influx of East Bengal cultivators mostly Mymensinghia Muslims from the neighboring Bengal districts of Brahmaputra valley in the first half of the twentieth century. This immigration issue had stirred the politics of Assam in the colonial period. The colonial officials of Assam encouraged immigration on purely economic ground as they saw the vast wasteland of Assam lying uncultivated by the indigenous people. The movement of the people was also accelerated due to the completion of Assam Bengal railway and the partition of Bengal in 1905, by which a new province was created in the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam on the plea of administrative convenience. At the same time in absence of any restrictive law on the land revenue settlement the situation was conducive for these cultivators to settle in any vacant land particularly on the riverine base of the Brahmaputra valley.

In the Census Report of 1891 there were no such mentions of these immigrants. In the Census of 1911 gives information about the increase of population of the Brahmaputra valley by 18.7, which was partly due to immigration. It is evident from the Census report that the increase of population in Goalpara, where the immigrants settled first were due to the extension of the railway track and the extraordinary incurs of settlers to the lands from Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur.

The Census Report of 1931 gives the idea of the movement of large scale of East Bengal immigrants in Assam. According to which in 1911 few cultivators from east Bengal had gone beyond Goalpara, and in between 1911 to 1921 the movement of immigrants had extended far up the valley that formed an appreciable element in the population of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang. Till then the two upper districts namely Sibsagar and Lakhimpur were not affected by the inroads of immigrants. In Goalpara nearly twenty percent of the population was made up of those settlers, in Nowgong the immigrants formed about fourteen percent of the whole population. In Kamrup wastelands were being taken up rapidly, especially in the Barpeta subdivision. In Darrang, the immigrants had not yet penetrated far
from the banks of the banks of the Brahmaputra. In between 1921 to 1931 the immigrants had consolidated their position in Goalpara, Nowgong, Kamrup and Darrang. Mr. Lloyd in 1921 census estimated that including children of the immigrants born after their arrival in the province, the total number of settlers was at least 300,000 in that year.

Along with other districts the increase in immigrant population of Nowgong was especially noticeable in Khathowal, Juria, Laokhowa, Dihing, Bokoni and Lahorighat Mauzas where it was solely due to the large influx of immigrant settlers mainly from Mymensingh. They had opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and had occupied nearly all the lands which were open for settlement in that tract.

Therefore, it was observed that since 1911 the Brahmaputra valley witnessed a large scale immigrants from East Bengal particularly Mymensingh districts in Assam in search of vacant lands which changed the composition of population structure of Assam to many extent. So, it becomes necessary to investigate the attitude of colonial authority behind such large scale immigration in Assam as well as changes in their attitude towards the policy of immigration in the twentieth century.
Chapter II:

Chapter II deals with the official attitude of colonial rulers towards the immigration issue in nineteenth and early twentieth century. An effort has been made to find out the motive of the British colonial officials to encourage immigration of people for tea plantation and other industries in Assam form outside Brahmaputra valley. In this chapter, the agricultural growth of Assam under earlier phase of the colonial rule was discussed. The opinions and motives of the various colonial officials in Assam have been analyzed in connection to the increase the area of cultivation by colonizing the wastelands of Assam by peasant immigrants from outside the province.

Since annexation of Assam, the British colonial officials like Francis Jenkins allured by the prospect of tea and other industries, advocated for the settlement of English capitalists in the wastelands of Assam. Accordingly, various industries had grown up in Assam side by side with the tea plantation under liberal wasteland rules. But the scarcity of indigenous labour to work on tea plantation in Assam necessitated the colonial planters to import labourers from outside the province in various phases. With the prospect of tea industries in Assam the immigration of plantation labourers were taking place on an extensive scale. The increasing number of such labourers created problem of food crisis, which Assam farming structure was not in a position to provide. So, the colonial rulers had to import food grains from outside the Brahmaputra valley to meet the crisis and table 2.1 gives the picture of the above problem.

On the other hand, the area of cultivation and land revenue derived from it during the nineteenth century was not satisfactory to the colonial officials. The colonial officials like Hopkins tried to increase the area of cultivation in Assam but with little success.

The above tables give the idea of area of cultivation and revenue derives from it under the colonial rulers in Assam in the second half of the nineteenth century which they considered unsatisfactory. George Campbell, Assistant Commissioner, Assam was of opinion that the slow agricultural growth was due to the system of cultivation followed by the indigenous cultivators on the one hand and the devastation by black fever or Kala Azar, disastrous earthquake and subsequent floods on the other which appeared in the last decade of 19th century in Assam. So, the colonial officials thought it necessary to bring more lands under cultivation and so farmers had to be brought and settled on wastelands in Assam to produce deficit crops.
Relying on the official correspondence between the Government of India and the Chief Commissioner, Assam, the present study has made an effort to analyze the attitude of various colonial officials towards the proposed scheme of Colonization of vast wasteland in Assam by the immigrants from outside the province. The factors responsible for the immigration of East Bengal cultivators particularly the Muslims in Assam under official encourage were also discussed.
Chapter III:

Chapter III deals with the change of attitude of the colonial officials towards indiscriminate settlement of Mymensinghia immigrants in Assam particularly since the annulment of Bengal Partition in 1912. The colonial officials while inspecting in Nowgong in connection to the settlement of immigrants found that the Nowgong was in a state of chaos due to the pace at which settlement of immigrants had taken place. There had previously been a very large area entirely occupied by thick jungle and only occasionally cleared by pam cultivators. It was a general system of cultivation by the Assamese in the low lying riverine areas which were fit for cold weather crops like mustard, pulse etc. The indigenous people used to cultivate there for one or two years or at least three years and then those areas had been abandoned and moved elsewhere for new cultivation. So long as plenty of land existed that system did not matter. But gradually this fluctuating cultivation had to be brought under survey and assessed to Government revenue.

All this changed with the coming of the immigrants who settled permanently because their main cultivation was jute. It should be noted that the riverine areas was not suitable for permanent cultivation of rice but eminently fit for the cultivation of jute. The new coming immigrant’s were prepared to pay what the local people considered fabulous prices for land, and all sorts of speculators, Assamese and outsiders, including members of the Land Record staff were busy selling immigrants land in Reserves or land belonging to others.

So long as the Mymensinghia cultivators were engaged in filling up the vacant spaces in the riverine area there was no clash between them and the indigenous people. But as soon as they drew closer to the areas held by indigenous people, the local people began to complain against these settlers. The colonial District officers, therefore, in the absence of any clear cut direction from the Government adopted such measures which were likely to prevent or any rate check the spread of immigrants in those areas where their entry would have had detrimental results. In the process of controlling immigrants the colonial district officials lay down certain lines on maps and on the ground to demarcate the areas which were to be available for immigrants. Thus arose what came to be known as the Line system, devised as a temporary expedient to control and limit the settlement of immigrants in a particular area.

In this chapter an effort has been made to analyze the concern of colonial officials over the transfer of land to immigrants by the Assamese landholders and preventive measures taken by the Government in this connection.
But as the inflow of immigrants continued the colonial officials decided to start colonization scheme for the accommodation of large number of immigrants, who arrived late. According to which, large blocks of lands, formerly waste and unattractive to the indigenous people were constituted as colonization areas for settlement of immigrants. But it retained the policy of Line system considering the interest of indigenous people especially tribal and backward community.

These were the two steps mainly taken by the colonial officials to solve the problem of settlement East Bengal immigrant cultivators in Assam. At the same time they emphasized the protection of indigenous community as a special responsibility of the Governor. While dealing with the issue, the colonial government in Assam deliberately created a gulf between two communities by encouraging immigration in Assam on economic ground on one hand and on the other controlling their settlement within a certain area by the policy of Line System, beyond which the movements of immigrants were restricted. Moreover, the Government categorically denied taking any steps to prohibit the immigration of people from outside the province which resulted into more inroads of immigrants in Assam. The colonial policy of immigration in Assam gave rise to communal consciousness and the matter was taken up by the public representatives.
Chapter IV:

The Chapter IV deals with the attitude of the politicians of Assam over the issue of immigration and Line System. Under this chapter an effort has been made to show how the members of the Council and Assembly were divided over the issue of immigration highlighting the interest of their respective community. It should be mentioned that till 1937, the party politics did not play any role in Assam legislature, though the Congress Swarajist Party introduced some elements of it in 1923.

In the beginning, the Assamese middle class of the Brahmaputra valley welcomed the arrival of immigrants considering the economic interest of Assam, but large influx of immigrants, mostly Muslim cultivators from Mymensingh districts of Bengal changed their attitude. Such large influx began to change the social composition of Assam as the Assamese Hindu Community began to face more aggressive immigrant Muslim community, whose social practices and attitude was totally different from them. The Assamese public opinion was voiced through the council members against the immigration. In the Legislative Council several attempts were made by the Assamese councilors like Rohini Kanta Hati Barua, Mahadev Sharma and others to put restriction on immigration as well as to reserve adequate lands for cultivation of indigenous people in future. But almost in all occasions they were vehemently opposed by the Muslim counterpart and Government members in that direction.

Meanwhile as the number of immigrants increased in the province and the matter of accommodation of landless immigrants from East Bengal became a major problem in Assam. Though steps were taken by the colonial Government by introducing the Colonization scheme but that proved inadequate to meet the crisis. With the change of demographic pattern due to increase of Muslim immigrants, the immigrant issue which was essentially a socio-economic pattern assumed a political colour. Since then the Muslim members of the House began to clamor for abolition of Line System which stood on the way for accommodation of large number of landless immigrants in colonial Assam.

Under the Provincial Autonomy when first Ministry under Saadullawas formed in 1937, the administrative measures like Line system was charged as being unfair and illegal method of controlling immigrants. The evictions which were inevitable part of it were subjected to severe criticism by the Muslim members of the House. An Enquiry Committee was appointed by the Saadulla Ministry in 1938 under the chairmanship of F.W. Hockenhull. It submitted a report with the general conclusion to support evictions and to
recommenda reform of the Line System. The Congress Coalition Government under Bardoloi came to power after Saadullah which took no action for fourteen months but just before the resignation in 1939 issued a resolution indicating their general policy in the matter of Line system. But it was not accepted by the Saadulla Ministry which succeeded it.

The issue of Line System became the target of Muslim League after the declaration of Two Nations Theory of 1940 at Lahore. 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. It coincided with large influx of landless immigrants in Assam who could not afford to purchase rice in Bengal. They came with the double object of cheaper food and the possibility of obtaining land for cultivation. The successive Muslim League Ministry under Saadulla under the Development Scheme and Grow More Food policy took such steps which were aimed at accommodating landless immigrants in various Reserve lands formerly closed to them under the policy of Line System. These actions on the part of Saadullawas subjected to severe criticism by both the Congress and the Assamese Hindus and considered it as a ploy to incorporate Assam within the map of Pakistan.

Therefore after exploring the entire chapter, it appears that the Assam Provincial Muslim League and the Congress Party stood against each other over the question of accommodation of land to the landless immigrants as well as retention of Line System as a protective measure of indigenous people including tribal and backward classes. The demand to include Assam in Pakistan during the All India Muslim League legislator's Convention at Delhi precipitated tension between the two communities in the province which ultimately led to communalize the issue of Line System.
Chapter V:

The chapter V deals with the relation of communal politics with the Line System and the creation of valley politics. The policy of eviction of large scale illegal immigrants pursued by the Bardoloi Ministry after 1946 and the role played by the Assam Provincial Muslim League in opposing it are analyzed in this chapter. An effort has been made to highlight the linguistic problem and valley politics and its relation with Line system which ultimately resulted into the demand for separation of Sylhet from Assam.

With the announcement of the policy of eviction of illegal immigrants from the province by Gopinath Bardaloi, who came to power in 1946 was met serious opposition. The matter of eviction had already attracted the attention of Jinnah and All India Muslim League. During his visit to Assam in 1946, he took up the cause of Muslim immigrants and warned the Congress Government to reverse its policy of eviction of Muslim settlers, or a situation would be created which would not be conducive to the people of Assam. It was followed by a Committee of Action headed by Abdul Hamid Khan popularly known as Bhasani in 1946 which directed Muslim League workers to agitate against the eviction policy of the Congress Government all over the province. In and outside the Assembly the Congress Government faced the strong opposition from the Muslim League members who decided to launch Civil disobedience movement in Assam to oust the Bardaloi Government from power.

An effort has been made to highlight the communal politics inaugurated by the Muslim League in Assam and their demand for Pakistan as a remedial measure of the policy of Line System.

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 Abdur Rauf, who were the members of Line System Enquiry Committee. They also pointed out that the attempt to convert the Bengalee immigrants into an Assamese under the duress of economic stress proved a failure as the later immigrants were not interested in assimilation theory. 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 an important question which made the issue of Line System more complicated.

Moreover, 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.

Besides that the valley jealousy between the Surma and Brahmaputra already existed over the question of superior position in the Government jobs. It further widened over the question of medium of instruction in education, establishment of University and High court in the Brahmaputra valley. 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.

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.
Chapter VI:

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 pattadar 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.
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