CHAPTER IV

Role of the Congress party towards major issues in Assam

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter a detailed discussion on Congress party and major issues of the period has been taken up. The issues identified are Immigration and Food Scarcity. Immigration is considered as an important issue because of its inception in the pre-independence period and the impact that it cast on the politics of Assam in the subsequent years. Consequent to the partition of India in 1947, there occurred a huge movement of people into India from neighbouring countries. Assam was one of the states of India to be affected by immigration in a way that has challenged the demographic dimensions of the state. The first part of this chapter examines immigration into Assam from 1947–1957 and the response of the party in power during that period. Thus an attempt has been made to highlight the stands taken by the two chief ministers whose reign covers this crucial period. This period is chosen as the social and demographical changes of the fifties and sixties in Assam created a crater of events the impact of which is felt even today in the socio-political life of the state.

The issue of food scarcity in Assam in the period following independence has hardly been emphasised in literature from the point of view of its severity and its impact on the people of Assam. The state which was generally self-sufficient in food crops production in the pre-independence period had to face shortages in production of food on account of several factors like the Bengal famine, economic policies of the centre, floods and presence of social evils like hoarding and black marketing. The period 1947–1957 has been chosen for discussion of the food problem as the impact of the problem was most acutely felt during this period.

4.1.1 Immigration

Transnational flows have been witnessed in most parts of the world. Whether legal or illegal, the phenomenon is almost universal. The perceived increase in migration and immigration has incited many scholars to understand the processes and its ramifications with an analytical eye. Whether it is war, political, ethnic, religious or
economic strife, people are forced to flee to other comparatively safer countries when there is a threat to their very existence.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines human migration as the permanent change of residence by an individual or a group. Since criterion of “permanence” is vague, international statisticians designate a person as an immigrant if he has stated his intention of settling in the country of entry for one year. It also mentions that there are different dynamics of human migration like motives, distance, direction and demographic factors. The *Encyclopaedia Americana* distinguishes between three important terms – immigration, emigration and migration. Immigration is the voluntary movement of nationals of one country into another country for the purpose of resettlement. It mostly covers movement of people on a large scale and is a modern phenomenon most applicable to human movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Emigration on the other hand explains movement from the point of view of the country of exit. Another term for human movement, migration, includes emigration and immigration and also movement within countries when it is continuous and on a large scale.

It is a general assumption that people generally move from developing to developed countries. However the Human Development Report, 2009 titled ‘Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development’ states otherwise. The Report estimates that around 740 million people move within regions while less than 20 million people move across regions. The present discussion also seeks to contradict this viewpoint that transnational flows occurs mostly from developing to developed countries. The HDR estimates that only about world’s 200 million people moved from developing to a developed country.

Why does immigration occur? Apart from reasons which arise out of war and strife, what are the factors that generally induce people to immigrate? Better economic opportunities, good educational and health facilities, growing employment opportunities and cheaper modes of transport and communication, in short a better standard of living leads to migratory flows between and within countries. Globalization is also to some extent responsible for immigration. Barriers to trade fell and the world became a smaller place. Countries like Italy, Spain, Canada and New Zealand also recognized migration
because they believed human development could achieve tremendous gains when barriers to movement were lowered down and migrants were treated in a humane way. Some such countries have also developed tolerant policies towards migrants. In less tolerant countries, there are stringent policies to deal with ‘inflows’ and ‘outflows’ of immigrants.

New independent India gave rise to many expectations among the people. In Assam, people belonging to different communities had started to nurture new hopes, dreams and aspirations. But only very few of these dreams and aspirations saw the light of the day. Partition brought in many problems for Assam. Engulfed by a plethora of problems like food scarcity, natural disasters like the perennial floods and the Great Earthquake\(^80\) of 1950, poverty and unemployment, the state was also healing the wounds generated by the impact of war and partition.

The Human Development Report of 2009 states, “Large gains to human development can be achieved by lowering the barriers to movement and improving the treatment of movers.”\(^81\) Western nations owe a major part of their existence to migration. They have indulged in celebratory acts of welcoming migrants resulting in expansion of culture. However such celebration cannot be performed in a state like Assam where questions of immigration have started to cast shadows of concern on the realm of identity (Dutta, 2012). Immigration during the climacteric years in Assam did not capture the Indian popular imagination like the conflict in Kashmir and Punjab. Perhaps because of the fact that “Assam and the northeast are very far away; a "sensitive border region" to use an Indian cliché; the image it evokes is of a borderland full of deviants conducting subversion.”\(^82\) Sanjib Baruah (1986) identifies the two major

\(^80\) On the evening of 15\(^{th}\) August, 1950 an earthquake measuring 8.6 in the Richter scale had struck the state letting loose a chain of devastation of lives and property. The energy of this shock was felt over an area of 1.75 million square miles. This great earthquake brought about destruction over large tracts of Upper Assam and in the hills of the North-East Frontier Agency.


factors that kept the immigration issue out of the political agenda in the pre–1979 period. According to him, the centrality of the ethnic tensions arising from the language conflict and the tacit agreement among political parties, primarily the Congress party, to keep this contentious issue hidden from the political discussions were the cardinal reasons for the immigration issue being kept in the dark.\(^{83}\)

Undocumented and large scale immigration becomes problematic for any country to tackle as it causes drastic changes in the demographic balance of that country. But it raises higher and greater questions on political repercussions when immigration is dispensed by enfranchising ‘refugees’ and ‘illegal immigrants’ alike as was allegedly done by the Congress party of Assam until the 1970’s.\(^{84}\) Hence it is imperative to delve into the historical origins of this problem.

### 4.1.2 Historical Origin of Immigration Problem

In order to understand the problem of immigration in pre–colonial Assam it is necessary to refer to the four waves of immigration. Three classes of people migrated into the state during the first phase. They were tea plantation labourers, people from Bengal who were employed in the administrative departments and merchants and tradesmen from Rajasthan and Bengal. In the second phase, people, both Hindus and Muslims from East Bengal immigrated in search of land and economic opportunities. The third and fourth waves of immigration were also from the districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur of East Bengal.

During the nineteenth century, India was colonized into the world capitalist economy through the British capitalism. The British imperialists were in search for land to start tea plantations as their own country was unsuitable for tea cultivation. Assam


was found to have the most suitable climate and soil for cultivating tea. The dearth of local labour force and the requirement of cheap labour to work in the tea industry together encouraged many labourers from the Chotanagpur region to migrate to Assam. At the same time the peasants of East Bengal flocked into Assam to carry out jute cultivation. The discovery of coal and petroleum towards the later part of 19th century opened the floodgates of immigration into Assam as streams of people started coming in mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Nepal and Rajasthan. This manpower was needed to run various departments, construct roads and railways, excavate the different hidden coalmines and to work in various service sectors.

In the late 19th century Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner’s Province. This territorial integration of the state into colonial India opened the frontal gates for new settlements. With the introduction of Bengali as the official language from 1837, reorganisation of Assam meant inducting many Bengalis in the administration department. As a part of the colonial strategy, the colonial rulers tried to bring more land under cultivation so as to augment their revenue base. Hence, patronizing the migration of people from nearby states and East Bengal became an important part of the British colonial design. Simultaneously the oppressionist policies followed by the zamindars in East Bengal required the revolutionist elements to be exported to another area. Assam seemed to be a favourable option as quantity of cultivable lands in Assam was much more as compared to the availability of land in East Bengal. The colonial policy encouraged these suppressed elements to migrate to Assam. Thus during different periods and fundamentally to suit the interests of the British imperialism, immigration to Assam took place.

Apart from the British rulers, the approach adopted as regards immigration by one of the foremost political leaders of modern Assam, Syed Mohammed Saadulla (Muslim League) should also be taken into account. Saadulla was one of the foremost political leaders of modern Assam. A qualified parliamentarian, Saadulla was a great rationalist who was willing to assist the Britishers so as to usher constitutional reforms in the country. Saadulla’s role becomes significant when we encounter with the fact that the land settlement policies followed by him gave indications to the Assamese elite that his Muslim League government in Assam was promoting the inflow of Muslims into the
territory of Assam so that in due course of time it could be converted into a Muslim-majority province. In 1916 the officials of the Nowgong district devised a plan to control the indiscriminate settlement of immigrants in Assam. The introduction of the Line System, as it came to be known, empowered the district officers to draw lines in order to restrict immigrants from occupying new lands eliminated the developing tensions between the Assamese Hindus and the immigrant Muslims as the movement of the immigrants were restricted within definite tracts. It was first implemented in 1920 in Nowgong district and Barpeta sub-division in Kamrup district. According to the rules of land settlement, the government authorized the Deputy Commissioner to drive out immigrants who had not acquired appropriate right on a piece of land within three months of notice. According to the Line System, land was classified into the following categories: 1) Those in which immigrants might settle freely; 2) Those in which they could not settle; and land in which a line was drawn, where they could settle on one side of it.

The classification also aided in the collection of revenue for the colonial government. Villages located on the wasteland grants were divided into four kinds:

a. Exclusively occupied by the immigrants;
b. Exclusively reserved for the Assamese;
c. Mixed villages for both groups; and
d. Villages with a line on Assamese side where immigrants were not allowed to acquire land.

Though the line system was introduced with the purpose of restricting the immigrants to settle on the land of Assam, yet the system devised for such a purpose was not entirely free of flaws. The ‘mixed’ and ‘closed’ villages were soon occupied by immigrants as the officials entrusted with the task of implementing the line system could not discharge their duties sincerely. For instance, in Barpeta, the officials did not come to collect revenue from the immigrants in the stipulated time. As a result the immigrants could reap the harvest of one time and then when time of eviction came,

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they had already planted their second crop, in the process acquiring more time from the officials. In this way, the immigrants encroached on the land demarcated as “closed”. This continued for such a time until the number of immigrants swelled to hundreds and eviction became difficult.\textsuperscript{86}

Difference of opinion arose regarding the continuation of the Line System. Whereas the Assamese supported it, the immigrants opposed it. To resolve the issue, an all – party Committee was formed in 1928. A.W. Botham was the Chairman of this Committee. Nabin Chandra Bordoloi who was a member of this committee opined for a system of settlement of land with the immigrant peasants in definite areas leaving sufficient reservation of land for their expansion.\textsuperscript{87} In the course of time, population of Assam kept on increasing. The following tables show the comparative population of the districts of Mymensingh, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna (now in Bangladesh) with that of the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Mymensingh</th>
<th>Rangpur</th>
<th>Bogra</th>
<th>Pabna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891 – 1901</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901 – 1921</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921 – 1931</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 4.2: Percentage Increase in Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Kamrup</th>
<th>Darrang</th>
<th>Nowgong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891 – 1901</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901 – 1921</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921 – 1931</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The tables show that population of the districts of Mymensingh, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna kept on decreasing while the percentage of population in Goalpara increased from 2.0 per cent in 1901 to 26.9 per cent while in Kamrup population increased from 14.2 per cent in 1921 to 27.9 per cent in 1931. Population in all the four districts of Mymensingh, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna decreased during the decade 1921 – 1931. It may be mentioned here that due to linguistic affinity and geographical proximity, Goalpara was the first choice for immigrants to settle. Due to availability of land for cultivation, Kamrup was another effective choice for the immigrant peasants.\(^{88}\)

Meanwhile the United Muslim Party under the leadership of Mohammed Saadulla formed the government in 1937. The introduction of the land settlement policy during his tenure opened up 1 lakh bighas of land in Assam Valley for the settlement of Bengali Muslim immigrants during 1939 – 1940 and proved very beneficial to these land hungry peasants who could hold as much as 30 bighas of land or more for each homestead.\(^{89}\) Saadulla’s government of 1942 further revised the regulations regarding grazing and forest reserves only to facilitate the incoming of more immigrants from East

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\(^{88}\) In comparison with the districts of Darrang, Goalpara, Nowgong, Sibasagar and Lakhimpur, Kamrup had the highest quantity of land per square mile (3858 kilometer) and also the highest percentage of area under cultivation (20.68 per cent).

Thus Saadulla government’s policies with regard to immigration were directed towards patronising the Muslim immigrants. This second wave of immigration created quite a stir in Gopinath Bardoloi’s mind, who had been imprisoned in Jorhat jail since August, 1942 in connection with the Quit India Movement. The Line System was blatantly violated as streams of immigrants were permitted to enter and settle in the state. The flow of immigrants was so outrageously high that Saadulla at one point of time had to himself admit that Muslim immigrants had flooded the state. But ironically he adhered to the policy of abandonment of the line system. The third and fourth waves of immigration were from the districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur of East Bengal. The western part of the district of Goalpara including South Salmara, Lakhipur and Bilashipara was the earliest and most affected due to its proximity to East Bengal. The influx of Bengali Muslim farmers to the chars (River Island) of Goalpara from these districts covered almost all the available lands of Goalpara. From the 1920’s these Muslims spread to other districts of lower Assam. In 1911, the total Muslim immigrants numbered 2, 58,000 in the Brahmaputra Valley and 6,000 in the Hills. In the next decade, the settlers numbered 3, 48,000 in the Valley. It must be noted here that apart from the British and the Muslim League, Nehru was also in favour of open borders. The reason cited was to implement the ‘grow more food’ campaign and meet the production demands. The peasant migrants from East Bengal brought with them better cultivation techniques and greater varieties of crops. They also introduced multiple cropping that was not practiced

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91 The Congress coalition government (19 September 1938 – 16 November 1939) published a notification in November 1939 to control illegal encroachment of land in Assam by those outsiders who came into the province after 1 January, 1938. The Saadulla government which came to power thereafter did not execute this resolution.
95 Ibid, p. 115.
96 See the latter half of this chapter for details on the Grow More Food Campaign.
by the natives. Therefore Nehru supported the incoming of Bengali Muslims into Assam for the purpose of production of more food. With the patronage of the British and political leaders like Saadulla, the Muslim population of the state started increasing at a higher rate (Table 4.3).

**Table 4.3: Muslim Population of Assam from 1911 - 1941**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Muslim Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,55,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>5,85,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9,43,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>13,03,962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The table shows that between the years 1911 to 1941, the Muslim population in the Assam Valley (including Garo Hills) had substantially increased. This increase in Muslim population resulted in the demand for the creation of a separate state for the Muslims. In 1940 the Lahore resolution of the All India Muslim League voted for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the country. Echoing this demand, Saadulla opined that Assam and Bengal could form one Pakistan Union to form a Muslim majority state whereas Punjab, North West Frontier Province and Sind could form another Pakistan State. This according to the Pakistan scheme would help to avoid conflict between Hindus and Muslims (Dev and Lahiri, 1985).

The immigration issue was discussed in the Assam Legislative Assembly, within and outside Congress from different perspectives. Sarveswar Barua (Congress) submitted a motion in the Assembly to highlight the troubles faced by indigenous
people due to the land settlement policy of the government. Bringing an adjournment motion in the Assembly on 16 November, 1944, another Congressman Beliram Das pointed out the forcible occupation of grazing reserves by immigrants from Bengal. To this, Saadulla proposed to hold an All Party Conference where the earlier policies on land settlement would be revised. Though the Conference put forward certain proposals for consideration, however a mutually acceptable resolution on land settlement could not be arrived at as the revised policies were strongly opposed by Revenue Minister Munawwar Ali and Finance Minister Abdul Matin Choudhury, both belonging to the Muslim League.

The Muslim members of Saadulla’s ministry differed from their Congress counterparts regarding immigration. For instance, in 1945 responding to Maulavi Matior Rahman Mia’s enquiry about the presence of number of settled immigrants in Assam, Maulavi Munawwar Ali informed that their number could not be ascertained. Several Muslim Leaguers like Maulavi Matior Rahman Mia wanted that the government should open up vast tracts of wastelands for settlement of immigrants. Munawwar Ali interestingly wanted to keep on postponing the discussion regarding the Adjournment Motion raised by Beliram Das. However on the persistence of the then Speaker, Babu Basanta Kumar Das, the motion was aptly raised and a discussion took place in the Assembly. In this way, though the rays of legislative politics fell on the question of immigration, yet nothing concrete could be done to restrain it in the colonial period. Meanwhile land for the immigrants was being settled in accordance with the policy laid down by the government. Saadulla revived the land development scheme and opened the grazing and forest reserves for settlement of immigrants. This caused confrontation between immigrants and the graziers. From different quarters protests were launched condemning the policies of the Saadulla government. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha,

97 Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (ALAD). 13 November, 1944. Vol.2, No.11, p. 807
Sibasagar Ahom Sabha, Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha, Assam Kachari Association, Assam Mouzadar Association and the Hindu Sabha criticised the dereservation policy of the government and urged the government to reconsider the question of land settlement. However no mutually acceptable agreement was reached between the Muslim League and the Congress party on the issue of discontent arising from the policies of the government. The extremist section of the League was of the view that immigrant Muslims should be fully accommodated even at the cost of the interests of the local people.\footnote{102 The problem of immigrants coming and settling into Assam became a chronic issue in the state politics. Muslim population of the state went on increasing culminating to the demand for inclusion of Assam with East Bengal.}

4.1.3 The Cabinet Mission Plan

The Cabinet Mission which arrived in India in 1946 formulated a Plan to serve as the basis of agreement between the political parties for the future Constitution of India. The Mission’s proposal for sectional grouping of the provinces was met with deep resentment by the Assamese public opinion. The statement declared by the Mission to group Assam with Bengal threatened the preservation of the autonomy of Assam as it was intended to create a predominantly Muslim zone in Eastern India. The people felt that the decision to deny Assam provincial status was equivalent to dismissing off her culture and identity as insignificant.

As the Chief Minister, Gopinath Bardoloi had a significant role to play during this time. Bardoloi consistently urged for provincial autonomy for Assam as the state had always maintained a separate and distinctive identity of its own. Hence, tagging the state with Muslim – majority East Bengal was not feasible for Assam’s survival. The APCC solidly supported Bardoloi in his opposition to the Cabinet Mission’s Grouping Plan. It reiterated its stand of framing the province’s Constitution only by its own representatives. Meanwhile the Muslim League in Assam under Saadulla’s leadership tried to convince the delegation that it was the Muslims who actually constituted the majority of the population in the province but it was because of the partial classification
of many tribals as Hindus in the Census operations as a result of which the Hindus were shown to be having greater numerical strength. Saadulla was of the opinion that Assam would be better protected from the raids of hill tribes if it became a part of Bengal. Moreover according to him, the state was dependent on Bengal for a considerable period of time for many of its civilised amenities (Bhuyan and De, 1980). Therefore Saadulla took a stand supporting Assam’s amalgamation with Bengal for economic and administrative convenience. Saadulla’s arguments regarding favouring the grouping of Assam led Lord Pethick Lawrence, the then Secretary of State for India to conclude that “Assam’s connection with Bengal was so close that separation from Bengal was not possible.”

Had it not been for the vehement opposition registered by APCC against the grouping clause, the Cabinet Mission Plan would have definitely materialised and resulted in the merging of Assam with Bengal. The APCC endorsed Bardoloi’s memorandum which was submitted to the CWC on 19 May to unanimously protest against grouping. The role of the National Congress in responding to Assam’s pleas against grouping has already been discussed earlier in Chapter 2. It should be mentioned here that Nehru was not clear regarding Assam’s position in the Plan. Two instances show his ambiguity. On one occasion at a press conference on 10 July, 1946, Nehru remarked, “It is highly likely that Bengal and Assam will decide against grouping...I can say with every assurance and convictions that there is going to be finally no grouping there, because Assam will not tolerate it under any circumstances whatever.” On another occasion, in a broadcast, Nehru as Head of the interim government made a statement: “We are perfectly prepared to, and have accepted, the position of sitting in


105 See Chapter 2 for details on the Memorandum.

106 Political Situation Reports, Home Political File No. 51/2/1946. NAI, New Delhi.
sections which will consider the question of formation of groups.\textsuperscript{107} The deadlock at the Simla Conference\textsuperscript{108} and the non-inclusion of any member of Assam in the CWC further enabled the APCC to understand that the question of preservation of Assam’s identity was not taken seriously by the National Congress. As such the only help received was from Gandhiji who fully supported the necessity of maintaining Assam’s provincial autonomy. He even urged Bardoloi to launch \textit{Satyagraha} against the Congress if it did not endorse Assam’s case. In the final analysis, Gandhiji’s support and Bardoloi’s leadership together helped to create a strong opinion among the Assamese people against the grouping plan. With the issue of grouping being the main hurdle, the Cabinet Mission Plan collapsed in its entirety.

\textbf{4.1.4 Congress’ Eviction Drive}

In 1946 Congress government decided to finish the task of evicting immigrants which was actually started during Saadulla’s tenure but left uncompleted. Initially Saadulla’s ministry identified illegal encroachers who were evicted from some reserves of the Kamrup district. But gradually the government showed less resolve to implement the terms of the Tripartite Agreement of 1945.\textsuperscript{109} Bardoloi therefore entrusted the task of eviction to his trusted aide Bishnuram Medhi. Instructions were therefore issued, by the Government for the eviction of all unauthorized and unprotected encroachers from the professional reserves except those who had been in occupation of the land in the reserves since 1938 or earlier. By 31 May, 1946 unprotected encroachers from reserved areas were evicted from four reserves in Mangaldoi, three in Barpeta and two from Gauhati. These encroachers were mainly Muslims but there were also Hindus and Tribals amongst them. Mohammed Ali Jinnah who arrived in Gauhati on 7 April, 1946


\textsuperscript{108} Both the Congress and the League which participated in the Simla Conference held in June 14, 1945 differed on the grouping issue. The Conference also failed to give a solution to the communal question.

\textsuperscript{109} Barooah, Nirode K. (2010). \textit{Gopinath Bordoloi, ‘The Assam problem’ and Nehru’s centre}. Guwahati: Bhabani Publications, p. 250. The Tripartite Agreement was signed between Saadulla, Bardoloi and Rohini Kumar Choudhury on 20 March, 1945. According to the terms of this agreement a revision of the land settlement policy with a view to accommodate claims of sons of the soil was to be taken up.
threatened the Government to revise its policy or face a situation “which will not be conducive to the well being of the people of Assam.”\textsuperscript{110} In May 1946, the members of the all – India Muslim League Council consisting of Liaquat Ali Khan, Choudhury Khaliquzzaman and Siddique Ali Khan paid a visit to the regions where evictions were carried out and condemned the actions of the government. They argued that it was a ‘barbarous act’ on the part of the government to demolish the settlements of the immigrants.\textsuperscript{111} According to them, the areas in which evictions were carried out were actually villages and not grazing reserves. The Assam Muslim League organized meetings, processions and hartals to oppose the policy of the government. Abdul Hamid Khan, popularly known as Bhasani led the struggle for the return of the evicted Muslims.\textsuperscript{112} He organized a fast – unto – death programme in May, 1946 in Barpeta and successfully encouraged about one hundred and sixty persons to reoccupy their holdings. For the Congress government the task of evicting immigrants became increasingly difficult because of the protests and actions of the League. It responded by introducing the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance on 18 November, 1946. This showed the firmness with which the government wanted to tackle the immigration problem. To counteract this move, the Assam Muslim League launched a civil disobedience movement on 30 March, 1947. Leaders like Choudhury Khaliquzzaman and Abdul Basit Choudhury held public meetings in a number of places and encouraged the Muslims to defy Sec. 144 Cr. P.C. and encroach reserve lands. While the government arrested the violators of law, the workers of the Muslim League continued to shout slogans, attempted to hoist flags and organised picketing in front of government buildings. On 18 April, 1947, the League workers and the Muslim

\textsuperscript{110} Star of India, 4 May, 1946 op. cit. Bhuyan, A.C & De, Sibopada (1980).

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 4 May 1946, p. 280.

\textsuperscript{112} Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan was born in the district of Pabna in East Bengal. He took active participation in the Khilafat and Non Co – operation agitation. This made him realize that Bengal’s Muslim peasantry needed to raise their voice against the zamindars and money – lenders who were mostly Hindus. He stood for the abolition of zamindaris and worked for providing relief to the indebted peasants. He set up his establishment in Dhubri and in Bhasanir – char, an island in the Brahmaputra. It was after this place that Maulana came to be called ‘Bhasani’. Bhasani began to articulate the demands of the immigrant families for land. For championing these causes, he soon attained fame as the leader of Muslim immigrants of Goalpara.
Students’ Federation carried out a procession in Sylhet and hoisted the League flag at the District Commissioner’s Court, Municipal office and jail buildings. The movement which initially began peacefully soon turned violent. At places like Mankachar bazaar in Goalpara district and Sylhet, workers resorted to violent means to get their demands fulfilled. A tense situation thereby prevailed in the areas inhabited by Muslims and the government had to clamp Section 144 in several places. Those who violated the orders were arrested and warned. It can be seen from the above discussion that the Muslims of Assam had responded to the call of the League with full unity as a mark of protest against the eviction programme of the Congress government. The Assam Provincial Muslim League officially relinquished the Movement on 11 June, 1947 due to its waning popularity.

4.1.5 Partition and Immigration

The partition of the country into two sections – India and Pakistan marked a new phase of demographic development in the state. The Sylhet Referendum and the amalgamation of Sylhet with East Bengal reduced the Bengali population of Assam (Goswami, 2009). Partition of the country was expected to bring an end to the problem of immigrants. However, it was not so. From the newly emerged East Pakistan, fresh batches of refugees entered Assam. The number of refugees in Assam till October 1950 were 4, 94,432.\(^\text{113}\)

The constant flow of immigrants and the necessity to provide relief and rehabilitation to the refugees who had been victims of war and persecution generated serious problems for the Congress government in the post – independence period. Food scarcity, natural disasters, poverty and insufficient economic and industrial growth had already created many socio – economic woes among the people of the state. At a stage when a state in a newly independent country should have been receiving grants from the centre for economic and industrial development, even the promised post – war grants for reconstruction programmes was reduced drastically and this created stagnation in the

economic growth of the state (From an expected grant of Rs. 8 crores, the grant was reduced to Rs. 1, 60 lakhs). \(^{114}\)

Despite achieving certain amount of success in the eviction programme of 1946, immigration continued into Assam. Nearly 4 and a half lakh of Muslims had entered the state of Assam between 15 August, 1947 till the beginning of 1949, as informed by Shri Gopalaswami, the Minister of Transport and Railways on an enquiry by Sardar B.S. Man.\(^{115}\). The government admitted that it was unable to place a bar on the continuous movement of refugees as no law or system had been adopted to stop the inflow\(^{116}\). Natural disasters like the earthquake and accompanying floods diverted whatever meagre resources were available towards disaster management. Despite unfavourable natural conditions, inflow and outflow of Hindus and Muslims between Assam and East Pakistan was incessant. In a period of six months, i.e. , from 9 April, 1950 to 28 October, 1950, Jawaharlal Nehru revealed in the Parliament that from East Pakistan to Assam there was a flow of 2,27,042 Hindus and 1,85,592 Muslims. In the same period, from Assam to East Pakistan there was a flow of 65,079 Hindus and 44,152 Muslims.\(^{117}\) Just before his death in 1950, Bordoloi informed the central government that Assam did not have the capacity to harbour more than 1.5 lakh refugees. But it is a shocking revelation by the government on an enquiry by Beliram Das that Assam was giving shelter to approximately 4,94,432 refugees up to 16 September, 1950.\(^{118}\)

4.1.6 Immigration issue and Centre’s role

It is important to examine the Centre’s role in dealing with immigration, as admission into and expulsion of persons from India is a subject which falls in the Union List. During discussion in the Assembly and Parliament, it came to light that no special machinery was created for eviction of immigrants by the Central government during

\(^{114}\) Budget Speech of Bishnuram Medhi, 10 March, 1949. ALAD. Vol.1, No.1. p.15.


\(^{118}\) ALAD, 5 October, 1950. Vol.2, No.15, p. 944
this time. After repeatedly pleading the Union government to pass legislation on prevention of entry of undesirable persons into Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi succeeded in persuading the government to pass the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act in 1950. However the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950 followed by the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Ordinance could only expel 354 immigrants from the state. The Act lacked proper machinery and the procedure followed for expulsion did not garner much support from the centre. The centre’s direction regarding granting of political rights to people also needs close examination. According to these directions, a permanent resident in an electoral constituency could claim voting rights. However, as regards refugees who came from Pakistan to Assam, the centre had relaxed its directives instructing that if any refugee from Pakistan wanted to be a voter, then a simple declaration of his/her refugee status was sufficient. In this regard, Rohini Kumar Choudhury interestingly remarked that this instruction was too harsh on them and refugees (whether actual or so-called) must be allowed to get political rights by presenting a simple declaration in front of the local head. It cannot be denied here that without determining the genuineness of a person’s refugee status, it was against the interests of the people of the state to provide refugees political rights. Many anti-national elements used this opportunity to enlist themselves as voters in Assam.

On checking immigration Jawaharlal Nehru’s advice, on the other hand, to Bardoloi revealed indifference. “There is no bar to individuals coming, but I think you would be justified in stopping large groups from coming, unless they come with your approval,” Nehru wrote to Bardoloi in one of his letters. Nehru actually expected

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119 The Immigration (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950 had the power to order expulsion of certain immigrants who were considered to be detrimental to the interests of the general public by the Central Government. The Act implicitly distinguished between Hindu refugees and illegal immigrants. It was repealed later due to political compulsions.


122 Ibid.

123 Nehru to Bardoloi, 15 March, 1948. Assam Secretariat Files, cited by N. Barooah, op.cit, p. 332
Bardoloi to deal with immigration on his own when no such power was entrusted with him. On another occasion, when Bardoloi’s government stated that there was not even sufficient land to provide to the local landless people, Nehru remarked that if Assam failed to accommodate refugees, then its pleas for financial aid would have to suffer.\textsuperscript{124} Nehru was also quick to add that if land was not available in Assam, then it was wrong to expect that it would still be available in any other part of the country.\textsuperscript{125} In another instance, the Prime Minister said that he was definitely opposed to mass exchange of population but on the other hand he insisted that all those people who expressed wish to cross the border in either directions had to be allowed to do so in order to erase the fears of minorities.\textsuperscript{126} These evidences show that Jawaharlal Nehru did not take the issue of unabated influx into Assam very seriously.

\textbf{4.1.7 Immigration Issue and State’s Response}

The state’s response to immigration issue under the leadership of two Chief Minister’s namely Gopinath Bardoloi and Bishnuram Medhi is discussed below.

In September 1949, the issue of determining the correct enumeration procedure for ascertaining the number of immigrants from East Pakistan to Assam was raised by Babu Bidyapati Sinha in the Assembly. However, the issue raised was wrapped up when Bardoloi opined that a separate census was not meaningful for the general census exercise would soon be carried out.\textsuperscript{127} In another context, \textit{Dainik Axomiya} revealed in one of its editorial about Bardoloi’s view regarding establishment of a new administrative set – up. As the population of the state had increased with the addition of 4 lakh immigrants, therefore Bardoloi commented that a new census enumerating them would be useful so as to increase the number of seats for Assam in the administrative council.\textsuperscript{128} But Bardoloi failed to look beyond the fact that giving people seats in the

\textsuperscript{124} Nehru to Bardoloi, 18 May, 1949, cited in N. Barooah, op.cit., p.394

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, cited in N. Barooah, op.cit., p. 393.

\textsuperscript{126} The Times of India, March 8, 1950, No. 56. Vol. CXII, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{128} Dainik Axomiya, 28 January, 1949, p.2
administrative council without verifying their nationality would imply that they were considered to be part of Assam’s indigenous population. The above instances show a certain amount of slackness on the part of the Bardoloi government with regard to dealing with immigration.

Few other examples continue to prove that Bardoloi government did not adopt tough measures to regulate immigration. To deal with the onrush of immigrants who were pouring in continuously, the Bardoloi government appointed a Special Officer to make enquiries but the reports prepared by them were not discussed and debated in the House. The Chief Minister also cited that in cases where the immigrants contravened the law of the land, they would be dealt in a ‘suitable manner’\textsuperscript{129}. But as regards defining what action ‘suitable manner’ implied, he was unclear. In 1948 questions were raised by Sarat Chandra Sinha (Congress) in the Assembly regarding the closure of borders of Assam to fresh immigrants. The government however assured the indigenous inhabitants that they were closely protected in matter of land settlement as it had already declared the unavailability of land in Assam for settlement of new immigrants. But interestingly the government had opened up 5719 acre of village grazing reserves in 1949 – 50 for settlement of immigrants.\textsuperscript{130}

However, it is not to be assumed that Bardoloi wanted immigrants to enter and encroach into the land of Assam. In his personal diary belonging to the year 1948, he frequently expressed his apprehension on the challenge that had confronted his state. This anxiousness was relating to the horde of people who had been silently penetrating Assam and to the difficulty of determining their refugee status. With his deep perception of the situation, Bardoloi detected that the actual number of people looking for shelter was less.\textsuperscript{131} An ailing Bardoloi requested Jawaharlal Nehru to vest the state government with power to control the flow of immigrants.\textsuperscript{132} On several occasions, Bardoloi had also approached Mahatma Gandhi, his friend, philosopher and guide,

\textsuperscript{129} ALAD. 3 April, 1948. Vol. 1, No. 11, p. 888.

\textsuperscript{130} Natun Axomiya(Assamese daily newspaper), 6 January, 1953, p.2

\textsuperscript{131} Bardoloi’s Diary (in Assamese) entry on 19 July, 1948. Other Papers. Serial No. 10, NMML, New Delhi.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid, entry on 21 July, 1948.
seeking advice on curbing infiltration into Assam. Gandhi was aware of the problems faced by Assam and often rendered his valuable suggestions, thus, showing him the course of action. In one of his letters to Bardoloi, Gandhiji wrote “It is greatly in the interests of the Ministry to settle this eviction trouble...If the present unlawful movement continues and gathers strength through the further incitement of communal passions and assistance from our next door neighbour we may find that the armed strength at our disposal at present or which may be placed at our disposal by the Central government, who are themselves pre-occupied with grave troubles in certain other provinces, insufficient to cope with the situation.”

He also proposed that immigration could be effectively restricted by emulating the permit system followed in European countries.

Though Bardoloi had repeatedly requested for help from the centre to bail Assam out of the extraordinarily difficult situation, yet the Congress party could not argue with a firm and consolidated hand for its cause in front of the centre which contributed to continuation of the problem in the subsequent years. It is true that expelling immigrants from Assam was the greater responsibility of the centre. But Bardoloi’s appeal for devolution of power to the state went unheard.

Bardoloi’s successor, Bishnuram Medhi on the other hand was a strong advocate of sons of the soil. Whether it was allotting jobs or land, for him the rights of the indigenous people always came first. While delivering the budget speech in 1947 as the finance minister, Medhi lamented that before the arrival of Bengal immigrants, the Assamese cultivators, Hindus, Muslims and tribals used to live together in peace and order. But occupation of riverain areas by the newcomers led to scarcity of land in Chaporis. According to him, the encroachment on the Professional Grazing Reserves had disturbed the entire economic life of the indigenous people and was also responsible


134 Though the Assamese elite were strongly in favour of state autonomy, yet their pleas went unheard as this voice was unorganized. Most of the central leaders wanted a federation with a strong centre. Hence devolution of powers was unacceptable to them.

135 “Chapori” is the Assamese word for sand bars.
for shortage of foodstuffs in the province. Then in the budget discussion of 1949, Md. Saadulla expressed his wish that the vast lands of Assam should be thrown open for cultivation so as to counter the food scarcity problem and increase the revenue of the state. Finance minister Bishnuram Medhi replied “Regarding his claim for land – that there are sufficient waste lands for cultivation in the province – I would ask him to go to Nowgong and Lakhimpur and see for himself what is the condition of the Assamese Muslims there...We cannot provide land to the outsiders before providing economic holdings to our own men. I am surprised that he is shedding crocodile tears for the lot of the refugees, but he did not shed tears for the lot of the Assamese Muslims of Nowgong and North Lakhimpur.” Medhi thus continued to urge the people to stop encouraging land – hungry people to come in numbers and deprive the indigenous people of their due rights. According to him, taking advantage of the porous borders areas, many ‘undesirable elements’ had been spreading communal hatred among the simple minded people of Assam living near the border areas. Hence he was strongly in favour of strengthening the police force and to contain such ‘menace’.

It is interesting to observe the centre’s ambiguous and apathetic stand on the crucial issue affecting Assam during this period. Sadat Ali Khan, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of External Affairs stated that there were no Muslim infiltrators into Assam during 1955 – 56. The prime minister himself was devoid of any answer when asked by Kamakhya Prasad Tripathi (M.P. of Darrang district) about the statistics of Muslims immigrating to Assam. On the contrary, in another statement, Union Rehabilitation Minister Mehr Chand Khanna informed the media that upto the end of 1955, 20,000 people from East Bengal had been coming into India every month. This figure increased to 50,000 per month in the period 1955 – 56. More

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than 16,500 Pakistani Muslims crossed the border of Assam through Karimganj during August 1956. This huge movement of people was viewed with concern because it was the highest figure of Pakistanis entering Assam through the border since the introduction of the passport system in 1952. This shows that the central government lacked political will to fight the problem in Assam. On some occasions, as clearly shown above, the government was either lacking response or showing least concern towards the influx problem of Assam.

During Medhi’s tenure, passport and visa system was introduced for the first time between Assam and East Pakistan from 15 October, 1952. But as police verification was not deemed to be necessary anyone could easily get it. This reaped huge benefits for people who wanted to cross the border into Assam. During this period, government data provided by Bishnuram Medhi revealed that between 15 October, 1952 to 28 February, 1954, 85,666 persons entered Assam with requisite travel documents from East Pakistan. Thus inspite of introduction of the passport and visa system, the problem of immigration could not be controlled. In this context, it will be important to note that Nehru was strongly opposed to the introduction of passports between East Pakistan and Assam, as this would, according to him hamper the free intercourse between the two countries.

The economic hardships and the unfavourable atmosphere in East Pakistan induced more people from East Pakistan to keep coming into Assam towards the end of 1955. The crisis faced by the people of East Pakistan was indeed grave. Those who crossed over the border into Assam even without travel documents knew very well that illegal entry would amount to incarceration. But these helpless people were ready to survive in jail with food rather than die in their country without food. It must also be noted here that these immigrants were 'lured' to India with 'easy employment and ready


143 Passport and Visas come under Union List.


cash amounting to 200 rupees’ which were inviting factors for these people to come to India. \textsuperscript{146} Congress MLA Ramprasad Chaubey drew attention of the government’s drives in the Assembly regarding checking influx from East Bengal. The government during this time claimed to have constructed 78 border outposts, 13 passport checkposts and a special checking staff at Badarpur. Persons detected entering the state without valid travel documents were prosecuted under the law. \textsuperscript{147}

However Medhi government was not free from criticism regarding the policies which it adopted against immigration. A careful observation reveals the following inadequacies. Medhi’s policy of granting rehabilitation benefits to all displaced persons irrespective of their possession of refugee registration certificates came under severe scrutiny. It cannot be denied here that this policy paid rich dividends to many miscreants who wanted to cross the border illegally. Moreover, till 1951, the government had opened up 27,700 acre reserved forests. In many areas fraud co – operatives grabbed major parts of available land. The government was accused of uneven distribution of land as many needy indigenous did not get what they deserved, with many others there was surplus land and worse, with flood affected and earthquake ravaged people the allotment of land was insufficient. \textsuperscript{148} It was also during Bishnuram Medhi’s reign that 5 lakh East Bengal refugees got voting rights. \textsuperscript{149} It will be purposeful to remember, as mentioned earlier, that 16,500 Pakistani Muslims had entered Karimganj during August 1956. Some refugees were even successful in acquiring false refugee registration certificates and Indian citizenship. From the above evidences it is clear that though Bishnuram Medhi had been vocally registering his support for the rights of the indigenous people of Assam, yet a certain degree of ambivalence was found in his actions.

\textsuperscript{147} ALAD. 7 September, 1956. Vol. 2, No. 22, p. 1740
\textsuperscript{148} Natun Axomiya, 6 January, 1953, p. 2
\textsuperscript{149} The Hindustan Standard, 27 August, 1956. Vol.19, No. 326, p. 3
Thus both Bardoloi and Medhi wanted to oppose immigration into Assam yet it could not be controlled during the reign of both the chief ministers for the reasons mentioned above.

However after the announcement of declarations at the States Rehabilitation Conference held at Darjeeling on 30 – 31 October, 1957, a significant development took place. This Conference was crucial in the sense that it proposed to the Union Cabinet to take up a fixed date after which no refugees would be accepted from East Pakistan by the Government. The participants of the Conference also suggested that rules had to be strengthened in respect of issuance of migration certificates by the Indian High Commission at Dacca and only those who could support themselves should be allowed to migrate. After the declaration of these restrictions, the rate of transnational flows between the two countries somewhat decreased.\textsuperscript{150} The Hindustan Standard reported in 1957 that a sharp decrease in the number of migrants from East Pakistan in the first quarter of 1957 was witnessed as compared to 1956. On an average, nearly 2000 persons were crossing the border till May 1957 against the average of 26000 that had come to India per month in 1956. The East Pakistan authorities claimed that the decrease in the flow of people was the result of assurances by them to the minorities creating a favourable atmosphere for the latter. The actual reason for the decline in these figures was the enforcement of a planned migration programme for the movement of intended refugees to India.\textsuperscript{151} The central government had decided to seal the borders to fresh migrants from East Pakistan who would be rushed to other states immediately upon their arrival into India. It was explained that freezing of the problem was the first step towards the liquidation of the problem in the states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.\textsuperscript{152} This was however only a temporary lull because immigration never really stopped after 1957. The growth rates of population during the period 1951 – 1961 and 1961 – 1971 were 34.98 and 34.95 per cent respectively as against the national rates of 21.51 and 14.80 per cent and during the two decades between 1951 and 1971, the


\textsuperscript{151} The Hindustan Standard, May 26, 1957. Vol. XX, No. 235, pp. 1 and 3.

population of Assam increased by 82.16 per cent as against 51.81 per cent for the entire country (Goswami, 2009).

Immigration flows into Assam from 1947 – 1957 was examined under the tenureship of two chief ministers Gopinath Bardoloi and Bishnuram Medhi. It is clear from the above discussion that there was no sustainable plan which was designed to tackle the demographic crisis during both their tenures. Bardoloi struggled to devise a strategy but lack of party strength and central support failed to give shape to it. There was an uproar raised in Medhi’s cabinet to check infiltration, but again that was hushed down due to cardinal reasons like the paralytic response of the centre and Medhi’s own puzzling and unfathomable decisions. It thus becomes apparent that though there was a commitment to handle the unabated infiltration but it was of an imperfect kind. The apathy and indifference displayed by the Union government during these critical years did not help to confront the predicament. It is very disheartening to know that not even a statesman of par excellence and the then President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad could recognise immigration as a challenge to the state. In his address to the nation on 18 March, 1957, the President while mentioning the alarming proportion of people, amounting to around 4 million population crossing over India from East Pakistan, admitted the genuineness of the heavy burden faced by the country and “especially by the state of West Bengal”.  

The crisis faced by Assam in these turbulent years was nowhere mentioned in the Presidential address.

The lack of a sustainable design to handle immigration and popular discontent arising out of non – fulfilment of expectations of the Axomiyas in post – colonial Assam led to eruption of ethnic tensions between indigenous Assamese and immigrant population in the state which culminated into the Assam Movement (1979 – 1985). Years of agitation, slogans and discussions however could not pave the way for influencing policy – makers to devise a unanimously acceptable strategy to restrain illegal immigration and settlement in Assam. For Assam, the implications of immigration need to be profoundly analysed. The initial benefits of immigration have


been replaced by a fear of outsiders threatening the socio – cultural – economic identities of the indigenous people and simultaneously also causing shifts in the demographic balance. Unless borders are properly managed and this fear is dissipated from the lives of the people, the bond between immigration and maelstrom will be strengthened. And this can be highly detrimental to the sustainable development of Assam (Goswami, 2009).

4.2 Food Scarcity Issue

The economy of Assam is agriculture – based where more than 70 per cent of the population is engaged in agriculture and allied sectors. Agriculture is so deep – rooted into the state’s economic system that its existence and sustainability depends on the production and distribution of food. Assam has been blessed by nature in respect of availability of good quality soil to grow various crops like rice, paddy, wheat, tea, mustard, sugarcane, pulses, jute, etc. For a very long time, the people of the state had been cultivating on their own and were self – sufficient in matter of food materials. Inspite of immense agricultural potential, however, due to some socio – economic factors, Assam witnessed shortage of foodstuffs in the period following independence. The following account aims to identify the reasons which gave rise to this problem in the state and the role of the party in power in tackling this issue. Food being one of the three basic necessities of life, an attempt has been made to throw significant light on the crisis of food scarcity faced by Assam which tormented the masses in a decade which was already infected by the woes of partition. Deficit of food products in a state like Assam which normally claims to be self – sufficient or even a surplus area at times, was a paradox which caught the imagination of scholars and administrators alike and it is the historical study of this paradox that is attempted to be explored here.

4.2.1 Background of the problem

In the nineteenth century, Malthus, the celebrated British demographist cautioned the human race about the potential dangers of high population outpacing availability of resources and means of subsistence. This Malthusian concept became applicable to the Indian context when population started to increase exponentially creating pressure on food supplies.
One of the principal reasons for the origination of the problem of food scarcity in India was the high growth of population. As Dayal (1968) points out, during the period 1891 – 1920, India was a net exporter of foodgrains. “Taking 1900 – 01 to 1904 – 05 period as base population index for the period 1914 – 1915 to 1919 – 1920 stood at 105.6 whereas foodgrains production index was 107.2.” But in the subsequent years, population went on rising at increasing levels whereas food production had to suffer on account of various socio – economic as well as political reasons. Thus there was a huge imbalance in the demand – supply ratio and production of foodgrains was inadequate for the needs of the population. A look at the census figures will give us an idea about the expanding population.

**Table 4.4: Zone wise increase/decrease of population from 1891 - 1950**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Mean Decennial Growth Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1891-1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North India</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East India</td>
<td>+ 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South India</td>
<td>+6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West India</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central India</td>
<td>+1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North – West India</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>+1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As the Census Report depicts, the population of India decreased by 0.2 per cent in 1891 – 1900, increased by 5.6 per cent in 1901 – 1910 and again decreased by 0.4 per cent in 1911 – 1920. This trend was then reversed with an increase of 1.2% per cent in 1921 – 1931, followed by a decrease of 1.0% per cent in 1931 – 1941. The population then increased by 0.6% per cent in 1941 – 1951, and again decreased by 0.4% per cent in 1951 – 1961. The population then increased by 1.2% per cent in 1961 – 1971, followed by a decrease of 0.8% per cent in 1971 – 1981. The population then increased by 1.5% per cent in 1981 – 1991, and again decreased by 0.6% per cent in 1991 – 2001. The population then increased by 1.0% per cent in 2001 – 2011, and again decreased by 0.4% per cent in 2011 – 2021.

cent in 1911 – 20. On the other hand, population increased by 10.4 per cent in 1921 – 30, 12.7 per cent in 1931 – 40 and 13.2 per cent in 1941 – 50. Taking the average rates for the two thirty – year periods, population grew between 1891 and 1920 at the rate of 1.7 per cent per decade, while between 1921 and 1950, it grew at the rate of 12.0 per cent per decade (Census, 1951). This increase in population necessitated an increase in imports in order to meet the demands of a rising population.

Therefore the government made certain arrangements such as barter agreements with foreign countries during this time to acquire those commodities whose production in the country was deficit. Since 15 August, 1947 to 1949, the commodities exchanged under barter agreements were as follows:
Table 4.5: Commodities exchanged under barter agreements since 15 August, 1947 to 1949

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Exports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August 1947</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>320,000 tons maize</td>
<td>60,000 tons hessian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>120,000 tons barley</td>
<td>80,000 tons hessian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>385,000 tons wheat</td>
<td>50,000 tons hessian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95,000 tons maize and barley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>390,000 tons wheat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October 1948</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>120,000 tons barley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95,000 tons maize and barley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 1949</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>385,000 tons wheat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.S.R</td>
<td>May 1948</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50,000 tons wheat</td>
<td>5000 tons tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81,000 tons wheat</td>
<td>5000 tons tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>January 1949</td>
<td>5000 raw jute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1000 tons castor oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>March 1948</td>
<td>9000 tons imported wheat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20,150 tons rice</td>
<td>12,000 tons imported maize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,500 tons imported barley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Assam also, the trend of growth of population was increasing since 1901. The following table will highlight this growth of population in the state.
Table 4.6: Trend of Growth of Population in Assam during 1901 – 1961

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population Assam</th>
<th>Decadal Growth rate in per cent</th>
<th>Annual Exponential Growth Rate in per cent</th>
<th>Percentage share of State’s population to India’s total</th>
<th>Population Density (persons/square km)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3289680</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3848617</td>
<td>16.99</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4636980</td>
<td>20.48</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5560371</td>
<td>19.90</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>6694790</td>
<td>20.40</td>
<td>14.22</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>8028856</td>
<td>19.93</td>
<td>13.31</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>10837329</td>
<td>34.98</td>
<td>21.51</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The table shows that population of Assam had been increasing gradually since 1901. From 3289680 persons in 1901, the population of the state rose to 8028856 in 1951. The decadal growth rate in per cent in Assam was always higher than the all – India growth rate. This growth in population was creating pressure on the food situation of the state as well.

Moreover repeated perennial floods in the state in the 1940’s had devastated extensive croplands in Assam. Then, it must be remembered that not only Assam but it was since the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 and following that the Bengal famine that had led to shortage of foodgrains in India as a whole. Burma had been contributing...
around 15% of rice to India and at the time was the world’s largest exporter of rice. Needless to say, the Japanese invasion of Burma affected the rice export to India. Moreover, the devastating Bengal famine was also responsible for food shortages in the country. In 1943, this disaster claimed an estimated 1.5 to 3.5 million lives.\textsuperscript{156} Swaminathan (2013) notes that a combination of factors led to food deficiency across the country, such as the Japanese occupation of Burma, the damage to the kharif rice crop both due to tidal waves and the epidemic caused by the fungus \textit{Helminthosporium oryzae}, panic purchase and hoarding by the rich, failure of governance, particularly in relation to the equitable distribution of the available food grains, communication chaos due to World War II, and the apathy of the then U.K. government to the plight of the starving people of undivided Bengal.\textsuperscript{157} The Government of India on 6 April, 1942 called on a Food Production Conference consisting of representatives of provinces and states for the purpose of planning a programme to increase foodgrain production in India. This Conference recognised that the situation arising out of the Second World War had led to shortage of food and recommended that a planned action for the increase of food production should be taken up to counter the situation. This planned action consisted of the following steps:

- **i.** Expansion of area under food and fodder crops by:
  - a) bringing new land under cultivation;
  - b) double – cropping;
  - c) diverting land from non – food crops to food crops;

- **ii.** Increase in the supply of water for irrigation by the improvement and extension of existing irrigation canals, construction of additional wells, etc;

- **iii.** Extended use of manures and fertilizers;

\textsuperscript{156} Swaminathan, M.S. \textit{From Bengal Famine to Right to Food}. The Hindu, 13 February, 2013, p. 9

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid
iv. Increase in the supply of improved seeds.\textsuperscript{158}

However, the suggested course of planned action did not produce the desired results in Assam. The state had to import huge quantities of food stuffs from other provinces. The table below gives us an idea of food imports by Assam in the year 1944–45.

Table 4.7: Quantity of imported foodstuff in by Assam in 1944 – 45

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodities</th>
<th>Value (in Rupees)</th>
<th>Quantity (in Maunds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gur</td>
<td>28,67,137</td>
<td>2,52,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard Oil</td>
<td>13,49,380</td>
<td>61,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30,29,330 (1945-46)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masoor Dal</td>
<td>36,73,336</td>
<td>2,07,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gram Dal</td>
<td>1,44,964</td>
<td>9,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moong Dal</td>
<td>10,77,546</td>
<td>59,319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khesari Dal</td>
<td>15,54,344</td>
<td>1,23,549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arhar Dal</td>
<td>9,05,271</td>
<td>64,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>63,28,772</td>
<td>3,65,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat Product</td>
<td>44,11,813</td>
<td>44,11,813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This was in brief the food situation in the country and in Assam in the colonial years. The problem of food shortage was developing uncertain prospects for the future of the people of Assam.

4.2.2 The food situation in Assam (1947 – 1957)

In the period following independence of the country the entire nation was in the grip of serious economic strain that had threatened to cripple the socio – economic fabric of the country. The factors contributing to this economic crisis were an acute shortage of commodities, especially of food and cloth, falling production leading to rising prices, increasing cost of living, labour unrest and deficit in foreign exchange for
the purchase of consumer and capital goods (The Times of India, 30 August, 1947). In Assam during this time, excepting for rice and paddy, the state had to import all other essential foodstuffs from other provinces. Apart from natural causes, the economic policy adopted by the Central government led to deterioration of the food situation. The prices of commodities were raised on the one hand and the quotas allotted from different provinces and states made the procurement position difficult. The government adopted a policy of gradual withdrawal of control and rice and wheat were the only items available in respect of which control existed in Assam.\(^{159}\) The Second World War had brought about disastrous effects to the country. War necessitated the need of goods from India and the allied armies were entitled under the Reserve Bank Law to present sterling and to receive any amount of rupees against it. As a result of this policy, the purchasing power of the country shot up and prices of commodities went up by 300 per cent.

In view of this precarious condition, the state government decided to move the Central government to raise the price of rice and paddy so that the native cultivators could be saved from the economic difficulties. However the Government of India only gave an assurance that the prices of commodities would be sealed. It could not bring down the price of other commodities. As a consequence the cultivators of Assam had to buy all commodities at a high price and had to sell off their rice and paddy at an uneconomical price.\(^{160}\)

### 4.2.3 The Grow More Food Campaign and Assam

The Grow More Food Campaign was launched by the colonial government to overcome the effects of the Bengal famine. The Foodgrains Policy Committee also emphasized on this pressing Indian need to produce more food. Therefore it directed the provinces and the states to work towards implementing the campaign of 1942.

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\(^{160}\) Ibid, p. 51.
For the purpose of implementing the Grow More Food campaign in Assam, the central government provided a grant of Rs. 36, 10,061 and a loan of Rs. 36, 19,000. Schemes were sanctioned by the Government of India under the campaign with the target of raising food production. Important varieties of seeds and manures were distributed and mechanised cultivation was taken up in big areas. Vast areas of land had been placed at the disposal of the Food department for the purpose of carrying joint and co-operative cultivation. A plan for long term agriculture was undertaken by the government for the expansion of an Agricultural College. The landless cultivators were encouraged to form groups for joint cultivation in selected wastelands with mechanised implements. This scheme was designed to ameliorate the economic condition of the agriculturalists and to make the province self-sufficient in matter of food crops.

Despite taking some path-breaking measures for the upliftment of the condition of food production, the government was unable to eradicate the economic woes of the people. A developing state with a plethora of problems could not develop on her own without help from the centre. But in this regard Assam was unlucky. The drastic reduction of the post-war grants had financially crippled the state. Initially the central government had promised an amount of 500 crores as a part of post-war development scheme. That amount was reduced to 250 crores. From a promised amount of 250 crores, only 204 crores was proposed to be distributed among the provinces. So the projects which had been originally planned keeping in mind the assumption of receipts on the allotment of 500 crores had to be reduced to a great extent. The then finance minister Bishnuram Medhi in his budget speech appealed to the central government to distribute the post-war grants to an undeveloped province like Assam on the basis of meeting the minimum basic needs of the state instead of on a population basis. However, for Assam, post-war grants were reduced by the centre and progress in the development sphere was held back for a considerable period of time. In

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163 Ibid.
another of his budget speeches earlier, Medhi had highlighted the injustices caused to Assam under the Otto Niemeyer Award of 1936\textsuperscript{164}. This award was introduced to guarantee the financial equilibrium of the provinces of India. However, the Niemeyer Award reduced Assam’s deficit to 47 lakhs on the basis of the budget of a single year of 1935 – 1936 which made no allowance for the progressive cost of social service and development projects\textsuperscript{165}. Therefore the finance minister consistently kept on requesting the centre to place more grants at Assam’s disposal.

The already retarded economic situation created more difficulties for the general people because the price of essential commodities including foodstuffs could not be controlled by the government. Simultaneously other social evils like black marketing of controlled goods, hoarding and adulteration of foodstuffs had penetrated the market, aggravating the problem. A grave crisis was gradually developing as the government was administratively unequipped to address the deteriorating food situation.

Year 1950 was probably one of the most trying and painful years in the history of Assam. The state was subjected to one tragedy after another. The inadequate fund from the centre, the Great Earthquake, communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims and scarcity of basic commodities had created torpor in Assam. Moreover, the disturbances in the social and demographic sectors in Assam in the first half of 1950 led to some serious challenges which hampered the procurement schemes of the government. These difficulties were:

1. communal clashes leading to exodus of a large number of Muslim cultivators and influx of a Hindu refugees;

2. Return of the displaced Muslims;

3. Destruction and dislocation of foodgrains during the above disturbances;

4. Occupation of riverain areas by the immigrants for carrying on cultivation leaving no vacant land for the indigenous people in the Chaporis (sand bars of Brahmaputra river) for carrying on shifting cultivation;


\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
5. Encroachment on Professional Grazing Reserves by immigrants.

Owing to these problems, whatever little stock of foodgrains was available became exhausted leading to unfavourable agricultural prospects and serious maladjustments in the food economy of Assam.

4.2.4 The Great Earthquake of 1950 and its impact on agriculture

At a stage when the state was already suffering from a deficit of food products, another natural calamity had struck the region bringing colossal damages to the wealth of the state. On the evening of 15th August, 1950 an earthquake measuring 8.6 in the Richter scale had struck the state letting loose a chain of devastation of lives and property. The energy of this shock felt over an area of 1.75 million square miles was estimated to be equal to the energy released in the explosion of an atom bomb. This great earthquake spelt disaster and ruin over large tracts of Upper Assam and in the hills of the North – East Frontier Agency. Keeping in mind the purpose of the study here, it is relevant to mention only the extent of damage caused to the food and agricultural sector.

Placing a statement on the havoc and damages caused by the recent earthquake in Assam, Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi highlighted the devastation caused by it on the floor of the House. “…rich paddy fields were strewn with sand gushing out from the gaping chasms which suddenly appeared on the earth’s surface…The Additional Director of Agriculture, who recently visited the North Lakhimur Subdivision, has reported that over 30,000 acres of cultivable land have been affected in this subdivision as a result of the earthquake and floods…While the procurement scheme was thus just on the verge of collapse, and stocks everywhere had become very low as a result of the heavy drain of reserves, there came this terrible earthquake, followed by the heavy floods throwing a heavy demand on the already strained resources of the Procurement Department, by making an already bad situation even more precarious.”

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166 Statement of the Hon’ble Chief Minister on the havoc and damages caused by the recent Earthquake and flood in Assam and the relief measures taken by the Government and discussion thereon, ALAD, 30 September, 1950, Vol. II, No. 13, pp. 758 – 784.
This shows the appalling condition of the cultivable land and the procurement department of the state. Strict instructions were issued to District and Sub – Divisional Officers to subvert the activities of hoarders and profiteers, which had shot up suddenly after the disaster and to resort even to Preventive Detention where necessary. About 55,000 maunds of paddy were seized by various drives organised by the procurement department. Prices which had suddenly arisen because of shortage in supply were also reduced from Rs. 5 to Rs. 10 in some places. Small procurement units in surplus areas with a single government purchasing agent had been created in order to eliminate competition. Under The Assam Foodstuffs (Foodgrains) Control Order of 1951, the District Officers were given adequate powers and responsibilities to step up both production and procurement. Over 900 minor and 29 major irrigation schemes were also undertaken and about 53,000 acres of land were offered by the Revenue Department for cultivation purpose. The Tea Garden Land Utilization Scheme and the scheme for loans for fallow – land cultivation had been operationalised. A total quantity of 4500 tons of rice was received by the state from the central government. Besides this, another quantity of 723 tons was received as free gifts from East Pakistan, Kashmir, Patiala and others for supply in the affected areas. A quantity of 500 tons of rice was also purchased from East Punjab and 34000 maunds of rice was procured and despatched from the surplus available in Manipur state. Inspite of the additional help received from different states, the food position in the state was far from satisfactory and in the rural areas people suffered more because of lack of adequate supplies. Prices everywhere rose to great heights and they continued to be so for many months. In many areas, at times the quantity issued was far less than the demand for goods. Thus the government warned the masses that the situation would remain critical for the next few months keeping in mind the profound destruction caused to crops and grains by the earthquake.

The expedient measures adopted to meet the emergency which arose in the wake of the Great Earthquake could not produce any agricultural miracles but it must be admitted that the government could at least give an assurance to the masses of its ability to withstand such a misfortune amidst many uncertainties.

167 Governor’s Address, ALAD. 8 March, 1951. Vol.1, No.1, pp. 9 – 11.

4.2.5 The Food Position of Assam

Unfortunately the Grow More Food campaign failed to eliminate the food problem of the country on account of its shortcomings. The Foodgrain Policy Committee (1947) referring to the campaign said, “The measures which were undertaken were doubtless in the right direction, but the objectives were too diversified, the efforts were inadequate and in most areas the necessary vigour and drive were lacking.” Moreover it was also unsuccessful as it was unable to meet the desired production and supply targets. Though food production increased from 52 million tons in 1947 – 1948 to 54 million tons in 1949 – 1950, it however declined to 50 million tons in 1950 – 1951, the reasons being acute drought conditions and dependence on imports. From 1947 – 1952, India had to import foodgrains worth Rs. 577 crores. This shows that the Grow More Food campaign could not achieve the desired targets and therefore the objectives of the campaign were modified to suit the desired circumstances in the light of the day. It must however be stated that though the campaign was essentially introduced to meet short – term objectives in the country and it could not make much headway, yet the positive outcomes of the campaign must not be underestimated. In Assam during this time, under the Grow More Food Campaign 24 Grow More Food schemes were in operation in 1951. 904 minor irrigation projects were completed out of a target of 954 projects. Under the Power Plant Irrigation Scheme 12 pumps were installed benefitting 300 acres of land. Under the Seed Multiplication and Distribution Scheme, 11,032 tons of improved seeds were distributed. 16 major irrigation schemes were being carried out under the Major Irrigation Scheme. However, due to the communal disturbances and certain technical difficulties, many other schemes and projects could not be operationalised.

The loss of rice resulting due to earthquake, floods, drought, communal disturbances and diversion of paddy lands for growing money crops was estimated by the Department of Agriculture to be 4,41,500 tons. In addition losses in granaries were


170 Ibid, p. 11

estimated to be 19,078 tons. Recognising the potentiality of the food problem in the country and specially in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Madras, the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru directed all the Chief Ministers of states to take over the Food portfolios themselves in all provinces so as to recognise the severity of the problem and place it on a war footing. In their Memorandum submitted to the Food Minister of India when the latter visited the state, the Government of Assam pointed out “it will not be incorrect to say that in many areas in Assam actual famine conditions obtain and unless the position was quickly retrieved the consequences are bound to be serious...the absolute non – availability of rice is also reported from many areas. The government had promised to open a large number of grain shops in different places across the state where rice and paddy could be purchased at a cheaper rate. But while moving his motion regarding acute shortage of foodstuffs and textile in the state, a Member of the Opposition Emran Hussain Choudhury pointed out that these grain shops were inadequate in meeting the demands of the people and the price of rice (available at Rs. 140 per maund) and paddy (available from Rs. 45 – Rs. 50 per maund) had also been shooting up. It was apparent that demands had arisen as the population figures were also going up. This created a misbalance of a certain sort. From 74,06,537 people in 1941, the numbers increased by 96,90,442 in 1951. Against this inflated number, the production for 1950 – 51 was only 12,93,100 tons which undoubtedly was far short of the requirement.

As a result of the difficulties faced in the past, the year 1952 started off on a sombre note. In the beginning of the year only 27,000 tons of foodgrains was available with the Government and industries. The position was far from satisfactory and required

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173 The Times of India, 3 June, 1951, p. 1


175 Ibid.

progressive improvement. Nevertheless, the government did take some steps for effective administration and improvement of the supply position:

a) An Enforcement Branch under the control of the Inspector General of Police was established to enforce the various Supply Department and Textile Department Control Orders.

b) A Border Security Force to check smuggling and to protect the Procurement Staff working in the Pakistan bordering areas was also established.\(^{177}\)

It must be noted here that though the Grow More Food campaign could not wave a magic wand across the country yet it must be noted that 19 Grow More Food schemes were in operation in 1952 in Assam. The Agricultural Department carried out 955 minor and 7 irrigation projects, distributed 1,148 tons of improved paddy seeds and applied 1,28,000 tons of compost in different agricultural areas.\(^{178}\)

As a result of the steps taken by the government to fight food shortage in the state, the procurement during the Kharif year 1952 – 53 amounted to 1,46,000 tons against the expected quantum of 70,000 tons and actual procurement of 63,000 tons in 1951 – 52.\(^{179}\) The position of Assam thus improved visibly after a long time. As controls were relaxed, the price of rice also fell down considerably at a rate even lower than the control rate. This ‘bumper crop’ had also overburdened the government godowns because of which the government decided to help her neighbouring state West Bengal by making an offering of 15,000 tons of rice. It must be noted here that during this period states like Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, PEPSU, Coorg and Vindhya Pradesh had also declared surplus rice production of 12 lakh tons for the year 1954. While in states like Andhra Pradesh, the surplus rice was left in the reserves ‘uncared for’, it was most generous on the part of Assam despite prevailing tough conditions to make the offering of 15,000 tons of rice to West

\(^{177}\) Budget Speech of Motiram Bora, ALAD. 10 March, 1952. Vol.1, No.4, p. 138

\(^{178}\) Ibid, pp. 146 – 147.

\(^{179}\) The Assam Tribune, 23 April, 1954. Vol. 16, No. 108, pp. 1 and 6
Bengal. Other states could also have offered help to the needy state, but it was Assam which took the initiative.

4.2.6 1954 floods and its impact on agriculture

Just when the state had revived from severe food shortage, there struck another calamity of greater intensity. The state was hit by floods yet again which caused profound damages to crops and other livelihood. About 13 lakh people of the state were affected and 12,000 square miles of land was inundated. Around 3000 families with approximately 25,000 persons had lost their homesteads and cultivable lands due to erosion. Two important business centres of Assam, Dibrugarh and Palashbari suffered heavy losses due to erosion. Crops including paddy, jute and others worth approximately Rs. 11, 73, 13,370 were damaged and the total damage in areas affected by erosion amounted to Rs. 1, 73, 03,170. The total loss of private property including standing crops due to floods and erosion was estimated to be over Rs. 17 crores. Such was the gravity of the situation that The Assam Tribune reported that the “existence of entire Assam Valley was at stake” unless appropriate flood control measures were not taken. The magnitude of the calamity of 1954 compelled the government to take several flood control steps. The Central Government constituted a Central Flood Control Board and established the Brahmaputra River Commission. The Assam Flood Control Board chaired by Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi was constituted which took decisions on long term planning and on immediate schemes on town protection and flood control. However the scale of devastation was so huge that the costs could not be recovered very soon. The government of Assam had taken up a number of large and small flood protection measures during last few years. These schemes were mainly construction of embankments and drainage for protection of crops from flood waters in different areas. These schemes were helpful for protection of crops to a large extent. But much more was left to be done as many affected areas were not covered by the schemes. Besides since many of these were taken up at random and without a comprehensive

180 Ibid.
181 The Assam Tribune, 8 September, 1954. Vol. 16, No. 244, p. 5
182 The Assam Tribune, 9 September, 1954. Vol. 16, No. 245, pp. 1 and 8
plan, the embankments quite often caused greater damage to some areas while benefitting others.183

4.2.7 Issue of Price Rise

By the end of the year, securing food supplies for the people especially in deficit areas was getting more and more difficult due to rise in food prices. Ramprasad Chaubey, Congress Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) enquired in the Assembly regarding the astronomical rise in the prices of rice and other essential commodities in Assam. Baidyanath Mookherjee, the Minister – in – charge of Supply replied that the lower yield of crops in certain areas, hoarding tendency, smuggling of goods, high price of essential commodities exported from outside and inflationary tendency caused by deficit financing were responsible for the rise in commodity prices.184

Some other reasons put forward by Debeswar Sarmah, the Minister of Supply in the discussion related to the Food Motion185 were:

1) Increased economic activities under the Second Five Year Plan.
2) Difficulty caused in the bordering areas due to partition.
3) High prices of other essential commodities imported into Assam.
4) Increase of population due to:
   a) Naga operation.
   b) Influx of refugees which was considerably higher during this period, than in most of the other periods.

In order to combat the evil of uneven distribution of foods, the following steps were taken by the government:

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185 Motion to discuss food problem of the state, 1 July, 1957. Vol. 1, No. 18, p. 1317.

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1) To check smuggling, a Control Order was promulgated in November 1956 regulating the movement and distribution of rice/paddy in the bordering belts. Enforcement Staff was also appointed in the border to enforce the Order. Thus smuggling was eliminated to some extent.

2) Assistance was also rendered to private parties for bringing rice/paddy into Assam from outside. Considerable quantity was also imported by Assam traders on private trade account and Indian Trade Association from outside besides the quantity imported on Central Government account for consumption in Assam.

3) The Central Government authorised the State Government under the Essential Commodities Act\textsuperscript{186} to seize the hoarded stock. The government had also informed that the millers had agreed to release their stocks at prices lower than the existing market rates.

4) In order to help the poor people acquire purchasing power, steps had been taken to organise test relief works in various districts.\textsuperscript{187}

From the trend of problems accompanying the food situation, it was evident that the extent of price rise was not commensurate with the availability of food in most areas of Assam. The magnitude of the problem was only minimised, if not totally eliminated by the Congress government who recognized the gravity of the situation and introduced certain measures to deal with the calamity.

Since independence, concentrated efforts were made to raise levels of food production and distribution. After an objective analysis, it becomes clear that during the said period, the requirement of foodstuffs was much more than its availability. Population increase, government policies, social ills like hoarding and black marketing, communal clashes and illegal encroachment together with natural and unavoidable disasters like perennial floods, the Bengal famine and the Great Earthquake contributed

\textsuperscript{186} Under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, a number of Control Orders were issued by the Government of India and State Governments for regulating production, distribution, movement etc. pertaining to the commodities of food grains, edible oils, pulses, kerosene, sugar etc. which are essential and administered by them.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, pp. 1319 – 1320.
to deficiency of food supplies during the period. The climate of the state continued to play havoc with the foodcrops and increased demand for supply of finance warranted by development needs contributed to soaring prices in respect of food commodities almost throughout the Second Five Year Plan period (1956 – 1961). Again, the people of Mizoram (Mizoram became a separate state only in 1987) faced almost famine like condition due to bamboo flowering and rat menace resulting in huge destruction of crops. Solution of the food problem thus remained elusive and the objective of self-sufficiency was inconsiderably achieved even after the end of the Third Five Year Plan (1961 – 1966).

However, it must also be remembered that Assam has peculiar topographical and meteorological conditions which are beyond the control of mankind and agriculture is one such aspect which is hugely affected by weather and climate – related vagaries. It could not be denied that for a brief period, the position of food availability improved in Assam due to some of the measures taken by the Congress government, which was again unfortunately debilitated by destructive floods. Again whatever limited impact the Grow More Food campaign had on Indian agriculture also must not be ignored. In 1954 the progress of the schemes taken up by the Public Works Department under the Grow More Food and the Five Year Plan Schemes had added to the cultivable area and afforded protection to fields subjected to inundation, thereby contributing to the growth of more food and other crops. The total number of these schemes including those aimed at improving areas exposed to scarcity and famine was 165 estimated to cost 4.5 crores rupees and benefitting an area of 8.5 lakh acres. Nearly one-third of these schemes had been completed and others were in various stages of completion. During the first four years of the Five Year Plan (1951 – 1956), the target of foodgrains achieved was 3,31,000 tons.

Yet the prices of foodstuffs could not be reduced for reasons mentioned above. Hence easy food availability was still an issue for the common people. The farmers and

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188 The 1958 – 59 Mautam (bamboo death) affected approximately 1,60,000 people out of a total of 2,40,000 people. In Aijal subdivision, 60 per cent of the crop and in Lungleh subdivision 80 per cent of the crop was destroyed. (Governor’s Address, 26 February 1960. Vol.1, Part A, No. 1, p. 7).

the cultivators were lacking in motivation, as apart from economic losses, they were psychologically affected by the colossal damage caused to their crops during the floods and earthquake. In short it can be safely concluded that though the food crisis was resolved provisionally, yet there was the lack of a sustainable design to tackle the food problem in Assam as a result of which the problem persisted even in the years to come leaving the people grappling with economic problems.
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