CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM

3.1 Migration into Assam: A Historical Background

The process of migration into Assam dates back to the days of early Aryan settlement in India when the streams of Aryan people came to this part after crossing the North Bengal Plain. It is said that Narakasura, the earliest mythological Kirat King of Kamrupa which included many parts of present North Bengal and Bangladesh brought a large number of Aryans from Northern India for the promotion of Aryan culture in this region. However, the most notable stream of migration took place in 1228 A.D. when a group of Mongoloid people entered Assam through the north-eastern gateway. They came from the ancient kingdom of Muangman or Pong, which was situated in the upper portion of the Irrawady Valley. They not only defeated the local tribes but ruled over the Brahmaputra Valley region for six hundred years till it was taken over by the East India Company in 1826 by the Treaty of Yandaboo.

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The descendants of these migrants who are known as Ahom now constitute one of the major population group of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. Even during the Ahom rule migration to the region took place both from its west and east. The Ahom kingdom was invaded several times by the Mughal Emperors of Delhi and the rulers of Bengal. Many of them stayed back as prisoners or captives and later they became an integral part of the State's indigenous population. On the other hand, the Buddhist people from Upper Burma belonging to the present Khamti, Phakial and other communities came down to Upper Assam and settled there.

However, the number of these migrants was comparatively small and a new phase of migration started with the annexation of Assam by the British. Therefore, an attempt has been made here to study the different streams of migrants in Assam since the arrival of the British in 1826. Altogether there were five large-scale streams of migrants, namely, (i) tea-garden labourers, (ii) Muslim peasant migrants from East Bengal, (iii) Bengali Hindus, (iv) Nepalese, and (v) other migrants from different parts of India.

The out-migration or emigration from Assam is of very insignificant amount, the total number being as small
as 45,936 in 1951 against 73,223 in 1931. There has been no change in the volume and direction of out-migration or emigration since 1921. About 72 per cent of them are found in the adjacent states of Manipur, Tripura and West Bengal. West Bengal is actually responsible for the largest number of out-migrants numbering 18,570 from Assam. West Bengal owes its large proportion to the casual and temporary border movements from Goalpara and to a number of students and businessmen in Calcutta. A few hundreds Assam born people were found in Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Madras in 1951 Census Report. Probably most of them were the children of repatriated tea garden labourers and a few of the educated classes and traders. Unfortunately, the number of emigrants outside India is not available but it is sure that the number was insignificant. According to 1971 Census Report, only 54,014 Assamese speakers lived outside Assam which account for a bare 0.6 per cent of the total Assamese speakers. Therefore, we can now turn our attention to the five major streams of migrants into Assam already outlined above.

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3 Ibid.
3.1.1 The Tea-garden Migrants

The tea garden labourers were brought by the British capitalists mainly from Bihar, Chotanagpur, Central Province (presently Madhya Pradesh) and Orissa consequent upon the development of the plantation industry in the state. Although started as early as in 1853, migration of tea garden labourers on a large-scale basis took place from the seventies of that century. It continued till 1937, the number falling low after 1931 by which time tea garden labourers had numbered just under 10 lakhs in Assam. The importation of people to work in the tea gardens from densely populated low-wage areas became necessary not because of general indolence of the indigenous people, as is alleged by some writers, including the Census Superintendents, but because of a number of factors such as depopulation of Assam caused by the civil wars and the Burmese insurrections during the latter part of the 18th and the early part of the 19th century, the non-existence of a class of landless peasants, self-sufficiency, lack of demand for cash and the inhuman treatment meted out to the garden labourers by the planters. It is to be noted that

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the total numbers of tea garden labourers, consisting wholly of migrants were 67,500, 243,400, 461,800 and 747,200 in 1876, 1891, 1911 and 1931 respectively excluding those migrants who after the expiry of the contract period, took up independent agriculture outside the tea gardens.\textsuperscript{7}

Imported tea garden labourers whose number along with their descendants is about 15 lakhs at present have completely identified themselves with the indigenous population of the state and they constitute an inseparable part of the composite Assamese society and culture.

3.1.2 The Muslim Peasant Migrants

The second stream of migration was the Muslim peasants from the then East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Fadna, Borga and Rangpur. Driven apparently by the pressure on the soil at home, and lured by cheap and plentiful supply of both virgin and exceptionally fertile lands in Assam with the freedom of settlement of ryotwari settlement, land-hungry peasants from East Bengal began to pour into the state from the beginning of the current century. They first entered through the district of Goalpara, the population of which increased only by 1.4 per cent in 1881-91 and 2.0 per cent in 1891-1901, suddenly

\textsuperscript{7} Government of Assam, Annual Reports on Immigration in Assam, 1876, 1891, 1911 and 1931.
The number of migrants in Goalpara rose from 49.1 thousand in 1901 to 118.2 thousand in 1911, and increase of 240 per cent forming 19.7 per cent of the actual population of Goalpara. In this decade, namely 1901-11, however, few peasants went beyond Goalpara, those censused in other districts of the state being mostly clerks, traders and professional men, numbering only a few thousands. This sudden change in the population of Goalpara district and in the motivation of Eastern Bengal farmers deserves investigation.

Though there was long-standing congestion of population, scarcity of land, famines and pestilence in East Bengal, people never migrated from there in large number prior to the present century. It is on record that the zamindars of the Goalpara district failed to induce ryots of the overcrowded districts of Eastern Bengal to settle in the wasteland of the District during the middle of the 19th century. The Census Commissioners of

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
1891 and 1901 categorically stated that the people from overcrowded Eastern Bengal districts could not come to occupy wastelands in Assam as there was no inducement and recruitment avenues like those existing for the tea gardens.  

In fact, though the small farmers and landless labourers of Bengal were facing some economic hardships from the beginning of the establishment of Permanent Settlement (1793), the situation was perhaps tolerable till the last part of the 19th century. But the economic and agrarian conditions of East Bengal districts gradually became unbearable for the depressed and landless labouring classes from the beginning of the present century.  

There was extraordinary rise in the prices of foodgrains, and the indebtedness of the Mymensing district had become a subject of inquiry by the government in 1906.  

And with the rapid growth of population the increasing pressure on land, the oppression of the zamindars led to the movement of peasants towards Assam.

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16 Ibid.
Another factor which attracted East Bengal peasants to settle in Assam was associated with the political development in India during the twenties of the present century. The Congress leaders of Assam withdrew their support to the British in forming a government under the Government of India Act, 1919, due to the call of Non-Cooperation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi. A new Government was however being formed in 1921 with the support of leaders of other parties like the then All Assam Mohammedan Association and the Tea Planters of Assam who were mostly Britishers. Therefore, the then Assam Government, particularly during 1921-1938 gave an implicit support to this incoming migration stream in the name of 'grow more food campaign' which tilted the religio-ethnic composition of the Valley's population. Even special officers were appointed to look after the welfare of these migrants and it is on record that a greater portion of the sum realised as premia from the allottees of wastelands was spent in the area for the benefit of these migrants.17

Thus the inflow of these migrants from East Bengal was so severe and the way they seized vacant areas of the Valley was so vigorous that they were able to alter permanently the future of the Valley's socio-economic structure as well.

3.1.3 The Bengali Hindu Migrants

The third stream of migrants is the Bengali Hindus who were brought by the Britishers for their office and other professional work. It happened because of their early initiation to English education and the British-India administrative system. The movement of this stream was intensified along with the opening of new railway lines, post and telegraph offices, development of tea and petroleum industries. Thus Bengali clerks, doctors and lawyers monopolised the British Government jobs and professions. However, the most conspicuous mass migration of this stream took place at the time of partition and immediately thereafter. The feeling of insecurity of life and property of the Hindus in East Pakistan led the movement of this section of population to India and Assam being the adjacent state had to receive a large number of Hindu displaced persons. The 1951 Census gives the total number of refugees in Assam including present Meghalaya as 274,455 of which 272,075 came from East Pakistan. Cachar being the nearest district received the highest number (93,177) followed by Goalpara (44,967) and Kamrup (42,871). Sibsagar district received the lowest number (7,514) while Darrang and Lakhimpur received 13,965 persons respectively. The process was further intensified when the refugee rehabilitation schemes were implemented by the Government
and when they were given physical and social shelter by their relatives and acquaintances. In 1958 their number was estimated at 4.87 lakhs and it rose to 6.28 lakhs in 1961. Their number was estimated to be 1.5 million in 1971 constituting 9 per cent of the state's population. The district-wise percentage was put at 17.5, 18.2, 10.7, 19.1, 10.6 and 15.2 in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Lakhimpur and Cachar respectively. The migrants belonging to this category are mostly engaged in service and commercial activities and they are concentrated in urban areas, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley towns. For example, according to 1961 Census, out of 9.13 lakhs urban population in Assam, 3.5 lakhs were Bengali as against 3.04 lakhs Assamese speaking population. Thus Assamese speakers constitute 35 per cent of the urban population as against 33 per cent Bengali and 13 per cent Hindi speakers. In some towns of Goalpara, Darrang and Nowgong districts, Bengali population comprises over 40 per cent of the total urban population. With the emergence of Bangladesh, a fresh stream of Bengali Hindu migrants entered Assam and their number is not known as 1931 Census has not yet taken place in Assam.

3.1.4 Nepalese Migrants

The fourth stream of migrants into Assam consists of Nepalese immigrants which started with the British
occupation in Assam. The recruitment of Nepalese into
British army dates back to 1815 when they defeated Kazi
Amar Singh Thapa and according to the fifth provision of
the agreement, the British secured the right to recruit
Nepalese into British army. However, the government of
Nepal was unwilling to allow its men to serve British army
and therefore Gorkhas of the Indian army on leave in Nepal
were also encouraged to smuggle out recruits from Nepal and
were rewarded by the British. The Nepalese government
disliked the clandestine operations and took strong measure
to discourage it. Instances were found that some of the
Gurkhas serving in Indian army on their return home on
leave in Nepal were even put to death and property of those
serving the Indian army was confiscated. As a result the
British government encouraged migration of Gorkhas from
Nepal with their families and established Gorkha settlements
in certain parts of India including Assam. The British
administration first brought the Gorkhas as soldiers and then
subsequently as watchmen, official peon, chowkidar etc. for

18 Vidya Bir Singh Kansakar, Emigration, Remittances and
Rural Development (Centre for Economic Development and
Administration, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, 1982),
p. 77 (Mimeo).

19 Ibid., p. 81.

20 Kanchanmoy Mojumder, Political Relations Between India
and Nepal, 1827-1921 (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal
their personal service. Many of them remained here after retirement and settled permanently in Assam. However, later on, the fresh Nepalese migrants began to come of their own accord and started settling in different parts of Assam as graziers. Thus their movement grew stronger when they came in large number during the last few decades to take up cultivation and livestock in the uncultivated and unowned hill slopes. They went more or less unnoticed because they preferred to settle mainly in the forest areas near the foothills along the northern border of Assam and occupied large areas of the forest land. Many of them live in the outskirt of urban areas supplying milk and fuel to the urban dwellers. At present a major part of the business of milk and milk products is in the hands of these Nepalese migrants. Besides, still a large number of Nepalese are employed as porters, chowkidars and office peon throughout the state following the same tradition initiated by the British administration.

The period 1911-1931 was the most important for Nepalese migrants and their number was estimated at 53,306 according to 1951 Census Report. The number has further increased up to 101,335 in 1951 and 349,116 in 1971.22 Thus

21 B.C. Allen, Census of India. 1901 (Shillong, 1902), Part I.

according to 1971 Census Report Nepalese speaking population constitute 2 per cent of the state's total population. Forty per cent of these Nepalese migrants were found in Darrang district followed by 24 per cent in Lakhimpur district. In other districts it varied from 1 to 8 per cent. The immigration of Nepalese migrants still continue as the citizens of Nepal do not require any passport to enter India, under the terms of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and the 1956 Revised Indo-Nepal Agreement. Thus, free interchange and flow of both country's nationals as well as their right to own property in either country is allowed, unhindered and without restrictions. These agreements only made official a situation which had existed de facto from the British period. The reciprocity which the agreements formulated indeed continues today, with 3.24 lakhs Indian-born population in Nepal and 5.25 lakhs Nepal born population in India according to census reports of 1971 of both the countries. Bihar alone accounted for 23.27 per cent of the Nepal born population in India which was the highest among all states in 1971. Assam stood next to Bihar by absorbing 17.41 per cent of the Nepal born population in India in 1971.
3.1.5 The Migrants from Different Parts of India

The fifth stream of migrants into Assam are the migrants from other parts of India seeking economic opportunities in trading, construction works and white coloured jobs, particularly from Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala and West Bengal. It is to be noted that the migrants from Rajasthan need a separate historical analysis because of their significant role in the economy of Assam since the British period. The majority of the migrants from Rajasthan are from Marwar and they are popularly known as Marwaris. Marwari migrants came to Assam in a very small number even in pre-British period, but their movement became significant along with the establishment of British rule and subsequent development of tea industry and other commercial and industrial establishments. They acted as money changers, bankers and general agents to the managers of tea-gardens, especially in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts, operated the mustard trade in Kamrup and Goalpara districts, sold hardware and other articles imported from other parts of India and became dealers in rice and grains throughout the state. Thus they were successful in monopolizing practically the whole of the trade in Assam by the turn of the nineteenth century.23

The 1891 Census reported only 4,877 migrants from Rajputana and their number has increased to 22,000 in 1961 and further to 70,000 in 1971. They are mostly concentrated in the urban and industrial centres and virtually the entire business and commercial transactions of the State at present can be said to be in their control.

The migration from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh also started with the beginning of British rule in Assam. The migrants were absorbed as washermen, barbers, sweepers, cobblers, load carriers, wage labourers in construction and their inflow increased with the extension of railway lines and steamer service which opened new avenues of employment in Assam. Their inflow was further intensified after independence when their services were in great demand as a result of industrialization and urbanization in the region. Thus their concentration is found in the urban and industrial areas of the State.

The in-migration of the people from other states of India is mostly a post-independence phenomenon. Of these, the Punjabi migrants are somewhat economically more significant as they are mostly engaged in commercial and industrial establishments of their own while most of the other migrants are either salary holders in some companies or public sector undertakings as a contractor or a wage labourer in construction activities. Thus most of the
internal migrants from other states of India are found in the urban areas of the State.

To sum up, most of the above migration streams into the State took place with the annexation of Assam by the British administration from the early part of the nineteenth century and the inflow of migrants increased considerably by the turn of the last century. Therefore, an attempt has been made in the next sub-section to get the overall picture of migration during 1901-1971 in the present political jurisdiction of Assam by our own estimates and then to verify the findings by census and other evidence.

3.2 **Migration into Assam during 1901-1971:**

**A Preliminary Estimate**

From the above historical background it is quite evident that a new phase of migration started in Assam at the turn of the current century and therefore the beginning of the present century is taken as the starting point of our estimates of migrants into Assam. The year 1971 is taken as the terminal year, because census operations for the subsequent decade, 1971-81, have not yet started in Assam. No meaningful analysis is possible on the basis of the projected figure for 1981, particularly when large-scale immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal into the State is believed to have taken place during 1971-81. Being an
exogenous element of population increase, the magnitude of which is unpredictable, immigration cannot be fitted well into any equation used for population projection. Figures, population as well as others, relate to Assam with its present political jurisdiction, unless otherwise stated.

Assam's population increased from 3,239,680 in 1901 to 14,625,153 in 1971 representing a fantastic rate of growth of 345 per cent as against an increase of 132 per cent for India as a whole (Appendix I). Had Assam's population increased at the national rate, it would have stood at 763,205 in 1971. Assam's actual population in 1971, therefore, includes an excess of 6,993,095 representing 47.82 per cent of its 1971 population. This gives a rough estimate of the magnitude of migration into the State. However, since migration into Assam started from the middle of the 19th century, the 1901 population figures of Assam include a large number of migrants, mostly tea garden labourers and their descendants. Therefore, the number of migrants during the same period will be much higher if Assam's 1881 or 1891 population is projected at the national rate of increase. Again, as the national rate is slightly pegged up because of the inclusion of Assam's abnormally higher rate of population it will be proper to project Assam's population, not at the national rate of increase but the rest of India's (excluding Assam) rate of increase to arrive at a more accurate estimate of migrants into
Assam. The rest of India's population increased from 232,991,565 in 1901 to 533,524,656 in 1971 representing an increase of 129 per cent. If Assam's 1901 population would have increased at this rate it would have stood at 7,533,367 in 1971. The excess of 7,091,786 during 1901-1971 constituting 49.49 per cent of its 1971 population represents the extent of migration from other States and neighbouring countries, assuming Assam's rate of natural increase to be the same with that of the rest of India.

During 1951-1971 Assam's migrant population works out to 2,442,970 and 2,498,369 respectively calculated at the national and rest of India's rates, representing about 17 per cent of its 1971 actual population.

Assam's population constituted 1.53 per cent of India's population in 1901. This percentage went up to 2.22 and 2.67 in 1951 and 1971 respectively (Appendix I).

Assuming the 1901 proportion in 1951 and 1971 also, Assam's actual population includes an excess of 3,045,267 and 7,063,446 in 1951 and 1971 constituting 37.93 and 48.30 per cent respectively of these two periods' actual population.

The above figures of migrants from other areas and adjoining countries, will clearly be an over-estimate if Assam's birth rate is higher than the national rate or the rest of India's rate and/or Assam's death rate is lower than
those for India as a whole or for the rest of India. Unfortunately, the birth and death statistics of our country are not reliable, as a large number of both births and deaths escape registration, rendering any meaningful study based on such data impossible. Demographers have, therefore, tried to make more reliable estimates of these vital rates. We are using below the rate of natural increase for different decades based on the differences between estimated birth and death rates for Assam. All the estimates are made by the Office of the Registrar General of India. But, while the decadal rates from 1941 to 1971 are made on the census differencing method, the rates for the previous period 1901 to 1941 are taken from 1961 Census Report (Assam) which does not mention the method used for estimating these rates. We are conscious of the limitations of these rates, but have used them in the absence of more reliable estimate to gauge the volume of migrants into Assam during different periods. The rates of natural increase for various decades are shown below in the Table 3.1.
## TABLE 3.1

**RATES OF NATURAL INCREASE, ASSAM: 1901-1971**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901-10</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-20</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-30</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-40</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-50</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-60</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-70</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:**
2. Rate for 1941-50: *Table 3 of Registrar General's Paper No. 6 of 1954,* p. 10.

**Notes:** The natural rate of increase for the decade 1911-20 is abnormally low because of the influenza epidemic soon after World War I.

In Table 3.2, we give the estimates of migrants into Assam, from rest of India as well as from neighbouring countries, based on the difference between projected
population figures (calculated on the basis of each decade's rate of natural increase) and the actual population figures.

**TABLE 3.2**

DECADE-WISE ESTIMATES OF MIGRANTS INTO ASSAM BASED ON DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACTUAL POPULATION AND PROJECTED POPULATION (Projection made at rate of natural increase)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Actual Population</th>
<th>Projected Population</th>
<th>Migrant Population</th>
<th>Migrant Population as % of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,848,617</td>
<td>3,737,076</td>
<td>111,541</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4,636,980</td>
<td>3,933,286</td>
<td>703,694</td>
<td>15.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5,560,371</td>
<td>5,276,883</td>
<td>283,488</td>
<td>5.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>6,694,790</td>
<td>6,600,160</td>
<td>94,630</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>8,023,356</td>
<td>7,692,314</td>
<td>330,542</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>10,837,329</td>
<td>9,827,320</td>
<td>1,010,009</td>
<td>9.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>14,625,153</td>
<td>14,023,504</td>
<td>601,640</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Col. (2) Figures are taken from Census of India, 1971, Assam. Cols (3), (4) and (5) figures are computed.

According to this method, Assam's migrant population during 1911-1971 and 1951-1971 works out to 3,141,553 and 1,948,200 respectively. These estimates are much lower.
than the previous estimates based on differences between actual population and projected population, projection being made at the national or rest-of-India's rates of population increase. This is because of the fact that the actual population of different periods, which includes migrant population as well, has been projected at the rate of natural increase, thus inflating the projected (indigenous) population and deflating the migrant population of each period. If however, the actual population of 1901 is projected at the rate of natural increase for 1901-10 to obtain the projected population of 1911 and this projected population, not the actual population, is blown up at the corresponding decadal rate of natural increase for Assam to arrive at the projected population of 1921 and following the same procedure estimate the projected population of each subsequent period, we get a more reliable estimate of migrant population in the cumulative form (Table 3.3). This exercise gives us a total migrant population of 5,236,323 from 1911 to 1971, constituting 35.80 per cent of the State's actual population in 1971. But even here as the 1901 population has been assumed to be constituted wholly of indigenous people, which it is not, the estimate is on the lower side.

Taking the 1941 population as composed wholly of indigenous population, as the migrants from erstwhile
East Bengal till that period were Indian nationals who have been assimilated with the culture of the State, and blowing it up by the rate of natural increase for 1941-50 for estimating the projected population of 1951 and following the procedure mentioned in the preceding paragraph, we find that 2,441,636 persons were migrants into Assam during 1951-71, constituting 16.69 per cent of State's total population of 1971.

TABLE 3.3

DECADAL MIGRANT POPULATION IN ASSAM : 1901-71

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Projected Population</th>
<th>Actual Migrant Population</th>
<th>Cumulative Migrant Population (CMP)</th>
<th>% of CMP to Total Population</th>
<th>Decadal Migrant Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4) (3-2)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,737,076</td>
<td>3,848,617</td>
<td>111,541</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>703,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>3,819,292</td>
<td>4,636,980</td>
<td>817,688</td>
<td>17.63</td>
<td>285,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>4,346,354</td>
<td>5,560,371</td>
<td>1,214,017</td>
<td>21.83</td>
<td>285,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>5,159,122</td>
<td>6,694,790</td>
<td>1,535,669</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>207,470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>5,927,831</td>
<td>8,023,856</td>
<td>2,101,025</td>
<td>26.17</td>
<td>563,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>7,255,665</td>
<td>10,837,329</td>
<td>3,581,664</td>
<td>33.05</td>
<td>1,238,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>9,338,830</td>
<td>14,625,153</td>
<td>5,286,323</td>
<td>35.80</td>
<td>1,072,280</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Decadal migrant population of each period is calculated by deducting from the cumulative migrant population the increase in migrant population of the preceding period at the corresponding rate of natural increase.
The above figures of migrants include both internal migrants from different states of India and immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal. To know the intensity of these two different categories of migrants from the total estimated migrants we can use the proportions of inter-state migrants and immigrants based on 'place of birth' data of 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census Reports. The proportions of these two categories of migrants calculated from the above Census Reports are given below:

**TABLE 3.4**

**PROPORTIONS OF INTER-STATE (IN-MIGRANTS) AND INTERNATIONAL (IMMIGRANTS) MIGRANTS TO TOTAL MIGRANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>In-migrants</th>
<th>Immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>33.76</td>
<td>66.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>36.56</td>
<td>63.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>34.97</td>
<td>65.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking the mean of the proportions mentioned above, we find that of the total migrants from 1951 to 1971 of 2,441,636 into Assam, 35.10 per cent was from other states and the rest 64.90 per cent from the adjoining countries of the then East Pakistan and Nepal. The figures of
inter-State migrations and immigration during 1951-71 thus works out to 857,014 and 1,584,621 respectively, representing 5.86 and 10.83 per cent of Assam's total population of 1971. Year-wise break-up of inter-State migrants and immigrants is as follows:

**TABLE 3.5**

NUMBER OF FRESH INTER-STATE MIGRANTS AND IMMIGRANTS INTO ASSAM: 1951-1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Inter-State Migrants</th>
<th>Immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>113,617</td>
<td>222,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>369,260</td>
<td>640,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>236,759</td>
<td>440,276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are aware of the fact that the place of birth information in the Census Reports for Assam is not reliable particularly in the case of migrants from the then East Pakistan, which constitutes the most important stream of immigrants in the post-independence period into the State, as many of the Muslim immigrants did not return their birth place correctly for fear of deportation. This has clearly underestimated the number of immigrants, deflating substantially the proportion of immigrants to total
migrants. But even at this very conservative estimate of the proportion of immigrants to total migrants, Assam hosted during 1951-71 as many as 15.85 lakh immigrants.

A close look at Appendix I, which gives the trend of population in Assam and India from 1901 to 1971, reveals the following: (a) Throughout the period Assam's decadal rates of population growth stand much higher than those for the country as a whole. (b) In the decade 1911-21, while India experienced a negative rate of population growth of -0.31 per cent, Assam's rate of population increase was as high as 20.48 per cent, giving the highest difference between the national and the state rates of 20.79 per cent. (c) Assam's population as a percentage of India's population rose continuously over the decades from 1.39 per cent in 1901 to 2.67 per cent in 1971. The only conclusion that can be deduced from these observations is that Assam's recorded population throughout the period has been inclusive of a large number of migrants, from other areas of India and neighbouring countries. It is the continuous flow of migrant population which is responsible for a much higher rate of Assam's population growth.

Let us now examine how far our findings are corroborated by Census and other evidence. Our estimate of migrant population in 1911 is only 1.11 lakh. This is, however, a gross underestimate because we have blown up
the 1901 population assuming it to be composed wholly of indigenous population at the rate of natural increase to arrive at the projected population of 1911. Between 1891 and 1911 about 2.2 lakh tea garden labourers alone entered into Assam leaving aside the migrants from the then East Bengal. There was obviously some migration of population from other States, particularly from Bengal, who were recruited by the British Raj to help it in running its administration. Therefore, our findings of 1.11 lakh of migrants seem to be a gross underestimate. However, this decade had a positive rate of growth of population, although quite small, unlike the preceding decade which had a negative growth rate because of the great earthquake of 1897 and the epidemic of Kala-azar both of which took heavy toll of State's population. The predominantly larger part of the increase in population was, therefore, due to migration.

Our estimate of migrant population for 1911-21 is 7.04 lakhs. During this decade the rate of natural increase of Assam's population was only 2.2 per cent. The decadal growth rate went up to 20.48 per cent, giving a net migration of as high as +18.28 per cent. The East Bengal migrants were counted in the census for the first time on the 'char' lands of Goalpara in 1911. In the words of 1961 Census Superintendent, Pakyntin, East Bengal
migrants 'were merely the advanced guards or rather scouts of huge army following closely at their heels'. Mullan describes the situation more specifically thus:

The East Bengal settlers have increased more than four fold in the decade to their present total of 258,000 in the Brahmaputra Valley. There are also 6,000 people of Myensingh and Rangpur in the Garo Hills. Sibsagar and Lakhimpur are scarcely touched as yet. In Goalpara 20 per cent of the population is made up of the settlers. The next district is Nowgong where they formed about 14 per cent of the whole population. In Kamrup, wastelands are being taken up rapidly, especially in the Barpeta subdivision. In Darrang, exploration of settlements by the colonists is on an earlier state; they have not yet penetrated far from the Brahmaputra Bank. Thus during this decade, about 2 lakh Muslim migrants from East Bengal were recorded. Together with the regular inflow of tea garden migrants and migrants of traders and professionals, it is not surprising that they numbered about 7 lakh as estimated by us. Our estimate is corroborated by the fact that despite a loss of nearly 2 lakh persons in influenza epidemic, Assam's population during this decade increased by about 8 lakhs.

During the next two decades, 1921-1941, the rate of migration slowed down considerably. According to our

estimates, fresh migrant population into Assam in 1931 and 1941 was of the order of 2.86 lakh and 2.07 lakh respectively. For the first time Assam had a positive natural growth rate higher than the Indian average. In spite of a growth rate of 19.91 per cent during 1921-31, net migration constituted only 1.21 per cent, as the rate of natural increase jumped up to 18.7 per cent. In the subsequent decade also the contribution of migrants to Assam's total population was insignificant. The rate of natural increase being 14.9 per cent during this decade, net migration constituted only 5.50 per cent of the population growth of 20.40 per cent. The hike in the rate of natural growth was due largely to growing mastery over epidemics, immigration of East Bengal colonists, tea-garden labourers and the Nepalis.26 It was during this period that Saadulla Ministry of then Assam Muslim leader, under the pretext of raising the State's agricultural production engineered the systematic settlement of people from East Bengal in Assam. By 1931, most of the wasteland of the Brahmaputra Valley was already occupied by these settlers. During 1911-41, therefore, East Bengal migrants moved up the Valley and occupied whatever wasteland was available in Kamrup, Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang and North Lakhimpur.

26 Census of India, 1951, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, General Report, pp. 31-32.
During 1941-51, according to our estimate the flow of migrants quickened and fresh migration to the tune of 5.36 lakhs took place. Migration was accentuated by the Bengal famine of 1943, leading to a movement of population on a large-scale from Bengal to Assam, particularly to the districts of Goalpara and Cacher. The major portion of Sylhet went to Pakistan as a result of partition and consequently there was a very heavy influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from the Pakistani part of the Sylhet district to the adjoining region, including Assam. Vaghaiwala in his Census Report of 1951 observes:

Persons born in Pakistan and enumerated in Assam reached the enormous total of 800 thousand. Of course this huge number includes the large number of refugees (262 thousand) born in Pakistan who have recently migrated to Assam during the partition. 27

There was some emigration of Muslim people from Assam at the time of partition who opted for Pakistan. However, their number was insignificant.

According to our estimate, fresh migrant population during 1951-61 and 1961-71 stood at 12.39 lakhs and 10.72 lakhs respectively. As we are dealing in detail with this period, the evidence is cited in a subsequent chapter.

Now, to sum up, it can be said that although migration has been an important factor in Assam's population growth throughout 1901-71, the rate of migration varied from time to time. Migration rate was very high during 1911-20, but after slackening during the next two decades, 1921-40, picked up considerably in the subsequent three decades, 1941-71. The first two decades following independence, 1951-71, were marked by a large volume of migration from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal as well as from other parts of India. This period is analysed thoroughly in the subsequent chapters. For the period 1901-41, thus our findings are corroborated by Census and other evidences.

3.3 Economic Development in Assam: A Historical Background

An attempt is made here to present an assessment of the economic development in Assam since the early part of the last century to the independence of India. With the British occupation of the State a new dimension to the economy of Assam had been added and we can trace out the different phases of economic development at different periods of time during the British rule. All these economic developments that took place during this period have obviously influenced much on the present state of affairs of the economy of the region under study.
It will be appropriate to present the state of economy of Assam briefly prior to the British occupation so that we can know at what stage of development Britishers took over the economy of the State. It is to be noted that almost half of Assam's population was lost during the early part of the eighteenth century in civil wars and the Burmese incursions which followed them, and a major portion of the loss was in the upper portion of the Brahmaputra Valley. So when the British completed the annexation of the State in 1842, innumerable deserted villages were seen in the upper part of the Valley. This large-scale depopulation and as a result extensive vegetative growth had greatly changed the climatic conditions of the State making it unhealthy. Due to heavy precipitation, the climate became extremely damp and enervating. The area was thus infested with cholera, malaria, small-pox, dysentery, 'Kala-azar' and other tropical diseases which took a heavy toll every year. Under such circumstances the economy of the State, almost uprooted during the later part of the 18th and early part of the 19th century,

23 A.R. Dhekial Phookan, "Observation on the Administration of the Province of Assam" in A.J.M. Mill's Cit.

failed to recover even after the establishment of the British rule. So, when tea was discovered, its commercial cultivation was found impossible for lack of sufficient labour force. The problem was, however, solved by importing labourers from outside the State and the province of Assam.

The period from 1826 to 1873 was a period of transition for Assam's pre-capitalist economy into its colonial phase. British capital penetrated the economy and started building up an infrastructure suitable to capitalist set-up. The traders, bankers, lawyers and clerks from other Indian provinces joined hands with them. The economy was monetised and thus the closed society was exposed to migrant labourers with new skills, new vices and new ideas. 30

The process of urbanization was practically completely absent during this period. Thus a complete lack of urbanization, alongside the pre-capitalist production relations, was not rapidly altered by the new set-up. Superimposed on a semi-tribal and semi-feudal society of petty producers, the new plantation economy alone could not bring in a radical transformation within the local society.

The start in modernisation of the economy was thus a very limited one. Except land, practically all other inputs of production for the expanding modern sector were brought from outside the Province; for example, capital and enterprise from England and labour from other Indian provinces. Thus a dual economy, more precisely, a multi-sectoral, plural economy, began functioning at different levels of the economy of the Province.

There was a tremendous growth of the tea industry during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The total land area in possession of the industry doubled and accounted for some one-seventh of the entire settled area in the Assam plains. The acreage, actually under tea in the Province, increased from a little over 56 thousand acres in 1872 to 338 thousand acres in 1901 and the output of tea from 12 million pounds to 134 million pounds during the same period. The total amount of capital invested in the industry increased from about £1 million in 1872 to an estimated £14 million (Rs. 210 million) by 1903. This tremendous growth was in response to the rising British demand for Indian tea both in percentage and absolute terms.

In terms of percentage in 1886 only 4 per cent of the British tea imports were from India, the share increased to 38 per cent in 1896 and 59 per cent by 1903.

The construction of railways started in 1881 as the planters needed an improved infrastructure, particularly transport and communication. The length of railway increased to 114 miles in 1891 and further to 715 miles in 1903. The cost incurred was very high amounting to about Rs. 131 thousand per mile. Thus the total railway investment made in Assam till 1903 appears to have been not less than Rs. 95 million. With the demand from the tea factories and the increasing length of railways, increased the output of coal from 50 tons in 1872 to more than 2,77 lakh tons by 1905-6. The oil fields developed by British capital in the 1890s increased their annual production of crude oil from 882 thousand gallons in 1900-01 to 2,733 thousand gallons in 1905-6. As many as 14 saw mills were functioning in 1901 to supply packing boxes to the tea industry.

British investments in coal, petroleum and saw mills amounted to an estimated Rs. 5.4 million, Rs. 4.6 million and Rs. 1.0 million respectively at the close of the century. Thus the total investment in the organized sector of the economy was not less than Rs. 315 million or so during the years 1874-1905, even at a conservative estimate.32 Unfortunately, the local

inhabitants and economy could hardly enjoy the benefits of such huge amount of investment of British owned and British-managed part of the economy, with labour and middlemen services almost entirely recruited from other Indian provinces.

The colonial character of investment is clear from the fact that the alignment of the railways was done through the thinly populated tea-belt with the obvious purpose of serving the planters' interests best. Old trading centres like Coalpara and Barpeta and towns like Sibsagar were bypassed, thus allowing them to stagnate and decay. With improved transport communications thousands of labourers could now be recruited in remote tribal tracts and forwarded to Assam. Another important aspect of the issue is that the extracted surplus of these organised sectors was remitted to England in the form of fabulously high dividends and individual savings. A substantial part of the wage bill was also remitted outside the province. For example, by way of money orders alone there was a net outflow of Rs. 4.8 million in the year 1904-5 which had adversely affected the regional multiplier of the economy of the Province. Even otherwise a good portion of the remaining disbursed income was spent on services and goods procured from outside, rather than on local suppliers and this reduced the multiplier effect further. Thus the indigenous
sector of the economy was only marginally benefited by the huge amount of British investment in the Province.

On the other side, the agricultural sector with abundance of land in the Brahmaputra Valley failed to grow enough foodgrains to feed its increasing population. The annual imports of foodgrains into the Valley increased from 0.3 million maunds around 1872 to some 0.7 million maunds during the last five years of the century. This deficit was marginal to the tune of less than two per cent of the total requirement. With 1884-85 as the base year, comparable index of the total gross cropped area exclusive of the area under tea, after having risen to a peak of 129 by 1892-93, went on decreasing from year to year until it was 113 in 1900-01. Thus, more or less, it just kept pace with the rate of population growth. However, the Kala-azar epidemic and the great earthquake of 1897 caused many deaths and a havoc over many hundreds of acres of farm lands which adversely affected agricultural production during this period.

Thus, there emerged a serious imbalance between the fast-growing modern sector comprising the plantations, coal mines, oil-fields and the associated infrastructure, on the one hand, and the near-stagnant, traditional agricultural sector on the other. The gap between the
stream of income accrued and income disbursed within the province increasingly widened.

During the period 1905-1920 there was a steady and continuous growth in the State's economy almost till the end of the First World War. The short-term crisis in the tea industry was over by 1905 and the rate of growth of acreage under tea as compared to the nineteenth century record had of course slowed down under the restrictive, monopolistic policy of the Indian Tea Association. Despite, the introduction of fine plucking, both the quantity and the total value of output went on fast increasing as a result of the rising crop yield per acre.

Railway investments were even of greater importance during this period. About 439 miles of new railway lines were extended in Assam during the decade 1901-1911. There was also an expansion of ordinary peasant cultivation side by side. Ex-tea garden labourers were taking up wastelands for cultivation mainly in the neighbouring tea gardens. The extent of government lands taken up by such labourers for cultivation increased from 112 thousand acres in 1906 to 262 thousand acres by 1921. This was in addition to their tenant cultivation on tea garden lands. Even labourers on the tea garden muster-rolls carried on some cultivation of ordinary crops. For example, in 1920-21 they held
about 1 lakh acres of tea garden lands as tenants, about 10 thousand acres as tenants of other landlords and about 16 thousand acres as direct-settlement holders under the government according to official sources. At the same time the immigrant land hungry peasants from East Bengal also started settling down in thousands since the beginning of the current century on the uninhabited riverine tracts. They started cultivating jute and other crops and the acreage under jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley increased fast because of this great population movement from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-6 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20. A steady influx of Nepali graziers into Assam led to an increased cattle population and milk production. All these factors were conducive to an overall high economic growth of the State during 1905-20.

During the subsequent three decades since 1920, the growth of economy of Assam was not very smooth due to the political developments that took place in India, the outbreak of the Second World War and Independence of the Country in 1947. Tea industry had been subject to violent business fluctuations. The inflow of East Bengal migrants continued during this period. The impact of these peasant migrants on land use in Assam has been considerable. Between 1930 and 1950, some 15.08 lakh acres, mostly in the
Brahmaputra Valley were settled by immigrants. As a result, the number of agricultural labourers started increasing and by 1956, about ten per cent of the total rural households in Assam belonged to agricultural labour class which was almost non-existent in early decades of the current century. Thus, it is apprehended that much of the increase in agricultural production is attributable not to the increase in productivity but to the extension of land under cultivation by the immigrants from East Bengal (Bangladesh). This aspect will be thoroughly analysed in Chapter VI with special reference to post-independence period.

Although India became free from the British rule in 1947, the imperialist domination over Assam's economy hardly slackened even after independence. Less than fifteen managing agency houses, through their control of some two hundred joint-stock sterling and rupee companies, and all of them with head offices outside the province, dominated the economy. With control over one and a half


Million acres of land - only a third thereof was under tea plants.

After independence, a new chapter was added in 1948 to the Assam Land Revenue Regulations, 1886. It provided for reserved tribal belts in different parts with the purpose of protecting the tribal people from competition of non-tribals, mainly the immigrants from East Pakistan, for land. We will discuss the effectiveness of such regulations at length in Chapter VI. It is also worth-mentioning here that the Indian Parliament also passed the Immigrants' (Expulsion from Assam) Act on 13 February 1950, following an earlier ordinance on similar lines with the purpose to discourage Muslim immigration from East Pakistan. The Act provided for the removal of immigrant persons, excepting the bonafide refugees, whose stay in Assam was undesirable politically.

With the emergence of Pakistan, Assam economy had to face a temporary setback due to disruption of transport and communication system. Assam's normal channels of communications through East Bengal (East Pakistan) was disrupted after the expiry of the Indo-Pak Standstill Agreement on 29 February 1948. However, with the completion of Assam Rail Link Project through a difficult terrain, Assam's railway and road communications with the rest of India were once more established since 1950.
The great earthquake in 1950 severely damaged the economy of the State. Nearly 95 per cent of the population lived in rural areas in 1951. By and large a subsistence agriculture, its economy remained poor in techniques and resources. There were no engineering industries or even other small and tiny sector industries worth the name. The annual per capita consumption of electricity in Assam was only 0.58 kWh in 1950-51 as compared to 13.3 kWh for all India -- a measure of its industrial backwardness. Some foreign-owned oil refinery and a few saw mills, with the supporting infrastructure of railways and inland navigation -- were all the hallmarks of a century of colonial development until the fifties.

The above historical background of migration and economic development in Assam till the end of the British period will thus enable us to understand the problem under study during the period 1951-71, in a better way.