CHAPTER IV

SETTLING THE RIVER: EAST BENGAL PEASANTS, AGRARIAN EXPANSION AND NEW RELATIONS WITH THE BRAHMAPUTRA

The animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction... Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first...

- Frederick Engels, Dialectics of Nature

The rate of growth of the population in the Brahmaputra Valley during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was too slow for the liking of the colonial government. This was in spite of it being aware that the raiyats were recovering from the widespread outbreak of the epidemic kala-azar [Black Fever] in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The state had been making efforts to bring as much land in Asom under cultivation as possible throughout the nineteenth century, so that the revenue base of the state could grow accordingly. However, even after giving away large
tracts for tea cultivation, the quantity of cultivable ‘wastelands’ in Asom was considered to be quite high by its estimations, while the peasants remained ‘indolent’, ‘ignorant’ and ‘non-enterprising’. It was rarely recognised that the problems besieging the agrarian society in Asom was not due to the lack of its peasantry’s industriousness, but a result of the prevailing regressive production relations which colonial policy did not change, but in many ways strengthened. Nonetheless, the responsibility for the perceived agrarian stagnation was put on the certain inherent and essentialised character of the peasantry. As the hopes of a rapid ‘reclamation’ of land by enterprising and energetic Asom peasants receded from colonial considerations by the turn of the nineteenth century, the colonial state actively began to consider the possibility of utilising the East Bengal peasants to clear the Valley, a population which was considered to be made of hard-working, industrious and dexterous cultivators, with the potential to turn the unproductive forests of Asom into fields of fortune. This intent of the state was put into practice from the early decades of the twentieth century, initially in an ad-hoc manner but subsequently according to a plan. But the consequences of this policy had resulted in certain entirely unexpected and unintended outcomes, which also involved the forging of a new relation with the Brahmaputra, one in which the river emerged as a malevolent force of nature.

**Living Close to the River**

The expansive riverine tracts along the two banks of the Brahmaputra containing numerous *chars* and *chaporis* formed by the river were of interest to the colonial government, which was keen to put the fallows, forests and ‘wastelands’ of the region to productive use. As an official communication in 1904, referring to the *chapori* lands, described this landscape,

[The nature of] cultivation is essentially fluctuating. These villages are situated on the riverain (or *chapari*) lands of the Brahmaputra and of its principal affluents. They generally include a core of established fields, occupying rather higher lands than the rest of the area, around which there stretches an expanse of long grass deeply flooded during the rainy season. Clearings are made in the
grass by firing it, and on these clearings may be grown a crop of _bao_ (long stalked) rice, also broad-casted, during the flood season, or a crop of mustard or pulse (_mati-kalai_) during the cold weather. The clearings are commonly abandoned after three or four years, either because the soil is exhausted, or because the growth of weeds defies cropping.¹

In one of the early land settlements carried out by the colonial state in Assam, we find references to the settlement of the _chaporis_, the tract on the immediate vicinity of the Brahmaputra on both its banks. James Mathie, the collector of Darrang wrote to Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam in February 1835 about the settlement operations pertaining to the _chaporis_, the cultivation of which was fluctuating in nature,

In the _jammah_ I have included the amount for which the _chapurees_ or islands thrown up by the Brahmaputra are farmed. A separate settlement is made for them, as they are farmed to the highest bidder. There are 13 _chapurees_ registered, but as it is quite impossible to calculate what islands may be thrown up or carried away by the river during the year, depending entirely on the nature of the season, the settlement is made for a fixed _jammah_ at the risk of the farmer, who is allowed to demand for such persons who may cultivate them the rates noted here: Buhuni Chapuree settlement [at] Rs. 700; Remaining 12 Chapurees [at] Rs. 7,000. _The soil of these islands is very productive, but the cultivators are subject to great loss by any sudden rise of the rivers, and from the numerous wild animals and buffaloes which resort to the uncultivated parts._²

In the subsequent decades, the _chars_ and _chaporis_ where extensive cultivation of mustard and _ahu_ —a variety of broadcast rice— was carried out but were left out of the regulations applied to the permanently settled land, were surveyed and brought under revenue settlement. Such tracts, though considered to be highly fertile due to the regular silt deposited by the river in the annual flood season,

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¹ F. J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Government of India, Shillong, 4 December 1903, “Reassessment of the Assam Valley Districts”, Rev.-A, June 1904, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

² Lieutenant James Mathie, Principal Assistant to the Governor General’s Agent, Collector and Magistrate of Zilla Darrang, to Captain Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, 15 February 1835, _Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835_, File No.298, Bengal Government (B.G.) Papers, ASA. Emphasis added.
however, were under risk of sudden and damaging inundations, and hence yielded unpredictable harvests. Under the colonial land revenue policy of the nineteenth century, which generally retained the basic land-classification of the Ahom state, such land was categorized as under *faringati* or fluctuating cultivation, and assessed at a lower rate compared to the other two major categories of land, i.e., *basti* or homestead and *rupit* or permanent fields yielding transplant varieties of rice. The nature of cultivation here was classed as temporary, called *pam* cultivation, whereby the peasants created *pams* or temporary shelters away from their settled villages and on the banks of the rivers or river islands. They stayed there for the season to cultivate mustard and other dry crops, and returned to their villages with the crop after the season was over and the monsoon set in. 'Since after two to three years' of cropping the fertility went down in these riverine lands considerably, peasants abandoned it and took up other such tracts. They could come back to the same *char* or *chapori* land after keeping it fallow for a few years when the fertility was brought back by the river's silt.

Thus the tenure of land-holdings on these lands was also temporary, mostly under annual *pattas* or land-deeds as opposed to the decennial *pattas* issued for *basti* and *rupit* land (under the land revenue system introduced during Henry Hopkinson's chief commissionership in 1860s). The annual relinquishment rate of these *pattas* as a result of the temporary and unpredictable nature of cultivation was very high in comparison to that of the *basti* and *rupit* lands. Though this *pam* cultivation generally played a supplementary role in increasing the income of Asom's peasants, who invariably held *rupit* land in or near to his village, the income from *chapori* land was nevertheless crucial, since a considerable part of or the entire land revenue accruing on them was paid from the income earned by selling the cash crops grown on the *chars* and *chaporis*. It was an important source of cash, as mustard was one of the most valued marketable crops in nineteenth century Asom, and since the colonial state demanded cash payment of the rent as opposed to its predecessor, the Ahom state which predominantly collected it in kind, Asom's peasants considerably depended on the produce of their *pams* for paying up the rent of not only the
faringati land they owned, but also their basti and the rupit lands. This was the usual practice for a large section of Asom's peasants till the beginning of the twentieth century.

The colonial state perceived this form of cultivation to be wasteful, since the revenue generated from such land was much less compared to the rupit and homestead lands, but the peasants of the Brahmaputra Valley could not be persuaded or forced to settle and cultivate the char or chapori lands on a permanent basis. There is also evidence that migration from the riverine tracts to the interiors took place, at times induced by heavy inundations. As it was reported from the South Bank Group of villages in 1905, which saw a fall in the population by 4.72 percent between 1891 and 1901 due to the killer epidemic kala azar, "the fall could have been much greater for immigration from the chapari mauzas, which were subjected to heavy flood after the earthquake" of 1897.

The demographic distribution of the population in the Brahmaputra Valley, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was not uniform but had distinct patterns. While the richest and the most well-off among the people, including the rich and middle peasantry, settled and owned the rupit tract between the river and the hills, the riverine tract and the submontane tract flanking the rupit tract from two sides were the home of those communities held to be of lowly social and ritual status in the caste-differentiated society. They included the tribal communities, the 'untouchable' or 'outcaste' communities such as the 'Doms' or Nadiyals, and others belonging to the oppressed castes. Significantly, one could see a general overlap of caste and class here, since the dominant castes predominantly inhabited the best basti lands, cultivated the best rice lands of the rupit tract and had the highest economic resources within the Valley, those who had land in the other two tracts, if at all, invariably owned land of inferior and less productive quality. Therefore it is hardly surprising to find that the blocks of land earmarked for the Colonisation Scheme to be opened up by the East Bengal

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peasants in the riverine tract were those that were either owned or used by the deprived and marginalised people of the Valley. Mayang and Nij Ghagua mauzas added to the Nowgong Colonisation Scheme in 1929, was inhabited in general by the Mikir, Kachari and Lalung tribal communities, though much of their possessions had been denied any legal validity by the colonial laws.4

Apart from cultivation, the riverine tracts of Brahmaputra were grazing fields for the peasants where dairy products were produced and supplied to surrounding villages and towns. Thus, for purposes of cultivation and grazing, peasants and graziers used to inhabit or frequent these tracts, but the nature of such habitation was almost always temporary, some lasting for a mere season, and some other for a few years. It was only the Nadiyal and Kaibarta communities that depended on the river for their livelihood built their permanent abode on the immediate vicinity of the river. As such, the population on these tracts in the beginning of the twentieth century was sparse and dispersed, with a few small permanent villages along the river.

A section of the tea garden workers of Asom, who were part of the first large-scale immigration to Asom in the contemporary times, over time took to cultivation once their contracts with the plantation owners got expired, in spite the numerous hurdles put by the plantation owners to such outflow of their labour force, which they jealously guarded. Apart from expanding the tea industry and filling the coffers of the foreign monopolies as well as the colonial state with their back-breaking labour in the tea plantations of the province, they were also instrumental in expansion of rice cultivation in the Valley. As one government report found, the area outside tea gardens in Asom had been settled by the 'coolies' to a large extent, those who after spending a few years in the tea gardens settled in the nearby villages as ordinary cultivators. "The Land Revenue Report of 1928-29 shows 344,980 acres of Government temporarily-settled lands held in the plains districts by ex-tea garden coolies. In addition to this, 'time-expired coolies' (a euphemism for the ex-tea garden labourers from outside

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4 Proceeding No.55, From S. P. Desai, Officiating Director of Land Records, Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue Department, No.33/57, Shillong 13 October 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, June 1931, ASA.
the province whose contract expired], held 31,680 acres as sub-tenants." The worker-turned-peasant had to supplement his income by working seasonally in the nearby tea-gardens, more often "at times when the regular tea-garden labour is insufficient, especially for plucking and hoeing, and when the ex-coolie is in need of ready cash." Thus, the rise in the population of the Valley due to the inflow of the tea-garden labourers and their taking to cultivation was a welcome development for the colonial state. However, the scale at which this took place was not perceived to be adequate for the rapid rate of agrarian expansion which the state envisaged.

The riverine lands on the Brahmaputra were very much valued for its fertility and high productivity, and were subjected to constant struggles for control over them, many of these land disputes taking the form of litigations. The occurrence of such disputes was frequent with respect to the char and chapori lands on the Brahmaputra, given the fact that "the churs of the Berhampootur which are extensive are subject to encroachment and destruction yearly, and they are constantly being reformed". In one such dispute, for which the records are available, Seebnath Lahiri, the '12 anna shareholder' of the Pergunnah Curraibaree, complained to the Board of Revenue of the Bengal government in 1853, challenging the apportionment of his property by the Commissioner of Assam on the basis that "a survey made in 1842 now 11-12 years ago so that must be an incorrect one". He wrote,

The original survey itself was incorrect in as much as the descriptions of the lands were not surveyed but merely a distinction made between the high and the low lands and the face of the country in 3-4 years is quite changed. What was there jungle is now cultivation and vice versa and what was taken away by the waters has since reformed... With reference to Jugrah chur which has been made over to me it has been completely destroyed and eighteen of my villages –Julua

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6 ibid., p. 7.
7 Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, Letter No.21, 30 January 1854, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.
and others—have been destroyed by a new nuddee [river] called Kuldee and they have since reformed in conjunction with the 4 anna share.⁸

The petitioner also contested the decision of the survey officials to exclude the ‘Kallo chur’ from the surveys and settlement as “as the chur is under very flourishing cultivation.” Lahiri further complained that even after several petitions made to the district officials, the latter insisted that the lands did not “agree with” their surveys, and therefore appealed to the Board of Revenue to order fresh surveys of the disputed land.

Indigenous peasants in the early decades of the twentieth century were found to be clearing land for the expansion of cultivation in the chapori tracts as well as in the submontane region. There were also signs of the shrinking of land available for future cultivation and new settlements. As has been reported by the subdivisional officer of Mangaldai in 1929, “it is felt that the local people have increased in population and it has been found that batches of local people are opening up lands in undeveloped areas as they have no lands near about their homes. They have opened land not only in Chaporis but also in high land jungles in the northern mauzas.”⁹ Similar instances of this phenomenon were earlier reported from Jorhat in 1905,

The increase in the village population is greater than the in the khiraj area, due to the fact that the local capacity for expansion being limited... The settled area amounts to 87.2 percent of the total. Except in the flooded villages along the Kakadanga [River] there is scarcely any land available for rice cultivation. Land is in great demand through the [Central Jorhat] group and the possibilities of future expansion are limited.¹⁰

Other regions also witnessed agrarian expansion, and significantly, some of it towards the river-plain: “In the two most fertile mauzas of the [southern Jorhat]

⁸ Petition from Seebnath Lahiri, the 12 anna Shareholder of Pergunnah Curraibaree, to the Board of Revenue for Lower Provinces, Fort William, 28 October 1853, Series V: Letters Issued to the Board of Revenue for the Lower Provinces, 1854, ASA.
⁹ S. Gohain, Subdivisional Officer, Mangaldai, ibid., p. 29.
group (Gakhirkhoa and the western portion of the Amguri-Kharikatia) an enormous expansion has taken place due in a great measure to the ease which the low-lying waste, covered for the most part with grass, ekra, tora or light jungle, can be reclaimed.”

The people of the Valley were spreading out to new areas in the early half of the twentieth century, in a period when the second significant movement of people to the province from eastern Bengal began, first to the riverine tracts of Goalpara, and then gradually towards the eastern districts the Valley along the riverine tract on the Brahmaputra.

Settling the River: The East Bengal Peasants

“Padmar tufanë uraiyã nilo
amâr sukher ghor,
ujân thëilya ailam ami
luitër chor.”¹²

“Padma hoîtë ailam ami asâmeri chor
Barramputroi bhanglo amâr shëîna sonâr ghor;
shei ghor chariya jabo kothây upây bolona
shara jibon dukhë gelo ārto shohêna.”¹³

“Arë o nodi Burhamputra ki maya lagayli
Shukhër bosti korîrê sara sari.
Karo bhangli joma jämi, karo bhangli bhitarë bari
Amâr bhangli nabin boyoshjer peeriti.”¹⁴

Baapë dukkhôt poriya kaandëre
maayer chokkhë paani porëre
haayrë Burhamputra kasher bhangiyàre.”¹⁵

¹¹ ibid.
¹² “The whirlwinds of Padma have blown away my happy home; now I come to the char of the Brahmaputra by swimming against the tide.” Folk-songs of the East Bengal immigrants of western Assom, Ismail Hossain, Asomor Chor-Chaporir Loka-Sahitya, Guwahati: Banalata, 2002, p.18. I am grateful to Buno for the translations.
¹³ “From the banks of Padma I came to the river-islands of Assam, The Brahmaputra also destroyed my golden home, Where do I go from here, can some one tell me? I can’t bear this lifelong pain any more.” ibid., p.29.
¹⁴ “What magic have you done O river Brahmaputra! Destroying homes of happiness, You are breaking some people’s land, some other’s homes, And for me you broke my young love!” ibid. p.29.
¹⁵ “My father is shattered, My mother crying relentlessly, O Brahmaputra, you are the destroyer!” ibid.,p.29.
The 1881 Census of Asom counted 280,000 persons who were born outside the province and had subsequently immigrated to Asom. Of this, immigrant tea garden labourers constituted 170,000 persons, 50,000 were 'temporary visitors' to the province, and 60,000 were settlers engaged in agriculture, trade and services. The figures, even though giving only approximate numbers and of doubtful accuracy, showed that while 40,000 persons born in Asom resided in Bengal according to the Bengal Census of 1881, around 30,000 Bengal-born persons resided in the Brahmaputra Valley. The exchange of population between the two neighbouring colonial provinces seemed mutual and near-equal in 1880s, if one leaves out the tea garden workers. The official perception of a scanty population and abundant unutilized land, and its attempts to bring about an externally induced transformation through immigration, was to change this equation in the next few decades.

The colonial state in Asom was seriously contemplating the rapid reclamation of land under 'ordinary' cultivation through encouraging immigration from at least the first years of the twentieth century. Tea was a much-celebrated runaway success story, but the expansion of the area under cultivation by peasants was less than satisfactory for the state. The simple answer to the lack of progress in this direction was often attributed to the lack of enterprise among the Asom peasants, and the colonial dream of seeing a class of agricultural capitalists was yet unrealised. A prevalent stereotype within the colonial bureaucracy was that a numerically large peasantry led to a larger amount of land under cultivation. Since the natural growth rate of the Valley's population during the late nineteenth century was considered by the colonial state to be quite slow, infusing a migrant population into the province was actively considered from the beginning of the twentieth century. This commonly-held perception was expressed in an official communication in 1905, "The lower portion of the valley has lost population owing to the mortality from kala-azar", while in government's calculations, "the growth of the purely Assamese population in the

upper portion has been exceedingly slow."\textsuperscript{17} The most widely cited and appreciated model of success in the 'reclamation' of forests for rice production so far was provided by the colonial experience of Burma, and given its proximity to Asom, it was presented by the provincial government as the ideal model for Asom to emulate.\textsuperscript{18}

It was of course admitted by the state that though the 'wasteland' that Asom could offer to the immigrant settlers was "very extensive", it was by no means so large as was sometimes claimed by over-enthusiastic official opinion. Of the area of uncultivated land with which the plains districts of Asom were credited, a very large proportion was considered by the native population to be permanently uninhabitable, consisting as they were of the riverine lands of the Brahmaputra and its principal tributaries, which were deeply submerged during a part of the year. Only certain forms of habitation were existent in those lands that were considered to be habitable temporarily and were attuned to the amphibious environs of the rivers. Conditions that prevailed in the extensive \textit{chars} and \textit{chapori} lands of this kind were "obviously not suited to permanent colonisation", even the government admitted in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, some parts of the Valley, particularly in the Darrang district, were endowed with stretches of savannah land between the riverine tract and the forest tract along the foothills, the fertility of the soil being poorer and the altitude too high for the culture of rice, were not favourable for crops that required a regular supply of water and a fertile soil.

What remained for future reclamation after excluding these apparently unfavourable tracts, the colonial state contended, was still a very large area of country available for permanent cultivation, sparsely inhabited by "Cacharis and similar tribes of Indo-Tibetan stock, whose neighbourhood is shunned by

\textsuperscript{17} L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905, Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} From L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905, Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
Hindus.” Two great difficulties still awaited the future immigrants, the government concluded. First, the initial cost of reclamation was very high, and second, the jungles of Asom were considered exceedingly unhealthy and dangerous to the health of those who ventured to clear it. The high mortality from dysentery and anemia among the labour-force employed by the tea gardens to clear land during the decades of rapid extension of tea cultivation in the second half of nineteenth century was presented as a testimony to this.

Though the government was satisfied with the rate of expansion of the tea industry and its “pioneering” role in embarking on the “difficult and hazardous enterprise”, the rate at which the country had been “opened up for ordinary farming is slower than might have been expected.” During the past twenty five years, the area under general cultivation in five districts of the Asom Valley had expanded by “only 24 percent”, and about a third of this increase was attributed to the reclamation by the tea garden workers who had been brought in by tea planters, and had subsequently migrated from their tea gardens to village settlements. Disappointingly for the state, there was no such rapid development comparable to what had been witnessed in the districts of Lower Burma. Some colonial administrators held that cultivation would have advanced with greater pace had ‘colonists’ been encouraged to take up land by the offer of revenue-free tenure during the earlier years of their leases. This concession was enjoyed by peasants who applied for land in Burma. Though the rules prevalent in Asom did not prevent its Chief Commissioner from granting land on revenue-free terms or at nominal rates, as indeed was done in leasing out land for tea cultivation, very little use had, however, been made of this power for the cause of extending ordinary cultivation, the government regretted. Thus it was always the practice in the Brahmaputra Valley during the colonial period to levy full revenue on newly-broken land from the first year of occupancy itself. The reasons for this is not difficult to ascertain, and was also admitted by the colonial government.

20 ibid.
21 ibid.
22 L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905, Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
Two reasons had so far prevented the colonial government from implementing the revenue-free grant to the peasants in the province. Firstly, the revenue procedure of the province did not recognise the difference between the shifting cultivation carried out in the riverine tract and the permanent cultivation of the ‘rupit mahal’ that were free from deep inundation, with the result that a single set of rule had been applied to both kinds of tracts.

Since in the Valley a large proportion of the total ordinary cultivation was under fluctuating system under which fields shifted every two or three years, the government feared that the grant of an initial revenue-free tenure of a few years in such lands would exempt the raiyats from the payment of any revenue whatever.\(^{23}\)

Secondly, and more importantly, the state admitted that such concessions could have the "highly undesirable outcome" of inducing the tea garden workers who had served out their initial contracts to take up cultivation as peasant proprietors in large numbers, undermining the tea planter’s interests and depleting their labour force. The colonial state in Assam, designated as a ‘Planter Raj’ by historian Amalendu Guha, was not prepared to take any step that could harm the interests of the tea industry and reduce its prospects of profit. As the government observed, betraying its role as the protector of plantation interests,

the general offer of a revenue-free term would have the effect of tempting the tea garden employ coolies that have been imported at great expense, before the cost of their importation has been recovered. Since the cost of imported labour is so high that the planters would be ruined if their coolies generally left service at the end of their statutory period.\(^{24}\)

Though the prevailing labour laws formally allowed the garden workers to leave their garden after the expiry of four years, coercive practices of the plantation owners stringently prevented the even the legally ‘free’ labourers from leaving.

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\(^{23}\) L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905, Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.  
\(^{24}\) ibid.
The provincial colonial government with Fuller at its helm was, it was claimed,

while anxious to secure fair treatment and reasonable prospect to immigrants
who owe their footing in the province to the initiation of the tea industry, would
be reluctant to see action taken, in the interest either of government revenue or of
philanthropy, which would be at the expense of the capital that is invested in tea.25

Tea garden managers in the Valley had already “assured” the colonial
government that “the general offer of land with a revenue-free period would
deplete their labour forces”, when in 1888 the plantation owners suspected that
the government was initiating a scheme to offer revenue-free land to ‘time-
expired’ tea garden workers during the chief commissionership of Denis
Fitzpatrick. After encountering strong objections from the “tea-planting
community, it was made clear that it was not the intention of the administration
to offer this concession over the heads of the garden Managers.”26 The government
conceded that “any attempt actively to encourage tea-garden coolies to abandon
their service for ryoti cultivation would be greatly resented by the planters as
involving unfair competition between their legitimate interests.”27 The colonial
authorities were happy to live with the fact that

[If the extension of ordinary cultivation has been impeded in the Assam Valley
by limitations that were necessitated by the conditions of the tea industry, the
growth of this industry has in return cleared and settled exceedingly large
expanses of jungle country which were, apart from tea, of very little agricultural
value.

As has been pointed out earlier in the present work—and by recent research on
government forestry in South Asia—the land designated as ‘fallow’, ‘wasteland’,
or “of little agricultural value” were of crucial importance for fulfilling the needs
of villagers, forest dwellers and tribal communities, and indeed many of them

25 ibid.
26 L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the
Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905,
Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.
27 ibid.
depended on these lands for their livelihood and survival. In the districts of Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur the area under tea in the early twentieth century constituted no less than a fifth of the total cropped area, and the produce of this fifth was considered to be of considerably higher market value than that of the four-fifth that were under ‘ordinary’ crops, and hence the latter had to give way to the former when there was a conflict of interest between the two.

The incumbent Chief Commissioner J. B. Fuller, it was said in 1905, was considering for the last three years the appropriate policies to stimulate the extension of ryotwari cultivation without offering a revenue-free term. The Indian government also accepted the provincial officer’s conclusion that in place of such a concession, the rates for the assessment of wastelands needed to be substantially reduced, and the settlement records of Sibsagar and Kamrup convinced him that this measure would effectively encourage the raiyats to expand their cultivation. Yet, the Chief Commissioner wanted to “go farther than this in the riverain tracts”, and inspired by the precedent of the Burma allotment rules, he was keen to “stimulate” the migration from Bengal which was already underway to these areas in a sporadic manner, by offering the future colonists a revenue-free term.

The colonial government had already taken a few steps in this direction by allowing small grants on favourable terms to “Hindustani settlers” along the Assam-Bengal Railway in the late nineteenth century, especially in the forested regions west of Lumding in Nowgong district. The migration of peasants from Bengal to the extensive chars of north Goalpara had also been encouraged during the first decade of the twentieth century by the offering land on easy terms. While doing so, however, the colonial authorities were careful not to allow “the benefit of the concession to unauthorized squatters”, primarily to prevent the tea garden labourers from leaving their gardens, though the government contradicted itself by claiming that as a matter of law or declared policy, there was “no question whatever of prohibiting or discouraging time-expired coolies
from settling on the land."28 As an indication of the fact that the colonial officials were not looking seriously at north India but rather towards eastern India for migration "in enormous a scale", it noted, "A connection exists between Assam and the congested districts [of Bengal], and it is expected that with the extension of the Eastern Bengal Railway to Gauhati, the intercourse between the two provinces will become much closer than it is at present."29 This colonial expectation was to be materialised in the coming decades with the immigration of East Bengal peasants.

The flow of immigration picked up in the 1910s and 1920s. Which areas of the Valley did the Bengal immigrants mostly settle? As it turned out, a majority of them were made to inhabit the *chaporis* and *chars* of the Brahmaputra, and take up their land here for permanent cultivation and settlement. It was an environment which they were arguably familiar with because of the similarities with the conditions in their home district of Mymensing, but this pattern of settlement had far-reaching and unforeseeable implications, encompassing all aspects of social life in Asom, including the political, economic, social and cultural spheres in the late-twentieth century.30

There were many significant characteristics of this latest flow of immigration and settlement, which distinguished it from the earlier instance of migration to Assom, that of the tea garden labourers. The former settled down primarily on the riverine tract on the Brahmaputra, not only because they were accustomed to this environment back home and since such land was highly productive, but also because colonial policy allowed the East Bengal immigrants to take up only this type of land. Apart from cultivating rice, they also introduced the cultivation of jute, a high-value cash-crop, and land taken up for this crop grew steadily in the first half of the twentieth century. The connectivity provided by the Brahmaputra

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28 L. J. Kershaw, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, No.2531R, Shillong 5 June 1905, Rev.-A, June 1905, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

29 ibid.

and its numerous tributaries played an important role in the processing, transport of and trade in jute.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the settlement of East Bengal peasants expanded to cover the riverine tracts along the River Brahmaputra on the north and the south banks as well as its *chars* and *chaporis* spanning from the westernmost district of Goalpara through the districts of Darrang, Kamrup and Nowgong to parts of Lakhimpur. Along with the introduction of changes in the agrarian production process by the new peasants, there was also a marked change in the way the riverine landscape was put to use. The administrative integration of Eastern Bengal with the province of Assom and the emergence of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 played a catalytic role to this process in its initial phase. Not only did the administrative set up underwent a change in this period, but also the usual landscape of the riverine lands or the *chaporis*, which were now showing signs of permanence after they were being inhabited by the East Bengal peasants. *The Report of the Banking Enquiry Committee* noted in 1929 that in the last twenty years a unique feature of Assom had been "the continuous stream of immigrants, mainly from Mymensingh in Eastern Bengal – who have spread out in large tracts of land in Assam Valley."31 In their home districts, the peasants found the exactions under oppressive zamindari system and the pressure on the land too severe, and were attracted to Assom by reports of wide expansion of government wasteland under relatively lower revenue assessment. "The significance of the movement may be judged from the fact that 55.6 per cent of the total increase of 748,650 in the population of the Assam Valley between 1911 and 1921 was due to immigration. While part of this increase must be attributed to the importation of tea-garden labour, it is largely due to the immigration from Eastern Bengal of actual cultivators."32 The changes brought in by the new settlers to the demographic pattern of the Valley were summed up by the *Report*.

32 ibid., p.11.
Before the immigrants from Eastern Bengal came to the province, there were large areas of waste lands in all districts. The indigenous Assamese, prior to that time, used to take up much land for cold weather crops, preferably near the bank of the Brahmaputra, on annual lease. These he would cultivate for three years or so and then throw them up, seeking fresh pastures of which there was [sic] abundance. After some years, he would go back to the previous lands, knowing that probably no body would have taken them up, as there was enough spare land for all. This was in addition to his permanent rice land in or near his village. The coming of the Mymensingh people has changed all that. They have occupied most of those waste lands (frequently buying them at an exorbitant price from the Assamese who had them under annual lease) and brought them under permanent cultivation.33

In the westernmost district of Goalpara too, there was a steady growth of the immigrant population. It noted that 57,000 immigrants in this district from came to settle in this district from Eastern Bengal before 1911. In the 1921 census it was calculated that nearly 20 percent of the total population was composed of such settlers, numbering around 150,000. “Since then immigration has extended especially on the low lands adjoining the Brahmaputra. There has also been expansion by Santals and others in the submontane tracts in the north of the district.”34 The practice of fluctuating cultivation and temporary settlement gradually gave way to permanent cultivation and habitation on the riverine tract.

Up to about twenty years ago, the Assamese practiced fluctuating cultivation on the Chaporis mainly in growing cold weather crop but very large areas have now been brought under permanent cultivation by the Eastern Bengal immigrants. The Chaporis of Barpeta subdivision show an increase of about 700 percent in the settled area in the last 20 years.35

In fact, the Brahmaputra’s chars of Goalpara district were not only cultivated but also permanently inhabited by the Eastern Bengal peasants in “a very large proportion”. Their cultivation included ahu, aman rice and jute, the outturn and

33 ibid., p.16, emphasis added.
34 ibid., p.25.
productivity of which were highly dependent on the nature and timing of the annual floods. As the then Deputy Commissioner of the district noted, "if the floods are late and not extraordinary in height no particular damage is done. If on the contrary, the floods occur early in June before the crops are harvested, or very high so as to damage Amon and jute, the position of the people becomes very precarious."36 The floods of 1921, however, took a destructive form, as "this year the floods came very early, before the ashu crop had been reaped. It died down after having done great damage and rose again higher than ever to complete the destruction of the first crop and the 'Amon' crop as well."37 The Subdivisional officer who visited the chars under the jurisdiction of South Salmara police station, termed it an "abnormal flood, the like of which the people here have not seen for the last twenty years" and it had brought "untold miseries to thousands of people and cattle and has rendered many families homeless".38 He reported,

The damage done to the crops is simply shocking. I visited Jamriabari, Notibari, Khasertila, Monkola, Dolani, Gendoa, Bahadur Tari, Kushbari and Satsimla. Here to the whole tract of country from Chunari to Satsimla is a vast sheet of water. The people are living on rafts and changs and their crops have completely gone. Most of the people have nothing to eat and if immediate relief is not given to them, many people are sure to die of starvation. On hearing that I had gone to that locality about 400 men came on rafts and boats to see me and to apply for immediate relief... Several hundreds of people will die for want of food by the time flood subsides. I am of the opinion that extensive distress due to flood is present in Katlamari, Ramhori, Hojua, Chunari, Jamirabari, Notibari, Bhungbari, Nonkola, Satsimla, Tangbhita, Kushbari, Tagunbari, Bhobrabhita, Joleswar, Kadamtola, Joldoba, Phoringipara, Silapani, Simlabari, Ourabari, Lejam, Jamadarbhita, Sarakhowa, Rowkhowa and Tipara villages and that they mat be

38 Report of A. Rahaman, Subdivisional Officer, Goalpara, to the Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, Goalpara 21 July 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
declared Flood Affected Areas under Rule 18. Ninety percent of the sufferers are Bhatia Mussalmans. They could not sow their Ashu crop in time owing to the first flood which took place in the middle of Jaisto [early June] last and the crops they sowed after that flood have been damaged by the present flood. The same remark applies to the jute crop also...  

The Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, who visited the flooded regions in September – almost two months after the floods had subsided – found that the “only mitigating feature is that these Muhammadan chur dwellers are accustomed to calamities of this kind and show great resisting power”, even though both their rice and jute crops were almost totally destroyed.  

He discovered that the poorer people had no food at all, and that many of them were subsisting on stalks of ‘katchoo’ (arum) mixed with ‘tush’, the inner husks of paddy, which was normally used as fodder for cattle. Some people were forced to make a living by cutting and selling ‘jhau’ for firewood. Nowhere could he find any stock of food with the peasants, but this was seen not as a sign of their state of destitution, dismissed with the remark that “the Muhammadan chur wallah does not I believe keep large stocks”. In any case, the officer held that “the physical appearance of the bulk of the people is the best test of the need of relief or otherwise”, and in the present case, not quite unpredictably he found amongst the people he visited “no marked sign of emaciation.”  

Colonialism and the Colonisation Scheme

The “Colonisation Scheme” was initiated by the colonial government in the second decade of the twentieth century in western and central Asom districts, aimed at an organised settlement of the ongoing immigration from Eastern Bengal to the riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra. The Scheme was initiated when in a conference of the members of the Assam Legislative Council in 1828, certain representatives objected to the manner in which the colonial government had so

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39 ibid.
40 ‘Note on the Inspection of Flood Relief Works in Goalpara’ by B. C. Allen, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, 26 September 1921, “Flood in North Lakhimpur”, File Nos. 110-123, Rev.- B, January 1922, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, ASA.
41 ibid.
far been "allowing immigrants to settle anywhere they liked causing great disturbance to indigenous people". It was then decided that the government would appoint a Colonisation Officer and select "suitable area of land in which alone these immigrants would be allowed to settle", and the settlers would be asked to pay Rs.75 for each acre or Rs.25 per bigha as premium on the land settled. An immigrant peasant willing to take up land under the Colonisation Scheme was to first apply to the colonisation officer with a fee of Rs.5, who would then demarcate the land for occupation. Another payment of Rs.5 was to be made when he received the annual patta the next year. After two years of cultivation, he was to pay Rs.5 of the salami (premium), and after the expiry of five years, he was entitled to receive a periodic patta for his land on the payment of Rs.10.

In Nowgong district, the scheme "started in November 1928 with approximately 28,000 bighas of land comprised in 29 villages along the bank of the Brahmaputra in Laharighat and Bokani mauzas. Almost the whole area suitable for cultivation has been settled." The land brought under the Scheme was excluded from settlement under the existing ordinary rules. It was not surprising that the whole area under this 'Immigrant Group' of villages was chapori land. As the Settlement Officer of Nowgong observed, "The entire area of the group partakes of chapari character and is a formation by the action of the Brahmaputra." For the State, this type of land was perfectly suited to the needs of the Eastern Bengal peasants and the crops they were to cultivate. The Settlement Officer in charge of the Nowgong colonisation scheme explained,

Generally speaking the soil in the villages nearest the Brahmaputra is sandy... In such areas the Assamese used to practice their pam cultivation. The immigrants

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42 'Extract from the Recommendation of the Retrenchment Committee', S. P. Desai, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue Department to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division., No.2306R, Shillong 24 July 1931, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, December 1931, Nos.220-244, ASA


prefer this kind of soil for growing jute. The area is annually submerged by the Brahmaputra flood and the soil which gives its best to jute cultivation comes out of water with its richness restored after the rains. Unless the floods are untimely, i.e., occur before the jute is high enough not to go completely under water or after the sali crop has been transplanted late in the season, the annual inundations are a natural process of fertilisation and most welcome. Without a normal flood even the steeping of jute for extracting the fibre becomes difficult in many places.\textsuperscript{45}

The kind of land to be cleared by the immigrant peasants taking up land in the Immigrant Group of villages under the Scheme varied in different localities and tracts. The nature of the overgrowth was a factor in the speed of clearance and cultivation, although the material conditions of the peasants played a more important role in determining their speed and ability to turn forests into fields. While the grass jungle commonly grown on the chapori tracts was easier to clear, the ekra or reed jungle – also a common vegetation of the riverine lands – took much longer and more effort to be made cultivable. More importantly, a poor or marginal peasant\textsuperscript{46} took longer time to clear and cultivate than those with cash and food. Subsequent developments in the settlement of the East Bengal peasants in Asom was to demonstrate that the social and not the Natural conditions played a more decisive role in determining the pace and pattern of the ongoing ‘reclamation’. As it turned out, the “Majority of the colonists have little ready cash or grain for their maintenance, while carrying on clearance of [their] allotted land. There are a number of cases in which the colonists have to work on other people’s lands for their maintenance, while engaged in clearing their own land in the colonisation area.”\textsuperscript{47}

While touring the new settlement villages under the Colonisation Scheme in Nowgong in May 1929, the settlement officer noted exuberantly in his official

\textsuperscript{45} ibid. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{46} Poor peasants here are meant to denote those who has small amounts of land and other necessary means of production, but which is not sufficient for the sustenance of the family for the entire year, often forcing them to take up additional land on rent as tenant cultivators, or work as hired agricultural labourers. Marginal peasants on the other hand are those who are landless, and entirely dependent on tenant cultivation or agricultural work on other’s fields for their sustenance.
\textsuperscript{47} Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.227S, 7 August 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
diary that the scheme was going to be a success, as applications for land in large numbers were received both from "Mymensinghias and Nunias", denoting immigrants from the East Bengal district of Mymensingh and that of the Indian mainland (also termed 'Hindustani') respectively. A beginning had been made, he proclaimed, though the new settlers turned out to be "not typical of what we want", i.e., peasants with wherewithal, ownership of means of production and cash to take up large amounts of land, and who could undertake rapid agrarian expansion. Due to the vulnerable financial condition of the majority of the immigrants having land in these Colonisation blocks, they generally owned no more than 15 bighas of land per family on average, considered by the government to be not of large-enough size. Though the settlement officers earmarked some additional land for each immigrant family residing in the newly settled villages to be taken up in the future, the transfer of land deeds was contingent upon their ability to pay a premium to the government and fulfilling of other terms and conditions of Colonisation, including the permanent residence on the area they till, which effectively meant permanently inhabiting the riverine and flood-prone tract. Even if immigrant families wished to take up more land, their inability to pay the premium was a major impediment. At the commencement of the Scheme, the rates of premium charged by the government were, "In the first year only Rs.2 per bigha is taken as premium from the colonists, the total receipt up to date being Rs.12,636. The second installment of premium at Rs.3 per bigha is due in the third year, and then the main Installment of Rs.20 not until the fifth year." As per the Colonisation rules, the East Bengal peasant who failed to pay the premium was liable to be evicted from his land.

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48 "Note on Colonisation Scheme", Extract from the Tour Diary of the Settlement Officer, Nowgong, for February and May 1929, in letter from H. M. Pritchard, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.1125R, Proceeding No.83, Shillong 3 April 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.

49 "The settlers are not yet actually resident in these blocks. I have told the colonisation officer that the residence is a condition of settlement, unless a special exemption is granted... they will not be allowed to stay unless they accept the colonisation conditions, and have given them one month in which to pay their first premium", wrote the settlement officer of the Nowgong Colonisation Scheme. ibid.

50 Proceeding No.92, from C. Gimson, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.399S, 10 September 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
This process of settlement did not always take place according to government’s plans and under its aegis. A growing land market emerged in the colonisation areas where transactions were carried out outside the purview of the state and its laws, and therefore were termed by it as illegal. Native individuals with influence and power emerged as middlemen for such exchanges and speculations, along with a section from among the immigrants themselves who played that role. It was noted that in Laharighat, an immigrant village in Nowgong, “One immigrant was said to be making a living by settling new immigrants within Assamese lines.” There were concerns circulating within the colonial Colonisation establishment that “The Mymensinghias... are getting out of hand”, who were accused of “trying to settle in forbidden areas”. Complaints of the prevalence of “dirty work” in a “condition of muddle and corruption” in the Nowgong settlement area were rife. According to the colonisation officer, it was found in the immigrant villages that “the strong are trying to grasp more land than their share of land allotted at the expense of the weak”. Attempts on the part of the government to “see that land is not settled with men who do not cultivate it themselves”, indicate that there indeed emerged a class within the immigrants who practiced subletting of land to their economically weaker fellow immigrants, or were simply engaged in speculation of land. This was despite the express condition in the Colonisation Rules that “A colonist is not allowed to sublet his land”, and the general perception that a family of immigrants “cannot

51 Proceeding No.94, from C. K. Rhodes, Secretary to the Government of Assam, revenue Department, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.3670R, Shillong 24 October 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
52 “I notice a rather subtle change that has come over the in Assamese Mymensinghia relations. Whereas in the past the immigrants planted themselves as close to the Assamese lines as they could with the intention (often successful) of spreading over it, now wily Assamese are taking up land on the edge of Mymensinghia settlements in the hopes of large and early profits. They are going especially to places where Mymensinghias are settling in uncultivated Assamese villages.” ibid.
53 ‘Note on Colonisation Scheme’, Extract from the Tour Diary of the Settlement Officer, Nowgong, for February and May 1929, in letter from H. M. Pritchard, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.1125R, Proceeding No.83, Shillong 3 April 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
54 Proceeding No.112, ‘Inspection Note’, 1 February 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
55 Proceeding No.92, from C. Gimson, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.399S, 10 September 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
56 ibid.
ordinarily clear and bring under cultivation more than about 5 bighas of land in a year without hired labour which it is not easy to procure and impossible for the majority of them to employ."57

The initial exuberance of the colonial officials soon gave way to concerns about 'malpractices' in the Colonisation Scheme, as they complained of "some difficulties in carrying out the scheme" in 1929, its first year of operation. It was observed that there were instances of "forcible occupation" of land by immigrants even before the colonisation officers arrived at the scene and earmarked the land. They were accused of having "no pattas, and no rights." Moreover, indigenous peasants claimed ownership of their uncultivated lands in some of the areas brought under the Scheme, and "when the colonisation officer went to the villages to settle colonists, he was confronted by the pattadars who have now begun to take interest in their lands", forcing the exclusion of such plots of land from the Scheme.58

But the demand for land by the immigrant peasants was growing. In his report to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, the settlement officer of Nowgong proposed that 29,976 bighas of land belonging to a block of sixteen villages in the Mayang mauza be added to the present Scheme, an addition to the original 28,000 bighas under it. He noted that the initial area earmarked for settlement with immigrants under the Scheme had nearly been occupied in entirety, "except for some land which has been washed away by the Brahmaputra and some which is unsuitable for cultivation." The proposed land in Mayang was of chapori character and on the Brahmaputra, a part of which was under fluctuating pam cultivation by the native peasants mostly belonging to various tribal communities, and where mustard was primarily grown.59 On inspection of the settlements, it was found that at Jhargaon in the newly included

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57 Proceeding No.118, From Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.227S, 7 August 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
58 Proceeding No.92, from C. Gimson, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.399S, 10 September 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
59 C. Gimson, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.500S, 22 October 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
block of Mayang, "there were some protests from Assamese villagers on the
ground that the land was required for them for their pam cultivation."^60
However, the protestations or objections from the natives were rejected by the
authorities on the plea that "there is plenty of waste land left in the
neighbourhood for the Assamese"^61 But the tension prevailing due to the conflict
over land forced the district settlement officer to call a halt to any addition of
land to the Colonisation Scheme in Nowgong, in any case for a few years, if not
making a permanent halt.^62

Nevertheless, the results of the work put in by the immigrants in clearing the
riverine chapori tract and bringing it under cultivation and habitation seemed to
have been startling for the colonial state. Significantly, not only did the quantity
of land brought under cultivation expanded dramatically in some of the
immigrant blocks, but its quality and character also underwent a change. As has
been noted already, from being temporarily settled for fluctuating cultivation
and classified as faringati (or its latter classifications such as Dā-faringati), the
agrarian landscape in the riverine tract changed towards being permanently
cultivated and inhabited (classified under rupit earlier, but now as sali-tali, balia
or kathua sali-tali etc.). As one settlement officer noted in October 1930, "The
immigrants who have taken up land within the last few years have cleared and
regularly cultivated their lands from the very beginning and no land has
remained as faringati from any deceptive appearance."^63 Two aspects of the
agrarian life of the Valley demonstrated more than any other that the nature of
the land on the river was changing; first, the rate of relinquishment of cultivated
land in general and in the chapori tracts in particular showed a gradual decline,
and second, the area under transplant rice grown in permanently held rupit

^60 Proceeding No.112, 'Inspection Note', 1February 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings,
Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA

^61 ibid.

^62 The indigenous tribal communities continued to complaint against immigrant peasants in the decades
to follow, and also at times demanded their eviction, as was asked for Nagendra Chandra Baro and
others for "eviction of immigrants from tribal localities in Kamrup." File No. RS 19 of 1943, Assam
Secretariat Proceedings, ASA.

^63 'Assessment Report on the North-Western Group (Nowgong District)', Memo by S. N. Datta,
Settlement Officer, Nowgong to the Director of Land Records, Assam, No.393S, Nowgong 31
October 1930, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, No.140-155, Rev.-A,
September 1931, ASA.
lands grew by replacing broadcast rice which was a major crop of the *faringati* land.

The rate of relinquishment of land in the Mayang and Nij Ghagua *mauzas* under the Chapori Group of villages in Nowgong, for instance, fell drastically within a span of fifteen years from 1915. This was despite the area being only marginally inhabited by the East Bengal peasants, which constituted not more than one-fourth of the total population of the blocks. While the total settled area almost doubled between 1915 and 1929, the rate of land annually relinquished by the landholders came down from almost 29 percent in 1915 to nearly six percent in 1929. The following table shows this phenomenon in the two *mauzas*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Settled Area (in bighas)</th>
<th>Area Relinquished (in bighas)</th>
<th>Percentage of Relinquished Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914-15</td>
<td>34,035</td>
<td>9,790</td>
<td>28.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>42,031</td>
<td>6,719</td>
<td>15.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924-25</td>
<td>51,876</td>
<td>8,884</td>
<td>17.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-30</td>
<td>64,064</td>
<td>3,750</td>
<td>5.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, while the acreage under *ahu*, *sali* and *bao* varieties of rice in the Chapori Group in 1906 were 40.93%, 4.52% and 6.48% respectively, in 1929 the same changed to 13.35%, 11.73% and 37.51%. On the other hand, while 37.11% of the land was under mustard cultivation in 1906, it declined to 20.32% in 1929. As has been noted, “In the increase in the *sali* there is a clear indication that the country is changing from fluctuating towards permanent cultivation” and “The falling off in the percentage of mustard (as well as of *ahu*) is a clear indication of a move towards settled cultivation.” In bringing in this change in the character of cultivation, the colonisation officers argued, “The settlement of immigrants and the Colonisation Scheme has recently been a potent influence, both by

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64 Proceeding No.55, From S. P. Desai, Officiating Director of Land Records, Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue Department, No.33/57, Shillong 13 October 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, June 1931, ASA.
65 ibid.
example and by raising the fear of a possible danger."66 Though the evidence of this transition presented here is only from one Group of *chapori* villages, a similar trend could be witnessed in other groups of villages and regions settled by the East Bengal peasants as well.67

The practice of annual relinquishment of riparian *farangati* lands by the indigenous peasants at the same time went down after the immigrant settlements came up in the vicinity of their villages, since they now apparently preferred holding on to their land even if at the cost of allowing it to remain fallow. This phenomenon, the Settlement Officer of Nowgong felt, was more due to the fear that land once relinquished might "slip out of their hands altogether", though it was also reasoned that the native peasants were also impressed by the industry of their East Bengal counterparts, and therefore took to cultivation more earnestly.68

In Nowgong district, the Census of 1931 registered a significant increase of the population in Khathowal, Juria, Laokhowa, Dhing, Bokani and Lahorijan *mauzas*, which was considered to be due to large-scale immigration of settlers mainly from Mymensingh. The East Bengal peasants cleared tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and occupied nearly all the lands which were open for settlement in the riverine tract. The outcome of this process and its contribution to a rapid enhancement of colonial revenue was greatly appreciated by the colonial government. The government was all praise for the newcomers,

> These people have brought in their wake wealth, industry, and general prosperity to the whole district. They have improved the health of the countryside by clearing the jungles and converting the wilderness into

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66 ibid.
67 A similar trend was visible in the Northwestern Group in Nowgong district. Whereas in 1914-15 the percentage of relinquished land to the total settled area was 9.11%, it came down to a negligible .08% in 1929-30. 'Assessment Report on the North-Western Group (Nowgong District)', Memo by S. N. Datta, Settlement Officer, Nowgong to the Director of Land Records, Assam, No.393S, Nowgong 31 October 1930, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, No.140-155, Rev.-A, September 1931, ASA.
prosperous villages. Their industry as agriculturists has become almost proverbial and they extract from their fields the utmost that they can yield. Their love and care of cattle is also an object lesson to others. Government revenue has increased. Trade and commerce have prospered.69

The immigrant's inclination to undertake hard-labour and to survive difficult conditions was well appreciated, and though their efforts enhanced colonial revenue, the peasants hardly could improve their lot in their new home. If the objective of leaving their homeland was to escape the excruciatingly exploitative environs in search of a life of economic security, dignity and freedom, it is doubtful if the majority of them could find it in Asom.

'Why are they poor?'

Though the Colonisation Scheme was profitable to the colonial government, the immigrant peasants themselves could hardly retain the fruits of their labour, a fact that had to be admitted by the State itself. About the deplorable economic condition and plight of the 'charuas' in general, an Assamese colonial bureaucrat posted in Barpeta provides incisive insights about their condition in the late 1920s. He observes,

Today the immigrants have no way out. They have sold all their belongings at Mymensingh and when they come here they do not have a chance to get land easily. As soon as they come here they fall prey to Assamese middlemen and Dewanis, who rob them of everything. Then and then only they encroach on reserves and commit other offences as lands are scarce. Last year I think there were 700 encroachment cases. I issued distress warrants in about 300 cases, but 80 per cent of them could not realise anything. There was nothing in their houses which could be sold. I visited many of the villages of Charuas [inhabitants of the chars] and spoke to them... Assamese only work half a day. They work for the full day, their wives work, their children work and raise abundant crop; why are they poor?

69 Report of the Census of Assam, 1931
The immigrants could not provide him the answers. But the officer's own study and his experience of a particular incident brought him the answer. He found that the poor immigrant peasants were totally under the grip of the moneylenders, indebted to the hilt and under the spell of a vicious debt cycle. The moneylenders and mahajans were virtually running their own fiefdoms and zamindaris, the immigrants increasingly becoming tenants on his own land. He noted,

Recently about a few months ago there was a theft case in a Saha's [moneylender] house at Sorbhog. During investigations the Police found rolls of bonds executed by Charuas where the amount borrowed is left vacant at 3 per cent interest per month. The Charuas cannot forget the high price of jute they once got some years ago. Therefore if a Charua has got 10 bighas of land he thinks that 3 bighas will be enough for his dhan [rice] crop. He cultivates jute in 7 bighas. He cannot take all the jute to Hat [the local market] at once. He goes to the Hat and sells jute, and he gets anything between Rs.4-8-0 to Rs.5 per maund. Our mauzadar is there, his Mahajan is there, and so as soon as he gets the money it goes. The man then purchases a red shirt for him or a red sharee for his wife and sweets for children and he comes back home with a rupee or so in his pocket. In this way he cannot save anything from jute. At the same time these 3 bighas of land do not give enough paddy to last to last to the end of the year. Then he goes to the Mahajans and Mahajans lend him more money and the immigrants get deeper and deeper in debt. There is a man called Biren Saha. I met a man who had a talk with him. I asked him how the Mahajan will realise his money? He said that the annual lands of Charuas cannot remain annual for ever. Some day they will have to be turned into periodic. At that time how will the Charuas keep their lands? These will be sold for debts. My impressions are that small zemindaries will be created by the purchase of these periodic pattas. Nowhere in Assam Valley there is zemindary except in Goalpara and Kamrup. The Charuas will ultimately come into the grip of small zamindars, the very persons they tried to avoid in leaving Mymensingh.70

70 Statement by G. C. Bordoloi, Sub-Divisional Officer of Barpeta, to the Line Committee "about immigration generally", ibid., p.107, emphasis added.
The Banking Enquiry found that the substantial amount of money which annually pour into the immigrant areas in exchange of jute almost immediately went out of their hands to the traders who sell them their food-stuffs and imported goods as well as the lawyers and the moneylenders who demanded payment of for litigations and loans. The colonial authorities were also well aware of the vulnerability of the immigrant peasants, and suggested that “Any avoidable pressure should not be put on them, which will have a tendency to send them to the clutches of money-lenders.” Therefore, in spite of their income from land the immigrants “seldom become rich as they are spendthrift by habit, are prone to litigation and do not hesitate to run into debt...The Marwari mahajans are ready to accommodate them with loans at usurious interest so long as crop prospects are good. The Banking Enquiry Committee also observed the economic vulnerability of the immigrant peasants while describing their condition of the Nowgong district:

The special feature of the district [Nowgong] in the last twenty years is the opening up of the north of the district by immigrants from Eastern Bengal – mainly Mohammadans, and to a less extent Hindus – from Mymensingh. They have been able to bring large tracts under permanent cultivation, especially with jute. Those who were the first settlers are the most prosperous as abundant Government waste land was then available. Many of them now lend to those who came after them. The immigrants annually take advances mainly from the Marwaris which they repay from the proceeds of the jute crop. They have the reputation of clearing off with fair punctuality the advances when they have a good crop with a reasonable market price. When they have a surplus, however, they spend it extravagantly and have no idea of saving. The result is that they have to take advances later in the year for the next jute season, and they seem to be always in the hands of the Mahajans... on the whole the price of land has more than doubled in the last twenty years and that relinquishment of lands held for annual which used to be common is now comparatively rare.

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71 Proceeding No.118, From Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.227S, 7 August 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.
73 ibid, pp. 21-22.
The economic condition of the immigrant peasants as a whole was even worse than poorest of the indigenous peasants, their position being in no way helped by the large-scale indebtedness which they suffered, primarily because of their jute-based cash-crop economy that was dependent on the fluctuations of the market controlled by middlemen and moneylenders. As has been noted,

It is well-known that the immigrants are much more indebted than the indigenous Assamese... As the custom of the Mymensingh settlers is to take advances on the understanding that the crops, especially jute, are given in repayment, it is only expected that when the crops are poor debts should increase. The Mymensingh settler usually pays up his creditor when he has a good crop and if he has a surplus balance left after this, he does not, as a rule, save it, but invests it in the purchase of more lands, of a corrugated roof for his house or of expensive up-country plough bullocks or, as is too often the case, launches into unproductive expenditure.74

Very little could be saved by the immigrants even after a good harvest, but when it failed, their condition became much more desperate. The conflict with the indigenous peasants over cultivable land, which was said to become scarce as the twentieth century wore on, only added to the woes of the majority of the immigrants.

**Struggle over Scarce Land: The Indigenous and the Immigrant Peasants**

More of the *chapori* land on the Brahmaputra was sought to be opened by the colonial officials for new settlements in Valley districts. As was suggested by a colonial official in the Mangaldai district in 1938, "I am of the opinion that this *Chapari* area should be thrown open to the immigrants because Assamese people will not go there. These are lying vacant for so many years."75 Similarly in Nowgong district too, it had been said that "The areas now reserved for

74 ibid., p.40-44.
settlement with the immigrants fall within the colonisation scheme. These are all mostly out-of-the-way, low-lying swamps or flood-stricken areas where the Assamese, Nepalis, tea-garden coolies or people coming from other provinces do not like to settle. However, the apprehensions of the colonial government that competing claims over land between the indigenous and the immigrant peasants might lead to conflicts spiraling out of hand, along with the unregulated nature of the settlement by the East Bengal peasants in the first two centuries of the twentieth century, prompted it to introduce the Line System, demarcating and segregating the indigenous and immigrant lands. As Amalendu Guha observes, "Administrative measured had to be devised to contain the conflict. The Line System – an idea that was first mooted in 1916 and adopted in 1920 – was such a device. Under this system, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas, specified for their exclusive settlement."

The image of the immigrant peasant presented by the settlement officers and shared by the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, that he was "something of a beggar on the horse back and has not learnt to bear the prosperity which a good season brings him: when he does so he will probably buy out his Assamese neighbours, line or no line" was not only confined to a section of the colonial establishment. The taking up of the riverine pam lands by the immigrant peasants was accompanied by a paranoia, mostly articulated by a jittery Assamese middle class, that "the Assamese will be submerged by the Mymensinghia tide". The colonial state attempted to dispel such apprehension, in a manner the sub-divisional officer placed in Mangaldai argued in his letter to the Line System Committee in January 1938,

There is some point in the fear of the Assamese that he will be submerged by the Mymensinghia tide. If I recollect right the density of population in parts of

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78 Memo by the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No.84R, Guwahati 9 January 1931, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, Nos.140-155, ASA.
Tangail subdivision of Mymensingh district is nearly 1,000 to the square mile, far in excess of what the land can support. On paper there is nothing to prevent this huge excess population from rushing to the empty spaces of Mangaldai and filling them up in a very short time. But in reality this is never likely to happen.

*The Mymensinghias are a riverain people and the average Mymensinghia does not like to go far from the river on whose banks his crops of jute and mustard are best grown.*

But even these riverine tracts emerged as a contested terrain between the supporters and opponents of the colonial immigration and Colonisation policy. The conflict was at two levels, one was the struggle for control over land, and the other was the question of identity. The colonial government’s wishes that all contradictions between the newcomers and the old inhabitants would wither away once the East Bengal immigrants “settle down and become Assamese, learn the language in their schools and, while teaching their neighbours the advantages of expert cultivation... assimilate Assamese customs and traditions” was starkly in contrast to the prevailing social realities of the time.

Opinion on the issue was divided between the upholders of the interests of the indigenous and that of the immigrants. When asked, “Do you think that if these *chaporis* are thrown open to the immigrants the condition of the Assamese people will be materially affected?” since “the Assamese grow mustard and pulse in the Ranganadi *chaporis* of Darrang district”, the answer from Kumud Ram Bora, an Assamese pleader from Mangaldai, was a predictable “Yes”. Indeed, he truthfully represented the opinion of the contemporary Assamese nationalists when he went on to express his apprehensions. Bora observed, “I am very much afraid that the Assamese culture and civilisation will be gone if more immigrants are allowed to come in.”

The cause of economic distress of the Asom’s poor peasantry was soon traced to the coming of the ‘aggressive’ Eastern Bengal

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80 Proceeding No.85, ‘Extracts from the Inspection Note of Nowgong by the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division’, February 1929, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.

peasants. As an Assamese witness of Barpeta testified to the Line System Committee,

The Hastinapur famine occurred on account of the fact that the indigenous people are now deprived of the *pam* land which has been occupied by the Mymensinghia people. For the same reason they have become very poor and cannot repay the loan they took from the *Mahajans*. Since the Mymensinghia immigrants came here the financial condition of the Assamese has become deplorable. Vast areas of land having been occupied by the immigrants the Assamese cannot keep buffaloes and milk has become very dear. Petty trades which were carried on by the Assamese formerly have now been taken up by the immigrants. Vegetables market is now in the hands of the immigrants.²²

Due to such oppositions and protestations, there were suggestions from within the colonial bureaucracy that low-lying riverine tracts in some areas should be entirely reserved for the indigenous peasants who cultivate such land. One Assamese respondent to the Line System Committee demanded,

in those areas specially in this Subdivision [North Lakhimpur of Lakhimpur district] where the fluctuating cultivation is in vague all available lands fit for fluctuating cultivation may be reserved for such cultivation by the Miris, Deoris, Khamties, Kacharies and the other Assamese 'Chaporials' (i.e., those living in low lying areas like those of the Majulies in Sibsagar district and Telahi, Komolaboria, Dhokuakhana, Gohaingaon, Machkhowa, etc., in this Subdivision.).²³

Concerns were expressed within the colonial bureaucracy that the *chapor* lands where fluctuating cultivation was practiced by the indigenous peasants could be the potential bone of contention between them and the immigrant peasants. Both were now competing for the same land, especially at a time when the pressure on land was on the rise and the land for expansion of traditional forms of

²² Sonaram Chaudhuri, member of the Barpeta Local Board, ibid., p.131.
cultivation to cater to a growing population was nearly exhausted in many regions of the Valley. The problem was compounded by the decline of uninhabited and unclaimed char and chapori lands still available on the Brahmaputra, an indication of which first came from the more populated western Asom districts, such as Kamrup. According to the report of the Deputy Commissioner of that district, "The immigration of Eastern Bengal Muhammadan settlers continued throughout the decade [1921-31] into Barpeta subdivision and parts of the Sadr subdivision. The chars and riverain tracts have now nearly been filled up and all available waste lands are gradually being occupied by them. The increase of 69 per cent in the population is solely due to the Eastern Bengal immigrants." The Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division also noted, "Quarrels would be frequent in a fluctuating area because peace can be maintained only by careful respect of the rights of neighbours in the village. A man must have plenty of waste land in a fluctuating area in which to plant in succeeding years. He must allow his neighbour to do the same. A mixture of Assamese and immigrants would not be suitable as neither would respect the convenience of the other."

But the conflict over land was not merely confined to the two neatly demarcated sets of people, the natives and the immigrants. The reality was much more complex. As land in the Valley, including in the chaporis and chars, were becoming scarcer primarily in the western Asom districts of Goalpara, Darrang, and Kamrup, instances of conflicts within the East Bengal peasants themselves cropped up more frequently. As the sub-divisional officer of Barpeta reported,

The land which seems good to the Charuas [one who lives on the chars, meaning the Bengal immigrants] is not generally good to the Assamese. To-day lands suitable for the Charuas are almost all occupied and are getting scarce in this subdivision [Barpeta, of Kamrup district], and that is why almost 95%, if not 96%, of disputes for lands is between immigrants themselves. Recent murder

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85 K. Cantlie, Officiating Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, ibid., p.31.
cases for land are all between immigrants and immigrants because the particular kind of land they want is getting scarce."86

It is in this context, where the prevailing conditions generated by colonial policy forced both the native and immigrant peasants compete for the riverine tract of land on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries hitherto left out of permanent habitation or cultivation, that the impact of floods were registered in a new light, from a new perspective. Floods, which were so far considered to be normal and necessary, emerged as a force of malevolence and destruction in the course of the twentieth century.

Floods and the New Settlements

*With the advent of the East Bengal immigrants the whole face of the country along the Brahmaputra... has undergone a tremendous transformation from ‘chapari’ and fluctuating into a permanent regular jute-growing area.*87

By 1930s the number of immigrants from Bengal to Assom was said to be around 5,00,000.88 During that time, the results of immigrant Eastern Bengal peasants permanently inhabiting an cultivating the *chapori* or riverine tracts on the banks of the Brahmaputra came to the fore, being now regularly resulting in losses to them due to the floods and erosion of the river. As the Colonization Officer, who was in charge of the Scheme in the Nowgong district, when asked by the Line Committee, "There are 1,59,839 bighas in the scheme only 64,000 bighas have been settled. How do you say that there is no more land in the scheme? What has happened to the rest?" replied that "It has been made unfit for cultivation by the erosion of the Brahmaputra."89

87 Proceeding No.59, from S. N. Datta, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Director of Land Records, Assam, No.205S, Nowgong 23 July 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, June 1931, ASA.
Still, the preferred choice for the government to settle the immigrant peasants was in the vicinity of the Brahmaputra, as allowing the immigrants to take up land on the submontane tract could lead to clashes with the indigenous tribal communities. As the Sub-Deputy Collector of Kalaigaon Circle in Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang district noted in the context of expanding the Mangaldai Colonisation Scheme, "I want to take this 10,000 bighas [of the Orang Reserve Forest] because it is fairly high land and near the Brahmaputra."\textsuperscript{90} The same officer observed, from the colonial government's point of view, that the riverine tract along the Brahmaputra was more preferable than the land further inland and between the riverine and submontane tracts. This was argued primarily on two grounds. First, it was claimed that such tracts were preferred by the migrants themselves, and second, that clashes with the indigenous people were less likely if settlements were allowed in the riverine tract, as these were sparsely populated. As the colonisation officer put it, "If some mauzas which are situated near the Brahmaputra and which are liked by immigrants are thrown open to them there will be no clash. But in some mauzas there should be restriction [to the settlement of immigrants]. I mean which are thickly populated [by the indigenous population]."\textsuperscript{91}

Such opinion was also expressed by the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, who noted in 1938, "Eastern Bengal immigrants in Barpeta have cultivated watery areas that have never been taken up, and probably would never be taken up, by local people."\textsuperscript{92} The stereotypical perception that Bengal peasants preferred the riverine belt, the tribal communities favoured the submontane tracts close to the hills, while the 'Assamese' wanted to stay put on the tract in between the two, had already crystallized within the colonial bureaucracy, which was reflected in the colonial settlement policy.\textsuperscript{93} According to the colonial officials, practical experience vindicated such opinion. As an officer in Magaldai explained,

\textsuperscript{90} ibid., p.79.
\textsuperscript{91} ibid., p.79.
\textsuperscript{93} Report of the Line System Committee, Vol. II (Evidence), Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1938, 89. When asked by the Line Committee, "You said immigrants like the chapari areas and do not like
Sixteen thousand *bighas* of land in Kalaigaon circle, which is in the hinterland, had to be excluded from the colonisation scheme, because immigrants did not take up land there. Lands of some immigrants were washed away by the Brahmaputra and the Colonization Officer offered them land some distant from the river. These people came to me the other day and said that they would await the chance of some land near the river being opened in the future rather than accept the Colonization Officer's offer. *The number of immigrants will depend on the amount of riverine land available for settlement.* The Assamese raiyat on the other hand is principally a rice cultivator and except for the new *pam* farmers has no use for riverside land. So the area of possible conflict of interest between the Immigrants and the Assamese is not so wide as it looks at the first sight.94

Similar opinion was repeated by other colonial officials as well. The Colonisation Officer of Dalgaon, Darrang, noted that the immigrants generally wanted land close to the Brahmaputra, where they could grow jute, mustard etc., while on the other hand the ‘Assamese’ liked to take up low lands only where they could grow *sali* paddy. “So I do not see any reason why waste lands situated on the bank of the rivers can not be settled with the immigrants without any restrictions.”95

Not only the Brahmaputra, but the banks of its major tributaries too were settled with the Eastern Bengal peasants, particularly in western Assam. As was reported by the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, that “Two important rivers, viz., the Manas and the Aie pass through the Bijni Duar and as the Mymensinghia immigrants like riverain places practically both the banks of these two rivers have already been occupied by them and I do not think that these immigrants

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94 Letter No.156 of 15 January 1938, from the Sub-Divisional Officer Mangaldai, to the Secretary, Line System Committee, ibid., p.105, emphasis added.

would like to move on to the interior of the northern portion of the Bijni Duar as there is no river or any other source of water supply in that area."\textsuperscript{96}

The process and pattern of settlement bears particular significance to the present study, because it becomes evident that as permanent habitation grew and settled cultivation expanded on or close to the rivers – primarily the Brahmaputra – the annual floods as well as the high floods started to adversely affect their lives, not so much because the floods have become increasingly more severe, but because there were now more people and more property to be destroyed by the floods with similar or even lesser intensity and scale. The crucial significance of this transformation in the pattern of settlement from fluctuating to permanence had much to do with the changing relations with the rivers and the floods, and therefore this process begs a close historical scrutiny.

Barely two years after the Nowgong Colonisation Scheme was initiated in the predominantly riverine tract, the inundations of the Brahmaputra started to make their presence felt. Sand deposits brought down by the flood-waters covered 850 \textit{bighas} of land belonging to 59 immigrant families in 1930 in the \textit{mauzas} of Laharighat and Bokani, rendering it uncultivable.\textsuperscript{97} Though the land made unusable for cultivation in this way was less than 2 percent of the total land under the Nowgong Colonisation Scheme, the significance of the damage lie in the fact that it occurred in spite of the claims made by the colonial officials that “The water level seems to have fallen over the whole area since the last settlement [in 1906] and inundations are neither so frequent nor so serious as before.”\textsuperscript{98} This assurance turned out to be badly out of tune with reality, and one can arguably infer that the colonial authorities deliberately undermined and


\textsuperscript{97} ‘Extension of Colonisation Scheme’, Proceeding No.133, From S. N. Dutta, Settlement officer of Nowgong, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, No.615S, Nowgong 20 January 1931, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, March 1931, ASA.

\textsuperscript{98} Proceeding No.55, From S. P. Desai, Officiating Director of Land Records, Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Revenue Department, No.33/57, Shillong 13 October 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, June 1931, ASA.
downplayed the possible effects of floods on the permanent inhabitants of the riverine tracts to hard-sell the plots of land under the Scheme.

Moreover, though it was assumed and assured by the government that the East Bengal peasants were adapted to a riverine life, the new conditions of an alien country was against the fast adoption of the ways of the natives who had a better knowledge of the terrain. Therefore, when the destruction struck, the government was forced to provide fresh land to the affected families as in many cases, the premium was already levied. Due to the already scarce government 'wastelands' were unavailable in the vicinity, 1297 bighas of the Dumkura Professional Grazing Reserve was added to the Colonisation Scheme in July 1930. Though the inclusion of this land in the Colonisation Scheme had multiple claims from the graziers and villagers, it was 'opened up' with the familiar argument that there was still enough land around for such purposes.

Migration of peasants in search of new land from one place of the Valley to another after their own was washed away by floods was becoming a common phenomenon in 1930s. It was reported that around hundred families migrated from Kamrup district to Darrang after they lost their land to the floods.99 Likewise, the mauzadar of Bogribari in Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup district reported that

The villages Lakhipur, Maheshkuthi, Marchakandi, Damdamia and others were washed away by Brahmaputra. People stayed there for 10 to 12 years. Those villages were washed away 3 or 4 years ago... There are 1,000 to 2,000 landless people in my mauza because Brahmaputra washed away their land. These landless people have been scattered. Some people gone [sic] to Noli, Pithadi; 1,000 people still remain in my mauza. They are remaining as Kamlas [agricultural labourers] to other people.100


The Bengal peasants who lost their land and belongings to the floods or erosion aggravated the problem of landlessness and destitution in the region. A large number of the Bengal peasants who came to the Valley in late 1930s and 1940s could not own land due to the near-full occupancy of the tracts under the Colonisation Scheme, which substantiates the observation that even in the riverine tracts, land was increasingly becoming scarce. By 1938, in the Samaguri circle of Nowgong district alone, for instance, there were more than 20,000 such landless cultivators of East Bengal origin, even going by the conservative government estimates. The landless Bengal peasants were forced to work as kamlas (agricultural labourers), or cultivated on both immigrant and indigenous landowner's fields as tenants and as sharecroppers on adhi terms.\textsuperscript{101}

With the kind of exploitative system in which the Eastern Bengal peasants were forced to work in the Brahmaputra Valley, it was not unusual to find them under utter poverty and destitution when floods swept over their lands and crops, which were not infrequent given the location of their habitation and cultivation. The Settlement Officer of Nowgong reported in August 1931 that

the recent Brahmaputra flood, which is said to be the highest on record since 1907, has hit the people of the Immigrant and Chaporoi groups very hard. These areas suffered also from the last years' flood. The most affected are Bokani, greater part of Laharighat, Mayang, and nearly half of Ghagra. Certain areas of Laokhowa, Juria, and Dhing have also been badly affected... \textit{The general fall in the price of agricultural products, especially that of jute}—have struck at people's economic vitality; on the top of this, these two successive floods with the attendant loss of crops, house — property etc., have rendered most of them, without at least a year's time to recuperate, unable to meet the increased demand of land revenue, which has been proposed for the Immigrant group, and which has been sanctioned already for the Chaporoi group.\textsuperscript{102}

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Mayang mauza, to a part of which the Nowgong Colonisation Scheme was extended, was known to fall under a low-lying tract, often inundated by floods of the Brahmaputra. Six villages under ordinary cultivation were reported to be “completely washed away by the Brahmaputra” in the mauza between the years 1906 and 1930, while the area in another seven decreased due to erosion.\textsuperscript{103} Likewise, in Nowgong district, “About 13,000 bighas in Laharighat and Bokani notified as Colonisation area has either been washed away by the Brahmaputra or spoilt by sand deposit.”\textsuperscript{104} The same wave of floods also affected the Immigrant Group comprising of Juria, Laokhowa, Dhing, Lahorighat and Bokani mauzas in Nowgong, in which “wide tracts of country covered by reed and grass jungle have been converted into open, clear, excellent cultivated fields” by the Bengal peasants.\textsuperscript{105} Though claims were made by the settlement officer that “Floods of old days are now a rare occurrence” and that “The ordinary annual Brahmaputra flood enriches the soil and the methods of cultivation of newcomers take advantage of it”, it was also admitted by the same officer that “Never within the last 20-25 years was there a flood of such magnitude as that of September 1930.”\textsuperscript{106} He further remarked, “It came at a time when jute had not yet been harvested fully and gathered in. the Assamese basti occupy generally high lands, but the immigrants have settled in any available area. In Laokhowa, Juria and Bokani the bastis went and remained under water for several days causing untold suffering.”\textsuperscript{107}

As a result of the floods, the colonial state was forced to consider the postponing of implementing new rates of land revenue settlement in the immigrant settlements of Nowgong district. The State rued the loss of land revenue and premium on land that was to be collected from the East Bengal peasants. For the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Proceeding No.59, from S. N. Datta, Settlement Officer of Nowgong, to the Director of Land Records, Assam, No.205S, Nowgong 23 July 1930, Rev.-A, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue Department, June 1931, ASA.
\item \textsuperscript{104} S. N. Datta, Settlement Officer, Nowgong, to the Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong, No. 123S, 12 May 1931, No.248-251, Rev.-A, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, December 1931, ASA.
\item \textsuperscript{106} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{107} ibid. Emphasis added.
\end{itemize}
State, the series of destructive floods was a throwback from the path of development and success of the Colonisation Scheme it envisaged for the immigrants. In what was termed as a ‘reversal’ of the Scheme in Nowgong due to floods, the Commissioner of Assam Valley Division observed,

*The abnormal flood of last year has thrown things back badly just when the scheme was developing rapidly.* In a normal year it is probable that Rs.25,000 would have been realised as premium, in addition to the second installment [of land revenue]... nearly a quarter of the total area reserved for colonisation was either washed away by the last flood or damaged for greater or less periods by sand deposits."\(^{108}\)

The distressful situation of the immigrant was accentuated by his near-complete dependence on the jute market for selling his primary crop, which was under the control of the Marwari trader, generally doubled up also as a moneylender. The destructive flood of September 1930 was accompanied by a “trade depression” and consequent ‘abnormal’ fall in the price of jute, which fell to a low Rs.3 per *maund*, which was even below the actual cost of production.\(^{109}\) The price of mustard, grown as a second crop by many peasants, also experienced a downward spiral. To add to it was the reassessed rates of land revenue, through which the colonial state sought to increase the collection by as much as 50 percent in the Immigration Groups of *mauzas*. For instance, the total land revenue assessment of the Nowgong Immigration Group was increased from Rs.204,574 to Rs.303,816 in November 1931, a steep hike of 48.51 percent.\(^{110}\) In a somewhat ironic portrayal of the situation, the Settlement Officer observed,

The immigrant has been hit much harder than the Assamese. The former keeps no stock of paddy, takes heavy advances from the Marwaris or other Mahajans and grows jute which requires much outlay. Without a good price for jute, his

\(^{108}\) A. H. W. Bentinck, Commissioner of Assam Valley Division to the Secretary to the Government of Assam in Revenue Department, No.349R, Gauhati 29 June 1931, Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue Department, Rev.-A, December 1931, 220-244, ASA.


\(^{110}\) ibid.
domestic economy has got out of gear; he is out of pocket, has no money to pay
his Mahajan and finds it difficult to raise a loan. The Assamese has got his bharal
(granary); he is in no difficulty about food, though he has to deny himself a little
of the ordinary amenities of life. The immigrant is a hard, tough man and no
fatalist and is patiently working and waiting for better days; with the return of
normal trade conditions his present distress will disappear.\textsuperscript{111}

An appreciable hope, perhaps, but too distant from the reality, as more settlers
came into the Valley in search of land to face even harder economic, social and
political challenges than the early East Bengal settlers whose path they followed,
not to talk of the challenges thrown up by the landscape. The government was
also now doubtful of the success of the Colonisation Scheme, once the initial
euphoria of land reclamation slowly died down, or in any case was tempered by
serious concerns after confronting the hard realities. As the Retrenchment
Committee of the Assam Legislative Council noted in July 1931,

\textit{Progress of colonisation was not up to expectation on account of the}
unprecedented drop in the prices of jute which was the money crop of these
people [East Bengal immigrants]. Government were considering whether they
should not extend the scheme of \textit{salami} to the ex-tea garden coolies who were
now settling in large numbers in Nambor colonisation area, and whether they
should not charge the same premium from immigrants from the Surma Valley
who came and settled in the Assam Valley.}\textsuperscript{112}

The following table shows the total area of land settled with indigenous and
immigrant peasants in the five years between 1938 and 1943, with the
indigenous peasants owning land predominantly in the clayey '\textit{Rupit Mahal}' tract
and the submontane tract, while the immigrants in general possessing the sandy
riverine tract on and around the Brahmpautra.

\begin{table}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Land Area Settled (in Acres) \\
\hline
1938 & 1200
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1939 & 1500
\hline
1940 & 2000
\hline
1941 & 2500
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1942 & 3000
\hline
1943 & 3500
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{111} ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Assam, Darjeeling 24 April 1857,
Series I: Foreign Department, for 1857, Vol.43, ASA.
## Total Land Settled with Indigenous and Immigrant Peasants in Brahmaputra Valley, 1938-39 to 1942-43 (all figures in acres)\textsuperscript{113}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Settled with Indigenous Peasants</th>
<th>Settled with Immigrant Peasants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td>775,046</td>
<td>193,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-40</td>
<td>784,125</td>
<td>199,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-41</td>
<td>790,386</td>
<td>206,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-42</td>
<td>835,801</td>
<td>206,593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942-43</td>
<td>849,499</td>
<td>209,345</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from a comparison of the above figures, though almost one-fifth of the total land in the Valley was settled with the immigrants by early 1940s, and primarily on the low-lying tracts along the Brahmaputra, the rate of agrarian expansion in this zone does not appear to be as dramatically high as it was at the beginning of the Colonisation Scheme in early 1930s. This also falls short when compared to the rate of growth in the land settled with the indigenous population, mostly in the clayey \textit{rupit} lands as well as the submontane zone. While the land settled with the indigenous people grew by 74,453 acres or 9.6 percent between 1938-39 and 1942-43, those settled with immigrants grew only by 15,550 acres or 8 percent in the same period.

The importance of the Colonisation Scheme thereby came down for the colonial government within almost a decade of its initiation, as it failed to continue the high rate of agrarian expansion as distinct from indigenous agriculture.\textsuperscript{114} But the dynamics of demographic distribution changed drastically as a result, along with which began a new relation with the Brahmaputra. The above developments are a strong pointer that the by-now familiar and oft-repeated imagery of floods in the Brahmaputra Valley, replete with the invocations of

\textsuperscript{113} 'Reservation and Settlement of Land with Professional Graziers, Immigrants and Indigenous People', Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 30 November 1943, pp.1055-1057, ASA.

\textsuperscript{114} Even though the rate of agrarian expansion carried out by the immigrant peasants progressively came down, the overall area they cleared and brought under cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley was by no means inconsiderable. It has been pointed out that "In the twenty years ending in 1950 the immigrants turned some 1,508,000 acres of forest into settled agriculture." Richard P. Tucker 'The Depletion of India's Forests under British Imperialism: Planters, Foresters and Peasants in Assam and Kerala', in Donal Worster, \textit{The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.126.
'disaster', 'destruction', 'problem' etc., are neither ahistorical nor an eternally present 'curse' of Nature. Though natural factors could and did play a significant role in influencing the experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon like flood, and by extension the relation to the river, it would not perhaps be wrong to argue that in the final analysis, it is the social factors that played a more decisive role in forging a particular form of society-nature relationship. The experience of the immigrant peasants in Asom discussed in this chapter indicates that the emergence of the floods as a destructive force particularly to the peasants, which rendered them homeless, landless or destitute, was not just contingent upon a sudden and simple spurt in the river's waters, as might at first appear. Nevertheless, that the floods were known to be an old and expected visitor in the riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra, and often a welcome one, until its turbulent course was transformed into homes and hearths as a result of the policies of the incumbent ruling power, is often ignored. The apparent contradiction in the moods and emotions in the songs sung by the East Bengal peasant addressing the river in many ways expresses this dichotomy of our perception of the rivers with its double-life as a creator and a destroyer, one that helps reproduce life but also extinguishes it. The need therefore is to examine the prevalent relations within society no less than the river to find the factors that could turn a benevolent river malevolent, and its fertile floods a disaster. What the present chapter tries to demonstrate as regards the forging of this new and predominantly antagonistic relation with the Brahmaputra after the coming of the East Bengal immigrants, can also be extended to reflect on the later developments involving the river and the people of its Valley as the following chapters seek to do, although in a different context and under changing socio-economic and political circumstances.