

## British Colonial Policy of Immigration in Assam (1826-1910)

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The annexation of Upper Assam is attributed to the successful manufacture of Tea in 1837 and the beginning of the Assam Company in 1839. Since late eighteenth century the East India Company was very much eager to cultivate tea in India as they saw China having a monopoly over this imported consumer item and Upper Assam furnished them as suitable place for the growth of Tea industry. To promote British capital in Assam a series of wasteland rules were formulated and after liberalization of rules in 1854 there was a land rush. The Chinese labourers were imported earlier for the cultivation of Tea in Assam till 1843 when tea plantations came to be served by local inhabitants mainly *Kacharies*.

From 1859 onwards Central Indian labourers were imported for the tea plantations. The first Labour Act was passed in 1863 which was to regulate the transport of native labourers emigrating to Assam valley as well as their recruitment through *Arkattis* (licensed recruiters). Under the Amendment Act of 1870 the *Sardari* system of recruitment was also recognized. As reported by the Bengal Administrative Report for 1867-68, 22,800 were imported labours and only 11,633 were local labours. By 1880's immigration of plantation labourers was taking place on an extensive scale.

The increasing number of the tea garden laborers needed more food grains which Assam's farming structure was not just in a position to provide. Food grains began to be imported since 1872 to meet the crisis. On the one hand the tea, oil and coal mining industries were putting pressure on the agricultural sector which was lagging behind and on the other the state witnessed starvation



deaths and decreasing indigenous population on account of *Kala Azar* (black fever). From 1881-1891, the population of Goalpara subdivision decreased by 18 percent, Kamarupa by 7.1 percent and Nowgong was the worst affected with 24.8 percent. Conditions were further worsened by the Great earthquake of 1897 that caused many deaths and havoc over many hundreds of acres of agricultural lands. It therefore became necessary to import more farmers into Assam and settle on wastelands to produce deficit crops.

It would be precise to mention here that in the second part of 19th century a section of the Assamese middle class also supported immigration in Assam. The person like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Babu Gunjana Barua were convinced that no economic progress was possible in Assam without immigration and requested the Government to promote immigration in Assam.

Henry Hopkinson, the Chief Commissioner was of the view that the tea labour immigration into Assam should be discouraged because Assam did not have enough food grains for the expanding population and in place of it the cultivating classes should be invited to settle on the wastelands of Assam. In 1897, Patrick Playfair put emphasis on settling immigrants on the cultivable wasteland of Assam for providing relief from recurring famines and scarcity of Bengal. In the meantime the worldwide increase in Jute trade necessitated the expansion of Jute cultivation. As there was no sufficient space to increase jute cultivation in Bengal the British traders turned towards Assam. The completion of the Assam Bengal railway facilitated large scale movement of the immigration. The Government now took up the matters seriously and the immigration policies were formulated and it was recognized that the colonization of the wastelands of Assam had to be undertaken with the help of



the immigrants from other provinces of India. The stout and hardy Muslim cultivators of East Bengal were considered to be the most eligible for the job.

Therefore the peasant cultivators from Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur began to migrate in small numbers. But as the century progresses the migration took the form of large scale influx into the Brahmaputra valley and finally from economic problem it became social, political, cultural and linguistic problems in the later period. As the eighty five percent of the cultivators came from Mymensingh, the term *Mymensinghias* became synonymous with immigrants. The Census Report of 1911 was the first document on the extraordinary influx of cultivators to the *Chars* of Goalpara from the adjoining districts of Bengal and soon spread to other districts of lower Assam.

Thus the Tea industry was responsible for bringing these labourers in a planned manner which developed in the middle of the 19th century. Many of them on the expiry of the contract settled in areas adjacent to the tea gardens. The settlement was treated by the planters and the Government as a purely economic problem and so made as to serve their own economic interest. But the coming of the East Bengal cultivators particularly Mymensinghia since the opening of the 20th century is of the greatest significance.



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