

প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

An Online Journal of Humanities & Social Science

Published by: Dept. of Bengali
Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India.
Website: www.thecho.in

British Colonial Policy of Line System & Immigration Issue in Assam (1911-1931)

Bodhi Sattwa Kar

Research Scholar, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar, India

Email: bodhi.kar@gmail.com

Abstract

The British Colonial authorities encouraged immigration in Assam purely on economic ground. The establishment of tea and other industries in Assam during nineteenth century followed by the extension of cultivation of wastelands necessitated to follow a liberal immigration policy by the Colonial rulers. Accordingly, good numbers of immigrant labourers and cultivators were brought for the purposes from outside the Brahmaputra valley to fulfill the economic interest of the Colonial rulers. The majority of the immigrant cultivators came from the adjoining Bengal districts of Assam, among which largest numbers were Mymensinghia Mohammedans who were good cultivators. But soon it became a threat to the indigenous people. The large scale immigration led to a shift in the demographic balance of the Brahmaputra valley. To restrict the indiscriminate settlement by the immigrants the Colonial officials of Nowgong district in 1916 devised administrative measures known as Line system, which was followed by Colonisation scheme. These were the only steps taken by the Colonial rulers to solve the immigrant problems in Assam, but failed and it gradually turned into communal, racial and political questions in the Brahmaputra valley.

Since the establishment of tea and other industries in Assam in the nineteenth century followed by the extension of cultivation of wastelands of Assam required good number of immigrant labourers and cultivators from outside the Brahmaputra valley. So the British Colonial authorities followed a liberal policy of immigration in Assam purely on economic ground. Most of the immigrant cultivators came from adjoining Bengal districts of Assam among whom largest numbers were *Mymensinghia Mohammedans*. But soon it became a threat

to the indigenous people who felt that unless it was checked their economic and cultural life would be in danger.

Mass immigration in an organized way and occupation of wastelands, grazing and forest reserves posed a serious problem. Mass squatting and occupation of whole villages by *Mymensinghia* immigrants through purchase of lands, by offering attractive prices to local inhabitants, seemed to threaten the survival of indigenous inhabitants.

It was in 1911, that the Census Commissioner first pointed out the dangers of immigration by calling it “..... a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hoards of Mymensinghia army...” But the Assamese remained ignorant of any adverse effect and the public took little interest in the matter.

For the first time in 1913, the problem of agricultural immigrants and the need of preventing interference with the Assamese had begun to attract the attention of Colonial authority. The number of various immigrants was then under twenty thousand and the government policy was to encourage immigration.

It is to be noted here that the Assamese indigenous cultivators had the habit of fluctuating cultivation by which they did cultivate the land for three or four years and they abandoned it. They used to think that the land had lost its fertility. The *Mymensinghia* immigrant cultivators took notice of it. Therefore they preferred to get settlement of such old and abandoned land. For such type of land the immigrants offered good prices and went on cultivating the land year after year.

The Colonial officials observed that the land settled with *Mymensinghia* immigrants was never abandoned. The officials realized one fact that it was impossible for indigenous cultivators to adopt the method of cultivation pursued by the *Mymensinghia* immigrants in near future. Therefore, it became necessary to Colonial officials, at least for near future, to reserve sufficiently large number of jungle lands near the villages of indigenous cultivators. It might enable them to carry out their old method of fluctuating cultivation.

In the meantime the Colonial Government proposed a consolidated set of rules of land settlement and published it in September 1915. It was planned to empower the Deputy Commissioner to make

settlement subject to the Chief Commissioner's orders. It also empowered Deputy Commissioner to expel any person who had not acquired appropriate right on a piece of land within three months of notice. It was finally approved by the Chief Commissioner in 1916.

In 1916 the Director of Land Records first put forward a proposal for a *Colonisation Officer to assist the settlement of the incoming immigrants and coordinate the work of all districts into which immigration was going on. Although this proposal was supported by several Deputy Commissioners, it did not appeal to the then Commissioner and was not raised until Mr. William Reid addressed Government with similar suggestion in 1920. From a letter of the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup it appeared that the system of drawing a line across which new immigrants should not be permitted to settle had already begun in the Barpeta sub-division, and from a similar letter from Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong it also appeared that some lines had been laid down in the villages to restrict indiscriminate settlement by immigrants. The division by lines originated entirely with the District officers concerned and was not adopted in execution of any Government order. Government however did not interfere and the system was gradually developed although not on parallel lines in all districts.

In 1923 it was found that *Mymensinghia* immigrants began to press on Assamese villages for land more aggressively than before, that the question of imposing some sort of restriction was considered. The first standing order was passed by Mr. Higgins, who in 1923 classified the villages in Nowgong district into seven different classes and his order was further amplified by Mr. Thomas in 1924. Accordingly, in Nowgong further settlement of immigrants was restricted in

eight mauzas. Though in a number of villages old immigrant settlers were allowed *an officer to look after the settlement of immigrants in Brahmaputra valley

to continue, subject only to the restriction that no more new immigrant settlers should be allowed to take up lands in those villages.

Under Line System the villages in Nowgong were divided into four categories- (1) exclusively occupied by immigrants; (2) exclusively reserved for Assamese; (3) mixed villages in which there both immigrants and Assamese; and (4) line villages in which a line has been drawn on the Assamese side of which no immigrant was allowed to settle.

The first restriction was applied only to *Mymensinghias*. But immigrants from other districts of Bengal started coming in. In 1924, by an order of Mr. Thomas the word *Mymensinghia* was dropped and the term immigrant was substituted to include all immigrants.

The Colonising Officer raised the question that the Assamese were subletting their lands to immigrants. On this, Mr. Thomas ordered that if such lands were covered by annual pattas that would be cancelled. In 1925 Government issued instructions approving the principle of these restrictions. During the time of resettlement all attempts were made to give effect to these orders.

In 1926 the problem of immigration was again extensively discussed. It was proposed to hold a conference of non-officials and officials at Shillong to discuss the subject. However due to inability of many of the non-officials to attend, the proposed conference had to be postponed. The District Officers were then consulted to ask leading gentlemen in their districts on the proposed legislation over the prohibition of transfer of lands between the Assamese and immigrants. It was found that the public opinion was divided and was not in favour

of such legislation. It was considered by the Colonial Government that the first move in such legislation should come from the people themselves or from their representatives. But no bill was, however brought forward in the Council.

In 1928 a Conference of district officers was held at Shillong to discuss various questions connected with the immigrant problem. The general opinion of the Conference was that the lines had been reasonably successful in Nowgong, but a failure in certain parts of Kamrup. It was then decided that the number of lines should be reduced, as far as possible. That line should be simplified and straightened with the object of allotting considerable blocks of lands to each community. It was also decided that the pattas should be annual in case of Assamese and other indigenous races so as to prevent them from transferring their land.

At this conference for the first time the Colonisation schemes were discussed and the proposal was raised to charge *salami* on all new settlements of lands wherever they were made. In September 1928 the conference of officials and Non-officials members of the Council was held. It formally approved the general policy of Colonisation scheme. Premium was fixed at Rs.25 a *bigha*, but later on it was reduced to Rs.10 in 1935. A Colonisation Officer was appointed in Nowgong to settle all available waste lands in the immigrant area on the block system.

A similar scheme was put into operation in the Mangaldai subdivision as well as in Barpeta. However in Barpeta subdivision the immigrants were so poor that it was found impossible to realise premium and the scheme had to be abandoned in 1932.

Thus Line System and the Colonisation scheme were the only steps taken by the Colonial Government to solve

the immigration problem in Assam. But they failed to do so rather prolonged it by the

gradual induction of communal, racial and political question into it.

References:

1. A. S. F Revenue-A, September, 1926 Nos. 1-22
2. Bhuyan A.C (2008) Political History of Assam Vol-II, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.
3. Guha, A (1977): Planters Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947, New Delhi, ICHR
4. Kar, M (1990): Muslims in Assam Politics, Delhi, Omsons Publications.
5. Report of the Line System Committee (1938)