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## **Colonization, Immigration and the growth of Agriculture in the Brahmaputra Valley during the period from 1826-1947 in Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*Migration from one place to another is a human nature. People from ancient period of time had immigrated towards different parts of the world. Assam from a long period of time is a land of immigration of different race from different parts and region. During the colonial period the Bengali farmers had emigrated towards the Brahmaputra valley. The Bengali immigrants were mostly agriculturist and they were encouraged by the colonial regime, the Zamindars and the moneylenders to clear the waste land and the jungle for cultivation. These emigrants had migrated from East Bengal to a large extent and started cultivation with their hard working nature and cultivation techniques. They permanently settled in Brahmaputra valley and had contributed greatly towards the progress of agriculture. The Bengali farmers had completely changed the nature and scenario of agriculture. The objective of this study is basically to highlight the background prepared for the immigration of the Bengali farmers in the Brahmaputra valley and to bring to light the role of the Bengali farmers towards the progress of agriculture in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period of Assam.*

**Key Words: Colonial period, Bengali immigration, Brahmaputra valley.**

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Mobility is an in born nature of mankind. Over the ages, the culture, habits and customs of numerous ethnic have been influenced by man's tendency to look and search for scopes beyond his geographical region.<sup>1</sup> Assam has a very long history of migrant's settlers from the ancient period itself. 'Assam as being situated in one of the "great migration routes of mankind".<sup>2</sup> The Aryans, the Dravidians and the most prominent group the Ahoms in the medieval period. However, during the colonial period the nature of immigration was different from the earlier ages. The Britishers brought the Adivasis from different parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh for tea plantations, the Hindu Bengali people for govt. and non-gov. clerical jobs, the Marwari's and the Sikhs emigrants in this region for the commercial purposes and the significantly the Bengali speaking Muslims for agricultural functions. The type of immigration was inter-regional and intra-regional at that time.

The colonial time immigration and the post-independent topic of immigration are to be viewed differently because during the colonial regime the politico-geographical condition was totally different. The Bengali farmer's immigration in the Brahmaputra valley was the most significant event with far reaching consequences. Bengal and present form of Assam had a very close connection especially with the lower part of the Brahmaputra Valley. Geographically Assam's connection with the rest of the Indian sub-continent has been always through Bengal.<sup>3</sup> From physical and linguistic point of view these people were more similar. 'There was practically no

Assamese speaking element in the Surma valley, whereas in the Goalpara district (undivided) of Brahmaputra valley the majority according to the census figures spoke Bengali (census 1911). This was because it had formed a constituent part of Bengal continuously for about two hundred years from 1639 to 1822<sup>4</sup>. It was after the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 that East India Company came into contact with the medieval kingdoms of Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar and Assam as well as the tribal communities of the adjoining hills.<sup>5</sup> The British entered the Brahmaputra Valley, i.e. Assam, in the later part of the first quarter of the nineteenth century when they dislodged the Burmese invaders, who had conquered the valley in 1819. The valley then was incorporated with the province of Bengal and the British extended the area of control of their eastern frontier further east.<sup>6</sup>

The Burmese incursion had devastated the whole region and also led to the entry of the British to establish their authority. 'The devastated and wholesale depopulation during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasions left tract of wasteland throughout the province.'<sup>7</sup> The local authorities (British) were alive from the very beginning to the fact that unless these lands were reoccupied and brought under tillage the revenue of the government could not be improved. Plans were made to bring these areas under cultivation, and thus proposed to grant wastelands to applications on certain conditions. David Scoot in 1827 proposed a plan that the grantee should bring one-fourth of the allotment into tillage by expiry of the third year, one-fourth by sixth year and another one-fourth by ninth year, after which the grantee should be entitled to hold the land in perpetuity on paying usual rent upon three-fourth of the whole.<sup>8</sup> Jenkins's had given a complete shape on waste lands in 1838. At that time the primitive agriculture was done and only one crop was cultivated in this region. 'The annual produce was for his immediate need; hardly was there a surplus for the sale or provision for the rainy day. Consequently in the event of failure of crops, on account of draught and inundation conditions bordering on famine were of frequent occurrence.'<sup>9</sup> The Governor of Bengal approved in May 1856 the grant of waste lands in Assam in future to Europeans, Assamese, Bengali and others without distinction and the cultivation of whatever produce the grantee might think proper.<sup>10</sup> In 1872, agent of Governor General Colonel Hopkins had written to the Governor of Bengal; 'what is wanted for Assam are drafts of immigration from the over crowded, famine stricken districts of Bengal who might receives plot of waste land to break up on the most liberal terms.'<sup>11</sup>

The rate of immigration was very slow till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1874 Assam was separated from Bengal and put under an agent of the Governor. Assam proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and other hills districts was formed in to chief commissioner's province. 'In the beginning of the next century another reorganization took place when in 1905, the province of Bengal was partitioned into East and West Bengal. The size of Assam was enlarged by joining Bengali Muslim dominated East-Bengal to it on the ground of administrative efficiency'.<sup>12</sup> Though partition was annulled few years later, it attracted the East Bengal farmers to migrate to the Brahmaputra valley for a better life.<sup>13</sup> Since the mid-eighteenth century, the British introduced a series of legislation in Bengal to break up the Bengal handloom and to destroy the spinning wheel. This in turn brought in a major demographic change; this is movement of people away from the cities to the countryside for survival, thereby creating an artificial over pressure upon agriculture.<sup>14</sup> 'Of the cultivators at the close of the century, only a few migrants from the neighbouring districts of East-Bengal crossed the boundary and settled down in the Syelhet and *char* lands of the district of Goalpara. The situation altered with the turn of the century.'<sup>15</sup> The land hungry immigrants' peasants from East-Bengal of whom an estimated 85% were Muslims started settling down in their thousands from about 1905 on the uninhabited riverine tracts.<sup>16</sup> The census of 1911 is the first to report of the Bengal immigration to the *char* lands of Goalpara.<sup>17</sup>

The Bengali Muslim emigrants were mainly agriculturist. Their emigration was totally inter-regional at that time. 'With 1884-85 as the base year, the index number of total tea acreage in Assam proper, for which alone more or less complete agricultural data are available, steadily increased to 192 in 1900-01. But the comparable index of total gross cropped area exclusive of the area under the tea, after having risen to a peak of 129 by 1892-93, went on decreasing from year to year until it fell to 113 in 1900-01.<sup>18</sup> 'Soon after their emigration, the East Bengali farmers opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the Brahmaputra and prepared the wasteland for cultivation'.<sup>19</sup> These agriculturist people mostly settled in the *char* areas of the Brahmaputra valley. The Bengali emigrants had their expertise in the agricultural activities. 'At that around beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the indigenous people cultivated the land for two crops in a year. But at the same time the *char-chapori* people, used to cultivate the same land for maximum of five crops. For ex- at the same time crop of mustard, *masur mah* and *dhania*. In addition a combination of crops, *tichi & dhania*, *tichi & machur mah*, Wheat & *machur mah*, Buck wheat, *guji til*, *meshtapat*, *kalijira* etc. Moreover, 'son' used for eating to the cows; introduced for the first time by them.'<sup>20</sup> Mr. Higgins writes from Nawgaon, 'They do better cultivation than the local people as such they are certainly beneficial to the country'.<sup>21</sup> To increase the productivity of the crops, they used to maintain the same distance between the plants, for this they developed some techniques. Among them an important was '*Bidha*' for the first time in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. Now a day this cultivation object still is an essential for every cultivator.<sup>22</sup> By the second & third decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century a major change was visible in the field of agricultural production of the Brahmaputra valley. 'The comparable gross cropped acreage under ordinary cultivation increased 54% and the acreage under tea 29%'.<sup>23</sup> with their superior techniques of cultivation, these East Bengal peasants taught Assam how to grow jute, *mung* and several other crops.<sup>24</sup>

The Bengali immigrants introduced the jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period. Since 1880's, the production of the jute was growing in importance...it was produced on a commercial scale for export in the district of Goalpara and Sylhet which adjoin the jute growing areas of Bengal.<sup>25</sup> In Goalpara, the zamindars had been encouraging peasants from East Bengal to settle and cultivate jute in *char* areas (river islands and banks formed by silt deposit). These peasants were mainly tenants. They were emigrating from a densely populated land, subjected to an oppressive tenure system which guaranteed them little security of occupation.<sup>26</sup>

The export of jute from Assam-<sup>27</sup>

Year	Brahmaputra Valley
1880-81.1.1.1	59,249
1889-90.1.1.1	225,742
1893-94	324,911
1896-97	348,332

The census of 1931 records income of lakhs of rupees annually from the jute cultivation into the Nowgong district exchequer alone.<sup>28</sup> By the second world war Assam was the third largest jute producer of the country.<sup>29</sup> This cultivation is still dominated by Muslims and to a smaller extent by Hindu refugee peasants of East-Bengal origin, with very little of transformation of technique to others.<sup>30</sup> It is reported that in 1853, out of a total area of 34,345 sq. miles of Assam, only 2,242 sq. miles or 6.5 per cent was under cultivation. This had increased to 2.43 million acres in 1901-02 and to 5 million acres in 1941-42. This increase was more prominent in the plains areas, where the net sown area increased from 2.40 million acres (15.4 per cent of the total area) in 1901-02 to 14.10

million acres (25.2 per cent) in 1941-42. This percentage of area sown more than once also increased in the plains districts from 8.8 (0.21 million acres) to 16.1 (0.73 million acres).<sup>31</sup> From 1921 to 1931 in Brahmaputra valley 5, 42, 00 (acre) waste lands was made suitable for cultivation and from 1931 to 1941 additional 84,000 waste lands was prepared for agriculture.<sup>32</sup>

The hard working immigrant peasants with their improved techniques and efficiency had changed the agricultural pattern of the Brahmaputra valley. The vast tract of waste land and virgin soil were converted into a hub of crop production. The increased agricultural productions not only boost the revenue for the government but also improved the living standard of the people of Assam. P.G. Mukherji, District Officer, Nowgong observed: "These people brought in their wake wealth, industry and general prosperity to the whole district. Their industry as agriculturists has become almost proverbial. Trade and commerce have improved." He further says: "They have improved the health of the countryside by clearing the jungle and converting the wilderness into prosperous villages".<sup>33</sup> The settlements of Officers in 1928-29, were of opinion that "there has been a distinct rise in the general standard of livings during the last twenty years." About the general standard of living of Sibsagar district, Mr. Hodes writes, "He is now living on a definitely higher level of comfort, and, thanks to the greatly increased prices of obtainable for surplus produce, is able to enjoy regularly things which 20 years ago were regarded as sheer luxuries... The average villager in now better clothed, he wears a shirt and coat, he carries an umbrella. He has a tin roofed house...and in general enjoys a higher standard of living than of yore."<sup>34</sup> A huge increase in revenue for the government exchequer was visible. Sir Sadullah stated in 1944, that "thirty years ago the revenue of Assam was 80 lacs but now it has gone up to one crore twenty five lacs. The Mymensingiya brothers have given more 45 lacs".<sup>35</sup>

**Conclusion:** In conclusion it can be said that the migration of the Bengali farmers to the Brahmaputra valley was as an upshot of various circumstances and reasons, viz; the vast uncultivated land, the British colonial legislation, for better livelihood and the need of time resulted in permanent settlement of these emigrants. These agricultural people had contributed greatly towards the betterment of the agriculture and standard living of the people of this valley. The descendants of these emigrants mostly inhabitate in the same *char* areas, associated with agriculture and contributing towards the agricultural production and the development of country's economy.

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