

CHAPTER II

Immigration and Demographic Changes

Assam was a vast country with scarce population prior to its annexation by the British; it was ruled by different principalities and small chiefs. According to Mr. Mullan's Report on the Census of Assam, 1931, the population of the great Bodo race in the whole province of Assam was 5,31,000 comprising the Garo, Rabha, Chutiya, Bodo-Kachari, Dimasa Kachari and Lalungs. In the district of Cachar there were only 22,622 speakers of the same group including Koch 7, Bodo 9,068 and Dimasa 13,547 respectively.¹ However, the region was highly fertile and its hilly areas were bounded with natural resources. The rich resources lured the immigrants from outside. It was through the Patkai passes in the east and Bengal in the west that most of the immigrants entered and settled in Assam and that had much impact on the socio-economy and cultural assimilation of the people. The immigrants mingled up with the culture of the region and they adopted it as their own. Unchecked immigration led to the demographic changes in the region. The tribals resented this development fearing loss of their land

and identity. Moreover, in the long run it manifested in the insurgency problem demanding separation and cessation from the Indian union.²

British Administrative Policy and Immigration in Assam

After the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the British established their firm administration in Assam. By 1840 the British established uniform administration throughout the territory which has significantly affected the society, polity and economy of Assam in the successive years. Assam now became the part and parcel of pan-Indian economic space. Of course the expulsion of Burmese from Assam restored peace and further boosted confidence in the mind of the people of Assam, but the British colonial government, which followed exploited the region fully. In the initial stage the East India Company had no objective to extend their territory towards the North-East. Rather their intention was to keep North East India as buffer region from the threat of Burmese intervention in Bengal.³ But due to various political and economic pursuits the British East India Company in Assam introduced acute policies to suit their interest.

Assam was a plural society with diverse racial and linguistic groups of people belonging to the Mongoloids, Caucasoid, Austroloid, Dravidians and Indo-Aryan races who settled in this land from time immemorial much before the coming of the British. One of the features of the British colonial rule in Assam was the encouragement of influx or immigration of outsiders. Though the Burmese were repulsed completely in 1826, a few numbers of prisoners of war were allowed to settle in Singimary in Goalpara. The process of high rate of immigration in the region started with the establishment of British rule in the region. It was for the administrative purpose and for their colonial interest the British reorganized Assam into multi-ethnic and multi-lingual frontier province. There were two phases- firstly, after Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the Ahom kingdom was annexed and brought under a Commissioner as an administrative division called 'Assam'. Secondly, Goalpara district was included with Assam by separating it from Bengal and was upgraded to the status of a province under a Chief Commissioner in 1874.⁴

Due to internal and external conflicts, the region met with devastation and resulted in depopulation in the region and left vast tract of land wasted throughout the

province. Besides, the flood inundations and frequent occurrence of epidemic diseases mounted the region with various challenges. In order to bring under tillage the vast waste lands the British Government planned to grant waste lands to the grantees. In September 1827, David Scott proposed a plan of granting waste lands to the grantees. According to the condition of the proposal the grantee was to bring 1/4th of the allotment into tillage by the expiry of the third year, 1/4th by the 6th year and another 1/4th by the 9th year. At the end the grantee would be entitled to hold the land in perpetuity on paying the usual assessment of 3/4th of the whole. But the project of the Commissioner met with failure because the applicants were required to deposit a security equal to first two years revenue and in case of defaults in payment at the expiry of the fourth year the holding of the grantee was liable to be cancelled. Robertson tried to bring some reformation on the existing plans by allowing the occupants rent free grants for the period of three years, but it was also in vain.⁵

It was also a fact that at the time of British annexation of Assam in 1826, the revenue system of Assam was not in an organized way. The system of taxation was not on the basis of unit of the land area in occupation. But it was on the adult male population on personal basis. As per the tradition the entire adult male population was utilized as the militia or manpower pool under the hierarchical officers.⁶

The British had commercial motives to exploit the wealth of Assam. Therefore, encouraging immigration was an alternative policy to fulfill their aim and accordingly they introduced various economic policies both in the Brahmaputra valley and Surma valley. To encourage the immigration in disguise of cultivation the circular letters and propagandas were issued through the respective collectors in the highly populated districts like Bengal-Dacca, Tippera, and Mymensingh by offering rent free waste land for years to the willing cultivators. The land brought under cultivation by the cultivators was given proprietary rights as *Talukdars* and *Zamindars*.⁷

The establishment of British rule in Assam opened new opportunities of jobs in the offices or trade. The population in large number started to migrate from neighbouring territory of Bengal viz; Sylhet, Mymensing and Rangpur. The *amlahs*⁸ were replaced in place of the earlier aristocracy officials. Another major change of British rule in Assam was that they introduced the Bengali as the court language in

Assam regardless of the regional language in 1831. The reasons behind the introduction of the Bengalis as the court language were⁹:

- (i) In all the Government schools either in Anglo-Vernacular or Vernacular there were inadequate number of local teachers. The adoption of Bengali as the medium of instruction made it easy to impart the lessons to the students.¹⁰
- (ii) The education of the state was in the most deplorable condition, very few persons were able to read and write. Captain Butler stated that in 1838, thirty (30) educated persons were not found in the district of Nowgong (present Nogaon) Bengali as the medium of instruction made it easy to reach out to the uneducated mass.¹¹
- (iii) Another reason was that for the better prospects of the administration of the company they gave preference to the Bengalis as they were conversant with the administrative system of the company.¹²

The virtual monopoly of office and employment of the immigrants from Bengal in almost all the departments of the Company generated ill feeling and deep resentment among the local people.¹³ Francis Jenkins stated that the courts of the existing *Zilla*, Goalpara and Kamrup were fully employed with Bengalis of Rangpur who had accompanied David Scott. Besides, the police officers and judges in Goalpara were all virtually Muslims from the Burdwan and North West Province. Meanwhile the treasurers and chief revenue officers were also Bengalis of Rangpur and Mymensing or the Brahmins of Santipore.¹⁴ Jenkin during his visit in the District of Darrang in the early 1838 found that a *Marwari* merchant at Gamini was carrying multiple duties. He was running his own trade and also served as a *mauzadar* of the government while acting as a manager of the hats of Charduar. The *Keyas* or the merchant of *Marwar* had trading establishment at Jogighopa, Goalpara and Gauhati from where they had been carrying on their business with the Mudais of the western Assam. They monopolised the external trade and acted as the bankers, entrepreneurs and farmers for the government revenue.¹⁵ In trade and commerce the entry of Marwaris in Assam was on a big scale. They penetrated into the deep interior areas to carry out their business with the villagers without any obstruction. They showed their nature of simplicity and friendliness with

the indigenous people and kept themselves aloof from the social affairs of the indigenous people. As businessmen they never hesitated to take any advantage to make money in any circumstances. They acted as the money lender and rescued many from the impending ruins. They also opened the eyes of a few Assamese people the way to earn profit through the agricultural and industrial activities.¹⁶ In the internal and external trade the Marwari traders always acted as the intermediaries between the consumers and domestic producers and foreign exporters and importers. The domestic producers and traders of Assam had no access to sell their goods in the market therefore they had to completely rely on these traders to sell their products. In this way the Marwaris got the opportunity to exploit the situation and earn more profit.¹⁷

In the nineteenth century among the main economic initiatives taken up by the colonial administration in Assam, was the development of tea industry. It became the primary factor for the influx of immigration into Assam.¹⁸ For instance, discovery of indigenous tea plant in 1823 could convince the British authority of India and London. Literally, Robert Bruce is to be credited for the knowledge of existence of indigenous tea in Assam. It was Robert Bruce during his visit in the Upper Brahmaputra valley discovered the existence of tea plant in the Singpho area for the first time.¹⁹ With the coming of Jenkins and under his encouragement the 'Assam Tea Company' was established in 1839. He is also credited for the discovery of the tea plant in Assam known as *Thea Assamica*.²⁰

The Waste Land Grant Rules was newly introduced by the Government in 1839. By the provision of this rule the waste lands were allowed to be occupied by the Assam Company. As per the rule the applicant was granted the waste lands on the condition that on lease for forty five years and by the expiry of the fifth years, 1/4th of the entire granted area was to be brought under cultivation and in case of failing the whole grant of the applicant was liable for cancellation.²¹ Jenkins attempted to shift the agrarian base economy of Assam into the commercial and industrial base by two ways²²:

- (i) Firstly, by encouraging increased cultivation of the commercial crops, which had easy markets.
- (ii) Secondly, by creating a class of speculators with the motives of exploiting the natural resources of Assam.

It must be mentioned that among the early tea garden labourers of Assam the Bodo- Kachari tribe of the Brahmaputra valley worked as the labourers in the tea garden.²³ In this regard, P. Goswami cited the letter of Superintendent of the Assam Company as 'The Kachari Coolie is very much superior to the common Assamese as a labourer, has fewer prejudices of caste, eats animal food, drinks spirits and unless when perverted by the Assamese example and influence, abstains from the use of opium. These habits, while they tend to preserve their physical superiority, also entail the necessity of increased industry for their provision'.²⁴

The most formidable challenges faced by the tea planters were the scarcity of labourers either equipped with skilled or unskilled. In the beginning the planters had to start the work with the help of unskilled Assamese labourers and most often the Nagas and Singphos. They engaged the Nagas by offering feast to the community, attractive presents like beads, cutleries, looking glass etc. It was difficult to find the Assamese labourers in whole seasons as they were agriculturist and could manage only in the off season. In order to balance the scarcity of labourers Major Jenkin firmly realized that the problem would be solved effectively by procuring of labourers from the areas of surplus population outside the province. In 1837, he placed this suggestion through the Tea Committee and the Government of Bengal agreed to import the *Dhengas* from the South-West provinces with a view of employing them in the Government plantations. They could also engage in the reconstruction and repair of the roads and public buildings of the local authority in the off-season.²⁵ According to J.B. Bhattacharjee most of labourers emigrated from the Northern India were lured by the development of tea estates of Assam and in course of time they became the part of the local population of the province. He also further mentioned that besides tea other natural resources like crude oil, coal and forest attracted the outsiders to exploit the province.²⁶ More demand of labourers gave rise to more immigration in the province.

The category of the immigrants can be classified into two- first category of the labourers was recruited by the Government for the purpose of the tea plantation from outside Assam. They belonged to the tribal groups such as Santhals, Mundas, Kharias, Gonds, Oraons, Kisans and many others mainly hailing from the present day Bihar, Jharkand, Chattisgarh, Bengal and Orissa states. They were brought to Assam under

contract basis for certain periods and after the expiry of the contract period, they were to return to their original home. But most of them decided to settle in Assam permanently, mingling with the local culture. Another category of the immigrants was Muslim peasants hailing from Mymensingh and Rangpur of Bengal province of present Bangladesh. They were recruited by some local land owning class called *matbars*.²⁷

In the Census of 1931, Assam, C.S. Mullan considering the birth place and migration in the past censuses noted five types of migrations as follows²⁸:

- (i) Casual, which means the minor movement in between the neighbouring villages. It affected only the villages lying on the opposite sides of each districts.
- (ii) Temporary; it was due to business journeys or a demand for labourers in the new public work place.
- (iii) Due to the seasonal demands for the labourers; the periodic migration.
- (iv) Semi- permanent; in this type of migration the inhabitants of one place earned their living in another place but maintained their connection with their own home and in due course of time they returned for example the Marwari traders of Assam valley.
- (v) Permanent migration; due to the overcrowding, pressure situation of the place and for other reasons the inhabitants of certain place migrated to settle permanently in another place. For example the Mymensingha colonization of the Assam valley.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, labourers recruited in the tea industries were double the local labourers. For instance, the Administrative Report of 1867-68 indicated that out of 34,433 labourers for plantation in proper Assam, 22,800 were the imported labourers and only 11,633 were local labourers.²⁹ Fancis Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General and the Director of the Assam Company gave much priority on the systematic improvement of the main roads by means of clearing the wastes to link up better communication between the cultivated districts.³⁰ With a view for expansion of trade and commerce as well as to import high skilled labourers from the densely populated areas of Bengal to Assam, Jenkin recommended opening of three

roads- Assam to Rangpur in the North Bank, Assam to Mymensing in the South Bank and Assam to Sylhet through the Khasi Hills and Cachar.³¹

Further in the wake of the expansion of the tea cultivation in Assam, the scarcity of the labourers became the major hurdle. This necessitated the tea planters to initiate importing of large number of labourers from the densely populated areas of Bihar, Orrisa, Bengal, Central Provinces, United Provinces and Madras (present Chennai). In 1891 the total number of immigrants who were attracted to tea gardens was estimated at 423,199, nearly 7% of the total population of the province. In 1901 the number increased up to at 645,100 and after two decades it rose to a million and in the third it became 1/6th of the population of the province.³²

In fact as per the census of 1901, near about 13% of the persons recorded in the Assam census on March 1st was found born outside Assam province. Most of the immigrants in the province were drawn from the Bengal, Chota Nagpur, Burdwan, Patna and Bhagalpur. Generally the immigrants were divided into two classes. The first category included the traders, the clerks and other educated persons who arrived in Assam in search of employment. Another class of the immigrants included the tea garden labourers and the agriculturist who poured into Assam by crossing the frontier in search of land in large numbers. The second class of the immigrants were mostly found in greater number in Sylhet and Goalpara, while the tea garden labourers were mostly found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. According to the census of 1901, 15,611 persons were recorded in the Goalpara district who were mainly immigrant natives of the Rangpur. They settled in the district as cultivators.³³

According to the Census of Assam, 1911, the Muslim population increased by 20.2 percent since 1901 in the whole Assam province. Out of which the Brahmaputra valley contributed 42.8 percent of Muslim population who were mainly immigrants from Rangpur and Mymensing. A large number of them were settled in the district of Goalpara.³⁴

The subsequent growth of tea industries in Assam fascinated Hopkinson to improve the transportation communication by introducing railways in Assam. In 1882, railway was opened in Assam from Dibrugarh to Margherita. The introduction of

railways in Assam further encouraged immigration from the outside states. George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal proposed three options for the improvement of communication between Assam and Bengal. The first of the two objectives was to connect Dhubri with the railways of Bengal.³⁵ The other objective was to improve the steamer traffic on the Brahmaputra.

Table 2.1 - Immigrant Population Recorded in the Census of Assam, 1921 and 1931 with Variation

Birthplace	1921	1931	Difference + (Increase), -(Decrease)
Bengal	376000	575000	+ 199000
Bihar and Orissa	571000	472000	-99000
Central provinces	91000	82000	-9000
United Provinces	77000	68000	-9000
Madras	55000	58000	+ 3000
Central India Agency	18000	15000	-3000
Rajputana	16000	22000	+ 6000
Burma	7000	8000	+ 1000
Bombay	1000	6000	+ 5000
Punjab	3000	6000	+ 3000
West of India	2000	2000	+ 0
Total from India	1217000	1314000	+ 97000
From outside India	73000	95000	+ 22000
(Nepal)	70000	88000	+ 18000
Grand Total	1290000	1409000	+ 119000

Source: C.S. Mullan, Census of India, 1931, Vol-III, Assam, Part I – Report, p. 44

In lower Assam regarding the construction of rail routes from Dhubri (Golakganj) to Guwahati was not unanimous in opinion between the local government and the government of India. Eventually, on 4 May, 1900, the Chief Commissioner was asked to submit the survey report for the suggested routes. As per report, the

construction of railway line in the northern side from Golokgonj on the Moghulhat-Dhubri line crossed the high wooden tract Parbatjuar and passed through Bijni and Bhabanipur to Rangia and then turned to Amingaon opposite Pandu. The southern route started from Gauripur near Dhubri and skirting Parbatjuar and the Brahmaputra passed through Salmara, Barpeta and Hajo to Amingaon.³⁶ However, due to some natural factors the progress of the construction work was delayed. It was only in 1911, after the completion distance of 36 miles beyond Kokrajhar, a direct rail communication from Assam valley to Calcutta was opened.³⁷ The new scheme of construction demanded increase of labourers in Assam. It is evident from the fact that a section of the planters adopted an obstructionist attitude towards the advent of the railway because they feared that introduction of it would affect the labour force adversely. Besides, they envisaged that their labourers would be enticed to work on the railway instead of working at tea garden.³⁸ To solve the problem of workers in the construction site the labourers were imported to Assam from the Bihar, United province, Chotanagpur and the Central Provinces of India.³⁹ **Table 2.1** showed the number of immigrants entering Assam from various parts of India and outside India, as recorded in the Census of 1921 and 1931. It also shows the variation in the magnitude of immigration in the two decades.

The vast waste lands in Assam turned the attention of colonial authority to bring it under cultivation, which they thought would support them to accumulate potential source of revenue. William Robinson stated that the amount of waste lands in Assam estimated considerably more than one half of the extent of its area. But the meagerness of the populations, combined political causes, accustomed ancient feudal customs and bifurcation of land among the peasants prevented them to make profitable account.⁴⁰ The British Government adopted several measures in the Brahmaputra valley for the settlement of the agriculturists. In this regard the enactment of the *Assam Land and Revenue Regulation I of 1886* brought remarkable changes on the land settlement rules which further encouraged the immigration in Assam. Under that regulation any person who held any land for ten years before commencement of that regulation and paid the due revenue thereon could ascertain the status of a landholder in respect of the land. That regulation also provided to have permanent, heritable and transferable rights to the landholder. Further, the provisions of right to relinquish any land by the landholder from his occupation were provided.⁴¹

In the later part of the 19th century for the purpose of cultivation only a few migrants from the districts of East Bengal crossed the boundary and settled in the Sylhet and *Char* lands of the district of Goalpara. They formed 20 percent of the population in Goalpara district.⁴² The Census Report of 1911 shows the evidence of high rate of influx of cultivators in that *char* region from the district of Bengal. The continuous influx of population in the region brought anxiety to Assamese society. The report made it evident that out of total population of 31,08,699, there 6,31,552 were immigrants in the Brahmaputra valley. The momentum of population influx in the Brahmaputra valley including Goalpara district is highly deluged. In 1872 it was 18,84,046 and consequently it rose to 22,52,003 in 1881, 24,76,481 in 1891, 26,19,077 in 1901 and 31,08,699 in 1911 respectively.⁴³

The district of Goalpara alone received highest magnitude of immigrants. During 1881-1891 and 1891-1901 the population of the district was increased by 1.36 percent to 2 percent only in the two decades. But in a very high intensity the population in the district was increased by 26.07 percent during 1901-1911. They brought the waste lands under cultivation which was out of cultivation.⁴⁴ In the Census Report of Assam 1931, C.S. Mullan had noted that the intensity of the event of immigration in Assam during the last twenty five years emerged likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam. It would be most destructive than the Burmese invasion of 1820, as the entire structure of Assamese culture and civilization has been under the invasion of the vast horde of the land hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly the Muslims who hailed particularly from Mymensingh of the Eastern Bengal district. The events of invasion initially began before 1911 and the Census report of that year able to reveal nature of advancing host. The Bengali immigrants figured for the first time in the Census of 1911 on the *char* lands of Goalpara were considered merely advance guard or the scouts of large immigrant followers. By 1921 they had passed into Assam and had practically conquered the district of Goalpara.⁴⁵ Moreover, regarding the immigrants into Assam C.S. Mullan in his report had pointed the important events in between 1911 and 1921 which was described in the Census Report of 1921 as follows –

“In 1911 few cultivators from Eastern Bengal had gone beyond Goalpara, those censused in the other districts of the Assam Valley numbering only a few thousands and being mostly clerks, traders and professional men. In the last decade (1911-21)

the movement has extended far up the valley and the colonists now form an appreciable element in the population of all the four lower and central districts....the two upper districts (i.e. Sibsagar and Lakhimpur) are scarcely touched as yet. In Goalpara nearly 20 percent of the population is made up of these settlers. The next favourite district is Nowgong where they form about 14 percent of the whole population. In Kamrup waste lands are being taken up rapidly, especially in the Barpeta subdivision. In Darrang exploration and settlement by the colonists are in an earlier stage; they have not yet penetrated far from the banks of the Brahmaputra....Almost every train and steamer brings parties of these settlers and it seems likely that their march will extend further up the valley and away from the river before long".⁴⁶

In the Census Report of Assam, 1931, C.S Mullan stated that the population variation of Assam valley from 1911-1931 suggests that much progress of immigration had been began since 1921. In the first place, behind this population rise it must be remembered that the children of the settlers born after their arrival in Assam had been recorded as the Assam born, hence it did not appear in the figures (as shown in **Table 2.2**).

Table 2.2- Number of persons born in Bengal figured in each district of the Assam Valley in 1911, 1921 and 1931. (Ms= Mymensingh)

Year	Goalpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong	Sibsagar	Lakhimpur
1911	77,000	4000	7000	4000	14,000	14,000
	34,000(Ms)	1000(Ms)	1000(Ms)	1000(Ms)	Nil(Ms)	Nil (Ms)
1921	151,000	44,000	20,000	58,000	14,000	14,000
	78,000(Ms)	30,000(Ms)	12,000(Ms)	52000(Ms)	Nil(Ms)	Nil (Ms)
1931	170,000	134,000	41,000	120,000	12,000	19,000
	80,000(Ms)	91,000(Ms)	30,000(Ms)	108,000(Ms)	Nil(Ms)	2000(Ms)

Source: C.S. Mullan, Census of India, 1931, Vol-III, Assam, Part I-Report, p. 50

There were two main factors behind the migration into Assam from the East Bengal⁴⁷:

- (i) Accustomed of various pressures like loss of their land and also due to diluvium.
- (ii) Due to *ryotwari* settlement in Assam and cheap and abundance of fertile land lured, instead of expensive tenants of land holding under the government in Bengal.

The growth of population brought changes in the demographic outline of the Assamese society which had a great impact on the polity and economy of the Bodos living in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam as well.

Introduction of the Line System

The immigration of farm cultivators from East Bengal rapidly increased in the Brahmaputra valley and their occupation of vacant lands in large scale alarmed the internal life, customs and traditions of the indigenous people and mostly affected the tribes in the plain area which created apprehension among the tribal and backward classes.⁴⁸ In the beginning the voice of the rural people was too feeble and unorganized. To prevent the rural anxiety between the two communities the colonial district official in Nowgong devised an administrative measure known as Line System in 1916 and was finally implemented in 1920.⁴⁹ As per this devise a permanent line was demarcated on the village map taking into consideration the people living in villages and the occupation of the land by the immigrants. The imaginary line between the villagers and the immigrants came to be known as the Line System in the later period.⁵⁰

Under the provision of Line System the villages were divided into three categories namely 'Open villages', 'closed villages' and 'mixed villages'. As per the provision in the 'open villages', the immigrants were allowed to settle freely. But under any circumstances the immigrants were not allowed to settle in the 'closed villages'. Lastly, in the 'mixed villages' the immigrants were allowed to settle on the one side of line demarcated in the map.⁵¹ Accordingly, in 1916, the Director of Land Records proposed to appoint a special colonization officer to settle the issue of immigration in the respective districts to follow the restricted line system. The Line system was successful to check the influx of the immigrants to some extent for a certain period of time.⁵² Therefore, to ascertain the success and failures of the Line system a scrutiny committee was formed.

Accordingly, under the Chairmanship of F.W. Hockenbull, the Line System Committee of 9 members namely Abdul Matin Chaudhury, Syed Abdur Rouf, Saiyudr Rahman, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Sarveswar Barua, Dr. Mahendra Nath Saikia, Kameswar Das and A.G. Patton was formed. The Committee started its job from November, 1937. Finally, in February, 1938, the committee submitted its reports after

ascertaining views from both the official and non-official members on the aggravated issue of Line system, whether it should be abolished or retained. It is a fact to be mentioned that maximum of the officials favoured the retention of the Line System on different valid reasons. For instance, Muhibuddin Ahmed, the colonization officer in Nowgong district fully welcomed the retention of the Line System since the immigrants had a separate culture and a habit of life compared to the indigenous people and they were generally lured by land. Therefore, the Line System was the best means to protect the natural rights and interests of the indigenous people and maintain peace and amity⁵³

However, the Bordoloi Ministry in spite of utmost interest in Line System could not fully materialize the plans as the cabinet had to resign in 1940 following an appeal by Mahatma Gandhi for the national movement and not to support the war efforts. In the meantime, Muhammad Saadulla came to the power and formed new government. The government headed by Saadulla ignored the Line System Committee's Report and introduced new development policies which was against the interest of the indigenous people. According to the new policy all the waste lands would be divided into blocks and allotted to the different communities including immigrants on the payment of a premium of rupees 5 per *bigha*. Through this policy many of the immigrants were given the settlement even in the predominantly tribal areas which further aggravated the situation.⁵⁴

However the Saadulla Ministry collapsed in December 1941 and soon after the fall of government Sir Robert Reid, the then Governor took over the administrative charges in Assam. The Governor without delay scraped the 'Development Scheme' of Saadulla government considering that such a scheme would lead to the discrepancies between the immigrants and the local indigenous people. It was done because the problems of immigration had already started the peril in the internal life and habitats of the local people. The Governor also further reviewed the submontane area where predominantly tribal and backward classes of people inhabited. Extra precautionary measures were adopted so that the elements of foreigner intervention would not spell any disaster to the local population.

Muhammad Saadulla once again came into the power in August 1942 on the provision of assurance to support the British administration in the war efforts. The

Saadulla ministry in the name of 'grow more food' campaign encouraged more fresh settlements of the immigrants even in the tribal dominant submontane areas. In the meantime, when the Saadulla ministry faced stern criticism throughout the entire Assam valley, he was compelled to modify the land policy. In fact the League Ministry failed and successively a Coalition Ministry was formed again headed by Muhammad Saadulla in March 1945. The newly formed coalition government completely superseded all previous land settlements and restarted with its new policies. The policy had the following four objects⁵⁵:

- (i) Provision for planned settlement of the waste lands.
- (ii) Provision for recognition of landless immigrants from the other provinces who entered in Assam before 1st January 1938 as being equally entitled with landless indigenous persons to waste land settlement.
- (iii) Provision for protection of tribal classes in the predominantly occupied areas by them against the outsider elements which would endanger their normal social, economic and other traditional basis of village life.
- (iv) Provisions for evicting encroachers for the maintenance of grassing and other reserves.

Accordingly, in line of the provision (ii) of new policy, a statistics was compiled for the area of cultivable waste land. This facilitated the immigration from Bengal and tens and thousands of them flooded the virgin land of Assam.

Demographic Change

The issue of immigration in Assam had a profound impact on the demography of Assam. The demography covers study of the size, structural distribution, and spatial as well as temporal changes in population in response to birth, death and migration. The vibrant socio-culture and the economic factors also play great role in the demographic pattern of a society. Hence, demographic variations affect the socio-economy, culture and polity of the people.⁵⁶ Large scale immigration since 1901 had considerably affected the then traditional pattern of population distribution in Assam. In 1881, the population of the Brahmaputra valley figured 22,49,185 persons. Out of this, 3 lakhs were recent immigrants and the rest were indigenous. The Muslims constituted 9.3 percent of the total population of the Brahmaputra valley, which was as much as a

quarter of the population of the then Goalpara district.⁵⁷ The important population strength of the people living in the Brahmaputra valley in 1881 is shown in the **table 2.3.**

Table 2.3 - Population of major castes and tribes in the Brahmaputra valley (1881)

1. Bodo-Kachari Tribes uninfluenced by Hinduism	
a. Kachari.....	265418
b. Mech.....	57885
c. Lalung.....	46077
d. Hajong.....	3689
e. Garo (Plains).....	23373
2. Bodo-Kachari Tribes in the process of conversion	
a. Rabha.....	56285
b. Madahi.....	13149
c. Mahalia.....	6198
d. Sarania.....	4718
e. Totila.....	2539
3. Castes formed of converted Bodo-Kacharis and allied tribes	
a. Borahi.....	(extinct)
b. Moran.....	(not reported)
c. Chutiya.....	59163
d. Rajbansi/Koch.....	336739
Total Bodo-Kachari Elements.....	875,233
4. Miri (Mishing) Tribe.....	25636
5. Hindu Castes	
a. Kalita.....	241589
b. Ahom (Tai-Ahom).....	179283
c. Kaivarta.....	105317
d. Dom (Nadial).....	96779
e. Katani and Jugi.....	81931
f. Brahman.....	68784
g. Ganak (Daivajna).....	17390
Total Hindu Castes.....	791073
6. Muslims.....	208431

Source: Report Census of Assam, 1881, p. 63 & Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, K P Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, p. 18

The above table shows that more than one third populations of the Brahmaputra valley are ethnically of Bodo-Kachari origin. Amalendu Guha observed and cited that some of the Muslims must have been converts from Bodo-Kachari stock.⁵⁸

In the census of 1881, the population of the Brahmaputra valley was broadly divided on the racial basis. Bodos were figured with a population of 875,233 which represented more than one-third majority of the population in the valley. The groups of Shans families like Ahom, Khamti and Shan were with a population of 182,441. The Daphlas, Miris and Abor populated with 27,006 and the other Hindus with a population of 857,450. But the Census Report of Assam, 1891 brought extensive contribution in the field of ethnology by rendering data on physical and racial types based on anthropometric measurements. As per the report except Hindus the other three categories belonging to different races were categorized as tribes because of their non-*Aryan* origin. According to the census of 1881, the tribes represented major proportion of the total population in Assam. They had distinct ethnic origin, language and diverse socio-cultural traditions. In the two decades from 1881 to 1901 the total population proportion of indigenous Hindu castes and aboriginal tribes declined from almost a hundred percent in the pre-colonial period to 78.3 percent and 67.8 respectively. In 1901, it was reported that the non-indigenous section constituted one-quarter to one-third of population. Though the proportion of tribal population was consistent to general population in Assam it was seen turned down since the early twentieth century with considerable descend from 16.72 percent in 1901 to 10.04 percent in 1951 respectively. The growth rate of tribal population was witnessed always positive during the colonial period but the variation of percentage was much lower than the general population. The main reason behind the vast variation was due to the large scale of immigrant settlers and the rapid conversion of the tribal people into the fold of Hinduism. In the census of 1931, the Ahoms and Kacharis were differentiated on the basis of category. Accordingly the Ahoms were mentioned as racial caste and the Kacharis were recognized as tribe.⁵⁹

According to the Census Report of Assam, 1921, the total number of villages had increased from 3,000 to 32,275. The main reasons behind the increase of villages were due to the establishment of new villages by the Eastern Bengal immigrants in the Assam valleys. The average village population increased from 233 in 1911 to 240 in the

census of 1921. The districts of Goalpara, Darrang and Nowgong highly received the increase number of villages due to the new immigrants in large number.⁶⁰

The proportion of women was lower to the men counterpart in the Goalpara district than the other districts of the province. The proportion of women to men was in a tendency of decrease in the successive decades, where the ratio of women to 1000 men were 947 in 1881, 911 in 1891 and 903 in 1901 respectively. The deficiency of women in the sex ratio was partly due to immigration. It was because the men amongst the immigrants largely exceeded the women population in number.⁶¹ In this connection, decadal and net variation of population from 1891-1941 of the Goalpara district are shown in **table 2.4**.

Table 2.4 - Variation of Population during Last Fifty Years in Goalpara District⁶²

GOALPARA							
Year	Persons	Variation	Net Variation (1891-1941)	Males	Variation	Females	Variation
1891	453,275	-	-	237,135	-	216,140	-
1901	462,555	+9,280	-	242,957	+5,822	219,598	+3,458
1911	601,198	+138,643	-	318,776	+75,819	282,422	+62,824
1921	763,052	+161,854	-	406,906	+88,130	356,146	+73,724
1931	883,288	+120,236	-	470,557	+63,651	412,731	+56,585
1941	1,014,285	+130,997	+561,010	539,437	+68,880	474,848	+62,117

Source: Census of India, 1941, Volume IX, Assam, Tables, p. 9

Language constitutes an indispensable medium of study in the social demography pattern of a particular region. The large scale immigration of labours in Assam had directly or indirectly impacted on the local languages of the region. Assam is the land inhabited by diverse group of population with a huge variety of languages and dialects. Linguistically the region witnessed the prevalence of four great linguistic families namely Austric, Tibeto-Burma, Indo-European and Dravidian. In the Census of 1901, as much as 167 different languages had been found spoken in the province of Assam. The Indo-European linguistic family included the language of Assamese, Bengali, Bihari, Nepali and Oriya which had been recorded as 6,164,000 souls or 66.7 percent of the total population in the valley. No doubt the Assamese language was very widely spoken in the valley but it was found that the rate of speakers to the total population remained very steady since the Census of 1901. This retreating percentage

of population illustrated in the Census was due to the deliberately slow growth of natural born population and the encouragement to settle large immigrants in the region. In the Census of 1911, the district of Kamrup and Nowgong illustrated as the largest proportion of Assamese speaking population districts as being the non-tea industry district.⁶³ As per the Census Report on Assam 1881, in the Brahmaputra valley the Bengali speaking people had 309,958 souls and out of this 209,212 are found in the Goalpara district, with 47 percent of the population as Bengali speaker. By profession they belonged to two classes namely tea-coolies, most of who were recruited in the central Bengal and the others were the writers who were employed in the offices.⁶⁴ As per the Linguistic Survey of India, the pure Rajbanshi dialect was mostly spoken in the western and southern district of Goalpara with a Bengali dialect. The Tibeto-Burman group of ethnic population had been a mighty group in Assam. According to the census of 1921, the speakers of this group considerably increased from 485,000 to 531,000 or by 9.5 percent. Bodo language was the main branch of this language group and the other sub-branches of this group included the languages of *Garo*, *Rabha*, *Koch*, *Chutia*, *Bodo-Kachari*, *Dimasa* and *Lalung*. However, these languages were mostly affected by the contact with other languages in Assam.⁶⁵

Bengali influenced other languages and became common language in the district of Goalpara, where 69 percent of the population used it in 1901.⁶⁶ In 1911 the total Bengali speaking population in the district was 77,000 out of which the immigrants of Mymensingh were 34,000 that indicate 44.15 percent of them. In 1921 the Bengali speaking population illustrated in the district was 151,000 out of which 78,000 were Mymensingh immigrants and successively in 1931 the Bengali speaking population increased to 170,000, of this number 80,000 were recorded immigrants of Mymensingh. On the basis of percentage the immigrant population of Mymensingh can be represented as 51.65 percent and 47.05 percent in the year 1921 and 1931 respectively.⁶⁷ The Assamese language was spoken by less than 3 percent of the population. However, the different tribes inhabited in the district usually spoke their origin forms of speech. Out of this, nearly one fourth of the total population used Kachari (Bodo), Rabha and Garo which are akin to each other.⁶⁸ Various languages spoken in the Goalpara district are shown below in **table 2.5**.

Table 2.5 - Data of Languages Spoken in the Goalpara District in 1901

Languages Spoken	Dhubri Subdivision		Goalpara Subdivision		Total Districts		
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Assamese	5401	4396	960	640	11397	6361	5036
Bengali	118822	109039	47136	45053	320050	165958	154092
Bodo or Plains Kachari	34856	35071	6948	6458	83333	41804	41529
Eastern Hindi	8374	1874	2238	432	12918	10612	2306
Garo	819	654	6901	6204	14578	7720	6858
Rabha	2023	2044	3903	5579	13549	5926	7623

Source: B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Goalpara, p. Appendix, Table IV, 6

In the census of 1931, the total number of Bengali Speakers in the three districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong of the Brahmaputra valley increased from 529,000 to 840,000 and the number of Assamese speakers also considerably increased from 1,726,000 to 1,995,000 or by 15.6 percent.⁶⁹ In the Census Report of 1921, Mr. G.T. Lloyd cited the remarks of a former Chief Commissioner who had the intimate knowledge on the language statistics of the Assamese and Bengali in the Goalpara district explained it as worthless as the people of Goalpara district all spoke Goalpari. Likewise, Bengali language was spoken by them as well as at the Assam end with a tinge of Assamese language and in the middle part with a tinge of both the languages.⁷⁰ According to C.S. Mullan, in the Census of 1931, it was noted that the Assamese was barely spoken in Dhubri, Golakganj, Gossaigaon, South Salmara and Mankachar thanas which were all situated at the Bengal end. In the thanas of Goalpara, Dudnoi, North Salmara and Bijni which were adjacent to the Kamrup district Assamese was spoken more than the Bengali language. Under the *thanas* of Bilasipara, Kokrajhar and Lakhipur both the Assamese and Bengali languages were spoken but Bengali was

predominant. But in the Kokrajhar and Bilasipara *thana* jurisdiction a large speakers of Tibeto-Burmese language group were found.⁷¹

Trends of religious beliefs and faiths of the people also signify the nature and change of the demography a particular region. Likewise, Brahmaputra valley was not spared from it. The Census of Assam between 1872 and 1941 illustrated as many as eight main leading religious groups in the region namely *Hinduism, Muhammadanism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Animism* and others. As per the population distribution based on religions the census of 1872, in the Assam valley recorded 1,692,054 souls as Hindus, 176,109 as Muhammadan, 1,379 as Christians, 6563 as Buddhist and 158 as Jains respectively. By 1901, the percentage of the major religions followed in the Brahmaputra valley was specified as 72 percent Hindus, 18 percent animists (tribes) and 10 percent Muhammadans. In the Census of 1881, the population of the Muslim was recorded 208,431souls which denoted 9.3 percent of the total population of the whole valley. Consequently the burden fell in the district of Goalpara alone.⁷²

According to the Census reports from 1881 to 1931, the distribution of population by religion the Christian population in Goalpara district were 513 in 1881, 1,632 in 1891, 3,495 in 1901, 5258 in 1911,⁷³ 10,312 in 1921⁷⁴ and 18,536 in 1931⁷⁵ respectively. This indicated the rapid increase of followers in Christianity among the masses in the six decades.

According to the census of 1901, in the Goalpara district 40 percent of the populations were identified as Hindus, 28 percent as Muhammadans and 27 percent as animists or following tribal form of religion. 83 percent of the Hindus followed different sects. Out of this 6 percent described themselves as Saktists or worshipper of the generative powers as manifested in the female, 4 percent as the follower of the Siva and the 90 percent as Vaishnavites. Nearly one fifth of the Vaishnavites were said to be Mahapurushias.⁷⁶ Thus, various religious denominations prevalent during 1901 are shown in **Table 2.6**.

Table 2.6 - Religious data of Goalpara district in 1901

Religion	Dhubri Subdivision		Goalpara Subdivision		Total District		
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Total Hindus	75082	62539	34457	31618	203,696	109539	94157
Mahapurushias	2060	1765	15431	10126	20,382	17491	11891
Other Vaishnavas	48712	43138	12673	17402	121,925	61385	60540
Saktists	5916	3284	994	526	10,720	6910	3810
Sivaitees	2312	1828	1413	1140	6693	3725	2968
Muhammdans	59989	53730	7987	6682	128388	67976	60412
Animists	37862	37795	24873	25088	125618	62735	62883
Total Christians	695	644	1118	1038	3495	1813	1682
Baptist	3	1	1084	1034	2122	1087	1035
Lutheran and allied denominations	660	622	1282	660	622
Other religions	540	226	82	07	855	622	233

Source: B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Goalpara*, Appendix, Table IV, p. 6

In the Census of Assam, 1911, the animists had been decreased from 125,618 to 47,339 against the census of 1901 in the Goalpara district. The proportion of the animist decreased from 2,719 to 788 in per 10,000 of populations.⁷⁷ In the Census of 1911, regarding the reason for abrupt decrease of animist followers, J. McSwiney described that due to the introduction of the new Brahma *Dharma* of Sib Narayan Swami among the Meches (Bodo) in the first decade of twentieth century large number of Meche (Bodo) masses converted into the new religion.⁷⁸ In the following decades the new

religion brought about drastic changes in the socio-political economic aspect of the Bodos.

In the Census of Assam, 1931, C.S. Mullan described that the followers of animists or the old tribal faiths as recorded in the census of 1921 was 1,256,641 which decreased to 992,390 in 1931 with the variation of 264,251. There were two reasons behind the large number of variation in the population decrease in the valley. Firstly, the large number of tribal living in the Brahmaputra valley converted into Hinduism. Secondly, the considerable number of animists of the hill districts converted into Christianity. But it was reverse in the case of Goalpara district as because the tribal population increased from 64,665 in 1921 to 89,389 in 1931 with the variation of increase in 38 percent. It happened mainly the Bodo population under *thana* of Kokrajhar in the district retained both their religion and caste.⁷⁹ **Table 2.7** clearly shows the distribution of population per ten thousand (10000) in the Brahmaputra valley as well as in Goalpara district from 1881 to 1941.

Table 2.7- Distribution of population by religion in the Goalpara district from 1881-1941

Div. Valley & Dist.	Number per 10,000 of the population																					
	Hindus							Muhammadans							Animists (Tribes)							
	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
Brahmaputra	8,504	6,984	7,182	7,014	6,878	7,219	4,865	918	981	950	1,143	1,520	1,999	2,264	534	1,974	1,782	1,734	1,459	587	2,783	
Goalpara	7,374	4,031	4,409	5,573	4,844	4,372	3,019	2,348	2,751	2,779	3,522	4,151	4,392	4,623	263	2,567	2,719	788	848	1,013	2,346	

Source: Census of India, 1911, Vol- III, Assam part- I Report, Subsidiary Table-II, p. 45 & Census of India, 1941, Vol- IX, Assam, p. 26

In the census of 1921 the population of Bodo-Kachari tribes decreased by 23,000. It happened because they followed different social uplift movements in various districts. Due to that more than half of the 28,000 Bodo populations designated themselves by the sub-caste name such as Sonowal in the district of Lakhimpur.⁸⁰

The colonial intervention in Assam changed the population pattern in the region in various ways. In 1826, the population of Assam was estimated at 830,000 which have been described with the change of social composition and position, religious and linguistic dispersions. The new economic policies of the colony encouraged more migration from outside Assam which resulted in the change of population pattern. During this period, along with the religious and caste divergences such other disparities like language and occupation played an important role in the society in determining the social composition of population. The colonial mechanism of modern governance reconstituted the meaning of community along the lines of religion which hitherto a overlapping the community identities among the masses. Due to the large scale of religious affiliation of a particular kind and in search of status in the society by the tribes resulted in the irregular use of tribal languages among them. This trend of lack of enthusiasm in identifying their mother tongue at the time of census enumeration reflected their change of attitude.⁸¹

During the colonial period the influx of immigrants in the districts of Assam had an adverse effect on the ethnic balance of the population and it also caused deep sense of social and cultural insecurity among the tribal people. The migrants tried to reinstate their culture in the newly settled places from where they came and this resulted into the cultural pluralism in the region. The high intensity of immigration led the census reports to follow the fluctuation in favour of the new settlers. For instance in the Census of 1891, the proportion of tribal population to the general population illustrated highest in the district of Goalpara and Nowgong but unfortunately in the Census of 1921 both the districts recorded with highest concentration of East Bengal migrants due to the hauling of abundant land under cultivation. The gradual extension of immigrants in the tribal habitat vicinities had alienated the tribes and subsequently compelled them to move to remote areas. Due to the fear of marginalization among some of the tribes, the process of merge up and assimilation into the greater entity like Assamese had started.⁸² Thus, the immigration whatever may be the internal or external factors, had tended to fetch disequilibrium on the socio-political and economic life of the people. The immigrants after occupying the *Char* areas of the Brahmaputra valley gradually started squatting government reserve lands and even occupied the lands of the tribal by means of force. Mr. J.H. Hutton, the British administrator in the Census Report of 1931, admitted that

the immigrants in their anxiety to get lands had a good deal of friction by squatting government lands or the lands of the local people so that they could not be evicted from there without great difficulty. The constant friction between the immigrants and local people over the period for the occupation of land created the problems of law and order and revenue settlement which hitherto was unanticipated.⁸³

Endnotes

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