

POPULATION TRENDS IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

Homeswar Goswami



This book on regional historical demography is the first major study analysing the factors responsible for the growth and variations in the population of Assam during 1881-1931.

The book fills up, for the first time, the gaps in the population statistics of Assam, particularly in the field of fertility, mortality and migration rates. The internal migration factor has been decomposed into main historical streams and then studied and analysed in depth. The work is methodologically oriented and offers estimates of the population parameters with the aid of appropriate growth curves and other statistical tools and techniques. The links of population events with the socio-cultural milieu of Assam in an historical perspective have been adequately probed by the author.

Besides being a useful reference work for the postgraduate students majoring on population and demography, the book would provide much new information for demographers, population experts, planners, policy makers and economic historians who are interested in pursuing a scientific study of the behavioural dynamics of population in the Brahmaputra Valley, also called the Assam Valley. The variations in population have been studied and analysed componentwise. While it does not purport to be a comprehensive text on the economics of population, important questions of demography are discussed in the context of the book's main aims.

The book should also be useful as prolegomena for a scientific and dispassionate understanding of the current movement for the deportation of the illegal infiltrators coming into the north eastern region from neighbouring countries.

Dr. Homeswar Goswami (b. 1943) is a Reader in the Post-Graduate Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, Assam. He has seventeen years of experience in teaching at the Post-Graduate level. Dr. Goswami has specialised in Population and Demography and has been supervising the doctoral works of research scholars in the said field.

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POPULATION TRENDS
IN THE
BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY
(1881—1931)

A STUDY IN HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY



HOMESWAR GOSWAMI



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PREFACE

In this study, I have made a modest empirical attempt to reconstruct from scattered sources and incomplete records the history of population change in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam of the period 1881 to 1931, covering five decades of demographic transition. In its restricted sense, this is a work on the regional historical demography of Assam and would form part of the larger corpus of knowledge called Regional Population Accounting or Regional Human Book-keeping. It is well-known, but nonetheless important to observe, that demography, construed as accounting of human units and of vital events, is a science of measurement of historical phenomena. No such science can be effectively designed without understanding what it exactly intends to measure and what the measurement signifies. It is also important to know to what extent this science can be reasonably expected to measure demographic phenomena whose dynamics operate ceaselessly.

Poverty and Population Explosion are generally co-related in both popular and professional opinion current at this time. The movement of people and immigration, in its economic aspects, often figures in discussions at both laical and scientific levels. Likewise, vital events like births and deaths are no less commonly discussed and debated topics in connection with problems of birth control and the general improvement of health and hygiene and the consequent rise in the expectation of life.

The complete socio-economic study of any region must start from a study of its population. Such a study has to do with things which are of vital concern for the continuing welfare of various socio-economic and ethnic groups. The number of human units in any space preconditions not only the

types of mutual relationships but also the level and degree of social cultural and economic advancement. In this sense, no study can be more fundamentally important and at the same time more generally useful and interesting than a study of regional demographic change. It is true that a demographic study such as recorded in this volume may be concerned primarily with a period of the past, but it does not lose its value for this reason as present demographic facts are undeniably linked with the past. With these facts in mind, I have undertaken a study of population dynamics of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the period 1881-1931. In this study, I have analysed population demographically from four major points of view : number and distribution ; composition, components and characteristics ; nature of dynamic vital processes ; and trends and fluctuations. I have explained at the appropriate place the scope and objective of the study, including the methodology adopted and the sources of statistical data and documentary evidences used.

My work is a modest attempt to grasp a problem which involves deep and great understanding of economic phenomena in the process of historical flux. I would, therefore make no pretence to completeness and perfection. I must also say that no effort has been made to evolve or advance a universal or general theory of regional population growth based on my study in a historical perspective of the phenomena in Assam Valley both in its totality and constituent parts. Nor would I claim that I have fully succeeded in making a complete documentation of the regional literature and statistical materials in the field. But I do hope that the results and findings of this study will provide some penetrating insights into the behaviour of population including its components, in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the fifty-year period from 1881 to 1931. I, however, hope that my work will at least provoke further research in this large and much-neglected field of economic-demographic history and population studies of the North-Eastern region of India.

I would be failing in my duty if I do not express my gratitude and thanks to my research guide Dr. R. Mehrotra, Professor of Economics and Head of the Department of Economics,

Dibrugarh University, for his constant guidance and supervision and for his numerous insightful comments and suggestions which resulted in remarkable improvements in the contents of the work. I must thank him for the time he spent to improve my thinking on population theories, demographic analysis and statistical and mathematical matters.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to Prof. V.M. Dandekar, Director of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics at Poona ; Dr. S. N. Agarwala, ex-Director of the International Institute for Population Studies at Bombay ; Dr. P.C. Choudhury, ex-Director of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of the Government of Assam at Gauhati ; Dr. P.C. Goswami, Professor and Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management, Assam Agricultural University at Jorhat ; and Dr. B.K. Roy Burman, Deputy Registrar General, Census of India, New Delhi, for their valuable helps, comments and suggestions during the course of my research work. To Prof. Dandekar and Dr. Agarwala I am also grateful for extending me facilities of residence in their respective institutes during my visits. To Dr. Choudhury, I am also grateful for making available to me the mine of historical records at the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

I am also grateful to the following for the help and assistance rendered me during my research studies : the Librarians and staffs of the International Institute for Population Studies, Bombay ; Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona ; National Archives of India, New Delhi ; National Library, Calcutta ; Indian Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi ; Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, Gauhati ; Superintendent of Census Operations, Assam, Shillong ; Keeper of Records, Assam Secretariat Records Room, Shillong ; Gauhati University, Gauhati ; Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, Gauhati, and above all, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh.

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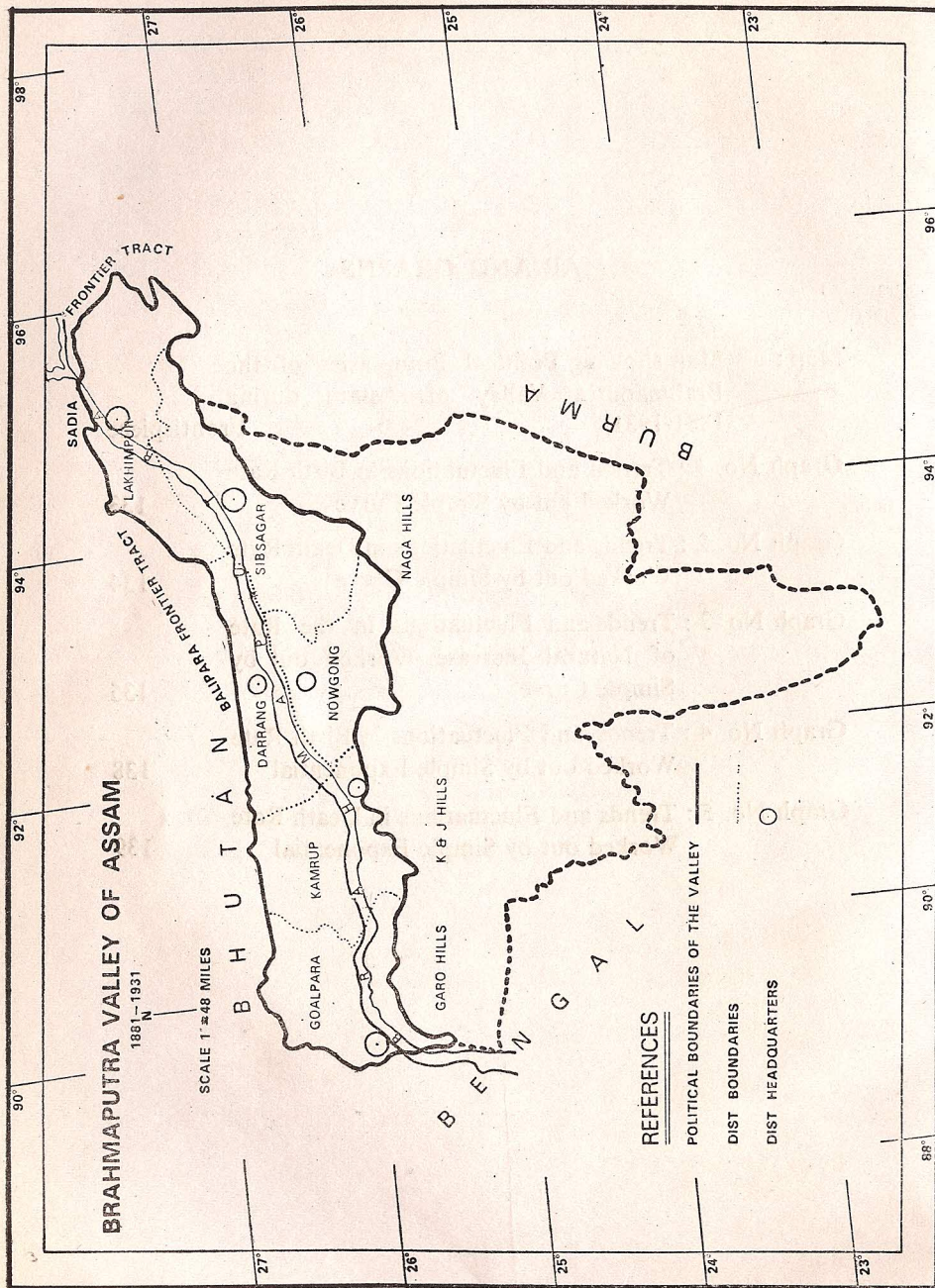
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I

INTRODUCTION

SECTION-I

Studies on population have assumed great importance in recent times in view of the impact of population growth on social change and economic development particularly in overpopulated underdeveloped countries. Demographic trends and patterns evolve and take shape according to the differing socio-economic configurations of the social milieu and under widely disparate levels of development. Population studies in India have so far been mainly conducted at the national level which tend to conceal the distinctive social, economic and environmental patterns at the sub-national spatial levels. Such macro-level studies tend to overlook the regional peculiarities in the behaviour of demographic variables. A study of the causal factors explaining such regional variations would, therefore, be rewarding. Indian demography badly needs research at the regional and state levels.¹ The present study is an attempt in this direction. Realising the fact that existing population patterns of a region have their roots in the past, running into several decades,² a historical study is chosen.

Scope and Objective

This study seeks to analyse and explain the trends, fluctuations and patterns of population and its principal components in a historical perspective in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the period 1881-1931. The primary interest of the study lies in studying the determinants rather than the consequences of population trends and fluctuations.

The period selected for the study is unique in the population history of the Valley for many reasons. The most important reason is that relatively vast uninhabited land areas of the Valley were settled by immigrants coming mostly from other parts of India during this period. The first stream of immigration comprised the labourers in the tea gardens of the Valley. Though such immigration actually began as early as 1853, it started in a large and organised scale only from the seventies of that century when the industry recovered from a depression and accelerated its development.³ The inflow of garden labourers with their dependants continued with the expansion of the tea plantations and the development of means of transport and communications till 1921. This process practically ceased after 1937. The second important stream of immigration was the immigration of farmers, mostly landless, from the overpopulated districts of Eastern Bengal who started settling on the vast wastelands of the Valley from the beginning of the twentieth century till the partition of India. Besides, the Valley was subjected to large-scale influx from Nepal, Rajasthan and many other parts of India since the beginning of the present century. In addition, there was immigration into the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam from the Surama Valley of Assam. These three principal immigration streams affected the population trends in the Valley during the period 1881-1931 in a variety of ways. This study seeks to investigate their effects on the size and dynamics of population growth of the Valley.

The period covered is important for yet another reason. In contrast to the present, the pattern of growth of the population of the Valley during the later part of the 19th and the first quarter of the present century was subjected to large-scale fluctuations. An attempt has been made in this study to analyse the causes of such fluctuations.

An added reason for the selection of this period for intensive study is that the Valley's population history during 1881-1931 has so far not been systematically explored by any writer or research worker in the past. Choudhury's work relates to the entire province of Assam and to the period 1931 to 1961.⁴

Though regular decennial population Censuses for the province of Assam were undertaken since 1872, the first scientific

and synchronious Census was made only from 1881.⁵ It is said that Indian statistics began to be useful after 1870.⁶ Hence the year 1881 has been chosen as the starting point of our study. The terminal point for our study is the year 1931, because, as stated earlier, Choudhury's study covers the period from 1931 onwards.

The population statistics for Assam relating to the period 1881-1931, as contained in the original official documents, have not yet been adequately analysed. Thus, our study is mainly based on the data from the primary sources, that is, the Census publications. In certain cases, however, we have relied upon secondary sources to supplement the data available from the primary sources. Sufficient care has been taken in using the data, from either a primary or a secondary source, as to their comparability, accuracy and reliability. Whenever accuracy, reliability, etc. of certain data were found questionable or dubious owing to under-enumeration or over-enumeration or where the data were not strictly comparable, we have either discarded such data or used them after making due adjustments and allowances for the likely errors.

Methodology

A historical approach combined with an analytical method succinctly sums up the methodology adopted in this study. A purely historical or descriptive method will tend to have low validity and high generality whereas a purely statistical or analytical method would tend to have high validity and low generality. It was, therefore, considered desirable that a balanced mix of both these methods would impart the much needed measure of both validity and generality to the findings of our study. We have described the principal social, economic and political forces that were taking shape in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the period 1881 to 1931 in a historical perspective. At the same time we have described and analysed the effects of these forces in shaping or affecting the size and composition of the population of the Valley and on the dynamic components of its growth. By adopting a balanced mix of both the historico-descriptive and the historico-analytical methods, it is contended that we have been able to do justice to

theory, measurement and historical reality. Apart from the necessity of imparting scientific rigour, the adoption of this methodology was also considered necessary for purposes of expositional convenience. We have used the well known tools available for demographic analysis to economists in so far as they are relevant. We have worked out the principal measures and indices of demographic change. In addition, attempts have been made to fill up important gaps in demographic statistics by the adoption of various estimational devices, methods and procedures. The trends and fluctuations have been studied by the technique of curve fitting, etc.

Sources of Data

The main sources of data in the above regard are briefly enumerated below.

Population Censuses : Census is the most important primary source of population data in India. "The best demographic materials on India come from the Censuses".⁷ The first attempt to collect demographic data through Censuses in India in modern times was made during the period 1865-1872 when the first population Census was taken throughout British India.⁸ The first synchronious Census was, however, taken in 1881 and has since then been conducted every tenth year. The Censuses contain a mine of information on subjects not only demographic but also sociological and anthropological in content, but they embody very little of demographic analysis.⁹ Though our study largely depends on the data contained in the decennial Census Reports on Assam, we have consulted the all-India Reports and also the Reports of certain neighbouring states whenever necessary. The past Census Reports are partially preserved in the Library of the Office of the Director of Census Operations for Assam, the Records Room of Assam Secretariat and the Library of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of the Government of Assam.

Vital Registrations : The second source of demographic data used in the present study is the vital registrations. Though the system of registering vital events was independently organised in India from about mid-seventies of the 19th century, regular birth and death statistics for different administrative units of

the British India are available only since mid-eighties of the 19th century.¹⁰ The registration data of that period, however, are not very reliable. Because of the inefficiency of the collecting agency at the grass-root level, the data are extremely incomplete.¹¹ Gyan Chand is of the opinion that the "administrative inefficiency of the reporting agencies" is the main reason for not getting reliable figures of vital registration in India.¹² Wattal remarks "roughly speaking it may be said that about three-fourths of the population of India are subjected to Registration".¹³ In Assam Vital Statistics were collected by village headman who submitted them to the local revenue official ('Mouzadar') who, after compilation of such statistics for all the villages under his jurisdiction, submitted them to the Officer In-Charge of the local Police Station. The Police Station authorities further collated the statistics of all revenue divisions ('Mouzas') under their jurisdiction and sent them to the District Civil Surgeon who after receiving of similar statistics from all the Police Stations in the district sent them to the Medical Department, Government of Assam. The Medical Department published them in "Annual Public Health Reports" and also in the Annual Administration Reports. The decennial Census Reports also contained vital registration figures. In view of the fact that many of the registering officers were hereditary village officials (the village headman and the 'Mauzadar' held their offices on hereditary basis), no qualifications could be prescribed for holding such posts.¹⁴ A comment made in an Administration Report is worth quoting, "That the general vital statistics are utterly untrustworthy is a result only to be expected, considering the nature of the agency employed in their collection—an agency removed at a distance from any scrutinising control".¹⁵ "Though inadequate, in various ways the registration figures can be used for estimates that must come somewhere near the truth."¹⁶ Precisely for this reason we have used the registration figures of vital statistics. Past Public Health Reports of Assam, which contained registered vital events for Assam, were consulted as far as available partly at the Records Room of the Assam Secretariat and partly in the National Library, Calcutta. The recorded birth and death figures used in the present study are, however,

taken from the decennial Census Reports. It is because even after repeated searches in the National Library and the Assam Secretariat Records Room, the author could not trace out the relevant Annual Public Health Reports pertaining to the period of his study.

Reports : Economic and social characteristics of an area exert considerable direct influence upon its population patterns.¹⁷ Therefore, in addition to Censuses and Vital Statistics, we have consulted and used the social and economic data from various other reports. Fortunately there is no relative dearth of such statistics in Assam. The Governor General of India, remaining far away from this easternmost province of British India, had to govern this region mainly on the basis of 'paper investigation'. Whenever a scandal arose or a reform or new scheme was proposed the Central or Provincial government had to appoint a Commission or Committee or a person to go into the details of the scandal or the proposed scheme of reform and to submit a report thereon. This gave rise to the publication of voluminous reports. The chief reports of this nature, consulted by us are the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931 ; Report of the Famine Commission, 1881 ; Reports of the Labour Enquiry Committees of 1906 and 1921 ; Report of the Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30 ; Report of the Line System Committee, 1938 ; Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet 1968 ; Report on Manufacture of Tea and on the Extent and Produce of Tea Plantation in Assam, 1839 ; and the famous Mills Report on the Province of Assam, 1854. These Reports contain abundant social, economic and demographic statistics pertaining to Assam. Though many of the comments embodied in certain reports are not free from bias, these reports are indispensable for any research worker in the field.

Other Official Publications : In addition, various Departments of the Government of Assam have been publishing on a continuous basis, official economic statistics since the Province was constituted into a separate Chief Commissionership in 1874. These statistics, relate to industry, agriculture, labour, prices, trade, transport and communications, medical and public health

and sanitary conditions including vital statistics, public works, revenue, taxes, education, police, finance, etc., and they have been initially prepared by the respective government departments and then compiled and published annually by the Government of Assam as 'Administration Reports' in accordance with the instruction of Government of India contained in Resolution No. 1674-90 dated 12th May, 1873. Certain key departments, however, have been publishing annually their respective Departmental Reports in detail in addition to the summary of such reports incorporated in the Administration Reports. Such annual publications consulted for the present study are : Report on Tea Culture in Assam, Annual Report of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture, Annual Report on the Season and Crops of Assam, Tables of Agricultural Statistics, Annual Report on Immigrant Labour, Report on the Land Revenue Administration, and Annual Public Health Report. Information and statistics supplied by the officials from Village to District levels are incorporated in these reports. Except a few which have initially been collected by illiterate village headmen, most of the information and statistics contained in such official reports can be accepted as reliable. We have, therefore, made extensive use of the relevant statistics found in these reports. All such reports are preserved in the National Library.

Other Records : Though the Chief Commissioner was entrusted with the power and responsibility of the administration of the Province, he had to work under the direction of the Government of India. He had to seek approval of any policy decision taken by him in the matter of administration, receive sanction of funds for development activities from the Centre and keep the Centre abreast of the day-to-day developments taking place in this region. To accomplish such statutory obligations, a lot of correspondence entailed between them which itself constituted a valuable source of accumulated information on varied subjects including population. Realising the future utility of these correspondential records, they were preserved mostly to be used as authentic materials giving information on events and contemporary statistics. We have made best possible use of such records as supplementary sources of data for our study. These records are available in the National

Archives and partly also in the Records Room of the Assam Secretariat.

Gazetteers : The all comprehensive Imperial Gazetteers of India and the Assam District Gazetteers written by B.C. Allen and published during 1881-1908 and during 1901-1906 respectively provide a rare and useful fund of information about Assam as a whole and the districts of its Plains Division. Like the Censuses, they are landmarks in India's and Assam's statistics. These Gazetteers are available in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of the Government of Assam.

In addition to the above, we have drawn upon the statistics available in the studies on demography conducted by various research workers in India and abroad. These have been mentioned in the appropriate places.

Topical Organisation

Briefly, the thesis is divided into seven Chapters. Besides this First Chapter which is introductory and in the first Section of which we have outlined the objective, scope and methodology of the study including the sources of data, a brief introduction of the Valley and its geographical and climatic conditions is given in its second Section. The Second Chapter is intended to provide a theoretical background, and it reviews some important population theories, and recent literature and studies on population problem in India. In the Third, Fourth and Fifth Chapters we have discussed Fertility, Mortality and Migration in Valley's population respectively. In the Sixth Chapter the trends and fluctuations of the principal components of population of the Valley are studied. The Seventh Chapter embodies the summary and conclusions of our study.

SECTION-II

The term 'Assam' had originally been applied to the tract of country ruled by the Ahom Kings¹⁸ (1228-1826), and subsequently to the six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, administered by a Commissioner stationed at Gauhati, under the Lieutenant-Governorship of Bengal (1826-1874). On 6th February, 1874 this tract was constituted into the "Province of Assam" covering the wide area of the Brahmaputra Valley,

Surama Valley and the Hill tracts between these Valleys, with an independent administration under a Chief Commissioner, stationed at Shillong.¹⁹

The land area within the boundaries of the Province of Assam may be classified into three broad physiographic divisions, namely, the of Valley of the Brahmaputra on the North, and Valley of the Surama on the South and the Hilly tracts running East and West which lie between the Valleys and form the watershed of the two basins. The six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley lying all along the bank of the Brahmaputra river are, from West to East, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, the last one being separated into two districts, viz., Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh in 1972. Traditionally these districts are known as "Assam Valley Districts".²⁰ The Hill tracts from West through East to South comprise the hill districts of Garo, Khasi and Jaintia (both the districts have now formed a separate State called Meghalaya), United Mikir and North Cachar, Naga (separated in December, 1957 as a Centrally administered territory and subsequently formed into a separate State) and Lushai or Mizo (separated from Assam as a Centrally administered Territory in 1972 and subsequently into a separate State). The Hill Tract consisted of petty independent states ruled by village chiefs before it was annexed by the Britishers and subsequently merged with the Province of Assam in 1874. The Surama Valley had two districts namely, Cachar and Sylhet, but after partition, Cachar with the Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet district remained within Assam while Sylhet sub-division merged with Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Surama river passes through this Valley. Before its merger with the Province of Assam in 1874 the Valley was ruled by the British since 1830, when its king Raja Gobindachandra died without issue.²¹

Since 1874, though the three divisions were politically tied together, each of them had been maintaining a separate and distinct identity of its own. The ethnological and social conditions of these three portions of the Province are as diverse as their physical characteristics.

Most of the inhabitants of the Surama Valley, both Hindus and Muslims, speak Bengali and differ in no way from their

neighbours in the districts of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh). Geographically, linguistically and ethnologically the Valley is, and always will be, more nearly allied to the adjacent districts of Eastern Bengal than to any other portion of Assam.²²

The people of the Hill districts, on the other hand, are of Mongolian stock and speak their own languages and dialects. They follow a tribal and primitive culture which is completely different from that of the people of the either Valley.

The Brahmaputra Valley is inhabited by the people of both Aryan and non-Aryan origins. But most of the people of this Valley speak Assamese and majority of them are Hindus.²³ Because of its accessibility to the rest of India, this Valley is more populous and prosperous than the Hill tracts.

Thus, the natural grouping of population is unrelated to the politically defined area of the Province of Assam. The characteristics of the populations of the three divisions are so heterogeneous, that any generalised study for the entire population of the province is bound to conceal the real differences between the three divisions. It is well known that for any scientific analysis the area of study should possess maximum internal homogeneity.²⁴

The colourful way of life of the inhabitants of the Hill division, their primitive tribal culture and beliefs, had aroused interest among the civil and military officers of the British Administrations. Many of them made studies and research on the socio-cultural life of the Hill people. The early entrance of the Missionaries into the hill areas also contributed much towards such studies. As a result, a good number of literary works dealing with the socio-cultural life of the hill people have been produced during the British Rule. But very scant attention was paid by such officers on studying the demographic and economic aspects of life of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley, though bulk of the Assamese speaking people and more than 80 per cent of the total population of the province were confined to this region.²⁵ This explains why upto the very recent past the culture of the Hill people had continued to be regarded as the representative of the Assamese culture by a good number of people living outside Assam.

There are certain outer limits, apparent in the territorial environment, beyond which human survival, locomotion and sustenance can be managed only rarely or with great difficulties.²⁶ Geographical location, topography and climate are such environmental features which have a major bearing on population growth.²⁷ The geographical location and roughness of topography not only reduce the area potentially available for settlement but also form important barriers to population movements and the development of transport. The climate, rainfall, fertility of soil, the mineral and energy resources limit, the area of cultivation, shape, the nature of occupation and thereby affect the distribution of population.²⁸ In an agricultural country, with primitive method, a levelled surface, fertility of soil and sufficient rainfall favour the concentration of population.²⁹ Therefore, it is quite relevant to enquire briefly into the information regarding the geographical location, topography and climate of a region before embarking upon a scientific study of the behaviour of demographic variables of the region.

The Brahmaputra Valley, also known as Assam Valley on Assam proper forms the Northern portion of the Province of Assam. Situated in the easternmost part of India the Valley is a long alluvial plain, about 450 mile long and an average width of 50 miles. With an area of about 24 thousand sq. miles, the Valley lies between 90° and 97° East longitudes and 26° and 28° North latitudes and covers an area of nearly 24,338 sq. miles according to Professional Survey.³⁰ The Valley, from the beginning of the period under study to the present day, extended from the river Sonkosh on the West, bordering Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal, to the foothills of the Himalaya and Patkai Ranges in the East, bordering Lohit and Tirap districts of Arunachal Territory. On the North, the Valley is bounded by Himalayan foothills bordering Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan. On the South, it is bounded by Assam Range inhabited by Garo, Khasi, Jaintiah, Mikir and Naga tribes. The Valley is, therefore, surrounded by mountains on the North, East and South. It is linked with the Gangetic plains of North India by a narrow strip of level ground on its Western border. The river Brahmaputra³¹ flows through its entire length

from east to west like a great artery and crossed by fifty-eight tributary streams falling into this central channel from the bordering mountains on either side. The Valley lies almost east and west but slightly turns northeast in its eastern portion.

The surface of the Valley, apparently smooth, is dotted with innumerable hollows, swamps, marshes and a number of isolated hillocks here and there. The Valley has a steep gradient falling from east to west. The fall exceeds 300 feet in a distance of about 450 miles.³² As the surface is highly watery, there is less place for human habitation in relation to the total area of the Valley. The gradient of the Valley has made the cultivation of different crops in the upper and lower portions of the Valley very suitable. The bed of the river Brahmaputra, which was the only communication link between the Valley and the rest of India during the 1880's, slopes downwards from east to west along the surface of the Valley. The slope of the river beyond Dibrugarh is about 16 inches per mile, from Dibrugarh to Tezpur it is 6 inches per mile and after Tezpur it is very insignificant.³³ Owing to this steep slope of the river-bed and the large number of tributaries from the bordering mountains falling into it, the velocity of the current and the volume of water of the river Brahmaputra is very high. Owing to the alluvial nature of the Valley's soil and the rapidity of the river's current, the Brahmaputra exhibits the operations of alluvion and dilution on a gigantic scale on its bank during the rainy season and constantly changes its course. The repetition of these actions has created a large belt of alluvium almost throughout its course, extending 6 to 8 miles on average, on both sides of the main channel. Though fit for human habitation³⁴, the indigenous people did not use the land area of this belt except for cultivation of mustard and pulses during winter season by a few adventurous cultivators from nearby villages on a few scattered plots. Almost the entire belt therefore remained unused and uncultivated, which was usually covered with grass and reeds. Being frequently inundated the land of this belt was highly fertile and most suitable for the cultivation of jute and oil-seeds. This belt of land is known as 'Chapori' belt.

Further inland, the level of the Valley rises and there is a

belt usually of 10 to 12 miles breadth on both banks known as 'Central Belt'. The land of this belt was used by the indigenous people of the Valley for permanent inhabitation and cultivation. In most parts of the Valley this belt supported a fairly dense agricultural population. 'Sali' or transplanted winter rice was the staple crop here. People here led a relatively comfortable life because of the existence of better lines of communication, facilities for the disposal of agricultural produce and better scope for subsidiary occupations. "This region was thickly populated and highly prosperous during Ahom rules. The fifty years of instability and anarchy before the British occupation, took away a heavy toll of population from this belt, and thousands left their homes and hearths."³⁵

Beyond this belt comes the sub-montane belt of 10 to 12 miles breadth on both banks of the Brahmaputra river. The level of the land is high here. Grassy plains and forests, which in part owed their origin to the depredations of invaders from east and north, stretch to the foot of the hills on both sides. Most of the land areas of this belt, like the low-lying 'Chapori' belt, was lying unutilised by the indigenous population except for a few tribal people who lived in scattered villages.

The three belts with different topography were not however found equally extensive throughout the length of the Valley. Though the 'Chapori' belt was found on both sides of the Brahmaputra, the margin of the central belt came down almost to the river banks in the Sibsagar district, the Dibrugarh Sub-division of Lakhimpur district on the south bank, and in the Tezpur Sub-division of Darrang district on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. While 'Chapori' belt was almost absent in these regions, the 'sub-montane' belt was broader, paving the way for extensive tea cultivation there which took place during the latter half of the last century and the first quarter in the present century. The extensive 'Chapori' belt in the Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts, the Mangaldai Sub-division of the Darrang district and North-Lakhimpur Sub-division of the Lakhimpur district attracted the immigrant cultivators from the densely populated districts of Bengal during the first few decades of the present century. The area of the Central Belt, which

was fairly utilised by the indigenous population, was almost of equal breadth throughout the length of the Valley.

The moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal cause heavy rainfall in the Valley during Monsoon. The Valley is largely free from dry and hot air-currents which flow down the Gangetic plains during mid-April to mid-June. The rainy season commences with the spring season (April), and lasts till the beginning of the autumn (October). Moderate rainfall is caused during the winter in the Upper part of the Valley, by the North-West winds carrying some amount of moisture while crossing over the snowy Himalayan range. The annual average rainfall in the different seasons of the year is as follows "in the monsoon season (1st June to 30th September) 60.6", autumn season (1st October to 30th November) 6.4", winter season (1st December to end of February) 2.3", spring season (1st March to 31st May) 24.8".³⁶ The abundant monsoon and moderate spring and autumn rainfall make the Valley eminently suitable for the cultivation of crops like rice, jute and tea.³⁷ The southern regions of Kamrup and Nowgong districts receive comparatively less annual rainfall (50 to 60 inches per year only) because of the fact that this region lies on the leeward side of the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia hill range which directly obstructs the flow of the monsoon wind coming from the Bay of Bengal. For this reason the southern slope of this range receives very heavy rainfall (450 inches per year).

The long rainy season with heavy rainfall and the scanty rainfall during winter have made the Valley's climate temperate but damp throughout the year. The annual normal temperature of the Valley fluctuates between 60° and 90° Fahrenheit,³⁸ and the normal annual humidity content in the atmosphere is 90 per cent.³⁹ The heavy rainfall during monsoon and spring seasons causes heavy erosions in the Valley's alluvial soil. The eroded soil is carried by the tributaries to the Brahmaputra. Silting takes place both in the main and tributary channels. Heavy floods and inundations are, therefore, frequent occurrences of the Valley, which bring untold misery to the people and their crops and cattle.⁴⁰ The presence of extensive rainfall, swamps, marshes and other water surfaces, with large tracts of jungles and forests have subjected the Valley to have precipi-

tation thereby making its climate extremely damp. Such a climate would obviously be a dumping ground for the germs of Cholera, Malaria, Small-pox, Dysentery, 'Kalaazar' and other diseases which used to take heavy tolls each year during the later part of the 19th and the 1st quarter of the present century. The rigours of climate and lack of communications debarred the people of the other parts of India from entering into the Valley until the last quarter of the last century when the Britishers undertook certain economic activities which paved the way for the immigrants into the Valley.

Though climatically unhealthy, the Valley is resource rich. The southern border of the Valley below the foot hills of the Assam range, contains large coal mines. The Makum and Namchik fields in the district of Dibrugarh alone are estimated to contain about 2,000 million tons of coal reserves.⁴¹ The eastern region of the Valley contains huge stock of petroleum and Digboi (in the district of Lakhimpur, now Dibrugarh) was the sole oil-producing centre all over India till the fifties of the present century. The extensive jungles of the Valley contained valuable forest and wild life. The most important natural resource of the Valley is its soil. The soil of the Valley is so fertile that with the minimum of efforts one can reap a golden harvest. Except a long strip on the southern border, the Valley is of fertile alluvial soil.⁴² Such a soil is known to be rich in lime and potash and very responsive to manuring and irrigation. It is said that the river Brahmaputra is second to scarcely any in Asia in the productive quality of its alluvion.⁴³ Crops like paddy, wheat, sugarcane and cotton and tea and banana plantations besides silk and tobacco can be grown easily with promising result in the Valley's rich soil. The sandy loams of the 'Chapori' belt give a good yield of jute and mustard. The heavy clays with a high percentage of nitrogen in the Central Belt give a good return of rice. The acidic old alluvial soil, with phosphoric content of the upper part of the sub-montane belt are suitable for tea cultivation. The remark of Mr. Harler is worth quoting, "Of the present countries growing tea on the large scale, the Assam Valley is the best equipped by nature with regard to climate, lie of land and soil. Enormous crops of quality tea can be produced with the minimum of

effort and there are large areas of land suitable for extensions. The Assam Valley is the country 'par excellence' for tea planting."⁴⁴

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