

Roots of Social Tension : A Study of Line System in Assam

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The period following 1937 saw a rise of social tension and conflict between the linguistic and religious communities particularly the Hindus and the Immigrant Muslims. The introduction of the Government of India Act of 1935 and subsequent establishment of provincial Government in Assam, no doubt, helped in developing constitutional consciousness among the masses. But, at the same time, it should also be admitted that various types of petty consciousness in the form of proto-nationalism of immigrant Muslims, protectionism of the indigenous Assamese, tribalism of the plain tribals of Assam were also found its expression significantly during the period. These petty consciousness in one hand helped to rise social tension and resultant social conflict, on the other hand, stood on the way of mass-consolidation for national freedom.

The major controversy around which the social tension and conflict gathered its momentum was the Immigrant Settlement and the Line System. The issue had its economic, demographic, cultural and political dimensions. The roots of social tension laid in the large scale immigration for the colonial economic development since 1834. In the thirties of the 20th Century, it degenerated into cultural complications. During the Saadulla Ministry, the policy of Wasteland Settlement aroused sharp reactions both from Hindus and Muslims elite groups. The Muslim League demanded abolition of the line system, which they considered to be a source of discrimination against Muslim population. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, Asom Sangrakshni Sabha and United People's Party, Assam Association and the tribal (plains) elites however opposed to Muslim League's demand. They insisted to retain the Line System to protect their distinct identity both linguistic and religious. The issue reached to a statewise debate, both administrative and public, leading to communal polarisation finally. The issue, basically an economic, turned into a communal by

the vested political forces. Commenting on the issue, Dr. Guha stated "initially welcomed, even sponsored on revenue and development considerations, the immigration wave was later vilified by the administration as Muslim invasion of Assam."¹ Consequently, therefore, the majority of the Muslim population rallied behind the Muslim League in support of its demand to abolish the 'Line System' while the Hindus in great number, gathered round the congress to 'counteract it'. The controversy compelled the Saadulla Government to appoint an enquiry committee on the Line System towards the end of 1937. The Committee's report, published in 1938, was 'a curious amalgam of conflicts, compromise and contradictions and failed to suggest any clearly defined solution to the vexed problem of land settlement'.²

Wasteland Settlement

The colonial Rule was conditioned by exploitation. Once occupied Assam by virtue of the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826, the English East India Company thought of raising revenues by any means; in stead of establishing an administrative system. Since 1826 to 1886, there was, in fact, no radical change in the revenue administration.³ Keeping the existing Ahom System of revenue affairs, intact, the only fundamental change, which, David Scott, the Chief Commissioner of Assam did, was the replacement of revenue collection in kinds by cash.

Of Course, during this period (1826-1886) the colonial Rule in Assam made series of experiments in land settlements. Lord Bentinck, the Governor General of British India, deputed F. Jenkins, an army officer, 'to report on the resources of Assam'. After due survey, Jenkins, in his report dated the 22nd July, 1833, advised '.....settlement of English men of capital'. He further suggested to grant 'Wastelands on liberal terms like revenue free grants, absence of clearance clause, and even exclusion of natives as well as operation of a discriminatory land revenue

payable by them.' He insisted that the grant of Wastelands to Europeans was the only source of development of the province⁴. Jenkins suggestion was soon encouraged by the introduction of the *Charter Act* of 1833, which sanctioned Europeans to acquire lands outside the Bengal Presidency.' In 1834, the company government resolved to assess the lands of Assam to fix the revenue rates. The result was the introduction of *ordinary land settlement* basically of three classification according to the productive quality of land. The second category of land settlement was come into force after the *Regulation of Wasteland Grant Rules of 1838*. The Wastelands, the term, as defined later on in the *Rules for the Lease of Sale of Wastelands in India, 1892*, was an 'unoccupied land, the property of government, which the government has not disposed of by lease, grant or otherwise and which of such a character or in such a position that it is not likely to be taken up for the cultivation of the ordinary staples of the country within a reasonable time'⁵. The vast tract of Wastelands covering 'more than one half of the extent' of the province, was covered with deep forests, long grasses and bushes. The regulation of Wasteland Grant Rules of 1838 was later on substantiated by several Rules like *the old Assam Rules of 1854*, *The Fee Simple Rules of 1862* and *the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886*⁶.

Colonisation & the Line System

The influx of Muslim peasants since 1901 continued unchecked till 1915, when the government for the first time, decided to check the immigration through a draft set of Settlement Rules. It was prompted by two factors, firstly expecting more revenues through settlements and secondly, the continuous in-coming of unchecked immigrants became an administrative problem by this time. There were reports from the district officers on the increasing crimes and infighting among the 'unruly' migrants. There was also reports of occasional conflict with the neighbouring indigenous villagers. In 1916, the Director of Land Records, suggested 'for a special colonisation officer to assist the

settlement of the incoming immigrants and co-ordinate the work of all districts into which immigration was going on'.

The Director's suggestion was supported by all the district officers but the Commissioner did not pay any serious attention to it. The issue, therefore, remained as it was.

Under compelling situation, without any official sanction from the Commissioner, the district Commissioners of Kamrup, Nowgong and Barpeta Sub-division had already taken pre-cautionary measures by drawing lines in the villages 'to restrict indiscriminate settlements by immigrants'. In 1920, Sir Willam Reid, the Commissioner, addressing the Government suggested to appoint Special Colonisation Officer to deal with the Immigrant Settlement. In response to this suggestion, the line system received governmental sanction vide there letter No. 2132 R dated 18th August 1925. In tune with the pragmatic experiments in settling immigrants, particularly in Nowgong, Waste lands under colonisation scheme was classified into six categories. These were as follows:

- 1) Assamese Villages (purely)
- 2) Muslim Villages (purely)
- 3) Mixed Villages
- 4) Unsettled Villages reserved for Assamese
- 5) Unsettled Villages reserved for Muslims
- 6) Unsettled Villages.

The settlement of the immigrants in Nowgong district, was thus, confined to a block of eight mauzas from *Laokhowa* in the east to the *Mayang* in the west and to a small area of *Garubat* mauza. A few immigrants who came long back were settled in an isolated area. According to the Settlement Report of 1932 of Nowgong district, the immigrants were later on grouped in mainly five mauzas namely *Laokhowa*, *Dhing*, *Bakori*, *Lahorighat* and *Juria*.

In the district of Darrang, the colonisation scheme, of course, was in operative only since 1931. In the Mangaldoi Sub-division, there were 62 villages exclusively settled with the immigrants. In the Tezpur Sub-division, immigrants were allowed to occupy nearly

300 acres of land in about 10 villages, under Behali circle. The operation of colonisation scheme was not uniform in all districts. In the Mangaldoi Sub-division, while the 'villages were taken up for colonisation with the old immigrants and also sometimes Nepalis', in Nowgong, the plenty of waste lands offered to settle all the immigrants. The area allotted to each immigrant varied from 20 to 30 bighas considering number of members of the family.

For each plot of land, the settler had to pay premium at the rate of Rupees ten for waste lands, Rupees seven for low land and Rupees five for grazing land. They were given option to pay the premium in three equal instalments within five years since the allotment of the plot.

Roots of Social Tension & Conflict

The colonial authority took keen interest in the colonisation scheme considering good return of revenue both in terms of pre-paid premium and land taxes. It was estimated that in the district of Nowgong, the net amount of revenue had been increased by eight time during 1936-37 in comparison to Rupees 40,000 only in 1906-07. The population, too was expected to increase little over 6.5 lakhs in 1941 while the actual population including both indigenous and early settlers, in the district was 5 lakhs.

The colonial administration, though found to be sincere in settling the immigrants with an expectation of more revenue, they were not so interested in giving rights of the land and improve cultivation. There were serious anomalies in granting pattas. Most of the lands allotted under colonisation scheme were scattered. These were not cadastrally surveyed. According to the Sub-deputy Collector of the district of Nowgong, there were nearly 20,000 acres of lands under hills and bills (ponds) which were settled with the immigrants.

It is also noted that out of 1,59,839 bighas of land under the scheme all over the province, only 64000 bighas had been settled in 1937. So far the grant of pattas was concerned, annual pattas were granted in the third year while from the fifth year,

periodic pattas were supposed to be issued on condition of clearance of premium. Even this law was not properly carried out, as there were frequent cases of violations of law by the corrupt officers in charge. The Deputy Commissioners were given powers to evict persons without appropriate rights on the land¹³.

Under such situation, the immigrants, tried to enter into the purely Assamese villages or mixed villages by 'taking advantage of land sale'. Sometimes, the immigrants were offered land either on *adhi terms* or by regular sub-tenancy by the Assamese villagers. In the opinion of the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong - 'It is undoubted fact that many owners of *nisf - khiraj* land get their land cultivated by immigrants and many Assamese gentlemen carry on the same practice in their periodic lands. We do not think, any restriction should be placed on this practices'¹⁴.

The relation between the immigrants and the indigenous became strained over the gradual closing of grazing areas. The common grazing fields were later on forcibly encroached by the immigrants in several parts of the relevant districts for which there was criticism in the Legislative Assembly.¹⁵ The growing social tension between the above social groups found expression in the commitment of crimes like clashes, looting, arsons, theft of cows and cattles. To control the population, 'no less than eleven police station have had to be opened during the years 1923 to 1937'. Not only that, there was complain of insufficient administrative staff from the Revenue Collectors. They suggested for more re-inforcement. 'From Magistrate to Mandals, as they insisted on, increased staff is necessary all along the line if efficient administration is to be carried on and respect for 'law and order'¹⁶ maintained. The district offices should be fully staffed'.

The social tension was further aggrieved by the declared status of the immigrants as defined by the Government. The word 'immigrant' was categorically defined by Mr. Thomas in his standing order of 1934 as 'including all persons coming from districts in Bengal and the Surma Valley; but not including tea garden coolies and ex-coolies'. The very definition, clearly

discriminated the status of the immigrants. The definition, indirectly recognised the domiciled rights of the plantation immigrants over the land. It hurt the sentiments of the non-plantation immigrants. Since then, the social tension had been turned to bitter controversy between anti-line system and pro-line system groups.

The elite groups of the non-plantation immigrants demanded immediate abolition of the line system. To justify their demand, they put forward following reasons:

1. The line system has no legal sanction.¹⁸
2. It hinders assimilation between the immigrants and the Assamese people. It 'imposed on the immigrants a stigma of segregation and inferiority which they resented and fostered a sense of animosity which could not be for the good of the province and tended to keep the price of land low' too.
3. As the immigrants had already disconnected relation with the place of their birth, the system of line should not be continued indefinitely. They should be recognised as the people of Assam. The temporary barriers in the form of line system which 'separated communities of different economic levels were artificial', they considered.

Strongly opposing the demand for abolition of the line system, the indigenous elite groups insisted to retain it. They considered the settlement of immigrants as 'Muslim Invasion of Assam'. The large scale influx of immigrants (to mention non-plantation immigrants) has not only reduced the lands of the 'bonafide Assamese' but also at the same time because a threat to swamp the autochthons. naturally, the incoming of 'foreigners' were unwelcome to the local people. They, therefore, resented these 'intrusion into their tribal and ancestral lands, both economic and biological reasons.²⁰ The Asamiya and Bodo Kachari autochthons, thus, raised the cry of their home land being in danger'.²⁰

The issue, basically an economic, turned into a serious political problem with the inaction on the part of the Government and the involvement of the political parties. The indigenous Assamese elites took the cudgel of fighting the Muslim immigrants taking

the case of encroachment in the Assembly floor. The members drew the attention of the Government, though defeated, through adjournment motions. They cited instances of forcible mass encroachments of professional grazing by the *Mymensinghia* immigrants in *Pub-Chamaria Mauza* under Barpeta district, in the areas from *Kamarkhati* down to *Tewaripal* in Tezpur Sub-division. They also drew the attention of the Government that, the large scale encroachment along with the official settlement of the immigrants caused 'panic and unbearable hardship' and even fleeing away from their own village. For instances, nearly one thousand families of Nepali graziers and indigenous people in *Bhurbhanda*, *Laokhowa*, *Garoimari*, *Gakhirkhowa*, *Nal-tali*, *Kurhimari*, *karaitangani*, *Dalapani* and *Hatibandha* areas had to desert their hearths and homes due to settlement of the immigrants in the *Bhurbhanda*, *Barghuli* professional grazing reserves and *Laokhowa* Game reserve under Nowgong district. The indigenous spokesmen criticised the government for its failure to protect them from the unauthorised encroachments.²¹ The tribal leaders, who were all along remained pro-Saadulla Ministry, did not support his land settlement policy. Rabi Chandra Kachari criticising Saadulla, alleged that his land settlement policy is to protect the interest of the immigrant Muslims at the cost of tribals' interest.²²

The *Assam Sanrakshani Sabha*, an Assamese protectionist elite union strongly opposed attempts of abolishing the line system which was viewed 'as a menace to Assamese race and culture'. Ambika Giri Roy Choudhury, the President of the Sabha, in a memorandum²³ submitted to Nehru in 1937 during his tour in Assam, stated -

The Bengalee Hindu and Muslim who run at one another's throat in their own province are all in one in Assam in this respect, not with a view to fighting for the cause of national freedom, but for establishing their Bengalee kingdom in close co-operation with the British Government. There has been serious set back to the process of assimilation with the Assamese. The Mymensinghi

immigrants who had voluntarily come forward to identify their interests with those of the Assamese are now persuaded to give that up and are being forced to read Bengali.

The Assam Provincial Muslim League opposed the line system all out. In its first annual conference held at Ghagmari near Dhubri in November, 1939, 'the Raja of Mahmudabad condemned the system'. Mayeenuddin Choudhury, a Muslim League member questioned the legal legitimacy of the system²⁴. Quaid-i-Azam, Md. Zinnah, the president of the All India Muslim League warned the government that if it would continue to retain the anti-people line system and pursue eviction of the immigrants, and serious consequences, if even occur, the Govt. shall be held responsible for it²⁵.

Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, 'a jail turned khilafatist' championing the cause of immigrants through a non-violent crusade against Line System. He organising the immigrant peasants, marched to Darrang Districts to settle them in the Waste lands there. The slogan which infused tremendous inspiration to the immigrant peasants was - '*Chal, Chal, Darrang Chal, Jangal Bhangia abad kar, patit mati dakhla kar*' ('Let's march to Darrang, clean the jungle and occupy the fallow land')²⁶

The government, under such controversy and pressure, appointed a line system enquiry Committee in 1937 under the Chairmanship of Mr. Hackenhull. The committee submitted its report in 1938. Before appointing the Enquiry Committee, the government however, convened conferences of officials and non-official members of the Hindus and Muslims. Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the revenue Minister of Saadulla cabinet, was of the opinion to have a careful consideration on the issue by the leaders of the Hindus and Muslims Committee including consultation with the district officers. There were certain differences of opinions among the non-official Assamese Muhamedans. The Assamese muslims, mostly the villagers wanted continuation of the line system, while a section of the urban

based Assamese Muslims opposed to it. ²⁷ The Assamese Hindus, in general insisted to retain it. Few of them, of course, suggested modification of the system and to stop further immigrants. The Government ²⁸, considering the extent of revenue and was of the opinion that the 'valley still had enough land for both the Assamese and the immigrants.

In 1928, a conference of members representing both the Assamese and the immigrants including district officers was convened at Shillong to discuss various questions connected with immigrant problem. The conference resolved the following decisions: ²⁹

1. The number of lines should be reduced as far as possible
2. Pattas should be kept annual in case Assamese and other indigenous races, so as to prohibit legal transfer of land
3. Periodic pattas are to be issued in some areas with a clause prohibiting transfer with the consent of the pattadars.

The Congress coalition government (19th Sept. 1938 to 16th Nov. 1939) was in dilemma. It failed to take a definite decision before it resigned. In a notification published in November 1939, the congress coalition government, however, 'prohibited settlement of land to persons who came from outside the province after 1st January, 1938.'

The whole controversy assumed communal, racial and linguistic complications with growing drift between the major Indian political parties Muslim League and the Congress on the issue of Muslim League's move for Pakistan and the Cabinet Mission's plan of grouping. The majority of the Muslim population both Assamese and immigrant Bengali Muslims rallied behind the Muslim League to safeguard their interest. The proto-nationalism of the Muslims found militant expression in their demand for Pakistan and support in favour of inclusion of Assam under grouping number C. To counter Muslims League's move, the Hindus under

various shades like *Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha*, *Assam Jatiya Mahasabha*, *Assam Kachari Association*, rallied behind the congress. Thus the mass-nationalism so far developed against the Alien Rule for national freedom was divided sharply. In spite of such polarisation, the most significant fact is that the valley remained remarkably free of major communal riots except in 1950.

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