

"Foreigners" in Assam and Assamese Middle Class

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## NOTES

### *"Foreigners" in Assam and Assamese Middle Class*

IT is about a year now since the movement in Assam against the presence of "foreign nationals" and the inclusion of their names in the voters' list was launched. Deletion of their names from the voters' list and their immediate deportation to their original homeland are the main planks of the organizers of this movement. Hundreds have been killed and many more rendered homeless in the movement. Carnage, pillage and devastation engulfed North Kamrup for days together in the month of January 1980. Election to the seventh Lok Sabha from the Assam Valley could not be held. Of the 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam, elections could be held only in two constituencies—Karimganj and Silchar. For one seat, Barpeta, four candidates filed nominations. The nomination paper of Abida Ahmed (wife of the former President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, and a candidate of the Congress led by Indira Gandhi) was cancelled by the returning officer. With the cancellation of her nomination paper, other three candidates withdrew from the fray as their main intention was "not to allow Mrs. Ahmed go uncontested". In the other 11 constituencies, nominees of various political parties could not file nomination papers as they were confined to their residences or party offices for days together by the agitators.

The President's rule was proclaimed in Assam on 12 December 1979, and the Assembly was put "under animated suspension". In the wake of large-scale violence, North Kamrup was declared a "disturbed area" and the Army put on the alert. But for their intervention, the cruelest of genocide, the like of which Assam has witnessed only once before in the hands of the Burmese in 1816-1826, would have been perpetrated.

The movement was started under the joint leadership of the All Assam Students Union (AASU), All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), Purbanchalia Lok Parishad (PLP) and the

Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJO). AAGSP is said to represent the "socio-politico-cultural organizations" in the state. But from the style of its functioning, AAGSP can be called only as a political byproduct. With the launching of the *satyagraha* from 12 to 17 November 1979, the movement really began to receive the support and participation of the masses. Though the movement got a stupendous mass backing, the leadership remained divided regarding the aims and course of the movement. And as can be expected in such an explosive situation, with the masses in excitement to redress their economic wrongs, one section of the toiling masses was set against another section of their brethren. And a fratricidal war ensued.

### *Election: Outstanding Features*

Both the PLP and AJD were floated before the Assembly election in 1978. But neither of them could get a single candidate returned to the Assembly. Certain outstanding features of the last Assembly election in Assam were i) failure of the Congress to secure a majority needed to form a post-emergency ministry, ii) emergence of the Janata as the ruling party and iii) the return of a leftist bloc of 24, with 11 members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the Assembly of 126 members. With the Congress in political wilderness and Janata enfeebled by infighting, the reactionary forces in Assam pinned their hopes on the PLP and AJD. And backed by the reactionaries, the PLP and AJD started, almost from the beginning, a virulent attack on the left and democratic parties and organizations. Now, supported by AASU elements, their attack on the left and democratic parties and organizations continues unabated. Assam now is virtually under mass terrorism.

There can be no two opinions as to the deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. But during the present movement, and even before that, the leaders, while demanding the deletion of foreigners' names from the voters' list and their deportation, have been using wilfully and synonymously two words, "outsiders" and "foreigners". The idea was to form an independent united state of Assam (USA) after the last outsider has been got rid of. Leaflets were distributed in propagation of this idea. However, as the leaders used the words "outsiders" and "foreigners" synonymously, there was great confusion among the general public as to the real issues involved. By this wilful and confusing manipulation of words, Indians coming from outside Assam and foreigners alike were made victims of the so-called patriotic frenzy. Not to speak

of outside Indians, even indigenous tribals were not spared. Two Boro tribal peasants, Habiram Boro and Bihuram Boro, were shot dead by the police in league with the AASU elements in Uttar Phullong Chapari under Kamalpur circle in North Kamrup.

*Problem of Cut-Off Year:*

For the detection of foreign nationals, 1948 has been demanded by the agitators as the cut-off year. In this regard the argument of the PLP chief, Nibaran Borah, is worth quoting: "If the issue of 'stateless persons' could be raised by Sri Lanka as late as 1965, in respect of migrants from India who had moved out a century earlier and if the Government of India could undertake to get these persons repatriated and rehabilitated in India, which the Government of India has done, we do not consider a post-1955 issue as either being belated or closed."<sup>1</sup> It seems that Nibaran Borah takes Assam on a par with the independent sovereign state of Sri Lanka. Clearly, the spirit of Borah's arguments is that, if the Government of India could get back the people of Indian origin from Sri Lanka and rehabilitate them in India, nothing stands in the way of it doing the same in the case of the people of Indian origin in Assam. Our conclusion would certainly have been different had Borah referred to Bangladesh and Nepal in place of the Government of India in his argument.

Of late, a responsible and veteran Congress leader (now an Indira Congress member) has been demanding that all foreigners must be deported from Assam without taking into account the years of their residence in the state. If this is accepted, then a family living in Assam for the last hundred years or so may easily be dubbed as foreigners and be forced to leave the state. The man propounding this theory is none other than Mahendra Mohan Chowdhury, who was the Chief Minister of Assam after the death of Bimala Prasad Chaliha. He even adorned the Governorship of Punjab. Some enthusiastic activists of the movement want to push back the cut-off year to 1826, the year of the British occupation of Assam.

According to a recent estimate<sup>2</sup>, the population of Assam is 1,46,25,000, and it is alleged that out of every three, one is a foreigner, that is, at present there are five million foreigners in Assam. In the midst of a movement, it is not possible to make an assessment of the same with any mathematical accuracy. But in the light of the demands put forth by the agitators for the deportation of foreign nationals without taking into account the period of their habitation in Assam, it will not be improper to make an attempt

to study the issue of immigration into Assam in the post-1826 period. The study of the role of the British colonial power as well as the neo-Assamese middle class in connection with the immigration into Assam is a matter of interesting revelation.

### *History of Immigration*

Immigration into Assam, in the past, was the result of historical process and of necessity. With the annexation of Assam by the British, the erstwhile Ahom kingdom became an integral part of India. The present Goalpara district of Assam formed part of Bengal even before the East India Company was granted the Dewani of Bengal in 1765 by the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. It was in 1639 that Goalpara had become a part of Bengal. Thus Goalpara was included in the British empire nearly 60 years before Assam as a whole became a part of it. From 1826 to 1873, Assam was being administered under the administrative umbrella of the Bengal Presidency. It was only in 1874, that, with the addition of three Bengal districts, namely, Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet, Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner's Province. With regard to the inclusion of Sylhet into Assam, Amalendu Guha writes:

Although vast in area, this new Province with its small population of 2,443 thousands had a meagre revenue potential.... To make it financially viable the authorities therefore decided in September to incorporate into it the populous, Bengali speaking district of Sylhet which, historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal. Even with this additional 1,720 thousand people of Sylhet, the new province was only about half as populous as the Central Provinces.<sup>3</sup>

Not from Assam but from Sylhet the voice of protest was raised against the inclusion of Sylhet in the province of Assam. With a view to increasing "administrative efficiency" Lord Curzon prepared a plan for the partition of Bengal in 1903. According to this plan certain subdivisions such as Rajshahi, Dacca, Chittagong of Bengal Presidency were made over to Assam and the province was re-christened as "East Bengal and Assam" with Dacca as the capital of the new province in 1905. Against this imperialist plan of Curzon there started in Bengal the anti-partition movement which very soon came to be known as the Swadeshi movement. This time too Assam's reaction was trifling. However, in view of the agitation, the British Indian administration declared the plan for partition of Bengal void in 1912. In the process, Assam too retained her old status of a separate province. On the eve of inde-

pendence, there was a great agitation in Assam for the separation of Sylhet from the province, and accordingly, as a result of a plebiscite, Sylhet was transferred to Pakistan.

The British administration, to suit its own imperialist designs, made territorial adjustment and readjustment with Assam in the west and south-west directions. So was the case with regard to the hill states inhabited by numerous tribal groups in the north, north-east, south-east and south. These hill people were self-assertive and of independent character. They were war-like people and because of this trait the British imperialists did not view with favour the contact between them and the plains people. To pursue their policy of divide and rule effectively they devised a plan for segregation of the hill tribal people in their habitat. And this was the system of "Inner Line Regulation" introduced in 1873, restricting the entrance of any person beyond the line so demarcated.

### *The Impact of Territorial Adjustments*

The process of territorial adjustments and readjustments had its impact on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of Assam. The most important was on the demographic aspect of the Brahmaputra Valley itself. A study of the 120 years of British colonial rule in Assam will reveal that they opened the doors of Assam to the immigrants from distant places to suit their own colonial exploitation. The neo-Assamese middle class, basking under the imperialist patronage, helped the process of immigration in its own way. The Moamoriya peasant rebellion in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the Burmese invasion in the first quarter of the nineteenth century had left Assam at almost half of her natural population. Diseases like Kal-Azar had also swept away a large number of the population during the early period of the colonial rule. In this way the natural growth of population in Assam was retarded. As a result, miles after miles of the Valley remained uncultivated and soon became covered with deep jungle infested with wild beasts. As the cultivable land was much more in proportion to the inhabitants, and as the government did not want to be deprived of the land revenue from these lands, the British administration encouraged large scale immigration into Assam from the various famine-stricken areas and provinces of India.<sup>4</sup> The Northbrook administration allotted a fund of £ 50,000 for encouraging immigration into Burma and Assam. But "the planters of Assam did not want additional labourers at that time and the scheme to encourage immigration to that province was abandoned."<sup>5</sup> A large number of people from Central Provinces

immigrated to Assam during the famine of 1896-1898. During 1900-1918 a number of people emigrated to several British colonies and to Burma, Bengal and Assam from several parts of India.<sup>6</sup> With the opening of tea gardens in Assam, the British planters, in league with the government, imported cheap labourers to Assam through various intermediaries. "Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped, and traded like cattle . . . Absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves." Of the total number of 89,756 labourers recruited outside the province of Assam during 15 December 1858 to 30 June 1866, 103 fled away and 30,488 died on the way and the remaining 59,268 reached Assam.<sup>7</sup> Besides tea labourers, men of different trades and professions started coming to Assam to cater for the needs of the new administration. "All those factors helped the rapid growth of the population of the Brahmaputra Valley—from an estimated one million in 1826 to about two millions by 1872—and of the economy as well."<sup>8</sup>

#### *Memorandum to Northbrook*

As the people who had migrated to Assam till then happened to be inferior culturally, the lackeys among the neo-Assamese middle class implored Lord Northbrook, during his tour of Assam in 1874, to take effective measures "to bring up here the redundant population of the province of Oudh, the Belgium of India, and North Bihar. To effect this purpose it will be necessary for the Government to incur a little expense and to grant tracts of Uloo and Borota (grass) high land lying waste on all sides, revenue free, for a period of, say, ten years, but subject afterwards to the usual rates. This description of land is not taken up by the existing population for the cultivation of the ordinary crops of the country. But it will be highly suited to the high land crops (wheat and barley) upon which the natives of those provinces subsist."<sup>9</sup> This memorandum was signed by about 100 of the Assamese gentry, including Durgadhar Sarmah Barua and Dhelaram Deodhai Phukan.

The colonial administration did not strive in right earnest for the development of the English system of education in Assam. Calcutta was the centre of British commerce and administration for the whole of India, and it became the centre of Indian renaissance. The descendants of the Ahom feudal nobility also had their early initiation into English education there. Calcutta also became the cradle of Assamese literary activities in the second half of the nineteenth century. The "Jonaki Age", a glorious chapter in the history of Assamese literature, had its origin in

Calcutta. Anyway, as there was limited scope for higher education in Assam, naturally the majority of the Assamese youths could not avail of the opportunity of government jobs. But it is a historical falsehood to say that the Assamese youths were deprived of all government jobs. Even Boli Narayan Borah<sup>10</sup> and Benudhar Sharmah<sup>11</sup> have said that almost throughout the nineteenth century, government services were manned by competent Assamese of good (aristocratic) families without taking into account any academic qualifications. Competition for jobs on the basis of English education developed at a later stage. But gradually educated youths, whether Assamese or non-Assamese (mainly Bengali) began to get government jobs that were open to them. And thus the uneducated Assamese youths were being eliminated from the field. The inevitable result was the greater numerical strength of the non-Assamese, particularly Bengali, in service in Assam. And this was again the result of limited scope of English education to the Assamese, and even when the scope was there, the aversion of the Assamese to English education. People willing to take to English education had to face dire consequences of even being socially ostracized.

### *Recruitment of Bengalis*

Administratively, Assam was part of Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873, although historically and ethnically Assam was different from Bengal. The British administration made it a policy to recruit educated Bengali people for government service in Assam as they did in the case of Orissa and Bihar. In the land revenue settlement work also, men from Marwar and Sylhet were appointed in preference to the local Assamese gentry. This was objected to by Maniram Dewan in his memorandum to A J Moffatt Mills, during the latter's visit to the province in 1853: "Under the revenue settlement of military officers, while a number of respectable Assamese are out of employ, the inhabitants of Marwar and Bengalees from Sylhet have been appointed to Mouzadarships; and for us respectable Assamese to become the riots of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification."<sup>12</sup> In the Ahom period also, men conversant in land revenue settlement like Pitamare Ghose were brought from Bengal.

Boli Narayan Borah, a leading member of the neo-Assamese middle class and an engineer by profession, implored the government to bring "good educated people from the west (Bengal) with enhanced pay for the educational development in Assam. That is, he wanted good educated Bengali men to be appointed as teachers in the schools of Assam with higher salary."<sup>13</sup> A man with super-



iority complex and casteist mentality, Borah did not recognize the aborigines of Assam like Kachari, Mikir, and Hojai as "Assamese". Borah's sentiment was clear.<sup>14</sup> He was afraid that caste Hindus might be swamped by the plains tribal people of Assam. And so he implored the government to bring men of his caste from other parts of India, mainly from Bengal.

The natural growth of indigenous population in Assam had gone hand in hand with the increase of outsiders (*bahiragata*) in the last century. "The non-indigenous population of Assam proper increased from less than a lac in a total population of 15 lacs in 1872 to an estimated five to six lacs in a total population of about 22 lacs in 1901 . . . . Non-indigenous elements came to constitute at least one-quarter of the population of Assam proper in 1901."<sup>15</sup>

### *Immigration and Jute Industry*

The immigration of the Muslim pesaants from the present-day Bangladesh in the first few decades of this century into Assam was clearly linked with the growth of the jute industry in and around Calcutta by the British finance capital. With the expansion of jute trade, the expansion of its cultivation also became an immediate necessity. As the area of jute cultivation in Bengal could no longer be extended, it was thought well to grow the same in the soil of Assam. Hence the immigration of expert jute cultivators into Assam. "With their superior techniques of cultivation, these East Bengal peaseants taught Assam how to grow jute, mung (a kind of pulse) and several other crops. For example, the acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased as a result of this great population movement from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-06 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-20."<sup>16</sup>

Bengal had been the scene of mounting presant mobilization against the zamindari oppression and exploitation. The Bengal zamindars and the British imperialists thought of sending out the landless peasants to the neighbouring states to checkmate the revolutionary situation. And thus immigration into Assam of East Bengal peseants was encouraged under landlord-imperialist machination. This process had two immediate effects; i) it resulted in the ebb, though temporary, of the peasant upsurge in Bengal, and, ii) it created the situation for a conflict between the Assamese and Bengali peasants. The oppressors thought that their interests would remain intact so long as there was disunity among the toiling masses in the name of language, religion and nationality.

The neo-Assamese middle class and their representatives in government service contributed a great deal to the influx of out-

siders into Assam in the pre-independence era. Their role during the 30 years of the Indian National Congress rule in the post-independence era also was in favour of the immigrants. The Assamese middle class, with a view of employing cheap labour in their fields and homesteads, had encouraged the influx of East Bengal men into Assam. As the majority of these East Bengal peasants were Muslims, the conservative section of the Assamese Hindu middle class encouraged the Nepali people to immigrate to Assam. Thus the Nepali people got access to the forest lands and the *char* areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. Very often, Assamese Hindus recruited a large number of Nepalis for their agriculture and household work. After a certain period they too settled down permanently in Assam. Assamese *mahajans* (elite) had made the East Bengal peasants settle down in their land as well as in government lands with the high hopes of becoming zamindars. The wealthy sections of the Barpetia *mahajans* turned to land speculation. Barpetia people by nature preferred business to cultivation. So with whatever finance available, they started a profitable business in land.<sup>17</sup>

“Marwari traders and even Assamese Mahajans of Barpetia provided a substantial part of the necessary finance to enable the immigrant peasants to bring virgin soil under the plough .... Local Marwari and even Assamese money-lenders financed the immigrants so that the latter could reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, Ahu rice, pulses and vegetables.”<sup>18</sup> “Immigration had led to all-round prosperity in Barpetia area. Many Assamese farmers had turned into land speculators. They sold off their lands to immigrants at a good price, then they cleared new plots (Pam) on waste-lands and sold them again. The immigrants were financed by their own headmen (matbor) as well as by Marwari and Assamese (Barpetia) moneylenders. Even the *hati* (indigenous co-operative bank) funds of Barpetia were involved in this financing to a small extent.”<sup>19</sup>

### *East Bengal Peasants in Assam*

The immigration of East Bengal peasants into Assam began in and from 1905-1906. While stating this, we must not fail to remember the fact that, according to the Curzon plan, East Bengal and Assam formed a new province till 1912. The Census report of 1921 says that “the Assam Valley hardly began to attract Colonists from outside Assam till the decade 1901 to 1911, and the enumeration previous to that of 1911 shows little immigration from across the Bengal border. . . . Before 1911, however, a change came.

The men of Mymensingh began to advance to Assam, driven apparently by pressure on the soil at home . . . . About 85 per cent are Muhammedans and 15 per cent Hindus . . . . We find that Mymensingh, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri provided 51,000 immigrants to Goalpara and 3,000 to the other Brahmaputra Valley district."<sup>20</sup>

The East Bengal settlers in Goalpara and other districts of Assam upto 1921 numbered 141,000 and 117,000 respectively.<sup>21</sup> As 85 percent of the East Bengal settlers in Assam were Muslims, the communal harmony in the state was deteriorating. The Hindus were afraid of being swamped by the immigrant Muslim peasants. A device to keep the Hindus in majority in Assam, initiated by Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first President of India, received encouraging support from the Assamese middle class. To counter the influx of Muslims from East Bengal, particularly from Mymensingh, Rajendra Prasad advocated the immigration of Bihari Hindus into Assam. To quote Rajendra Prasad: "In my tour of Assam, I found large tracts of uncultivated land in Nowgong District. There were no signs of human habitation for miles around, except a few huts here and there. There was no shortage of water and the land was covered with green foliage. There was no sign of the land ever having been ploughed. I was told that there was plenty of such land in the Province and, according to the law of the land, anyone who brought the land under the plough and settled there became owner.

"The adjoining Mymensingh District of Bengal (now in East Pakistan) is a thickly populated area. Many Muslim families migrated from Mymensingh to Nowgong and settled on the land and when they began cultivation became its owners. As more and more unused land came under the plough, the ratio of the Muslim population began to rise.

"When I heard of all this, I had an idea. Chapra is one of the most densely populated districts of Bihar and its people generally have to go out of the province in search of work every year. Thousands of them go to Assam and work as labourers and after earning some money return to their homes. They never thought of settling down in Assam. I saw Biharis and men from Chapra almost everywhere in Assam.

*"I thought that if instead of just going to Assam to earn something and returning to Chapra, they permanently settled down on the land there, not only would their future be assured but also the pressure on land would be reduced in Chapra.*

"I sounded the Assamese on this subject and they wel-

comed it. They told me that they liked the Bihari labourers and not did like the people of Mymensingh, whose treatment of the local population was far from satisfactory. *Some thought it better to have the Hindus of Bihar than the Muslims of Mymensingh. The communal feeling was uppermost in men's minds then and Assam was no exception. They welcomed the idea also because by themselves the Assamese were unable to bring the land under the plough. But the influx of Muslims from Mymensingh was upsetting the population ratio and the Assamese wanted to retain a majority in the Brahmaputra Valley. The influx from Mymensingh could be countered only by allowing Bihar Hindus to settle down on the land.*"<sup>22</sup>

Rajendra Prasad's idea had two dimensions: i) to reduce the pressure on land in Bihar by the emmigration of Biharis to Assam and ii) to keep the Assamese Hindus in majority. His Assam tour was on the eve of the Gauhati Congress in 1926. Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi were the chairman and secretary respectively of the reception committee. Phukan and Bordoloi seemed to be the Assamese *bhadralog*, among others, consulted by Rajendra Prasad.

### *Line System*

The British government in Assam introduced the line system in 1920 restricting the settlement of East Bengal peasants so that the identity and individuality of the Assamese society remained undisturbed. This line system was like the Inner Line Regulation introduced by the British in 1873. According to the line system, the East Bengal immigrants were made to settle down in segregated areas far away from the Assamese villages. But as the immigrant peasants were hard working and industrious, they could easily coax the Assamese peasants as well as the gentry to sell their land to the former.<sup>23</sup> The corrupt revenue officials also gave settlement to the immigrant peasants and thereby flouted the provisions of the line system. It may be mentioned that a good number of these officials were Assamese. Sometimes, the immigrants too were responsible for the violation of the system.

The violation of the line system made a section of the Assamese middle class to think seriously of their future. Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, a nationalist par excellence, organized the Asom Sanrakshini Sabha which was later rechristened as Asom Jatiya Mahasabha. With a view to restricting the settlement of land with the immigrants, Mahadev Sharmah moved a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council in 1927. Participating in the debate on the resolution Basanta Kumar Das (a Bengali) urged the preserva-

tion of sufficient land for the indigenous population, while N C Bordoloi said that he "would not restrict immigration so far as can be helped."<sup>34</sup>

To resolve the problem, an all-party committee was formed under the government initiative with A W Botham in the chair in 1928. The committee included nine members, including N C Bordoloi and Saadullah. Bordoloi's opinion was for the settlement of land with the immigrant peasants in definite areas with sufficient reservation of land for further expansion of the indigenous population.<sup>35</sup> "The Colonisation Policy, though initiated by British officials derived its legitimacy thus from the deliberations of an all party conference and had initially the approval of both Saadullah and N C Bordoloi. The first Colonisation scheme, thereafter started in Nowgong in 1928, was successfully followed by one each in Barpeta and Mangaldoi sub-divisions."<sup>36</sup> According to this colonization plan a small family was given 30 *bighas* of land against a lumpsum amount. As a result of this, altogether 47,636 acres of land were settled with 1,619 Muslim and 441 Hindu families in the district of Nowgong upto March 1933. During the six years ending 1936, 59 grazing reserves were opened up for the settlement of the immigrant peasants in the district of Nowgong alone.<sup>37</sup>

### *Retrogressive Effect*

The line system proved a dismal failure in restricting the coming of the immigrants and their rehabilitation in Assam. But it had retrogressive effect. In one way it failed to safeguard the interests of the indigenous population, while at the same time, being forced to live in segregated areas, the immigrants were made to feel the humiliation of a "second class citizen". Many of the present-day so-called Assamese intellectuals would like to treat the areas inhabited by the immigrants as "miniature Bangladesh." It was an obnoxious virus introduced into the body politic of Assam. "The Government was aware that a system of racial segregation was being practised thereby.... The Assamese Muslims in general welcomed immigrants with the hope that they would be Assamised in due course and numerically strengthen the base of Muslim communal politics in the province,... they will become Assamese—not domiciled Assamese like many people—but Assamese in fact as much as the Ahoms and Kalitas became Assamese."<sup>38</sup>

Actually they did so. No national group in the history of Assam had Assamized themselves so early as did these East Bengal immigrants. It is unfortunate that no attempt has so far been made by the leaders to realize the motivation behind the intro-

duction of this religious dividing line—the line system by the British. The intention of the British administrators was to inject communal virus wherever possible in the interests of their Empire. May be, they wanted to keep the inhabitants of Assam divided on religious line so that the latter would not form an united front against the British during the freedom movement in the thirties. Biresh Misra predicted that “the conflict between the landless Assamese and Bengali peasants will be exploited by some ill-motivated self-seekers to inflame a Assam-Bengal national conflict for the realisation of their own interest in future.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Immigration from Nepal*

Immigration from Nepal into India became frequent since the conclusion of the treaty of Sagauli in 1816 between the British government in India and the Kathmundu Darbar. Ever since 1816 Nepal has been friendly to the British. After retirement from service in the Gurkha Regiment, many Nepali people settled down in Assam permanently. Poor landless Nepali peasants too immigrated into Assam and began to eke out their livelihood through cultivation and milk production and supply. The number of Nepali immigrants in Assam was as follows: in 1901—21,000<sup>30</sup> in 1911—47,654; in 1921—70,344; in 1931—88,306.<sup>31</sup> The number of Nepali speakers in Assam in 1961 was 1,79,883.<sup>32</sup>

There is no restriction on travel between Nepal and India under the treaty of friendship concluded in 1950. Therefore, it becomes natural on the part of the poor peasants to emigrate from Nepal and settle down in Assam or any other part of India.

Except during the present movement, anti-Nepali feeling in Assam has been rare. In 1920 the British administration, while carrying out an eviction operation in the now well-known Kaziranga sanctuary, perpetrated barbarous atrocities on the Nepalis living there. The Assamese middle class was in the lead in raising the voice of protest against this ghastly deed of the colonial power. This brotherly feeling of the Assamese middle class was reciprocated by the Nepalis in the course of the freedom movement right from the non-cooperation days. The role played by the late Chabilal Upadhyaya was in no way inferior to that of any nationalist Assamese in this regard.

This is, in a nutshell, the historical background of the immigration into Assam. That immigration into Assam was under British machinations and supported by the Assamese middle class is beyond doubt. These immigrants who settled down in Assam with their blessings have become overnight “outsiders” or “foreigners” and

the target of virulent attack. Keeping this historical background of the present situation in view, all the conscious and right thinking intellectuals form a clear idea as to who is a foreigner. The problem is so complicated that it cannot be resolved in an atmosphere surcharged with passions and emotions. Only on an objective and judicious solution of the problem rests the harmony of the diverse races and linguistic groups inhabiting Assam and the ultimate unity and integrity of the country.

KAUSTAVMONI BORUAH

- <sup>1</sup> M V Kamath, "Neglected Assam", *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 20-26 January, 1980, p 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Economic Survey Assam, 1974-75, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam.
- <sup>3</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Hari Shankar Srivastava, *The History of the Indian Famine (1858-1918)*.
- <sup>5</sup> Edward C Moulton, *Lord Northbrook's Indian Administration, 1872-76*, pp 93, 114.
- <sup>6</sup> Srivastava, *op cit*, pp 226, 307.
- <sup>7</sup> Guha, *op cit*, p 18.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p 19.
- <sup>9</sup> Welcome address by people of Sibsagar, National Archives of India (NAI) No 166 Home Public B, Sept. 1874.
- <sup>10</sup> B N Borah, "Uccha Siksha", in Hemchandra Goswami (ed), *Asamiya Sahityar Chaneki*, Calcutta University, 1924, Vol III, Part I, p 297.
- <sup>11</sup> Benudhar Sarmah, *Dunari*, pp 61-62.
- <sup>12</sup> Mills, "Report on the Province of Assam", 1854, p IXVII, appendix-L
- <sup>13</sup> NAI, No 17, p 293
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p 297.
- <sup>15</sup> Guha, *op cit*, p 39.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p 102.
- <sup>17</sup> Sailadhar Rajkhowa, *Atitar Sowarani*, pp 117-118.
- <sup>18</sup> Guha, *op cit*, pp 102, 206.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p 206 (foot note).
- <sup>20</sup> *Census of India*, 1921, Vol 1, India Part I, Report, p 86.
- <sup>21</sup> Guha, *op cit*, p 102.
- <sup>22</sup> Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, pp 259-60, Emphasis added.
- <sup>23</sup> Guha, *op cit*, p 206.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p 207.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p 208.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p 209.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p 209.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp 208, 211.
- <sup>29</sup> Biresh Misra, *Mantridutar Sarajantrat*, Assam, p 16.
- <sup>30</sup> Guha, *op cit*, p 102
- <sup>31</sup> Census reports for relevant years. p 95
- <sup>32</sup> *Statistical Hand Book, Assam*, 1971.