

**Welcoming the *Miyan***  
**Settlement Practices of East Bengali Cultivators in Nowgong,  
Assam, 1920-1938**

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***Abstract:** This paper is a case study in some detail of the revenue administration and the changes in the agrarian scenario that emerged as peasant settlers from East Bengal arrived in the province of Assam during the period under review. The study chooses Nowgong district as this period showed almost a point to point migration from the district of Mymensingh to Nowgong. The paper navigates through several dimensions of agrarian practices such as cropping pattern, land usage, and administrative practices such as survey and settlement methods, relinquishment of lands, and rules of reassessment in order to bring to the fore the mentality of the administrators who have been understood as the main patrons of the flow of migration.*

***Keywords:** Agrarian, Immigrant, East Bengali, Assam, Migration, Mymensingh, Nowgong*

***Introduction***

The colonial period witnessed a huge influx of farm settlers into Assam from some Eastern Bengal districts, especially Mymensingh. Later, the magnitude of migration and settlement of these Bengali Muslim settlers became a huge political problem as the indigenous Assamese Hindus feared that the migrants

would emerge a majority and capture political power in Assam. This stream of migration was mostly sponsored by colonial state. This article not only shows the colonial responsibility in patronising the migration but also how it studied and changed agrarian conditions and laws to make Assam suitable for migration of *Miyans*, as the Mymensinghia immigrants were popularly referred to.

In this paper an attempt has been made in some detail to unpack the processes through which racialised perceptions of two agrarian communities emerged as officials began to arrange for the settlement of the population coming from East Bengal. At another level, it tries to demonstrate how these racialised perceptions of two agrarian entities became the official wisdom for deciding several measures pertaining to their settlement and agricultural administration in general. It is based on the study of this larger migration in the district of Nowgong in the decade 1921-1931.

### ***Changes in land use***

Migration from East Bengal of people who primarily sought to cultivate or live off land began in the districts of Lower Assam significantly from 1911. There are accounts which mention their presence before this as well; but in the period 1921-1931, the situation was different. By this time, there was a clear policy within government circles about the possibility of having people from East

Bengal to reclaim wastelands in Assam. The idea was based on the following understanding of Assam's landscape. Assam had lot of wastelands which could be brought under plough but the indigenous population was not willing to do so or did not have the capacity to do so as they were 'lethargic' and 'unenterprising'. On the other hand, the East Bengali cultivator was seen as an 'advanced' and skilled peasant who could do wonders in the wastelands of Assam and also ease the human congestion in the districts of East Bengal.<sup>1</sup>

The Mymensinghia cultivator began to appear in the provincial records of Assam through the cropping pattern he chose. This implied a change in the usage of land in turn causing a ripple effect on other aspects of agrarian affairs. The following is an attempt to understand these processes of change that came about with this migration and trace their trajectories.

In a letter on 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1925, to the Under Secretary of Assam, the Director of Land Records stated his approval for the proposal of reclassifying *Baotoli* land as *rupit* and to assess the same at -/12/- *annas* a *bigha* in the Chapari group in Nowgong. He found it reasonable and justified. The Member of Revenue, on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1925, reflected on the proposal. He argued that it would be proper if the name *Baotoli* was retained and given out at the same rate as *rupit*. He cautioned that care must be taken not to classify on the basis of the crop but on the basis of the soil and its level. He advised that the Deputy Commissioner be instructed not to classify high *faringati* as *baotoli* only

because it had a crop of jute; also, the term *baotoli* ought to be applied to land which is really *baotoli* and no other. He stated that the classification of such land as *rupit* would only cause confusion later, if not at the time, and hence it should be classed as *baotoli* and assessed at *rupit* rate. Secretary II on 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1925, wrote that he entirely agreed with the proposed orders.<sup>2</sup>

The problem, which the above deliberations were about, emerged from a change in the character of the land that emanated from the settlement of peasants from Mymensingh district. This new situation emerged particularly at Juria which was the northernmost *mauza* of the district. The land was essentially marshy and inundated. There, a crop which could sustain water for a week and had a long stem, namely *bao*, was occasionally cultivated by the local cultivators and hence the nomenclature of the soil in records was *Baotoli*. This was adopted as a classification based on the soil unit system within the broad category of *faringati* and hence *faringati* rates were applied to them. Although the classification was done on the basis of different kinds of soil, rates were based on the broad classification of *basti*, *rupit* and, *faringati*.

The cultivation of *bao* crop was known as *pam* cultivation. This was an additional cultivation by local agriculturists who came from other side of the district. It was the only crop that could be grown in marshy lands. Hence, it was done only by cultivators who had extra means at their disposal viz travelling, lodging expenses, wages for labour in marsh, etc. From a revenue perspective,

these lands were under heavy fallowing and cultivation was mostly on annual leases and was heavily relinquished. Because of this infrequent nature of cultivation, these areas were kept under the group *Chapari* or fluctuating and the revenue derived was the same as other kinds of land under *faringati*. This was the situation till the settlement of 1918-1919. After that, as preparation of survey work began for the settlement of 1928, the above change in the character and productivity of land was noticed and it gave rise to this problem of classification.

What was this problem? The land which fell under the classification of *baotoli* had heavy silt and sand content. This kind of soil was excellent for the crop of jute which the Mymensinghia cultivators knew like the back of their hands. Squatting was free and this part of the district was most remote. Therefore, Mymensinghians began their initial settlements in this part. This type of soil and the coming of the new cultivator was the combination which was at the base of the most outstanding change in the northern part of the district in terms of agrarian expansion. These lands were mostly temporarily cultivated and hence were under *faringati* rate; they now began to be used for permanent cultivation of jute. The yield from this crop was high and had relatively high commercial returns (though in this decade prices of jute were coming down). In other words, the basic criteria on which these lands and rates were defined were transformed by an altogether different usage.

The matter came to notice of the Deputy Commissioner, who understood that the peasants were descending on Juria region with the intention of settling permanently and these lands were now being used as their mainstay and jute was the principal crop that they were raising. He understood that what was rice transplanted *rupit* land to the Assamese cultivator was the submontane inundated marsh land for the Mymensinghians, currently termed as *baotoli*. Hence, he wanted this classification of *baotoli* to be shifted to *rupit* so as to have appropriate classification according to the usage of land and also to have the rates of these high yielding crops revised. The DC was therefore thinking plainly in terms of revenue enhancement which was the prime motive of the colonial regime. Other officials also understood the essence of the proposal and assured that it was completely justified to assess this land differently now as the nature of its usage had changed. But their reclassification from *baotoli* to *rupit* was seen as problematic as it had the potential of altering lot of registers and records, which would lead to confusion.

This was an interesting juncture in the land revenue regime of the province of Assam. A few decades back, in 1891, L. J. Kershaw,<sup>3</sup> in charge of the land settlement operations, had raised this issue in his notes. At that time of survey in Assam, the colonial government had failed to reach that level of confidence whereby an accurate measurement of the productivity of the province, based on the value of the crop, could be made. As a measure to solve the uncertainty of

the matter, the degree of land usage rather than the market value of the yield was taken as the basis of assessment. Thus, *basti* being the most used, *rupit* being the next, and *faringati* being the least used, was the order in which revenue rates of the land were set.

Corresponding to this degree of usage was the nature of the land. *Basti* was the most fertile and produced all major produce from bamboos to brinjal. *Rupit* was for transplanted paddy where seedlings developed in part of *basti* was planted and *Faringati* was land relatively in higher tracts which had to be cleared first in order to cultivate. The coming of the Mymensinghians, their settlement, and their cultivating method altered this very agrarian pattern of land usage. They introduced cultivation of prime cash crops on land that was earlier categorised in revenue terms under *faringati* and classed as *baotoli*. Mymensinghians habitually began to grow a cash crop for a remote market. This was the way in which they worked out their subsistence in their erstwhile home province in Bengal. So, it was just not jute but this agrarian pattern with which the Mymensinghians came. This kind of cropping pattern which included a space for the market was not in the cultivation system of Assam.

This was fully realised by the government, as was to be seen repeatedly throughout the decade. Therefore, the concern of the revenue regime now was how to tap this newly generated produce through the existing rates and classification of revenue or rent. It is within this larger context that the DC of

Nowgong was demanding special approval of a reclassification of *Baotoli* lands, so that a higher rate could be set on these lands. The problem that was pointed out by the other officials was essentially technical. Categorizing all *baotoli* lands into *rupit* would mean that all existing land under those areas would see a reclassification as well as revenue enhancement. *Baotoli* lands under the Assamese cultivators were still in the previous condition and this different usage of the same kind of land by different groups of people would lead to confusion on paper if the existing classification was changed to *rupit* especially as both the communities were in regular transfer of their lands. So, the question was how to garner a share from the change in the productive character of land, yet avoiding confusion in classification.

In this regard, we might note that the Sub-Deputy Collector of the *Chapari* circle in 15 villages had already assessed the lands at the *rupit* rate and also classified them as *rupit*. This action of the SDC was ratified by the DC on the basis of an order of May 1924 in which the DC was given wide discretion to vary the rates of the assessment in the direction of enhancement under the very different conditions that had emerged. The point to be noted here is that these orders were reflective of the government's larger policy of shaping and formalizing all measures to be taken in order to ensure as big a share as possible of this new development in agrarian order due to the coming of the settler peasants.

The letter of Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong<sup>4</sup> which was prepared to be sent for approval to the Director of Land Records, leads us to a much greater complexity of the whole task of classification and assessment. In his letter, we find detailed lists of villages where this changed situation had been assessed. He stated that there was a road which ran through the particular area and categorised the villages into three groups according to their proximity to that road and the market and the threat posed to crops by wild beasts and other pests. Based on this grouping, he suggested unit rates of .90, .85 and .80 for the three groups respectively. This enhancement of rate of revenue he argued as justified which now came to more than -/12/- *anna* per *bigha* which was the *rupit* rate in the area.

At the same time, he also pointed out six villages in *mauzas* Bheleuguri and Borbhagia of the North East group which had been properly classed and no change in the classification had been necessary. There were no 'immigrants' in these villages and cultivation was done by Assamese and ex-coolies.

Apart from this, there were 15 villages of Laokhowa *mauza* which were earlier in Juria *mauza* where there was *rupit* class land only in one village, rated at -/12/-*anna* per *bigha* and in these 15 villages now, the *baotoli* land has been classed as *rupit* in order to differentiate between good and bad lands and rates of *rupit* had been applied. It is to be noted here that what was happening was actually a change along with continuity in the very criteria of classification of

land. The change was that a new form of usage was gaining currency which implied shift in the classification of lands from one to another; the continuity was that usage of land was still the criteria of assessing the land revenue. But here, we have what can be called the beginning of forming a rigid profiling of the in-coming people with this usage. Mymensinghias were pinned to this change in cultivation and hence their spread and presence now began to become the criteria for a lot of things apart from change in classification of soil.

### ***Reconfiguration of procedures of survey and settlement methods***

In having any village surveyed, assessed and settled, the *mandals* and *kanungos* were the people who manned the whole operation. These were paid semi-official government staff. In turn, they used to take assistance from the *gaonburas* or the village headmen of established villages. Survey and settlement of villages meant that the staff actually traversed all the miles they measured, settled with the people, and created drafts of the deeds. In Assam, as most lands were settled on an annual basis, this was a yearly task to be completed in the months before rains which left at best two months in the hands of these officials to complete the process. Given the poor condition of roads and communications, and also the problems posed by other factors such as frequent relinquishment of land, difficulty in obtaining actual information from households, made it an almost impossible task. Thus, many shortcuts came to infiltrate the ideal procedure.

Taking Nowgong district as a typical case, we can say that villages were clubbed into *mauzas* and then *mauzas* in turn were clubbed into groups based on geographic features, types of cultivation, composition of people etc and samples from these broad units were picked up for classification of land or categorising revenue rates. Contiguity was a huge factor in determining the revenue of large groups of villages. This may appear to be quite a relief in disguise for peasants but it was actually not so. Good samples could be found in all groups and when this became the basis of assessment, villages not actually in that condition due to many factors apart from soil quality found it difficult to meet their revenue demands.

For instance, the *mauzas* north of the district of Nowgong were divided into two groups, the North West group and the Chapari group. In this division, the fine line was between the flood plains and the alluvial plains. In the flood plains there was hardly any cultivation and in the alluvial plains there was huge amount of vegetation dotted with small plots or small villages. Here, the three broad classification of land was applied at the rate of 14 *annas*, 12 *annas*, and 8 *annas* per *bigha*. Now, when these rates were applied sample lands of a village were used for groups as a whole. This was sometime around the 1890s.

After that, survey work added some more detail annually to the general comprehensive framework and rates were revised accordingly. The DC had wide discretion in these matters. Therefore, the standard procedure was to act

according to a standing order which was issued to meet an immediate situation. Executive decisions were taken first and then the procedure to make it official was processed afterwards.<sup>5</sup>

The increasing settlement of the Mymensinghians first got noticed in these conditions; a particular kind of land which used to be occasionally under plough for an auxiliary crop in a patchy manner came to be completely transformed into jute fields along with simultaneous development of roads. Jute fields began to mushroom all of a sudden around small patches of *pam* cultivation of *baotoli*. Therefore, the officials now could not assess on similarity of land productivity or on the basis of contiguity. There was also the problem (which has been specifically discussed in the section above) of changing the classification of *baotoli* into *rupit* in all the groups, villages and *mauzas* because it would then be too heavy for those who were still using *baotoli* lands in the earlier manner. There was also the pressure of keeping enough reserved areas for the traditional kind of cultivation. Thus, survey and settlement workers now had to acquire village-by-village knowledge of what was happening to the marshy *baotoli* land of their localities. There were also mixed villages and so even within villages there were cultivators who would cultivate the same kind of land in different ways.

It appears that the initial settlements were quite disparate at least at the village level. Officials had to selectively point out villages in different *mauzas*

where *baotoli* was used as *rupit* and where *baotoli* land had to be assessed at a higher rate. This can be argued as the primary process of differentiation that began to descend on the rural areas, based on usage of land and which in turn was based on community.<sup>6</sup> The government was eager and cautious to catch up with changing rate of productivity of land and all areas which were unoccupied and unsettled in the area contiguous to the 'immigrant' villages were instructed to be settled at the revised rate. For the government this became a primary marker of the in-coming population, their choice of land, their choice of crop, and their use of land. The assumption here was that anyone coming from East Bengal would be doing exactly what the early settlers had done. This was the moment when Mymensinghians began to be profiled as a community with these as their essential markers.

Another very important fact which can be deduced from this particular episode of revenue history is that the government was pretty unsure of the flow and the movement of the Mymensinghians. It was not until these settlements began to reflect in assessment reports that their presence was noticed. This establishes quite clearly that the government, at least in the initial period, did not have any sort of involvement or regulation so far as the coming of the settler was concerned.

However, a similar development in the quality of the soil had come about owing to a geophysical change. This was particularly reported by the Sub-

Deputy Collector in 1926 who submitted a special case of the lands in the Dhing circle which meant most *mauzas* north and west of the Kallang River. He reported that due to seismic activity, transplanted paddy lands in these areas were badly affected and marsh land classified as *baotoli* had become fit for transplanted paddy.<sup>7</sup>

By 1931, the issue of land classification over the groups had been resolved to a certain extent. In all the groups, the *faringati* lands which were leased at a low rate and brought under the crop of jute by settler peasants were classed as *Da faringati*, the corresponding category for the same lands in Assamese being *balia lahi*; this sandy loam soil was used for the *lahi* variety of paddy. From the initial settlements it had seemed that the settler peasant was drawn especially to these kinds of lands where jute crop was more suitably cultivated. But over the years, owing to different factors, such as increase in number of settlers, restrictions on settlement and availability etc, Mymensinghians grew their crop of jute wherever they could. When jute began to be tried on different kinds of soil, an estimate of the yield from different kinds of jute was possible. In the North Western group report, it was stated that the land to provide the best crop of jute was *Sali lahi*, the same land which was used for paddy. The jute of *Baotoli* would be good provided there was no occasional flood. The outturn of jute crop in *Faringati* was less than *Sali lahi*. The lower *faringati* which had been classed as *Da faringati* for the settler peasant provided an annual yield of

the crop but if rainfall was not plentiful, the quality of the crop was not very good.<sup>8</sup> Thus, those growing jute in the district were not having the same outturn; it depended greatly on the quality of land, the proximity of market, communications, and management of the field. However, though the government could see differences of yield of jute based on these factors, it did not take them into account while dealing with the lot of Mymensinghians. An impression of their growing jute and hence capable of paying more revenue became deeply embedded into the official discourse, something which we keep encountering repetitively.

However, this change of usage in land by the in-coming population was not in isolation but had consequences on the local pattern of cultivation and their socio-economic situation. Usually, this impact has been understood as a decline of local agrarian practices which led to a certain depravity. However, the nature of this impact and the response of the local society have not been sufficiently explored. This will be talked about in the subsequent section.

### ***Relinquishment of land***

By the end of the 1920s, relinquishment of land or the practice of formally giving up land for another plot had been reduced to below 10 percent of the settled and in all the assessment groups of villages. Usually, this change has been attributed to the permanent squatting of the Mymensinghians on lands which had so far remained vacant and hence fallow. Officials stated it was fear

of losing land to the 'immigrants' which made local cultivators keep the lands formally in their *pattas* although they may not be growing anything on it. However, when the information provided in the reports is taken together with this, the reasons for such relinquishment in the different groups vary slightly.

The Chapari group reports show that in that group, relinquishment of land up to 1927-28 varied between 15 and 20%. However in the next two years the average went down to below 10-10.86 in 1928-29 and 5.85 in 1929-30; for the year 1931 it was still less. The explanation of this relinquishment of land in the report makes interesting reading. It is stated that the population of the group had increased by the coming of 650 families from Eastern Bengal. They had settled in 12 villages in the Mayang mauza. This group had only two *mauzas* and the settlers had settled in one of them. Their settlement was part of the extension of the colonisation scheme which had begun in 1929-30 in the neighbouring *mauzas* of Bokani and Lahorighat. The colonised area adjoined the two 'immigrant' blocks of villages and separated the local Assamese population into two segments. The DC stated that in his tour he sensed fear of an invasion by 'immigrants' on their land among the Assamese. He argued that it was this fear that induced them to give up their practice of fallowing and demand the creation of reserved grounds for them. He informs that the danger was of an imagined nature as these areas marked for colonisation were generally areas where extension of ordinary Assamese cultivation was nearly impossible but the fear

had the effect of ‘changing their traditional outlook’ on land and its cultivation, settlement and relinquishment.<sup>9</sup>

This is interesting because rather than confronting the ‘immigrant’, it was fear that influenced or changed the agrarian decisions of the locals. The officer also reported that the colonisation scheme had been worked in a way that the two populations were spatially divided. At the same time, this development though induced from a fear of invasion is considered a positive one and a departure from what is understood as ‘traditional’. This implies that what the ‘immigrant’ was doing was considered to be modern, market being a factor in his agrarian practice. Thus, a change taking place through the mere flow of ideas and perceptions was something that was welcomed.

In the report of the North Western group, the overall drop in the relinquishment of land since 1925-26 had gone down to below 1%. In the main *mauzas* i.e. Hatichong, Kachimari and Khatwal, relinquishment had been always below 1.5% and had altogether ceased from 1927-28. In other four *mauzas*, there was a drop of 3.38-1.34% in 1921-22 and this fall was maintained with very rare exceptions.<sup>10</sup>

This group had faced the brunt of *Kalaazar* the most and since then had been on a steady path of recovery. In this group, it is only in Hatichong and Kachimari that Mymensinghias had moved; their villages were in the *mauza* Khatwal and had been separated from it to be a part of the new *mauza*,

Laokhowa, formed in 1921-22. Thus, in this group where majority of the population were locals, we see just a degree of difference between the relinquishment of lands.

The report of 'Immigrant' group stated that the entire area in northern part was 'unestablished' in 1918. Here, the area was in essence vacant with very scanty cultivation. Laokhowa *mauza* which was created in 1921-22 had had no relinquishment since then. And, in other areas, the drop in relinquishment between the two settlements was a drastic one. It had almost ceased in this group. However, there was also a block of five villages, a small block where there was no settlers' presence. Here, the cropping and cultivation was 'traditional' and was done by *Lalungs* and *Kacharis* who were surrounded by non-cadastral areas. Relinquishment in this block had also come down as well.<sup>11</sup>

In the Central group report, cultivation had been more of a permanent character and relinquishment had exceeded by more than .46% and the reason behind such relinquishment was the bad quality of *faringati* land in the group.<sup>12</sup> In the south-western group, relinquishment had gone down from 10 to 5% since 1921-22 but in the previous two years, the relinquishment had come down by more than 3%. Interestingly, the area that increased under settled area of land was 83% which was much more in proportion to the increase in population. Further it was distinguished that the difference between the Assamese villages which had *fluctuating* character and East Bengal settler villages which were of

permanent character were getting blurred as their cultivation was getting more and more of a permanent nature.<sup>13</sup>

In these comprehensive reports, where the effort is to look at the overall situation of the areas under review, relinquishment of land which was understood as characteristic of Assamese cultivation is shown as going down in all groups irrespective of the presence of East Bengali settlers. In no group report do we find any mention of a confrontation between the two communities except in one in which a fear of their invasion is explicit. In the rest, it is almost assumed that the influence has been from the moving of East Bengali cultivators even though there are simultaneous descriptions of these *mauzas* where the relinquishment of land has gone down without the presence of 'immigrants' at all. Can we subscribe to this assumption? It would be difficult to decide on an explanation right away as these are indications which have filtered through the discursive lenses of the colonial officials. There are enormous possibilities that many details, thought to be unimportant, escaped due to the way of seeing things. Given this constraint, we shall rely on looking at some other aspects of agrarian changes in order to have stronger co-relations.

### ***Cropping priorities and changes within***

The Chapari group, where the preponderant population was mainly locals with a sizeable presence of Mymensinghians, the character of cultivation is found to be moving towards a permanent nature. Here, this increase is traced from the

increased acreage of *Sali* which is a permanent crop and there is a decrease in the growth of *ahu* which was an occasional crop grown on *bao* land. The decrease of acreage of *ahu* on low-lying *bao* lands was because these lands had come up from beneath the water-level and were gradually being used as *rupit*.<sup>14</sup> In South western group, a similar trend of increase in permanent paddy crop of *lahi* was noticed and along this there was an increase in *bari* crops i.e. betel to bamboo. The *bao* lands were now less used for *ahu* crop, and a second crop of mustard was also grown too.<sup>15</sup> The Central group had a predominantly Assamese population. Here, in the poor *faringati* lands production was low because of the quality of soil. Otherwise, cultivation was gradually moving towards a permanent character as *rupit* crops and double cropping were increasing.<sup>16</sup>

In the 'Immigrant' group<sup>17</sup>, officials discovered that in the event of Assamese cultivator taking up permanent cultivation and giving up the practice of fallowing, a cropping pattern was emerging in his cultivation quite different from that of the East Bengali cultivator. In the low land which is *baotoli*, *bao* would be grown and in the higher levels, *ahu* and mustard. The East Bengali cultivator, on the other hand, would grow jute on *baotoli* and provided it just stuck out of water and remained soft, a second crop of transplanted paddy would also be grown. Thus, the overall difference in the pattern of cropping was

that the settler would make two crops from the *baotoli* lands whereas the Assamese cultivator the *baot* crop only.

Even if, in the case of relinquishment of land, it is considered that the fear of 'immigrants' was a potent factor, the same cannot be said of the cropping pattern in any direct way. In all the groups, the Assamese growing jute was more of an exception than the rule. Their cash crop was mustard. Keeping aside the racial explanation of the Assamese being indolent and unenterprising, an attempt can be made to look for another way of understanding it. Jute required not only intense labour but also capital. This capital was managed by the East Bengali settlers through borrowing, something which they were used to doing in Bengal and they also knew the process of the crop thoroughly. The Assamese cultivator, on the other hand, did not have the assets which he could mortgage to take up this enterprise. He was not in the habit of borrowing and would like to be content with a cash crop of mustard which now had a good market and good price (thanks to the coming of the jute crop). Apart from this, the Assamese was in the habit of labouring in his own farm and would not go beyond the immediate needs of his family. The Assamese household was small and could not provide that amount of labour in the jute field which was just the opposite in the case of the East Bengali household. The East Bengalis would not only use family labour but also employ *kamlaas* who came to work in the jute fields every year. Hence, the choice of crop was based on these factors. It was based

on the agrarian habits of the respective peasant communities, which had so far emerged under different settlement systems. Interestingly, they both seemed to have co-existed as the crops in the market were found to be complimentary. *Basti* produce like fruits, vegetables, domestic fowls and especially bamboo grown in Assamese households found an easy market in the areas where settlements of East Bengali settlers were coming up. Eventually, when East Bengali settlers grew jute and *boro* rice on their settlements, Assamese cultivators grew *lahi* and mustard. Over the years, the market witnessed variety in fare. Jute and mustard went to create a market for the rest of the agrarian products as well rather than displacing any of them.<sup>18</sup>

As two agrarian patterns began to emerge much from the distinctions, problems cropped up for the government. The problem was how to tap revenue from the emerging market-oriented jute economy and also maintain a uniform revenue structure. This concern was quite intense as can be understood from the deliberations of officials in the section below.

### ***Revisiting rules of reassessment***<sup>19</sup>

The Director of Land Records, the Assistant Director of Land Records, the Officiating Commissioner of Assam Valley Division, the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, the Commissioner of Assam Valley, and the Second Secretary of the Government of Assam, in June 1924, had a series of correspondence about the legal scope of obtaining a heavy share of revenue

from certain *mauzas* of Nowgong district before the resettlement that would expire in 1928.

W. L. Scott,<sup>20</sup> the Director of Land Records, was the first to raise a proposal after his assistant had recently inspected the circle. Broadly, after the settlement of 1918-1919 when lands were surveyed and settled and rates were revised, certain *mauzas* of Nowgong district had seen vast changes in settlement owing to the coming of the settlers who were very interested in acquiring lands. In the previous six years, they had obtained land at rates fixed in 1918-1919 but they had increased their value tremendously by an altogether different kind of cultivation and a fair share of which the government was entitled to.

Now, how would the government acquire that? Scott's opinion was that although documents of settlement did not carry any clause of revision until the current settlement, the government could do so with new orders. He argued insistently that increased rates would not deter the 'immigrants' decision in any way and also that they were not into speculating; so an increase in rates would not lead to any speculation, or coming of middlemen. He pointed out that as they were still coming in large numbers the rates of wasteland or waste rates were to be revised immediately for unoccupied and unsettled land and villages undergoing survey and assessment should also take into account such a revision proposal. He also added that care should be taken that these survey operations should not work on the contiguity factor, that they should not propose

enhancement for adjoining areas where cultivation was of a different kind and, that land taken after 1925 should be under the revised rates. As the revision took place in the case of land that was classed under *faringati*, it inadvertently meant a higher rate of revenue for the Mymensinghia settlers.

This was quite a comprehensive proposal to which, in principle, every other official agreed but not without adding their own view on matters. Such official discussions afford an idea of how 'immigrants' and their coming was handled in circuits of revenue administration.

J. Hezlett<sup>21</sup> agreed that, under existing orders, the scope of revision was confined only to unoccupied and unsettled land and villages which had not been surveyed yet. He also calculated that the government, owing to these legal bindings, would lose around Rs 40,000 of revenue and if progressive enhancement was applied in the upcoming settlement, this loss would increase still further until full rates could be applied. He reiterated that it would be suitable to increase the waste rates at once as that would serve to reduce the potential loss of revenue. He added that it could also help in checking the 'immigrants', something that had been communicated to him as a 'problem'. He pushed the issue of classification of lands till the time of settlement saying that as there would be no revision of rates immediately, change in classification of lands was not necessary at the moment.

F. A. S. Thomas,<sup>22</sup> while deliberating upon the issue, went into providing a lot of detail that he gathered from his travels in the areas. It is in these semi-official travelogues that we find descriptions of the countryside where Mymensinghians had settled. The narrative here is essentially that of a sea-change in the landscape and therefore after a point seems exaggerated. Thomas argued that with ample land still available for settlement with ‘immigrants’, the current rate of produce was at least Rs 50 per *bigha* per annum, especially jute (even though its price in this decade was comparatively low). Owing to this, land-price had skyrocketed with previously unsalable land fetching Rs 75 to Rs 150 per *bigha* and not less than Rs 25 in interior areas. Thomas ascribed it not only to intense demand but also because of improved conditions and the crop possibilities which pioneering settlers had shown in the land. He added that the value of crop grown on the south of the Kallang River where the revenue reached maximum up to Rs 1.4.0 was calculated to be between Rs 15 and Rs 40 per annum.

On this basis, Thomas argued that land leased on annual *pattas* could undergo a revision of rates. Accordingly, Thomas stated a differential rate for five *mauzas* depending on their rate of reclamation, proximity to markets, and conditions of roads. Further, he argued that taking all the five *mauzas* into account there was only 40% of land left which could be termed as genuinely of the *faringati* type. From a statement given by Thomas, it can be seen that only

in the *mauza* of Dhing and Juria a substantial amount of land had been surveyed and issued with periodic *patta*. Even in these *mauzas*, the amount of land given under the annual *patta* was comparatively very high. And in the rest of the three *mauzas*, all land leased out was on annual *patta* basis. In all there was 2, 64, 241 *bighas* of land leased under annual *patta* and 72, 846 *bighas* under periodic *patta*.

However, regarding the classification of land, Thomas offered a shortcut. He argued that just like the category *faringati* was now unsuitable for lands brought under plough in these *mauzas*, *rupit* category was also unsuitable as both the crop and the type of land was not what *rupit* generally meant. Thus, the alternative was to reclassify all the *dags* on a fresh basis which, he stated, he knew was out of the question. Therefore, he suggested that the whole classification matter not be bothered with at all. In other words, keeping the whole issue of nomenclature aside, he plainly argued for a 'lenient' increase in the rate which could be applied to the annual *pattas* from the coming year. He argued that this would lead to an enhancement of revenue without any additional cost in its realization.

At the same time, Thomas was very careful to mention that there were certain lots in Geruabokoni reserved exclusively for Assamese, Kachari and Lalung cultivators which, although had benefited greatly from the opening of the area, were not in that stage of development as the 'immigrant' areas.

Therefore rates of revenue were to be different there and would have to be remarkably lower than those applicable to 'immigrant' areas. The proposals finally got through within the month of May and rates of revision in areas that were still unoccupied and unsettled and in villages that had not come under operations of 1918 were applied.

The officials had all sorts of estimates of the increased value of land in those years and the share that the government was entitled to. Accommodating changes in order to enhance revenue through executive measure was not an unknown one. There had been more than one instance where officials had executed orders and then applied for approval of these orders under the rules. But, this was a case of exception. In other cases, all executive orders were for a change that had the potential of enhancing the revenue in future, such as classification of soil. But this was a case where the revenue desired to be realised was in retrospect; it was unprecedented. As no rule in the statuette book allowed for such an enhancement, all previous orders regarding settlement were revisited to find a scope for such a revision but none happened to contain any.

This instance demonstrates how the government did not have a fuller idea of the consequences of migration and how new settlement would unsettle the prevalent pattern of revenue administration. Also, it provides us with an interesting situation where the revenue officials could not reap its 'fair' share of produce as it was caught up in its own rule of law. It was taken as one of

caution by the administration and it tried to verify all rules of assessment and modify those which had the potential to narrow the base of revenue. Thus, the contiguity factor which was a basis of assessing the revenue in village groups was done away with and a village to village survey became officially mandatory in the upcoming survey and settlement work. Throughout this decade, the government's agenda was almost dominated by this concern of catching up with the Mymensinghia settlements with the intention of looking at every possibility of enhancement of revenue.

From this very moment, we can also see certain assumptions making a head start in influencing these decisions. Already in this correspondence, there was an assumption that the 'Immigrants' did not mind paying a high price for anything related to land. This was one of the first stereotypes that informed the revenue policy of the government in the province and district in particular. This decade and this particular district in Assam bore witness to one of the significant developments in the history of twentieth century Northeast India at large. Processes and perceptions of communities and identities that developed in this period continues to be reproduced and reinstated well into the next century, the historical context of which remains to be explored and assessed further.

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***Endnotes:***

<sup>1</sup> Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic conflict: Nationality Question in North-East India*, Manohar, 1990, pp.88

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<sup>2</sup> *From DLR Assam, to Under Secretary*, 6 October, 1925, Revenue B, No. 345/1549, Assam State Archives, Guwahati (hereafter ASA)

<sup>3</sup> For details see, L J Kershaw, *A note on Settlement System of Assam Valley*, Calcutta Secretariat Press, 1899, National Archives of India, New Delhi

<sup>4</sup> Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the Director of Land Records, Assam, Revenue-B, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1925, No. 597-600, pp. 7-11, ASA

<sup>5</sup> This can be drawn straight from the opening lines of the letter of Director of Land Records who was stating his approval for the decision. While the Director was writing his approval for the decision in October, the decision and its details prepared by the Deputy Commissioner to Director of Land Records is dated in August. *From DLR Assam, to Under Secretary*, Revenue B, No. 345/1549, 6 October, 1925, ASA

<sup>6</sup> *Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the Director of Land Records Assam*, Revenue-B, 345/1549, 6 October, 1925, p.10, ASA

<sup>7</sup> Revenue B, December 1925, No. 597-600, ASA

<sup>8</sup> *Assessment Report of North Western Group of Nowgong*, Revenue-A, 1930, No. 145, ASA

<sup>9</sup> *Assessment Report on the Chapari Group*, 8 August, 1930, Revenue-A, No.57, ASA

<sup>10</sup> *Assessment Report of the North Western Group*, 22 January, 1931, Revenue-A, No. 140, ASA

<sup>11</sup> *Assessment Report of Immigrant Group*, 9 April, 1931, Revenue-A, No. 336, ASA

<sup>12</sup> *Assessment Report of Central Group of Nowgong district*, 1929, Revenue-A, No. 97, ASA

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<sup>13</sup> *Assessment Report of South Western Group of Nowgong district*, June 1930, Revenue-A, ASA

<sup>14</sup> *Assessment Report on the Chapari Group*, 8 August, 1930, Revenue-A, No.57,pg. 9 ASA

<sup>15</sup> *Assessment Report of South Western Group of Nowgong district*, June 1930, Revenue-A, pg.10, ASA

<sup>16</sup> *Assessment Report of Central Group of Nowgong district*, 1929, Revenue-A, No. 97,pg. 7, ASA

<sup>17</sup> *Assessment Report of Immigrant Group*, 9 April, 1931, Revenue-A, No. 336, pg.10, ASA

<sup>18</sup> *Assessment Report of Immigrant Group*, 9 April, 1931, Revenue-A, No. 336, pg.10, ASA

<sup>19</sup> *Revenue A*, June 1924, No. 99-107, ASA

<sup>20</sup> *Revenue A*, June 1924, No. 99, p.1, ASA

<sup>21</sup> *Revenue A*, June 1924, No. 100, p. 2, ASA

<sup>22</sup> *Revenue A*, June 1924, No. 101, p. 3, ASA