PAIRING SPARE DEMOGRAPHY WITH SPARE GEOGRAPHIES

Some Historical Reflections on Discourses of Settlement in Late Nineteenth-Century Assam

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Blueprints of Demographic Engineering in Contemporary Assam

On 27th March 2017, the department of Health and Family Welfare (A) of the Government of Assam floated a draft of State Population Policy soliciting comments and observations within thirty days. The moot point of concern, which prompted this measure, is claimed to be the rate of increase in the population of Assam as per Census 2011. The current rate of growth of population in Assam, which is 17.07 percent, is argued to be unsustainable. Apart from citing other parameters that substantiates the continuation of this rate of growth, it underlines right at the beginning that incidence of underage marriage of the age bracket of fourteen to twenty is quite high particularly in *char* areas, tea belts and some tribal areas in the state.

In drawing up this scenario, the report does acknowledge the positive indicators of the State's demography such as higher sex ratio and higher female literacy rate than the national average. However, it argues that the demographic dividend that the State is supposed to reap, owing to the presence of its young population, is not possible in the absence of population planning. Hence, the challenge for such population policy and its implementation has been ascribed to four domains: diverse communities, geographical accessibility, socio-religious beliefs and health related service problems. Within these four domains, the geography of riverine and tea belts is once again underlined and it is indicated that in some communities there is higher incidence of underage marriage and polygamy and that some communities have socio-religious beliefs that are against modern conceptions of family planning (Government of Assam, 2017: 1-6).

Interestingly, while citing the numbers, the report does forward credible references of sources. On the other hand, when it outlines these four domains of specific challenges within Assam, it does not provide any such reference. In the absence of any references, it implies that these challenges are part of common understanding and does not require any credible substantiation. Along with this, certain other features of this draft policy have prompted criticism that it carries within itself an attempt to target particular communities. The *Business Standard* carried an article saying that the two-child policy suggested by the Government of Assam places women at a particularly disadvantageous position (28/04/2017). Additionally, it has also been argued that instead of population engineering through linking child norms to opportunities and benefits from government, improving healthcare and education has been far more successful in containing demographic crisis in developing countries.

As mentioned above, the report quite clearly identifies not only certain communities but also certain geographies where it finds the problem particularly accentuated such as the *char* areas and the tea belts. Reference to these geographies and the population located within these geographies in the draft of this legislation of the current government brings us a rather interesting opportunity to revisit their colonial roots. This paper takes the opportunity to do so.

What are *char* areas and tea belts? Who live there? The draft of the policy is rather polite to just point towards these geographies because that is more than adequate for the audience. So, if you ask this question to anyone in Assam, who does not bear the burden of being politically sensitive or correct, for instance, my mother, the prompt response would be *'Lebaar'* and *'Miyan'*.[2] The quantum of history and diversity that these two terms and their associated imageries can subvert and conceal is not funny. These identities are etched onto the geographies of tea estates and riverine areas just like the Rhino of Kaziranga forests in Assam.

How did these geographies come to be so ethnicized? Why does the current policy draft on population maintain special concerns for these geographies and the demographic section who are perceived to be their residents? The historical exploration that such a question demands has begun only in the last two decades of historical studies of Assam. This paper dwells on some of these existing historical studies that unpack and elaborate on the ecological and geo-political discourses specific to 19th century Brahmaputra Valley that were deployed for its colonization and consequently reconfigured the political geography of Assam into different enclaves of organized

commodity production. Having situated the regional specificity of the logic of colonization, the paper engages with a set of correspondence of colonial bureaucracy and the debate within it that set in motion a demographic change carrying forward the project of colonization of the "spare" geographies of the valley.

Based on this historiographical exercise as well as historical exploration, the paper attempts to demonstrate the perilous continuities and similarities between motives and perceptions behind colonial policy that subverted indigenous conceptions of ecology and the contemporary attempts at demographic engineering as outlined in the beginning.

Mapping British Assam: Applying Scales of Revenue to People and Spaces in the NineteenthCentury

For trade and commerce, the British East India Company needed information and undertook intelligence-gathering about the Brahmaputra Valley as early as 21st August 1788. However, it was not until the 1792 expedition of Captain John Welsh, solicited by the Ahom principality, that serious intelligence gathering regarding the region began. In this direction, Dr Peter Wade, an assistant surgeon on the team of Captain Welsh, had gathered enough material by 1805 to compile a brief statistical account of the history and geography of the region. Formally, this last decade of the eighteenth century is seen as the first significant contact between the British and the region.

These early accounts are impressive intelligence dossier from today's point of view. However, so far as those times are concerned, these reports show the priorities and approach that the Company took while documenting the region. If we leave out works written in the language of the region, this kind of intelligence literature appear to be quite pioneering. However, we would do well to remind ourselves that these were primarily compilations in English language of information related to events, places and people, gathered from primarily indigenous records. In these accounts, even when the official brief of the authorities of British East India Company was not in favour of military expansion, one can see the very template for information was that of military intelligence gathering (Wade, 1927). A historical outline was constructed in order to have a better grasp on the prevailing crisis of Ahom principality and activities of neighbouring kingdoms and communities. A geographical outline was required for geo-strategic purposes. Hence, Dr Wade's description is essentially about nomenclature and classification of

the space known as Assam, primarily in quantifiable terms. Wade's account was the first dossier to draw up Assam in colonial revenue and administrative terms such as districts, *paraganas*, *taluks* and towns, etc. It identified districts and towns on both the banks of the river Brahmaputra and further triangulated the direction of the numerous streams and tributaries of the river Brahmaputra. Place-making in these terms was already at work.

The formal occupation of this region by the British East India Company after 1826 further provided the scope for making the territory of Assam more legible in terms of revenue capacities and potential. It is from this moment onwards that the Company began to demarcate the territory, acquired by virtue of the Yandaboo Treaty, and define the geography and demography of this region. Henceforth, all reports were built upon prior literature, amplifying and enhancing those very templates of information. Hence, these colonial writings became the basis on which this region came to be viewed and understood both by people within and outside it.

Between 1826 and 1838, David Scott, an agent of the Company, undertook all the official arrangements with all the chieftains and Ahom principality. He sought to establish a tributary system in place that would generate revenue for the Company. However, resistance, rampant corruption of revenue collectors did not allow this tributary arrangement to sustain and by 1838 the Company established direct management for the region. Till this period, drawing upon reports such as that of Wade and other official correspondence, the basic demarcation of territory appears to have been on the basis of the tributary arrangements that had been made. It is in this context that Goalpara, Kamroop, Durrung, Nowgong, Assam Rajah (the region later to be known as Upper Assam and Brahmaputra Valley) emerged as districts in the writings of John McCosh in 1837. This very approach of demarcation of territory on the basis of revenue generation and its demography as revenue-paying subjects was the cornerstone of British colonial rule. Any entity whether human or natural falling outside this classification was to be brought within these folds by the British government. The nineteenth century British rule in Assam unfolded itself primarily on this line of governmental thinking. This approach itself was responsible for many demographic shifts that were, perhaps, not intended but happened as a result of this rule.

The first of these demographic shifts took place during the period 1826-1838 when under the protection of British rule, the nobility of 'Assam Rajah' or the Ahom principality attempted to raise revenue, as per the existing traditional levies, in cash. There was a lack of personnel who could maintain and direct an office of revenue

collection in cash, and operate with a court language that was not native to the region (Bengali). As a result, the Company sought to bring landlords and intermediaries and settle contracts of collection with them who were not resident of the concerned areas. The most abrupt change was realization of revenue in cash instead of kind as was the case with the traditional system of *paiks*. Thus, within a few years of the new administration, the conciliatory policy of the British East India Company turned out to be atrocious for the commoner on the ground as intermediaries decided to fleece the toiling tiller and make the most of their short-term tenure. The disgruntled nobility and chieftains, who, owing to their incompetence, were replaced by intermediaries in the new system of documentation, rebelled unsuccessfully in 1828. However, the most common response in this case was the desertion of land by commoners who sought refuge in hills and zones, which were outside the regime of revenue. This resulted in large tracts lying vacant and massive arrears and default in the registers of revenue (Barpujari et al., 1960).

Each Commissioner succeeding David Scott as well as the authorities in Calcutta realized the challenge of striking a balance between continuation of a traditional non-documented regime and the very foundation of their own government in the mercantile principle of maximization of profit through maximum utilization of resources.

By 1838, when the Brahmaputra Valley was brought under the direct management of the Company, the territory began to be demarcated in the following terms: 1) land under rice cultivation; 2) land under village settlement and plantation; and 3) waste as jungles, hills, rivers (McCosh, 1837: 127).The agenda that British rule followed from this period onwards was to amplify the revenue potential of lands under revenue generation and find the best possible means of putting 'Waste', which included diverse ecological terrains, to revenue-generating commodity production. Thus, began the process of conversion of "usufruct commons"[2] into active production geographies, neatly demarcated on the pages of revenue ledgers and physically marked by well-hedged fences, revenue posts and pillars on the ground.

(Un)Settling 'Wastes' of British Assam in the Nineteenth Century

It is in this context that British Assam acquired the epithet of being 'labour short' and 'land abundant' in the parlance of the British East India Company. The departure from this understanding

was to improve the balance between land and labour. Organized production of tea was, thus, the first measure that the British undertook in order to attain this improvement. The terrain chosen for this was all the unoccupied land above the flooding level of the numerous tributaries and the main river channel of Brahmaputra on both its northern and southern banks.This land was situated on uneven topography so that water did not get accumulated at the root of the tea tree. However, the set of Wasteland rules that emerged from this objective was not confined to tea. It began to be rolled out uniformly across the diverse topography of the valley. The inherent logic was not ecological but economic. Any geography that was outside active human occupation began to be categorized and enumerated as 'wastes'. Classification of soil began to be undertaken on the fundamental principle of its nature and scale of productivity. The set of rules that governed such parceling off of lands was known as "Wasteland Rules" that became law of the land on 6 March 1838. By the time Assam was conquered by the East India Company, its monopoly and its mercantile interests had been vanquished by industrial interests in Britain. The Charter Act of 1833 allowed for European capital to own land outside Presidency towns fairly unencumbered. It was around the same time that Francis Jenkins, the newly appointed Chief Commissioner of Assam was busy drawing up rules to invite Europeans to hold 'wasteland' at very nominal rates of rent and with very little conditions on its use. These rules were gradually liberalized in 1854 and then in 1861 under fee simple grants. Such liberal rules led many European planters to buy or hold lands in far greater quantum than was required because 'such wastelands provided them with far greater resources than what land as a factor of production ordinarily denotes'(Guha, 1977:10-12). Interestingly, this discourse and logic of 'wasteland' finds relevance in the legislative battles of mid-twentieth century fought between different political parties based on community lines over the question of land settlement. This illustrates that the logic of 'wasteland' came to be a part of the political vocabulary and the political imagination of the host population of the province as well (Guha, 2006: 166-170).

This logic of governance was a watershed moment as pre-British regimes did not function on such cartographic and survey driven rule of proprietorship. The new regime that sought to interpret the existing physically unoccupied geography of Assam as 'wasteland' with only token regard for 'social meanings' that was endorsed by the residing subject population. The plantation economy flowed from this logic of 'wasteland' which was put to profitable use by commercial

production of tea and in course of this produced an enclave economy and topography that cut right through traditional economic and agrarian geographies of Assam. While the administration adopted the traditional nomenclature of "*basti*", "*rupit*" and "*faringati*" as classification for rural geographies, its underlying economic logic was inverted on its head by introducing the rule of property conditional upon paying revenue (Baruah, 2001: 45-49).

This radical reconfiguration of the meanings of geography of Assam then brought two more demographic shifts:

— the coming of Europeans and their settling down as planters on vast tracts of lands fenced and demarcated through complete subversion and marginalization of indigenous conceptions of the surrounding ecology, thus making the existing rural economy subservient to this new enclave formation.
— the 'import' of impoverished indigenous communities as indentured labour, who were made to settle along the fringes of the plantation estates, sharply demarcated from the Scottish style bungalows of planters but attached to the estate and the whip of the planter, with near absolute immobility and away from the resident population of the region.[4]

Thus, traditional ownership and usage of resources by resident communities, and certain mobilities within this geography were curtailed, while new mobilities of capital and profit-making entities were aggressively promoted. This resulted in a hierarchy that is visible in classification of colonial documents as new economic settlements began to be enumerated as 'tea or special' cultivation and 'ordinary' cultivation. Colonial bureaucracy after decades of trying to frame residing subjects of Assam within these two classifications at the end of nineteenth century relented and shifted to promoting the logic of demographic engineering as an essential requirement for 'improvement' of the province which in turn meant organized commodity production (Kar, 2007: 344).

In course of colonizing the geography of Goalpara, the 'settlement of wastelands' resulted similarly in undercutting a complex and fluid relationship of state and society—something that was signature of that region. Diverse ideas of space and mobility were curtailed and reconfigured by privileging sedentary cultivation of preferably profitable and marketable commodities. The community known as Meches was primarily that of cultivators who would utilize a particular plot of land only for a few years. This was particularly irritating for governing officials as revenue paperwork and staff had

to continually roam with this mobile occupation. Officials attributed this manner of life to the abundance of their surroundings. Thus, if such peripatetic occupation was a problem, then the solution lay in changing the abundance of the surrounding (Misra, 2007: 429).

The riverine area close to the river that became cultivable only during the low ebb of the river in the winter was a crucial part of the arithmetic of subsistence of the resident communities. These lands were used only during that season to grow mustard, a crop that provided among other things the cash that could be used to pay the rent and revenue. The colonial bureaucracy downplayed the unsuitability of the riverine tracts for permanent cultivation in order to expand the revenue base under the Colonisation Scheme that it undertook to create 'orderly' settlements on a premium. The consequence of this kind of settlement was that the East Bengali peasant settlement was exposed to floods in a manner that was only destructive. This colonial policy combined with the construction of railways across the floodplain terrain of the Valley turned the equation of human settlements with the river into an antagonistic one. The policy of land settlement stretched the discourse of 'abundant wasteland' to an unrealistic extent focused solely on maximization of commercial acreage and agrarian revenue. Consequently, permanent settlement of East Bengali peasants in these riverine tracts came in conflict with the arithmetic of subsistence of the cultivation pattern of resident communities and pastoral groups leading to antagonistic equations within the different communities as well but most importantly, it brought about the discourse of floods as a 'problem' within public sphere and was crucial in shaping policies about the river (Goswami, 2010).

However, invoking the logic of 'wasteland' was only one part of the discourse of scripting the idea of colonization. The other part was measuring the capacities of labour and assessing the skills of residing population to the demands of organized commodity production and sedentary cultivation. The analytical departure of the above scholarship has also similarly concurred on the accompanying process of construction of taxonomy of the various communities within the neat lines of 'caste' and 'tribes' in the geography of Assam and the periodic examination of their production caliber for becoming sedentary cultivators.

The residing population eventually failed to pass this test of becoming sedentary ryots as demanded by colonial administration. Colonial bureaucracy argued that the availability of 'abundant' land was the prime reason why the residing population of Assam was

disinclined to practice sedentary cultivation. Hence, it was argued that all measures on the part of the government failed to alter this mode of production, and the colonial bureaucracy was, therefore, compelled to make systematic efforts for demographic engineering in order to reconfigure 'waste' into 'productive' geographies—themuch quoted 'smiling fields' (Baruah, 2001: 109-124).

The 'value' of a 'race' was primarily measured in terms of its availability for organized commodity production.As early as 1840s such characterization could be seen at work in the following correspondence of one Mr. Butler: 'The people are not industrious or enterprising, and will not cultivate more than is sufficient for their own wants; unless Assam is colonized from Bengal, there is no prospect or hope of the province being brought fully under cultivation for centuries to come' (Kar, 2007: 344).

Official circles in Assam by the end of the nineteenth century were of the firm opinion that the task of organized commodity production had to happen through special measures of demographic engineering from outside the province. Such a discourse appears to have converged with the pan Indian survey that initiated from the circular of WW Hunter in 1885. However, it simultaneously opened a debate about the terms and conditions under which such demographic engineering was to be carried out. We proceed now to examine the debate as it unfolded between the provincial government of Assam and the central government of India.

Measuring 'Waste' and Finding 'Settlers': Cotton's Crusade of Civilization in Assam

Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton in his long career in the Bengal Civil Service, served as Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1896 to 1902. Cotton drafted a note in response to a letter from T.W. Holderness, Secretary, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Government of India, in 1898. He compiled from latest reports of cadastral survey data related to quantum of land that was constantly going out of cultivation each year, and tabulated these lands as 'culturable wastes' from 1853 onwards. He then juxtaposed this data with that of revenue realized so far from the same year. He inferred from these statistics that while realization of revenue had increased, there was no corresponding increase in acreage of cultivation.

On the question of a policy of migration, he talked about the inertia in the existing discourse of 'improvement' or 'development' of the wastelands owing to the fear of mortality which arrested the

wheels of 'civilization' in its march towards Assam. He explained this inertia to be emanating from a pathological error of 'race science' in identifying the suitable 'reclaimer'.[5] Drawing upon an episode of experiment in reclamation in Bengal, Cotton explains the fatal flaw. Let us note this in his words:

> The failure of the experiment was due to many causes and among others to the selection of a most unsuitable emigration agent, but it is principally to be attributed to the *error* of importing for the reclamation of jungle in a malarial tract of country a body of cultivators drawn from districts of quite different climatic conditions. Nothing is better known in Assam than that the coolies imported from Behar and the North West Provinces are not only useless for clearing jungle, but that they succumb to malaria far more rapidly than the more hardy and indigenous tribes from other parts. There is every reason to suppose that they would make good cultivators when the land is cleared and the miasma is blown away, but they ought never to be employed as the pioneers of cultivation (Cotton, 1898: 11).

Cotton clearly refuted the official reasons that had been against active colonization, namely 'the obstacles of climate and language and the risks to health' and 'the initial mortality expected'. He called upon numerous precedents of reclamation from different parts of the Empire to demonstrate its inevitability and stressed with utmost emphasis that such notions which were a decade old in the case of Assam could not be allowed to hold anymore the crusade against nature and the necessity of 'reclamation' with almost a lament to the injustice done to the very nomenclature of this experiment and exercise. His own words are appropriate here as well:

> It is the fact that sickness almost invariably attends the breaking up of forest lands, and I have no doubt that mortality will be considerable among new settlers in Assam, even in a comparatively open country. But it is impossible to forego reclamation for ever on such grounds as this. The fight of civilization against nature demands its victims no less than war against human enemy, and land cannot be reclaimed from jungle except at the cost of a comparatively high mortality amongst the pioneers of cultivation. The mortality among the early settlers over large tracts in America, Africa and Australia was frightful, and in India also the State-aid attempt of opening out the Charwa jungle in the Central Provinces some twenty-one years go [sic], and the more recent efforts at reclaiming waste land in Upper Burma, have been attended with a very heavy death-rate […] But the cost of life and treasure has never been allowed to count in the balance, and *the triumphs of peaceful industry must continue to claim their victims*[…].The fact that the opening out of new land is

> attended with many risks makes it incumbent on Government to see that all possible sanitary precautions are taken, but it cannot be accepted as a reason for practically prohibiting the extension of cultivation and civilization (Cotton, 1898: 10).

For Cotton this was a crusade for 'peaceful industry' and 'civilization' and the price of death had to be paid. This could not be an excuse for retreat of 'civilization' or 'cultivation'. Cultivation as imagined and dictated by colonial bureaucracy was akin to civilization. Cotton provided a course of correction in taking forward this industry in the following words:

> The rude and temporary cultivation of nomadic and aboriginal tribes must, therefore, be the prelude to the migration of regular agriculturists[…] It is however, fortunately the case that there are ready to hand other reclaimers in Assam than these imported coolies, and no more efficient agency could be found than some of the indigenous races of the Assam Valley, such as Cacharis, Garos and Lalungs, whose services can be obtained with little cost, to whom employment on tea gardens offers comparatively small attractions, and who are inured to the climate. It is also needless to add that the Naga and Mikir Hillmen in localities where their services can be made available afford a material second to none for undertaking the clearance of heavy jungle. But as cultivators of any sort, they would be quite useless(Cotton, 1898: 11).

At this moment, it would serve us well to leap a decade in time and cross over to Bengal and look at another official observation. F.A. Sachse in his highly informative gazetteer of the district of Maimansingh made the following observation:

> One peculiarity of the district is the number of representatives of aboriginal tribes. Garos number 38000, Hadis 26000, Hajangs 25000 and Koches 32000. They inhabit the Susung and Sherpu villages along the foot of the Garo Hills and are the pioneers of cultivation in the Madhupur jungle. The Garos and Koches do not use the plough but only the kodali and they still prefer to cultivate virgin ground. After cutting the jungle and cultivating two or three crops they make way for a Muhammadan family and start over again (Sachse, 1917: 39).

Sachse is not curious about what kind of arrangement operated between groups of different modes of cultivation which appeared to be opposite to each other. His appreciative tone suggests that he found the arrangement extremely beneficial for the purpose of reclamation and sedentary cultivation. It is highly unlikely that Cotton had any inkling of an established practice in the neighbourhood that seemed to coordinate on its own to fructify colonial objectives that

he desired to see in Assam. This was a case of clairvoyance but also helps in pointing out that drive and experiments of reclamation and increasing acreage of revenue settlements was a product of colonial regime, something that had been in operation throughout the long nineteenth century across the Empire and the case of Assam was not an isolated one.

Nonetheless, after eliminating many groups of cultivators citing various issues of health, climate and habits, Cotton cited Porteous's notes from his Naga Hills diary eight years ago, 22nd April 1890 to forward the candidature of settlers from Deltaic Bengal. Naming Mr. Porteous as his most observant officer, he quoted from his diary in this report which is reproduced here as well:

> The best hope for colonizing the Dhansiri Valley will be by colonisation from Sylhet. The Muhammadans of Eastern Sylhet, who have opened out so much land under the Tippera Hills both in Sylhet and Hill Tippera, and equally so the Manipuris, who are even better as pioneer settlers, would make the very best of stuff for imported colonists, being both industrious and habituated to the kind of climate that prevails in the Dhansiri Valley (Cotton, 1898: 11).

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the 'waste' had been measured and the 'settler' had been identified as well. However, another fundamental aspect of this whole policy was rules of settlement: in other words, what incentives to provide which would prompt migration.

Henry Cotton turned to Bengal and Burma for rules as well that could prompt migration to Assam. In his note under discussion, Cotton built a critique of the ongoing system of settlement by drawing upon several instances of successful colonization from Bengal and the existence of exceptions to the principle of the current system of 'no intermediary' such as in Kamrup district. He argued the following:

> My remarks will, I hope, not be misunderstood. I do not wish to disturb the settlement of the province, which has now adapted itself to the conditions of the people and could not be superseded without violating the fundamental principle that changes ought to be allowed to arise spontaneously[…] I think that the results of the settlement have been very unfortunate, and that there will be need of tender handling in assessment and the adoption of a more liberal policy in the future, especially in the direction of grant holdings and the free permission of subletting by those who are in a position to attract raiyats to cultivate their lands […] The object of my observations in not to propose any such change. But I think I may claim to have said enough to show that the

> extension of cultivation, upon which the advancement of the province depends, can never be accomplished by the prohibition of subletting or under a raiyatwari settlement (Cotton, 1898: 8).

Besides the abstract details of tenurial rights and terms of settlement, Cotton employed the trope of civilization in order to justify not only his appreciation for the system prevalent in Bengal but also of the crucial role an intermediary played in ushering a society towards "progress". Interestingly, he quoted one from the emerging middle class who was schooled in the idea of agriculture that we have referred to earlier. Cotton cited the recorded opinion of Rai Bahadur Jagannath Baruah, partially to make his point but let us cite him in some detail in order to have a glimpse of the discourse prevalent at the receiving end.

> If it is politically important to preserve from extinction the comparatively small class of zamindars almost all over India, it is of vital importance to preserve and to allow the formation of a much larger middle class who in every country in the world always lead the van of progress, enter the learned professions, direct the commerce and trade of the country, man the civil and military services, cultivate the arts and sciences, and, in point of fact, are the leaders of society. It is this middle class, the larger number of tenure holders intermediate between the zamindars and the cultivating raiyats, who have made all the progress that has been made in Bengal—in language, literature, science, arts and commerce and trade. They will be useful at all times, and they are politically more important than even the zamindars, as they possess more influence and are in greater touch with the masses. Having a stake in the country, they will always be on the side of law and order. Their loyalty to the Government is undoubted, and they will be more useful in critical times than a vast mass of hand-to-mouth tenants, having no leaders to guide them. It will be a grave error if the proposed rules, which will undoubtedly deal a heavy blow upon the growth of the middle class, be finally adopted (Baruah, 1897: Appendix).

Cotton's strategy of colonization was summed up in a comment from Mylne from Burma whom he repeatedly cited:

> Judging from our experience, if you want to open out Assam, you must be prepared to give more encouragement and better terms than the Burma Government gives. State emigration I don't believe in, and, at any rate, to begin with, there must be someone between the Sircar and the emigrant to whom the latter can look for money advances and assistance, and in whom he has confidence. My notion is if you could, by offering liberal terms induce wealthy and influential men like […] and others to take up the thing, not for honour and glory, but a commercial undertaking,

> there must be a margin of profit. By this means a few thousand families might be induced to emigrate, and once comfortably settled, they would themselves attract others (Cotton, 1898: 14).

Cotton's crusade and his scheme for the siege through reclamation did not meet official sanction. In a reply to his note, T.W. Holderness, in 1899, dismissed the essential argument made by Cotton. He vehemently defended the need and efficacy of the ryotwari system. While taking on each of the observations made by Cotton, he provided a blow by blow return. He held on to the theory of miasma and resultant high mortality as responsible for the depressed and inhibited growth of Assam. He further underscored the cases of successful colonization held up by Cotton as inadequate and reiterated that absentee landlordism of Bengal was behind the failure of the experiment in Charwa tract and not the choice of the reclaimer (Holderness, 1899: 1-4).

On the question of the scheme of colonization, he instructed to frame fresh proposals keeping the directives of the Government of India in mind. He concluded stating that in the given circumstances, the 'tea industry would seem to be the natural training grounds for immigrants. They are probably better looked after and protected against the climate on a tea garden than they would be on a zemindari grant' (Holderness, 1899: 4).

Cotton decided to refrain from any modification of his proposals and did not pursue the matter further but perhaps decided to respond in another way. He scripted another report highlighting the atrocities of workers on tea estates. This caused major embarrassment for the tea lobby and Government of India. Cotton had to step down from imperial service (Kar, 2007: 349).

Fullers' Incentive and Rules of Reclamation

After Cotton's exit, Sir James Bamfylde Fuller was appointed Chief Commissioner. Fuller was an official who had run the ryotwari system and also the experiment of Charwa tract that Cotton had criticized. Quite a few important changes took place under Fuller's administration with regard to colonization. In 1905, the Government of India called for fresh proposals on the question of colonization in Assam. This initiated another round of discussion in which F.J. Monahan once again represented the essential argument of Cotton. Monahan argued that a scheme for getting colonizers from outside the province was difficult because the suitable candidate, the farmer, from East Bengal was not yet under any substantial demographic

pressure to look outside his province. In fact, East Bengal was also receiving people from Behar and North West Province which filled the lower order of laboring population. More importantly, he once again put forth the argument from Cotton's note that there was considerable demand and practice of subletting and anyone in Assam who had more land than he required for his own needs would sublet it. The reason behind this, according to him, was that subletting land was 'part of his notion of rising in the world' (Monahan, 1905: 2).

Deliberations began with the Government of India in June of 1905 and L.J. Kershaw reported on the matter. By this time another important change in the revenue administration aided towards reaching something of a consensus about the matter. Kershaw in his report to Government of India that surveys had led to reveal the spatial and temporal limits of the idea of 'abundant wastes' of Assam. He then delineated the topography as well as the demographic character of unoccupied lands in Assam valley which so far were clubbed under 'waste'.

> The field which Assam offers to immigrant settlers is certainly very extensive, but is not so extensive as is sometimes supposed. Of the enormous area of waste with which the plains districts of the province are credited, a very large proportion is not suitable for permanent human habitation, consisting of the riverain lands of the Brahmaputra and its principal affluents, which are deeply submerged during part of the year […] Moreover, in some parts of the valley,—notably in the Darrang district,—there are extensive stretches of savannah land between the riveraincountry and the forests that skirt the hills, which lie too high for the growth of crops other than tea. Deducting, however, the riverain areas and these sandy plateaux, there remains a very large area of the country available for permanent cultivation(Kershaw, 1905: 1).

The proposals eventually crystallized and sought a closure in 1908. The rules that received approvals from the Government of India regarding cultivation on unoccupied tracts came down to the following:

1. The reduction of the assessment on wastelands, to induce existing cultivators to extend their cultivation. This had already been authorized.
2. The offer to colonists of a revenue-free term. It was proposed that the power already possessed by the Chief Commissioner to make such an offer should be more freely used.
3. The adoption of a rule to preclude the danger of this offer attracting labour from tea gardens.

4. The offer to tea-garden managers of land on favourable terms on which they might settle coolies.
5. The offer to such managers of the mauzadarship over coolie settlers colonizing waste tracts near their gardens.

The Government of India approved the above in principle with some precautionary directives which were to guard against absentee leases, against alienation. It was further suggested that a *jotedari* system similar to that of Jalpaiguri in Bengal was to be introduced and that facilities were to be given for settlement of areas larger than 50 bighas with groups of tenants under a headman. The most crucial part was that formal rules were seen to be not necessary and instructions under Section 12 of the Land Revenue Regulations could be issued (Notes on Colonisation of Wastelands in Assam, 1908).

The proposals were not totally amenable to the tea estates associations who saw the grants awarded to them as inadequate and this question remained alive in correspondence even in the next decade. However, so far as 'special' measures for 'ordinary' cultivation were concerned, the debate as we can see above concluded rather on an anti-climax. The initiative began with the aim of large-scale colonization with special rules and investment schemes that essentially sought to alter the landholding system of the province. However, in the end, it was reduced to investing the bureaucracy with executive powers to be used to promote colonization.

Ritupan Goswami in his Ph.D. dissertation pointed out how Curzon's stated intention of constituting Eastern Bengal and Assam led to an increase in migration towards Assam from East Bengal (Goswami, 2010: 212). However, there was another set of events, which recent scholarship has underscored, and which does not allow this argument to settle comfortably. Tariq Omar Ali contends that a considerable opposition had gathered in Eastern Bengal, particularly in the jute-growing districts against the Partition of Bengal 1905 onwards on the grounds that this reconstitution led to the loss of trading opportunities and cultural proximity with Calcutta in which traders and professionals, who constituted the public opinion of the jute hinterland of East Bengal, had invested heavily (Ali, 2012: 113-115).

However, one might argue that this opposition was mainly from the middle class and did not correspond to the needs and aspirations of the cultivating class for whom the Scheme might have definitely proved useful. Here we would like to recall that perception of the

destination was very important for prospective migrants, and during this decade, Assam was reeling under the effect of 1897 earthquake and epidemics of malaria and small pox. As mentioned, the earlier ambitious proposal of Cotton did not meet official sanction; therefore, there was no scheme in place that could exploit the advantage brought about by the plan of 1905. Thus, once again, the plan of Curzon can be said to have carried within it the intention of promoting mass migration from East Bengal to Assam, but there is nothing to suggest that such change provided a stimulus to the networks of migration to Assam that had developed so far. So far as the perception of people about Assam is concerned, Tariq Ali demonstrates that as late as 1921, vernacular tracts depicted that Assam was a destination of uncertainty to which people moved only when all means to make a subsistence living had been exhausted in Bengal (Ali, 2012: 38-39).

However, the presence of the prospect of this mass migration for reclamation of land in Assam valley in the government and public sphere during that phase had one negative outcome. It aroused a lurking fear in the public sphere of Assam which quite rapidly organized itself into public opposition towards migration from East Bengal as early as 1915 (Kar, 2007: 350).

This discrepancy between politics and policy needs to be borne in mind. Curzon did have the prospect of jute extension in mind when the territorial redistribution scheme was drawn up but provincial administrative correspondence, as we have discussed, clearly did not formulate any measures to this effect. The effort that was made to promote jute was to distribute seeds and exhibit methods of cultivation at various districts without any effort at settling East Bengal farmers for the purpose. F.J. Monahan informs in his report that jute was grown to a certain extent in all districts of Assam as well as the plains of the Garo Hills. It was grown in Goalpara for export. Very active encouragement was not feasible and that it was stated that it should be left to gradual development (Jute Cultivation in Assam Valley District, 1905).

Concluding Observations

In summation, from our brief survey of late-nineteenth century British Assam, it should be clear that though there was a desirability of colonization through demographic engineering both at the provincial and central levels, a systematic scheme of colonization failed to emerge even after considerable deliberation. Among many other factors, the difference of method and approach on the question

of reclamation was at the heart of such a situation. Moreover, even in the course of elaborate discussion spread over almost a decade, the figure of the Muslim cultivator from East Bengal found favourable reference only twice, and the prospect of his migration was seen to be not good enough as the Muslim cultivator was not destitute enough to forsake his province and migrate. However, by 1907-08, the annual report of land revenue administration of Assam already noted the gradual trickle of settlers from Mymensingh and other districts of East Bengal to Darrang where they were said to be setting 'example in good husbandry'(Annual Reports of Land Revenue Administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907-08: 3).

It is interesting to note that in course of deliberation on colonization policy where so many migration streams were discussed, this trickle did not find favourable mention because it was thought that the tracts of Assam Valley did not hold out enough incentive for them. The quantum of this settlement did not come to notice before the Census of 1911. The point that is being made here is that within the thinking of the provincial government, prevailing notions of the tracts being unhealthy and without much economic incentive did not allow them to take notice of the trickle of settlers from East Bengal and anticipate that it would turn into a torrent. Given the racial taxonomy the government officials subscribed to, such an oversight is not surprising.

However, the fact remains that in course of discussion on colonization, the question of subletting got a certain official recognition as an essential tool for inducing reclamation. This turn in administrative discourse holds importance for us. Similar tendency of acquiring holdings and subletting them with their occupants was noted in East Bengal towards the end of the 19th century within a section of East Bengal peasants (Nakazato, 1994).

Thus, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, both these geographies acquired a rather common feature of agrarian aspirations and ideology within the 'forward' section of its landed peasantry. There were those in Bengal who aspired to acquire and cultivate and had the capacity to do so and there were those in Assam who were open to having tenants in land they had acquired. As seen in policy correspondence, the apparent contrast between land tenure systems of zamindari and ryotwari had been diluted so far as unoccupied tracts of lands were concerned. Thus, the steady stream of migration that Assam province witnessed from Eastern Bengal in the subsequent decades appears to be not so much due to how conditions of Assam were different and advantageous but rather how tenurialconditions similar to Bengal came to be formulated for the

settlement of unoccupied tracts by the turn of the twentieth century.

These unoccupied tracts were primarily the floodplains and *char areas* of Assam, particularly in the lower bank of the Brahmaputra Valley. The settlement rules that were formulated and revised right after the occupation of Assam by the British East India Company throughout the 19th century is responsible for the formation of what is known today as the tea belts of Assam. These geographies and their demography was the product of colonial policy. These spaces were reconfigured and 'peopled' in order to promote what the Crown government and their loyalists thought to be 'progress' and 'civilization'. The policies and measures that were formulated were premised on utter disregard of the social and ecological meanings and the method of resource use that indigenous societies endorsed.

Today, in these very geographies, the 'demographic problem' that the current public sphere perceives and the current government seeks to address, appears to carry a heavy baggage of colonial governmentality. It seeks to introduce legislation premised on an ideal set of standard of living and development that is not in consonance with the economic and ecological realities of these geographies.

Through this empirical exercise, this paper sought to insist on a much nuanced understanding of the ecological and historical setting of these geographies in Assam rather than simply categorizing communities residing in them in parochial terms. Previously, such constructs of identities helped in building an enclave economy and this reproduced itself in a highly differentiated society premised on these identities which in the post-independent era has been embroiled in divisive and internecine conflicts in domains of language, culture and resources. Geographies within the state till today are known by their respective occupants such as tribal belts, tea belts as mentioned in the current population draft. It is highly plausible that if this colonial inheritance is not abandoned in current policy thinking, it might leave behind a huge gulf between the outlays and outcomes of its policies.

Notes

1. *Lebaar,* a corrupt pronunciation of the word labour, is the common term by which most residents of Assam refer to the manual working population of tea estates. Apart from the colonial registers where this population that was brought through indentured system during British rule, this term perhaps gained wider currency from the common practice of this working population standing in market places of small towns across Assam to solicit manual labour for the day during off season of the tea growing cycle. On the other hand, the term *Miyan* is used as a term to address with affection and respect within

Islamic world. Even God is referred to as *Allah Miyan*. In Assam, the term is essentially used in reference to Bengali-speaking Muslims who migrated during British rule from the then East Bengal. The connotation of this usage is usually derogatory; it is a reference to their recent migratory past that has a rather stigmatized position in public memory and history of Assam. This term has also gained currency through the widespread migration of this population from their rural settlements to urban areas where they sell their labour for daily wages or perform various services like pulling rickshaws and so on.

2. I derive this term from Gorky Chakraborty (Chakraborty, 2012).
3. For detailed accounts of critical tea histories, see Behal, 2014 and Sharma, 2011.
4. See Jayeeta Sharma's account which tells us about the role of 'scientific theories' during colonial regime in identifying in a pathological manner people and places that went into designing the roadmap of capitalist transformation in Empire (Sharma, 2006: 445).

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