

## Impact of Line System on Assam Politics during the Late Colonial Period

Dr. Fakrul Islam Laskar,

Assistant Professor of History,

University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya, India.

Email: [fakruldu@gmail.com](mailto:fakruldu@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

The execution of the Line System in Assam in order to restrict the settlements of immigrant from Bengal was one of the important issues that influenced the Assam politics, most particularly the Muslim politics, during the late colonial period. It was first implemented in 1920 in Nowgong district and also in the Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup district. The Bengali speaking immigrants, mostly peasants, resisted against the Line System designed by the district administration and in that they got the support of the Assam Provincial Muslim League. The provincial league under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani condemned the Line System and protested against its implementation. The Muslim League organized meetings, demonstrations and *hartals* throughout the province to get it abolished. The indigenous inhabitants, however, strongly advocated the retention of the Line System and demonstrated their support for the Line System.

Keywords: Assam, Brahmaputra Valley, Line System, Bengal Immigrants, Muslim League.

### INTRODUCTION

The continuous influx of immigrants from Bengal to Assam necessitated devising an administrative measure to restrict the immigrants and to avoid the clashes between the Bengali speaking immigrants and the local people. The Line System was such a measure devised by the officials of Nowgong district in 1916. The main purpose of it was to restrict the indiscriminate settlements by the immigrants. It was first put into action in 1920 in Nowgong district and in the Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup district.<sup>1</sup>

Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri while discussing on the genesis of the Line System in their work writes, “The Line System was a short title for the system by which Muslim immigrants from Bengal, especially from the district of Mymensingh, were required to settle in certain definite areas of the Assam valley districts and were not allowed to take settlement of land under the Government in

other areas. It was, in fact, a device to segregate the Bengali Muslims from the indigenous population including the tribal and backward classes.”<sup>2</sup> The officials devised such an administrative measure because they thought that there were possibilities of the breach of peace because of forceful occupation of land and grazing reserves.<sup>3</sup>

#### RESISTANCE AGAINST THE LINE SYSTEM

The immigrant leaders and the Assam Provincial Muslim League opposed the Line System and urged the government for its abolition and to follow a liberal policy towards the immigrants. Agitations were started throughout the province, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley, for the abolition of the Line System.<sup>4</sup> The Assam Provincial Muslim League under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani (188?-1976) started movement against the Line System. In fact, Maulana Bhasani fought for the immigrants and also for the abolition of the Line System in the legislature as well. The Muslim immigrants organized meetings and protests throughout the province demanding the abolition of the Line System. The Muslim League took the Line System as an opportunity to strengthen its position and tried to take advantage of it. Abdul Matin Chaudhury (1895-1948) termed the Line System as a system of racial prerogative and economic exploitation and urged the Muslims to join the Muslim League if they wanted to be protected.<sup>5</sup>

Maulana Bhasani, a peasant leader, started to unite the immigrants who were mainly peasants to fight against the Line System as well as against the oppression of the government. He set up an association called *The Assam Peasant and Laborer's Association* and himself became its President. The association arranged meetings in various areas of Assam to mobilize people and to protest against the anti-immigrant activities of the government.<sup>6</sup> While speaking in a public meeting held at the Karimganj Town Hall on April 2, 1940, he strongly advocated for the abolition of the Line System. He criticized those who stated that the Muslims did not cherish independence. He said that Muslims would fight with swords against the colonial Government for independence of India.<sup>7</sup>

The matter of the abolition of the Line System was also discussed in a meeting held at Piradhara under the North Salmara police station on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1942 where Maulana Bhasani addressed a meeting of about 500 Muslims of the locality. During his speech he urged the people present there to unite themselves. A similar type of meeting was organized at Kirtanpur under the same police station mentioned above on February 27, 1942 which was attended by about 600 Muslim immigrants. Maulana

Bhasani addressed the gathering there also and the subject matter of the meeting was same as noted above.<sup>8</sup>

The resistance against the Line System did not remain within the Assam Valley only. It reached to the Surma Valley as well. One important aspect of the movement against the Line System was that it now began to attract other Muslim organizations such as *The All Assam Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind*, *The All Assam Immigrant Association* etc. An informal meeting of the Executive Committee of the *All Assam Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind* was held on the night of 30<sup>th</sup> January 1945 at the Nayasarak Mosque of Sylhet town where about 15 members were present. A number of resolutions were reported to have been adopted at that meeting including the demand for the abolition of the Line System in Assam.<sup>9</sup>

*The All Assam Immigrant Association* was reported to organize a public meeting at Hamidabad on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1944 under the presidency of Maulavi Khondaker Momtazuddin, an advocate of Judges Court, Gauhati. Maulavi Khondaker Momtazuddin and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani addressed the gathering emphasizing the need for the abolition of the Line System. They termed the Line System illegal. The meeting passed the following resolutions:<sup>10</sup>

- a) To move the Government of Assam to abolish the illegal Line System.
- b) To release reserved lands for the settlement of homeless people instead of using them as grazing fields.

The Line System was also discussed and condemned in the 5<sup>th</sup> session of the All Assam Muslim Students Federation which was held on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May 1945 at the Madrasa field of Goalpara town under the presidency of Chaudhury Khaliqzaman (1889-1973).<sup>11</sup> Chaudhury Khaliqzaman in his presidential speech while discussing the Line System said that it was intended for the satisfaction of a few people and not for the well being of the whole population. He did not find any reason of keeping so much acres of waste land unused and said that it would not only satisfy some needy people but would have helped much in solving the economic problem of India.<sup>12</sup>

The Assam Provincial Muslim League organized several meetings condemning the Line System and demanding its abolition. One such meeting was organized on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1944 at the Dhubri Town *Idgah*. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani presided over of the meeting. About 300 Muslims including some students attended that meeting. The meeting passed a number of resolutions and the most important resolution was the condemnation of the Government of India's program of importing laborers from the United Provinces to grow foodstuffs in Assam. It urged the Government of India to

abandon the program immediately and that the land in Assam should be settled at once with the immigrants from Bengal numbering about 8 lakh by abolishing the Line System.<sup>13</sup> The Muslim League meeting that was held on December 9, 1944 at the Goalpara Madrasa ground also passed various resolutions including the abolition of Line System in Assam and protesting against the Government of India's proposal to import cultivators from the United Provinces and give them land to grow more food.<sup>14</sup>

The Muslim League called another meeting at Curzon Hall, Gauhati on January 28, 1945 with Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani in the Chair. About 1000 persons including about 525 delegates from different parts of Assam were present in the meeting. Some important resolutions were passed in the meeting:<sup>15</sup>

- a) Disapproval of government resolution dated January 15, 1945 regarding the Land Settlement Scheme.
- b) A resolution pressing the Government for abolition of the Line System was also passed.

#### INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ON IMMIGRATION AND THE LINE SYSTEM

The indigenous public opinion was against the immigration of Bengal peasantry. They advocated for the retention of the Line System. The *Assam Samrakhsini Sabha* strongly opposed the settlement of the immigrants in Assam and voiced the Assamese Hindus' opinion against the immigration. It viewed the settlement as a threat to Assamese race and culture. However, they were ready to take a liberal stand towards the immigrant settlers if they accept Assamese language and culture.<sup>16</sup> Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (1885-1967), the president of the *Assam Samrakhsini Sabha* submitted a memorandum to Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) during his Assam visit in which he elucidated the following points:<sup>17</sup>

The Bengali Hindu and Muslim who run at one another's throat in their own province, are acting in one in Assam in this respect not with a view to fighting for the cause of national freedom but for establishing their Bengalee kingdom in close cooperation with the British Government. There has been a serious setback to the process of assimilation with the Assamese. The Mymensinghia immigrants who had voluntarily come forward to identify the interest with those of the Assamese language are now persuaded to give that up and are forced to read Bengalee.

But much before the submission of memorandum to Nehru, there was the instance of anti-Bengali activities of the *Assam Samrakhsini Sabha*. It held a meeting on January 16, 1936 at Athgaon which was presided over by Srijit Ratna Kanta Barkakati, a *Mauzadar* of Laharighat Mouza. Madhab Chandra Bezbarua of Gauhati, Chandra Kanta Barkakati of Athgaon, Mohendra Nath Phukan and Khagendra Narayan Rajbangshi, a teacher of the local Middle Vernacular School, delivered lectures in

the meeting. They urged people to agitate against the establishment of the Bengali School at Athgaon, to boycott the Bengali shopkeepers and the medical practitioners and other settlers in all matters, to devise means to oust Non-Assamese from Assam and also to give up the dress and the language of Non-Assamese.<sup>18</sup>

The executive committee of the *Nowgong District Hindu Sabha* on August 12, 1941 criticized the diminishing number of population of Hindus, Christians and Buddhists in Assam. It also condemned the arbitrary instruction of the Government of Assam and erroneous methods of counting, sorting and classification of census (1941) operation and strongly protested against the high handed action of the Saadulla Government in curbing the natural right of the people for recording the religion they follow.<sup>19</sup>

V. D. Savarkar<sup>20</sup> during his Assam visit addressed several gatherings in Assam. In Gauhati while presiding over the meeting of *The Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha* on November 27, 1941 he advised the Hindus to resist all attempts of converting Assam into Pakistan. He further suggested the Assamese Hindus to be free from the mental slavery of the 'Congressite creed'. He urged the Hindu leaders to be united and put immediate execution of a scheme which would attract the Hindu hill tribes in and around Assam to settle on those areas which were opened out for colonization.<sup>21</sup>

Savarkar's statements and his concern on Muslim immigration had been published in the *Assam Tribune* in its issue of 5<sup>th</sup> November 1943. Mentioning the influx of the Muslims into Assam from the neighboring districts as abnormal, Savarkar said that the influx amounting to several thousands of men, women and children constituted not only provincial but a Pan-Hindu menace. He continued to say that the Hindu public outside Assam was not yet sufficiently aware of the Muslim intention of turning Assam into a Muslim majority province. He said that there had been efforts by Muslims since long to send Muslim peasants from Bengal to Assam. He exhorted the Hindus of Assam to stand up boldly and protest against every little design which aimed to undermine the Hindu majority in Assam at a time when the Muslims were blatantly claiming that Assam must be turned into a part of Pakistan. According to him, the Hindu Ministers should bring pressure on the Government to drive out even forcibly the Muslim immigrants pouring into Assam and also to provide every encouragement and protection to Hindu settlements on the uncultivated land. He also said that the Hindu capitalists, land lords and industrialists should set on foot an organization to induce Hindu agriculturists, artisans and workers from the indigenous people and also from outside Assam to secure land and settle down in Assam.<sup>22</sup>

The Line System issue was discussed also at the *Kamrup Kshatriya Sanmilani* held on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1944 at Sarupeta in Barpeta Sub-division. In the presence of about 200 people, the following resolutions were passed:<sup>23</sup>

- a) The Line System must be preserved.
- b) The reserve lands should be kept intact.

So, the indigenous public opinion was for the continuation of the Line System. It opposed the immigration from Bengal and it was voiced through various organizations from time to time during the late colonial period.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the Line System had great impact on Assam politics. The issue of Line System actually communalized the politics of Assam and the Muslim League was the great beneficiary of it. The agitation against the Line System helped the Assam Provincial Muslim League to extend its base on the Bengali speaking peasantry. The Muslim League tried to use the feelings generated against the Line System in its favor in the province especially in the Brahmaputra Valley. Abdul Matin Chaudhury who failed to make any headway in the Surma Valley for the Muslim League turned his attention towards the immigrants from Bengal in the Brahmaputra Valley. He got the support of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani in that regard. Maulana Bhasani who was fighting for the immigrants got Muslim League as the platform to press for the rights and demands of the immigrants. The immigrant peasantry also had as such no powerful organization to fight for them. The assurance of the provincial league leaders to work for the abolition of the Line System and also to protect their language and culture convinced them to join the Muslim League.

It could also be seen that the issue of immigration and the subsequent Line System and eviction gradually got mixed up with the issue of the creation of 'Pakistan' and the demand for the inclusion of Assam in the proposed 'Eastern Pakistan'. The Assam Provincial Muslim League got a ready-made tool in the shape of immigration, Line System and eviction and exploited the opportunity in the best possible way to strengthen its stand in Assam. These elements proved very useful for the Muslim league in Assam. But the demand for the inclusion of Assam into Eastern Pakistan made the indigenous leadership worried and compelled them to believe that their national future was doomed. That concern for future made them hostile to immigration.

The question of the abolition or continuation of the Line System remained one of the main issues of Assam politics during the late colonial period. The issues of immigration and the subsequent Line System were actually economic and administrative problems but because of some organizations, these became communal and political issues.

---

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

- <sup>1</sup> *Report of the Line System Committee*, Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1938, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>2</sup> Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *Assam Muslim Politics and Cohesion*, Delhi: Mittal Publication, 1985, p. 23.
- <sup>3</sup> Arun Chandra Bhuyan and Sibopada De (eds.), *Political History of Assam*, vol. II, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2008, p. 309.
- <sup>4</sup> Atful Hye Shibly, *Abdul Matin Chaudhury (1895-1948): Trusted Lieutenant of Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, Dhaka: Juned A. Choudhury, 2011, p. 103; see also, Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North-East India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990, p. 96.
- <sup>5</sup> D. Pandey, 'The Muslim League Politics in Assam (1936-1947)' – *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 7<sup>th</sup> Session, Pasighat: 1986, p. 475.
- <sup>6</sup> Abid Bahar, *Searching for Bhasani, Citizen of the World: The Life and Times of Earnest (Mazlom) Leader Mawlana Bhasani*, USA: Xlibris Corporations, 2010, p. 105.
- <sup>7</sup> Dev and Lahiri, *Assam Muslim Politics*, p. 37.
- <sup>8</sup> File No. 287, year, 1942, Political History of Assam Record (henceforth PHAR), Assam State Archives (henceforth A.S.A.), Guwahati.
- <sup>9</sup> *Abstract of Intelligence Assam Police*, Sylhet, 7.7.1945, File No. 18, Year 1944-45, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, Goalpara, 22.1.1944.
- <sup>11</sup> Chaudhury Khaliquzzaman (1889-1973) became the President of the All India Muslim League after M. A. Jinnah relinquished the position of the President. He also remained the Governor of East Pakistan from March 31, 1950 to March 31, 1953.
- <sup>12</sup> *Abstract of Intelligence Assam Police*, Goalpara, 26.5.1945, File No. 18, Year 1944-45, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, Goalpara, 2.12.1944.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, Goalpara, 16.12.1944.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, Kamrup, 3.2.1945.
- <sup>16</sup> File No. 741, year, 1940, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>18</sup> File No. 285, year, 1935-38, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>19</sup> File No. 741, year, 1940, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>20</sup> V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966) was the president of the *All India Hindu Mahasabha*.
- <sup>21</sup> File No. 741, year, 1940, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.
- <sup>22</sup> File No. C297/46, Part-II, Year, 1946, Confidential B, A. S. A., Guwahati.
- <sup>23</sup> *Abstract of Intelligence Assam Police*, Kamrup, 6.5.1944, File No. 18, Year 1944-45, PHAR, A.S.A., Guwahati.