

Effects of Immigration and Socio-Economic Status of Peasantry in the late 19th and early 20th century: A Case Study of Bijni Raj Estate.

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Abstract: Migration from one place to another is a human nature. People since ancient period of time had immigrated towards different parts of the world. During the colonial period the Bengali farmers had emigrated towards the Bijni Raj Estate in particular and Goalpara district as a whole. Bijni Raj Estate was actually the largest zamindari estate of undivided Goalpara which cover the maximum area of Goalpara district. The Bengali immigrants were mostly agriculturist and they were encouraged by the colonial regime, the zamindars and the moneylenders to clear the wasteland and the jungle for cultivation. These emigrants had migrated from East Bengal to a large extent and started cultivation with their hard working nature and cultivation techniques. Thus the land hungry and hard working immigrant cultivators of East Bengal pushed out the indigenous Koch, Kachari, Mech and Rajbangshi peasants from the agricultural work. The present study is an attempt to discuss about the background prepared for the immigration of Bengali farmers and their impact on Socio-Economic life of the indigenous peasantry of Bijni Raj Estate.

Keywords: *Bijni Raj Estate, Immigration, Peasantry, Socio-Economic Status, Zamindars.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Bijni Raj Estate was actually a Zamindari Estate of undivided Goalpara district of Assam. There were twelve permanently settled estates in the Goalpara district at the time of permanent settlement. These permanently settled estates were included in the six zamindari, namely Bijni, Gauripur, Mechpara, Chapar, Karaibari and Parbatjoar.[1] Bijni Estate was the earliest one among these six zamindari. One descendent of Koch Royal family Chandranarayan alias Bijit Narayan was the founder of Bijni Raj Estate, which at that time comprised of twelve parganas, viz. (a) Habraghat (b) Khuntaghat (c) Mechpara (d) Chapar (e) Karaibari (f) Parbatjoar (g) Ghurla (h) Jamira (i) Tarai (j) Gola Alamganj (k) Kalumalupara (l) Alamganj.[2] Starting from Bijit Narayan, the founder of Bijni Raj Estate, many rulers from this ruling family ruled Bijni Raj Estate to the abolition of zamindari by the government of Assam in 1956 A.D.[3] With the passing of time many jotedars or middleman came to existence under the zamindari of Bijni Raj Estate.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Goalpara was a historically liminal and fluid space, located between the politically more compact colonial provinces of Assam and Bengal, and sharing a cultural and historical memory with these regions as well as with the northern polities of Bhutan and Tibet. As a Zamindari Estate of undivided Goalpara district the ruler of Bijni Raj Estate had the right over the land within their territory. The original inhabitants of Bijni Raj Estate were Koches, Kacharis, Rajbangshis, Rabhas, Bodos and Garos.[4] The rulers of Bijni Raj Estate put the burden of different kinds of taxes over them. But the land revenue collected from indigenous people was very less. In order to collect more revenue and to increase the profit the rulers of Bijni Raj Estate encouraged cultivators from the East Bengal. The immigrants were land hungry peasants, of whom an estimated 85 percent were Muslims. It was not in the case of Bijni Raj Estate only, but same thing prevailed in the other zamindari of Goalpara district also. At that time large tracts of land were left uncultivated and unploughed. Zamindars of Permanently settled areas established these East Bengal immigrants in these fertile uncultivated char areas in order to collect more revenue.

The immigrant population was attracted by the presence of the char lands which were and are situated in the riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra. The jotedars having jotes in the fertile tracts of Brahmaputra put these for auction to the highest bidder.[5] Moreover those who could afford to pay heavy Salami, in addition to rent were allowed to take up land in detriment of those who were already in possession but were unable to satisfy the rapacity of those jotedars.

II. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF PEASANTRY UNDER BIJNI RAJ ESTATE

Socio-economic status of peasantry under the Bijni Raj was satisfactory in general. But it cannot be said that tenants of all categories were happy under the administration of Bijni Raj. Those tenants whose right over the land was not permanent were the dissatisfied group of cultivators. There were grievances also about the rate of revenue rent to be paid to the zamindar. The rate was revised from time to time though not very frequently. The tenants practically had no additional source of income except agriculture. Price of agricultural products was very cheap. Hence the tenants could not save handsome amount of money. Whatever amount they save was spent on marriage, *sraddhya* and other social ceremonies. So they could hardly pay the rent to the zamindar. In addition to these there were occasions of crop failure, which hit them hard. Many poor tenants could not pay the annual land revenue (rent) every year. Accumulation of arrear let them to greater disaster.[6] The peasants under the Bijni zamindari had to pay different kinds of taxes (Abwabs) in addition to land revenue. The burden of these Abwabs was unbearable for the peasants who could not pay even the land revenue regularly.

Apart from economic condition of peasants when we go to discuss about the social condition of peasants of Bijni Raj Estate it is necessary to discuss about the different categories of tenants. According to report of Mr.R.C.Sen, *Dewan* of Bijni Raj Estate, which was submitted to A.J.Laine,(D.C. Goalpara) there were three kinds of tenancies in the Bijni Raj Estate. These were - (a) '*Patrik Sali*' tenants, (b) Occupancy tenants and (c) Ordinary tenants. The tenants who paid rents at a fixed rate were known as *Patrik Sali* tenant. The ryots who enjoyed lands at fixed rates were entitled to get *pattas* for their land. The Second category of tenants were called occupancy tenants. A tenant who cultivated of held land for a period of 12 years had a right of occupancy over the land cultivated by him. He might not have *pattas* for the land he cultivated. But so long as he paid the rent for the land he was a genuine tenant. The third category of tenants were known as ordinary tenants. They were also called '*Korsha ryots*'. These tenants were subdivided into three classes- (1) Tenants paying rent in money (2) Tenants paying rent in kind. These tenants were called *Chukani* tenants, who paid annually certain fixed quantity of paddy per *bigha*. (3) *Karari Ashu* tenants- these tenants cultivated on yearly basis. They did not have a fixed holding. Their names were entered in the separate *touzi*, and as soon as the crop was raised, the land became *Khas*. *Karfa* or under tenants were not recognized by the Bijni Raj.[7] These three classes of tenants were not allowed to cut any tree in their own holding without the permission of the Estate. They had no right to construct permanent structure in their holdings.

III. EFFECTS OF IMMIGRATION ON THE SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

The migration of thousand of cultivators from Eastern Bengal in the early decades of the twentieth century altered the demography and the regional economy of Goalpara. By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial state's drive for agrarianisation was showing visible results in the district of Goalpara. Large stretches of forests, woodland, 'wastelands' and cultivable areas had been measured and classified into fairly distinct geographical domains. Colonial records tell us that between the last decades of the nineteenth century, the 1880s and the 1890s, and the 1920s, the extension of the limits of arable land, along with the 'colonisation of wastelands' scheme, had effected significant changes in the social order of the region.[8]

Unlike the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley, the practice of leasing out land to men with capital to organise reclamation had been resorted to by the Bijni Zamindary Estate of Goalpara from the early nineteenth century onwards.[9] It was the time when whole Assam was under the Raiyatwari system, except Goalpara and Cachar. Only the Goalpara and Cachar were under the Permanent Settlement System. At the turn of the century in Goalpara out of a total area of 4433 square miles, the area under cultivation was only 2143 square miles, the rest being 'waste lands', the greater part of which was cultivable.[10]

The 'Wasteland Scheme' that was introduced in Goalpara to counter this trend was part of a larger concern of the state with the settlement of the uncultivated areas of the province of Assam. The disappointment of rural peasantry coincided with the late nineteenth century perception of land as 'a quantifiable measurable object of knowledge, and a resource to be controlled and improved, in the colonial imagination.[11] The colonisation of wastelands project had several elements, including the categorisation of land into 'waste' and 'arable' the encouragement of immigrant cultivators from neighbouring regions into Goalpara, and the strengthening of the jotedar class, indicating a gradual hardening of the boundaries between tenurial strata in Goalpara. The introduction of permanent cultivation into areas which were identified as 'wastelands' was a process that had begun from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Jotedars continued to be classified as 'reclamation' tenants well into the twentieth century, as colonial officials identified reclamation as the main purpose for the creation of jotes.....in a pioneering district like Golpara'. In several estates, this class further strengthened its position by initiating the extension of the boundaries of settled agriculture. This was particularly true for the estate of Bijni, where the jotedar was still the 'enterprising cultivator who paid a prospecting visit to a likely piece of waste land and if his impressions were

favourable, approached the zamindar for permission to settle.’ The land settled with jotedars by the zamindar of Bijni, was entirely wasteland.[12] He remained, therefore, the primary agent for creating a settled agrarian order in the district. The actual cultivator very rarely holds his fields from the zamindar or superior landlord ordinarily he is the subtenant of a man called the jotedar and sometimes he is a subtenant of a subtenant.

There were very few jotedars in Bijni, the largest estate in the Goalpara district, at the turn of the century and large areas of the estates were still under alternative forms of cultivation. From the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Goalpara’s society was becoming subject to a new set of pressures, which led to an extension of the public space and of the domain of colonial law in the district. This section looks at the phenomenon which appears to have set in motion much of these changes- the unprecedented migration of thousands of cultivators from the plains of eastern Bengal.[13]

Migration of cultivators between the region of eastern Bengal and the district of Goalpara was a characteristic of the local economy during the pre-colonial period and had continued into the colonial period as well. The pattern of migration had, however, remained primarily a seasonal one, linked to the demand for labour during the jute season. In the early twentieth century cultivators from Bengal were being ‘invited by the offer of special conditions’ to settle in the extensive wastelands of Goalpara, and settlement officials had no doubt the Bengali colonists would have come forward in very considerable numbers to take up blocks of land on zamindari tenures, with the concession of a revenue free period.[14] Colonial records pointed out that while there was a migration of cultivators from Mymensingh and other districts of eastern Bengal between 1905 and 1907, it did not appear to have affected the proportion of population to land and a steady annual immigration of about 2000 would be required to maintain the 500000 immigrants of 1901 into Goalpara at their existing strength. According to the census of 1921, nearly 300000 cultivators had migrated to the province of Assam, of which 141000 had settled in Goalpara alone. Of this 141000 the highest figure of 78000 was Mymensinghia cultivators.[15]

The availability of cultivable land and the migration of cultivators from Eastern Bengal in such large numbers emerged as significant determinants of the nature of tenurial relationships in Goalpara in the early twentieth century. In several estates of Goalpara district, the migrant cultivators had gradually established themselves as ‘de facto’ jotedars over whole regions, who eventually coalesced into settled communities. In Bijni, for instance, where the cultivators had previously sometimes held the land directly under the zamindar, jotes were now being increasingly settled with immigrant peasants.[16]

Zamindari records denied any unreasonable increase in rent in the post immigration period, and instead suggested that only a very small number of tenants have been affected by this and the amount at stake is very small.[17] The petitions from the older tenants of the zamindari estates protesting against rent enhancement and subsequent ejections during this period indicate that these conditions affected both the Chukanidars and the Jotedars. A petition from the jotedars of the Dihi Dolgoma village of Habraghat pargana in the estate of Bijni attributed the several rent suits in the region to the migration, and questioned the right of the Rani of Bijni to eject them from holdings held by them in perpetuity over 100 years. The petitioners accused the zamindar of having ‘repeatedly brought suits against the raiyats for arrears of rent as well as ejection’, and pleaded for a sanad, which would secure their rights from any future invasion of migrants. Another petition from Thanda Ram Das and other jotedars of the Khuntaghat pargana objected to the new surveys being carried out after the settlement of wastelands in the region, and feared a further increase in rents after having already suffered at the hands of the Tehsildar for refusing to meet his exorbitant demand.[18]

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus it can be concluded that the migration of the East Bengal farmers to the Bijni Raj Estate and Goalpara district was as an upshot of various circumstances and reasons, viz; the vast uncultivated land, the British colonial legislation, for better livelihood and the need of time resulted in permanent settlement of these emigrants. These agricultural people had contributed greatly towards the betterment of the agriculture of this valley. The immigrant farmers were hard working, made excellent cultivators, and had taken largely to the growing of jute. They may be called enterprising cultivators. They were ready to offer higher rate of rent to the zamindar or jotedars. The hardship they experienced at their home land turned them desperate, while the Koches, Meches and Rajbangshis, who composed the main indigenous classes of population, were easy going and were in most cases unable to satisfy the greedy land holders. Thus they were over shadowed by the immigrant tenants.

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