



THE ECONOMIC ASPECT OF IMMIGRATION INTO ASSAM



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ABSTRACT

People have a tendency to migrate from one place to another in search of better livelihood. Of course there must be some reasons which motivate them to leave their born place. The immigration into Assam mainly from Bengal/ East Pakistan/ Bangladesh has a serious effect in the economy, polity and culture of Assam. Though in the British period and prior to British period, there attended many streams of migrated people in the land of Assam, but this recent and latest section of immigration has highly altered the demographic profile of the state with long lasting economic, political and societal consequences. This paper is about how Assam is effected by this immigrant people economically with a glimpse of both positive and negative concerns.

KEY WORDS: Migration, Immigration, Bangladesh, Economy, Assam

1. INTRODUCTION

Human history is the history of people's movement from one place to another. When people move from one place to another there are certainly some influencing factors economic, political and environmental. Immigrants are driven to leave their inborn place for variety of reasons including lack of access to local resources, a desire for economic prosperity and political disturbance or natural disaster. Migration or immigration is basically led by economic cause. When considering the economic aspect of immigration to the discussion, there may be seen some impacts in the overall picture: i.e. impact on aggregate size of economy, impact on wages and employment.

2. OBJECTIVES

It is important to identify the most influential part of immigration that is the economic aspect which is a serious issue of concern and study. This article is an attempt to understand the economic aspect of immigration, how economy is affected and influenced by the flow of immigration and its impact to the present sovereign entity where the migrants live and also its affect to the native

country of the same. Relating to this specific objective the paper will try to illustrate the condition and affect in Assam's economy by the influx of immigrants from particularly erstwhile East Bengal, East Pakistan and present Bangladesh.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper is a qualitative and analytical in nature based on secondary sources of data. Books, journal articles, various government reports including Census of India, Economic Survey of Assam, White Paper on Foreigners Issue and periodicals are used for the arrangement and reference of data and facts. Data are shown using tabulation.

4. MIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION-DEFINITION, CONCEPT

There are three comparable concepts- migration, immigration and emigration where the words migration and immigration and migrants and immigrants are often used interchangeably. But terminologically all the three words carry distinctive implications and uses.



Simply migration means to move from one place to another. Immigration is a movement of people into a sovereign land which is not native to him for permanent residence. Concise Oxford Dictionary defines to 'migrate' as "to move to settle in a new area in order to find work" and to 'immigrate' means "come to live permanently in a foreign country". According to the Merriam- Webster Dictionary the verb 'migrate' means "to move from one country, place, or locality to another" and 'immigrate' means "to enter and usually become established; especially: to come into a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence". The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a migrant as 'a person who moves regularly in order to find work especially in harvesting crops' while an immigrant as 'a person who comes to a country to take permanent residence'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a migrant as 'a worker who moves from one place to another to find work' and an immigrant as 'a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country'. Although 'immigration' and 'immigrant' seem to be more appropriate to refer to international migration and international migrant, these words can be used interchangeably because cross-border migration from Bangladesh is not always permanent in nature (Nath & Nath, 2010). Conceptually there are two factors called 'pushing' and 'pulling' to explain the meaning of emigration and immigration. According to Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics, Emigrants are pushed by the war or starvation and immigrants are pulled by freedom or job. Immigrants typically provoke the hostility of the native population, who accuse them of taking their jobs, unauthorized using of their resources or undermining their culture. As of 2005, the United Nations reported that there were nearly 191 million international immigrants worldwide, which was about 3 percent of the world population (Global Migration: A World Ever More on the Move, 2010). In 2013 the United Nations estimated that there were 213,522,215 immigrants in the world which is approximately 3.25 percent of the global population (Chalabi, 2013). As report in 2005, 60 percent of the immigrant population lived in developed countries while rest 40 percent lived in developed countries.

5. PROFILE OF IMMIGRATION INTO ASSAM

The history of Assam has been witnessing different scheme of migration throughout the time. In 1874 Assam emerged as a full-fledged province of British India. Since then immigration into Assam is being a subject of important consideration. Assam's immense economic potential, coupled with the reluctance of the indigenous

people to do toilsome and hard work, and absence of capital and entrepreneurship made such immigration imperative and the very heavy density of population and pressure on land in the neighbouring Bengal intensified the trend (Dass, 1980). In the early years of nineteenth century it witnessed a different phenomenon with an extremely far-reaching consequences. The vast expanse of cultivable wastelands in Assam attracted a large number of Muslim farm labourers and cultivators from the adjoining districts of Bengal, particularly Mymensingh, where lands were scarce and they soon settled in the districts of Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong (Kar, 1997). Within two decades their numbers rose to several lakhs and this brought into confrontation two communities and races with distinctly different ways of life. This migration was basically economic in character but also became an administrative and social issue, causing in the Assamese Hindu mind an apprehension of being numerically and otherwise swamped by the newcomers. But they refused to accept any restriction on their right to transfer land to those people (Kar, 1997). Since the late 1920s, the Assamese sentiment against immigration assumed a more crystallized form and in the post-independence period the issue gradually became one of the most potent political issues in the state leading to perennial tension, and also, sporadic violence and bloodshed (Sharma, 2012).

Between 1901 and 2001, the population of India grew by 331 percent while the population of Assam grew by 710 percent. The difference in growth rates can mostly be explained by large scale migration of people from other parts of the subcontinent - particularly from densely populated neighboring country of Bangladesh (Nath & Nath, 2010). Partition of the country led to more immigration. Although "illegal migration" or/and "illegal immigrants" (particularly from Bangladesh) are very much a part of the public discourse on society, polity, and economy of Assam, there is some haziness as regards the precise meaning of these terms (White Paper on Foreigners Issue, 2012).

Section 2(1) (b) of the Citizenship Act of 1955 defines an "illegal migrant" as a foreigner who entered India-

- (i) Without a valid passport or other prescribed travel documents, or
- (ii) With a valid passport or other prescribed travel documents but remains in India beyond the permitted period of time.

The immigrants from Bangladesh have been entering Assam on purely economic reasons. Bangladesh has been suffering from excessive population growth and

subsequent crush on natural resources. For the reason there is a crisis of economic opportunities and people have to move from outward of Bangladesh. Traditional economic theories suggest that differences in current wage rate and land-man ratio between the place of origin and

the place of destination could be the main motivating factors for migration (Nath & Nath, 2010). Table 1 shows the Average daily wages in Assam and India in the year 2002 and 2003.

Table 1: Average daily wages in Assam and All India: 2002 and 2003

Types of wages	2002				2003			
	Nominal (Current Rs.)		Real (1986-87 Constant Rs.)		Nominal (Current Rs.)		Real (1986-87 Constant Rs.)	
	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India	Assam	India
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Agricultural wage	56.8	60.04	17.75	19.31	63.33	66.02	19.19	20.44
Non-agricultural wage	78.29	81.08	24.47	25.90	71.68	89.29	21.72	27.47
Unskilled laborers	52.48	57.16	16.40	18.26	58.93	58.87	17.85	18.11

Source: Nath & Nath (2010), p. 35

In this regard again, Nath & Nath (2010) observes that it is important to recognize that even though the difference in current wage between Bangladesh and Assam is not significant enough to motivate people to migrate, it is unlikely that prospective migrants will have such a prejudiced consideration while deciding whether to migrate or not. But in comparison to Bangladesh it is relatively easier to acquire land in Assam and there is a vast expanse of public lands available here. The main types of land occupied by these immigrants are the riverine deltas of river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, forest land and the tribal belts and blocks. This has resulted immense tension and socio-political disturbance among the tribal and non-tribal indigenous people of Assam.

6.ECONOMIC ASPECT OF IMMIGRANTS INTO ASSAM

It may be noted that migrants played an important role in economic development of Assam during the colonial period. Assam has been a recipient of both legal as well illegal immigrants over the years. After the partition of India in 1947, the immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal, who in the preceding decades came to Assam in large numbers, became illegal immigrants as their migration continued unabated (Sharma, 2012). British annexed Assam in 1826 after the Yandaboo Treaty. At that time it was a largely unpopulated area. Major Butler who served in the state for 14 years during 1837-51 gave an account of the contemporary Assam describing its landscape with expressions such as ‘uninhabited, dense tree and grass jungle’ (Guha, 1991). British came with some kind of development projects in the natural resources like tea, oil coal, timber etc. To introduce these they needed rich communication systems like roads, bridges, railways.

But there was scarcity of efficient and skilled adequate numbers of labourers among the indigenous people in Assam. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Assam was a labor-scarce state with high land-man ratio (Nath & Nath, 2010). So, British had to import trained manpower from other parts of India like the central and eastcentral parts to work in the tea plantation and other works during the nineteenth century and these workers contributed significantly to the rise of the tea industry in Assam. So it can be easily noted that the British annexation highly altered the demographic profile of the state. People who came into Assam by the colonialists were Bengali Babus, plantation workers, the Marwaris, the Nepalis and the peasants (Bengali Muslims). The Bengali Babus were brought by the British to occupy the petty clerical and supervisory positions in the government offices, courts and tea industry. The flow of educated Bengali Hindu migrated to work for the colonial power, and they contributed their fair share to the economic growth of Assam. The discovery and establishment of tea industry demanded for the tea garden labourer from Chhotanagpur of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The Marwaris were another group who came to Assam in the colonial rule. They are known as trade merchants or business community of India. They did monopoly in the area of trade and commerce in the state and established shops in various places of Assam, set up grocery shops and lend money to the local people against mortgage. A surge of Nepali migration started since early twentieth century as cattle breeders and grazers. And in the twentieth century, the peasant migrants from East Bengal with skills and knowledge of intensive cultivation had a major impact on agricultural output, techniques as well as new crop diversity.



It is significant to note that the migrated peasants from East Bengal left some positive and beneficial effects in the economy of Assam mainly in the agricultural sector. They work basically in the agricultural field. In the initial times some people of Assam encouraged this section of people to settle down in Assam and even the Goalpara Zamindars and other landlords had in fact initially fortified these hardy peasants to settle down in Assam. The White Paper on Foreigners' Issue prepared by Government of Assam also mentions that the peasant migrants from the erstwhile East Bengal brought with them superior cultivation techniques including multiple cropping and introduced poultry farming. Because of the agricultural practices of the hardworking immigrants and their contribution to the agricultural economy, rice production increased significantly. They introduced multiple cropping that was not previously used by the natives. A number of vegetables and crops including jute previously unknown in the state were also introduced by the migrants. Thus they contributed to rise in productivity of agriculture in Assam. Because of this

contribution Assam had a rich surplus by as early as 1947 and also had a number of vegetables and crops earlier unknown in the state (Goswami, 2007).

So it cannot be denied the contributing part of this section of migrant people as it is known that migration helps in development. Regardless of the fact that historically migration has contributed to economic development of Assam, the contemporary time is witnessing an adverse effect that overshadowed the benefits. In the arrangement of problems, we can at first mention the land issue or the pressure on land has been increasing. There were 6,779,978 acres of cultivable wasteland in the five Brahmaputra Valley districts; of this 1,258,277 acres were cultivated by 1875-76 and within the next 25 years the cultivated area increased to 1,685,078 acres (Kar, 1997). But the Government did not formulate any plan for bringing the valuable land under cultivation. At the same time Bengal's population had grown in rapid number and it led to the large scale influx into the valley. Table 2 shows the migrant workers by occupational categories based on census of 1991.

Table 2: Migrant Workers by Occupational Categories: 1991

	Place of last residence in outside Assam but within India	Place of last residence is outside India
Total Number of migrant workers	254872 (67.98)	120048 (32.02)
Percentage distribution by occupational category		
• Cultivators	16.65	41.31
• Agricultural laborers	4.99	10.27
• Workers in household industries	0.87	2.70
• Others workers	77.49	45.71

Source: Nath & Nath (2010), p. 34

This table clearly shows that both the interstate and international migrant workers taken together, most of them are engaged in non-agricultural activities. It is already mentioned that the immigration problem of Assam placed tremendous pressure on land. Since the

Bangladeshi immigrants have its primary motive to acquire land this affected the agricultural productivity. Table 3 shows the constant declination of land holding which is an impact of the acquisition of land by the immigrant peasants.

Table 3: Agricultural Land Holding in Assam and India

Year	No. of holdings	ASSAM Total operated area (in thousand hectares)	Average size of holdings (in hectares)	No. of holdings	ALL INDIA Total operated area (in thousand hectares)	Average size of holding (in hectares)
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1970-71	1964376	2882	1.47			
1976-77	2253654	3079	1.37			
1980-81	2297588	3121	1.36			
1985-86	2419156	3161	1.31			
1990-91	2523379	3205	1.27	106637	165507	1.55
1995-96	2682997	3138	1.17	115580	163357	1.41

Source: *Economic Survey Assam: 2003-2004*, p. 19

This is called the decline of the land-man ratio. Assam is a state which mainly depends upon agriculture. So it is definitely a loss of efficiency in agricultural production because of the small size of land holdings. Moreover, encroachment of land in tribal belts and blocks, public waste land and forests by immigrants has created social and ecological problems (Nath & Nath, 2010). One of the significant negative impacts of immigration is labour market consequences. Because they supply cheap labour, they can take away the jobs of the native workers. The immigrant people accelerated the demographic growth of Assam but they do not pay tax to the government. Another most significant adverse economic effect by the immigrants in Assam is the pressure on labour market. Because of the cheap labour offered by this section of people the native indigenous people are to suffer joblessness.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that the influx of immigrants has no doubt a long-run implications for the demographic composition of Assam. Though this process is economic in nature it has been led to political unrests and ethnic tensions in the state which is a serious issue of concern. As governmental initiative to fight against the issue and protect the rights of the indigenous people the process of upgrading NRC (National Register of Citizen) is being in progress.

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