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Immigration in Assam: boon or a bane?

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Abstract

Assam has historically been a society of immigrants, a process that began in the colonial era under the tutelage of the British resulting in significant economic and demographic changes. The contribution of the immigrants in accelerating the pre-colonial stagnant economy of Assam and reshaping the societal dynamics paving the way for a great transformation of the state is conveniently overlooked as debates on immigration in Assam primarily tends to frame immigration and immigrants as a 'malady' posing a threat to the security and economy of the state and the 'culture and identity' of the natives. The politics in Assam is increasingly guided by a virulent hatred of the immigrant 'other' resulting in episodes of xenophobic violence against them by the natives and incriminating the immigrants for all inequity furthered by the continuous indoctrination by the several political parties and Governments of the state on the dangers of unrestrained immigration on the local population. This bias, however, hinders a proper understanding of the developmental consequences of immigration. Thus, 'immigration is a bane' is the dominant perception of the state that this article intends to deconstruct by examining the socio-economic transformation of Assam under the aegis of immigrant labor.

Keywords: Assam, Immigration, Economy, Nativism, Assimilation.

Introduction: Human history is a history of migration. With the advent of the globalisation paradigm, migration has become a strategy for survival. In his seminal work, 'A Theory of Migration' (1966), Lee defines migration as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence (p.49). He elaborates that there are several factors which act to drive away the people from the area, or to hold the people in the area or to attract the people to it, in other words, the 'push and pull' factors that explain migration between the origin and destination (p.50).

People globally, are on the move for diverse motives and purposes, the most apparent being economic gain, attaining a higher standard of living, security, poverty alleviation, and escape from discrimination.

After their arrival, the immigrants make a multitude of changes on the economy of the host country. (Weiner, 1995; International Labour Office, 2015). They contribute towards the economic growth by supplying their labour force, extraction of natural resources to its

utmost utilisation, innovation in destination countries while alleviating poverty in the sending countries. All highly-developed economies discover themselves progressively dependent on immigrant labour – at all expertise levels (Castles 2006; CEC 2005b).

One of the earliest and most authoritative works on migration has been by Ravenstein (1889), who cited the principal causes of migration as overpopulation in one part and existence of uncultivated resources elsewhere, bad oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation) (p. 288). Writing in the context of America, he notes that currents of migration was produced by vast areas of cultivable land not yet taken possession of by cultivators, a position similar to the case in Assam that shall be discussed below (p.278). Assam has historically been a society of immigrants, a process which began during the colonial era under the tutelage of the British because the colonial economy of Assam was in a state of decay with huge tracts of land converted into jungles and wastelands. Major John Butler, who first came to Assam in 1837 noted that it had no vestige of habitation or human beings, a dreary desolate land devoid of man, beast and birds with a death like stillness everywhere, broken only by the occasional barking or halloo of the ooluck or ape. (Baruah, 2001:44)

In the post-colonial era, migration has triggered ethnic tensions, discord, distrust and demolition of the social fabric of Assam which has remained in a state of flux with spates of violence on several occasions. The rising intolerance towards the immigrants has created a nation-wide turmoil through the National Register of Citizens (NRC) worsening the existing tensions.

Debates on immigration in Assam primarily tends to frame immigration and immigrants as a ‘malady’ posing a threat to the security and economy of the state and the ‘culture and identity’ of the natives. This bias, however, hinders a proper understanding of the developmental consequences of immigration. Thus, ‘immigration is a bane’ is the dominant perception of the state, that this article intends to deconstruct by examining the socio-economic transformation of Assam under the aegis of immigrant labor.

Immigration and structural changes in Assam: A critical analysis: The process of immigration in Colonial Assam began in the 19th and 20th century after the British conquest of the state in 1826. According to the reports of several colonial officers, administrators and historians, at the time of British annexation, Assam overflowed with vast areas of highly fertile, large cultivable wastelands that had turned into forests, marshes and rivers due to lack of sickle and plough.¹ The indigenous population were unwilling to clear and cultivate these lands as it was an expensive and tedious task and also because there was more cultivable land lying bare than the population could make use of.² It was only after the wave of migration that such wastelands became habitable and cultivable.

¹ See, Ahmed(2006), p. 1006-7 and Kar (1980), p. 70

² Ibid, p. 1004.

Assam was sparsely populated due to several factors such as floods, earthquakes and epidemics like black fever, malaria, cholera that claimed innumerable lives and destroyed the land fertility.³ The economic threat as well as the existential crisis prompted the locals to consider the prospect of immigration to Assam to restore the dying economy and the uneven population guided by a practical consideration that the progress of Assam lay in the utilization of its economy only possible through a population increase. The Assamese middle class too, in the 19th century, welcomed this immigration of skilled labour in the region.⁴

The then East Bengal, present day Bangladesh, the area from which most migration in Assam happened had a contrasting demographic structure- landlessness of the skilled peasantry due to overpopulation and an exploitative Zamindari system, which were the push factors for immigration⁵. This contrasting demographic structure of the two regions encouraged migration from one region suffering from overpopulation and subsequent settlement in the other which lay uninhabited acting as a pull factor in facilitating this mobility. The construction of railways by the British in 1881 furthered this process.⁶

Assam offered a lucrative opportunity for the British because of her fertile soil for the cultivation of several cash crops like jute and tea that subsequently became one of the major sources of revenue for the British. Thus, the growth of tea industry in 1830 necessitated the mobility of people to work as plantation labour in the newly opened tea gardens to ensure optimum land usage by the people either within or outside the region. The local population of Assam faced no dearth of employment, rather, were reluctant to work. Their working capacity was also adversely affected due to their addiction to opium (Guha, 1977: 48).

The rich economic status of Assam coupled with the reluctance and unwillingness of the locals to work hard for the economic betterment of the region forced the Assam tea planters to turn to the immigrants for the bulk of their labour needs (Dass, 1980; Guha, 1977) starting the trend of immigration which continued well throughout the period following India's independence to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In the post-independence era too, the head of the government of Assam, Sir Syed Saddulah encouraged immigrants to settle in the state and facilitate the agricultural development of the region using their skills and knowledge by giving them generous travel concessions subsequently abolishing the existing 'line system' introduced by Gopinath Bordoloi that prohibited outsiders from entering and owning land from natives.⁷ This was primarily in the backdrop of the acute food crisis (1942-1945) in India, as Assam could not produce enough to feed its population. However, settlement in Assam was not a cakewalk for the migrants; it brought along with it its own share of problems. Several migrants, especially the coolies, cultivators and peasants

³ See, Guha (1977), p. 37-38

⁴ Ibid, p. 68

⁵ See, Ahmed (2006), p. 1000.

⁶ Ibid, p. 35

⁷ See, Ahmed (2006) p. 1010-11, Misra (2017), p. 202-204.

lost their lives while cleaning the dense forests in Assam inhabited by wild animals, affected by malaria and black fever. The migrants toiled hard to make Assam economically prosperous thereby shaping the contemporary agriculture based economy of the state. The immigrants primarily associated themselves with agriculture and its related activities encouraging the local people to utilize the natural resources in an efficient manner.

Immigration in Assam had a positive impact on the underdeveloped economy of the state. The immigrants brought along with them superior agricultural skills and cultivation techniques and thus, the shifting of large cultivable lands to the peasants of East Bengal resulted in the growth of a variety of crops in those lands which also contributed to the crop diversity in the region. Guha(2006), notes that the introduction of ‘multiple cropping’ in Assam happened under the aegis of the skilled peasantry of East Bengal, resulting in an increasing agricultural productivity and enabling a more efficient and effective land use that also resulted in Assam being the ‘surplus’ producer of rice in 1947 (Goswami,2010;White Paper, 2012). According to Chakraborty (2012), the diversity of crops produced by the immigrant farmers in certain areas had been substantially higher than those crops grown in the areas by local farmers. The diverse crops included tobacco, mustard, sugarcane, jute, lentils which were not previously grown in the state and have now become major food and cash crops of the state (op cit, p. 21). Besides agriculture, they introduced poultry farming and improved the fishing industry of the state by introducing new fishing techniques (Guha, 2006).

The immigration of the Marwaris into Assam transformed the Assamese economy from a non-monetised one to a blooming market economy (Guha, 1977: 43). They were mostly traders from Rajasthan who subsequently settled down in Assam and gradually began trade and commerce in the region by establishing small scale industries and carried out trading and business activities such as lending money to the peasants in lieu of crops or other handmade crafts (Baruah, 2001: 61). Against this backdrop, Guha (1968), thus, asserted that Assam witnessed nothing short of an economic revolution under the British rule, from its prevailing state of economic backwardness.

Several studies on the migrant Muslim population settled in Assam reveals a pattern of acculturation (Dass, 1980; Kar, 1980; Ahmed, 2007). It is a process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 146). The Bengali Muslim immigrants, despite having a different culture and language, started identifying themselves with the Assamese population and in many cases they even sent their children to Assamese schools. In fact, they helped strengthened the linguistic dominance of Assamese in Assam. Ahmed(2007) notes, in the Census of 1971, the number of Assamese speakers in Assam rose to 60 percent as the migrant ‘*mussalmans*’ had mentioned their mother tongue as Assamese which consolidated the position of the Assamese people in Assam. However, if such support was withdrawn in the next Census, the indigenous people would become a minority (op cit, 625). Guha(1977), calls this the ‘Assamisation’ of the East Bengali Muslims in Assam as they accepted Assamese as their

mother tongue forgoing their own. Thus, the social fear of the Assamese society regarding immigrants concerned within the domains of culture, language and that the Assamese way of life will get subverted once the immigrants dominate the state resulting in unnecessary tensions between the natives and immigrants who have made Assam their home for centuries rests on weak assumptions.

The common opinion that immigrants take jobs away from nationals has been refuted by Reyneri (2001), who, using his research data on this issue based on a number of countries, concludes that immigrants compete only with marginal sections of the labour force, in specific sectors when they are not sustained by the welfare and in majority immigrant receiving countries, conflicts between immigrants and the local population only seldom concern economic issues (p. 57).

The Bangladeshi immigrants in Assam have mostly involved themselves in what Reyneri (2001) calls, the 3-D jobs: dirty, difficult and dangerous. They form the manual labour force in the state, working as rickshaw pullers, construction workers, field workers, barbers, vendors, brick kilns, while the women force work as maids (Goswami, 2010; Fernandes, 2005). These are the jobs that have strict conditions in terms of work hours, physical effort, endurance as well as risk of accidents and cannot be filled locally, since the Assamese labour are unwilling to perform them. The immigrants are hired because they serve the purpose of offering cheap labour force by agreeing to work with below minimum daily wages which acts as a boon for the employers as cheap labour is increasingly difficult to draw upon. Secondly, they are also ready to put up with the poor working conditions. In 2005, the Chiring Chapori Yuva Morcha, a youth organisation, launched a campaign urging the Assamese society to boycott Bangladeshi migrants by not employing them, travelling in vehicles plied by them, giving them shelter and engaging into business transactions with them (Upadhyay, 2005: 3002). The political parties have maintained a very guarded position in this campaign which soon relegated due to the economic motives as the Assamese society routinely employed them for manual jobs lured by their cheap labour.⁸The Assam case thus confirms that immigrants are employed in blue-collared jobs refused by the locals as the employers prefer them as viable workforce, because they are cheap, passive and vulnerable. Additionally, since they are uneducated, the immigrants cannot compete with the locals for the sought after white collar jobs.

Immigration in Assam has resulted in the birth of ‘nativism’ subsequently shaping the dynamics of the state. Fry (2007), defines nativism as socially constructed and an attempt by the ‘self-identified’ local and indigenous population to attain exclusive rights over land, property and resources as a security measure against those they perceive as foreigners and threats therefore creating boundaries between human beings. The politics in Assam is increasingly guided by the politics of nativism characterised by an imagined fear and virulent hatred of the immigrant ‘other’ resulting in episodes of xenophobic violence against the foreigners and incriminating the immigrants for all inequity. This attitude has been

⁸ See, Vinayak (2005).

furthered by the continuous indoctrination by the several political parties and Governments of the state on the dangers of unrestrained immigration on the local population thereby creating the bigoted stereotype of Assam being swamped by immigrants in the minds of the population.⁹

The infamous Assam Agitation, a mass movement under the behest of the All Assam Student's Union (AASU), that rocked the state from 1979-1985 was a brutal upshot of nativism as it tended to categorise all Bengalis as "Bangladeshis" resulting in loss of lives and a total rupture of the state apparatus.¹⁰ It was, however, not an isolated event as macabre attacks on the Bengali immigrants were becoming a norm in the state especially with incidents like Nellie.¹¹ The central causes of the Assam movement were the enfranchisement of the illegal immigrants into the voter's list and that unchecked immigration from Bangladesh (former East Bengal) was posing a threat to the land, resources, language and cultural existence of the local Assamese population and thus demanded that illegal immigrants be identified and deported.¹² The signing of the Assam Accord, a memorandum of settlement between the protestors, the Central Government and the then Prime Minister of India, restored peace and normalcy in the state. The Central government promised to provide constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to

⁹ Lt Gen (rtd) S K Sinha's report to the Centre saying that an "unabated influx of illegal migrants of Bangladesh into Assam has led to a perceptible change in the demographic pattern of the state and reduced Assamese people to a minority in their own state. Awareness should be promoted about illegal migration into Assam being not only a threat to the identity of the Assamese people but what is more, being a grave threat to our national security" which sowed the seeds of hatred in the minds of the locals against the immigrants. See, Sinha (2013).

¹⁰ See, Dutta, N. (2012). *Questions of identity in Assam: Location, Migration and Hybridity*. New Delhi: Sage Publication, p. 104-110. Dutta provides narratives of remembrance shared by the witnesses of the movement that indicate that the target of the Assamese agitators were the Bengalis. See, Gohain, H. (1980). Worse Times Ahead. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15(50), p-2076-77, Chopra, S. (1982). The Assam Movement and the Left: A reply to Hiren Gohain. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10(11), pp-65-66, for details on the violence inflicted on the Bengali population in Assam in the wake of the Assam Movement. See, Assam Accord (1985), p. 1369-70, for details on the rupture of the state apparatus.

¹¹ Nellie massacre on February 18, 1983, is regarded as the deadliest genocide of India. A huge mob of Assamese men had surrounded the village Nellie, mostly inhabited by Muslim immigrants from the then East Bengal, armed with guns, spears, swords, 'daos', shouting slogans of 'Jai ai ahom', the uniting slogan of the anti-foreigner agitation meaning 'Long Live Mother Assam', ruthlessly butchering men, women and children of Bengali Muslim origin, who, the agitators felt were the threats of the movement and their existence, under the broad daylight. See, Kimura (2013) for a detailed account.

¹² The agitation was a means for the Assamese population to assert their rights over the land and the fear of losing their culture, identity and jobs in the hands of the illegal immigrants. Considering the Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, threats, the agitators brutally assaulted them. See, Gohain (1982), p.60.

protect, preserve and promote the socio-cultural and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people, in response to the demands of the protestors.¹³ In Assam, nativism is juxtaposed with race and ethnicity, and hence, a Bengali speaking or Bengali origin individual is suspected as an illegal immigrant or foreigner by the self-identified natives who have outlined the boundaries of 'native' and 'foreign' supported by their perception of foreignness using the racial and ethnic distinctions allowing them to generate, sustain and legitimate a contrastive identity between them vis-à-vis the other population (Fry, 2007: 180).

The vanguards of the Assam movement soon formed a regional political party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1985 that formed the state government, coming to power on the mandate that it would weed out illegal immigrants and illegal immigration from Assam. Upadhyay (2005) writes, the issue of migration of Bangladeshis and the question of their citizenship have become so crucial in Assam's polity that an election could be 'won or lost' on that issue (p.3002).

Fernandes (2005), however, notes that the two major organisations which bided for the *Bogibeel* bridge contract were formed by members of the AASU. Yet, none of these organisations gave any undertaking that for the construction purpose only Assamese workers would be employed. This is because the immigrants offered cheap and ready labour which is capitalised by the employers. Hence, several landowners in Assam also routinely employ Bangladeshi labourers to cultivate the land they own as a rational choice for labour flexibility to satisfy their economic motives (Fernandes 2005; Shamshad 2017).

The surplus population created by immigration becomes what Bauman (2004) calls, '*human waste*' and '*collateral casualties*' of the economic progress (p. 63). A bigger population is necessarily sought after to reduce scarcity and increase production as it happened in the case of Assam, yet, they become a threat once the objective is achieved becoming '*wasted humans*' who are not recognized by the state or allowed to stay under the guise of economic anxieties, security fears and personal safety (Bauman, 2004: 12). This '*migration panic*', as Bauman calls it, in Assam, emanates from an (mis)understanding by the local population, who do not acknowledge the broader changes that have occurred rather feel vulnerable that immigrants would destroy the culture and economic prospects of the natives and native population, a pressing preoccupation, subsequently degenerating immigration into a 'politics of grievance' or a 'culture of blame', based on individualism.

The response of Assam to immigrants and immigration is what Castles (1995) calls the 'differential exclusion' paradigm as immigrants have not yet been fully integrated into the society and their ethnic identity and background often makes them the victims of suspicion, racism, discrimination and otherisation by the state. The settlement of the immigrants in Assam is framed as a threat by the state primarily on the grounds of economic and cultural

¹³ See, Assam Accord and its Clauses, <https://assamaccord.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-accord-and-its-clauses>

protectionism and security against the outsiders. Securitisation, according to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver implies “the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means” (Buzan et al. 1998, 26). This threat, in Assam, firmly constructed so as to become the state ideology, is based on the assumptions that the immigrants will threaten the ethnic purity, culture and identity of the indigenous population by reducing them to minorities in the state, besides putting strains on the economy, wages and increasing the demand of social service benefits.

This sentiment created a fertile ground for the updating of the National Register of Citizens, a political formula eulogized by the state as a means sought by it to fulfil its promise to protect its citizens against dangers of ‘external aggression’.¹⁴

Conclusion: This paper has elucidated the structural changes brought about by immigration in Assam which is often overlooked as discussions on this theme is characterised by a historical forgetfulness as it fails to acknowledge that immigrant labour has acted as a fuel for Assam’s stagnant economy, exaggerated and distorted by those in power by giving it a negative subtext where immigrants are stigmatised as ‘infiltrators’, ‘encroachers’, outweighing their positive structural contributions to the society. The immigrant labor force makes an economic contribution and acts as a driver of the stable economy as it increases the productivity of the state. However, immigration in Assam is placed within the lexicon of something negative, a phenomena that needs to stop. Bakewell (2007), calls this discourse the ‘*sedentary bias*’, as it emanates from an understanding that immigrants constitute a threat to the prosperity and public order by their movement.

The immigrants and immigration in Assam are blamed for a variety of the state’s social ills. However, as Bauman (2004) argues, states have welfare functions, social care duties as its claims of legitimacy which they are unable to perform thereby shifting their social incapability failure on the refugees and immigrants. It is increasingly replaced by a narrative of the state which seeks to protect its citizens from the, ‘figures and objects of resentment’

¹⁴ The Supreme Court referred to the presence of illegal Bangladeshi migrants as ‘external aggression and internal disturbance’ in the Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union Of India & Anr judgement in, 2005. It was a judicial verdict based on the report of S.K. Sinha (See, note 9) based on his claims of a large scale illegal migration in the state which, the 2005 judgement gave judicial credibility to. See, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/907725/> . The National Register of Citizens is a citizenship audit that aims to detect the legal citizens of India based on the furnishing of archival documents, so that the illegal migrants can be identified and deported. Riddled with confusions and errors the exercise caused immense harassment for the applicants and even loss of several lives over the fear of citizenship. This exercise began on 2015 and the final draft was released on August 31, 2019 wherein 1.9 million people were left out. See, <https://cjp.org.in/assam/> for detailed information.

and ‘target on which anger is to be unloaded’ (Bauman, 2004: 89) rolled into the figure of the illegal immigrant, as an alternate basis of legitimacy. Bauman’s argument can be placed in a parallel framework to elaborate on the inability of the state (Assam) in performing its welfarist functions. The essence of a welfare state is to ensure the well-being of its population through assistance and broad distribution and adequate access to essential services like primary education and medical aid and economic goods through the creation of jobs and opportunities. It thus contributes to the overall human development of the population. The 2019 NITI Aayog Report on the overall development of states in India, has placed Assam in the 27th position among the 29 states of the country owing to its poor developmental performance in crucial sectors such as health, poverty alleviation, education, sanitation, water supply and economic growth.¹⁵ Furthermore, Assam is also placed in the bottom list of states ranked in terms of the human development index according to the 2018 Human Development Report with 0.614% falling below the national average of 0.647%.¹⁶ The number of jobs generated under the flagship employment generation and placement schemes of the Government of India for the fiscal year 2019-2020 have shown that the sharpest decline has been in Assam as compared to its preceding years.¹⁷ Unemployment therefore remains a major problem of the state due to the non-availability of proportional jobs matching the education and skills of the youth. Additionally, the poor intra and inter-state road and railway connectivity too plaques the region adversely affecting its development.

Therefore, the failure of the state in performing its welfare functions in Assam has been increasingly concealed by sustaining the sentiment of security among the masses against the ‘phantom enemy’ (Bauman, 2007: 29-31).

It is also necessary that the already settled immigrants in Assam are integrated to the society through assimilation to build a peaceful environment. Assimilation and absorption are used to exemplify integration within the context of immigration. For scholars like H. Bunle, G. Manco, J. Issac assimilation refers to complete conformity, through breaking down the barriers of behavioral identification between the immigrants and natives while absorption, on the other hand, is the personal adjustment and acculturation (cited in Baglioni, 1964: 125-126).

This integration, in Assam, has remained retarded owing to the hostility of the natives and the state’s refusal to accommodate the unwanted precipitated by the cultural and racial distinctiveness of the immigrants from the larger Assamese society. Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003), argue that ‘belonging’ as intrinsically linked to the national community becomes problematic within the discourse of migration studies as the flow of immigrants, who ‘come from outside’ into the space of solidarity is considered as a threat to the

¹⁵ See, G Plus News (2019).

¹⁶ Human Development Index is an average of the health, standard of living and education level of the population. See, Sub –National HDI.

¹⁷ See, Mathur (2020).

isomorphism between the people and nation (p. 583-585), as all forms of social relationships are seen as culturally and politically framed by the nation-state within the domain of social sciences (Connell,1997; Faist,2000).

The structural marginalization and racist discourses in Assam have strengthened the avoidance of the immigrants who are characterized as 'others', placed outside the envisioned national community, and thus, it becomes near impossible for them to integrate into and to become part of the Assamese society and they continue to remain 'strangers in the land'. Such schisms, hence, can only be prevented through proper assimilation for the total integration of the immigrants.

Immigration is not going to disappear in the coming decades as human mobility remains the dominant leitmotif of human nature and existence (Weiner, 1995).As a corollary to this premise, it is thus necessary for Assam, absorbed in concerns of security, stability and identity, to facilitate stronger vigilance by the border police and ensure the hardening of borders between Assam and Bangladesh, as its prerogative in order to check further unchecked immigration.

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