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Illegal Migrants of Assam: Causes and Economic Consequences

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Abstract:

“Illegal Migrants” the term is used as a code to mean ‘Bangladeshi’ in Assam and the words are used interchangeably. The influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh into Assam is so high that changes demographic pattern of the State, which threatens to reduce the Assamese people to a minority in our own State, as happened in Tripura and Sikkim. Illegal migration from Bangladesh into Assam should be viewed against the backdrop of past history, present realities and future designs. Migration into Assam has been taking place from the dawn of history. Numbers of causes are there which are responsible for the migration of Assam. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine various aspects of illegal migration into Assam from various countries especially from Bangladesh. In this study we find that mainly environmental crisis caused by population pressure in Bangladesh and relatively greater economic opportunities in terms of higher lifetime income, acquisition of land and assets in Assam, have been the primary motivations behind large scale migration. There are some beneficial effects, such as the immigrants have contributed to the rise of agricultural productivity by introducing better techniques, crop diversity, and multiple cropping and also the immigrants causes the supply of cheap labor in the informal labor market have benefitted the consumers and producers alike. However, they have put tremendous pressure on land, creating socio-political and environmental problems that have indirect adverse effects on the economy. Finally, the immigrants hardly contribute to the government revenue while the government spends a substantial amount to maintain this significantly large fraction of the population.

Key words- Illegal Migrants, Influx, Environment, Immigrants, Socio-political

Introduction:

“Migration” being a worldwide phenomenon has been taking place since time immemorial, around all parts of the globe. The movement of people from one place to another to live permanently or temporarily in search of food and shelter is called Migration. The question of migration is something which is common to all the countries in the contemporary situation. It is an emerging issue which cannot be overlooked by any of the nations especially, the third world countries. India is also not an exception in this regard, India’s Northeast region, wedged between Bangladesh, Myanmar and China contains a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups that is rapidly changing as a result of uncontrolled migration from other parts of the country and neighboring states. Northeast has been

known for in-migration and the conflicts arising from influx of migrants, but studies are lacking on the out-migration from the region. Each state of the region shares an international boundary.

Assam has experienced highest population growth rates during the twentieth century not only among the North eastern states, but among the Indian states during the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 2001, the population of India grew by 331 percent while the population of Assam grew by 710 percent. This vast rate of population growth is caused by large scale of migration from the neighboring countries especially from densely populated Bangladesh. Most of the immigrants take the advantages of the extremely poor border of Assam, and enter into the state illegally. Environmental crises of Bangladesh and relatively greater opportunities of livelihood in Assam attract the Migrants to the state. The better employment opportunities and availability of fertile agricultural land in Assam act as a pull factor while the poverty, subsistence living, ravages caused by floods and other natural calamities in Bangladesh act as push factors. This influx of population to the state adversely affects the socio-economic and political conditions of Assam. Many times this had also led to numerous conflicts between the indigenous people and the migrants. It has a distinct political impact in the state, the Bangladeshi migrants has influenced the results of the elections in a large number of constituencies,(about 32% of the constituencies in Assam). Economically, increased pressure on land, deforestation, undercutting of wages of unskilled jobs, forcible occupation of Government land by the migrants and many more issues are there which generate an adverse effect in the economy of Assam as well as the entire North East.

Review of Related Literature:

As Illegal migration has played a vital role in the socio-economic life of Assam, there is number of books, articles and research paper regarding the issue of illegal migration and its consequence. There are studies that focus on migration during the British colonial period. In two most notable works on economic history of Assam, Guha (1977 and 1991) focuses on the migration of tea garden workers from the central and east-central parts of India during the British colonial period.

Sanjib Baruah emphasizes how tea began to play a crucial role in Assam to attract migrants from different parts [5]. Hazarika focuses on the rise of insurgency and violence in Assam and North -East states due to immigration [6].

There are a number of studies that focus on the socio-ethnic, political, and economic issues related to migration that has been taking place in large scale well into the post-colonial period. These issues have been of vital importance in recent decades. Studies focus some social and political conflicts and cleavages that have resulted from the responses of the indigenous population of migration into Assam.

In a related work, Weiner and Katzenstain (1981) evaluate government's preferential policies towards natives who lagged behind the migrants in grabbing economic opportunities in the state. Hazarika (1994) discusses migration into Assam and othe northeastern states as a part of the historical and political context of the rise of insurgency and violence in recent times.

Goswami (2007), takes a critical look at government's policy of reorganizing political boundaries in ethnic lines under the Indian federal system to contain ethnic discontent caused by internal displacement and migration, Goswami reflects on the so-called "lebensraum" theory that sees the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants as a part of a conspiracy to make Assam a part of greater Bangladesh. In a more recent study, Goswami et al (2003 examine the population growth of Assam during the period 1951-1991 with a focus on migration.

Using census data for 1971 and 1991, Kumar and Aggarwal (2003) show that distance and urbanization are the significant causes of internal migration while differences in earnings is the most significant cause of international migration. Gogoi (2005) further examines the role of per capita income, land-man ratio, and distance in determining the flow of migration into Assam.

Chirantan Kumar established the link between migration and refugee. He also analyzed the factors which responsible for the large scale migration from Bangladesh to India and its impact on the demography [7].

In a research report, Saikia (1995-96) presents her estimates of migration into Assam between 1951 and 1971.

The evidence of militant groups from Assam and other northeastern states being sheltered in Bangladesh and being aided by Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) only aggravates this fear. Uddipana Goswami reflects on the so-called "lebensraum" theory that sees the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants as a part of a conspiracy to make Assam a part of greater Bangladesh [9].

There is a relatively recent literature that discusses the threat to national security as a result of illegal migration from Bangladesh.

Discussion:

Illegal Migration into Assam:

Six north-eastern States sealed the inter-state borders and barred the general entry from Assam. Assam shares 2,743-km inter-state boundaries with Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and West Bengal.

Six NE states seal borders with Assam



Migration into Assam is not a recent phenomenon, but in recent decades it has occurred on a relatively larger scale. Although migrants coming to Assam include people from the rest of India as well as from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal but in most cases, the term illegal migrants is mainly used to refer to the migrants particularly from Bangladesh which became a part of the public discourse on society, polity, and economy of Assam.

Historical background of migration:

Migration in to Assam has started in the British colonial period when the British developed the tea industry in Assam. Because of the scarcity of labor in Assam to work in the tea garden the Britishers had imported lakhs of labors from different parts of India, they also encouraged Bengali Muslim peasants from present Bangladesh to move into Lower Assam for putting virgin land under cultivation. From that period the Bangladeshi people started to come to Assam and this set in motion a movement pattern which despite changed conditions, has been continuing till date.

Causes of Migration:

Numbers of causes are responsible for the growing migration from Bangladesh to Assam. From a historical perspective migration into Assam occurred for reasons which were not purely economic in nature, there are reasons to believe that the recent waves of migration – particularly across the border of Bangladesh, have been mainly due to economic reasons. Consequently, economic opportunities have shrunk and there has been massive outflow of people from that country. Population pressure of Bangladesh is one of the main reasons for the migration from the country. Uncontrolled rise in population and high density of population (964 per sq. km, according to 2011 estimate) compel them to move to other countries to survive. Especially in Assam they can get better economic opportunities. Some political factors are also responsible for this migration; these people are used as vote banks by some political parties and thus they encourage them to come to the state. Excessive population growth and resultant squeeze on natural resources have created an environmental crisis and environmental degradation in Bangladesh which are also responsible for this migration, large segments of population in Bangladesh uprooted severe floods and cyclones.

Magnitude of migration:

It is not possible to come to a precise estimate of the magnitude of illegal migration into Assam. Because we are not able to get proper information about the illegal immigrants. However, we can find data on migration characteristics like place of birth, place of last residence, reason for migration, and duration of residence at the place of enumeration, data on educational level, economic activity, and age distribution of the migrants from the census of India. But because of the inaccuracy of these data, estimates of migration based on these data could be inaccurate and, therefore, misleading.

After independence of India, the affect of migration to Assam was the highest. Illegal migration from Bangladesh is largely responsible for the demographic transformation of Assam. The claim of massive and continuing migration can be proved through the high decadal population growth rate of Assam since 1901. If we compare the decadal growth rate of population in Assam with that of India, the figures would look almost conclusive that such influx of illegal migration must have continued throughout the history of Assam. At present out of total 27 districts of Assam, the districts that have been mostly facing the crucial problem of illegal migration are -Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Dhemaji, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi .The trends of population density in Assam since 1901 are one of the major indications to explain how illegal migration may create serious problem for indigenous people. Again according to the 2011 census data Assam recorded the highest increase in share of Muslim from 30.9% (2001) of the state's population to 34.2% (2011)

Table 1: Interstate and International Migration to Assam: 1991 Census (Based on Census Place of Birth Statistics)

| District | Interstate Migration | International Migration |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Dhubri | 24373 | 14292 |
| Kokrajhar | 19578 | 13314 |
| Bongaigaon | 21490 | 22765 |
| Goalpara | 8452 | 12311 |
| Barpeta | 8631 | 21450 |
| Nalbari | 10297 | 9860 |
| Kamrup | 93714 | 27852 |
| Darrang | 25990 | 19927 |
| Sonitpur | 40900 | 18120 |
| Lakhimpur | 11376 | 6070 |
| Dhemaji | 10317 | 7133 |
| Marigaon | 5980 | 7780 |
| Nagaon | 30400 | 48481 |
| Golaghat | 18540 | 2803 |
| Jorhat | 18435 | 2392 |
| Sibsagar | 17051 | 1960 |
| Dibrugarh | 41014 | 6790 |
| Tinsukia | 52456 | 11880 |
| Karbi Anglong | 31391 | 10400 |
| N.C. Hills | 6090 | 2010 |
| Karimganj | 14615 | 29428 |
| Hailakandi | 6150 | 6326 |
| Cachar | 19339 | 36211 |
| All Assam | 536579 | 339555 |

Source: Census of India: 1991

Source- A study of Migration from Bangladesh in to Assam, India and Its impact

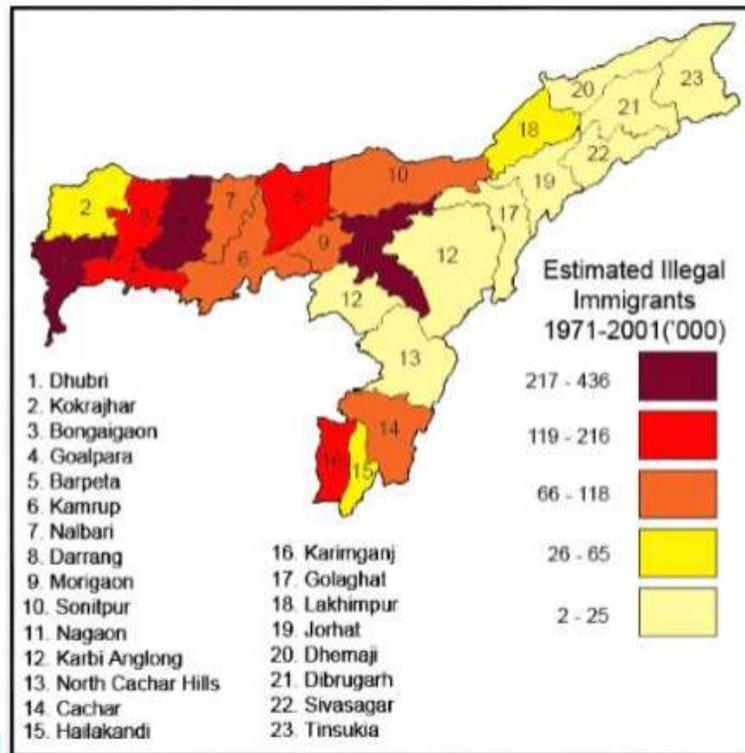


Table-II Decadal population growth rate of Assam.

| Period(in %) | Assam(in %) | India(in %) |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1901-11 | +11.0 | +5.8 |
| 1911-21 | +20.5 | -0.3 |
| 1921-31 | +19.9 | +19.9 |
| 1931-41 | +20.4 | 14.2 |
| 1941-51 | +19.9 | +13.3 |
| 1951-61 | +35.0 | +21.6 |
| 1961-71 | +35.0 | +24.8 |
| 1971-81 | +23.3 | +24.7 |
| 1981-91 | +23.6 | +23.5 |
| 1991-01 | +18.8 | +21.3 |
| 2001-11 | +16.93 | +17.6 |

Source: CMIF, basic statistics relating to Indian Economy

Economic Consequences of Migration:

It is a fact that the migration has a short run as well as long run effect on the host country; it affects the economy of the country directly or indirectly. Studies have shown that the migration from Bangladesh to Assam has significant effects on the socio-economic conditions of the state; also we cannot deny the impacts of the illegal migrants in the politics of Assam.

Migration Increase financial burden of the state, it increases pressure on the state government, as they do not pay tax on their income, however, the government spends on providing basic infrastructure: roads, power supply, water supply, health, education to these immigrants. Also, the state government has established special departments: the Char Area Development Department and the Minority Development Corporation, primarily for the development of the immigrants from Bangladesh, of course the government have to allocate funds for these departments. Further the govt. has to spend lots of money in the name of reliefs for the flood victim's immigrants who live mainly in the river side, and food subsidies through fair price shop.

Furthermore one of the harmful economic impacts of immigration, particularly of illegal immigration, is over the labor market consequences. In Assam the immigrants become a threat to the native people in terms of job. They displace the native workers, during the recession that immigrants take jobs which would otherwise be taken by local people; in particular place and circumstances there can be competition and conflict. As we see in the above discussion that population pressure in Assam has increases due to the migrants from Bangladesh, and it creates population explosion in the state and increases the supply cheap labor, it decreases the wage level. They begin to work as construction workers, day laborers, porters, rickshaw pullers, and household helpers, no doubt these kind of cheap labour benefits the consumers and producers in Assam, but the threat coming in the way when the children of these immigrants have received education and they have started entering the formal labor market, which has started to deprive the native people from job and may aggravate the educated unemployment problem.

Illegal migrants in Assam place a tremendous pressure on land. The main cause of migration of Bangladeshis to Assam is to acquire land and other assets, and they are mainly engaged in agricultural activities, this pressure on land has direct as well as indirect consequences for agricultural productivity. Because of the acquisition of cultivable land by the immigrants the average land holding has declining gradually. Also as a result of encroachment of riverside land and forest by the migrants, the ecosystem of Assam has adversely affected which has a negative impact on the weather and climatic condition of the state and of course this affect the agricultural productivity of the state adversely.

The negative impact of Illegal migrants in the Economy of Assam also adversely affects the society of the state. It has a long run impact on the demographic composition of the state. It is seen that from the last quarter of the century, immigration has led to political unrests and ethnic tensions. The diversity is relatively higher in Assam compared to other states. If we see the growth performance of Assam we can see that despite of being a resourceful state from all sides the net per capita income or growth rate of the economy of Assam is low in comparison with the neighboring states and the rest of the country. Assam has been one of the slowest growing states in both aggregate and per capita. The average annual rate of growth is much below the rate for other northeastern states and the national average.

It is important to note that although illegal immigrants have lots of negative impact in the socio-economic and political condition of the state yet it has some positive impacts on the state. The Bangladeshi migrants work primarily in the agricultural sector or in the urban informal sector. The peasant migrants brought with them better cultivation techniques and greater varieties of crops. They also introduced multiple cropping that was not practiced by the natives. Thus, they contributed to raise the productivity of agriculture in Assam. Because of this contribution, the production of rice and other vegetables has increased in Assam. Furthermore availability of cheap labor is another positive impact of the immigration which helps to increase the productivity and decrease the cost of production.

Conclusion and suggestion:

A problem like Illegal migrants which has its very deep historical roots cannot be solved in a blink. It is no longer a regional problem; the migrants are now spread in several states of the country like Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra Etc.

In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the various aspects of illegal migration into Assam from Bangladesh. From the above discussion we can understand that illegal migration into Assam could be very challenging. This silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geo strategically vital districts of Lower Assam. The immigrants have put tremendous pressure on land, creating socio-political and environmental problems which have indirect adverse effects on the economy. Finally, the immigrants hardly contribute to the government revenue while the government spends a substantial amount to maintain this significantly large fraction of the population.

It has been recognized that it is of utmost importance to stop or to slow down the influx of illegal migrants from a long period of time and several policy options have been discussed. The Assam Accord provided for detection and deportation of the immigrants who entered Assam illegally after 1971, but unfortunately the actual number of detection and deportation so far. The border fencing which was also in the Assam accord is yet to be completed. Assam shares a border of 262 kilometers with Bangladesh. According to government statistics, fencing has been completed only along 176.07 kilometer. Note that 92 kilometers of this Assam-Bangladesh border are under the waters. It has been suggested that in order to prevent population movements, border patrolling should be intensified. Border fencing in Assam must be completed forthwith on a war footing. The existing Border Security Force posts and the BSF water wing should be strengthened.

As we know that the economy of India is a developing economy. The economy is growing at a fast pace and has attained impressive growth in the recent years, still one-fourth of India's population is living under the poverty line. Accelerated immigration from across the border will be a formidable obstacle to India's economic development as well as to the efforts to reduce poverty. Economic cooperation between both the countries can solve the problem to some extent, particularly in the border areas, India, in cooperation with Bangladesh, should launch economic development programs that improve the quality of life on both sides of the border. The Central Government should appoint a National Immigration Commission to frame a National Migration Policy and a National Refugee Policy. The ongoing NRC updating should be completed without delay and proper arrangement for the deportation of illegal migrants.

Thus it is high time to solve the problems of illegal migration to save the Assamese people in their own land and to save the nation from the threat of immigrants.

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