



ILLEGAL MIGRANTS INTO ASSAM: CAUSES AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

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Abstract

This paper examines various aspects of illegal migration into Assam from Bangladesh. We first attempt to define an illegal immigrant in Assam by discussing the parameters set by History and polity of the state over a long period of time. Various estimates put the number of illegal immigrants anywhere between a few hundred thousands to 4millions. The study finds that environmental crisis caused by population pressure in Bangladesh and relatively greater economic opportunities in terms of higher lifetime income, acquisition of land and assts in Assam have been the primary motivation behind large scale migration. Among the beneficial effects, the immigrants have contributed to the rise of agricultural productivity by introducing better techniques, crop diversity and multiple cropping. The supply of cheap labour by the immigrants in the in the informal labour market have benefitted the consumers and producers alike. These immigrants do not seem to compete with the native workers who are generally educated and seek employment in the formal labour market. However they have put tremendous pressure on land, creating socio-political and environmental that have indirect adverse on the economy.

Keywords: *Illegal migration, Immigrants, Assam, Bangladesh*

INTRODUCTION

During the twentieth century Assam has experienced one of the highest population growths rates among the Indian states. Between 1901 and 2001, the

population of India grew by 331 percent while the population of Assam grew by 710 percent.¹ 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. One important aspect of this international migration into Assam is that most immigrants have gotten by the formal or legal immigration process, taking advantage of an extremely porous border. Environmental crisis in Bangladesh and relatively greater economic opportunities for livelihood in Assam and other parts of India provide the primary motivations for cross- border migration of population.

The influx of immigrants has not only had adverse effects on the delicate ethnic balance within the population leading to social and ethnic unrest and political movements but also has had short and long-run effects on the economy of Assam. It may be noted that migrants played an important role in economic development of Assam during the colonial period. The British had to import workers from the central and east-central parts of India to work in the tea plantation during the nineteenth century and these workers had contributed significantly to the rise of the tea industry in Assam. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Assam was a labour scarce state with high land-man ratio. With the establishment of the colonial rule – which came to Assam after almost a century of British rule in other parts of India- there was another flow of educated Bengali Hindu migrants to work for the colonial power, and they contributed their fair share to the economic growth of Assam. A small number of Marwari traders (from Rajasthan) also moved into the state. 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.

Despite the fact that historically migration has contributed to economic development of Assam, the sheer scale of it recent times seems to have adverse effects that have outweighed the benefits. First, the pressure on land has been mounting. Not only the land-man ratio has declined but also the availability of cultivable land per capital has been declining rapidly. For a state predominantly reliant on agriculture this implies 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. Secondly, a state which is already characterised by high unemployment and underemployment, the pressure in the labour market is likely to be significant. Although agricultural labour market in the rural areas and urban informal market seem to have been affected by the influx of cheap labour supplied by the illegal immigrants so far, it has been argued that the formal labour market will also be affected in the long run. In this paper we will make an attempt to examine the causes of illegal migration into Assam as well as its impact on the economy of Assam.

METHODOLOGY:

Historical research methodology is adopted in this research paper. The research paper is based on the critical use of primary sources such as newspaper, archival sources etc. and primary sources such as books journals etc. The objective of this paper is to analyse the factors responsible for the migration from East Bengal. The paper will also deal with the impact of the migration briefly.

DISCUSSIONS

MIGRATION FROM EAST BENGAL DURING COLONIAL ASSAM

The migration from East Bengal has a great importance in the history and politics of Assam. The migration which started in the colonial era continued in post colonial Assam also. No doubt the migration of the Bengali Muslims, which led to the Assam Movement of 1979 to 1985, has its origin in the colonial Assam.² If we look at the nature of migration we can say that the migration from East Bengal was encouraged by the Colonial government. Various policies of the Colonial government which were responsible for the migration from East Bengal are discussed in this paper. Before discussing about migration we have to define what migration is. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English migrate means- move from one place to go to live or work in another. On the other hand, Webster's' New World Dictionary defines migration as a "move from one place to another, especially to another country", and migration as "to move from place to place to harvest seasonal crops."

There are many economic, social and physical reasons for migration, and they can usually be classified into push and pull factors. Push factors are those associated with the area of origin, while pull factors are those that are associated with the area of destination.

The dominant motive for migration is economic, and pull factors tend to be higher wages and greater demand for labour perhaps found in centres of industry and commerce. Economic push factors can include overpopulation and the absence of economic opportunity. Social and physical reasons tend to involve forced migration, and an example of a social push factor would be intolerance towards a certain cultural group. Let's look at these push and pull factors in more detail.

ECONOMIC FACTOR:

PULL FACTORS

Economic motives loom large in all human movements, but are particularly important with regards to migration. Better economic opportunities, more jobs, and the promise of a better life often pull people towards a new country. Sometimes this is encouraged by the destination country, such as the availability of fertile land in Assam, the Colonisation policy of the British Government, the Grow more food policy of the Sadulla Government etc worked as pull factors during Colonial Assam.

PUSH FACTORS

Economic push factors tend to be the exact reversal of the pull factors; a lack of economic opportunity and jobs tend to push people to look out of their area of origin for their futures. An example of the exploitation of zamindars in East Bengal under Permanent Settlement worked as push factor along with others.

SOCIAL FACTOR:

Sometimes there are social pull factors in migration, for example the principles of religious tolerance, exploitation of upper class (in case of East Bengal exploitation of zamindar) etc.

PHYSICAL FACTOR:

Under physical factors we are not including things like the promise of fertile lands or waste land. As there was abundance of waste land in Assam this attracted people from East Bengal.

MIGRATION FROM EAST BENGAL TO ASSAM

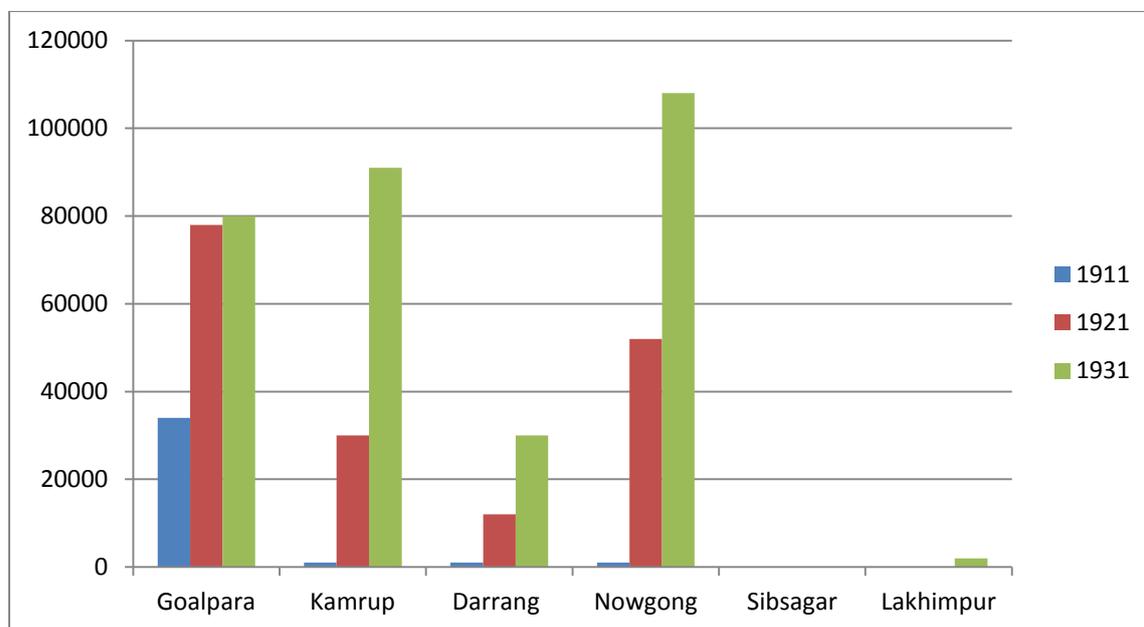
Migration into Assam is not a new thing it continued since ancient time. Though lots of people came to Assam from outside from time to time, the migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal has great importance in the history and politics of Assam. It has completely changed the demography and socio-political structure of

Assam. With the beginning of the 20th century it was seen that there was the Bengali galore in the state of Assam in various fields of administration, railway, post office, law, teaching and primary medicine.³ The British Government encouraged them to settle in Assam permanently. At that time Assam was very thinly populated. Local Assamese were not sufficient and well up for the different purposes of the British Government. The Muslims of East Bengal were expert in cultivation. The soil of Assam was very fertile, where varieties of crops were expected to produce. There were thousands of acres of wasteland in Assam. So, Bengali Muslim cultivators were invited by the British Government to settle in Assam for cultivation. The Government gave allotment of waste land to them. These opportunities attracted Muslims of Bengal to migrate to Assam. In this way the Muslims of Bengal started to come to Assam for permanent settlement. In this connection, it may be mentioned that East Bengal was a part of undivided India till 1947. Moreover, in 1905 Assam was tagged with East Bengal in order to make the greater province of Assam and East Bengal with Dacca as its capital. This arrangement lasted till 1911. Thus, the interstate migration took place during this period in large numbers and moreover, such migration continued till the independence of India. The Government of India Act, 1935 provided for full fledged autonomy system at the provincial level. Sir Mohammed Sadullah was popularly associated with the All India Muslim League and supported the movement of partition. He was able to form a League Ministry in Assam in 1937. During his days as head of Assam Government, he took particular interest in planning and development, rural uplift, eradication of unemployment, land reforms and promotion of cottage industries. For the development of low lying regions of Brahmaputra and Barak valley, he favoured and encouraged immigration of peasants from Bengal, who were particularly expert in jute cultivation. The Government of Assam not only encouraged Muslims cultivators by giving them railway concessions, but also, by providing them 'family ticket of rupees five' for the entire family to come directly from Mymenshingh to Nowgong district of central Assam.⁴ It is worth mentioning that in order to check the influx of the Muslims from the East Bengal a new device was evolved in 1916 by the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong. This new device is known as the 'Line System' and the system was introduced first in the district of Nowgong in 1920. The 'Line System' meant that the Muslims coming from East Bengal were not allowed to settle beyond a line drawn by

the Government. During the second term of the premiership of Sir Mohammed Sadullah the 'Line System' was abolished in 1940. In the mean time, there was shortage of food in some provinces of India during 1942-43. Under the scheme of 'Grow More Food' *Sadullah* Ministry of Assam in its second term again invited Muslims cultivators of East Bengal to come to Assam, to settle at the Government waste land and to grow more food. Thus, a new process of immigration started in Assam. The influx of the Bengali Muslim from East Bengal to Assam virtually ended with the attainment of independence and the partition of India. The table and diagram given below shows how the migration from East Bengal changed the demography of Assam.

Number of person born in *Mymensing* district in different districts of *Brahamaputra* valley:⁵

Table No. 1



(Source: Baruah Sagar: 23:2007)

Total population of Assam (1872-1951)⁶

Table No. 2

Year	Brahmaputra valley	Surma valley	Hilly districts	Grand total
1872	1917000	1955000	291000	4162000
1881	2251000	2285000	372000	4908000
1891	2476000	2543000	459000	5478000
1901	2618000	2700000	525000	5842000
1911	3107000	2973000	634000	6714000
1921	3856000	3071000	680000	7606000
1931	4723000	3295000	784000	8802000
1941	5762000	3758000	898000	10418000
1951	6815000	-----	1073000	-----

Source: Guha: 339:1977

The above mentioned diagram and table has made it clear that the migration from East Bengal led to the large scale population growth in Assam which ultimately resulted in the demographic change.

The colonisation scheme and the Grow More Food scheme greatly encourage the migration from East Bengal. In September 1928, for the settlement of migrants a committee was formed under the chairmanship of A W Botham. The committee after some discussion fixed a Colonisation Scheme. The table mention below show the year wise allotment of land to the migrants.

Land allotment in acre⁷

Table No. 3

Year	Allotment to Hindu	Allotment to Muslim	Total
1920-21	3229	30106	33405
1921-22	4878	41487	46365
1922-23	5960	50790	56750
1923-24	7789	55293	63082
1924-25	7619	64192	71,811
1925-26	9643	74682	84325
1926-27	8899	75857	84756
1927-28	11363	84098	95461
1928-29	11614	87435	19049

Source: Census of India 1931, vol-III, Assam, Part-I, p-15

Thus it becomes clear that under the Colonisation Scheme large number of migrants got settlement. This scheme was first implemented in *Nowgaon* and then in *Barpeta* and *Mangaldoi*.

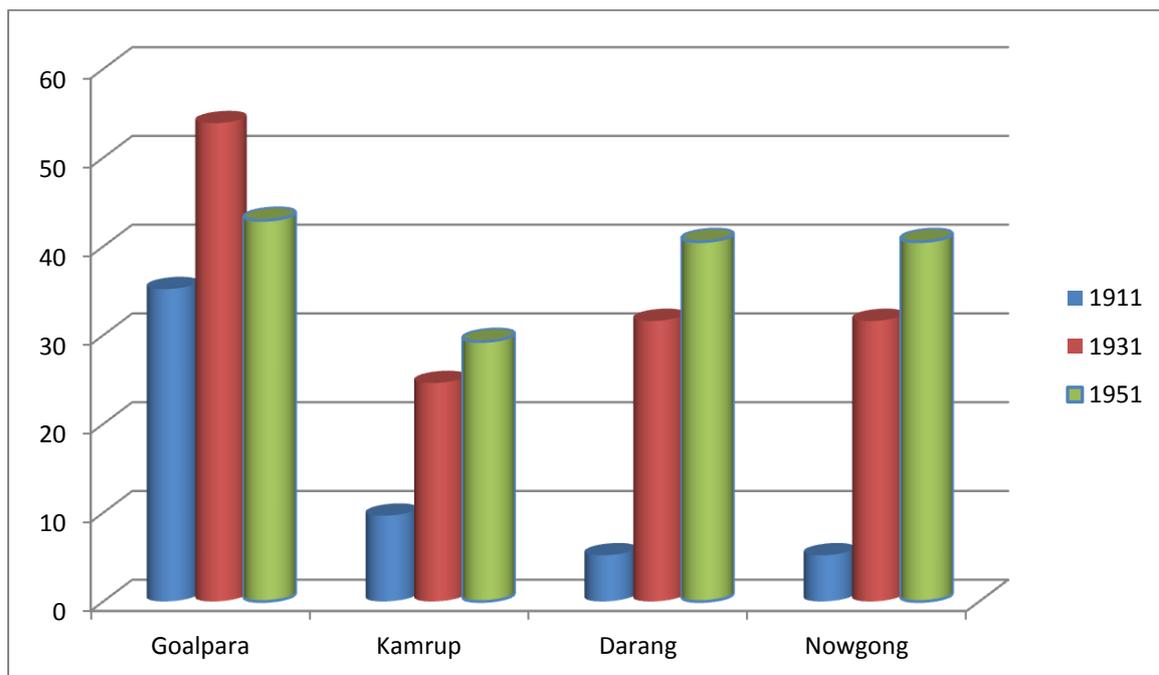
In 1937, Sir *Sadulla* Government took another scheme for the settlement of the migrants named “grow more food”. Some of the main clauses of the scheme are as follows:

- A) As per the decision of 21st June 1940 the waste land of *Nowgaon* district should be distributed among the people according to the proportion of population of every community and to unreserved all grazing reserves.
- B) To unreserved all additional grazing reserves in hill side and to give settlement to the landless aboriginal people of *Lakhimpur* and *Sibsagar* district.

A senior IPS officer named S P Desai was appointed to select additional grazing forest. Desai has reported that there was no additional grazing reserve in Assam due to illegal encroachment of migrants at that time. But the Sir *Sadulla* government ignored the report of S P Desai and opened grazing reserves for the migrants of East Bengal. As the *Sadulla* government had no substitute as the Barpeta session of Assam State Muslim League clearly declared: “the government should either provide land or resign.”

On March 24 1940, the Muslim league formally took the proposal to divide India to form Pakistan. Before this, the Muslim League in its Allahabad conference of 1930 raised the issue of formation of Muslim country. The Muslim League to fulfil its dream encouraged migration from East Bengal to Assam in large scale. The diagram given below shows the rise of Muslim population in the four selected districts of Assam from 1911 to 1951-

Table No. 4



Source- Baruah: 25-26:2007

The gradual increasing number of migrant people including other than East Bengal peasants brought down the percentage of the indigenous people in Assam. This increasing number of migrants latter on create a great problem in the politics of Assam which ultimately led to the rise of identity politics and land issues. The data given below shows the tremendous rate of population growth in Assam.

Population formation of Assam (according to religion)⁸

Table No. 5

Religion	Years					
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951
Hindu	2183922	2685136	3160357	3936431	3185823	5781974
Muslim	381344	659611	911179	1314700	1739235	1981867
Others	509404	606736	622630	364584	1858216	265015

Source- Gogoi: 198:2013

The food crisis in tea gardens of Assam and increasing demand of jute in European market also encourage the migration from East Bengal. Henry Hopkinson, the Chief Commissioner was of the view that the tea labour immigration into Assam

should be discouraged because Assam did not have enough food grains for the expanding population and in place of it the cultivating classes should be invited to settle on the wastelands of Assam. In 1897, *Patrick John* put emphasis on settling immigrants on the cultivable wasteland of Assam for providing relief from recurring famines and scarcity of Bengal. In the meantime the worldwide increase in Jute trade necessitated the expansion of Jute cultivation. As there was no sufficient space to increase jute cultivation in Bengal the British traders turned towards Assam. The table mentioned below shows the increasing quantity of jute before the advent of immigrants from East Bengal.

Export of jute from Assam (in ton)⁹

Table No. 6

Years	Name of valley		
	Brahmaputra Valley	Surma valley	Total
1880-81	59249	9787	69036
1889-90	225742	15480	241222
1893-94	324911	17964	342875
1896-97	348332	49837	398169

Source: Gogoi: 30:2013

After 1905 large scale migration of peasant from East Bengal started. The main purpose of this migration was the jute cultivation. In 1904, area under jute cultivation was 38,568 acre and in 1920 it reached 1, 37,337 acre. In 1933 area under jute cultivation was 303000 acre. The population of Assam increased tremendously with the expansion of jute cultivation.

The completion of the Assam Bengal railway facilitated large scale movement of the immigration. The Government now took up the matters seriously and the immigration policies were formulated and it was recognized that the colonization of the wastelands of Assam had to be undertaken with the help of the immigrants from other provinces of India. The stout and hardy Muslim cultivators of East Bengal were considered to be the most eligible for the job. Therefore the peasant cultivators from Bengal districts of *Mymensingh, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur* began to migrate in small numbers. But as the century progresses the migration took the form of large

scale influx into the Brahmaputra valley and finally from economic problem it became social, political, cultural and linguistic problems in the later period. As the eighty five percent of the cultivators came from *Mymensingh*, the term *Mymensinghias* became synonymous with immigrants. The Census Report of 1911 was the first document on the extraordinary influx of cultivators to the Chars of *Goalpara* from the adjoining districts of Bengal and soon spread to other districts of lower Assam. Thus the Tea industry was responsible for bringing these labourers in a planned manner which developed in the middle of the 19th century. Many of them on the expiry of the contract settled in areas adjacent to the tea gardens. The settlement was treated by the planters and the Government as a purely economic problem and so made as to serve their own economic interest. But the coming of the East Bengal cultivators particularly *Mymensinghia* since the opening of the 20th century is of the greatest significance.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

From the above certain important points can be summarised. First, it is found that since first quarter of 20th century Assam's rate of population increase has been always much higher than that of the country as a whole or any state or province thereof. Secondly, unlike in other states, immigration and natural growth rate are equally prominent causes contributing to Assam's heavy increase of population. It appears from these two Points that the widely held impression that Assam's population has been mounting only due to influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan since partition is not tenable. Moreover, the migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal has created lots of problems in post colonial Assam.

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