The State of North-East India: The Politics of Land, Migration and the Economy.

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Abstract
India’s geographical location has played a strategic role in maintaining its diplomatic and economic relations with the neighbouring states. The democratic system of governance and the growing economy, have been a centre of attraction for the people to flee across the borders ever since the independence: in search of peace, stability and employment opportunities. Immigrants from Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh have been settling in the subcontinent, especially in the border states and metropolitan as well. Among others, Bangladesh has been a prominent neighbour, in terms of its role in Indian political history since its creation in 1971 (with support of Indian forces). With a border 4,096 kilometres, it stretches along and shares borders with the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Immigration from Bangladesh gained pace in the north eastern belt of the Indian subcontinent from the year 1951 and intensified in the 1970s, which at present crosses a mark of 15 million. At this time, there was a large scale influx of Bangladeshi labour force into the state of Assam. This demographic transformation created feelings of linguistic and cultural insecurity that gave rise to political instability. Illegal immigration has been a bone of contention since 1950s, which became more evident in 1979. Major contention was over the issues of – employment, the availability of the resources, and the land which is home to more than five hundred tribes. To combat the inner turmoil in 1979, the Assam Accord was signed, which intended to deal with illegal immigration, and bring peace to the land. However, its success in dealing with immigration is questionable, and has been prominent in Assam politics. The current regime has brought in policies of National Register of Citizens of India and Citizenship Amendment Bill, which was originally formulated in 1955. These laws and policy programmes have been points of debate and discussions. This article thus aims to assess and analyse (i) the outcomes of widespread migration over the land of Assam; (ii) it’s impact on the economy, development, socio-cultural identity and; (iii) the upcoming implications of the present policies on migration, citizenship upon the state, the country, the local people and their constitutional rights. In order to study the above stated factors and the widespread impact of migration, and the response of the secular-democratic system towards it, we would be referring to facts, testimonials, available data, papers and articles written in this reference.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, Rights, Occupation, Political-Economy
Introduction

Migration is a process of any kind of population movement regardless of length, composition, or cause, either across an international border or within a state. It includes the migration of refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people, and economic migrants. Cross-border migration is a big challenge for many countries, both in terms of the variety and the magnitude of migration patterns and processes.

As per the 2011 Census data (1), nearly 5.5 million people in India had reported their last residence outside the country, which was roughly 0.44 percent of its total population. About 2.3 million (42 percent) of whom came from Bangladesh. The Census data provides details on the length of stay of immigrants in India, which then reveals that 76 percent of the Bangladeshi immigrants have been staying in India even before 1991. Major immigrant inflows were recorded during and after the Partition of India and Pakistan and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (2).

India shares a 4,096-kilometre-long border with Bangladesh, along the North-Eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and West Bengal. Only around 1,500 km of the total is fenced, leaving a major portion of the border porous and easy for illegal migration. Bangladeshi migrants are therefore concentrated in the states of Assam and West Bengal. Illegal migration into the Indian state of Assam from Bangladesh has been posing a serious threat to the identity of Assamese people. The presence of a large number of immigrants has adversely affected the social, economic and political environment of Assam, creating law and order problems. The inflow of immigrants started during the colonial rule of the British in India and continues even today, due to a number of pull and push factors. The main push factors involve lack of employment and business opportunities. Moreover, Bangladeshi migrants chose India since it was cheaper and easier to migrate to than going to another country.

Illegal migrants, as per the ‘Assam Accord’, have been defined as those persons who infiltrated illegally after 24 December 1971. Illegal migration is one of the major reasons for social and ethnic violence in Assam. It has generated a host of destabilizing social, political, economic, ethnic and communal tensions.

Assam, present day, is the largest state in the North-Eastern region India. It shares its borders with seven Indian states: Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal and two countries: Bangladesh and Bhutan respectively. Assam has a very heterogeneous population with vast socio-cultural and ethnic diversity. According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of Assam stands at 312.05 lakhs. The State with a total geographical area of 78,438 square kilometres is endowed with abundant fertile land and water resources. The economy of Assam, due to the mountainous topography,

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1 Refer Appendix (1)
2 Refer Appendix (2)
was mainly primitive and agrarian at the time of independence and even today remains one of the more traditional states of India. Assam is known for its extensive tea plantations and tea cultivation which has been the major source of employment for unskilled and semi-skilled agricultural workers in the state.

Following the independence of India, the impact of migration in Assam was strongest. Illegal migration from Bangladesh has been largely responsible for the demographic transformation of Assam. The claim can be witnessed considering the high decadal population growth rate of Assam since 1901. Population density trends in Assam since 1901 are one of the major indicators that explain how illegal migration may create serious problems for indigenous people. Increasing the density level means more challenges regarding health, sanitation and housing. At present, the districts that have been facing mostly the crucial problem of illegal migration in Assam are: Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Dhemaji, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.

Assam Accord: History and Significance

The mobilization against infiltration of foreign nationals began back in the 1979, and it escalated into violence with the onset of ethnic violence between the Assamese and Bengalis, which included both Hindu and Muslim populations. As the situation unfolded with increasing unrest and protests, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi(3) started a dialogue with the student body – All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1980-83. Both groups conveyed their fear and apprehensions toward the foreign nationals immigrating to the state which posed danger as per them, to their social, economic and cultural life. After deliberation, the historic ‘Assam Accord’ was signed in 1985 by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the leader of Assam Gana Parishad Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. Alongside addressing the challenges being faced in the state, the accord tried to maintain sanctity of the constitutional provisions, national commitments and humanitarian considerations.

The issue at the heart of the accord was to deal with the ‘Foreigners Issue’ and ‘Safeguarding the economic development of the state. It mandated ‘detection and deletion’ of foreigners who had entered the state after a particular date, even if they were registered in the state electoral list. The Assam Accord is a significant landmark in the modern history of the state, as the movement was led by the youth who viewed the influx of illegal immigrants as a threat to their future. Therefore, the accord was a political milestone that helped reduce the anxiety and apprehensions of the people at that time.

Changing Demography of Assam and the Growing Concerns

Assam is one of India’s multi-ethnic states, with its population comprising Bengalis, Assamese speaking Hindus, Muslims and the Tribal populations. During the period of 1971-
1991, there was a drastic change in the demographic composition of the state, especially in the bordering districts. The population increased by 52.44 percent between the two decades, which became a point of concern for all, including the inhabitants, moderates and conservatives in the country. This was one of the primary reasons for the Assam Movement. The drastic population change occurred due to the Bangladesh Liberation War for the independence of ‘East Pakistan’ to become its own nation-state. The war caused havoc in the region, with widespread rapes and genocides. In order to save their lives, more than 10 million Bangladeshi citizens sought refuge in India, mostly in the border states of Assam and West Bengal. This movement of people across borders, became the central point in the Assam Accord, which had caused turmoil within the state due to limited economic opportunities and resources to meet the growing needs.

Increase in Immigration: Impact and Consequences

The cross-border movement of people from Bangladesh to the state of Assam, had social, political and economic consequences over the ecological balance of the region, its people and the politics of the country.

As a social consequence, there was a crisis of identity among the inhabitants of the state, as they found their culture, political control and job opportunities in jeopardy. Along with this, the inability of the immigrants to identify themselves within the culture and economy of the state. The demographic transition transformed the infrastructure which occurred at an environmental cost, as the forests were encroached for settlement, which led to a decrease in the forest land from 39% to 30% post 1971. Besides this, there was an increase in intra-communal tensions, as large numbers of migrants caused an increase in poverty, poor housing and health of the people. The economic consequences of the migration were evident in the increased financial burden on the state to provide facilities like education and health to a larger population. As the population rose, the number of people to work in the labour market also increased, which brought in the possibility of decrease in the wages provided. Politically, besides the rise of the ‘Assam Movement’, there was an issue of ‘illegal voters’ who had entered their names in electoral lists through illegal methods. It is important to note that the immigrants in Assam are spread across the constituencies to influence the electoral results. The current National Register of Citizens in Assam has been implemented to deal with this scenario, however it’s outcome cannot be predicted.

As per the facts and figures, the major cause of immigration has been the search for improved quality of life and economic opportunities that will allow migrants to protect themselves and their families from violence. The scenario in Assam and the ripple effect it is causing in the state, proves its inability to provide the required opportunities. With the incoming policies and programmes from the government, their impact over the masses cannot be predicted and seem to be ambiguous.
Politics of the Past and Present

1) Indian citizens and National Register of Citizens:

The National Register of Citizens of India (NRC) is a register maintained by the Government of India containing names and certain relevant information for identification of Indian citizens of Assam state. This register was first prepared after the 1951 Census of India. Persons in India without either a valid Indian citizenship or a visa are ‘illegal immigrants’. The recent update happened due to a writ petition filed by members of civil society in 2013, which was taken up to the highest level of the judiciary, the Supreme Court, which asked for the updating of NRC as per the guidelines under the law of Citizenship Act. In 2015, the process officially started, under which 1.9 million applicants failed to make it onto the list. Applicants who are considered ‘illegal immigrants’, can contest the decision and appeal through Foreign Tribunals and the levels of judiciary: The High Court or The Supreme Court. As per the procedure, if the person loses their appeal in court, they would be detained indefinitely. Around a 1000 people have been detained in six detention centres. Along with this, at present there are 200 courts in Assam to deal with the situation, but it has been predicted the number will increase.

Questions and criticisms:

Sangeeta Barooah, the author of ‘Assam: The Accord, The Discord’ shared the anxiety among people whose names have not been included in the list, about their family’s future. She also talked to the BBC about the functioning of tribunals, which are unable to provide respite to the people. These tribunals have been questioned for their bias, and their riddled functioning. On similar lines, the choice given to appeal has been questioned as already the courts in India are clogged, and the indefinite appeals would overburden their ability to function. Some critics have also questioned the list on its religious bias, which has been supplemented with evidence in the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019.

2) The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019:

The Citizenship Act of 1955 regulates the grounds on which a person may obtain Indian citizenship. The act was supported by other laws which could enable the government to deport or imprison illegal immigrants. In 2019, the Ministry of Home Affairs tabled the Citizen Amendment Bill in the houses of Parliament which was passed with a clear majority of the members. The bill suggests to make Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, eligible for citizenship. It has classified three countries,

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4 Refer Appendix (4)
5 2019. Assam NRC: What next for 1.9 million ‘stateless’ Indians?. India, BBC
6 Refer Appendix (5)
namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan in Statement of Objects and Reasons (SoR), claiming that a huge number of citizens who were living in Pakistan and Bangladesh in undivided India, with no reason mentioned for the inclusion of Afghanistan. It also refers to religious politics in these countries and how it has caused trouble for religious minorities there. Given that this justification for mentioning these three countries does not have any precise rationale as under these other two neighbouring countries could have been made through the list. Besides this, emphasizing upon the violence caused due to religion – Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan and atheists in Bangladesh have been persecuted causing them to seek refuge in India. Therefore, the rationale provided by the government for including and excluding certain religious groups and countries has been questioned and have sparked nationwide protests and demonstrations.

**Future Prospects**

Migration has existed for centuries, but conflicts often arise when the questions over economic, political and social equality and availability come into play. There is a need for revising policies to cope with illegal immigrants within a country that is based more on humanitarian grounds. The Indian political system has been trying to instil policies and laws that seek to provide citizenship only to immigrants who align with the vision held in its constitution. India has promoted its culture and economy on the premise of being the largest democracy based on the ideals of secularism and sovereignty. However, there is much scope for improvement by trying to bring in and provide social and economic stability for the people, which is the primary step for promoting cohesion among the diverse communities and citizens not only within the country but across the globe.
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Appendix

(1) The Census of India is the largest single source of a variety of statistical information on different characteristics of the people of India. With a history of more than 130 years, this reliable, time tested exercise has been bringing out a veritable wealth of statistics every 10 years, beginning from 1872 when the first census was conducted in India non-synchronously in different parts. To scholars and researchers in demography, economics, anthropology, sociology, statistics and many other disciplines, the Indian Census has been a fascinating source of data. The rich diversity of the people of India is truly brought out by the decennial census which has become one of the tools to understand and study India.

(2) Bangladesh Liberation War was an armed conflict between the West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and the East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1971, it lasted for nine months. The reasons of the war were political - that could be traced back to Partition of 1947; and economic - the eastern region of the country was exploited as it got less funds than the western region; besides this, there was difference in the religious standpoints between the two.

(3) Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru. She was the first female Prime Minister of India served for three consecutive terms (1966–77) and a fourth term from 1980 until she was assassinated in 1984. Her son Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister, after her assassination.

(4) Writ Petition is primarily a provision made to make available the Right to Constitutional Remedies to every citizen. The right to constitutional remedies is a guarantor of the fundamental rights provided in the Part III of the Indian Constitution.